**Children of the Small Gods**

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**Children of the Small Gods**

*by alexxphoenix42*

**Summary**

Brother John is a recent addition to the Temple of the Small Gods on Baker Street. A mysterious stranger catches his attention one night when he does something that no one else has ever managed to do.

**Notes**

This Alternate Universe exists around our Regency era (late 1700's to early 1800's) though some differences will occur. This particular world has magic, rather modern ideas for its era, and names of Gods, places, and people close to existing ones, but just different enough that I don't have to do any annoying fact checking. :)

Hope you enjoy!
See the end of the work for more notes.
A flicker of movement caught Brother John’s eye as he lifted down the last of the oil lamps that needed refilling. John struggled not to react, turning his twitch into a movement to rub his bad shoulder. He was certain someone wrapped in their cloak hid in the shadows behind the bigger statues, but if so, it wouldn't be anything new. The brothers kept this front room available as a way-station for the many who wandered the streets when the good folk were abed.

Brother John liked working the night-watch hours best at Temple of the Small Gods. Even a minor place of worship, tucked away as it was on Baker Street, drew its fair share of matrons dropping by midday to simply see and be seen. No, for John, the true face of the temple was the prayer room after dark when the more colorful characters of the neighborhood washed up. Of course it didn’t hurt that the baker next door left an offering each morning at dawn. John had quite a soft spot for Mrs. Hudson’s pastry knots.

Keeping half an eye on the mysterious shape, John carefully measured out the oil, relit the wick, and placed the lamp back on its shelf. Some of the alley kids were skittish things, and John hated frightening them off before he could speak to them, or get them a bite to eat. This one finally unfolded upright, and stepped forward - tall, but slight. Not a kid then. His face remained hidden under a tatty hooded cloak, but the boots peeking beneath were of excellent quality. He must be a tavern hopper, John mused, a fancy lad gone slumming who had drunk too deep, and feared waking his mother coming home so late.

“May the Gods both large and small bless you, my son.” Brother John nodded, turning to face his visitor. “How may we serve you?”

“What’s a soldier doing playing at priest?” A voice deeper than he expected drawled out from inside the hood.

“What makes you think I’m a soldier?” Surprise widened John’s eyes.

“Please, you’ve been tracking me since you entered the room. Brother Mykal, and Brother Gregson don’t notice me unless I want them to. Plus you hold yourself like a soldier. You’re ready to flip me right over if I make a wrong move.”

“You know Brother Mykal and Brother Gregson?” John frowned. “You’re a regular then? Why haven’t I seen you here before?

“I’ve been away,” the man said shortly.

“Well, I’m sorry they aren’t available. It’s just me tonight. Can I help you?”

“I hope so . . .” The figure swayed, and John noticed with some alarm that bright red drops had fallen to the stone floor beneath him.

“Blessed Gallanus, you’re hurt. You need a healers’ sanctuary.” John caught him as he stumbled.

“Too far, besides, you’re a healer,” he gasped.

“We don’t have that many supplies here, but come in, sit down, and I'll see what I can do.”
Brother John slung his good arm under the stranger's shoulder, and guided him down a hall to a cot in a back room. The youth staggered beside him to collapse onto the bed, slumping to the wall behind. By the flicker of an oil lamp, John pulled his cloak aside revealing a shock of black curls hanging over his forehead, made even darker by the pallor of his milk-white skin. Piercing blue eyes in a sculpted face caught John’s breath for a moment. His assessment of the man shifted as he marveled at his eerie beauty. Perhaps a rent boy on the wrong side of his pimp, he thought, quickly scanning him for the source of the blood flow. Red soaked the front of the man’s shirt.

“My right arm,” the stranger croaked. He winced as John gently shifted the limb to remove his shirt. “And I’m no whore.”

“Nasty knife cut,” John tutted, peering at the gash on his forearm. “At least the edges are clean. I’m going to have to sew you up . . . and I never said you were a prostitute.”

“No, but you were thinking it.”

Brother John snorted and handed him a folded cloth. “Here, press this against the wound.” Once the man lifted an elegant hand to hold it in place, John moved to the storage cupboard to grab a few things. Returning, he dropped some powder into a cup of water by the bed, swirled it, and held it to the stranger’s lips.

“Drink this.”

His patient winced at the bitterness of the brew, but dutifully drank it down. John was nearly mesmerized by the way the muscles of the man’s throat moved as he swallowed. His chest was thin but muscled, and remarkably free of any scars, tattoos, or piercings that most of the temple’s late night visitors sported. The Great Mother has lingered awhile when she made this one.

“Like what you see?” the man smirked, glancing coyly up at him from under his smoky lashes.

Brother John coughed, and set the cup back on the side table. He pulled up a low stool to sit next to the bed, and readied his supplies. “Do you have a name my not-a-prostitute?” John asked as he threaded a needle, cutting off a length with a small knife.

“Sherlock.”

“Is that your real name?” John smiled.

“Real enough,” Sherlock said. ”And you, Brother Healer?”

“John. Brother John. And how did you know I was a healer? First the soldier, and now the healer. Have the other priests been talking about me?”

“No, they never mentioned you except to say a new Brother had joined them recently. You called on Gallanus when you saw I was bleeding, and you wear his symbol on the chain around your neck.”

John glanced down at the metal pendant with two hands holding herbs and a knife swinging under his robes. It wasn’t something anyone could see if they weren’t as tall as a sign post and able to peer down his open neckline. “You’re a clever one. Did being too clever get you that knife cut?” He asked.

“Being distracted, and too slow got me this knife cut,” Sherlock said. “It was stupid, STUPID of me.”

“Hey, easy there.” John laid a calming hand to Sherlock’s leg. “We all have our bad nights. Hold still
now."

Brother John leaned in to place his hands on either side of Sherlock’s skull. He closed his eyes and hummed. A warm glow briefly filled the room then dimmed as Sherlock visibly relaxed. John gently moved Sherlock’s injured arm into his lap so he could sew the wound closed.

“You’re a mage too.” Sherlock slurred, his head lolling back against the wall. “What’s a warrior mage doing stuck in a backwater bog . . .” He paused, crinkling his nose up in thought. “Ah, you were injured.” He finished opening his eyes to peer at John.

“I’m not much of a mage, more a medic,” Brother John said with a small shrug. “I can do a few small tricks, help patients feel better, nothing too complicated though.” He pushed the needle through the man’s torn flesh, and was gratified to find that his patient didn’t notice. John kept a patter going to keep him distracted. "You’re right again about the injury though. I took a cursed arrow to the shoulder. There wasn’t much anyone could do to get it back to right. But I’ll ask you not to insult our temple, thank you very much, grand sir. We happen to provide top-rate blessings, and sticky buns on Thursdays.”

“Oh yes, Mrs. Hudson’s sticky buns are divine.” Sherlock chuckled softly as John tied off the last suture, and wrapped a bandage around his arm.

“There you go. In about a week, you should have those stitches removed. Have your usual healer check for signs of infection, and you should be back to good.” Brother John wiped his hands clean, and handed Sherlock a damp flannel to sponge any dried blood from his skin.

John deliberately didn't watch the man running the cloth over his chest, and arms, and instead crossed the room to rummage through a bin. He returned shortly with a rough-spun top in his hands. “Here, that poor shirt of yours is a casualty tonight I’m afraid. This one should fit you well enough to make it home. I think you’ll need to rest a few hours before you’re ready to travel though. Should I get a runner to send a message somewhere? Let someone know you’re safe?"

“No, no message.”

John helped Sherlock to pull on the new shirt, remove his boots, then lie down across the bed.

“You’re not like the other priests.” Sherlock gazed intently at John as he pulled the blankets up to Sherlock’s chest, smoothing them flat.

“No?”

“No. You like boys.”

Sherlock surprised him when he leaned up, and caught John’s mouth in a kiss. His lips were soft, and the tongue that swept into his mouth was smooth as velvet. John meant to pull away, but he found himself sinking to sit on the edge of the bed instead, his hand moving to cradle the side of Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock worked his left hand out of the blankets, and slid it over John’s shoulder. It was unusually warm even through his clothing, and John frowned as a strange tingling sensation buzzed between them. Before he could even formulate a question, a great tide of magic crested up from Sherlock’s palm, and slammed into the old wound on his shoulder. John gasped. He could feel the damaged tissues healing and reshaping themselves around his bones in mere seconds. He shuddered, and collapsed across Sherlock on the narrow bed.

“Now, THAT was curious!” John heard the other man say as he tumbled into darkness.
Chapter End Notes

If anyone sees any inconsistencies, typos, or has questions, by all means drop me a line!
Where oh where has my little dog gone?

Chapter Summary

John wonders what happened to the young man who disappeared like a genie in the night.

Chapter Notes

I had someone ask if this fic is a crossover with Terry Pratchett's Discworld series. It's not an exact match, but it was definitely one of the magical worlds that inspired me.

If you haven't discovered Mr. Pratchett's wonderful books, I do recommend them highly. Some that I have particularly enjoyed include "Hogfather", "Wyrd Sisters," "Hat Full of Sky" and "Thief of Time" -- though his whole series is quite excellent.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Brother John woke to the full light of day streaming through the small window of the temple’s guest room. To his dismay, he found drool had trickled down his chin, and stuck his face to the pillow. He pushed upright, swept his fringe back, and scrubbed the heels of his hands over gritty eyes to try to fully wake. What was wrong with him? He felt like he’d been out on a bender, but he’d been on temple duty last night – it didn't make sense. Once he stretched and worked a crick out of his back, he stopped. Something was different. His left shoulder moved easily as he swung his arm in a circle. The scar that had pulled and twinged since the arrow strike two years ago – it was gone. The stranger last night, the kiss . . . it was all coming back to him. John scrabbled at his clothes, tore his robes and undershirt off his back. When his fingers touched his shoulder, front and back, he found the skin smooth and whole. No trace of the marks that had become a part of him remained.

John fell to his knees. He grabbed the medallion hanging on his breast. “O Great Gods, large and small, thank you for all that is good and holy. Thank you for all that is. I have no other words, but . . . thank you.”

John kissed his fingers, touched them to his forehead, and heart, and after a moment’s hesitation his shoulder. He rose to put his clothes back on, and saw it then, a small piece of paper folded on the table next to his bed. He picked it up, and a ring fell from inside the folds to clang on the floor. John stooped to retrieve it. It was thin, made of white gold, with a small blue gem set into the front. He opened the note. It read simply:

"Thank you – S"

When John ran his fingers more closely over the ring, he found something engraved inside. Taking it to the window, he saw the letters W.S.S.H. carved along the inside. Who was this man who has
turned his world upside down and disappeared? Who in seven hells was he? John unhooked his necklace. He threaded the ring to hang behind the medallion and placed it back around his neck. He could think of nowhere else to keep it where it wouldn’t draw questions or get lost.

Brother John entered the public prayer room flattening his hair as he went. Glancing about, he saw it wasn’t too crowded with petitioners for the day’s hour. An aging matron knelt before the statue of Keerta, Goddess of Lost Things, leaving a tightly curled scroll at her feet. How strange that just last night his hooded stranger had crouched behind that same statue. The fanciful notion that he’d been a special gift found by the Goddess just for John flickered briefly through his mind. A few young women wrapped in veils waited in line for the confession corner. John watched as the curtain twitched aside, and Brother Mykal stepped out as another priest moved in to take his place. He joined John as soon as he spied him across the room.

“Ah, Brother John! We thought you had taken ill again. I’m glad to see you on your feet so soon. Have you broken your fast?” At John’s head shake, Brother Mykal rubbed his hands together. “Care to join me in the dining hall then? I’m so hungry I could eat a hot buttered paving stone.”

“Yeah, alright.” John nodded falling into step with the more rotund man. “Listen, I need to ask you something. I saw a man here last night, an odd one. He said his name was Sherlock and he knew you and Brother Gregson. What do you know about him?”

“Oh him. He IS an odd young man. Rattled you abit did he?”

“Well actually, he was hurt. I stitched up a knife cut in his arm. I wanted to see if you knew where he lived. I’d like to follow up if I can—make sure he’s all right.”

They paused at the wooden door to the refectory.

“That’s a shame. He shows up from time to time, but I’ve no idea where he lives.” Brother Mykal shrugged. "He sits on the bench by the altar for Memir the wise, for hours. Never wants to talk, just comes to sit and think. We always find a gold coin or two in the donation box after he leaves though, so I don’t think he’s on the streets. Haven’t seen him in months, but don’t worry, Brother John." Brother Mykal reached out to clap John on the shoulder. "He’ll turn back up again soon enough, and you can check your work then."

"Yeah, all right. You’re probably right." Brother John nodded.

"He was lucky, and so are we are lucky to have a healer like you in our ranks. Now onto more pressing matters . . . breakfast!” Mykal winked, and pushed open the door to the warmth and noise of the kitchens.

Brother John worked his duties in the temple garden through the afternoon, but found himself with a spot of free time before evening prayers began. As soon as he was able, he washed up, and headed to the Hudsons' bakery next door. The bell tinkled charmingly as John walked into the sweet steam of the shop. John inhaled deeply. There was nothing like the smell of spices and warm sugar to get a man’s blood pumping. John stopped to quickly kiss his fingertips and rub the belly of the sweetly-rounded kitchen Goddess idol by the front door. It never paid to ignore Vestia, and John could use all the good luck he could coax his way.

“Brother John, how are you?” Mrs. Hudson called out. She herself was behind the counter today and not one of her husbands, children, or grandchildren who often worked the till.
“I’m very well, ma'am, and you?”

“Couldn’t be better, dear. Can I offer you a blueberry scone today? They’re fresh out of the oven.”

“They look very tempting Mrs. Hudson, but I really wanted to come ask you a question.”

“Oh, what can I help you with?”

“I met a visitor in the temple late last night. He told me his name was Sherlock. He didn’t tell me much about himself, and he left something behind. I wanted to return it to him, but no one at the Small Gods knows where he lives. He mentioned liking your sticky buns, so I wondered if you knew anything about him.”

“Do I know Sherlock! Oh, that boy! He got my second husband off a murder charge. Proved he wasn’t at that tavern when it happened. Wouldn’t take any money for solving the crime though. No, I pay him in sticky buns, and mince pies. He likes those. Whenever he comes around, I have them for him.”

“So, do you know where he lives?”

“Oh, no dear. Haven’t a clue. But don’t worry, he’ll turn up again. He always does.”

John left the bakery no wiser, but at least consoled with a handful of shortbread Mrs. Hudson insisted he take with him.

Chapter End Notes

For some reason, I didn’t like the sound of Brother Lestrade or Brother Greg, so I went with Brother Gregson. Please feel free to imagine the lovely face of Rupert Graves playing the part of Brother Gregson whenever he is mentioned.
Curiouser and curiouser.

Chapter Summary

What kind of game is Sherlock playing? John isn't sure he knows, but he's willing to try and figure it out.

Brother John liked walking about the city on his free afternoons. Since he often took night duty and mornings were his time to sleep, afternoons were a fine time for a prowl around. He loved to watch the vendors in the market place packing up. So often the stall owners were happy to part with leftover edibles, and John would ramble by the river to distribute them to any hungry families camped there.

John found that wearing the priest’s robes made him both visible, and invisible to passersby, and he enjoyed the paradox of it. He walked his usual rounds with a sack of bruised apples for the beggars near Baker street not a week later when a little street urchin, her hair in tangles, appeared with a note. She darted up to press the bit of folded paper into his hand.

“What's this, love? Do you want an apple?” John smiled at her.

“Go on then,” she said. He handed her one then set his bag down to unfold the note. She bit into the fruit immediately with a satisfied crunch.

The message inside was short:

"Come to Café Verona on Water street if convenient. If inconvenient, come anyway. – S"

John chuckled. “Who gave you this?” He turned to ask the little girl, but she had already fled. Brother John sighed. Water street was only a few blocks away, and there was no way he was missing a chance to finally get some answers. He managed to give out the rest of the apples, fold the bag, and tuck it into an inner pocket before finding the right tavern.

Café Verona was a cheerful place, full of the hustle and bustle of foreign traders and locals alike. The fine weather had the clientele spilling out to several tables set up outside. John was surprised when a man with a large mustache and turban waved him to his corner table on the patio.

“Brother John, come and sit with me. May I recommend the spiced wine and braised hare? Both are quite excellent here.”

If John hadn’t recognized his voice, and those sharp cheekbones, he would have sworn it was some grand Eastern merchant and not Sherlock at the table in front of him.

“Well, my good sir.” He said gathering his wits back about him. “What game do we play today?”

“Right now we play at dinner. Sit down and join me, you are blocking my view of the street.”

John sat, and was soon graced with a steaming cup of fragrant wine, and a plate of stew that a pretty young woman set down with a wink before hurrying off.

“Ah, I don’t have any money on me today.” John apologized.
“What sort of host would I be to invite someone to dine, and then neglect to pay for him? But don’t worry. Your coin wouldn’t be needed here anyway. I did a favor for the owner of this establishment once. All the meals for me and my associates here are free.” Sherlock waved carelessly at the place with one hand.

John smiled and took a sip of wine. “You really are quite the character, aren’t you?” John asked gazing into the other man’s clear blue (or were they grey) eyes. The eyes in question crinkled in humor at him.

“I could say the same of you Brother John, apples?”

“It passes the time. You seem to have come up in the world from the lost beggar boy of last week. What are you trading here in the market place, O Raja?”

“Information, Brother John. It’s the only coin that really counts.”

“Listen, this is all well and good, but I need to ask you a question . . . my shoulder, what you did, it was amazing . . . ”

Sherlock raised a hand to stop him. “Not here.” He cautioned quietly. “Enjoy your meal,” he added more robustly, “and all will be revealed in good time.” He winked, and took a swallow from his cup.

John raised his own mulled wine, and sipped again. It really was quite good. John suddenly realized how hungry he was, and took a large bite of the rabbit stew. As promised, it was equally delicious. John made short work of his meal thanking the serving girl when she swished back by with a basket of rolls. Sherlock picked at whatever was on his plate, and watched the streets around them.

It was a fine day to sit awhile, enjoy a good meal, and watch the world pass by, or at least those swirling through their slice of the great city of Delphium. A man driving a donkey weighted down with cages of songbirds ambled past them as a woman across the way haggled with a vendor selling pasties from a push-cart. A few palace guards decked out in their gilded finery marched down the street at an easy pace. John looked after them with a bit of longing, but he had left that dashing sort of life behind him now, and he’d made his peace with that. John sighed, and scraped up the last of his stew.

“Ah my good man, finish your wine, I think it was time we were on our way.” Sherlock broke into his woolgathering.

John glanced up to see that Sherlock had collected his several bags, and was making his way to the street. “TAXI” he called out, and a horse and carriage stopped almost immediately to board them.

“Are we in a hurry?” John asked, rising to follow.

“Time is always of the essence.” Sherlock answered briskly. “But I see an acquaintance I don’t wish to waste time chatting with today, so off we must be.”

John pulled himself into the carriage just as Sherlock called out “Rue de Ange - if you please” to the taxi driver. The driver nodded, and maneuvered them into the traffic with a flick of the reins. Sherlock leaned closer to John as he pulled the turban and false mustache off, and pushed them deep into one of his bags.

“If we’re quiet, we can talk now. You have questions, I know.”

“Who are you?” John asked. “I mean really what are you? What did you do to my shoulder? It’s good as new now. And how is your arm by the way?”
Sherlock rolled up his sleeve to reveal a perfectly smooth forearm, the one that had been gashed, the one John had sewn just last week. John reached out to run a forefinger up the length of Sherlock’s pale flesh. It felt as smooth and whole as his own shoulder had that first morning after. Sherlock’s mercurial eyes widened slightly at the contact. He stared at John for a moment, then shook himself, and lowered his sleeve again.

“I can answer some of your questions by telling you that I’m a chameleon mage. It’s a very low power. For a long time my family’s healer thought I didn’t have any talent at all, but I can mimic another person’s powers when I touch them. The effects only last a few minutes, and generally, I manifest a much weaker power than the person I channel.”

Sherlock leaned even closer, his lips were almost at John’s ear when he finished with “Touching you was the first time I ever amplified another’s talent. I not only healed you, I healed myself when we connected. It was . . . extraordinary. As for the rest of what I do. I’m a private detective. I find things out, I help people.”

“And you get paid in dinners and mince pies?”

“So it would seem.” Sherlock nodded.

“And where are we going now?” John was having trouble keeping up with it all.

“Rue de Ange – didn’t you hear?”

“Yes, I heard, but why are we going there?”

“A case John, I am hot on the trail of a case, and I need your help.”

“My help?”

“Exactly” Sherlock replied. “You’re not on call at the temple tonight, and I need assistance.”

The cab had arrived at their location or as close as they could get with the traffic snarl ahead of them. Sherlock dropped a few coins in the driver’s hand, grabbed his bags and shooed John out to the ground.

“Here, carry this.” He called, and with that, Sherlock tossed the heaviest bag into John’s arms before dashing into the foot traffic.

John recovered as quickly as he could, shouldering the bag to hurry and keep sight of the dark curls bouncing through the crowd ahead. John had almost caught up with Sherlock when the infuriating man made a sudden turn, darting into a dress shop on the right. John just made out the sign over the awning, “Madame LaSalle’s,” before pushing the door open, and plunging in after. It was much darker inside, and John blinked for a moment getting his bearings. He was surprised to find himself facing a round woman, presumably Madame LaSalle on her knees pinning up the skirt of a small, thin woman on a platform. The customer blushed bright red at seeing John.

“Oh, forgive me. I didn’t mean to intrude. I’m looking for . . . “

The shop woman merely grunted, and pointed him toward a curtained alcove in the back of the shop.

“Thank you.” John nodded and hurried past the women, pushing aside the curtain to discover a darkened hallway beyond. The door at the end of the corridor stood half-cracked, and John headed for it, pushing it the rest of the way open. A storeroom lay beyond judging by the great many things piled inside, but by far the most compelling sight was the pale, lanky detective standing mother-
naked in the center of it all.

“John.” Sherlock called over his shoulder. "Get in, and for Great Gods’ sake, close the door, man."
For some reason Brother John finds himself being drawn deeper into Sherlock's mad plans.

Brother John pushed the door to the room closed behind him. Dropping his bag to the floor, he glanced quickly around. A stack of boxes sat piled by one wall, a mattress, table, and chairs were against the other, and one long-drink-of-water detective stood starkers in the middle of it all. Sherlock faced the far wall, reading over a scrap of paper in his hand seemingly oblivious to his glorious, bare backside that lay on full display.

“What . . .”

“No, I don’t live here— it’s just a bolt hole of mine. I find it a useful way station. And we are changing clothes to get into character for an assignment this evening.”

John found it strange to have his questions answered before they had a chance to leave his mouth, but the view before him was enough to thoroughly distract him from it. John had served as medic, soldier, and priest. There wasn’t much about bodies that he hadn’t seen before, but the sight of Sherlock stripped bare caught the breath in his throat.

The man was long and thin as a whip, but the corded muscle that wrapped around his frame made him sturdier than he had a right to be. The lines of his torso to hip to thigh were exquisite, like a greyhound poised for flight. His rump was sleek muscle, but slightly rounded and framed nicely by the two sweet dimples on his lower back. Sherlock dropped his paper, and stepped into a pair of indecently sheer purple trousers pulling them to settle low on his narrow hips. He turned, and darted forward to grab up the bag at John’s feet. Reaching in, he searched a moment before extracting a small pot from its depths. Unscrewing the lid, he scooped out some mud-colored unguent and began smearing it over his person.

“Here, John, I need help. Come do my back.”

“Sorry?”

“It’s makeup. We’re going undercover tonight, and I need to look a bit more swarthy. I can’t reach the center of my back by myself.”

“And what is this mission tonight that I have not, by the way, agreed to accompany you on?” John stood with his feet planted, arms crossed against his chest.

Sherlock sighed. “Brother John, don’t be like that. I’ve been hired by a business man to investigate a rival’s plans to sabotage his business. I have it on good authority that the co-conspirators will be meeting tonight under the guise of a dinner party to plot their evil deeds. WE need to pose as servants to be at that dinner party, and I need YOU to assist while I investigate.”
“Spy on people you mean.” John huffed.

“Do good, and make things right. I thought you’d appreciate the noble mission of it all.”

“What do I get out of this if I agree to help you?”

“You can have 30% of my consulting fees.”

“Make it 40% and donate it to the temple, and you have yourself a deal.”

“Fine.” Sherlock snipped.

John stuck out his palm to shake hands, and Sherlock dropped the jar of glop into it.

“Be sure you get behind my neck as well.”

John scooped out a handful and set the jar down on the nearby table. Sherlock was a tall thing, topping him by at least half a head. John reached up and painted a stripe over the man’s shoulders. It was tricky getting it to coat evenly and soon he was smearing the stuff over Sherlock with both hands. The cream wasn’t unpleasant smelling, and it was mesmerizing running his hands over each of the planes of Sherlock’s back, and down his spine. Sherlock hitched the trousers lower so that John could smear the color down to where the soft swell of his arse just peeked out of his waistband. John was enjoying working the color down past those dimples when Sherlock twitched, and turned his head back.

“You can’t be “Brother John” tonight. From now on it’s just “John,” and I’ll be addressing you as that solely so we don’t make any slip-ups.”

“You never call me ’Brother’ anyway unless you’re taking the piss out of me.”

“Ah, you’ve found me out. I’m a hopelessly rude, uncultured clod.” Sherlock tossed out airly.

“No” said John. “Well, you might be, but I think you just don’t like being bothered with titles. They’re too conventional for you.” John gave Sherlock’s back one more long sweep before stepping away.

Sherlock turned fully to peer down at him. “John, you continue to astound me.”

“Well, you continue to gobsmack me.” John said. “Here, bend down so I can even out your face. You’ve left streaks all down your nose.”

Once Sherlock was suitably darkened, Sherlock handed John a jar of soapy cream and cloth to clean his hands, then lobbed a bundle at him. “Put these on.” He said, and went back to rummaging in his voluminous bag of tricks for the rest of his costume.

John pulled the bundle apart, and found a well-washed tunic, leggings, belt, and soft boots. John glanced over and watched Sherlock hooking a brightly-beaded red sleeveless top across his chest, then wind and tie a purple sash dripping in fringe and spangles around his waist.

“Oi, why are you getting up like a circus monkey, then?”

“Obviously I’ll be part of the night’s entertainment, and you’ll be working as a server with the kitchen staff. John, why aren’t you dressed yet?”

John sighed, shucked his shoes and pulled his robes off over his head. When he was down to his small clothes, he reached for the tunic top, stopping when he saw how intently Sherlock was staring
at him across the room.

“What?” John asked.

“You have my ring against your heart.”

“It was somewhere to keep it so I wouldn’t lose it. Thank you for reminding me. I need to give it back to you.” His hands went to unclasp the chain.

“NO, keep it.” Sherlock dismissed it with a wave. “If you need to speak with me, you can show it to one of my contacts and they can get a message to me quickly. Mrs. Hudson at the bake shop, and Big Bruno, the owner of Café Verona will always help you if you show them that ring.”

“I asked Mrs. Hudson about you before, and she said she had no idea how to find you.”

“You asked her about me? Well, of course you did. Hmm. Well, you didn’t show her the ring.”

“How was I to know I was meant to show your bloody ring to the baker to get a straight answer about you?”

“Well, you know now. “

John huffed out a breath, and set to work pulling the servant’s clothes on.

“Heads up.” Sherlock called.

John put his hand up automatically and caught the knife in its scabbard that Sherlock tossed his way.

“What am I doing with this?” John asked

“Wear it down your boot.” Sherlock answered distractedly, busily stuffing things into the pockets of a traveling cloak.

“It’s a rough dinner party, then?”

“It pays to be prepared, John.”

John and Sherlock stood near the rear entrance of The Rose and Pony Inn. After studying some drawings Sherlock had of the tavern’s layout, and a more cursory explanation of the evening’s plans than John would have liked, they had donned traveling cloaks, and set off from a back door of the dress shop. An uncomfortable coach ride spent squashed beside a fat matron, her fatter daughter, and a man with a cough had deposited them at the town of Whirsling where the inn in question lay.

“Give me your cloak” Sherlock twitched a hand imperiously at him. John unfastened his outer garment and handed it over.

“Why are we hiding this out here?”

“Never leave things lying around unless you want them pinched.” Sherlock informed him rolling the
cloak up, and carefully stowing it behind a stack of wood.

“You’ll go in first now. Just ask for Berta in the kitchens. Tell her you're here to work the party tonight, and she’ll find something for you to do.”

“What about you?” John asked.

“I’ll be along directly. Now go. We can’t be seen entering together.” Sherlock waved him toward the door.

John sighed. How did he get himself into these things? He really didn’t know, but he dutifully found the back door, and pushed his way in. Like all kitchens, the room was hot and noisy, a hive of activity.

“Are you delivering? Deliveries to the side door.” The young woman tending the spit at the fire called over to him. John stepped back as a man carrying a bowl of turnips hurried by.

“Pardon me. I was told I could find work tonight if I spoke to Berta?”

“Aw, she’s in the store room, she’ll be back in a mo’.”

A large woman in a dark dress swept into the room wiping her hands on her apron. She frowned when she saw John in the center of her busy domain.

“Who’s this then? Are you filling in for Gilly tonight?”

“I was told you might could find work for me? Serving for a big party?” John tried to look hopeful.

She ran her eyes critically over him for a moment. "What’s your name, then?” She sighed.

“John, ma’am.”

“Well John, we need the help tonight. Have you worked at serving before?”

“Yes ma’am, but not at a fancy party. I’m strong though, and I know how to follow orders.”

The woman nodded. “You’ll do. Here this one is Nan.” She beckoned over a sharp-faced woman with her hair scraped back in a tight bun. “Nan is in charge of serving. If she says jump, your feet are off the ground. “

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Nan, this is John. He’s filling in for Gilly tonight. Just show him the basics and all should work out. Make me proud. It’s grand folk in the back room tonight. Go, go. The second appetizers are almost ready. Ack, I’m getting too old for all this nonsense.” She shooed them off as if they were errant chickens wandered into her clean kitchens.

Nan beckoned John to follow her. “Can’t say as I like working with people I never laid eyes on before.” Nan muttered looking him up and down. “This here is a fancy party of them toffs, and foreigners, like.” She screwed up her face as if the mere thought of the rich and well-traveled offended her. “Don’t talk to anyone, don’t stare, keep your hands to yourself, and this might work out. And for Great Mother’s sake, put your hair down!”

John felt about five at his mother’s knee. He quickly licked his palm, and ran it over his fringe. Nan pushed a heavy pewter pitcher in his hands when he was finished. She led him out of the kitchen and down a hallway to the door at the end.
“Go and refill everyone’s ale cups. Ask if they want it first, call everyone 'sir,' and don’t spill anything on anyone.”

“Yes, ma’am. “ John ducked his head, and hefting the pitcher, pushed through the door.
It's All in the Hips

Chapter Summary

John continues being sucked into Sherlock's investigation, but why question things too closely if it involves some sexy purple trousers?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The dining room was a wash of noise and smoke that stung John's eyes as soon as he left the hallway. Hookah pipes, the source of the sour smoke, and braces of candles graced each of the low tables that dotted the room. The sound of the men, lounging on cushions around the tables, laughing and expounding loudly together mixed with the plinking of musicians tuning their instruments in the corner. John braced himself, squared his shoulders, and stepped into the din to approach the first group of diners.

"More ale, sir?"

The swarthy Eastern man merely lifted his cup without looking at him. Carefully John measured out a drink, and moved to the next man. This one looked more local but definitely one of the betters, swathed in some gaudy tunic of velvet and gold braid. It was certainly proof that one couldn't buy good taste. It went much the same at the neighboring table, some wanted ale, some didn’t. John moved steadily around the room at his allotted task. Except for the smoky haze, it wasn’t so different from serving at a temple he mused. Then the dancing girls arrived.

Three of them slipped in from another door, tinkling of small bells, to gather in an open space by the musicians. Swathed head to toe in shifting gauzy scarves and jingling bits, they were something out of a fairy tale. They waited, poised, their hips cocked, arms lifted above their heads for the music to start. At the first notes, the dancers sprang to life.

"JOHN!" Nan stood frowning and waving at him through the door to the kitchen hallway. John scurried quickly back to her. "Here now, we don’t pay you to stand around and gawp. Once them girls is done, you and Davey take the cheese tarts out." She motioned down the hall with a tilt of her head. "Go and help him."

"Yes, ma’am." John ducked his head, and hurried back to the kitchens. He found the youth in question moving tarts from baking pans to serving trays. The boy looked up, and mumbled a greeting as John set to helping him. They shouldered their trays once they were full, and headed back to the dining room. "Ugh, heavy." John muttered under his breath as he followed Davey down the hall. Davey paused as the strange music still trilled in the room beyond. John was more than grateful as they set their trays on a sideboard in the hall to wait for its end.
“Cor, you ever seen anything like that before?” the boy nodded toward the dining room and its exotic show still in progress.

“Can’t say as I have,” John said, stretching his back.

Davey cracked the door to peer through the sliver. “It’s like they don’t have bones,” he whispered in awe.

John found himself wishing he could see the spectacle better, but Davey was blocking the view, pressed as tightly as he was against the door frame. “Small Gods in corners. My hand and I won’t have troubles having fun tonight,” the boy muttered to himself. John rolled his eyes.

Once the music warbled down to a close, John nudged the boy impatiently. “There, are they done now?”

“Oh, yeah, right.” The boy turned, and shook himself as if rousing from a trance. They hefted the trays once more, and moved into the room to distribute tarts. John quickly fell into a rhythm, put plates of food down, collect empty plates back to the tray. He finished two more trips before Nan pushed another jug of ale into his hands and sent him round again. John sighed and wiped his brow.

Where in the frozen underworlds WAS Sherlock? Was he meant to simply play servant all the whole night long waiting for him to show? Demons take the infuriating man.

The musicians started into another warbling tune, this one even slower and moodier than the first if that was even possible. All chatter in the room froze when a new figure glided into room. This dancer wore gauzy purple trousers, a matching sweeping veil over his face . . . and a tray of lit candles balanced atop his head. All Gods save him, it could be no one other than Sherlock.

This time John did stop and stare, but since everyone else did likewise, no one paid him any mind. If John had thought the women earlier were amazing, what little he had seen of them, Sherlock was in some other category all together. He moved like waves around the room, swaying, twirling, skipping, all while keeping the tray of candles perfectly balanced atop his raven curls. His sparkling red sleeveless jacket only covered the top of his chest, and the purple trousers and sash were pushed so far down, they seemed in peril of slipping off all together. Between the two, his bared midriff swiveled and shifted like an oiled length of chain. A gleaming gem somehow affixed to his belly button and rows of jingling bracelets he had added to each forearm flashed in the light with each twist. It was utterly mesmerizing watching the man shimmy his way through the performing space.

The party goers, finally finding their wits, whistled, catcalled, and clapped their appreciation at each of Sherlock’s ever complicated tricks. When the man ducked, turned and caught the tray perfectly in his hands as he came back around, the audience struggled to their feet to give him a standing ovation. Through Sherlock’s pretty bows, John could see that he was nodding his head toward the front entrance to the room. Slowly, John set his jug down on a side table, and slipped out the door to the hallway beyond. The long corridor was darker than the dining room with only a few candles to light its length. John had but a moment to contemplate it though before the veiled dancing boy jingled his way into the hallway with him. Sherlock’s chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath, a fine sheen of sweat covering his forehead.

“Quickly, we’ve no time to lose,” Sherlock hissed. “They’ll be meeting upstairs in a room on the east side of the building. There’s a room next to it we can hide in to listen.”

John could only nod somewhat dumbfounded, watching as Sherlock quickly worked the bangles off his arms and unwound his jingly sash. Bundling the lot into a tight ball, he stuffed it into a cabinet nearby. Task done, he brushed past John to open a door leading to some stairs, and darted in, waving for John to follow. John took a quick breath, and hurried to keep up. The dim staircase led them
easily enough to an upper hallway, but the two burly men guarding the end of it rose instantly from their chairs to block the way.

“You can’t come this way, this wing’s closed. Private party.” The taller, paunchy guard sneered. He let his eyes roam over Sherlock and John, settling somewhere around Sherlock’s bare belly.

“You and your pretty boy will have to have your own, uh, private party somewhere else.” The other ginger-haired guard chuckled at his own joke.

Sherlock reached back to grab John’s wrist. The sudden contact between their skin nearly crackled.

“Oh good sirs, you look so lonely up here all alone while everyone else makes merry below. Pray, could I fetch you an ale at least to lighten your wait?” Sherlock eelied his way forward in a hip-swaying walk that drew all eyes until he could lay hands lightly on each of the guard’s forearms. A small glow accompanied his touch as both of the guard’s faces suddenly went slack. They slumped unceremoniously down to their chairs.

“Blessed Gallanus, what did you do to them Sherlock?” John frowned.

“Don’t worry, John, I just borrowed the knack of that light trance you healers do for pain relief. It won’t last but a minute and they won’t remember seeing us. Hurry!”

Sherlock grabbed his arm again and pulled him toward a door just down the hall. It opened onto a linen cupboard. Sherlock pushed John in and quickly shut the door behind them.

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The room was very small. By moonlight slanting in the one small, high window, they could just see the shelves of folded white towels and linens around them. Sherlock pulled off his veil and used it to blot his face.

“Is that silk?” John asked.

“Oh John, who cares what it costs? Take it home and wash it if it matters so much to you.” He pushed it into John’s hands.

“Now give me a bit of a boost, I need to get that window open.”

John stuffed the scarf into a pocket, and moved to help Sherlock climb up onto a shelf so that he could reach the window. Sherlock pushed a moment on a rusty latch and then with a small squeak, the window opened. Sherlock reached into a pocket inside his top, and pulled out what looked like two strings. Holding one set of ends, he tossed the others out the window, then eased himself back down to the floor.

“What’s that?” John said

“Extendable ears. I know someone who makes them. Here place this in your ear.” He passed one of the string ends to John. “In a few minutes when the men planning the attack gather next door, we will be ready. Make sure you listen closely. Details can be critical.”

“Why . . .” John began, but Sherlock cut him off, putting his fingers over John’s lips and shaking his head. The guards outside were rousing and moving again. They froze listening to the men rumbling around in the hall. John moved into parade rest, settling in to stillness. Sherlock grinned at him, no
mistaking the look on his face even in the dim moonlight. He too settled, listening like a great cat poised to strike.

They waited. Standing in the quiet of the cupboard, time stretched like a river. John slowed his breathing. The scent of Sherlock, the sweet smell of the make-up still on him, but a richer musk under it that was Sherlock alone, filled his nose. The man was such a presence next to him in the dark, looming slightly taller. John could feel the heat of his body mere inches away. If he moved his hand slightly, he could just brush the filmy texture of Sherlock’s dancing trousers with his fingertips. John closed his eyes and willed his cock to lie flat. He mentally worked his way through the litany of greater and lesser holiday prayers. He was up to the Blessing of the Great Convergence when the sounds of a group finally entering the hallway reached them. Sherlock twitched, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Showtime!" he mouthed.

Chapter End Notes

A shout-out to my girl J.K. Rowling for borrowing "extendable ears" from her nonpareil "Harry Potter" series. Thanks, love!
John and Sherlock stood tensed, listening closely, at the sounds of the men gathering next door. Chairs legs scraping on the floor, shuffling, and snippets of conversation reached them as their neighbors settled down to business.

“I appreciate your gathering here tonight gentleman. These are dangerous times for those who don’t agree with the powers that be,” a deep voice rumbled.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” a second voice said.

“You’ve spoken with . . . your friend, and you’re sure, if the obstacles are removed, our trade interests will be resolved?” came a third.

“Yes, good men,” the deep voice answered. “All of your needs will be taken care of for your expressed support in the matter.”

“They are sure this will be done, no half measures to come and bite us in the arse later?” a fourth voice whinged.

“My friend assures me that all will be taken care of most efficiently,” deep voice soothed.

“When and where are we to expect the happy occasion to take place?”

“I am not privy to that information, but I am assured that with the help of the Macmillans’ wares it will be . . . illuminating.”

“And what of the babe-to-be?”

“That, my good gentlemen, will be taken care of as well,” deep voice purred.

Sherlock started. Falling back, his arm knocked the shelf behind him spilling a basket and its contents to the floor.

“What was that?” came from next door. Chairs scraped, footsteps fell. Quick as a flash, Sherlock grabbed the extendable ears and winding them down, slipped them back into his pocket.

“Sherlock, what . . .”

John broke off when Sherlock pulled him quickly against him, and all questions dissolved in a puff when Sherlock swooped in and crushed their mouths together. John groaned, his hands winding around Sherlock to steady them, one hand gripping his back, the other finding a handful of his lush behind. John blinked in surprise when the door wrenched open, light from the hallway spilling over
them. He had completely forgotten about the commotion brewing.

“What are these two mice doing creeping up here?” the bigger guard, Fatty, demanded, dragging them out into the hall.

“Oi, mate I think you can see what they were doing!” the shorter one, Ginger, laughed rudely.

“Please, sir. I’m sorry.” Sherlock had curled in on himself. With his head ducked, he looked suddenly much smaller and younger. “I need to get back to work, or I’ll be in trouble.”

“I’m needed in the kitchens, sir,” John added tugging a forelock, following Sherlock’s lead to hunch his shoulders low.

"You. What’s going on out here?” someone demanded hotly from next door.

“Nothing, sir,” Fatty called back. “Just found a couple silly buggers having a little slap and tickle in the hall cupboard.”

“Well, then deal with it. Get rid of them.”

“Yes, sir.” The fat guard nodded, and the door to the meeting room clicked shut.

“Alright you two, time to haul your sweet arses out of here, and keep them where they’re meant to be.” Fatty made to wave them off.

“Hang on a mo.’ I wouldn’t mind a little time with this one.” Ginger tipped his chin toward Sherlock, and reached out to grab his upper arm. “How much for a little bounce, cupcake?” He licked his lips, breathing a sour stench that John could smell from several paces away.

“He’s not for sale.” John growled, straightening up.

“Ah the puppy has teeth!” Fatty laughed. “Don’t be greedy, son. We’ll give him back to you when we’re done.”

“I have to get back down, they’ll be looking…” Sherlock struggled against Ginger’s grip.

The guards were bigger than John, but he had already squared himself to take them both on. “Let go of him now!” he ground out through clenched teeth.


Without a second thought, John unleashed himself. He slammed a forearm into the throat of the guard holding Sherlock. The man staggered, releasing his captive. He collapsed fully when John kicked his leg out with a full-on snarl. John whipped his head around as Fatty grabbed at the truncheon at his waist, but before John could even go for the knife down his boot, Sherlock had smashed the idiot’s face with a head-butt, and knocked him half-unconscious to the floor.

“What in the All-Father’s name is going on…” the door to the meeting room had popped open again.

Sherlock, his eyes wide, touched John’s arm. “Run.”

Before the guards could regain their feet, John and Sherlock were pounding down the stairs. John followed Sherlock’s lead, through a corridor toward the front of the inn. Sherlock snagged two cloaks hanging on pegs and lobbed one at John. They pulled them on as they rounded the corner and
entered the main taproom. A crowd gathered over the many tables and benches set around the room, and John and Sherlock quickly threaded their way through, making a bee-line for the front door.

John bumped into a girl carrying two tankards that she spilled down her front. “Shite. . .” she swore looking down at the mess. “Sorry!” John called back - there was no time for any more.

“Stop them!” the ginger guard yelled, bursting into the pub room after them.

Sherlock reached the front door just as a couple was coming in. He grabbed John's arm, and pulled them both past to spring out into the street. Sherlock's long legs carried him along like a thoroughbred, and John struggled to keep up. Ginger wasn’t much of a runner at all though, and after Sherlock darted into a nearby alley, leading John through a stable yard, a laundry, and an overgrown garden, the guard was long-gone history left behind. They finally stopped behind a brewery to catch their breath.

“That was amazing,” John laughed, wheezing as they leaned against the brick wall.

“You were amazing,” Sherlock breathed. “I like how you defended my honor back there. You know I could have handled him though.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to blow our cover.”

“That’s all right. It’s fine. I liked it.” Sherlock grinned.

“How did you learn to dance like that? That was . . . incredible.”

“I did a favor once for a woman who led a dance troupe . . .”

“And she gave you lessons in return, right,” John finished for him. “Did you get the information you wanted?”

“I did, and more besides.” Sherlock said, sobering. "This isn’t a case of simple trade disagreements we heard tonight. This is conspiracy to murder the king and coming heir – treason of the highest order.”

“Gods save us.”

“Indeed.”
Lovers don't finally meet - they're in each other all along

Chapter Summary

The end of the night is no end.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter is lifted from a poem by Rumi, a 13th century Sufi poet, truly one of the most beautiful, lyrical writers to have ever lived.

It had been an ordeal getting back. John and Sherlock walked for quite awhile along the lonely country road before meeting a dairy cart headed toward Delphium. For a silver coin dug from a purse in Sherlock’s boot, the farmer let them catch a ride on the back of his wagon. John leaned against Sherlock and promptly fell asleep in the straw next to the milk jugs.

“John, wake up. We’re here.”

Sherlock shook John awake once they made it into the city. John pulled upright, sleepy and stretching, his blonde hair sticking up, tangled with straw. It was still several miles of walking before they made it to the dress shop though. Sherlock pulled a key from around his neck, and let them into the back of the store when they finally arrived. They moved carefully in the dark until Sherlock produced a jar of mage light from a shelf, dipping candles into it to set them burning. John pulled off his cloak, and sank onto one of the chairs, running his hands over his face as Sherlock set the candles around to light the room.

“Cor, what a night. I hope we never go back to that Inn again,” John groaned.

“A daring chase through stable yards not to your liking?”

“No, it’s that woman Nan from the kitchens. I not only scarpered off before the pudding course, but we nicked her bloody cloak to top it off.” John flipped the garment over to show a small tag reading “Nan Brockett” inside. “If she ever sees me again, she’ll probably skin me alive. Sherlock, is there some way to get these cloaks back? I feel bad stealing like that.”

Sherlock chuckled. “Never fear John. I have contacts who can take care of that.” He took his own cloak off and tossed it over one of the boxes in the corner. “Thirsty?”

“Gods, yes.”

Sherlock found two bottles of ale in a wardrobe and popping the tops, handed one to John. They both drank deeply.
“I have to get this make-up off. It’s starting to itch. It only comes off with the cream.” Sherlock stripped off the ridiculous little red jacket, and found the jar of soapy cream and two cloths. “John, do my back again, please?”

Like bookends to the start of the evening, John found himself wiping cream over Sherlock’s back, this time taking the color off. John decided he definitely preferred the natural pale white of Sherlock’s skin. Wiping the brown away was like finding a statue hidden in a block of stone, only this one lived and moved with each breath. John found himself falling into a quickly disintegrating orbit around this gorgeous vision. When Sherlock turned in his arms, it wasn’t even a thought before their lips found each other. Sherlock’s mouth was a wild thing kissing and biting, his tongue licking deeply into the recesses of John’s mouth. John plunged his hands into Sherlock's curls, and grabbed handfuls to hang on. It was a shock when after but a minute, John groaned, and turning his head, wrenched his mouth away. Sherlock tried vainly to follow.

“Sherlock, wait. Wait,” John panted, grabbing Sherlock’s upper arms to keep him at bay. Sherlock looked a mess, his curls in mad clumps, prism eyes so bright, lush mouth still parted. John struggled to draw a good breath. “I have to tell you I’m flattered, but I consider myself married to the temple.”

“Wrong. You’re still a noviate.” Sherlock's chest rose as he too struggled to breathe fully. "You haven’t been at that temple six months. You aren’t pledged to anything yet.”

John's eyes dropped to the flush that had spread across Sherlock's chest. “I know, but I meant to. I mean it was part of my plans . . .” His tongue darted out to wet his lower lip as he tried to assemble thoughts that had once seemed so clear.

“Aren't all acts of love and pleasure rituals of the Great Goddess?” Sherlock lifted one eyebrow. “Yes of course, but I can't just . . .” John stepped back, raking a hand through his hair to send his fringe sticking straight up in its wake.

“John.” Sherlock dropped his already husky voice to an even lower register. "Are you interested in following out-of-date plans, or would you rather shag me senseless into that bed?” His eyes cut to the mattress on the floor.

“Oh, Gods.”

John nearly toppled Sherlock flinging himself against the man, but Sherlock was stronger than he looked. He absorbed the embrace, rocking them together. mouths caught again sliding frantically against each other. John shifted and took charge of the kissing, leading Sherlock into a slower, sweeter dance of lips and tongues. When Sherlock grabbed John’s hips to grind their erections together, John groaned shamelessly.

“Bed. Now.” Sherlock growled against his ear.

They parted briefly to tear at John’s clothes, the tunic, belt, leggings, boots, and knife strapped to his calf were soon tossed across the room. Sherlock worked his boots off and made to shuck the purple trousers when John’s hands stopped him.

“No, keep them on a bit longer.”

In a few steps they were tumbling over onto the stuffed mattress. Sherlock sprawled on top as they pulled each other back into deep, drugging kisses. Sherlock bit at John’s lower lip, then moved to run his tongue down the side of his neck, sliding himself over John like a great cat. He pulled on the chain around John's neck with his teeth then dropped the necklace to the side to lick hot stripes over
his pebbled nipples. Sherlock bit lightly, then pulled each nipple, hard, into his mouth in turn.

“Great Mother!” John jerked up off the bed.

Sherlock nipped his way down John’s lightly-furred belly until he met the straining mound in his linen shorts. He wrapped his mouth around John’s erection and sucked through the fabric. John writhed under him. Sherlock pulled at the fabric with his teeth until John shifted his hips, and let him reach up and tug his underwear free. He eased the fabric over John’s legs and feet, then tossed it over his shoulder to join the rest of the tangle across the floor. With a growl, Sherlock swooped back in to claim his lover’s naked cock, hard and curving back toward his belly. He took John’s glans in to swallow him whole.

“Ah, stop . . . stop, love. Too fast.” John grabbed at Sherlock’s shoulders. Sherlock popped off with a small disappointed whine, but allowed himself to be pulled up to lie next to his lover. John smiled and pushed back the curls that had fallen over Sherlock’s forehead.

“It’s been awhile for me. Let’s take it a bit slower.”

“If you wish.” Sherlock ducked his chin down.

John could almost hear the pout in his words. “Silly git, come here.”

John leaned in, and slipped a finger under Sherlock’s chin to tilt his face back up. Tenderly, he kissed his forehead, each eyelid, each cheekbone, then let his nose slide against the side of his face. He ran his hand up and down Sherlock’s hip to feel the slip of the silky purple trousers clinging to his flank. Reaching down, he caressed his arse, kneading a comfortable handful. When he felt the proper amount of fondling had passed, John rolled Sherlock onto his back with a satisfied grunt, and leaned over to take his lips again. So thoroughly distracted was the clever man, that he didn’t appear to notice when John’s fingers crept under his waistband. So slowly, John stroked his way down the plane of warm flesh until he cradled Sherlock’s hard penis under his hand.

“Where did you come from you beautiful, beautiful man?”

Sherlock merely watched wide-eyed as John carefully peeled the purple bottoms down, kissing his way softly over each new inch of skin revealed. He kissed over his stomach, across his cock, along the inner groins and the juncture to his thighs. Sherlock lifted his hips for John as he pulled the trousers the rest of the way off. John rewarded him with small kisses along the soft inside of each leg, paying special attention to the back of each knee. He moved down for a final nibble along one curved instep and then the other, before finally returning to lay fully over him. Holding Sherlock’s skull between his palms, John ghosted lips across his face, dipping down to mouth over the shell of one ear.

“You have some oil or cream, yes?” he whispered dark and low.

Sherlock nodded and John moved aside to let him fetch it. Sherlock returned with a small jar. John pulled him back down with a kiss, and rolled over onto him again.

“My sweet boy.” John smiled.

John kissed at his neck, ran a soft tongue around each of Sherlock’s pink nipples, listening to the catch of breath in his lover’s throat. So gently John kissed back down past Sherlock’s navel, stopping to swirl his tongue into the dip. He nuzzled into the cradle of his pelvis, and took Sherlock’s cock into his mouth with a small sigh, holding it there for a moment against his tongue. He pulled
back, dragging the flat of his tongue along the shaft, returning to suckle at the glans with a harder pressure.

Sherlock melted under him, murmuring something incoherent, deep and rumbling.

John pulled off, and shifted back. He slid his hands under Sherlock, spreading him, urging his thighs farther apart. He leaned back on one elbow, and gently slid a finger between his cleft to touch the sweet pucker within.

“The jar?” He asked. Wordlessly Sherlock reached where it had fallen and pressed it into John’s hand. John uncapped it. It smelled of honey and clover. John scooped a generous portion from the jar, and moved his hand back to Sherlock’s opening. Cautiously he worked a finger past the tight entrance, as Sherlock arched his head back, and groaned.

“Open up for me, love, open,” John whispered as he slipped another finger in, and pressed. He set a slow rhythm, moving in and out as Sherlock rocked back against the mattress.

“Joooohn.”

“Yes, love?”

“Fuck me. . . please . . . now .”

“Yes, love.”

John took another scoop of cream from the jar and left it on the floor beside the bed. Taking his own cock in hand, his slicked himself root to tip, then lined himself up with Sherlock and pushed slowly in. Sherlock curled up around him, his fingers gripping into John’s back as he bottomed out. John rocked slowly back, pulling out slightly, to slide back home. With each stroke, he pulled out and pushed in a bit farther. Sherlock tilted his pelvis to match each thrust. Soon they were pumping together, crashing like waves. John pressed his face to Sherlock’s throat.

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“Ah, ah, ah, AH.”

John felt the hot splash of come across his belly as Sherlock tipped over and fell apart. He followed shortly after emptying himself into his lover in surge after surge.

After, they lay tangled just breathing until Sherlock kissed John’s cheek, and gently rolled him to the side to go find flannels to rub over their sticky parts. He pulled a wool blanket over them both and lay down facing John, running a long finger lightly over his chest. John caught his hand and brushed a kiss over his knuckles.

“I should go. I need to get back to the temple before I’m missed,” John whispered.

“Stay. it’s only a few hours til dawn. Go when it’s light.”

“All right.”

They slipped arms across each other and fell into the deepest sleep side by side.
John woke to the full light of day streaming across his face. His arm went to the other side of the bed, and he groped about. Empty. He sat up, and rubbed his eyes. Alone again. This was becoming something of a pattern, John thought, looking around the room. It remained much the same as the previous day though the candles had been tidied away, and a croissant and a note lay waiting on the table. John pushed the covers back, and rose to amble over, scratching at his belly. Only after taking a large bite of the croissant did he unfold the note.

"I couldn’t bear to wake you.
I’m sure you realize you can speak of last night to no one.
Thank you again.
The privies are out back to the right. – S"

John laughed in a huff, and set about finding his priest’s gear, finally spying it on a shelf by the door. John dressed quickly, then folded the clothes he had worn the night before, leaving them on a chair. When his hand touched the purple veil Sherlock has worn in one of the pockets, he pulled it out. He brought it to his nose, and inhaled deeply. It smelled musky and exotic, just like Sherlock. John looked around as though someone might be watching and shoved it into a pocket inside his robes before leaving.

John hadn't the money for a cab, so he simply walked as briskly as he could back to the Temple of the Small Gods. Shortly after finishing his croissant, it had occurred to him that he was probably late for his kitchen duty. John made it to the back door of the temple in record time. Nodding to the priests out weeding the gardens, he slipped inside and nonchalantly made for the kitchens. Yup, not in a hurry, Haven't been out all night. Not me. He groaned quietly as he passed the dining hall and
found that he had indeed missed lunch clean up. Only a few men remained in the main kitchen, tidying away the last of the dishes, and wiping down the tables.

“Brother John, there you are!” Brother Mykal emerged from the cupboard.

“I’m so sorry I missed my work time,” John hurried to say. “I was . . . called to other duties.”

“No worries, Brother Ezriel, switched times with you this morning. You’ll be washing dinner dishes instead tonight.”

“Then I am grateful to him. “ John ducked his head, looking hopefully humble.

“Oh, and Brother Gregson left word that you were to see him when you returned,” Mykal said, wiping his hands on a nearby cloth.

“Ah. Thank you for the message.” John smiled tightly before leaving the room.

*Shite.* Of course the head of the temple wanted to see him. John visited the baths for a wash, then grabbed fresh clothes from his room. He doubted Brother Gregson would appreciate smelling “eau du roll in the hay” on his person. Suitably attired, John walked the halls to Brother Gregson’s office quickly, but with decorum. John braced himself as he entered the room, but it was empty save for a younger noviate, Brother Anders, sweeping the floor.

“Good day, Brother Anders. I’m looking for Brother Gregson?”

“Good day.” Anders paused to lean on his broom. “I think he said he was going to the library. You might find him there.”

"Thank you, brother. Erm, did he seem . . . upset in any way?” No sense in not getting the lay of the land before approaching the temple head John thought.

Anders looked puzzled. "No. He seemed in usual spirits."

"Ah, excellent news, I'm sure." John pasted on a smile. "Always nice to be having a nice day. I'll just go see if I can find him at the library then. Erm, Cheers." John backed out awkwardly and made his way to the temple’s library, trying not to think too hard on the reception he would find when he arrived there.

John pushed open the door to the library, and spied the head priest busy at the reading tables. Gregson was a silver-haired man very fit despite his years with a welcoming, capable air about him no matter what he was doing. He was kind, but smart enough not to suffer fools gladly. John had liked him the minute he'd first met him. Brother Gregson looked up from his scroll as John moved into the room.

"Ah, Brother John. Glad to see you back safe and sound with us. I was a bit worried when no one had seen you last night.”

“Yes, I’m so sorry, I got called away on duties . . .” John trailed off.

Gregson watched him for a moment. “Then I got a note this morning telling me that you had been called away to help a sick cousin. I didn’t realize you had family in the area.”

“Ah, distant family,” John said faintly.

“I see. Brother John, walk with me.” Gregson rolled his scroll closed, and handed it to another priest.
“Put this away for me please, there’s a good lad.” He nodded at John to follow him out of the room, and they walked abreast down the corridor together.

“Brother John, tell me, are you finding your time at the temple satisfying?”

“Yes, yes, I think so.” John said, screwing up his forehead to think.

Brother Gregson led them to the back door, and they emerged into the afternoon sunlight to walk through the gardens. “You know we don’t need to have food gardens at our temple. We could simply buy fruits and vegetables at the market. They’d probably taste about the same, and take a lot less of our time. We make more money with our scribe work, and manuscript copying. Why do you think we bother with having a vegetable garden here?”

They stood looking down at the rows of lettuce, and flowering broad beans, as a fat bumblebee hummed by.

John took a breath. “Well, sir. It’s a good work we do with our own hands. It’s something that follows a cycle from seed to table, from winter to fall. It connects us to the Mother and her creations.”

“Good. That’s a very good book answer. Now why else do you think we might have a garden?”

“It gives people something to do?” John guessed.

“Hmmmm.” Brother Gregson considered him for a moment, and continued walking. He led them farther through the vegetable garden to a bench in the herb patch, gesturing that John should sit.

After he had, Gregson settled next to him, adjusting his robes to hang better over his knees.

“Brother John, some people see temples as an escape from life, as an island from the storm. They come to hide, but unfortunately when you try to hide from yourself, you only succeed in bringing your problems with you. Those of us who dedicate our lives to temple service know that we are far from an island – we are on the front lines for the people we serve. Of course there’s the politics, getting the resources to keep our temple open. But those games come second to the real work of the temple.”

John looked at him and nodded in what he hoped was an interested, but not in any way guilty of something manner.

“Brother John, you’ve got seven months before you decide to pledge yourself to this temple. I want you to use that time wisely, to consider if this is the life you chose.”

“Yes sir, thank you sir, I will.” John nodded.

“Good man. I have high hopes for you. You’ve done well here so far.” Brother Gregson smiled wearily at him, and reached over to clap John on the knee. He pulled himself to his feet, and gave John a small bow.

“Good day to you, Brother John.”

“Good day to you, Brother Gregson.”

John watched the older man walk back into the temple wondering what in frozen hells to make of all that.
A full fortnight passed with no word from Sherlock. John covered his prayer room duty, and his work details around the temple. He sat in services and daily prayers. He still took walks on afternoons. Twice he went back by Madam LaSalle’s dress shop, but it was always closed when he sauntered by. He thought about using the ring on his neck chain to send a message by Mrs. Hudson, but it made his stomach burn to think about chasing after someone who wasn’t actually interested in him. Sometimes, he felt like he had dreamed the whole thing. Only the ring on the chain around his neck, and the purple scarf tucked under his pillow told him differently.

He was completely unprepared to walk into his room one afternoon, and find Sherlock dressed in priest’s robes sprawled across his bed.

“Sherlock! How did you get in here?”

“I just walked in.” Sherlock sat upright, waving a hand carelessly. “People notice very little of what they see. If I look like I belong, then people assume I do.”

“Well, you don’t belong in my bedroom. I’m a bleeding PRIEST in case you forgot.”

“Well, you don’t belong in my bedroom. I’m a bleeding PRIEST in case you forgot.”

“John, I forget very little. Curse of a superior intellect.” Sherlock tapped one slim finger against his forehead, as he pushed to his feet to stand. This was even worse than him lying across John’s bed. The man was so blessed tall, that any standing by default involved LOOMING.

“Oh sit down for Gallanus’ sake. There’s too much TALL going on in the room,” John grumped.

He pulled a stool out from under his desk for Sherlock to perch on then flung himself down onto his bed.

“I left the money in the donation box,” Sherlock said in a bright tone.

“Sorry?” John glared at him.

“I told you I’d donate money from my investigative work to the temple. I would have left money with you that morning, but . . . that seemed to have other implications.”

“Oh really.” John returned. “Implications? Implications like you planned to ‘wine, dine, sixty-nine, and that’s all my time?’ I didn’t plan on being your tart or one-night stand.” John crossed his arms over his chest.

“You see. It wasn’t like that.”

“Oh really? What was it like then?”

“John. I’ve been busy. You could have sent me a message. I wondered why you didn’t.”

“Really? You thought we could pass notes back and forth like schoolchildren in class?” John raised his eyebrows high.

“John why are you being like this?” Sherlock ignored his directive to stay sitting, and rose to climb onto John’s lap. “I missed you.” His multi-colored eyes shone like a jungle cat’s in the muted light.

John couldn’t help himself. He pulled Sherlock close and buried his nose in the man’s neck. Sherlock turned his head and kissed at the side of John’s face. Before John knew it, he had wound
his fingers up into Sherlock’s dark curls, and they were swapping deep, open-mouthed kisses. Gods, John had missed the taste of him.

“Sherlock, no, no, we can’t do this here.” John turned his head to the side.

“Why not? It’s a private room with a door that closes.” Sherlock mouthed at his neck.

“STOP THAT! It’s my bedroom at a TEMPLE where I am serving as noviate.” John pushed back as much as he could without falling right over.

“Why give you private rooms if they don’t expect you to put them to good use?” Sherlock leered down at him.

“We’re meant to use them for quiet meditation—a drawing away from distractions of the world. Plus the occasional wank of course.”

“Well, see there, I can be of infinite use on that last one.”

“That was a joke. Really we have to stop.”

“If we must, John.”

Sherlock pushed himself upright, and put his hand down to pull John up too. He looked so . . . so very fuckable with his curls wildly tousled. John swallowed, and waved him off. He was afraid what he might do if he touched him again.

“You, go stand in the corner.”

“Have I been naughty, Brother? Do you need a ruler to smack across my hands?” Sherlock drawled suggestively, holding out said palms in offering.

“Sherlock, please. Stop.”

When Sherlock saw actual anguish in John’s eyes, he straightened up. “As much as I enjoyed the snogging, that isn’t exactly why I came to see you today.”

“No?”

“No, I need your help. I am continuing to investigate the . . . certain subject we overhead on our last foray. I am following up on all prominent families and businesses called ‘MacMillan’ in the city. I’ve narrowed it down to five possibilities. Three of them are gathering today, and I need to infiltrate their midst to investigate. I need your help. I won’t insult you by offering you pay. This would be a great favor to me and I would owe you.”

“Where is this gathering happening, and what EXACTLY would I be doing to help you?”

“The gathering would be a funeral of the head of MacMillian Quarry works at the Dark Crone Temple of the Saved, and you would be accompanying me as a fellow priest to the event . . . this afternoon.”

“You’ll be impersonating a priest?”

“Well, I can’t go as myself. They wouldn’t let me in to a private funeral, but you religious folks gather at deaths like crows to the carrion. You can’t shake a stick at a memorial without hitting five different brands of priests and priestesses.”
“All right, going beyond the utter blasphemy of your plan. Why do you need me? Why can’t you just go, and be a faux priest, and spy on these people?”

“John, I don’t know how to actually be a priest. I need you to come and be priest-like if anyone talks to us.”

John sighed and passed his hand over his eyes. “Gods save me, I must be mad. But fine. I’ll go with you. Great Mother knows what trouble you’ll get into without me there. Just let me get my cloak and bag.”
The chase is on for Sherlock and John.

John made Sherlock put his hood up and leave his bedroom first. No sense tempting fate John had told him. He waited a few minutes after Sherlock's departure, chanting his way through the "Contemplation of Forgiving Transgressions" to fill the time. It seemed very apropos of the afternoon’s activities. John took a final deep breath when finished, and left his room with a jaunty, I'm-just–off-to-do-an-errand-nothing-to-see-here step. He was almost home free, the door lay in reach, one more step, when Brother Anders appeared in front of him.

“Brother John, I was just looking for you!”

“Oh?” John kept the most innocent expression he could manage across his face.

“T’m practicing memorizing my 'Ten Reasons for the World’s Existence' catechism. I was hoping you could spend a few minutes spotting me."

“Ordinarily, I’d love to help you work on your litany, but it just so happens I have a previous date, sorry.”

“A date?”

“Well, a business appointment . . . with a priest from another temple. He wanted my help deciphering a manuscript they’re working on.”

“Really?” Anders eyes widened. “You, a noviate? They asked for you specifically?”

“Well, as I said the priest is a friend of mine, and . . . would you look at the time, I’m really running late. I’m so sorry, perhaps another time. Good Day to you, Brother Anders. “

“Good Day, Brother John.” Anders called after his retreating back. John could feel his eyes on him all the way out the temple door.

Ack. Lies. He was telling outright lies to people now. John wondered what level of karmic retribution he might be tempting from the Gods at this point. John rounded the side of the temple and set off toward the cross street. Sherlock stood waiting for him at the hat vendor’s shop, peering intently at the contents of the front window.

“Looking for some new head-gear for the upwardly noble?” John asked when he reached Sherlock, reading a placard by the hats display .

“John, why would anyone want to wear false fruit on their head?” Sherlock furrowed his brow adorably.

“I don’t know, it’s a fashion statement. Listen, what time is this funeral? What time do we need to be
there?” John looked at their reflections side by side in the shop window, and marveled again at how tall Sherlock was. John felt positively petite next to him.

“We have a little time. I thought we could walk the distance. It’s only over the Gadwick Bridge.” Sherlock nodded his head in the general direction.

"All right then. Lead the way, good sir." John swept out an arm, and the two of them set off together.

John found himself enjoying the walk once he lengthened his stride to keep up with his friend’s ridiculously long legs. The morning had been clouds and rain, but at mid-day the sun broke through the clouds to shine its blessing down on Delphium. It made even the glum stone buildings of the city look cheerful. John loved a good sunny day, though it always seemed a bit not right to have pretty weather on your way to a funeral. Although he supposed someone died somewhere every day of the week. Despite the warmth, Sherlock kept his hood firmly up as he soldiered on at a good clip. They worked their way through the main market area. John grinned at the usual hustle and bustle until Sherlock stopped them at a clothing booth.

“Well met, Brothers.” The shopgirl, a woman with her flaxen hair in small braids greeted them. “A fine day we’re having isn’t it?”

“Well met, Goodwoman,” John replied politely. “It is nice isn’t? Always lovely to get some sun after a few days of wet.”

“Last week was just awful, so gloomy. I get to feeling poorly when we don’t have sun all week. I have an aunt . . .”

Whatever the shopgirl was about to share about her aunt was lost when Sherlock cut over her. “We need to purchase some handkerchiefs. What do you have?”

“I’ve got some real toff ones, and then some every day sorts, four for a bronze coin.”

“We’ll take twelve of the cheaper ones,” Sherlock said, counting coins out of a small purse he had produced. The woman took the coins and passed over their purchase.

“Ta. You look familiar.” She peered more closely at John. “Come around here often, Brother . . .?”


“I’m called Elise.” The girl grinned. She had an adorable line of freckles across her nose. “I’m always here on Wednesdays and Fridays. Come round some afternoon, I might have some things to pass on.” She winked warmly at him.

“Ta, I’ll remember that.” John smiled back.

“Come, Brother.” Sherlock touched his arm. “We must be off.”

“Good Day.” John nodded at the woman as Sherlock pulled him away.

“Good Day, Brothers!” she called after them.

“What is that woman thinking flirting with you? Clearly you’re a priest.” Sherlock all but harrumphed as they walked away.

John laughed. “That didn’t stop you. Besides, she was just being nice.” Sherlock merely snorted in reply.
When they passed a vendor selling roasted nuts, Sherlock stopped, and bought a packet for John. “Your stomach was growling,” was all he said by way of explanation, and they continued on.

“Anything you want to tell me about this MacMillan family and what to expect today?” John asked, crunching a spiced almond as they left the noise of the market behind.

“The patriarch of a large family business, Arturo MacMillan of MacMillan Stone Quarries died two days ago. He leaves three sons, two daughters, and three wives behind to divide the spoils. The family is a possible suspect for the case we are investigating. We will be there to . . . observe. And speaking of that, here put these in your pocket.” Sherlock handed John half of the handkerchiefs.

“What’s this for, then?” John asked.

“It’s a funeral, John.” Sherlock said. “There will be weeping.”

“But, Sherlock, we don’t even know the man!”

Sherlock grinned, and let the way onward.

Dark Crone Temple of the Saved proved to be an imposing building graced by a row of fluted columns and iron lanterns hanging across a front portico. A knot of people gathered before the front door waiting to enter, and John and Sherlock quietly joined the back. Slowly the queue filed in through the open doors to the foyer within. The murmurs and footfalls on the tiled floors echoed up to the gilded ceiling high overhead.

“Gods, I bet mopping takes forever at this place.” John whistled looking around. Sherlock merely raised an eyebrow his way as they shuffled along with the crowd.

Two over-sized statues flanked the entranceway to the main hall of the temple. On the left stood an imposing old woman carved in dark stone, Heketi, the Crone, dressed in flowing robes. To the right stood Gallanus, the healer, in white marble in naught but a loincloth, barefoot among wildflowers that wound up about his ankles. Braziers on a pedestal held a bright flame before each. John stopped and fished some herbs out of his bag to drop as offering into the brazier before the God. “Blessed Gallanus, keep us well and hale over the travels of our lives.” John bowed his head, touching his fingers briefly to his forehead, then heart, then lips. He moved to drop another small bundle into the flame before the Goddess. “Blessed Heketi, fold us into your dark arms when our travels are through.” John bowed his head deeply as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Sherlock stood aside quietly watching him, his head slightly cocked, prism eyes shining. Priestesses in black robes moved quietly about directing people to doors on the sides leading to private chambers. Sherlock stopped one, and looking suddenly quite on the verge of tears asked her, “Pardon me, Sister, do you know where we might find the MacMillan rite?”

“But of course, Brother. It’s this way.” She led them to a door open on the right and gestured to the large room beyond.

“Thank you so much.” Sherlock dipped his head, sniffing loudly.

Sherlock and John entered the dimly-lit room. Only a few small high windows, and torches along the walls provided scant light. The smell of thick incense enveloped them as their eyes adjusted and
shapes emerged—people moving to the rows of chairs, the padded benches for the family, and the figure well wrapped in shrouds and herbs at the far end of the room.

Sherlock nudged John toward the benches where the family was receiving visitors. A stout ginger-haired man with a bulbous nose stood facing a thinner man with a smaller version of the same nose.

“I want to know!” Big nose complained.

“Argus, for the love of the Great Mother, sit down.” Smaller nose looked red in the face.

“I just asked if the flowers were covered or if we have to pay extra. I am NOT springing for some sodding white roses if they aren’t already covered.” Big nose crossed his arms over his chest.

"What a pair of cheap bastards you both are," a third younger man chimed in, scowling.

“Just hush!” A woman with ginger hair in a top knot joined the fray. “Papa lies waiting to be burned, and here you are thinking about MONEY?”

“Well someone has to think about the money if this family is to survive. How much did you spend on new sandals for the funeral? If anyone knows about money it certainly isn’t you.” Big nose rallied.

A visibly-pregnant woman, sitting nearby, her blonde hair cropped into short spikes around her ears, buried her face in her hands, and began to weep loudly.

“ENOUGH. SIT, and put a sock in it Sienna.” A sturdy woman with short grey hair pointed her hands down, and everyone sat. She glared daggers at all and sundry, only softening when she turned to accept kisses from an arriving trio of old grannies swathed in black. Ah, the professional mourners, John thought. All the best families had them to their memorials. Generally, John found their wails annoying, but he could see how it set the mood.

A priestess, elegant in her dark robes, swept in to the room. “If you will all take your seats, please? We will begin shortly.”

Sherlock hurried to find them places near the front, cutting off two well-dressed ladies in the process. “John, over here!” Sherlock stage-whispered, beckoned him over.

“Excuse me please, madames.” John sketched a bow toward the scowling ladies, and moved to join the madman.

Doors opened, and John swiveled to watch as four priestesses entered from the back, chanting strong and low, "Dark Mother, Crone Mother, Heketi, come." The first carried a staff with small bells that she shook as they walked. The next held a bowl of water that she dipped her fingers in to sprinkle drops about. Another carried a basket of flower petals that she tossed behind the procession, and the last bore a censer pouring out yet another cloud of incense to cloak the room. They circled the body three times, then stepped aside to allow an older priestess to take center stage.

The small woman seemed to grow taller than her stooped form might allow as she spread her hands and spoke. “We gather to bid farewell to this child of the Mother, given to the embrace of the Crone. We gather to honor the life and death of Arturo Garvus MacMillan. Who comes to speak today on behalf of this life lived?”

A middle aged, balding man in a gaudy tunic made his way to the front. “It’s a sad day to bid farewell to a great man like Arturo. He was a friend to all. He never forgot the little people who helped him get where he was and he was a great contributor to the local Mason’s guild . . .”
The speaker droned on for several minutes, twisting a hat in his hands, before surrendering his position to another business associate who was just as boring as the first. Once he was done, the big-nosed man, who was obviously the deceased man's oldest son, stood up to give a rambling, more heart-felt eulogy. Sadly he left his speech unfinished as sobs took him, and his sister rose to finish as he sank back to a bench, head in his hands.

Sherlock harrumphed, snorted, and twitched throughout the speeches, making John lean over to shush him multiple times. “Sherlock, you can’t giggle, this is a funeral!” he hissed.

Finally, eulogies done, two priestesses stood and opened the doors to the courtyard beyond, flooding the room with sudden light. Another pair turned the cart with the body, and wheeled it out to the waiting funeral pyre beyond. The family rose to follow, and the other funeral-goers followed in turn, the professional mourners bringing up the rear with some world-class keening.

A thin woman, her short dark hair threaded with grey, stayed behind on the family benches. She passed her hand over her face and swallowed deeply obviously trying not to cry. Sherlock pointed her out to John with a tip of his chin. "There, another widow - look at the cropped hair." He said. John followed as Sherlock zoomed in to join her. Smoothly Sherlock settled next to the widow, a concerned look pasted on his face as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket.

"Here, you look like you could use this," he said, passing the cloth into her hand.

"Yes, thank you, Brother." The woman took the folded square gratefully, and pressed it to her nose.

"This is horrible. Just horrible business," Sherlock tutted at the woman.

The widow nodded, and then suddenly burst into tears. Briefly, Sherlock looked horrified, but quickly slipped an oh-look-I’m-listening expression onto his face as she sobbed into the cloth. "There, there." Sherlock patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

John spared him an exasperated look, and slid onto the bench on her other side. John did nothing, and said nothing, and just sat, yet something around them seemed to bend and shift. The woman looked up, and noticed John’s smiling face next to her. “I bet this has been a real shite week for you,” he said kindly.

The woman laughed in spite of herself. “It has Brother, it really has. I loved my husband. I can’t believe he’s gone.” She paused to wipe under her eyes. "You know it’s not easy being the middle one, wife number two. You aren’t in charge like wife number one, and you aren’t new and shiny like wife number three." John nodded, listening, and the widow forged on, obviously needing to speak. "I was so angry with my husband lately. Since he married Sienna, he didn’t have as much time for everyone else. It was easy to feel . . . like yesterday’s news. And now he’s gone, and everyone’s at each others’ throats.” She broke off with a small sob, pressing the cloth back to her face.

"That sounds awful," John murmured encouragingly.

“Our boys, our three beautiful boys, look at them doing nothing but fighting,” Mrs. MacMillian flung an arm outward. "They were so sweet when they were little – you can’t image. I used to call them our little princes. We had three boys just like Queen Violet had her three little princes. Helen birthed the first two, Argus, and Stephan, and then I had little Marcus – just after the Queen had her youngest – Prince William. Look at them now, at each other's throats. It’s not right. It’s not what Arturo would have wanted.” Tears welled afresh in her eyes.

Sherlock looked distinctly ill at all this emotion sloshing around. John leaned in to place his hand on the woman’s arm. “I think you’re worried that he didn’t know how much you loved him. Don’t
worry, he knew. I know it feels like too much right now, but I think if you miss the funeral pyre, you’re going to kick yourself for the rest of your life wondering why you weren’t there. I think you owe it to yourself to say good-bye to your husband properly.”

“You’re right.” Mrs. MacMillan wiped her eyes. “Thank you Brother . . . Brothers.” she looked back over at Sherlock who quickly pasted on a smile of sorts. “I . . . thank you. Excuse me.” She gave John a watery smile, then hurried off to join the others in the courtyard.

“You’re good at that,” Sherlock said.

“Hmmm?” John looked up.

“Being with people, helping people, you’re good at it.”

“Well, that was part of the whole priest-training gig.” John smiled wryly. “So, what about the investigation? Did you learn anything? Are these people . . . involved?”

“No, of course not, John.” Sherlock pursed his lips.

“Really? What makes you so sure?”

“Well, Arturo MacMillan was obviously doing very well financially two years ago when he married wife number three. He had trouble balancing work and home life though with the extra time sink of the new relationship. Which by the way led to his heart attack that killed him. Wife two and three were both competing as to who could make him the most grease-dripping meals for dinner.

His oldest son, Argus, who had developed a gambling problem took advantage of his father’s inattention, and started skimming off the company books to pay for his debts. The youngest brother, number three, Marcus found out about it, and he’s been bribing Argus to send money his way for the poppy habit he acquired recently. Stephan, brother number two, has been having an affair with brother number three’s wife, and feels guilty about it so he’s been buying his two wives lots of expensive gifts.

The older sister, by the way, is fucking the gardener and terrified that everyone’s going to find out about those little trips away she financed for them. The matriarch is an alcoholic, she obviously carries liquor in her bag and has had very little to do with any of the business decisions in the last five years. So, no – there’s been no outside deals or new money coming their way recently, they’ve been completely focused on their own little misdeeds which however venial and sad do not fall under the category of treason. In short they’re a bunch of the usual sort of idiots.”

John stared at him “That was amazing. That was . . .”

“HORSESHIT!” A voice barked behind them. “That was utter horseshit. How dare you come in here and spout such filthy lies! Who let you in here? Who are you?”

Both men jumped and turned to see the matriarch of the family glowering behind them, holding the bag she had obviously slipped back inside to find.

“Oh, Gods.” John paled. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. Ignore him, he’s simple . . .”

“OUT!” The woman cried. “GET OUT. Go before I call the guard!”

“Gladly,” Sherlock said, grabbing John’s sleeve to haul him away. In short order, as fast as decorum would allow, they flung themselves out the grand front doors, leaving the august Dark Crone temple behind.
“TAXI!” Sherlock called and a horse and carriage for hire stopped almost immediately. John was half convinced that summoning taxis was another hidden magic talent of the man’s.

“Baker Street!” Sherlock barked at the cab driver as they set off, escaping into the traffic.
John looked at Sherlock in the back of the carriage. They both burst out laughing.

“That was horrible.” John got out when he could talk again.

“I should pay better attention to who is eavesdropping behind me next time,” Sherlock said shaking his head.

“Was that all true about the family?” John asked. “You got all that just from one meeting?”

“Do you doubt it?” Sherlock raised an eyebrow.

John regarded him for a moment. “No, I don’t. I really don’t. You are something else.”

“John, can you come with me somewhere or do you need to return to the temple?”

“I do have to get back, but if it doesn’t take too long, yeah, I have a few. What is it, another lead?”

“It’s . . .” Sherlock hesitated, “a surprise. I hope you like it.”

“All right Mr. Mysterious. Lead on then.” John waved jauntily forward.

They made it to Baker Street in good time despite the traffic. Sherlock instructed the driver drop them off at a nearby cross street, handed the man several coins, and led John the rest of the way on foot. He paused when they came to the building next to the Hudson’s bakery. It was a charming two-story brick affair with a small flower garden spilling across the front.

“This way,” Sherlock said, and beckoned John down a path to the rear of the building where a staircase led to an upper floor balcony and door.

“Are we visiting someone?” John asked, puzzled.

Sherlock said nothing, merely smiling. He led them up, drew a key from his pocket, and unlocked the door. After pushing it open, he ushered John inside to an airy room lit by the late afternoon sun streaming in through two large windows. A set of unfilled shelves covered one wall, and a familiar table and chairs, a cheerful rug, and several boxes lay around the room. A doorway opening to a smaller room beyond showed a peek of a bed on a wooden frame.

“Well, isn’t this nice,” John said, looking around. “Who lives here?”
Sherlock cleared his throat, looking down at the floor. "The Hudsons own this building and let the top rooms to boarders. Mrs. Hudson told me she was having trouble renting out this back flat, and I needed a bolt hole. The woman who owned the dress shop sold her property recently, and I needed a new place to hang my hat when I’m in the city." He raised eyes gone a cloudy grey to meet John’s. "You don’t mind do you?"

"Why would I mind?" John furrowed his brow slightly.

"I didn’t want you to feel pressured to see me as I’m just two doors down from the temple now."

"I don’t feel pressured by you," John said carefully, "but I do have some questions about you. I hardly know you. Who ARE you? Where are you when you aren’t hanging your hat in the city?"

"My name is Sherlock Holmes of Herringford. I live a few miles outside of town, in a country house with my mother and two brothers and their wives."

"Ah, it must get crowded," John commiserated.

"We make do," Sherlock replied dryly.

"What does your family do for a living?"

"We are, erm, in trading. John, that family we saw today, they look positively healthy next to the pit of vipers I was raised in. I need something away from them. The detective work I do, a small place to call my own . . . these things keep me sane."

"My parents are dead, but I’ve a married sister who lives a town over. We don’t get on at all, so I know how family can drive you mental," John offered. "And before I was ‘Brother John,’ I was John Watson of Dullenshire. At your service," he said grandly, dropping into a sweeping bow.

"Well met, John Watson." Sherlock dipped his head with mock gravity.

"Well, met, Sherlock Holmes." John nodded back with an equally hard-won straight face.

"John, I have to warn you." Sherlock sobered. "I didn’t expect to meet someone like you. I don’t mean to drag you down into my crazy life. If you’d rather I didn’t stay on Baker Street, I can find another flat."

"Sherlock, no, no. This is a lovely flat, of course you should stay here."

"I’m hoping you’ll feel free to come here when you like." Sherlock withdrew another key and set it on the table while carefully not looking at John.

"All right." John stepped forward, scooped up the key, and pocketed it.

"Ugh, I don’t know how you stand these robes all day, they itch." Sherlock pulled the priest’s clothing over his head leaving his hair sticking up in its wake. He tossed the garment to the floor, and shook both hands through his wayward curls to right them.

John couldn't help licking his lips as he watched him.

"I like you in priest’s robes though," Sherlock said as he rounded on John, a feral gleam in his eye. He looked like a panther so long and sleek clad in only his leggings and undershirt.

"Oh, really?" John chuckled weakly.
“Yes, I get to unwrap you like a bonbon after seeing you in them all day.” Sherlock helped John pull his things off until he was down to his small clothes, tossing it all to the floor as he went.

“Besides,” Sherlock purred, pulling John into his arms. “You make priests’ robes look sexy.” Sherlock ran his hands up and down John, slipping his hands under his waistband to pull him close. He bent down to catch John’s earlobe between his teeth and gently bit down.

“I’m not quite sure how to take that,” John said, giggling a little as Sherlock sucked along his jaw.

“Why don’t you just take my cock in your mouth then?” Sherlock growled filthy and low.

With a groan John pulled Sherlock into a searing kiss. They grabbed tight, sealing themselves chest to groin, trying to get even closer than they already were.

“John.” Sherlock pulled off to whisper in his ear. “Sometimes I like it a little . . . rough. I just want . . . to stop thinking.”

John made a small strangled sound. He pushed Sherlock back against the wall to better attack his mouth. Winding his hand up into his curls, he pulled Sherlock down into deep, breathless kisses. He broke off, panting, and tugging sharply on his hair, tilted his head to expose that long, white throat. John licked up the side, then latched on, and sucked . . . hard. Sherlock arched with a cry. John pulled him down to meet his mouth again, kissing, crushing, nipping as the fingers of his other hand dug into his lush arse. John pulled back with a small, wicked smile to stroke his hand over Sherlock’s crotch, cupping and squeezing.

“You dirty boy, you like that, don’t you?” he crooned.

Sherlock could only nod, breathless.

John stood before the man, and tugged his leggings down his thighs releasing Sherlock’s rigid erection to swing between them. Sherlock gasped at the sudden touch of cooler air as John gripped his hip with one hand, and took his penis with the other. John slid the foreskin slowly down as he moved a tight fist over his pretty cock. Sherlock closed his eyes, moaning from the back of his throat. John reveled in watching him coming undone with the simple touch of his hand, then bent his head to lick over the leaking head, running the flat of tongue down his hard length, licking passes to savor the musky, salty taste of him.

"John, please . . . please." Sherlock groaned nearly incoherent above him.

"Yes, love?” John had an evil glint in his eye as he waited for an answer. When none was forthcoming, he opened wide and swallowed him in. John sucked deeply, working his mouth over the glans as his hand rose up the shaft, meeting his lips with each pump. Sherlock braced his hands on John’s shoulders dropping his head back with a whump, and moaned. John stepped up the rhythm as Sherlock’s legs began to shake.

“Gods . . . yes!” Sherlock chanted as his orgasm ripped through him, and he spilled into his lover’s mouth. John held him there until the shocks had run their course.

Once all was quiet, John pulled off, and slapped Sherlock on the flank. “Cream, get cream.”

Returning to himself, Sherlock pulled up his leggings, and moved to search through the cluttered room. John tugged his own shorts off, and lay across the rug, waiting as Sherlock rummaged through his boxes for some lotion.

He rolled to one side, watching patiently as Sherlock searched through one box, muttered a curse,
then tried another before finally finding the jar he wanted. Sherlock sprang up, fairly sauntering back to hand his find to John. His gait faltered though, eyes darkening when he found John sprawled on the floor, hard as a rock, naked as the day he was born, save for the necklace against his breast.

John returned the favour, running his eyes up the length of Sherlock with a slow smile. He reached up to take the jar from him. “Clothes off,” he ordered.

Not breaking eye contact until the last possible moment, Sherlock slowly reached to push his leggings and pants off, then dragged his thin undershirt over his head.

“Down. On your knees.” John pointed to the ground.

Sherlock scrambled to get on all fours. John groaned at the lovely sight of him waiting patiently for him. He climbed carefully over Sherlock, dropping open-mouthed kisses down his nape, then scraped his teeth over his shoulders as he ground his cock over the curve of that gorgeous, plump arse. When Sherlock began pushing back, John reached for the jar of cream, and opened the lid, unleashing a blend of rose and musk into the room. He scooped a generous handful, and slicked Sherlock’s arse, balls to back. Teasing at his entrance, John worked a finger in, listening to Sherlock's gasps to guide his progress. Dipping out more cream with his other hand, he reached around to gather up Sherlock’s soft penis. He stroked over the silky skin as he plunged his finger deeper into his hole, thrilled at the way Sherlock writhed under his touch. Sherlock's soft cock leapt to life, hardening against John’s hand, and he moaned beautifully as John pumped his cock, and thrust a second finger inside him.

“You want me in you, don’t you? You want me to fuck you so hard and deep?” John growled by his ear.

“Yes . . . please.” Sherlock's voice had stretched to a thin thread.

Sherlock made a noise of complaint as John pulled away, but John steadied him with a warm palm to his flank as he scooped more cream from the jar to coat himself. With a grunt, John settled back into place over him. He slid his cock between Sherlock’s cheeks, brushing his hole, but made no move to enter it. “Tell me how much you want it.” He smacked his thigh with an open palm. “Tell me.”


John’s restraint burst into flames. He grabbed his lover's hips, and plunged in. Sherlock jerked, and cried out, but accepted him, bracing to take John's thrusts. John pumped swiftly, changing angles until he hit the sweet spot, and Sherlock's moans flowed into a single keen. John reached down to find the bar of steel that was Sherlock's cock, and slid slick fingers over it once more. Sherlock shuddered, and came again, pumping his release out with a roar. John followed quickly, exploding himself into his lover's bliss. After the whiteout of oblivion released them, John slipped out, and they collapsed to the floor, well and truly spent. Sherlock rolled over into John’s arms.

“I can’t feel my legs,” he sighed.

“Water.” John gasped “By all that is holy. Please tell me you have liquid in here.”

“There’s a jug on the mantle.” Sherlock lazily waved a hand into the air.

“I don’t suppose you’d go get it for me.”

“Legs, John. Aren’t working.”
After a few minutes they finally untangled. John pushed up to retrieve the jug of water, and Sherlock found a cloth to swipe over them. They sank back to the rug, passing the jug in turn, taking deep swallows. John reached out to touch Sherlock’s cheek.

“I don’t want to go, but I have duties at the temple tonight.”

Sherlock chuckled. “You don’t actually. I took the liberty of leaving a note under Brother Ezriel’s door in your handwriting this morning. I intimated that you had a sick friend to see, and asked if he would please take your shift as a great favor.”

“You didn’t!” John laughed.

“I’m afraid I did.” Sherlock had the good graces to look a little sheepish.

“You madman. Well, you don’t seem that sick to me, but maybe I’d better do a little more investigating just to make sure.”

He pulled Sherlock in for another kiss. His stomach interrupted with a rumble.

“Gods, got any food up here?” he asked, breaking away.

“No.” Sherlock grinned. “But I can easily remedy that.”

Sherlock rolled to his feet, and rummaged through the chaos of the room to find clothes. He glanced back at the bedroom as he quickly pulled his things on, quirking up a half smile. “I had hoped we might bless the new bed tonight, but it seems that the rug got all the attention.”

“Well, that can be for next time,” John said, reaching to snag his own robes to put back on. Sherlock stopped him with a hand to his shoulder.

“John, don’t. Don’t get dressed. Go get in the bed and wait for me. I won’t be able to leave you unless I know you’re waiting for me naked in my bed.”

“All right, you berk.” John grinned, and rose with a stretch.

“How are you real?” Sherlock marveled, stopping in his tracks to watch the slide of John’s muscles as he reached his arms over his head.

“I could ask the same of you,” John said softly, moving closer. Before they knew it, they were entwined again, kissing hotly, lips and tongues sliding together in a daze.

“John, bed, or you won’t be getting any dinner tonight.”

“Yes, sir,” John said, smiling as he deliberately stepped away, and walked to the bedroom to pull back the covers and slide under. Sherlock watched him walk the whole distance before he tugged on boots and swept out the door.

Dark was seeping in to claim the flat, so John got back up to find some candles, and the pot of mage flame to set them burning. He scattered several candles around the bedroom and left one in the main room before climbing back into the bed to wait. He had only a few minutes to gaze around the room in wonder before he heard the front door bursting open. Sherlock returned triumphant with a wide smile, and a large basket laden with sweet and savory pies, sticky buns, and bottles of lemonade.

“Where’s all this from?” John laughed.

“Mrs. Hudson. She said she was quite happy to feed us, but if I break your heart, I have to move out,
and it’s no more sticky buns for me.”

“Cor. It’s good to have a baker for a landlady. Bring that over here!”

Sherlock dropped the basket onto the bed, and quickly stripped to join John naked under the blankets. They made a picnic of the food, feeding each other, and laughing when they dropped crumbs in the bedclothes. They brushed the sheets out as well as they could, and lay back to face each other tangling their legs under the covers. John reached out to entwine their free hands together.

“Sherlock” he said quietly stroking his thumb over the back of the other man’s hand. “I never properly thanked you for healing my shoulder. You can’t know how it was. I went from being a whole person to half a man in a blink of an eye. I was so sick for so long. The healers weren’t sure I was going to pull through. Even after two years, the arrow wound still pained me. I had no idea what to do with myself. The priesthood was a Gods’ send, and then meeting you, well . . .” John trailed off.

“You did the healing as much as I did, but you’re welcome. I had no idea what you were when I first met you.” Sherlock's eyes shone brightly in the flickering candlelight.

“What am I?” asked John.

“A puzzle, a paradox, a conductor of light. And apparently, a damn fine shag.” Sherlock grinned at the last.

John laughed and grabbed a pillow to smack over his head.

“Oho, the battle is on, sir!” Sherlock crowed, and grabbed his own pillow to smash back. After some whacking, and rolling, and completely splitting one of the pillows open, they stopped, winded, Sherlock lying half over John.

John reached up to cup Sherlock's face in his hand. “You are a bloody miracle,” he breathed.

“John.” Sherlock swooped down to capture his lips. They made love again then, slowly, and sweetly, with long kisses, and sweeping touches. Sherlock pulled John’s cock to another release before they finally collapsed together, exhausted, and drifted off toward slumber.

“I really have to go at first light,” John murmured into Sherlock hair.

“I wish the night would last forever,” Sherlock sighed before sleep pulled them under her spell and they spoke no more.

Chapter End Notes

Part of the inspiration for the wonderful scented creams in this story comes from a delightful product line called Nadina's creams. While they are not exactly magical nor are they good as a lube, they are very nice collection of perfumed skin lotions. You can find them online at nadinascremes.com.
The Sounds You Make When You're Leaving

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock find that good-byes are terrible things.

John woke to the watch calling the dawn outside. The first fingers of light crept under the curtains shielding the bedroom window, lightening the room. He glanced over to find the dark head of curls resting on the pillow next to him, and it fair caught his breath. Something hot and wonderful unfurled in his chest at the sight. He slid closer to the heat of Sherlock’s body, and ducking his head, burrowed his nose against the back of his neck. John inhaled deeply. Sherlock smelled like sleep, and spice, and the warmth of a fire. Had anything in his whole life ever smelled so good before?

“Mmmfff?” Sherlock mumbled as John wrapped himself around the lanky man, pressing kisses against his nape and shoulder. Sherlock stretched, finally rousing enough to roll over in John’s arms.

“Good morning.” John grinned into the grey-blue eyes that finally fluttered open.

“Oh, JOHN.” Sherlock smiled wide. “You’re still here. Good. I want you for breakfast.” Sherlock dropped pecks all over his face finally catching his lips in a deeper kiss. John decided even Sherlock’s morning breath was delicious. He kissed his lips, then enjoyed scraping his teeth lightly over the slight stubble along Sherlock’s jaw.

“Are there privies?” John pulled back after several delectable minutes of lazy snogging.

“Better than that, there’s a water closet and pump through there.” Sherlock nodded to a door.

“Oh, this is a nice flat,” John said. “Back in a mo’.”

Sherlock waited outside the door when John returned.

“Next,” Sherlock announced, kissing John’s forehead as they passed.

By the time Sherlock exited, John had moved to the main room. With clothes pulled back on, John sat to lace up his boots.

“John.” Sherlock's face fell.

“I know. I almost can’t say good-bye, but I have to go.”

Sherlock went to fetch a sheet off the bed. Winding it around him like a robe, he trailed sadly into the sitting room. “When are you free next?” He asked.

“Next few days will be busy. I know I’ll have to make up for Brother Ezriel taking my shift last night. But tomorrow, after lunch? I should be free then. I’m sorry it’s not sooner.”

“No, John. You have your own life. I can’t expect you to keep my hours just because I’ll miss you.”
“I’ll miss you too.” John stood to extend an hand. “Come here.”

Sherlock walked the few steps to hover maddeningly an arm's length away. John reached out, and tugged him closer, bridging the gap. They wound arms around each other, pressed faces against shoulders and simply stood breathing each other in. John kissed him quickly on the cheek then stepped away. He walked as briskly as he could out the door, pulling it closed behind him without looking back.

John made a special effort to thank the Gods that afternoon. When no one was watching, he lit an extra cone of incense for Ongus, God of lovers, and then two for Keerta, Goddess of lost things. He still felt indebted to her for turning Sherlock up on his doorstep.

By some stroke of luck, no one had missed John the night before. Father Gregson had been called away to a temple head meeting until late, and no one particularly cared that John had been scarce through dinner and evening meditations. He agreed to double kitchen duties to thank Brother Ezriel for covering for him, and yes, his sick friend was much better, thank you.

He couldn’t possibly say that meeting Sherlock had been a bad thing, but never had John felt so divided living his life before. When he had been a healer's apprentice, and then a soldier, he had jumped into things without looking back. After the arrow wound, he had struggled back to life, and then thrown himself with open arms into the priesthood. He was still grateful to the purpose it had given him in his darkest hours. But now. Now it felt like half of him walked the temple, and the other half flew on wings to hover at Sherlock side, wherever he might be.

“Copper coin for your thoughts?” Brother Mykal teased as John stared out a window instead of sharpening quills in the library.

“Oh, don’t mind me.” John shook his head and smiled at the man. “Just chasing the faeries over the hill for a moment.”

“How is the shoulder feeling?” His friend dropped his voice as he stepped closer.

“Ah, good.” John rolled the shoulder in question a bit. It felt strange that he couldn’t tell Brother Mykal about the healing without spilling out the rest of it, without bringing up Sherlock. He just wasn’t able to pick apart what he could and couldn’t say right now. “My shoulder’s actually feeling better, thanks, mate.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Brother Mykal smiled, and moved to shelve some scrolls left on a table.

John manned the prayer room at nightwatch that evening, welcoming the distraction of it. When a street boy came in limping, John was able to convince him to take his shoe off and let him take a look at it. “There’s a brave lad. Just let me see your foot. I’ll be careful,” he promised.

“It hurts something awful,” the boy admitted.

John found an infection around a splinter in his heel. He touched the boy’s forehead and sent a quick healing into him, then pulled the wood chip out with tweezers. A swipe of some cream and a bandage tied around, and he hoped things were as good as new. He sent the boy off with one of the pastry twists left in the storage box.

Not everything was so easily fixed he knew. A young woman came in before dawn, her face a map
of bruises, a cut across her cheek, and a carefully told story that revealed more than she realized. It was easy to patch her up, and though harder, he did convince her to stay the rest of the night in the guest room. At first light, he called a taxi to take her to a woman’s shelter across town. John knew though that like as not, she’d just be going back to the husband that laid those marks across her. It was hard to change the channels running deep in your life like a river bed cut into rock.

John fell exhausted into bed after dawn, grateful to be too tired to think, and woke at lunch with one thought in mind — I can see Sherlock again this afternoon. He washed and dressed, and hurried to the dining hall for what he hoped was something filling. As he round a corner, a courier in his red cloak waiting in the corridor slowed his stride.

“Can I help you, good sir?” John asked. When the man pushed back the hood of his cloak, of course it was Sherlock Holmes underneath. Warmth blossomed in John’s belly just to see him. “Sherlock! You madman. What are you doing here? Couldn’t wait a few hours?” John grinned.

“John.” Sherlock’s eyes lit up, but he smiled back tightly. “Sadly, I have the bad news that I can’t keep our appointment this afternoon. But I needed to see you before I left.”

“I see.” John’s face fell. “Hang on.” He looked both ways and finding the coast clear, dragged Sherlock into a nearby storage room.

“John, I . . .”

John cut Sherlock off with a fierce kiss. They wound their arms tightly wherever they could reach, and kissed each other’s lips like men parched for water in the desert.

“You waited by this cupboard just for this didn’t you?” John said as they finally parted for air.

“I had hopes.” Sherlock sighed against him.

“I had hopes of an afternoon together,” John said.

“I am sorry about that. You might not know how much.” Sherlock pulled back to look him in the eye in the dim light of the small room. “My family, thrice curse them, has managed to locate me again, and my elder brother has issued an ultimatum that I return home for some urgent family business.”

“Well, we all have things we need to do,” John said.

“I wish with all my heart it wasn’t true.” Sherlock searched his face for something.

“No sense crying over the direction of water.” John nodded. “When can I see you again then?”

“I’m confident I can give them the slip in a few days. I have another lead I want us to follow in the investigation. Next Saturday?”

“Yeh, I’ll make sure I clear the day,” John said.

“I’ll send word if plans change, and I can’t make it.”

“All right.”

“All right.”

“John, I seem to have developed a terrible affliction.” Sherlock scrunched up his nose.

“Oh?” John pulled back with a slight frown.
“I can’t seem to last more than a day without a certain warrior-mage priest before I ache all over.”

John smiled sadly, and squeezed him closer. “I’ll miss you too. We seem to be doing altogether too many good-bye's.”

“I much prefer the hello's that follow.” Sherlock sighed.

“I can’t wait,” John said, pulling him down for another deep kiss.

Finally they moved apart enough to lean forehead to forehead, breathing quiet air together.

“You go first,” John said.

“I’ll see you Saturday,” Sherlock promised. With a quick last brush of his lips against John’s, he was gone.
For to a Bee, A Flower is the Fountain of Life

Chapter Summary

Sherlock takes John with him to the next MacMillan family on their list to investigate. This family at least keeps bees.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter is taken from a poem in "The Prophet" written by Kahlil Gibran, another kick-ass writer of yore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John decided it was merely an opportunity, a part of his personal meditation to manage the pain of Sherlock’s absence. But John had to admit, if only to himself, that he was pining. He sat at morning contemplations and let the sadness settle like stones in the bottom of his belly. A pool of clear water lay calm over top, but he simply acknowledged the ache that lay underneath like a bedrock.

Twice when he had free time, he managed to slip over to the flat by the bakery, and spent time tidying up. He doubted that Sherlock would ever get around to unpacking his boxes, so he enjoyed emptying them, placing knick-knacks and books on shelves, and clothes in the cupboard. He told himself he was in no way snooping on Sherlock’s life by doing this, though he marveled at the odd collections of things the man had accumulated. His favorites included a fossilized sea creature, a wicked-looking sex toy (would be having words about that later), a book on King Vlad, the torturer, and such a vast array of differing clothes for his various costumes, that John wondered what Sherlock actually wore when he was just being himself.

On his second visit, John was startled when some delivery men knocked on the door to the flat with a large couch on their backs.

“This is 221B? “ The man outside demanded.

“It is.” John said. “What’s this then?

“We’ve got your couch.”

“Couch? Are you sure you have the right place?” He asked

“If this is 221 B then it’s the right place. Hold the door please.”

The two men maneuvered the bulky thing into the flat, and set it down in the empty spot by the rug.

“Thank you.” John told them as they tipped their hats and left.

The sofa was sickly yellow-green with bright orange flowers across it. John wondered if Sherlock had perhaps gotten it on sale, or maybe received it as thanks from another client. Regardless, it was very comfy, and John welcomed it by lying right across it for a short nap. Spending time in the flat
made him feel closer to Sherlock even if it was just touching his things instead of the living, breathing man.

Later, as John locked up to leave, he ran into Mrs. Hudson out in the back garden. She sat at her patio table, tea before her, watching two of her smaller grandchildren kick a ball around the yard.

“Brother John, dear.” She called him over once he left the stairs. “Did those nice men with the sofa deliver it upstairs all right?”

“Yes, they did.” John nodded. “Right as rain. It’s a funny color, but mad comfy. I’m not sure where Sherlock got it.”

“Cup of tea, dear?” Mrs. Hudson pointed to the service before her.

“Yes, thank you.” John sat to join her, and was soon handed his own cup. “Ta.”

“John, I’m not your mother. I don’t want to tell you what to do. I like you. I like Sherlock, but he’s . . . a complicated one. Are you sure you know what you’re doing with him?”

“Does any of us know what we’re doing, Mrs. Hudson?” John smiled wryly into his teacup, then glanced up.

“Fair enough.” The older woman smiled at him. “I’ve been here a long time on Baker Street, next to the temple. Seen a lot in my time. John, the people in the neighborhood like you. They talk about the wonderful new priest all the time.”

“Thank you Mrs. Hudson, that’s good to hear.” John reddened slightly at the praise.

“I know it’s not quite regular, you spending all this time with your young man.” She looked sideways at him over her cup.

“That’s true. I . . . may have some decisions to make. It’s still six months though before I can decide to pledge at the temple.”

“Don’t worry, dear.” She reached over to pat his forearm. “Your secret is safe with me. The heart wants what it wants, hmm? Ah, to be young and in love. I can tell you, my second husband, Morris, courted us shamelessly before we agreed to marry him.”

She leaned in a bit and dropped her voice. “My first husband, Brennan and I thought we were done – just the two of us. Our Morris proved us wrong though. Look at us all these years later – happy as three peas in a pod.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” John said, finishing his tea in a big gulp. “Thank you so much for the tea. I enjoyed it. I do need to go though— get back to things.”

“Of course dear. No rest for the weary. He’s back on Saturday, right?”

“Yes, Saturday. Thank you again for the tea. Good Day, Mrs. Hudson.” John bowed his head.

“Good Day, dear. Take care.” Mrs. Hudson waved good-bye as John lifted a hand in farewell, turning on the path to the front.
Saturday dawned warm and fair. John felt like a small boy at Mid-Summer morning when he woke, the excitement curled like a knot in his chest. Breakfast was plain porridge with raisins, but it tasted all the sweeter knowing that Sherlock was back today. John figured he’d head over to the flat to wait for Sherlock after his morning chores in the kitchens. Sherlock knocked his plans awry as always though. John was sweeping the floor by the sinks when a small boy rapped at the kitchen door with a note for him. It was brief as usual:

"Meet me at the Stables on High Street as soon as you are able. – S"

John smiled at seeing Sherlock’s looping handwriting again, and rushed to finish the cleaning.

John turned the corner to High Street, hurrying past several shops before he spied the stables.

“John!” A tall man in a sweeping cloak and impressive hat waved him over.

“Well, good sir, who are we being today?” John laughed somewhat breathlessly, as he entered the stable yard.

“Why don’t you tell me? Use your powers of observation.” Sherlock quirked an eyebrow back at him.

John ran his eyes over the length of Sherlock. He wore a dark hat with a sweeping plume, lightweight cloak in dark grey, leather bag slung over one shoulder, blue shirt of decent quality held with a leather belt, well-made but scuffed, and dark trousers tucked into polished cuffed boots with a slight heel. Of course he hadn’t resisted adding a small jaunty, false mustache and goatee beard to grace his face.

“A business man? A merchant perhaps? Are we buying or selling today?”

“Good observations, Brother.” Sherlock’s eyes twinkled back at him. “Today we look at the MacMillan apiary, and see if any sweet secrets might be tempered out.”

“Apiary?” John asked.

“A bee yard.” Sherlock replied. “And it’s a few miles out in the country not served by any coach routes, so it’s a hired cart for us today.”

“Ah, here we are.” Sherlock smiled as the stable boy brought round a set of sturdy bay draft horses pulling a small carriage behind.

They waited until they had cleared most of the city, Sherlock maneuvering the horses deftly through the traffic before trying to talk.

“How went your business with your family?” John asked.

“Tiresome as always, but I hate to grant them any more time in my life than they already employ. Tell me how your week was. Did the couch arrive?”
“Sick-up green with flowers, Sherlock?”

“John, I’m hurt. I was informed that avocado was all the rage in decorating colors.”

John wrinkled his forehead in reply. They caught each other’s eye, and burst out laughing.

“All right, it was a gift from a client. I found the employee skimming off the books at a furniture shop.”

“I reckoned as much.” John chuckled.

“Besides, I thought we wouldn’t mind messing up a couch that wasn’t too pretty.” Sherlock cut him a sideways glance.

“Ah.” Fire leapt through John’s veins at the thought of the many things they might do on top of that couch later. “I look forward to that.” He grinned.

Sherlock quirked a half-smile, and clicked the reins to move the bays past a cart stopped by the side of the road.

“Gods, I missed you.” John slid his hand over Sherlock’s thigh, and squeezed gently.

Sherlock turned. His multi-colored eyes sparkled like a kaleidoscope in the sunlight. “John, I couldn’t breathe without you.”

John reached for Sherlock’s hand. They threaded fingers together, and held hands on the seat between. John wished they were back on the ugly couch already. City buildings gave way to green hills, and the traffic thinned considerably.

“John, what do you know about bees?” Sherlock mused at length.

“Not much.” John admitted. “I know they can sting the frozen hells out of you. I know more about honey. Good to cover cuts, and wonderful for sore throats in tea.”

“I’ve been reading about them, John. Fascinating creatures. Some think they can actually talk to one another in a sort of dance language, and that they have memory of where flowers they feed from lie. They might tell each other about a good patch of comfrey or vetch . . . like a restaurant review. Fascinating. Just fascinating. And there’s still so much no one knows about them.”

“Yes, that is fascinating. Listen, what exactly are we meant to be doing today?” John asked him.

“Research. This family fits the bill of being another MacMillan, and they send their goods all over Delphium. They are known especially for their honey. Today we come as possible buyers to test their wares, and see if we might sniff out anything rotten brewing in their affairs under the sweet smell of honey.”

“Fair enough.” John agreed.

“I am posing as a trader of course possibly interested in buying, and distributing their goods. I sent a letter making an appointment this afternoon as Mr. Weaver.”

“And who am I meant to be, then?” John asked.

“You are my associate, Brother John, of course.”

“Hang on. Why don’t I get a new name too?”
“Your given name is simple and common, John. It is much less easily noted than ‘Sherlock Holmes’ might be.”

“Simple, common? Thank you so very much!” John bristled.

“John, don’t take on so. Your bland exterior with its commonplace name, and pleasant demeanor simply masks the hidden, richly-layered depths that make up your intriguing inner character.”

“I think there’s a compliment in there somewhere.” John smiled, and scratched his forehead.

“Besides, I’ll just forget the name if we pick something else.” Sherlock added with a flip of his hand.

Soon, Sherlock was turning the carriage onto a private lane marked with a large wooden sign for “MacMillan Farms” with small bees painted all around.

“Charming.” John remarked. Sherlock just rolled his eyes.

They pulled up the drive to a comfortable farm house situated by a number of out-buildings and a vast array of flowering plants and shrubs all alive with the pleasant hum of bees.

“Good day, sirs!” A fair-haired, wiry man called out, walking from the porch of the house to meet them.

“Good day, my fine fellow.” Sherlock called out. “Is this the MacMillan Farms? I should have an appointment today to view your wares.”

“It is indeed.” The man told them. “Welcome. Come inside and I’ll have Barry tend your horses.” He called to a mop-haired youth who trotted over. The man touched his shoulder, “Thanks, son.”

After Sherlock and John alighted from the carriage, the boy clucked at the horses, and pulling gently on their leads, led them away to the nearby stable.

“Donald MacMillan.” The man said putting out his hand.

“Jack Weaver.” Sherlock returned grasping his palm in a firm shake. “And may I present my associate, Brother John?”

John bowed his head formally to the man. “Good day, sir”

“Good day, Brother.” Mr. MacMillan returned the gesture. “Pleased to meet you both. Now it was the honey you were interested in, yes? We do sell a number of foods and some livestock, but it’s our honey that’s our specialty.”

“Yes, indeed. I’ve heard good things about your honey. I buy and sell fine wares, and I represent parties who would be very interested in finding excellent honey supplies.” Sherlock nodded.

“Good. I’ll pass you along to my two mothers. They’re the resident experts on the bees and the honey. They can answer all your questions much better than I could.”

“Excellent. Lead on good man!” Sherlock grinned.

Mr. MacMillan led them into the farmhouse. John had a quick glance at tidy wooden furniture, and quilted pillows before they were moving down the hall to the brightly-lit large kitchen that was obviously the heart of the place. “I’ll leave you all to it. Good day.” Donald nodded and left.

Two older women, their white hair pulled back in soft buns, rose from the large table to greet them.
Once introductions had been made, one insisted they call her, Miss Eleanor, and the other, Miss Linnea, they settled down to view the jars and bottles set neatly across the table.

“We have beeswax, honeycomb, mead, and of course the honey to sell.” Miss Eleanor proudly pointed each out. “I think you’ll find we offer something quite special with our honey though. We’ve managed to perfect a technique so that we can harvest our honey at different time of the year, we do a spring, summer and fall harvest, and each time, the flavors of the honey are quite different.”

She offered Sherlock and John each a smear of honey on some plain biscuits from each of the three jars. John was surprised. “That’s amazing. They really do taste different. I always thought honey was just . . . honey-flavored.”

“Whatever the bees eat flavors the honey they make, and different flowers bloom in the different seasons.” Miss Eleanor explained.

“How is it possible to harvest three times in a year? I thought the hive was destroyed upon gathering the honey.” Sherlock asked.

The ladies looked at each other. “Oh, we must show you. Eleanor came up with something really very clever.” Miss Linnea grinned at them, creasing the soft folds of her apple face. “We’re quite proud of it.”

They left through a back door to the yard behind the house where several rows of boxes on stands lay in rows.

“Where are the hives?” Sherlock asked glancing around.

“You’re looking at them.” Miss Eleanor grinned.

“Boxes?” I thought beehives were always cone-shaped!” Sherlock mused.

“Oh they generally were.” Miss Linnea agreed. “In the wild, bees like to make their hives in circular shapes like old trees. People thought they’d only accept round hives, so traditionally, they made cone-shaped baskets coated with mud for them to build in. But at harvest time, you have to destroy the hives to get the honey. It's such a terrible waste, and so hard on the bees. You can get quite attached to them.” She smiled.

“My father came up with the idea of making stacks of flat baskets so that you could take apart some of the layers to harvest, leaving the rest of the hive intact to rebuild anew.” Miss Eleanor added. “But I came up with something even better.”

“Just excuse us a moment. We need to get a few things to give our little tour, and then we’ll show you.” Miss Linnea smiled at them, and the ladies left them to rummage in a shed behind the house.

Sherlock stood gazing out over the hills, the green hedgerows, and the collection of hive boxes laid out before them. Around them, the bees droned their soothing hum flying around and between all. John came to stand beside him.

“Look at them.” Sherlock waved. "So industrious. Working together like a single unit. So content in their work and their life, as if nothing is ever divided or complicated for them. Nothing more taxing on the soul than the normal demands of the body doing the tasks the Gods made them for. There’s something quite hypnotic about the sights and sounds of bees. I think I might like to keep an apiary some day, John.”

John stared at Sherlock’s profile. He looked so beautiful standing there in the afternoon sunlight, the
planes of his cheekbones, jaw, and long neck a work of shade and light. His lean body stood poised like the statue of some ancient God of field left on a hilltop to warn all passersby. Who was he, John thought, a mere mortal, to capture the notice of a fey creature such as this? Then Sherlock turned to look at him and the gentle smile that transformed his face banished any storms that had been brewing in John’s mind.

“Isn’t it glorious?” Sherlock asked.

“It’s lovely.” John said, looking up into his face.

The ladies returned with their equipment. “Put these on first.” Miss Linnea told them handing them a costume each to wear.

It seemed a bee yard tour involved them all putting on great hoods with veils and thick gloves which seemed like a good idea in light of moving into a swarm of bees. John smirked at Sherlock’s momentary discomfort at having to remove his grand plumed hat to put on the bulky beekeeper hood.

Miss Linnea produced a small can with bellows that she called the smoker, and after lighting a small fire in it, smoke trickled out of its side. “Follow me.” She said and led the way to one of the boxes. Bees buzzed in and out around the box, but once smoke was poured around them, the bees quieted down, and stayed inside.

“Once the smoke relaxes them, we simply open the box,” Miss Eleanor opened the top of the box, and then pulled up a frame filled with honeycomb from a slot inside. You see, we have framed slats of wood side by side. Just like drawers in a dresser, we can slide one out to get the honeycomb from it, and not disturb the rest. “

“This is simply fascinating.” Sherlock exclaimed stepping forward to peer more closely.

John was a little more distracted by the number of bees still flying around them. He’d had a bad sting once as a child, and hadn’t quite gotten over feeling edgy around bees ever since then.

“Would you like to see some different sizes of boxes we’ve been experimenting with? We’ve got one that’s much smaller, and one bigger we’re trying out this year.” Miss Eleanor offered, clearly thrilled at an enthusiastic audience.

“Oh indeed. . .” Sherlock glanced back at John.

“Actually I think I’ll pass, but you go on, have a look.” John waved him on.

“Here, dear, I’ll go back to the house with you.” Miss Linnea said to John. “You two go on.” She told her wife, handing her the smoker, and with a pat to arm, shooed her and Sherlock along. She led John back to the shed where they took off their hoods and gloves and hung them inside.

“Why don’t we go have a cup of tea whilst we wait for Eleanor to bring your husband back?” Miss Linnea said patting her hair.

“Oh no, we aren’t . . .” John started to say.

“Married yet? Oh it won’t be too much longer. Not with the way he looks at you. Come on dear, you can try a taste of our wildflower honey in tea, and some of the honey cakes that Eleanor makes. They’re quite spectacular.”
Sherlock and John left the MacMillan farms loaded down with no less than five bottles of mead, six boxes of beeswax, three packs of honeycomb, and ten jars of varying honey types with a promise to contact them if Sherlock’s clients were interested in further business with their farm.

As the carriage pulled off the private drive and out onto the main road, John looked over at Sherlock. "Well?" John asked raising his eyebrows.

“Well what?”

“Are these MacMillans somehow involved in a treasonous plot to kill the king?” John asked rolling his eyes.

“Of course not John, those were some of the nicest people I’ve ever met in my life. The idea.”

“Well, when do you think this big attack is meant to take place? Should we be worried that we’re running out of time? Shouldn’t you contact the watch or the palace guard and warn them?”

“John, the attack is meant to be on the king and heir. Since the heir-to-be isn’t due for another two months, I have reason to believe they plan to wait until after the baby is born. The queen is too heavily watched and guarded in her confinement for that to be a worry. Generally the king and palace are locked down tight as well, but when are they not? At festival times, and matters of state. A month after the baby is due, is Mid-Summer. I believe they will hold the baby’s Blessing Day during the week festival of Mid-Summer. That I predict is the week to watch for. And I did warn the palace already. I sent a note."

“And?”

“And I received a note back that it was a hare-brained theory with no evidence to support it, and palace security is just fine as it is, thank you very much. Stop bothering us basically.”

“Ahh, they didn’t believe you.”

“No. But as you see, we have a few months grace period before anything of note should happen.”

“Well, that’s a small blessing at least.” John mused, making himself more comfortable on the carriage bench for the ride home.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact:

In our world, the switch from traditional cone hives called "skeps" to moveable frame hives was facilitated by a book "The Hive and the Honeybee" published in 1853. It was written by an American apiarist, clergyman, and teacher named Lorenzo Langstroth after his extensive study on the life and habits of honeybees.

Now you know.
Sherlock takes John along when he drops in on an old friend, and they have fun blessing their new couch when they get home. (Oooh, la la.)

John woke as the rocking of the carriage stopped. He blinked his eyes open, and found himself draped over Sherlock’s side.

“Ah, you’re awake, good. We’re back.”

“Oh, sorry.” John sat up rubbing his eyes and glanced around. They were at the stable yards on High street. “Guess I haven’t been sleeping so well lately.”

“Don’t worry.” Sherlock twinkled down at him. “I don’t mind.”

After returning the rented rig, they shouldered the bags of honey sundries, and made to depart. John turned toward Baker Street on instinct, but Sherlock stopped him with a hand to his shoulder.

“No wait, a minute, I need to stop in somewhere first. Don’t worry, it isn’t far.” Sherlock nodded his head toward the other direction, and set off without a backward glance.

John sighed. “It better not be too far.” He grumbled under his breath. “These jars aren’t getting any lighter, you know.” Still, despite his bad humor, he gamely hitched his bag a little higher, and quickly made to follow.

Sherlock strode ahead at his usual long-legged trot, the plume on his hat bobbing jauntily after him, and John hurried to keep up. Thankfully, only one block over, Sherlock halted their progress to point toward a nearby shop door. “This is it,” he called over his shoulder.

John looked at the large sign hanging over the front only managing to read, “Anthea’s Apothecary – potions, lotions, and sweets” before Sherlock was making his way inside.

Sherlock pushed the door open to a jangle of small bells, and John followed after, feeling a slight tingle as he passed through the entrance. A statue of Gallanus, the healer, stood facing him on a small table just inside the shop, and John stopped on reflex to touch his head, heart, and lips, and sketch a bow of respect. The sound of Sherlock dropping his things unceremoniously to the floor thudded behind him. John turned, setting his own things down with more care, only to see the man literally vaulting over the counter top to reach a glass jar of sweets on a shelf behind the till.

John’s mouth fell open. “Sherlock, what in the GODS' names do you think you’re doing?”
“Fresh cinder toffee, John,” Sherlock garbled around the candy in his mouth. “Want some?” He held the open jar his way.

“Sherlock, please get out before someone sees . . .”

A thin, serious-looking woman set the beaded curtain to the back of the shop swinging as she swept into the room.

“Oh, I am so sorry, please forgive . . .” John started.

“Sherlock, I haven’t seen you in an age.” The woman's stern face relaxed into a smile as she moved to swat Sherlock on the leg. “Hey, don’t eat all those, save some for the paying customers.”

“Right-o.” Sherlock popped one last piece into his mouth, and shook the jar again in offering to John. When John mutely shook his head, he replaced the top, and set it back on the shelf. “Sorry, I haven’t been round. I’ve been busy lately.”

“I can imagine,” the woman said. “How . . .”

“Anthea,” Sherlock cut in, “May I introduce my associate, John Watson?” Sherlock opened his palm to indicate John across the room. “John, this is an old friend of mine, Anthea Hollingberry.”

"Good Day.” John nodded politely.

“Oh. OH. This is new.” Anthea send a piercing glance Sherlock's way. Seeming to remember her good manners, she flipped open a panel in the counter top to move toward John, extending a hand in greeting. “Good Day, John.” When John took it, a small frisson ran between them like a shock.

“Oh you’re a mage!” they both said at the same moment, and laughed.

“So what are you doing following this one around? I hope he hasn’t coerced you into some crazy scheme.” Her arched eyebrow spoke volumes.

“Well, now that you mention it . . .” John smiled broadly.

“ANTHEA!” Sherlock cried, scrambling over the counter as fast as he could to reach them. “Don’t start on John.”

“So how did you two meet, hmm?” Anthea pointedly turned her back to ignore Sherlock’s frantic approach.

“We met at the temple I serve at actually, Temple of the Small Gods.”

“Oh, so you’re a real Brother, then.” Anthea’s eyes widened slightly. “I thought maybe this was just another one of Sherlock’s mad costumes.” She waved a hand to indicate John's robes.

“He has a lot of them,” John agreed, finding himself liking this woman right off.

Sherlock puffed up, obviously ready to defend himself, when a small creature burst into the room with a war cry.

“SHEERLOOOOOOCK!” All heads turned to track the comet that had launched itself from the back of the shop to speed toward Sherlock. He caught the missile that turned out to be nothing more sinister than a little girl in a bright red tunic, and swept her into a hug.

“Hey, Poppet. Ugh, who’s getting heavy?” he asked swinging her around in a circle before placing
her back down on her feet.

“I AM!” she crowed. “Cuz I’m eating all my veg’ables.”

“Glad to hear it.” Sherlock ruffled his hand through her wild tangle of auburn curls upsetting them even more.

“Sherlock are you growing WHISKERS? I don’t like them.” The child pointed at the mustache and goatee on his face.

“Oh, these aren’t real, Poppet. See they come off.” Sherlock reached up to peel the fake hair strips off his face and drop them in a dustbin under the counter.

“This ball of energy is my daughter, Loralee.” Anthea sighed putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Pleased to meet you Milady Loralee.” John gave her a sweeping bow, bending deeply at one knee.

“Hullo.” The girl giggled from behind a hand. John couldn’t help noticing her slanting grey-blue eyes. Such a pretty little thing.

John glanced up to see Sherlock and Anthea exchanging a look over his head. Anthea turned quickly as he stood, and smiled. "We were just getting ready to go upstairs. Just let me lock up, and you can join us.” She crossed to turn the “open” sign to “closed,” bolted the front door, and shuttered the windows.

Loralee squatted down to inspect the several bags they had dumped across the floor. “Sherlock, did you bring me something?” she asked, peering up at him.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I did, for both you and your mother. We can unpack in just a moment, and all will be revealed.” Sherlock smiled as he hefted his burden over his shoulder. He took Loralee’s hand, and let her tug him behind the counter as she launched into an animated story involving spiders.

“After you.” Anthea motioned an arm politely for John.

"Thank you." John grabbed his own bag, and followed through the swinging bead curtain, and up a flight of stairs to reach a flat above the shop.

John was struck with the sheer greenery in the room as soon as he entered. It was like stumbling into a hothouse with so many plants covering shelves, corners, and any available flat space.

“You can hang your cloaks behind the door,” Anthea called, going to stir a pot simmering on the potbellied stove in the kitchen.

“Mmmmm, is that Mint Pea soup, I smell?” Sherlock sniffed the air as he dropped his bags on a sturdy wooden table. John moved to add his to the pile as well.

“It is,” Anthea said. “Are you freeloaders staying to dinner then?”

“Oh, we couldn’t presume . . .” John lifted his hands in protest.

“I’m sorry. I’m so used to taking the piss out of Sherlock.” Anthea’s eyes followed Sherlock who had wandered over to where Loralee lay sprawled on the rug. “I forget there’s someone with manners here tonight. Please stay and eat with us. I know Loralee will kill me if I let Sherlock leave too soon.”

“Not yet, just give me a few minutes to finish up some things, and then setting the table would be lovely.”

John joined Sherlock and Loralee under the bay windows. Loralee was poking at a large box of herbs growing there.

“That one.” He heard Sherlock say. “Can you make that one grow?”

The girl screwed up her face, and waved her hand over a small seedling. In a moment the sprout shot up, flowered purple, then withered and died.

“Oops.” She covered her mouth. “Too far.”

“A bit,” Sherlock agreed “But that was splendid. Try again, only think of the power going to the plant like it’s in a big watering can. Only tip out a little. Leave the rest inside the jug, “

Loralee pointed again at another shoot. This one grew several inches, then stopped.

“Excellent! Poppet. I think you deserve a treat for that.” Sherlock winked.

“Hey, stop messing about with my thyme!” Anthea called from the kitchen.

“Sorry, mama. Sherlock asked me to.” Loralee moved, chastened, to take a seat at the table.

“Don’t blame her, Crumbs, I just wanted to see how she was getting on. It’s amazing. She’s even better than last time I was here.” Sherlock strode over to the table, reaching to open the top bag.

“That was impressive. How old is your daughter?” John asked Anthea as she joined them.

“She was six just last month.” Anthea smiled proudly, wiping her hands on a cloth.

“That’s quite advanced for six,” John said.

“She’s doing quite well,” Anthea agreed.

“A green mage, extraordinaire, our Poppet. And she’s been practicing,” Sherlock said. “She definitely deserves a reward.” He reached into his bag, and retrieved one of the jars of honeycomb. “Just for you.” He plopped it into Loralee’s open hands.

He eyes grew instantly round. “OOh, mama, can I have some now?”

“Just a taste, dinner’s almost on the table,” her mother said. “What else do you have in there?” Her eyes grew round too when she saw the bounty of honey products that Sherlock unpacked from their bags and spread across the table.

“No freeloaders here.” Sherloked grinned “This is all for you. Except for this bit,” and he tucked a bottle of mead, and two jars of honey back in the sack.

“I needed some more honey for some new potions I’m working on, thank you!” Anthea said. She thanked him again when she tasted the different subtle flavors of the honeys, and leaned over to give Sherlock a loud smack on the cheek.

"You're welcome." Sherlock colored slightly. He fished out a card with the address of the MacMillan farms and handed it to her. “You can definitely contact them about getting more of whatever you
John glanced over at Sherlock, frowning. "So you weren’t lying about representing parties who might like to buy honey supplies?"

"John, whenever possible, it is better to bend the truth than brutally snap it."

"All right you lot, clear the table, get the dishes out, dinner’s on!" Anthea announced.

Dinner was a hearty soup, cheese, crusty bread smeared with some of the new honey, and a large cherry tart for afters. It was simple fare, but John found that both the flavors and the company filled him up most warmly.

Loralee chatted happily through dinner, but yawned and rubbed at her eyes by the time the tart was done. Sherlock offered to herd her through brushing her teeth and getting to bed, and Anthea gratefully waved him to it. John helped her carry the dirty dishes back to the sink to be washed.

"So have you known Sherlock long?" Anthea asked him so casually, it was definitely not casual at all.

"No, not really. It feels like a long time, but it’s only been a few weeks. He’s known you for awhile though, eh?"

"Oh, I’ve known Sherlock forever," Anthea said with a careless shrug. "He’s a crazy one, hmmm?"

"He is." John chuckled. "Why do I get the feeling you’re about to warn me off of him?"

"I . . . I think it’s not my place to warn anybody about much of anything. People generally go on and do what they want regardless of all the good advice they get, yeh? I was actually going to say you suit each other." Anthea tilted her head slightly as if to study him better. "He’s never brought anyone round to visit before. I think you must be special."

"Thank you." John felt his face warming. "I think Sherlock is special too."

"Listen." She looked at him more seriously. "If you ever need anything, potions, or lotions or sweets, or anything else, you’re always welcome here."

"Thank you," John said, feeling as though a great gift has just been bestowed upon him. "I appreciate that."

"All right, Miss Anthea. What lies are you spreading about me behind my back?" Sherlock rejoined them, sweeping in to the kitchen in his usual dramatic fashion.

"Nothing you don’t deserve, you big git." Anthea swatted at him, but he artfully ducked her, and she ended up just waving at air.

"Thanks so much for the grub, Crumbs, but we have to dash. Let me know how the honey works out for you. I’ve wanted more of your honey cream for ages."

"That reminds me," Anthea said. "I have a couple of things you asked for earlier." She got a small sack from one of her cupboards to hand him.

"Thanks, luv." Sherlock kissed her on the cheek. "And now we really must be off. Busy lives, busy lives."

"John it was lovely to meet you," Anthea said, and completely surprised him by enveloping him in a
warm hug. She smelled of mint, and rosemary, and other rich green things. John squeezed her back.

“Now, now, stop mauling the man, we have important appointments to keep,” Sherlock called impatiently over John’s shoulder.

Night had fallen by the time they left Anthea’s apothecary. Sherlock stowed his grand hat into his bag, and with their hoods up, they took a very circuitous route back to Baker Street. John wasn’t sure if all the cloak and dagger business was really necessary, or if Sherlock just enjoyed it.

John was relieved when they finally reached home at 221B. He wondered, when had the flat started to feel like home? They climbed the stairs carefully in the dark, and John waited whilst Sherlock unlocked and opened the door. He quickly located the pot of mage light glowing gently on the shelf, and they lit some candles to set around the room.

“All right. It is a rare sight, this couch, I must admit.” Sherlock exclaimed once they were done, circling around the green and orange piece of furniture hunkered down in the middle of the room.

“It’s ugly, but it is comfy.” John sighed sinking on to it. “Sherlock, I need to ask you something.”

“That sounds serious.” Sherlock paused in stripping off his cloak to look at John.

“That little girl, Loralee. She has your eyes. She favors you, Sherlock. Is she . . . is she your daughter?” John asked.

“Ew, me and Anthea?” Sherlock pulled a face, then tossing his cloak over a chair, plunked himself on the other end of the couch.

“Well, she is an attractive woman you do have to admit, and you’re obviously comfortable with her,” John returned.

“No, John, Loralee is not my daughter, but you observed well. She is family. She’s my brother’s child. I check up on her and her mother every other week or so. Make sure they’re well.”

“Is your brother dead?” John asked.

“No, not exactly,” Sherlock replied carefully, stretching his legs out. “John, my brother is in an arranged marriage, one with an exclusive contract that stipulates no other spouses may be taken. He was with Anthea before the marriage, but he was not allowed to marry her even though she carried his child. He has to pretend they don’t exist. He manages to see them maybe once a month, if that.”

John nodded slowly. His guesses as to Sherlock’s background just went up a few pegs on the posh ladder. Only the oldest noble families still clung to old traditions like arranged monogamous marriages.

“That’s . . . sad,” John said, rubbing his hands over his knees. “Does Loralee know you’re her uncle? She doesn’t call you that.”

“Anthea and I agreed it would be better if we didn’t tell her. It keeps things simpler for Loralee. I’m just funny ‘Sherlock’ who comes and goes. She’ll have questions soon enough as it is. It’s a sad business, and not her fault at all.”

“I’m sorry,” John said simply.
Sherlock turned eyes gone melancholy toward him. “John, sometimes people do what they must.”

“Come here, you.” John tugged the lanky man into his arms. Sherlock held himself stiffly for a moment then melted against John with a sigh. John ran his hand in slow circles over his back then threaded his fingers through the dark curls to caress the back of his head. Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to Sherlock’s forehead.

“John.”

Sherlock shifted to look up at him. Crystalline eyes so bright under that shock of black curls caught the breath in his throat. Fires lain dormant since John had left Sherlock’s bed suddenly roared to life. Sherlock climbed up John’s chest as his mouth sought his, catching him up in a searing kiss. John groaned as their mouths connected, and Sherlock’s tongue stroked into him.

“John, I missed you,” Sherlock murmured against him, pouring himself into the slide of lips and tongue. John answered back, holding Sherlock tighter as he met each fiery kiss with his own unspoken need.

They parted, and stood to peel away layers of clothing—shirts and robes pulled over heads, boots, leggings, trousers and small clothes tossed away. How lovely Sherlock’s paleness was in the soft candlelight. Each long limb was a movement of grace uncovered by every bit of clothing shed. John grabbed Sherlock's arm and ran his tongue up his forearm, wrist to elbow just because he could. Sherlock laughed and pulled his lover into his arms.

John marveled at the look of Sherlock’s pearly body against the golden tan of his own. “We look like the sun and the moon together – Helos and Deanne, forever chasing, but never catching one another,” John mused running his hands lightly up and down Sherlock’s sides.

“Oh I don’t know, my warrior priest.” Sherlock chuckled dark and low, reaching over to hook a finger under the necklace around John’s neck. “I seem to have caught you well enough.” He tugged John closer still by the chain, swooping in for a kiss. John’s hands settled on Sherlock’s hips, gripping tight, pressing their erections between them.

Sherlock kissed him slow and certain, sweeping his tongue into John's mouth over and over like a tide carrying him out to sea. John ran his hands over Sherlock’s arse, up the sweep of his back to clutch at his shoulders. He let himself be carried by the kisses, then let his mouth roam, exploring the map of Sherlock’s face, gently kissing closed eyelids, cheekbones, and the hollows below.

“Hear ye . . . I, who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white Moon among the stars,” John murmured, running his tongue just under Sherlock’s jaw.

“and the mystery of the waters, and the heart’s desire, call unto thy soul. Arise and come unto me.” John moved down, pressing open-mouthed kisses along the column of his long neck.

“For I am the Soul of Nature, who giveth life to the universe; from me all things proceed,” John licked a stripe across Sherlock’s chest to tongue a pink nipple.


“and unto me must all things return; and before my face, beloved of gods and mortals,” John continued relentless, kissing his way down Sherlock’s belly, dropping to his knees to press hot kisses against his hip.

“thine inmost divine self shall be unfolded in the rapture of infinite joy.” He caught Sherlock’s erection, and slid his hand up and down its length. Sherlock groaned.
“Let my worship be within the heart that rejoiceth, for behold: all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals.” John finished the passage with a flourish, swallowing Sherlock’s cock down with a hum.

Sherlock gave a strangled cry, his hands grasping at John’s shoulders. “My knees are giving out. John, have a mercy.”

John stopped, climbed to his feet, and pulled Sherlock to the couch. Once he had him spread across the cushions, John clambered between his long legs.

“Now where was I?” John mused. He bent his head, and licked along the length of Sherlock’s erection. Sherlock mumbled something unintelligible.

“Oh yes, right here. “ John held the base of Sherlock’s penis, and swallowed him down again. He paused to reach a hand up to Sherlock’s lips. “Here suck my fingers.”

Sherlock took two of John’s fingers into his mouth and sucked them in rhythm to John moving on his cock. John pulled his hand back, and carefully worked a spit-slicked finger into Sherlock’s hole. Sherlock lay trembling to the pull of John’s mouth, and the counterpoint of the finger curling inside him. Sherlock came so suddenly he hardly made a sound poised between an up and a down stroke.

“John,” he whispered when he could draw in breath.

“Right here, love,” John said, stretching out to lay over him. They stayed like that, just breathing, feeling their heartbeats against each other.

“The water’s on the table,” Sherlock slurred after a few minutes.

“I know, I’m holding you for a moment.”

“But I’m thirsty,” Sherlock complained. “I want the water.”

“Ah, you lazy boy.” John laughed, and clapped Sherlock’s rump before pushing up. He padded over to the jug on the table and grabbed a cloth to wipe his hands. John took a swig and then brought it over to Sherlock. Sherlock pushed upright to take it and drink.

“John, grab my bag too. While you’re up,” Sherlock said, pointing.

Yes, grand sir.” John laughed scooping up the bag and handing it over. Sherlock fished out the sack from Anthea along with one of the jars of honey.


“Yes, sir.”

Sherlock shifted, and John stretched out on the couch. Sherlock cracked open one of the jars of honey and dipped a finger in. He let John watch while he sloooowly sucked it clean. He dipped it again and brought it to John’s mouth.

“Suck,” he commanded. Dutifully, John sucked the sweetness down. It tasted doubly good on Sherlock. Sherlock scooped more out, and this time he painted a line of honey across John chest, swirling around each nipple. Sherlock set the jar down, and bent to lick up everywhere the sweetness lay. John arched his back at the jolt of pleasure that ran through him.
“Good Gods!”

Sherlock grinned, and scooped another dollop of honey to drizzle a trail across John’s belly ending over his upright cock. He bent and lazily licked his way down. With a particular relish, he licked John’s erection completely clean. John lay boneless beneath him with an arm thrown across his face. Sherlock pulled back then and placed a palm on John’s thigh.

“John?”

“Mmmf?”

“I’d like to try something new. I’d like to take you up the arse.”

John moved his arm and opened his eyes. “I’ve never done that before. I mean I’ve had fingers, but I’ve never been ridden before.”

“I know,” Sherlock said quietly. He pulled something out of the sack on the floor.” I asked Anthea to make a lotion for me, something extra slippery, good for someone who’s never had a lover anally before.”

“Ah. “John quirked a smile. “No wonder she kept looking at me so funny the whole night. “

Sherlock laughed a moment, then sobered.

“John if you don’t want to, it’s fine, but I’d be honored to be your first. I’d be humbled to share this with you.”

John looked at him with dark eyes. “Yes, I’d like that too.”

Sherlock pulled out the jar of ointment, opened it, and offered it to John.

“Here, do me first.”

John pulled out a scoop of the lotion, it was light and slippery and he reached down to cover Sherlock’s half-hard cock with it. Firmly, he coated his penis, swirling his hand around and pulling slightly with each pass as Sherlock hardened under him.

Sherlock’s eyes fluttered half-closed, “Ah, enough, enough, or you’ll finish me again.”

John smiled, and relaxed back. Sherlock scooped lotion onto both his hands, using one to slick John’s rigid cock, sliding his wet fingers back and forth along its length. The other, he slipped between John’s cheeks. He coated his entrance carefully working a long, clever finger in and back. John gasped. It was tight, but as he relaxed, the sensation moved into something marvelous. John felt himself dissolving under Sherlock’s careful onslaught. Sherlock paused to ask “Is it all right?” before adding another digit. Each time John hissed “yes,” Sherlock carefully worked in another. After three fingers pushed deep, Sherlock waited, then pulled out, returning with his cock.

“John are you ready?” he rumbled, dark and deep. “I’m going to fuck you. Fuck you so deep, right up the arse.” When John only gargled in reply, Sherlock slid carefully in.

John cried out. Sherlock waited, reaching out to wrap one hand around John’s straining cock again, and stroked a lazy rhythm while he waited for John to adjust. “Yes, love,” Sherlock purred. “You can take it. You can take my cock up your arse. Open up for me, love. Open.”

John shook slightly as Sherlock rocked against him. As he stretched, Sherlock moved farther out
with each slide. “How would you like me to take you in the middle of the prayer room of the temple?” he breathed out dirty and low. “Where you first met me? Fuck you there for anyone to walk in and see?”


Sherlock’s control slipped then. He pumped hard against John, slamming deep inside him with each thrust as John sank into the cushions, and bounced back.

“Yes . . . yes . . . Gods, YES!” John ejaculated white stripes across his belly as he came.

Sherlock felt John’s orgasm in the clench of his entrance around him. Throwing his head back, he too exploded in a burst. After an endless moment, Sherlock slipped out to collapse nerveless across John.

They breathed in, they breathed out. John’s skin felt porous like Sherlock could just sink right into him.

“John, how are you? Are you . . . hurt?” Sherlock mumbled against him.

“Hurt? No. I’d say transformed is a better word. When I see Anthea again, I really have to thank her for that lotion. That was incredible.”

“So,” Sherlock craned his head back to grin up at John. "How do you feel about the ugly couch now?"

“Sherlock, we are keeping this couch.”

Chapter End Notes

The poetry that John quotes while seducing Sherlock is from "The Charge of the Goddess" written by Doreen Valiente. First published in the 1950's, It has become one of the most moving and well-known prayers in Wicca.
After they peeled themselves apart from the couch, John insisted on a wash. "Guess it's a cold splash from the bucket." John sighed.

"Not necessarily." Sherlock said going to poke around at one of the shelves.

"But we don't even have wood in the flat to build up a fire."

"Watch. You'll like this."

Sherlock pulled open up a small cloth bag to drop several round, nubby stones into the bucket. Within a minute, the water had heated to a nice temperature. “They’re from Arabonia, the kingdom next to ours. They’ll be all over the market in the next few months.” Sherlock told him.

“Wow. That's marvelous.” John laughed. “I thought those were sex toys when I first found them.”

“Interesting idea.” Sherlock mused. “I wonder if inserting them into the human body would be fatal or merely leave a burn?”

“Let’s not be the first to try it out, hmmm?”

Sherlock fetched another jar of Anthea’s creams to wash with – this one a musky-smelling soap. They took turns washing, then rinsing each other clean.

“The hot water’s nice, but I wish the flat were near some public baths. I could really use a soak,” John said, drying off with a cloth.

“Ooh, I’d love to have you in a steam room.” Sherlock came to stand behind him. “Let’s put that on our must-do list.” He slid his hands over John belly to pull him back against him, and kissed his neck.

John laughed. “In public?”

“John, what do you think people DO in the men’s side of the public baths?” Sherlock purred into his ear.

“I’ve obviously been at the temple too long.” John chuckled.

“Speaking of that.” Sherlock’s tone shifted to something wary. “Tell me you don’t have to go back
“I don’t have to go back to the temple tonight.” John smiled, turning in his arms to face him. “I asked for an official leave to visit my sister. I don’t have to be back until tomorrow evening. So I’m yours until then—though I have to be a bit scarce on the streets until I’m meant to be back.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem, John.” Sherlock said squeezing up a generous handful of his backside. “I’m more than happy to keep you in my bed until tomorrow evening.”

They moved about the flat, snuffing out the candles save one by the bed. Sherlock pulled back the covers to sprawl elegantly across the mattress, his head propped by one bent elbow. He looked back up at John from under dark lashes, a slow smile curling across his face.

His form was something from a classical picture John thought – from his dark tousled curls, and pale sweep of a neck, to the line of those wide shoulders tapering in to his waist only to jut out again over a sharp angle of hip. What glorious architecture was the impossible stretch of thighs and calves covering the length of the bed to end in such beautiful, knobby feet.

It struck John with an almost aching pain how lovely this man was. “You do that on purpose.” John complained.

“What?”

“Pose there like a jungle cat waiting to strike. I can see you luring in prey as you pretend to doze.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, and stretched his head back exposing the long line of his throat even more. He snapped his eyes back open, piercing John with his hungry stare. “Is it working?”

“Oh, Gods, yes.”

John climbed in over him, and buried his face against Sherlock’s neck. “Oh, you smell good.” He sighed relaxing alongside him.

“Yes,” Sherlock simply said, wrapping his arm around John, and inhaling deeply into his hair. “I never thanked you for straightening up the flat. It looks much nicer.”

“I missed you. It gave me something to do while you were gone,” John admitted.

“I’m sorry, John. My family often calls me away to fulfill my filial duties. It’s tiresome in the extreme, but I haven’t quite figured out a way to shuck them entirely.”

“No man is an island.” John quoted. “It’s all right. I understand. We all have our obligations to fulfill. I don’t have much of a family, myself. My parents died several years ago in the Fever Plague, I lost . . . friends, my sister got married and moved on. It really left me at loose ends.”

“And you joined the army then.” Sherlock made it a statement and not a question.

“Yeah, I joined the army,” John agreed. “Listen, I know you don’t care for them much, but your family, I’d like to meet them sometime.”

Sherlock was quiet for a moment. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.” He said softly.

John pulled away, rolled on to his back. He couldn't help the wave of emotion that had swept over him at Sherlock’s quick dismissal. “Yeh, I know they’re very posh.” He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I guess I wouldn’t fit in terribly well.” He tried to laugh it off as a joke, but the sound fell a
bit flat even to his ears.

Sherlock turned over to face him, his eyes stricken. “John, don’t think for a moment that I would care what my family thought of you. You’re . . . perfect.” He spluttered out. “Everything with them is so petty and hard. It might be selfish of me, but I want to keep you away from all that as long as possible. Keep you safe and all to myself.”

Sherlock looked so shaken, that John softened and put a hand to his cheek. “There now don’t get so upset. It’s all right. Forget I said anything.”

“John, I’m sorry. Maybe later, when I can bear it, I can have you meet them.” Sherlock turned to kiss his palm.

“All right, then. No worries, love.”

John blew out the candle by the bed. He pulled Sherlock close, and tucked the covers around them. They held each other, just breathing, until John dusted small kisses over Sherlock’s nose, and they were off again, clinging tight, kissing like they hadn’t seen each other in weeks. They ran hands up and down each other as if their fingertips could memorize each bump and dip, slid warm tongues over even hotter flesh. Slicking their palms with cream, they pulled each other to release again, stuttering out cries in the dark of the night. They finally fell asleep, Sherlock curling himself to spoon around John as they lay pressed back to belly.

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Full light streamed in through the windows when John finally blinked awake. Sherlock lay propped on one elbow looking down at him, his eyes a clear grey this morning.

“Good morning, beautiful.” Sherlock smiled.

“Good morning, yourself.” John smiled back. “How long have you been watching me?”

“Time is too slow for those who wait, too swift for those who fear, too long for those who grieve, too short for those who rejoice, but for those who love, time is eternity.” Sherlock recited gently running a finger under John’s jaw.

“That’s pretty,” John said. “What’s it from?”

“It’s from ‘The Musings of a Poet Priest.’ You’re not the only one who reads poetry, you know.”

“I never said you didn’t.”

“You were thinking it. You know, I believe I just might make a special effort, and memorize ‘101 Love Sonnets For All Occasions.’ Then I can recite them the next time I take you up the arse.”

John barked out a laugh, and tried to roll on top of Sherlock. Sherlock had other ideas, and tried to roll back on top of John. They tussled madly across the bed for several minutes each trying to roll the other under them, stopping only when all the bedclothes lay on the floor, and John nearly spilled off the edge. Laying side by side, John reached up to brush a tumble of hair out of Sherlock’s eyes.

“I do, you know, love you,” he said.
“And I love you.” Sherlock’s eyes shone bright. “My heart is yours John. The whole of it, if you want it.”

“I want all of you – the bright bits, the dark bits, all of it. I love you, Sherlock,” John said.

“There are no dark bits to you, John.”

“All men have a shadow, love.”

Sherlock caught John’s mouth in a sweet kiss.

“What did I ever do to deserve this?” Sherlock asked, wonder in his voice.

“Well, you could start by seeing what the Hudsons have on for breakfast this morning,” John grinned. “I am well-nigh starving to death, here.”

“Well, that won’t do.” Sherlock chuckled. “I can’t have it said I rode you hard, and put you away wet and unfed.” Sherlock smiled, curving a hand around John’s backside to drag him closer.

“Oooh, I do love it when you talk dirty.” John rocked in against him, then pulled back. “Sorry, love, nature calls.”

After quick trips to the loo, Sherlock looked around at the tangle of clothes on the floor to find something to wear.

“John, where did you put all my clothes?”

“In the cupboard, where else?”

“Ah, what a novel idea,” Sherlock muttered, finding the right door and pulling it open to discover his vast array of clothing, and costume props neatly stowed within.

John came to stand beside him. “You know, I wondered about this one.” He pulled out a fiddly bit of leather and frowned, dangling it before Sherlock. “What is it then, a hat?”

When Sherlock demonstrated and modeled how the g-string slipped on, John immediately pulled him back to bed.

Hours later, breakfast ended up being scoops of honey licked off their fingers and handfuls of water from the pump in the water closet. This led, for some strange reason, to honey being drizzled over John’s feet and Sherlock licking it out from between his toes. Finally, Sherlock made it out of the bed and into enough clothes to knock on the bakery’s back door, and beg for a late lunch. He returned with a sack of cheese tarts, meat pasties, a variety of baked goods, and a pot of tea.

“Mrs. Hudson said I probably wasn’t feeding you enough,” he said by way of explanation.

“Oh, bless her.” John groaned biting into a fruit pastry wheel. Sherlock found cups in the kitchen, and stripped naked to join John under the covers, and again, they simply sat in bed and ate their fill.

“I’m not sure why we bother with having a table in here,” Sherlock said nodding toward the sitting room before attacking a mince pie. “We never seem to use it.”

“We could have sex over it later,” John calmly suggested, taking a swallow of tea.

“John, you’re going to be the death of me.”
Later, when all that could be eaten was eaten, and the remains had been stowed in a bread box in the kitchen, John and Sherlock sat back on the bed.

“John, there’s something I’ve been wanting to try.”

“Oh really . . .” John’s eyebrow rose.

“No, the table later.” Sherlock smiled. “I’ve been thinking about that night we met. Usually when I touch another mage, I hold a shadow of their talent for a few minutes. When you sent healing in to me, and then I touched you later, it set off some kind of resonance. An echo that seemed to amplify your talent looped between us. I don’t know if it was some fluke occurrence, or if it could be duplicated. I’d like to see if we can do it again.”

“That level of power was like nothing I’d ever experienced before,” John said. "Doing healing usually takes energy out of me, I’m tired afterwards. That night was . . . amazing, but it absolutely knocked me out afterwards. Do you think we can try it safely?”

“If you’re willing to try, I’m willing,” Sherlock said. “I think if I lead us in a simple atunement, we can start small. Keep most of the power in the watering can, and only let a small bit out.”

John smiled at the teaching tale. “All right.”

They sat cross-legged before each other. Then each put a hand over the other’s heart, and then a hand over the one on their chest. Looking in to John’s eyes, Sherlock counted out their inhales and exhales until they breathed deeply in unison.

Sherlock chanted low “Feel your power gathering at the base of your spine. Move it up through your core, up to the top of your head. Feel the energy bursting like a fountain out through your crown. The energy moves through you, out, down, and up again. Now focus on the energy moving from your heart to the heart before you, out and back. We are one. We are one. We are one.”

They both took a deep breath and dropped hands. “You did a good job with that.” John smiled.

“Thank you.”

“What do you want to try first?” John asked.

“How about you send a simple ‘be well’ to me and I return it. Keep it very light. “

John took Sherlock’s palm between his, and concentrated on sending the merest wisp of healing energy to him. He felt it building in his core, and passing easily to Sherlock. Sherlock gathered it and returned it. The energy had taken on a new feeling, it was so much brighter than what John had started. It filled his hand, his arm, his torso, his other arm, his legs, his, feet, his head, it was green, and purple, red and blue, it sounded like a bell, like a chime, like an ocean wave, rippling, smells of an orchard he swung in as a boy wrapped around his head, it was moving back to Sherlock, and back to John, and back . . .

Sherlock dropped his hand and they both tumbled over. When John could move again, he reached out and felt about until he connected with the warm body next to him. John shook him. “Shhhhlock, SHHHLOCK?”

“Hhmmmmfff?”

“how . . . how are . . .?”


An hour later, they struggled awake.

“Well,” Sherlock said dryly, passing his hand over his eyes. “I guess that needs some practice.”

“I feel amazing. That was incredible.” John stretched his arms over his head.

“I wonder if we could use that to heal someone else? Think of what we could do if we could actually direct that outward,” Sherlock mused.

“Needs more control though, yeah? I don’t fancy experimenting on sick people. Who knows what power like that could do undirected.”

“Gods, I have so much energy, John.” Sherlock sat up and stretched his spine like a cat. The look he turned on John might have worried lesser mortals. “John, get the slippery cream.”

“Yes, sir!” John mock saluted, and scrambled to comply.

Sunset painted the sky when John sadly found his clothes, and pulled them back on. “It feels odd to be dressed.”

“I like you better naked,” Sherlock agreed. “When are you free next?”

“Tomorrow will be busy,” John mused aloud. “Day after? I can probably clear the afternoon.”

“That works for me,” Sherlock said. “I have some things to do, and some leads on MacMillans I want to follow up on. Just some inquiries— nothing yet that requires reconnaissance. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“Alright.” John nodded “I hate good-byes.” He looked up at Sherlock, following the lines of his face as if to memorize them for later.

“Then this isn’t a good-bye, it’s just an ‘until we meet again’.” Sherlock stood and enfolded John in his arms, pulling him close.

With a final kiss, John squeezed Sherlock, released him, and not looking back, walked out the door into the cool air of the night. It felt sharp and foreign after all the time spent cocooned together in Sherlock’s flat. John shivered, and pulled his cloak tighter around him.

Chapter End Notes

The quote about the nature of time that Sherlock recites is from Henry van Dyke, an American Presbyterian clergyman, educator, and author
Chapter Summary

John learns much over the course of a day.

John hurried to the temple to reach the back doors before true nightfall. He was glad not to be late for evening meditation, and gratefully joined the line moving to the sanctuary room. Several brothers greeted him as they entered, and he nodded back, eager to slip into the quiet of the ritual. He was almost calm when Brother Mykal stopped him after services in the hallway.

“Brother John, good to see you back. You look rested - your visit must have agreed with you. Is your sister well, then?”

“Ah, yes. My sister’s fine. It was a good visit. Thank you.” John hated how the lies were coming easier.

“I hate to ask, I know the mid-day shift in the prayer room is your least favorite, but Brother Ronan who usually takes that shift is unavailable tomorrow. I would appreciate your filling in then.”

“Of course, Brother Mykal. No worries. I serve with a good will.”


“And you as well.” John bowed in reply. He hurried back to his room hopeful to not meet anyone else he’d have to spin more tales for about his nonexistent visit to Harry. It was wrong to lie, John knew this, but somehow the laws of morality seemed to bend and break around the force of one, Sherlock Holmes.

John found himself yawning as the afternoon wore on. He watched as the sun from the front windows crept slowly across the prayer room floor. A bumper crop of fancy matrons in their latest frocks and hair feathers had shown up to gossip on the meditation benches. Snatches of conversation drifted his way despite his attempts to hear none of it. He amused himself by occasionally walking by to remind the guests to please keep their voices low to not disturb others in contemplation. As if anyone were praying in the room that afternoon.

“I can’t believe he’s getting married in just a few months!”

“Who is that then?”

“The young prince – Prince William of course. They sent out a proclamation just this morning.”
“A royal wedding at Grain Fest - it's soooo exciting.”

“He’s marrying that princess from Arabonia. I hear she has hair long enough to sit on. “

“I wonder if I can grow my hair that long by the wedding date? It will be all the rage by then.”

“I love your dress, darling. Did you use the tailor I recommended on Button Street?”

John was grateful when his shift ended, and he was able to grab some soup at the dining room. Brother Anders found him as he was finishing his second bowl.

“Ah, Brother John. Good I caught you. Brother Gregson wishes to see you as soon as you are free.”

“Any idea what he wants?” John asked

“No idea, sorry, but he does seem to be in a bad mood today. Best to look lively and stay on his good side.”

“Ah, right. Thanks, brother.”

John washed his dishes out, and left them to dry before making his way to Brother Gregson’s office. John hurried, but found himself wishing the corridor was much longer.

“Oh, bollocks,” John muttered under his breath. “This is where I get read the riot act for ditching duty, and lying to everyone, and . . .” John rounded the corner to find Brother Gregson in the front room of his office. He motioned John over as soon as he saw him.

“Brother John, just the man I was looking for. I need you to run an errand. Not like we don’t have enough going on today, but the King asked for some scrolls in our library to be specially delivered. Some treatise on an obscure Phyrian deity, Szartook, God of lost causes.” Brother Gregson scratched his forehead. "I can’t image what the emergency is, but the page insisted it be delivered this afternoon. It needs to go to the Royal Library Archives. It’s next to the Palace on Broad street. You’re familiar with the area?"

“Yes, Brother. I’ve been many times to the public gardens nearby.” John told him.

“Good. You can use the entrance on Mulberry street. See Brother Anders for some money out of petty cash for cab fare.” Brother Gregson handed John a tube holding the scrolls and a note. “This note from the King will gain you access to the archives.”

“I’ll get right to it.” John bowed his head “Good Day, Brother.”

“Good Day, Brother John, and thank you.”

It was a fine afternoon, and John enjoyed the chance to leave the temple for some air. He glanced wistfully at the flat as he passed. He knew Sherlock wasn’t there, but still he had to resist the urge to pop by just to run his hands over the things where they had been together. He walked several blocks simply to stretch his legs before hailing a cab to take him to the other side of Delphium where the government buildings lay. Everything seemed brighter, sunnier, finer than usual, and John suspected it was all due to one tall, lanky detective entering his life. All the clichés about being in love seemed to be buffeting him along. He couldn’t stop smiling at everyone he passed. He was afraid people were going to think him simple if this kept up.
The Royal Library was a large building of warm-colored stone set on the corner of Mulberry and Broad Street. John whistled as he walked up the steps to the side entrance. Showing his royal note got him waved past the guards with only a glance. He pushed open the doors, and walked through a foyer to the dimmer, cooler space inside. It smelled wonderfully of paper, and musty cushions, and polished wood. A young woman in a librarian robe, her brown hair in braids pinned over her head, moved to greet him.

“Good Day Brother, can I help you?”

“Yes, I hope so.” John smiled at her. “I have some scrolls for the King. They were requested from the Temple of the Small Gods.” John pulled the tube of papers from his carrying bag.

“Oh, yes. I’ll take those from you, thanks so much. I’m Molly, by the way, Molly Hooper. Have you ever been to the Royal Library before?” she asked watching the way John craned his neck to see more of the high-ceiling room.

“I’m Brother John. Pleased to meet you. Are my country roots showing too much? Yes, this is my first time here.”

“No, don’t be silly. It’s a lovely building.” Molly told him. “I’d be pleased to give you a tour if you have a few minutes.”

“I think I do have a few minutes. Thank you, a tour would be wonderful.” John beamed at her, quite taken with her open charm.

Stained glass windows set high in the walls threw rich splashes of color across the shelves of books, and statues around the room. Molly showed him through a main stacks area, pointing out how they arranged and cataloged materials, then to a room of artworks and illustrated scrolls. John was particularly taken with a set of painted hangings of monkeys eating mangoes.

“It’s a shame so few people get to see these.” Molly told him, “but they’re far too old and fragile to be put out for the public. I’ll take you for a peek at the ancient manuscripts room too.” Molly smiled. “We have legal documents, royal lineage records, classic poetry—really all kinds of things. My favorite work is a medicinal herb journal going back to the time of Magnus the great’s reign. It’s surprisingly accurate.” Molly bubbled on clearly warming to her subject as they walked a corridor lined with documents in gold frames.

"That does sound nice." John agreed. "I've always found herbal work interesting too."

The corridor turned, opening up to a smaller space filled with the slanting afternoon sunlight. Dust motes danced in a beam illuminating the dark heads of two men bent over a center table. They were clearly arguing over something as one pointed at the scroll unrolled before them, and snorted.

“You see Mycroft was wrong. He owes me a hunting dog.” The older man with the deeper voice declared.

“Well you both owe me, and I think the balance now totals the cost of the Grimalkan province.” The younger one drawled. John froze, that voice . . .
Molly started, clearly flustered. “Oh Your Graces, Prince Sherringford, Prince William, I didn’t know you were down here, I didn’t mean to disturb you. I’m just giving a tour to a priest . . .”

The men looked up.

“JOHN.” The younger one gasped.

It was Sherlock, but not-Sherlock sitting before him. He looked so achingly familiar, yet so strange in his rich navy brocade tunic clearly at home in this elegant place.


“Sherlock?” the other man drawled. He looked a bit like Sherlock, but grown older and heavier with a sharper nose bisecting his face. He glanced back and forth between the two of them, clearly drawing some conclusions. “Curious, he knows you by your middle name, Prince William. Surely you haven’t let one of you playmates from the gutter follow you home, brother dear?”

“He’s a friend, Sherringford. The only thing in this room from the gutter is your mind.” Sherlock threw back at him.


“Yes.” Sherlock looked ill.

“I need to go. Excuse me. Sorry. Your Graces, excuse me.” John sketched a quick bow, and backed out of the room. He turned, and walked blindly through the corridor, moving briskly through the stacks to the exit.

Sherlock - no that wasn’t right. Prince whoever-he-was caught up with John in the foyer. “John, wait.” He grabbed John by the arm before he could reach the door, and spun him around.

“Who are you? Who in the many-headed God’s name are you?” John spat out pushing his hand aside.

“You know who I am.” His lover's eyes were wells of storm-tossed blue.

“No, I really don’t think I do. You should have told me. You played me for such a fool, haven’t you?” John held himself tightly, trying not to shake. “This is all just a game to you, hmm? One big sodding game.” John raked a hand through his hair to stop it from reaching out to the man before him. Somehow his body hadn't quite gotten the message that his brain had.

“No, it’s not, and you’re not. You’re the most real thing I’ve ever . . .”

“No. Stop.” John cut him off, briefly closing his eyes to marshal his thoughts. “Right, I have to go now.”

“John, please listen . . .” He reached out to take John’s arm again.

“No.” John stepped out of his reach. “No, leave me be. Just leave me be. And don’t show up in my damned laundry basket either. Just . . . no.” John turned, and pushed quickly through the door out into the light beyond.
John woke the next morning, and got dressed. He ate breakfast. He found his chores posted on the duty roster in the dining room, and he did them. He sat through the meditation times with the Brothers. He ate something at lunch and dinner. He went to bed right after his shift tending the prayer room, and did his best to think on nothing in particular. He did the same thing every day that week. John felt a new gratitude for the routines of the temple that had itched at him earlier. He had almost nothing to say to the Gods, and apparently they had even less to say back. He enjoyed the stillness of emptying his mind into the rhythm of temple life though. It had saved him once before, and it welcomed him back again.

Notes began appearing around the temple. None of them were addressed to John. They were left where people would be sure to find them though, over the tools in the gardening shed, dropped in the donation box of the public prayer room, pushed between the kitchen doors. The notes were cryptic. One read “The MacMillans on Quarter Street moved abroad last year.” Another simply said “Time is a fool.” Others held well-known love sonnets copied carefully out. It became a popular pastime at dinner for the brothers to read out the latest notes found, and speculate on the prankster responsible.

One morning a small statue appeared in the privies. An older monk identified it as an obscure Phyrian deity – Szartook, God of Lost Causes. The Brothers brought him in to the kitchens to sit next to the altar for Vestia. John just finished enough of his meals to not draw attention, and pushed off to attend to his next task.

Brother Gregson called John to talk in his office one afternoon. “Brother John, how are you?” He asked as John came in, and settled onto the wooden chair.
“Fine, Brother Gregson, yeh, good. Thanks.” John answered him with a nod.

“John, some of the other Brothers have noticed that you haven’t seemed like yourself lately. Has your shoulder flared back up? Do you need to visit a healers’ sanctuary?”

“No, Brother. In fact my shoulder seems to have settled into remission. It hasn’t been hurting me at all.” John gave a tight smile as he shrugged the shoulder in question.

“That’s good news. Anything bothering you that you’d like to talk about? It’s hard work we priests do. It isn’t meant to be done alone.” Brother Gregson clasped his hands, and leaned onto his desk.

“I know, Brother. Actually there is something I’ve been thinking about that I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Yes?” Brother Gregson raised his eyebrows.

“I was thinking about pledging early to the temple – not waiting the five months to make it official.” John leaned in slightly as well.

Brother Gregson smiled kindly. “Well, I appreciate your enthusiasm, John, but the rule of serving for a full year before pledging is there for a reason. The heart and the mind need the year to settle on their true path. It isn’t something that can be rushed. I’d rather have your whole heart at the end of the year, than a hasty decision now. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Brother Gregson, I do.”

“John, you’re a good man. You’ll do well with whatever you decide. I hope you’ll remember that my door is always open if you ever need to talk.” Brother Gregson reached forward to pat John's arm.

“Thank you sir, I appreciate that.” John managed a small smile.

“May the Gods keep you, Brother John.” Greg nodded.

“May the Gods keep you, Brother Gregson.” John nodded before returning to his folding in the laundry rooms.

It was an overcast, chill day threatening rain when John found himself rambling by the river. He had hard biscuits in his bag to hand out, but the weather seemed to have chased the river folk away to warmer locations. John stopped and looked out over the water. How relentless it was, scurrying around the rocks on its busy way. A favorite passage flickered across him mind “Water is soft, it yields to the rigid rocks and yet over time, it wears the rocks away.”

“Ah Great Mother. I am out fresh out of good ideas about my life right now. A sign, something, anything would be good about now.” John blew out a breath and looked up at the ugly grey clouds gathering overhead.

A noise behind him caught his attention. A young boy running up the path waved, and called to him. “Brother, Brother, I need your help!”
“What is it, son, what can I help you with?” John turned to face him.

“There’s a man at the bridge. He’s going to jump. You have to come!”

“Show me!” John followed at a run as the boy took off. They rounded the path back to the nearest bridge, and there indeed was a person in tattered rags clinging to the side of the bridge. The river swirled under him in a choppy mess sliding over the rocks below.

“How long has he been . . .” John turned to ask the street boy, but he had disappeared.

“HEY!” John called up to the bridge, pitching his voice over the rising wind. “Whatever it is, it can’t be that bad!”

The torn edges of the figure’s cloak whipped around him. He shook his head and switched hands on the railing behind.

“Hey now, come on. It’s too wicked a day to be out here like this. Come down before the rain hits, and I’ll buy you a cuppa, yeh?”

The figure seemed to consider his words, then gathering himself, scrambled along the side of the bridge, finally setting feet to safety on the riverbank.

“What troubles you so, friend?” John asked him kindly as the man crouched before him.

The figure drew upright, and pushed back his hood. “John.” Sherlock stared down at him, his eyes a blue fire in his pale, drawn face.

“Oh, no. You don’t get to do this. No. I thought you were someone killing himself.” John shook his head, and backed away.

“And what if I were, John?” His voice cracked on the words. “What if I were about to throw myself on the rocks? What do I have left if my heart has ripped itself free, and walked away?”

John dragged breath into his lungs. “Sherlock . . . I . . .”

It was hardly a thought to throw himself into the arms of the tall, thin man before him. They wrapped together, their mouths meeting in a frantic haste to relearn the taste of the other, sliding over lips, cheeks, jaws, and back to lips again. The heavens chose then to crack open in a deluge of rain.

“Come on!” Sherlock yelled over the downpour, and grabbed John’s hand to pull him along behind him. They sprinted the few blocks back to Baker Street. John felt like he had gone back in time clambering up the steps to the flat as Sherlock pulled a key from around his neck, and unlocked the door.

They fell in to the sitting room suddenly so quiet after the roar of the rain outside. Sherlock dropped before the fireplace to set the stack of wood there ablaze with a spark from the jar of mage light. Once the wood crackled, he stood, and turned back to where John remained frozen by the entrance, dripping onto the floor.

“John.” He lifted a hand, and again, John was on him. They pulled sodden clothes away as hands and mouths moved over rain-slicked skin.

“Missed you.”

“GODS, I missed you.”
Sherlock kissed the wet away from John’s face, licking the salt of the tears that mingled with the damp of the rain. They fell to the couch, wrapping legs and arms to slide whole bodies against each other. John buried his face in Sherlock’s neck, and drew in the smell of the man with each shuddering breath. Sherlock coated their erections with cream from the jar on the floor and they slid their release against warm bellies pressed tight. They lay entwined breathing open mouthed upon each other afterwards. John dropped kisses along the curve of Sherlock’s shoulder, so conveniently close to his lips.

“John.” Sherlock opened his eyes, bottomless pools of blue and grey, to search John’s face. “I am so sorry.”

“This doesn’t solve anything.” John said after a moment, moving his hands in gentle trails over Sherlock’s back. The sex was wonderful, but it didn't bring any answers to the questions buzzing around John's brain. “You shouldn’t have lied to me.” John told him quietly.

“I’m sorry. I know I should have told you.” Sherlock pushed up on one arm, and ran the fingers of his other hand along John’s cheek, down his neck and over his chest to tangle with the chain holding the pendant and ring. “You still have my ring on.”

“I couldn’t bear to get rid of it.” John smiled softly. “Prince William.” John tried the new name out in his mouth.

“John, don’t call me that, please. That man is a shell. He does small things with stupid people. He isn’t me.”

Sherlock pushed up to sitting, and John followed to settle against him. Sherlock grabbed a cloth off the floor and they wiped themselves clean.

“I don’t know what to say that excuses any of this, love. All I can say is that I never tell anyone who I am. I haven’t had a formal portrait done since I was twelve. I keep away from public gatherings. I spend my time as you see, being the rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief slipping through the back roads of Brettona. By the time I could have told you more, I was terrified of losing you with the truth. I still am.” Sherlock turned eyes gone huge to him.

John caught his face and pressed a kiss to his lips. Sherlock turned to climb onto him, and they were drinking each other down again like water on a hot day. They made love slowly, sweetly, turning, running hands over each other. John lay Sherlock under him to rock against the cradle of his spread thighs. When he finally pushed into Sherlock, they both cried out, pressing their faces against each other.

“You told me your name was Sherlock Holmes.” John mused later as they tangled together, gently running his fingers through the twists in Sherlock’s hair.

“That is part of it.” Sherlock agreed warily.

“I thought the last name of the royals was ‘Carrington’?” John asked.

“Carrington is a title from some ancestral lands. Our family name is actually ‘Holmes.’ It’s just almost never used as such. Whenever possible tell a lie that is wrapped in the truth.” He smiled wryly.

“And your full name?” John asked.

“William Sherlock Scott Holmes Carrington at your service.” Sherlock said with a wry smile tugging the corner of his mouth.
“That’s what the W.S.S.H. means inside the ring you gave me.”

“It does indeed.” Sherlock agreed. “John, it’s as if I’ve been playing a game of hide and seek my whole life. You were the only one who ever came to find me.” Sherlock pulled John even closer. "I’m heartsick that you had to meet ‘Prince William’ before I had the courage to tell you as I should have. I treated you badly, and for that I will always be sorry. I hope you can forgive me.”

John shifted until he straddled Sherlock, knees on either side of his hips. He bent to kiss Sherlock gently on the forehead.

“Blessed be thy thoughts that they are one with the creation of the universe.”

He kissed his pale chest. “Blessed by thy heart that it follows the true path of your soul.”

Then he gathered up Sherlock’s hands and softly kissed each palm. “Blessed by thy hands that they bring forth from the unmanifest the world made good and new.” John smiled down at him. "Of course I forgive you, you silly man. I can’t live without you.”

“Oh John, I don’t deserve you. You are . . . a marvel.” Sherlock stared up at him, eyes gone bright.

“No, I’m just John Hamish Watson, late of Dullenshire.” John nodded a mock bow toward him, then shuddered as a thought occurred to him. "Do I have to start bowing to you when I enter or exit the room?” John asked horrified.

“John, please only kneel to me if you are overcome with the desire to have my cock in your mouth.”

Their gazes locked, and they burst out laughing. When the giggles settled, Sherlock looked up with eyes gone serious. He cupped his hand to the side of John’s face. “John, I wish for you to be my equal in all things. I wish for you to never kneel before a royal. Will you marry me?”

John couldn’t stop the sudden intake of breath. “Sherlock, I would like nothing better, but aren’t we even going to talk about this Arabonian fiancé of yours?”

“Cursed Gods take my brother Mycroft.” Sherlock swore, and pushed himself up to standing. “I met the girl once across a banquet. I told my dear brother, the king, that I wouldn’t do it. I didn’t consent to anything, and he made the wedding proclamation anyway.” Sherlock paced as he talked.

“They can’t force you to marry without your consent.” John wrinkled up his brow following Sherlock's progress across the room. “That’s illegal.”

“Oh, he’d find a way. He orchestrated you finding me in the archives that day, you know.” Sherlock stopped to fix John with a pointed stare. "He’s a clever fox to be sure.”

“How did he manage that?” John asked.

Sherlock sank back to sit next to John on the couch again. “King Mycroft ordered those scrolls from your temple, and requested that at least a junior priest escort them instead of a courier to assure their safety. You are the most junior priest there, it made sense they’d pick you. All he had to do then was send me and Sherringford off on a goose chase into the archives, and there we were – actors set in his little play.”

John whistled. “Wow. Your brother already knew about me?”

“He has eyes everywhere. I’m sorry John. It was inevitable, the clever bastard. Did you like that the scrolls he requested were on a God of lost causes? My brother does add that certain something to
everything he touches.”

“I liked the statue you left at the temple. I’m sorry I was sleep-walking the week you left all those notes. The Brothers got a real kick out of reading them over the dinner table.”

“I had the Hudsons leave them when they dropped off their baked goods each morning, but thanks. I was desperate to talk to you, but Anthea made me promise to give you a few days before I came and bowled you over.”

“You talked to Anthea?”

“I stayed with her and Loralee for a few days. I couldn’t stand the sight of the vipers at the palace, and the flat here was . . . too empty without you.”

“Anthea, she’s King Mycroft’s . . . half-wife?” John asked him furrowing his brow.

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed, “but no one knows. No one outside the royal family. Her mother worked as a healer at the palace for years. It was how Mycroft and Anthea met. They kept their relationship very secret. After he had to marry the royal from Eran, they went even more underground. He set protections over her shop. Only customers who don't know her secret, and those who are family can find her.”

“Sherlock,” John began and paused. “Are the only marriages for royals monogamous ones? Is that the only option? How binding is this engagement to this princess?”

“The 'Princess Situation' requires more data, and monogamy wasn’t always the only option for royalty. For some reason, perhaps pressure from neighboring kingdoms, it became the custom. It doesn’t have to be.” Sherlock ran his hands through his hair, leaving it standing up wildly. “I wish I were just a citizen free to do as I wish, but as it is, I live in service to Brettona and her peoples.”

Sherlock turned wide eyes to him. “John, don’t let them take you away from me.”

“Oh, love, I’m not going anywhere.” He gathered Sherlock against his chest and squeezed him tight. “Yes.” John whispered into his hair.

“Yes?” Sherlock pulled back slightly to meet his eyes.

“Definitely - yes.”

“Ah, where did that honey mead go, we need to drink to this. It’s not every day a man gets engaged.”

“Well, I don’t know, love. For you it seems to happen at least twice a week.” John quirked up a smile.

“John. I felt like my skin pulled off when you walked out of that library. Let’s not do that again.” Sherlock shivered.

“No, I agree.” John caught his hand up and twined their fingers together. “No matter what happens, we face it together.”

Chapter End Notes
The quote about water wearing away rocks is taken from the "Tao Te Ching" a pivotal Chinese religious text. Its author is said to be Lao Tzu, though many scholars think this is merely a title meaning "Old Master" and it is really a compilation of many authors.
Where Do We Go From Here

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock make plans for the future.

Sherlock found the bottle of honey mead whilst John dragged a blanket from the bed to the couch. John said he had missed the Ugly Couch too much to leave it now for the bed. They took turns toasting each other with the bottle of honey mead, completely neglecting to find any cups in favor of drawing pulls directly from the bottle. That led in turn to drinking the mead from each other’s mouths, passing swallows between them with decadent glee. When John declared himself drunk AND famished, Sherlock sheepishly pulled out an entire basket stuffed with food from the kitchen.

“I know this looks like I purposefully planned a seduction and bribe today simply to win over your good graces . . . ” Sherlock started but John just cut him off.

“GOOD GODS, man, do you have sausage rolls in there? Bring that basket over here before I mug you for it!” John was pleased to find not only sausage rolls, but pastry twists, a chicken pot pie, berry scones, and a large cherry tart inside the basket as well.

“Mrs. Hudson was worried about us.” Sherlock explained.

“Sherlock, does she know about you being the Prince?”

“Yes, she does. I made the mistake of showing up on her doorstep a few too many times. What can I say – her baked goods rival anyone’s in the city. She’s a sharp old bird, and I trust her.”

“You are a lucky man! You’ve an excellent potions mage for a sister-in-law, and the best baker in the city for a landlady.” John teased him.

“Don’t forget a warrior-mage priest for a fiancé.” Sherlock reached out to brush the fringe off of John’s forehead. “What can I say? I only associate with the best people.”

“Speaking of being a priest, it looks like I won’t be pledging to the temple after all.” John looked down at the floor for a moment.

“Is this a bad thing?” Sherlock asked him quietly.

“No, it’s not. I enjoyed parts of being at the temple, but a lot of it grated on me. I think I would have gotten bored with it eventually, and come to hate it. That would have been a shame.”

“What did you enjoy about being at the temple?”

“Helping people. Watching after the street kids who came in at night-watch.”

Sherlock chuckled abit.

“What?” John asked.
“Many of the street children are contacts under my employment. I had some of them spying on you. Don’t worry, I pay them all quite well for their work.”

John rolled his eyes. “Sherlock, you madman.”

Sherlock fixed him with a sharp stare, then went unfocused for a few minutes. John waited. He knew Sherlock’s “thinking face” and that it was best to just wait until he cycled through whatever mental bit of cud he was chewing through.

“John, have you ever considered finishing your healer’s training?” Sherlock tilted his head slightly as he fixed him with that piercing blue-grey stare.

“No. I put being a full healer behind me . . . awhile ago. I was engaged before, you know.”

“I do. Why don’t you tell me about her.” Sherlock prompted gently.

“How . . .”

“John, I observe. Tell me.”

“We grew up together. I’d known Annalisa most of my life. I thought I was in love with her at the time, but now I think we were just used to each other. Getting married was simply the next thing to do. I was apprenticed at the local healers’ sanctuary then. I had my whole life mapped out ahead of me.” John raked his fingers back through his hair, and blew out a breath. “Then the Fever Plague struck. It was a nightmare, as you know. Just awful. We had no idea what was going on, the patients were coming in so fast, and nothing worked on them. Then my dad got sick, then my mum, then Annalisa. They all died within the week. My sister Harry couldn’t cope. She got married, and moved away as soon as she could. I was so alone. Great Gods, I wished I had died too. I gave up on healing—it hadn’t done anyone I loved any good. When the Gallatian wars hit, and they came recruiting, I was the first in town to sign up.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I remember hearing about that. I was so gone at the time, news from the outside world didn’t filter in too well. I do remember vaguely that’s when Mycroft became king. “

“John. I think you should reconsider it—finishing your healer’s training. Surely one of the first things they teach you as a healer is that you will lose patients? Just because you can’t save everyone doesn’t mean you can’t help someone.” Sherlock ran his hand down John’s back. “The world is missing out on your talents, my love.”

John drew in a deep breath. “I’ll think about it. A lot has changed since I threw away my healers robes.”

“You know I like a man in uniform.” Sherlock smirked kissing John’s cheek.

John smiled and let Sherlock pull him into some lazy snogging before leaning back. “So what’s to become of me when I leave the temple? Do we stay here? Do I come back with you to the palace?”

“We’ll have to spend some time at the palace, it’s unavoidable, but I do own other properties. I have a country estate, Rosewood Manor, that my grandmother left me. I can’t wait to show it to you. I spent all my summers growing up there. I thought we’d keep this flat though. I know it isn’t the
biggest place, but I’ve grown attached to it. If you want to look for something better though we can . . .”

“Sherlock, I love this flat. Plus it’s next to Mrs. Hudson’s bakery. How could we possibly leave?”

“John, you are a wonder to me.”

“Sherlock tell me about your family. What are they like?”

Sherlock pulled away, holding himself stiffly upright as though he were putting on armor merely to speak of them.

“Well, there’s my mother, the Queen Mum, she can be . . . formidable. There’s my oldest brother Mycroft, and his wife the Queen Norah, nee a princess of Eran . . .

“The one who’s expecting right?”

“Yes, she’s due any day now. The castle is aflutter. Mycroft, is relentless. He’s a truthsayer. He can sense any lies spoken to him.”

“Oooh, that IS a horrible older brother to have.” John shuddered. "I can see how you perfected the art of evasion."

“John I am sorry about that . . .”

“I know. Next on the roster?”

“Next down on the cast of horrors is my older brother, Sherringford. He’s married to a mouse of a woman, the Lady Prunella – Pruney. We all think she’s barren.”

“Is Sherringford a mage as well?”

“No, surprisingly he was born without a talent. It itches at him that the rest of us have something he doesn’t.”

“It occurred to me over the week. When you said you said you warned the palace about a possible attack on the king and the heir-to-be, you didn’t need to send a note to reach the king, did you? You just walked in and told your brother, King Mycroft, about it.”

“I did.” Sherlock looked a bit sheepish. “And he brushed my concerns aside. He said plots are bubbling every day to overthrow the monarchy. It’s what amuses a large segment of the populous. I disagree with him though that this is meaningless. It feels like part of a larger pattern to me. I’ve hit some dead ends, but if I can just get a few more pieces to come together, it will all make sense.”

“Oh Gods. Sherlock. I’m not sure I can do this.” John scrubbed his hands over his face. “This is surreal talking about royals like this. I don’t know how I can come to the palace, be part of a royal family.”

Sherlock paled. “I understand, John . . .”

“NO, no, you berk. I’m not backing out on you. I’m just nervous . . .” John reached over and slipped his hand into Sherlock’s.

“Don’t be. You are twice the man of any of them. I’ll have you knighted and given a royal title if that will make you feel any better.”
“No, Gods, no. You being Prince William is quite enough titles for us to be handling just now.”

“John, I realize how much this all is.” Sherlock looked down at their entwined hands

“Hey, I love you. I said that I stood by you and I meant it. I invaded Gallatia, and survived a cursed arrow hit. After that, how bad can a room of royal in-laws really be?”

“I love you too, John Hamish Watson. More than you may ever know.” Sherlock swept John into an encompassing embrace, pulling him tight. John wound his arms around Sherlock, and they sat breathing in each other’s air, feeling heartbeats moving together.

“I hate to leave you tonight.” John sighed. “But I have night-watch duty at the temple. Even if I’m leaving the temple, I need to go back, finish out the week, and say my good-byes. They were good to me there. I don’t want to leave anyone in the lurch. Sherlock, how much do I still need to keep under wraps when I tell them why I’m going?”

“I think you need to keep ‘Prince William’ out of the conversation for now, but by all means tell them your lover has shagged you senseless, and you’re running away to be wed. John, at least kiss me before you go.”

“John, at least kiss me before you go.”

Sherlock wanted to escort him back to the temple, but John made him stay at the flat. “What and have you snogging me good-night at the back doors like I’m sixteen home from a date? No, let’s spare the priests that sight.” John sighed, and kissed his lover near senseless by the door to the flat instead. No matter where they said good-bye, it was still agonizing to part.

John joined the Evening Meditation as the last of the men filed in to the sanctuary. He looked around the simple room with its bright wall hangings and wooden benches, the bowed heads of the brothers as they took their seats. How precious everything seemed now that he was leaving it. They moved through the close of day chanting, then settled to quiet contemplation. It was hard to calm his mind into a still pond, but he let his breath move slowly through him settling the tsunamis of the day.

His time watching the prayer room that night started out uneventfully. A few petitioners drifted in after late work shifts to light incense in front of statues and mumble their prayers. When an older woman came in crying, he met her at the door.

“Welcome to Temple of the Small Gods, mother. How may we serve you?”

“I . . . it’s my husband. He’s with the healers for the night. I wanted to stay, but they told me to go home and get some sleep. I couldn’t though. I couldn’t go home alone.”

John sat her on a prayer bench, and fetched her tea.

“Thirty years we’ve been together. We’ve almost never spent the night apart. You don’t have a sweetie, do you?” She wiped her eyes with a cloth John handed her. “You priests marry the temple, right?”

“Well, actually I’m leaving the temple service for my sweetie. He just proposed to me.” John quirked a rueful smile.

“Oh, that’s marvelous. You’re much too lovely to marry a temple.” The woman reached over to pat him on the knee. “Appreciate him. Appreciate every day you have with him.”
“Thank you.” John told her “I will.” John stayed with her through the night. They lit incense in front of Ongus, the God of Lovers, and Jeno, mover of obstacles. Then John lit a candle to Gallanus and recited a lengthy prayer for healing. John kept vigil with the woman even as she dozed against him until the dawn crept through the windows. When she woke, she hugged him.

“Thank you Brother. You don’t know what you did for me tonight.”

“I’m glad I could help. I wish your husband a speedy recovery.” John assured her as he saw her to the door.

After his shift in the prayer room, and falling into some sleep of his own, it was time to talk with Brother Gregson. John found his way to Brother Gregson’s office. He met Brother Anders in the front room writing at his desk.

“Brother Anders, is Brother Gregson in?”

“No, he’s probably out in the garden if you need to find him.”

The conversation he rehearsed in his head as he walked the length of the corridors was so different from the one they had shared just a few days ago. He found the temple head on his knees in the garden under a floppy hat happily pulling weeds out of the rosemary and sage.

“Brother Gregson, do you have a moment?”

“Ah, Brother John. Indeed. It’s a good time for a break.” Brother Gregson, stood, brushed himself off, and pulled his hat and heavy gloves free. Come on, I need a drink.” He walked to a small table by the stone walk where a covered pitcher and clay cups waited. “Lemonade?” he asked John.

“Yes, sir, please.”

Brother Gregson poured lemonade for them both, and led the way to a bench under a shady tree bright green with the fresh new leaves of spring.

John took a swallow from his cup, unsure how to start this now that he had the head priest before him.

“What’s on your mind, Brother John?” Brother Gregson took a deep drink then leaned forward propping his elbows on his knees.

“I’m leaving the temple.” John blurted out. “I mean I’ve decided not to pledge. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry John. You need to make the right decision for you. I can’t say I’m surprised though.”

“You aren’t?”

“John your heart hasn’t been here lately. You were hardly at the temple all last month, and while you spent the last week wiping the floor with your long face, someone was littering up the place with love notes. I didn’t think they were for old Brother Ezriel. I take it you and your special someone patched things up?”
John blushed. “He asked me to marry him.”

“Congratulations,” Brother Gregson smiled at him. “That’s good news. You know Brother John, I do think things take the path they are meant to. Do you remember earlier when I asked you why we might keep a garden at the temple?”

“Yeh, I think I said it was to have something to do,” John said furrowing up his forehead.

“That’s right. You know people who tend to stay at the temple usually tell me we have a garden because it’s a joy to work in. John, if the garden doesn’t call you, you need to find where your heart does lead.”

“I’ve actually been thinking about formally finishing my healer's training.” John admitted.

“Even better news. You’d make an excellent healer.”

“Thank you Brother Gregson.”

“Do you have a place in mind to apprentice at?”

“No, I hadn’t gotten that far yet.”

“I have some names of healers you might check out. I’ll get those written down for you.”

“Thank you so much Brother Gregson.”

John, we’re sad to see you go, but it’s all for excellent reasons. Who is your young man if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I think you know him, or know of him. Sherlock Holmes?”

“That, I do. John, I wish you the best, but please remember if things don’t work out for you for whatever reason, you’re always welcome back here.”

“Thank you Brother Gregson. I appreciate that. I thought I’d finish out the week, say my good-byes, wrap up.”

“That’s good of you. Ah, John, you make me feel so old.” Brother Gregson patted him on the shoulder. “Get out there and grab life with both hands for me, will you?”

“I will sir, thank you, sir.” John couldn't help smiling as he bowed his good-byes.
John stopped by his room after lunch. With plans to meet Sherlock back at the flat, he thought he’d grab the last of his books to take over with him. It was only a small heart-attack to open the door and find the man himself lying half-nude across his bed. John shut the door behind him as quickly as possible.

“Sherlock . . . ” John cried, and stopped.

He ran his eyes over the lean, pale body stretched along his mattress. Sherlock was clad in nothing more than a pair of under shorts . . . and lengths of rope knotted over his wrists and looped around the headboard above. A long wooden ruler lay next to him on the bed, a jar of cream on the table beside.

“John,” Sherlock grinned wickedly at him. “Come pull this bit and tighten things up.” Sherlock nodded with his chin to a loose end of the rope. “

“Sherlock, what is all this?” John suttered.

“I would think it was pretty obvious. I’ve been terribly naughty. You need to tie me up so I can’t escape and spank me as punishment. I brought my own ruler.”

“Sherlock, we can’t do this here, it’s a TEMPLE!” John hissed.

“So? John. Last time you protested that you were a noviate here. This is no longer the case.”

“But someone may hear us!” John cried.
“Isn’t it the case that some priests enter states of meditative ecstasy by self-flagellation?”

“I’ve heard that.” John found his protestations fizzling out under the onslaught of all things Sherlock.

“John, it’s the middle of the afternoon. Most of the other brothers are busy elsewhere. Besides you’re leaving here soon. How many other opportunities do you think I’ll have to get spanked and shagged rotten at a temple?” Sherlock’s eyes twinkled at him from under a tumble of hair fallen across his forehead.

“Oh, sod it.” John completely crumpled. He moved to the edge of the bed and grabbed the end of the cord, pulling the knots tight.

“You could get back out of this in an instant couldn’t you?”

“That’s not the point.” Sherlock told him.

“What is the point?”

“That I’m a bad boy, and completely at your mercy.”

“Aah.” John’s breath caught while his cock lept to attention.

“I definitely need at least 10 smacks with the ruler. More to your discretion.”

John reached over and picked up the ruler. It was 18 inches long, a mid-weight wood, smooth to the touch across his palm.

“Sherlock.” John bent down, placing a hand over his back to look him in the eye. “I like the idea, but I don’t want to really hurt you.”

“No worries. It’s been my understanding that a code word you wouldn’t normally say in this situation is a signal to stop.”

“Okay, what code word?” John’s tongue darted forward to briefly wet his lips.

“How about ‘cinnamon’?” Sherlock quirked an eyebrow.

“Oh, that’s got a bite to it.” John ran his hand down Sherlock’s length to cup his arse. He continued to delight in the fact that for such a skinny bloke, his lover had a luscious backside. John bent further to catch Sherlock’s lips in a kiss as he kneaded his bottom in a slow rhythm.

“What naughty things have you been up to, then?” He growled in Sherlock’s ear.

“I showed myself to the girl down the lane.”

John almost laughed, but looking at Sherlock, his eyes half-closed, a pink flush creeping over his chest, the laughter turned to pure want. John reached down to stroke a hand over the front of Sherlock’s shorts, and his erection already straining within. He squeezed gently. Sherlock made a soft sound at the back of his throat.

John rolled Sherlock over to all fours, balanced on his knees, and bound forearms, rump deliciously in the air. John quickly shed his clothes down to his own underwear. He returned to run a hand over Sherlock’s back, over the swell of his buttocks, to the tops of his thighs, then swung the ruler with a crack against his arse. John was surprised at how satisfying the sound was. He smacked it against his own thigh a few times, and found that while it made a nice sound, it didn’t bring that much pain on any one strike.
He returned the ruler to Sherlock, and smacked a few times across each of his buttocks, getting a feel for how heavy or light to make his swings. Light swings hardly seemed to register, but harder smacks brought out a cry. John paused to rub his hand over Sherlock’s arse, and was rewarded with a deep groan.

“You like this. You are a naughty boy, aren’t you?” John whispered near his ear, running a finger down his spine. Sherlock arched like a shock had run through him.

“I think we need to take these off, don’t you?” John ran a finger under Sherlock’s waistband, then untied his shorts, and pulled them half-way off. John smacked the ruler several times across the top half of Sherlock’s cheeks now bared, alternating sides.

Sherlock panted as John pulled the pants all the way off. A glow had risen across the usual pale curve of Sherlock’s behind. John marveled at the rosy blush on his skin stroking his hand up and down over the flush, cupping the bottom curves lovingly to knead lightly again. John grabbed the jar of Anthea’s cream on the table. He opened the lid to release the smell of vanilla and lavender into the room. Scooping out a bit, he used it to reach around and slick up Sherlock’s rock-hard cock, pulling once, then twice.

With another generous scoop, he worked fingers in-between Sherlock’s rosy cheeks, and slicked his back entrance, sliding several fingers into him. Sherlock pressed his face to the bed, and keened a low sound. John reached around to gather Sherlock’s cock again, pulling slowly along its length, and the man exploded, pumping warm stripes onto the bed, before collapsing down. John leaned forward to press smug kisses along Sherlock’s back making a trail from nape to tailbone, then bit lightly on his cheeks.

“I’m going to spank you, hard now.” John told him, choked and low, as he cupped his arse. “Ten times I want you to count for me. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.” Sherlock's voice was a dreamy thing.

“What’s the code word if you need to stop?”

“Cinnamon.” The word low and slurred, but recognizable.

Satisfied, John pushed off his own shorts, and slicked his penis with another scoop of the ointment. He was throbbing, he was so hard. John picked the ruler back up and swung it with force over the center of Sherlock’s bare bottom.

Crack. The loud sound bounced off the walls.

Sherlock jerked and cried out.

“Count for me.”

“One.”

Crack.

“Two.”

Crack.

John alternated where the blows landed. Upper cheek, lower cheek, one side, the other side, the tops of the thighs—he was careful to land each strike on a new patch of red skin. Sherlock made it to ten
on a near sob. John threw the ruler away, and pushed his cock home sliding into Sherlock up to the hilt. They both cried out at the jolt of it, and stayed a moment to adjust before John snapped his hips to pump in and out, riding Sherlock hard.

“Come on, love, come on.” John babbled as Sherlock moaned in time with his thrusts under him. He reached under them to wrap his fist over Sherlock's now raging erection, and pumped it in time with his snapping hips.

“JOHN!” Sherlock yelled, and came again, as John burst into a white hot flame to follow. When the aftershocks had ridden their way through them both, John carefully slipped out and fell to the bed squeezed between Sherlock and wall.

“Ah. Ah, love, are you all right?” John reached out to pet the back of Sherlock’s head. The man lay boneless, collapsed into the mattress.


“Here, let me get you untied.” John struggled upright, and worked against the knots binding Sherlock’s wrists to set him free. His wrists were a little chafed, but his backside, impressively red. John gathered the limp form of his lover into his arms and pulled him close. When he accidentally grabbed the side of Sherlock’s arse, the man squeaked.

"Oh, sorry." John carefully moved his hand to land higher on his back.

“You were marvelous, love.” John whispered against Sherlock’s hair.

“John . . . love you.” Sherlock mumbled as they drifted off to sleep, their legs and arms entwined.

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter is a nod to the very first book I read about BDSM - "Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns: The Romance and Sexual Sorcery of Sadomasochism" by Philip Miller. An excellent primer if you want to know more.
Welcome to My Parlour

Chapter Summary

John finally gets an eyeful of the royal palace.

When John next swam to consciousness, it was to full afternoon light shining down from the small window in his temple bedroom - though not his room for much longer he mused. It was a pure delight to find a head full of dark curls tickling under his chin as a drowsing Sherlock lay tucked up against him. Less delightful though was his arm trapped underneath them that had fallen asleep at some point in the nap. Still, it was a small price to pay, and John couldn't be arsed to mind overmuch. He tried valiantly to work his arm free without waking Sherlock, but any jostling seemed enough to rouse him.

“Hello beautiful man.” John smiled into the half-sun, half-storm of Sherlock’s blue-grey eyes as he blinked awake.

“Oh, John.” Sherlock stretched luxuriously next to him. “I’d say let’s do that again, but I think I’m going to be sore for awhile.” Sherlock pushed upright and winced when he took weight onto his buttocks.

“I had an idea about that.” John said, joining him in sitting up on the bed. “This might be a good opportunity to see if we can use the looped healing power between us in a controlled way. I remembered a magecraft lesson of visualizing your power caught up in a net to control it. Maybe that will work better for us.”

“All right my priest, I’m game. Lead on.”

Sherlock put his hand out and John caught it between his own. John centered his breathing, and humming slightly, sent a healing in to Sherlock directed to his wrists and backside. Usually his own power wouldn’t do more than give a slight pain numbing. He felt Sherlock pulling the energy in and containing it. When he passed it back to John, he sent all his focus into channeling the energy slowly into an imaginary net. Like a game of catch, he carefully tossed it back in to Sherlock. He watched while the red lines around Sherlock’s wrists shrank, then disappeared. He assumed the soreness on his bottom had healed as well as Sherlock’s face relaxed.

“Wow. I think we really got it that time!” John crowed.

“Oh, that does feel better. Now we really can do it all again.” A feline smile crept over Sherlock’s face, then abruptly vanished. “Only we can’t, we have to talk, and then we have to go to the palace.” It was as if a cloud had just passed over the sun, so fast did Sherlock’s mood shift.

“The palace?” John asked warily.

“We’re invited to dinner, and ‘no’ isn’t an answer.”
Sherlock swept around and rolled off the bed to gather the things he's worn in earlier from the floor. Angrily he yanked on shorts, and leggings, undershirt and robe. Finally he sat down on the small stool facing John, and clasped his hands in his lap.

“I have bad news, and I’m not sure how you’re going to feel about it.”

"Oh love, what is it?” Something in Sherlock's tone had sent a prickle up John's neck, and he instantly left off pulling on his own clothes to listen.

Sherlock stared down at his joined hands, obviously steeling himself to begin. “I spoke with my brother, Mycroft, yesterday. I told him I wasn’t agreeing to the wedding, and he told me I already had. Apparently I signed papers when I was eighteen. I had no idea at the time what I was signing, but Mycroft tells me if I do not honor the marriage, he’ll have me imprisoned for breach of contract.” Sherlock finally raised eyes gone quite mournful to meet his.

“But that’s ridiculous.” John sputtered.

“Not really.” Sherlock quirked up a wry smile. “He could be completely lying about the papers, and still have me imprisoned – he is the king. John, I can always run. Leave the country. With my wits, I can always build a life somewhere else. But I would never see Rosewood Manor, never breathe in Delphium, never see Anthea or Loralee again. If you came with me . . . we would be leaving all we knew behind.”

“Sherlock, if that’s your decision, I’m there with you. Of course I’d go with you.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?” Sherlock stopped, and tilted his head slightly to the side. He smiled, then took a breath to continue. "Option number two, the one that preserves hearth and country, is to marry the poxed girl with the provision of a clause that allows me a consort. The Arabonians insist on monogamous marriages for their nobles as well as their people, but a consort is an ancient Brettonian custom and law, and beyond their jurisdiction. In my heart, you would be my number one, regardless of what any papers would say."

Sherlock stared at the floor before looking up to catch John with a piercing look. "Option number three is Anthea in her shop, hiding and living a life that is half lie, and I will not ask that of you.”

“Sherlock.” John stood and padded over in his shorts to gather Sherlock against him. Sherlock pressed his face to John’s belly and inhaled deeply as his arms wound tightly around him. “I don’t fault Anthea for living the life she must.” John mused carding a hand through his love's hair. “I don’t know if she’s unhappy or not with her lot. I can say that if I had to, I would be your half-husband in a second. I would do whatever I could to keep you in my life.”

“John, I don’t deserve your love.” Sherlock sighed pressing his lips to his skin.

“Sherlock, none of us needs to deserve the gift of love. It’s freely given and freely received or it isn’t love at all.”

“Well, that’s settled then.” Sherlock said looking up at John with a bottomless blue gaze. “We’re eloping tonight, and Mycroft can go fuck himself.”

“I didn’t peg you for a coward.” John smiled wryly, cupping his hand around the base of Sherlock's skull. “Come on, love. Let’s go beard the lion in his den, and get it over with.”


“Oh, Great Mother.” John exclaimed suddenly pulling back.
“What’s wrong?” Sherlock peered down at him, narrowing his eyes into cat-like slits.

“What am I supposed to wear to a dinner at the bleeding palace?”

“Oh, that’s no problem.” Sherlock waved a careless hand. “Come back to the flat with me, and you can see some of things I got. I’ve been shopping.”

“Oh Gods, I think I’ve got prayer room duty tonight.”

“John, I say this with the utmost tact I possess, but I believe that the good brothers probably want you moved out of the temple as soon as possible.”

John furrowed his brow at him. “Oh?”

“Yes. I heard no less than six different sets of footsteps linger outside the door as you beat my arse, and shagged me into the mattress, and at least one man opened the door, looked in, and quickly left while you were sleeping. I doubt they’ll keep you from leaving anytime you wish now.”

John blushed a truly alarming shade of red.

Sherlock at least made himself useful, and helped John carry the last of his things from the temple to their flat at 221B. John shivered as they climbed the steps. He almost couldn’t believe that the place was finally his home. He opened his mouth to say something to that effect, but as they stepped inside, the words froze on his tongue. To say that some redecorating had gone on recently was an understatement. Every inch of furniture was now covered in heaps of rich garments while even the poor floor seemed to groan from the new boxes and bags stacked over it. It looked like a tailor's shop had sicked up across their living room.

“What . . .” John started, and had to swallow before continuing. "What is all this? I just cleaned up in here!” John dropped the bag he was carrying to add to the rest.

“John, as my fiancé, I cannot allow you to be seen in anything less than fabulous. I need to spoil you in the manner to which you will become accustomed. This is your new wardrobe.” Sherlock swept out an expansive arm to include the sartorial bounty spread before them.

“This is too much.” John ran his eyes over the room. His mouth opened and closed like a fish.

“John.” Sherlock said tugging the man against him. “You’ve left the temple because of me.” His voice grew soft. “You must come to the royal palace and swim with the sharks because of me. At least let me outfit you in the new armor you will need.”

“Surely I don’t need ALL this?” John turned wide eyes to him.

“No. You don’t need to keep it all, but there are a variety of outfits for different occasions. Try things on, and what you don’t like, I’ll have sent back. Everything should fit. I believe my estimation of your measurements was . . . spot on.” Sherlock groped John’s arse as punctuation.

“All right, madman.” John laughed. “What should I try on first?”

“Try the green velvet suit.” Sherlock suggested. “I want to see how the tight trousers look on you.”
He added all but leering.

At dusk, John and Sherlock left the flat to travel to the palace. John ended up with a mid-blue outfit that wasn’t too studded with frippery. Sherlock, on the other hand, pulled the most garish purple and green tunic and trousers from the back of his cupboard to wear. John could only shake his head at him. He had been sure it was a costume for a fancy dress party when he had put it away for Sherlock earlier.

“Really, Sherlock. You’re wearing that?” John asked raising an eyebrow.

“Protective coloring, John. The more outlandish the outfit, the less attention paid to the person behind it. Come on. Mycroft will have sent a coach, and I told them to wait at a usual rendezvous spot.”

They threw on lightweight cloaks that covered them to ankle, and walked the several blocks to a busy street lined with cafes and restaurants. A plain black carriage and set of dark horses sat by the side of the road wouldn't have caught John's eye for more than a moment, but it was obviously waiting for them as the servants jumped to attention at their approach.

“Good evening, sirs.” The footman nodded deeply, swept open the door and ushered them inside.

“Good evening.” Sherlock intoned back, and waited for John to enter ahead of him.

The inside was lined in sumptuous red velvet, with gold tassels, and hanging brass lanterns on both sides.

“Cor, we’re getting fancy already.” John looked around a bit nervously as they settled themselves and the carriage set off.

“John, this is all flash and gaudy trinket. Beyond meeting the basic needs, such ostentatious displays of wealth are simply displays of one’s lack of personal attributes.

“This is your brother’s carriage isn’t it?”

“Just so.” Sherlock replied. “Well, we might as well put the ambience to good use. John, come here and kiss me like you mean it.”

“Oh, I always mean it.” John grinned and climbed onto his lover’s lap.

The carriage navigated its way expertly through the city streets, arriving at the grand front gates to the royal palace quicker that John would have liked. At a word from their driver, the gatekeeper nodded and the large wrought-iron doors swung open to admit them. John and Sherlock peeled away from each other with a sigh, and adjusted their clothes back to rights. John smiled as he helped Sherlock straighten the ruffle down his ridiculous purple shirt. John suspected the man had kept his tongue in his mouth and his fingers down his trousers the whole ride to distract him from the moment
at hand.

“Ah, here we are – the main gate to the bleeding palace.” John marveled looking out the window, wondering what he had possibly done right or wrong to bring him to this moment.

“There are five other entrances to the palace ground.” Sherlock’s rumbled behind him. “Two are official, two are unofficial, and one is only known to me as far as I know. I can show them to you later if you like.” Sherlock’s reached over to take John's hand on the bench, working their fingers to twine together. “John." He tugged slightly at their joined hands to draw John's gaze back to his face. "Don’t let them intimidate you. You are a far better man than any of them.”

“Sherlock, you grew up here, it's different for you.” John groaned. “It’s all well and good to say ‘don’t be nervous’ at going to the royal palace when of course I’m going to be nervous.”

“Fine, John. Simply picture everyone in their underwear, and you should be fine.” Sherlock leaned in to press a kiss to his forehead.

"There's the ticket.” John laughed weakly, but his rising panic had ebbed somewhat.

The coach stopped on the paved drive, and a well-dressed footman darted forward to open their door. John’s first impression of the palace was a whirl of pale stone walls stretching out for days, endless rows of windows, and altogether too many people scurrying about. Sherlock held John’s hand firmly to tug him past the bobbing servants, up stairs, and through the wide ornate doors heaved open for them. John had barely a glimpse of ornately tiled floors, high ceilings, and long sweeping draperies before he was pulled into another room even posher than the first. By the fifth grand space Sherlock had dragged him through, John gave up trying to remember how to get back out again, and hoped he and Sherlock weren’t separated any time soon. When Sherlock finally encountered an older man in servants’ livery, bowing politely before him, he stopped abruptly making John almost crash into the back of him.

“Liverton. Where is my brother, the King, and where is tonight’s dinner to be held?”

“Good evening, Your Highness. His Majesty is entertaining delegates from Duslen in the smaller dining room this night, and bids you and your guest join him there as soon as you arrive.”

“Delegates? I wasn’t told this was to be a formal state affair. Curse Mycroft.”

“My condolences, sir. Shall I take your cloaks?”

John unfastened his wrap to hand to the man. With ill humor, Sherlock pulled his own cloak away, and swirled it in the general direction of the butler.

“Come on John, into the fray.” Sherlock tugged John down a hall and through a double set of doors that more servants swung open for them.

John cast his eyes quickly over cheerful space - light from wall sconces and chandeliers bounced off the many wall mirrors to glitter over the silverware and glasses gracing the tables. It was the group of bearded men at the tables next to the fireplace where a small mage fire crackled that kept his attention though. The men laughed, calling for their glasses to be refilled by the many servants who flitted in and out. The clean-shaven man wearing a rich plum tunic in their center stood out like some "spot what doesn't belong here" game. He could be none other than King Mycroft. John decided blowing out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

Sherlock of course pulled John into the center of things as he rounded on the elegant man with a snarl. “Mycroft what is all this about? I thought this was to be a family dinner.”
King Mycroft glanced their way before turning back to the man he'd been talking with. “My deepest apologies for the interruption sir. This rude young man happens to be my younger brother. May I present Prince William . . . and friend.” Dark eyes cut briefly to John before sliding away.

“King Mycroft, may I present Brother John Watson.” Sherlock ground out refusing to be swept aside.

John folded his arms over his chest, and gave Mycroft the deep bow a Brother might give anyone. “Your Highness.”

Mycroft merely raised his eyebrows. “Prince William, you’re late. Your place is here at the high table, and your friend can join the delegation at that table over there.”

“I would prefer to be seated together.” Sherlock fixed him with a steely glare.

“Your place settings are already laid. Please take them.” He smiled not-quite pleasantly in a way that reminded John of a tiger he once saw at a zoo.

“Fine. We will discuss this later.” Sherlock finally conceded, and showed John where his seat was at the back of the room.

“Bloody Mycroft.” He muttered under his breath laying a warm hand to John’s shoulder as he took his seat. Several emotions seemed to be chasing their way through his eyes at once - none of them good.

John tried to settle him with a small smile. "It's fine, love. Let it go, hmm?” He whispered. Sherlock nodded, and returned reluctantly to take his place a few seats down from his brother.

John spent the evening trying to figure out which spoon or fork to use with the endless stream of dishes that kept arriving at their table at steady intervals. The bearded men around him were speaking in Allemand, and robustly enjoying their apparent jests, meat and wine, so John was left mostly to his own devises for entertainment.

Sherlock looked simply murderous at the high table, and whenever he caught John’s eye, he made “I’m so sorry” eyes at him. Once Sherlock pulled such a funny face, John snorted, almost choking on his turtle bream soup.

Finally the interminable dinner seemed to draw to a close as Mycroft invited the delegation to adjourn to a nearby parlour for brandy and cigars. Sherlock rose only after his brother had leaned in to whisper something to him, and crossed the room to rejoin John. “Mycroft has asked me to meet him alone in the library. Are you all right with waiting here for a few minutes?” Sherlock looked over John with a worried frown.

“Sherlock of course, go.” John reassured him. "I’m not five. I’ll be fine.”

Sherlock grabbed John’s hand for a final squeeze before leaving him alone with the last of his berry soufflé, and his too-many-already glass of wine. John sighed and took another swallow.

Sherlock had only just left the room when a pretty serving girl appeared at John elbow to drop a curtsy. “Sir, would you follow me, please? The king thought you'd be more comfortable waiting in a smaller room.”

“Oh, yes of course, thank you.” John nodded rising to follow her.

She led him through a side door and down a long carpeted hallway of many doors. John had lost
count of how many they had passed when the woman stopped to open one that didn’t look any different from its brothers, and waved him inside.

“Thank you so much.” John nodded entering what looked to be a large well-appointed study.

“Of course, sir. Make yourself at home.” She made a final bob before quietly closing the door to seal him inside.

John looked around trying to take in what he could see by the flickering candlelight in the room. The walls were covered in rich wood paneling, and a large number of shelves filled with books, and a variety of statues of the many Gods. A large effigy of Bodicea, Goddess of war, and one of Zaros, the All-Father, guarded the side of the large mahogany desk that dominated much of the room. John had just sunk into one of the guest seats arranged under Zaros’ watchful eye, when a rustle startled him back upright. A dark figure separated itself from the deep shadows at the end of the room, and glided into the light. Of course it was King Mycroft.

“Good evening, John, thank you for joining me.” He intoned.

“I wasn’t aware I was, but good evening, Your Majesty.” John inclined his head. “Thank you for inviting me to dinner.”

Mycroft moved across the room, and seated himself at the high wing-backed chair behind the desk motioning for John to do the same. He waited until John had settled before leaning forward, bracing his arms on the worktop to begin. “John, we’re both men of the world. Let’s not beat around the bush. You wouldn’t be here at the palace if it weren’t for my errant baby brother.”

“That is quite true, Your Majesty.” John readily agreed.

“You may dispense with the formality. Addressing me as ‘sir’ will suffice.”

“Certainly, sir.” John agreed pleasantly again.

“You don’t seem particularly affected to be sitting in the heart of the Brettonian nation conversing with the king.” Mycroft observed, raising one eyebrow a fractional amount.

“I beg your pardon, sir, but we are all as equals in the eyes of the Gods.”

“Yes, a noble sentiment, I’m sure.” Mycroft drawled before flipping open a booklet of papers sat at his elbow. He scanned the top page briefly before continuing.

“You trained as a priest, and then served at the Temple of the Small Gods on Baker Street for six months recently reneging on your term as noviate?”

“Yes, sir, that’s right.”

“Before studying for the priesthood, you served as a foot soldier and medic in the Gallatian wars for fourteen months?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And before that, you apprenticed as a healer in the town of Dullenshire, but left before completing your training?”

“All true, sir.” John shifted a bit in his seat.

“Tell me, John, since you don’t seem able to complete anything you start, why do you think you
should qualify for the post of Royal Consort at the side of my brother?”

“Well, to be fair, the army *requested* my leave after I was injured, and I don’t think you need to ‘qualify’ for a relationship to love someone. You just do, sir.”

“Love. *Love*, John, is a pretty word for the poets and salesmen. It has no place in the affairs of state and business.” Mycroft clipped out.

“No, I agree. Love is different from business. It’s why we have state holidays, and Lovers’ Eve on different days of the year . . . sir.”

King Mycroft’s eyebrow twitched up in a gesture John had seen so many times on Sherlock’s face. The familiarity was reassuring.

“John. I will cut to the chase.” He reached into a drawer beside him, and pulled out a weighted cloth sack. He tossed it to the middle of the desk where it landed with a heavy clink. “In here I have 10,000 marks in gold coins. If you agree to have no more contact of any sort with my brother, you may take the gold, and walk out of here a free man.”

John tilted his head, and simply regarded Mycroft with a slight frown.

“Well, John?” the king goaded with a small smile.

“I’m trying to see what Anthea sees in you. . . sir.” John returned

Mycroft turned instantly pale. “What do you . . .” he sat straighter. “Are you threatening me, John?”

“No, of course I’m not threatening you. I enjoyed meeting Anthea. She was lovely. So was Loralee. I can see where she gets her hair color from. She was amazing. I can’t believe she was so far along in her magecraft at only six. You must be proud.”

“Oh, we are . . .” Mycroft trailed off, remembered where he was and collected himself again.

“Final offer, John.” The king waved a hand at the gold between them. “A pain-free life away from all this, and enough money to start a new life.”

“Your Majesty. I love Sherlock . . .er, Prince William. *No wealth exists that stirs the soul like the beat of a kindred heart.*’ There is no decision for me to make that takes me away from him . . . sir.”

Mycroft looking thoughtful opened his mouth to reply, when the door flew open so hard it bounced on its hinges and swung back half-way. Sherlock burst into the room looking furious enough to melt nails with his gaze alone.
“Brother, how good of you . . .”

“MYCROFT, HOW DARE YOU . . .”

Sherlock stormed into the room to slam his hands down on Mycroft’s desk. His eyes landed on the bag of coins lying in the center, and all words ground to a halt. After a pause, Sherlock looked up. “Really Mycroft?” he asked, deadly and low. “A bribe?”

“Oh brother mine, you know the drill. You will be relieved to note that your boyfriend has passed the test with flying colors.” Mycroft leaned forward to steeple his hands under his chin.

“Mycroft, John is more than my boyfriend and you know it. He is my fiancé, and I wish him treated as such.”

“If you can use your supposed massive intellect, you will recall that you are actually already engaged to Princess Irene Adler of Arabonia in an exclusive marriage contract.”

“I refuse Mycroft. I will not do it. If I can’t marry John, then I will marry no one.”

“You are five and twenty years old, William Sherlock Scott Holmes – grow up!” Mycroft rose upright in his chair as his eyes blazed. “If we do not arrange this marriage to cement our ties with Arabonia, a war is upon us with few allies. I wish we could have avoided a war with Gallatia four years ago. We cannot afford such a bloodbath again.” Mycroft paused to turn toward John and include him in the conversation. “John, as you well know, war is an ugly thing. Surely you don’t want the lives of countless soldiers and innocents on your head if Sherlock’s marriage to the princess of Arabonia falls through?”

John opened his mouth to answer, but Sherlock leapt in ahead of him. “Leave. John. Be. He doesn’t need to be involved in your scheming!” Sherlock ground the words out through clenched teeth.

Mycroft eyed Sherlock through narrow slits. “Brother, if John is sleeping with the royals, he is already involved. Being born to the ruling family of Brettona carries both great honor and great weight. It’s all well and good to have the money and time to live as a playboy gadding about the city, but with your privilege, comes duty. The Arabonians do not recognize plural marriages. There is only one spouse allowed for each of the royal court, as for all their peoples, according to their law. If you care about the fate of Brettona at all, you must honor this contract to marry the Princess Irene.”

Mycroft stood to his full height, just an inch taller than Sherlock, and leaned over the desk to glare at his brother.

“Mycroft, I understand. Curse you, I do.” Sherlock cut off to turn, and pace a few steps about the
room. “If I must marry this poxed princess of Arabonia, then I will have John as my consort. It is not a full spouse, and there HAS been past precedent of it in royal contracts before. You know this. It is a position that the other countries refuse to recognize but as if I’d give a swiving damn about that. I will have John in my life or you can all hang in the frozen hells.”

“Brother, it isn’t that simple and you know it.”

“If I’ve agreed to marry the cursed woman, what more can you ask of me? To hide John away like some secret shame that I see once a month? I’d rather die.”

Mycroft looked as if he’d been slapped. “I am not ashamed of Anthea. I keep her away from the slime of the royal court to protect her, . . . and our daughter.”

“If she’s ‘sleeping with the royals,’ she’s involved in the court. Don’t fool yourself.” Sherlock crossed his arms over his chest.

"WILLIAM." Mycroft barked out.

“Mycroft,” Sherlock’s voice dropped as his arms fell to his sides. “You were ill used when they made you marry the royal of Eran and set your beloved aside. Do not force the same prison on me. Two wrongs do not make a right, and I will not lay down as a lamb led to slaughter for any patriotic ideal.”

The two brothers stood, necks tensed, their gazes locked like dragons brewing flames in their bellies, promising destruction to come.

Mycroft fell back to his seat, dropping his forehead into his hand. “Fine, little brother. You win. I will negotiate with the Arabonians on this addition to the marriage contract. I don’t know if it’s possible. But I will try. You will stay the night. Tomorrow I meet with a delegation from Arabonia to finalize our agreement. If we are to add a royal consort to our list of . . . requirements, I need you to be there for the formal signing.”

“If I stay the night, then John stays.” Sherlock glared.

“Of course John can stay with you. Just make sure he is scarce in the morning. Negotiations will be delicate, and the less distractions the better. Contrary to what you may think, I am not a monster, William.”

“Yes, you are, Mycroft.” Sherlock spat out.

“Then we are all monsters under our civilized skins, brother dear. How remarkable when we can find someone who loves us despite the serpents lurking in our hearts.” Mycroft flicked his eyes to John, and then rose to his feet. “If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have some tradesmen to see out.”

John dipped his head in reflex as Mycroft swept past, though Sherlock’s hand on his shoulder stayed a deeper bow.

“Gods.” John let out a breath, and ran a hand through his hair when the door closed with a soft snick.

“That was something. I can’t believe you convinced him to consider the consort proposal.”

“Oh, John he’d already decided to do it. He wouldn’t have asked me to bring you to the castle if he hadn’t.”

“So what was all this dog and pony show?” John furrowed his forehead.
“It’s all halls of mirrors with my brother, and he must have his pound of flesh. What can I say? We royals love our drama. Come on, I want to show you something actually good about being in the accursed palace over night.”

John hurried to keep up with Sherlock’s long legs as he led them through a warren of hallways, stairs, grand rooms, and servants who stopped to bob at them as they passed. Finally they emerged at a large wooden door set with a plaque on the front.

“Ah, good, no one is using the Grotto.” Sherlock grinned, and turned a dial to switch the color of a panel on the door to red. “Green is empty, yellow is company is fine, and red is do not disturb.” He winked at John, and pulled the door open ushering John into a small foyer lined with benches and shelves with woven sandals.

“We can leave our shoes here.” Sherlock told him.

“But Sherlock what . . .”

“Patience, John. All in good time.”

They sat to remove their shoes, placed them on a shelf, and each found a pair of sandals that fit to slip on. Sherlock led the way down a short hall that opened up in to what John could only describe as an underground cavern. Stalactites dripped artfully from the high roof set above a large steaming pool of water. Steps on one side led into the pool, while islands of half-submerged smooth rock lay dotted around the water like benches or tables. A gentle glow filled the space from large white crystals set about the room, gently illuminating the bumpy rock walls, and shining softly under the water.

John paused to catch his breath. “What in the world . . .”

“It’s impressive, isn’t it? We had several water mages to coax some hot springs to flow here, and a whole team of stone mages to sculpt this. It’s one of my favorite things at the palace. Come on, you’re meant to wash before you bathe in the main pool.”

Sherlock showed John a side door that opened to a tiled changing and shower area lit by more mage light. The sound of voices chatting led them to two middle-aged women folding and stacking towels. They turned, surprised, and ducked their heads. “Your Highness.” The closest woman murmured.

“If you’re finished, you may leave, and please let the other servants know the Grotto will be off-limits for the evening.” Sherlock nodded at them.

“Very good, your Grace.” The women stacked the last of their towels, and gathered wicker baskets to bow out of the room.

After they had closed the door behind them, John and Sherlock undressed, hanging their things on nearby pegs. A line of individual shower stalls with heavy curtains lay along one side of the room, but Sherlock led John farther along to a larger tiled alcove. Sherlock touched a button, and warm water fell like rain from the ceiling above.
“This is marvelous!” John grinned, tilting his head back to catch water in his mouth. He gargled it as his mouth filled. Sherlock smiled himself, watching him, his curls slicking down in the water to hang heavy around his head.

“I thought you’d like...” Sherlock began, crying out as John spat a mouthful of water over his chest.

“John!” Sherlock’s eyes widened, shocked for but a moment, until he too tried to get enough water in his mouth to return the favour. John did the same, and they managed to spray each other several times, before they ended up laughing so much they nearly choked.

“John, you idiot.” Sherlock coughed when they were both breathing again. “Ah, if I told you how lonely I was before you came into my life, I don’t think the words would do it any justice.” He eyes glowed like sapphires as he hooked a finger under the chain around John’s neck, and tugged him closer.

John grabbed Sherlock’s hips and pressed them to his own. “Ah, love, I feel the same.” Reaching up, he caught Sherlock’s lips in a sweet, wet kiss. They discovered how nice it was to taste the water on each other’s skin, and spent the next few minutes happily licking water off each other’s faces, necks and collar bones where the water ran in rivulets over them. Finally Sherlock pulled back to grab a bottle of soap off a shelf, and poured a generous handful out, giving some to John. “Come on let’s wash off, I want to show you the pool.”

They ran soapy hands over each other before letting the suds rinse off and run to the drain. Sherlock reached over to shut the water off, and leaned out of the shower to grab large towels from a nearby shelf, passing one to John. John wiped down, wound the towel around his waist, and found his sandals again. After knotting a towel around his own waist, Sherlock beckoned, and John gratefully followed him padding back out to the pool.

John marveled anew at the glow of the room. They followed a path of shimmering crystals set in the floor to the steps, tossed their towels and shoes to the side, and slipped into the pool. The water was pleasantly warm with only a subtle sulfur smell of a hot spring. The depth of the pool lapped at their waists, but deepened to chest height as they moved farther in.

Sherlock pushed off and swam a few lazy strokes, turning to float on his back. He moved sleekly through the water like some unearthly merman come to drag John back to his fairy cave far beneath the waves. Then he stood up, shook the water out of his eyes, and held out his hand, just Sherlock again, and simply ravishingly lovely. John allowed himself to be tugged into Sherlock’s arms, and kissed breathless again. When they pulled back, Sherlock motioned with his head. “Come on, this is my favorite part.”

They wading across the pool to a small waterfall trickling over a cave entrance set back in the stone. Sherlock ducked in through the water, and John followed, gasping at the sight within. A thousand tiny lights moved over the room inside from the glowing, colored crystals studding its walls. They reflected off the waters of the pool, and shimmered over a wide, dry ledge laid with woven mats above.

“This is stunning.” John breathed out. “An actual fairy cave! I love it.”

“I’ve always liked this spot best.” Sherlock agreed. “I used to pretend this was my pirate cave and I hid my treasure here. In fact...” He pulled himself up to the ledge, and moved to the wall, reaching up to find a niche high in the back. He returned victorious with a small wooden box in hand.

John climbed out of the water to join him on the ledge. The stone was unusually warm to the touch.
“Is this rock heated?” he asked laying his hand to it.

“It is.” Sherlock answered. “One of the stone mages left a warming spell in it. It’s a bad place to leave some toffee, I can tell you.”

John sat cross legged next to Sherlock, and watched as he worked the lid off the small box. He poked at the contents revealed with a long finger - some shiny buttons, a costume jewelry brooch, two marbles, and a metal toy soldier. “Ah, the riches of the ages turned to dust with time.” Sherlock laughed looking at his once treasure. “I don’t remember why I kept any of this.”

“It must have meant something to you at the time.” John told him. “I had a box of collected things once too. I remember my older sister, Harriet, took it and threw it in the fire when she was angry with me. She always had such a temper.”

“How horrid.” Sherlock said making a face. "My brothers taught me to hide my things well or lose them too. Maybe I should bring this box back to Baker Street." Sherlock creased his forehead. "On second thought, I suppose I’ll leave it here. Maybe another child will come one day and discover it anew.” He rose and placed the box safely back in its secret hiding spot.

“Look at us growing all maudlin.” Sherlock joked, rejoining John, and catching his hand up in his own.

“Kiss me then.” John smiled at him. “Let’s make some new memories here.” He climbed over Sherlock pushing him back gently to sprawl over the mat.

“You have the best ideas.” Sherlock grinned as John straddled him, and took his mouth in a sweet slide of lips and tongue.

“There’s something I’d like to try.” John smiled a slow smile down at Sherlock.

“Oh?”

“The snake that eats his tail.”

“That could be fun.” Sherlock chuckled dirty and low.

John shifted to lie on his side, the opposite way to Sherlock, feet to head. Carefully they moved together, pillowing their heads on each other’s thighs, to guide their partner’s cock to their mouth. John cupped a hand around Sherlock’s balls, and rubbed his lips and nose against his penis nestled in the dark fur between his legs. John marveled at how fast his cock lengthened and swelled under his touch. He wrapped his hand around the base of Sherlock’s penis, and slipped the head between his lips to swirl his tongue around it. He struggled to focus as Sherlock was vigorously licking his own cock in long stripes base to tip.

When Sherlock sucked him down in some complicated oral gymnastics, John completely lost the thread of pleasuring the cock before him. He closed his eyes and clutched at Sherlock’s hip, while waves shook through him. When Sherlock worked a fingertip into his arsehole, John came, exploding in a burst of light.

“Ah, love, I’m sorry. You’re too good at that. I couldn’t keep up.” John panted when he could speak.

“No worries. I’m all yours now.” Sherlock rolled onto his back, his dark erection bobbing before
him. John climbed over to kneel between his outstretched legs.

“You beautiful sea creature.” John gazed down at Sherlock sprawled beneath him, his eyes half-closed, hair in damp curls clinging to forehead and neck, the colored lights of the cave playing over his pale skin. John ran his hands across Sherlock’s chest, pausing to run fingertips over his upright nipples. When he bent forward to tongue over Sherlock’s neck, the pendant on his necklace fell to drag along Sherlock’s skin and the man shivered under him. John sucked at each nipple in turn, then ran finger tips lightly over Sherlock’s belly back and forth before bending down to gather up his cock. He cupped the balls into one hand, and pulled gently at them while fisting his other to slide up and down Sherlock’s shaft.

“How many hours could I make love to you down here before someone comes looking, hmmm? Can I just make you my pleasure slave? You’d have to obey my every whim all through the night, and into the next day. How many times can I make you come in a row, hmmm?”

Sherlock turned his head, moaning helplessly in reply, as he melted into the mat in utter surrender.

John took Sherlock’s cock back into his mouth, and settled into a rhythm that they both enjoyed. He slid his mouth up and down until he felt the other man’s breath hitch and his balls tighten. He hummed until Sherlock ground out a staccato cry, and splashed into his mouth. John swallowed, wished for a water chaser, and climbed up to pull Sherlock against him. The man had gone boneless. John smiled into his hair. “All right. Who do I have to shag next to get a drink around here?”

Sherlock roused enough to open his eyes, and smiled widely at John. “I’m the only one you have to shag around here, and there should be something to drink by the pool. Come on.”

They slipped back into the water to wade out of the fairy cave and into the main cavern of the Grotto. As Sherlock had promised, they found an earthenware jar of cool lemonade on a table by the pool. John used the dipper and scooped them both a cup to drink.

“I’ve one last treat here to show you.” Sherlock told him after draining his cup.

“More?” asked John. “I’m not sure how much more I can take.”

“This one won’t require much of you.” Sherlock laughed. “Bring your drink.”

They walked around to the far edge of the pool where a separate tub lined with submerged benches nestled between natural-looking outcroppings of rock. Once they had lowered in, Sherlock pressed a button and the warm water surged into bubbles around them. John laughed in surprise. It took a moment to get used to, but once he did, the feeling of the bubbles sliding over him was fantastic.

“Come here.” Sherlock gathered John into his lap, settling him between his thighs. John laid his head back on Sherlock’s shoulder, and relaxed completely.

“Ah, love.” John sighed as Sherlock wrapped an arm around his waist. “This I could definitely get used to. I’m going to get spoiled.”

“I like spoiling you.” Sherlock murmured against his ear.

A sudden sharp noise across the room startled them both.

“Who’s there?” Sherlock called out. “I asked that the Grotto be left undisturbed tonight! Show yourself!”

Only the echo of his call answered.
“Probably some new staff member. There’s really no such thing as absolutely privacy at the palace.” Sherlock sighed.

John looked around. Suddenly the mystical beauty, and many dark corners of the Grotto had taken on a slightly sinister cast.

“Sherlock, I’m knackered. Where are we sleeping tonight?”

They made their way back to the changing room to dry off and redress. Sherlock led John through another maze of hallways and stairs until they reached an upstairs corridor lined with red carpet. They moved halfway-down, and made a left. John had gamely been trying to remember which turn when and which door where, but had given up awhile ago. He simply followed Sherlock past double doors into the room beyond. It was a bedroom in as much as there was a bed in it, but it was bigger than the entire prayer room at Temple of the Small Gods.

A huge four-poster bed with deep blue bed curtains and a small mountain of cushions and pillows sat to one side with a bench and ornately-carved chest at the foot of it.

Opposite, a large fireplace with a mage fire crackling away dominated one wall with a sitting area laid before it with several padded love seats, chairs and a low table. A small dining area sat before the large windows that most likely let in gorgeous light during the day but were now well-covered by sweeping draperies and tassels. Large patterned rugs covered the floor, and a number of wardrobes, small tables holding braces of lit candles, a roll-top desk and chair and a number of things that could only be called objects d’art filled the spaces between.

John found the nearest chair, and collapsed into it rubbing a hand over his face. He looked around the room. He looked at Sherlock who had nervously drifted over to hover beside him. He looked around the room again. He looked at Sherlock a final time, and burst out laughing.

Sherlock joined him, the tension leaving his shoulders with his chuckles.

“John, I apologize. I should have prepared you better . . .”

“Sherlock, I don’t think anything could have prepared me for this. You LIVE here?” John asked.

“Define live.” Sherlock replied warily.

“Oh, love. This is too much.” John stood, and pulled Sherlock into an embrace.

“I know. I didn’t think how all this would look to you. It’s a lot to adjust to.”

“Yeh, it is. But it will be all right. We’ll manage. Together.” John squeezed Sherlock, and Sherlock squeezed back. “Now are we allowed to touch that monstrosity of a bed, because I am ready to pass out.”

“John you can do anything you like on that bed except sleep there without me.”

They attacked the mound of pillows and cushions. John made a game of it seeing who could throw the cushions farthest across the room. When Sherlock almost landed one in the fireplace, they stopped, and merely settled for chucking them on the nearby rug. When a bed was finally uncovered, they pulled back the covers, tugged off their clothes, and tumbled naked into the sheets together.

“Sherlock, shouldn’t we put out the candles?” John asked looking around the room still brightly lit. Sherlock reached out, waved his hand over a panel, and every light in the room winked out at once.

“Well, that is convenient.” John observed into the dark, and they were both off laughing again.
By all rights they should have been exhausted, and gone right to sleep, but John was enchanted with how far he could roll Sherlock over without hitting an edge to the bed. Sherlock eventually put a stop to the antics by sucking open-mouthed kisses against John’s neck until he melted into a puddle, relaxing across the mattress. They finally fell asleep entwined about each other like puppies collapsed at the end of the day.
John woke to the piercing light of morning arcing straight into his brain. He struggled upright to see no less than three women in servant’s gear moving about the room, pulling open curtains, tidying, and laying a food service across the dining table. Sherlock remained a warm weight against him, his hair tickling against his neck, and he snorted a bit as John shifted. With something like horror, John pulled the sheet tighter around them both, acutely aware of their lack of clothing, as one of the servants, a pleasantly plump woman, approached the bed. She stopped on Sherlock’s side and giving John a small apologetic smile, leaned in closer to Sherlock’s exposed ear.

“YOUR GRACE.”

John jumped, and shook Sherlock with him.

“MMmmmfff?” Sherlock roused slightly.

“Your Grace, his Majesty, the King, wishes you to know he expects you in one hour in the east meeting room.”

Mmm, yes, Hilda. Thank you.” Sherlock muttered from under the shock of curls that had tumbled over his face.

“Good morning, sir.” Hilda looked at John, and bobbed a curtsy.

“Good Day.” John nodded to her, trying to muster as much dignity as a man could lying in bed with his lover in the all-together.

The woman winked, and scooted out of the room shooing the other two women before her, closing the doors behind.

“Sherlock?”

“Mmmm?”

“Do you always have a small army come to wake you in the mornings?”

“Only when I have the misfortune to wake in the palace.” Sherlock mumbled against John’s belly having slid down to rest his head there.

“John, you smell delicious.” He purred in a lower register that vibrated through John’s skin straight to his cock. Before he knew what had happened, Sherlock had burrowed his way under the covers between John’s legs, and had his erection half down his throat.
“Aaarrrr, love, stop!” John choked. “Loo, first!”

Sherlock popped off with a disappointed “tsk,” and climbed back up, pushing his head out of the blankets. His hair lay everywhere, eyes shining nearly green in the morning light. A dangerous, feline smile spread across his face as he prowled his way up John.

“John, I’d love for you to tie me up, and ride me on this bed some time.”

John reached up to curl a hand into the mess of Sherlock’s hair, and pulled him down for a kiss.

“You bewitching man. Only if the door locks!” John murmured against his lips, then swept him into a deep open-mouthed snog.

As if in answer, a perfunctory knock at the door was followed by a trim, middle-aged man pushing his way into the room, and closing the doors behind. John jumped, pushing Sherlock away, as he flung himself sideways across the bed. Unfortunately rather than preserving any modesty, John merely managed to knock all of the blankets away in the process. The man who had stepped into the room backwards, stood facing away from the bed, and had seen none of this, but most certainly had heard the grunts of John accidentally kneeing Sherlock in the balls, the “Sorry! Sorry, love,” and the quick sorting of blankets and pillows, before Sherlock announced somewhat strained, “You may enter.”

The servant turned around, and bowed. “Forgive my intrusion, sir, but your brother the king, insists that you be dressed in your finest within the hour to meet with the Arabonian delegation.”

“John, this is my personal valet, a not-too-annoying soul by the name of Goodson.” Sherlock drawled indicating the servant with a flick of the wrist. The man dipped his head politely. From Sherlock, John thought, this was high praise indeed.

“Goodson,” Sherlock continued, "this is Brother John Hamish Watson, my intended Royal Consort, and love of my life. You will also serve as his personal valet until such time as we desire other accommodations. You are to treat him with the utmost care, and with the same amount of respect as you would treat me. No, scratch that. Treat him with more respect than you treat me. His comfort is to be your highest priority.”

“Congratulations, your highness." The man was obviously caught off-guard, his bushy eyebrows shooting toward his hairline. He smoothed his expression as quickly as he could though, and bowed more deeply than before. "Pleased to meet you, sir." He intoned respectfully to John.

“You too . . ." John started, trailing off to turn towards Sherlock with a frown. "Wait, Sherlock, you can’t announce me as your intended, it isn’t official yet.”

“Hmmmm. Just so.” Sherlock scrunched up his nose in consideration. “Goodson.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want you to know that I can NOT introduce you to John as my intended Royal Consort.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Further more, you are NOT to let the rest of the staff know that if they see a gorgeous man of mid-range height with sandy-blonde hair anywhere near the palace grounds, they are to attend to his every need as a member of the royal family.”

“Yes, sir.” The man nodded with a twinkle in his eye.
“Ah, Goodson. Go on. Give us fifteen minutes so John can get some pants on, and I’ll be at your tender mercies.”

“Very good, sir.” Goodson bowed again, and backed out of the room, closing the doors with a click.

With a groan, John pushed the blankets back. “Get me to the loo, love, before the next round of sight-seers joins us.”

When Sherlock threw open the doors to the facilities, John was happy to find not only a water closet and sink, but also an in-ground marble bath tub shaped like a giant clam shell set into the floor. “Oh love, next time I come over, we get into that together.” John exclaimed standing over it.

“That, my love, is a promise.” Sherlock said coming up behind him to wind arms around his middle, and kiss the back of his neck.

“Do you have a razor I can borrow?” John asked rubbing a hand over his stubbled chin. You could stand to have a shave too, love. I think you took a patch off my thigh earlier.”

“I have something better.” Sherlock tossed him a jar. “Depilatory cream.”

“That stuff always burns me.” John frowned opening it to smell it. A slightly astringent odor filled the room, but with it an earthy spice.

“This one won’t.” Sherlock assured him.

“Is this from Anthea?” John asked.

“Just so.” Sherlock agreed.

John and Sherlock both slathered it on their faces and necks, and rinsed it off a few minutes later. John was delighted at how smooth it left their skin without a trace of redness. He felt over his beardless chin, then reached up to run a hand over the plane of Sherlock’s cheek and jaw.

“OH. Come here, you.” John soon had Sherlock sprawled across the carpet in front of the washroom as they rubbed their faces over each other like big cats. John simply had to drag his check down to Sherlock’s belly then, and surprise him with a raspberry blown right over his navel.

“Oh you’ll pay for that Brother Watson.” Sherlock promised, flipping John over, and tickling him under the arms as John howled, and begged for mercy. They were collapsed together, and giggling away when a discreet cough sounded to the right.

“Begging, your pardon, your Grace. I need to get you dressed now.”

Goodson stood facing to the side next to them.

“Oh, bugger.” John sighed. “I’m never actually going to have clothes on when people come in here, am I?”

“I could make it a royal decree that you are never allowed to be dressed in my presence.” Sherlock mused.

John made a rude noise in reply.

“Oh, come now. If Goodson is to be your valet, he might as well get used to the sight of your fine arse as soon as possible.” Sherlock rolled to his feet, and reached out a hand to pull John up as well.

“I guess I can wear out what I had on yesterday.” John said looking around the room. “Oh, Great
Gods. The maids took it all away didn’t they?”

“T’m afraid so.” Sherlock agreed.

“If I may, sir. I can adjust some of your Highness’s things for Brother Watson to wear now, and arrange for a suitable wardrobe to be assembled for future needs.” The valet bowed slightly.

“I already have things back at the flat . . .” John started, but Sherlock cut over him.

“And I’ll have some of that brought over here, but you will need more for a royal wardrobe, John, believe me.” Sherlock warned him.

“Goodson.” Sherlock turned to the valet. “You are a man among men. Give yourself a raise.”

“Your brother, the king, already rewards me handsomely, sir, but your praise is duly noted.”

In but a few minutes time, Goodson had hustled them through getting dressed, and a quick breakfast of tea, eggs, kippers and toast from the serving dishes left on the table. Much sooner than they wanted, it was time to leave the room. Sherlock lingered with John at the door though, unspoken things heavy on their lips. He glanced past John to the servant waiting nearby.

“Goodson if you’ll give us just a moment, and then show Brother Watson to the carriage row, via the side route, I would appreciate it.”

“Certainly, sir.” Goodson bowed and stepped into the hallway leaving them finally alone again.

“John do you have a key to the flat?”

“Oh no, I forgot to bring it.”

“No matter, take this one.” Sherlock darted to an end table nearby, touched the side, and reached into the small compartment that popped open in the table leg.

“That’s a neat trick.” John observed raising an eyebrow.

“No privacy in the palace.” Sherlock reminded him pressing the key to his palm. John quickly slipped it into a pocket.

“John.”

“Sherlock.”

They stood for a few moments with foreheads pressed together, simply breathing quietly. Sherlock pulled back then, and kissed John lightly on the nose.

“I’ll be back by this evening. Try not to miss me too hard.”

“I will anyway.” John said, and tugged Sherlock in for a real kiss that left them both a little breathless.

“Sir, it’s time.” Goodson reminded them at the doorway.

“Curse you Goodson, take that raise back.” Sherlock quipped, and with a squeeze to John’s shoulder, he was gone.

John blew out a breath, giving the room a final look over. The room remained as opulent as ever, but
Sherlock's exit seemed to have sucked the breathable air from it. “Yeh, I’m good to go as well.” He nodded.

“If you’ll just follow me, sir.” Goodson smiled kindly as he motioned John toward the hall.

The valet took him through another warren of stairs and corridors, but these were a bit narrower and uncarpeted – obviously the servants’ routes in the castle. The people they passed generally ignored them busy at their tasks, or nodded at the valet, until one woman carrying a basket stopped them.

“Oi, Larry, be careful in the kitchens this morning. Cook has her knickers in a twist – his cakeship sent back half the breakfast . . .”

Goodson frowned and shook his head cutting meaningful eyes to John.

The woman blushed and immediately bobbed a curtsy to John. “Oh, I beg your pardon, sir. I didn’t see you there!” she gushed before hurrying on.

“Oh, don’t worry about me.” John told the valet with a laugh. “I’m not so fine as all that. Besides you just caught me rolling around on the floor, and helped me find pants that fit.”

“It is for just that reason that the rules exist, sir. The good folk on one side of the line, those that serve on the other. The walls of behaviour let us know what to do so we can live together peacefully.” John nodded, pressing his lips together, and they continued along the corridor to a door leading outside.

“Goodson, thank you.” John extended his hand. “I appreciate all your help this morning. I’m not really used to all . . . this . . .” he trailed off.

“If I may say so, sir, I’m very pleased to have made your acquaintance.” He clasped John's hand and shook it warmly. "I haven’t heard His Highness laugh like that . . . in many years.”

"Erm . . . thank you.” John said with a shrug. "I'd have to say the same for myself."

John followed the valet out the door to a small courtyard where a group of footmen lounged. Goodson hailed the closest one. “If you would be so good as to assist – this gentleman requires a carriage into town.” With a final bow, Goodson winked at John, and disappeared back inside.

The footman, who had jumped to attention, showed John to a bench, and assured him it would only be a few minutes wait for his carriage. It was another lovely day, and John relaxed back on the bench, closing his eyes to let the warmth of the sun soak across his face. He was startled when a low voice broke through his reverie.

“Why Brother John, is it? Fancy meeting you here.” John opened his eyes to squint into the light at the figure hanging above him. Dark hair, sharp nose, it was none other than Prince Sherringford, Sherlock’s middle brother. “Do you mind if I join you?” he asked.

“Actually . . .” John began when the man simply dropped down onto the seat next to him. “ . . . be my guest.” John finished lamely.

The prince stretched his long legs out in front of him. “I suppose you think very highly of yourself spending a night in the palace.”

“Not really.” John crossed his arms across his chest. “I’d be just as happy spending the night in a mud hut. It’s the company that matters, not the accommodations.”
“You’re not the first you know. “ Sherringford cut his eyes sideways to John.

“Excuse me?” John asked.

“I saw you two in the Grotto last night. You’re not the first bedmate he’s dragged back to the palace before.”

“Prince Sherringford, do you make a habit of spying on your brother as he bathes?”

“I have no prurient interest in my brother’s sex life if that’s what you’re asking. I stumbled on you two by accident. My apologies at disturbing your interlude.” Sherringford curled his lip slightly. “No, you’re no worse than some of the lowlife he’s paraded through here. He once brought a whole party of drunken whores back to frolic in the Grotto. The servants had to pull one of the tarts out of the pool before he drowned. They were all out of their minds on poppy smoke and wine—that was a nightmare.”

“Ah.” John replied thoughtfully. “I’m sorry I wasn’t more entertaining for you.”

“A word of advice, Brother John,” The prince leaned in as if to whisper a secret. “Just because you’re fucking royalty, don’t start thinking it makes you special.”

“Thank you so much for your words of wisdom . . . Your Grace.” John parsed his words through gritted teeth.

A welcome clatter of hooves on the paving stones caught their attention as a team of horses pulled up. “Sir, your carriage is here.” A footman stepped forward, waiting to lead John.

“Thank you.” John told the servant before turning back to Prince Sherringford. He tilted his head to one side. “If you’ll excuse me, sir, my ride seems to be here.”

“Indeed. Good Day, Brother John.” Sherringford nodded, rising to loom over him in a parting shot.

“Good Day, your Highness.” John bowed formally to the man, and followed the footmen to his waiting coach eager to put the palace and its inhabitants behind him for the day.
News Arrives

Chapter Summary

No news is good news, but glad tidings are always hoped for.

John curled up over the empty bed at 221B. It had been a lonely day spent rattling around at loose ends. At midday, he straightened the flat, flipped through some books. Finally in the late afternoon he pulled on his priest’s robes and went for a rambling walk hoping Sherlock would have returned by the time he got back, but there was no such luck. He felt very adrift all of a sudden with no particular place he needed to be. He almost went back to Temple of the Small Gods to see if they needed any help, but that didn’t feel right.

Finally at evening, he knocked on the Hudson’s back door downstairs. A sweet young girl with her hair in pigtails answered.

“Hello, I’m Brother John, one of your tenants next door. I wondered if you had any day-old things from the bakery you didn’t sell that needed eating?” He smiled warmly at her.

“I’ll go ask Grammy.” The girl said, and left the door half open, going back inside to call for her. Mrs. Hudson popped her head out a moment later.

“Oh, John. Come in here.” She pulled John in through a sitting room where her husbands were playing a card game, they nodded at John as he passed, and into a cheerful kitchen. The little girl sat at the table where she had several dolls set up with teacups.

“Pippa, dear, run on back to your flat, now. We’ll have to finish the tea party later. Come on, give us a kiss, love.”

“All right, Grammy. Good night.” The girl kissed her grandmother, and after carefully gathering her toys, left by the door to the sitting room.

“Have a seat, John. I’ve been trying out a new recipe for soup. Tell me what you think.” She dished up a bowl from a pot bubbling on the wood stove, and with a small loaf of crusty bread, set it down in front of John. It was creamy with potatoes, leeks and dill, and John enjoyed the feeling of it going down for several minutes before looking up at Mrs. Hudson.

“John, dear, did you eat at all today?” She asked him.

“Oh, yeah, I had something at the palace this morning I think.” He looked wary for a moment.

“Yes, we both know Sherlock’s little secret now, don’t we?” She smiled.

“How did you find out he was a prince?” John asked her, dipping a large hunk of bread to catch the remains of his soup.

Mrs. Hudson took his empty bowl unasked, and refilled it.
“He told me when I first met him. It was years ago. I found him... high as kite on the bakery doorstep. He thought he was dying. He told me to get a message to the palace if he didn’t make it. I thought he was just rambling. I took him over to the temple. They nursed him through the night, and he was fine the next day. He started coming round more often then, said he liked my sticky buns.”

John nodded thoughtfully as he spooned up more soup.

“When my Morris was arrested for a murder, Sherlock showed up at the gaol, and proved why he hadn’t been at the tavern where that man was killed. I put some odd things about Sherlock together, added up two and two and realized he hadn’t just been raving when he told me he was the prince that night. It’s his business though, and I keep it private. Where is himself now, hmm?”

“Oh, he’s busy meeting with heads of state to see if we might get permission to be engaged.” John shrugged.

“I didn’t want to say anything, dear. But this engagement to that foreign princess. Ugh.” She rolled her eyes.

“It’s one of those royal things. He has to marry another royal in an exclusive contract. If we’re really lucky, I can be his consort on the side. If we’re not lucky, I can be his nothing even further on the side. I can’t imagine not having him in my life.” John raised his eyes to hers.

“I know dear. I understand.” Mrs. Hudson patted his arm. “John, do you have any spending money to your name?”

“I have a little bit, why?” John asked her.

“John, he doesn’t live in the everyday world that you and I do. He handed me enough gold to pay for the rent on that flat three years over when he moved in, and wouldn’t take any back. He doesn’t know how much mince pies actually cost. If you need something, you have to tell him.”

“I understand, Mrs. Hudson, thank you.”

“John, pop over to the bakery, for a minute with me. I have some leftover things, and I need a hungry young man to take them off my hands.”

“I think I can help you with that.” John grinned, and followed her down the corridor to the shop front.

Laden with a sack filled with enough buns, rolls, tarts, and pastry knots to feed a good roomful of hungry young men, John climbed the stairs back to 221B, and let himself in. The quiet of the empty flat was deafening, and he was grateful when it was late enough to climb into bed and fall asleep.

It was still dark when John felt a weight tipping the mattress next to him. Then Sherlock was there naked and warm, smelling of the outside and... himself, pulling John into his arms. He buried his face against John’s neck, inhaling like he hadn’t breathed all day.

“Hello, love.” John murmured sliding a hand down the wonderful length of his back.

“John.” Sherlock breathed rolling on top of him. Then no more words were spoken for quite some time, only the sounds that lovers make that mean nothing to anyone listening, and everything to those panting against each other. John finally came with Sherlock riding his cock above him in a slow, sultry pulse. They collapsed together, falling asleep, legs and arms entangled.

When John next blinked awake it was to the bright light of day streaming in the window, and the
wonderful weight of Sherlock slumped against him. John buried his face in Sherlock’s mad tangle of curls and breathed deeply as he scooped him closer. Sherlock made a muffled rumble, and turned in John’s arms to face him.

“Oh good you’re still here. I thought maybe I dreamed you, my incubus in the night.” A smile tugged at John's mouth.

“Oh, John.” Sherlock opened his cat’s eyes half-way, and pulled John in for a sleepy kiss.

“Missed you.” John roamed farther afield, dropping kisses on his cheeks and eyelids, scraping his teeth carefully over stubbled jaw.

“Missed you more.” Sherlock ducked his head to mouth at John’s neck in return.

“Thank the Gods we’re at Baker Street where no army is coming in to get us out of bed.” John sighed against him. Hands were just getting into interesting places when a knock boomed from the front door.

“Great Mother!” John cried sitting up. “Now what?”

“John can you get that, it might be important. The queen went in to labour last night.”

“Can’t you get it, your royal laziness?”

“John I’m hard as a rock, I can’t put any clothes on.”

“I’m not any better.” John grumped, but he got out of the bed, and searched through the clothes tossed across the floor. Another series of sharp raps rang from the front door.

“All right. Hold your horses, I’m coming!” John yelled back. He finally caught hold of some trousers, and pulled them on, carefully tucking himself inside. He stumbled into the sitting room, tugging the bedroom door closed behind. John managed to interrupt another series of raps at the front door by yanking it open. A young man in a red courier tunic stood on the stoop looking only mildly surprised. He held a small scroll sealed with wax in the hand not poised to knock again.

“I’ve a message for Sherlock Holmes or John Watson.” Red tunic informed him politely.

“Yeh, I’m John Watson.” John yawned, and stuck out his palm.

“Then this is yours, sir.” The man bowed his head, handing him the scroll.

“Hang on a mo’.” John stopped his leaving. Stepping inside, he returned shortly carrying an enormous cinnamon bun.

“Thanks, mate!” The man’s eye’s lit up as he accepted the bounty.

“We live next to a bakery.” John shrugged.

“Good Day, sir.” The man bowed slightly, and headed off biting into the bun.

“Good Day.” John mock saluted back. He pushed the door closed, peering at the letter in his hand.

“What does it say?” Sherlock asked as John returned, idly licking spiced sugar off his fingers.

“Hang on, I haven’t got it open yet, have I?” John crawled over the bed to resume his place by Sherlock’s side. He ran his thumb under the seam to pop the seal of the wax. Smoothing the roll of
"You’ll be pleased to note you are no longer so close to the throne, the queen delivered a baby boy this morning. All are well. – M"

Sherlock passed a hand over his face. “Well, that’s a relief. I’m no longer third in line for the throne. At least I’ve gone to fourth.”

John furrowed his brow in confusion.

Sherlock huffed. “After Mycroft, there’s Loralee, Sherringford, me, though now there’s the new prince ahead of Loralee because he’s legitimate. Anthea will be so pleased . . . oh, Anthea.” Sherlock frowned.

“Oh, Gods.” John exclaimed. Somehow it had never occurred to him that Loralee was next in line for the throne. “Oh, when I met her, I was teasing her, calling her grand lady and such.”

“Yes, she has no idea.” Sherlock sighed. “That reminds me. Give me your necklace, John.”

John quirked up an eyebrow, but he reached around and unhooked the chain, handing it to Sherlock. Sherlock worked the ring free from it, and clambered out of the bed to kneel on the floor below.

“John Hamish Watson” Sherlock raised his eyes, huge pools of blue, to pour into John’s. “Will you please do me the great honor of becoming my Royal Consort, first in my heart, and love of my life?”

“They agreed?” John could hardly breathe.

“They did. I think Mycroft could talk the shirt off a peddler’s back if he had a mind to.”

“I’ll marry you today.” John grinned down at him. “Just get some trousers on and we’re good to go.”

“One caveat.” Sherlock sighed. “Mycroft made me promise I wouldn’t marry you before the day of the royal wedding to the Princess Irene. It’s part of the marriage contract.”

“Oh,” John’s face fell a little. “No matter, love. It will happen. That’s the important bit. Come back here, you.” John pulled Sherlock up onto the bed. They sat cross-legged facing each other, eyes shining despite the small bad news.

“John, give me your hand.” Sherlock held his own out, and John placed his left palm into it. Sherlock slid the small ring onto John's third finger until it stopped, caught before the second knuckle. Sherlock smiled, lifting John's hand to drop a kiss over the bright band. “I suspected it might be a little tight on you. My grandmother gave it to me on my thirteenth birthday. Why don’t we take it to a jewelers and get it re-sized. Or I could get you a new ring?”

“No, no, I like this one.” John said, his gaze transfixed by the new location of the band around his finger. “I’d be honored to wear it.” He grinned looking up.

“Good, I wanted to stop by a jewelers today anyway. Pick up a little something for Loralee, she’s a big sister now.”

“She doesn’t know, does she?” John asked.

“She doesn’t, but I want her to have a sibling gift just the same.”

John climbed over to kiss Sherlock on the forehead. “You’re a good man.”
“Don’t let it get out.” Sherlock quirked up one side of his mouth.

“Ugh, I’m dying for a wash.” John said scratching over his belly. “Come on, let’s go heat up a bucket of water before we have to face the day. Do you have any of that depilatory cream here?”

“I don’t, but I know where we can get some.”

After a trip to the loo, a quick wash, and everyone pulling on underwear, John went to find the bag of baked goods in the kitchen. He even cleared the table and made them use it for the first time.

“Are there any of those berry tarts I like?” Sherlock asked

“One. It’s yours.” John opened the bag of pastries on the table, and they picked selections for their plates. After they had devoured at least four things each, John turned to Sherlock.

“I’d like to have a talk with you,” he said, “and I think it’s the sort of talk that would be best had in bed whilst holding each other.”

“All right.” Sherlock agreed warily.

They stripped naked again, and fell into bed, pulling each other close. Only when John was propped against the headboard with Sherlock’s warmth pressed along his side, his head of curls well tucked under his chin, did he start.

“Sherlock, I had a talk with Sherringford on my way out of the palace the other day.”

“I’ll have him killed. “Sherlock’s voice iced instantly. “What did the weasel say to you?”

“He told me you used to bring . . . people back to the palace. A lot of drunken parties?”

“John.” Sherlock’s voice grew quiet and he huffed against John’s skin. “I’d like to tell you it was all lies, but I can’t.” Sherlock sat up so their faces were level.

“There are no good excuses for it, but I can tell you that my grandmother died suddenly when I was seventeen. She was . . . everything to me. My parents felt that once they had produced heirs, their duty to their children was done. Except for the servants and tutors, who fed and taught us, she was the only one in that whole blasted castle who cared for me. My Gran raised us.”

John reached down and threaded his fingers through Sherlock’s, holding his hand tightly between them.

When she died from a heart attack, my world crumbled. I had nothing. My brothers were older, they had other ways of coping. I fear I went a bit mad for a few years. They were crazy times, and I did very stupid things. I wasn’t sure I wanted to live anymore.” Sherlock looked down at their joined hands. “I’m glad you didn’t know me then.” He added quietly.

“I’m sorry I didn’t know you then.” The words had gone tight in John’s throat, and he cleared it. “I would have held you every day until you felt like living again. I went through something like that when my parents and Annalisa died, but at least I was older when I lost them. You’re not quite sure you still exist if the people who love you aren’t there to see you anymore.”

“John, I would have stopped you from going to war if I had known you then.” Sherlock reached up to cup a hand to John’s cheek.

“Then someone else’s son would have gone.” John said quietly leaning into it. “But I would have
stayed home for you... Sherlock, the drugs you took... do you still..."

“No.” Sherlock stopped him. “I haven’t ingested anything narcotic in years. I discovered the city, and my detective work.” He waved his hand to indicate the sprawling metropolis somewhere beyond the cocoon of their four walls. “I got high on solving cases. I made a life for myself. I didn’t realize how lonely it was though until I met you, John.” Sherlock's swung his gaze back to John's, his blue eyes now glowing bright as the ocean at mid-summer.

“Oh, my beautiful man. I think I was sleep-walking through life until you came in to the temple, and bled on me.” John slipped both arms around Sherlock to snug him closer. “I am lucky beyond measure to have found you. The Gods have truly smiled on me.”

“Perhaps there is only so much misery in the world before the scales must tip, and joy comes our way.” A small smile lifted Sherlock's generous mouth.

“Sherlock, I love you.”

“I love you too, John. With all my heart. I can’t tell you how happy I will be for you to wear my ring.”

The fell into each other, kissing deeply, fingers winding into hair. When John whispered low against Sherlock’s ear “I want to feel you inside me, please?” Sherlock growled, and pushed them back under the blankets.

The sun was much lower in the sky when they finally left the flat. Sherlock made John stop at the Hudson’s bakery first for a box of Jammie Dodgers. “They’re Anthea’s favorites.” He explained. Mrs. Hudson’s daughter, Alice, was behind the till, and she refused any money reminding them their coin was no good there. They set off toward the apothecary then, Sherlock taking them on another strange, twisting route, this one passing by a small jeweler’s shop on the way.

"Just here, John." Sherlock nudged him, and led the way to the shop's narrow door.

“Sherlock!” the older man behind the counter cried out as they entered in a tinkle of bells. John glanced at the small statue that guarded the niche by the door, a smiling figure with a bag of coins, Ozan, God of the marketplace. John nodded toward it, following Sherlock inside.

“You know everyone, don’t you?” John whispered as the shopkeep moved from behind the counter to join them.

“Only the important ones.” Sherlock murmured back, turning to smile at the man.

“Dimitri. I have a project for you. This is my fiancé, John. We’d like to get a family ring refit to use as his wedding ring.” Sherlock smiled broadly as he motioned toward John.

“Oh, but you are getting married!” Dimitri clapped his hands together. “This is happy news. So, you are the lucky man to capture the great Sherlock Holmes!” He fairly beamed at John.

“I am the lucky one, Dimitri.” Sherlock assured him. “Here see what you can do with this.” Sherlock held his hand out to John for the ring he had stuck on his pinkie. John worked it off and dropped it into Sherlock’s palm. When Sherlock passed it over to the jeweler, the man exclaimed over it.

“Oh, such nice work. But the engraving inside, I’ll have to remove that to resize the ring.”
“That’s no problem.” Sherlock said. “Perhaps we could get a new inscription engraved – ‘SH + JW’ sounds about right.”

“That is no problem” the man agreed.

Once the jeweler had measured John’s ring finger, and set the ring aside to be worked on, Sherlock called him over to the display of bracelets to suggest something nice for a six-year old.

“Oh, we have many fine things here.” Dimitri assured him, pulling a selection out to view.

With their purchase wrapped, and pocketed, they continued on their way to Anthea’s Apothecary, stopping at one last place to buy some takeaway dinner. The shop day was almost at a close as they pushed into the apothecary’s front door. John bowed quickly to the statue to Gallanus, and touched his heart in prayer.

“I don’t care what your mother thinks.” Anthea assured the girl at the counter adding an amulet to the packet of herbs on the tabletop. "If you're old enough to notice boys, you're old to wear a contraceptive charm. You can owe me the rest of the money for later.”

“Thank you so much.” The young woman counted out a few coins, then gathered up the things to drop into her bag. When she turned to see the two men behind her, she blushed scarlet, ducked her head, and hurried out the door.

“Sherlock, John! It’s so good to see you!” Anthea called as she swept the coins into her money box. “Sherlock, be a love - turn the sign, and lock the door.”

Sherlock set his bags on the floor, and busied himself securing the entrance.

“John.” Anthea came around to kiss him on the cheek. “How wonderful to see you again.”

“Thank you, Anthea.” John smiled back at her. “You as well.”

“What’s all this, have you been shopping?” She looked at their many bags.

“We brought dinner, Crumbs. You cook too much for me.” Sherlock winked back at her.

“Oh, you angel.” Anthea clapped her hands. “I didn’t manage to get anything cooking today. It was going to be a cold bread, cheese, and pickle supper for us tonight. This is perfect.”

“Shheeeeerloooooock” a fireball that could only be Loralee streaked out of the back room and catapulted herself into Sherlock’s arms.

“Poppet, you mad thing!” He scooped her up and kissed her on the forehead. “What have you been up to lately? Been rock climbing? Tiger hunting? Sailing on the Yangzee river? No? What is your mother thinking?” He carried her up the stairs leaving John and Anthea to gather the bags and follow behind. Anthea smiled wryly, and motioned John to go ahead of her.

When they unpacked the bags over the kitchen table, Anthea and Loralee both exclaimed over the roast chicken, potatoes, jellied eels, kidney pie, wine and cider. When Anthea saw the jammy biscuits she pulled Sherlock into a hug. He looked a bit uncomfortable at first, but then relaxed and patted her shoulder.

“What a feast.” Anthea exclaimed wiping her eyes.

They dished up the food, opened the drinks, and Anthea lit candles around the room from a jar of
Everyone relaxed and enjoyed the meal. Loralee told silly stories about the girl in her class who brought a pet monkey to school. She and Sherlock danced around the room seeing who could make the best monkey noises until Anthea threw a cushion at them, and said everyone was going to bed without biscuits if they didn’t stop.

“I’ve a treat for you, Poppet.” Sherlock told Loralee after dinner. “Guess which pocket it’s in and it shall be yours.”

Loralee looked at Sherlock for a moment and said “It’s in the pocket that has something in it.” Sherlock couldn’t fault her logic, and he told her to stick her hand in his left one. She pulled out the package and unwrapped it to drop a silver bracelet set round with small white crystals in her lap.

“It’s a weather bangle, Poppet. The stones turn blue if it’s going to rain or snow.” Sherlock told her.

“Oh, OH, won’t Maisy at school be so jealous.” Loralee crowed utterly delighted with her gift which she immediately slipped on, and pranced around the room, waving her arm about to best show it off. “I look FANCY!” she declared with a grin.

Anthea’s face crumpled a bit at the bracelet, and she had to go use the washroom for awhile. When she came back, her eyes were red, but she was smiling. She directed everyone through clean-up, and let Sherlock and Loralee read a story together before she put her daughter to bed.

When Loralee was finally sleeping, the adults gathered back around the table with the last of the wine.

“You heard the news?” Sherlock turned his piercing gaze on Anthea as she poured herself another glass.

“They’re calling him Fergus Rupert Barnaby Lachlan Holmes Carrington.” Anthea answered.

“And that’s not abusive.” Sherlock observed wryly.

They all burst out laughing.

“And I thought having Hamish was bad for a middle name.” John got out.

For some reason, perhaps the wine, this set them all off again in a whole new gale of giggles.

Unfortunately, when the giggles left her, Anthea dissolved into tears. “Oh don’t mind me, I’m just a watering pot today.” She said grabbing a dish towel to wipe her face.

“Crums.” Sherlock’s face twisted. He put a hand out over hers on the table. Anthea squeezed it and then pulled away.

“When Loralee’s sister, Kaitlin, died in the Fever Plagues, Loralee was only one. It nearly broke Mycroft.” Anthea told them, mopping under her eyes. “We were so grateful that Loralee survived the epidemic. So many babies and elderly died that year—the old king too of course.”

“I lost my parents and my fiancé.” John told her quietly. “It was a terrible, terrible thing.”

Anthea nodded at John, her eyes shining. “I’m so sorry, John.”

“I’ve never met her, Queen Norah. I was banned from the palace before she arrived.” Anthea took a swallow of wine. “Oh, I’ve seen her from afar of course. It’s strange to think we share so much, and yet I’ve never spoken to her. I wish her only the best with the new baby. I wish Fergus, a long and
happy life.” She intoned holding her glass high in toast.

“Hear, hear!” John agreed raising his glass as well.

“To the new Prince . . . Fergus.” Sherlock smirked.

"SHERlock, you know you're the pot calling the kettle black, don't you?” John lifted eyebrows meaningfully at him.

"Just so . . . Hamish." Sherlock replied, and they were off sniggering yet again.

“Crumbs, we have some news. I don’t know if this is the best time to tell you.” Sherlock looked sideways at her after all had calmed.

“Oh, tell me what?” Anthea asked setting down her glass.

“They agreed at the palace. I don’t have to marry the Princess Irene in a completely exclusive contract. I can take John as my consort as well.” Sherlock admitted.

“You’re ENGAGED?” Anthea sat up. “And we’re just sitting here drinking wine? Let me look in the kitchen I’m sure I have some peach schnapps in there. Oh, congratulations.” Anthea came around to hug John, then ruffled Sherlock’s hair on the way to the kitchen.

“Thank you so much.” John told her. “I have to say, I’m pretty chuffed.” He reached over to take up Sherlock’s hand.

Once the schnapps had been found, and toasts to their engagement had been made, John turned to Anthea. “I don’t mean to open up old wounds, Anthea, and tell me to stuff a sock in it if you want,” John furrowed his brow “but why didn’t it work out for you and Mycroft? Why couldn’t you arrange a consortship with him?”

“The old king was still alive then. A right old arsehole, he was. Sorry Sherlock.” She said looking his way.

“Oh, you’ll get no disagreement from me.” Sherlock waved his glass at her.

“There was no marrying of commoners, or mucking about with tradition with Good King Edward the fat-arsed rat bastard, Gods rest his soul, on the throne.

“Yes, I think that was one of his official titles.” Sherlock twitched up one side of his mouth.

“He’s gone. Isn’t it possible to change things now?” John asked her gently.

“Oh, John, I don’t know. In some ways, it might be easier to do something now that the queen has an heir again. In other ways, it’s better for Loralee not knowing, having a normal sort of childhood. I tell her that her father travels. I have a girl called Bridget who helps out in the shop, takes Loralee back and forth to school. I tell her I’m divorced.” Anthea rubbed her forehead.

“It’s hard, but I’m not watching our backs for a knife, you know? Mycroft had three different mages design the protection around us and the shop. No one who wishes us harm can find us. Besides my customers who have no clue, only family can enter the shop, and those we invite in.”

“I’m honored to be included in your circle.” John told her.

“Oh, John, you’re family.” Anthea quirked a watery smile at him. “For better or for worse, hmm?”
“I’ll drink to the better.” John said. And with that, another round was happily poured.

“You should think about putting protection on your flat.” Anthea tilted her head at Sherlock. “Now that people will have an official eye on John.”

“I have the standard wards on the Baker Street place, but you’re right. I’ll look into getting more personalized protective spells added.” Sherlock agreed.

They made their way through the bottle of peach schnapps, and started on a bottle of sherry which Anthea happily opened with a “Why not, tomorrow’s Sunday, and I keep the shop closed!” When they heard the early morning chime of the clock on the street, Anthea declared them too pissed to make it back to their flat in one piece. She made John and Sherlock a pallet of cushions and blankets on the sitting room floor, and ordered them to sleep.

“Yes, ma’am.” Sherlock mock bowed at her and nearly spilled to the floor. Anthea kissed his forehead, and blew out the candles, but one by the washroom. "Good night." She bade them before retreating to her room.

“Come on, you. Bed.” John helped Sherlock take off his boots and clothes after stripping his own, and tumbled them onto the pallet. Sherlock immediately rolled against John and buried his face against his neck, plunging his hand down to grasp John’s arse.

“John, you are the most delightful, . . . most dare-devil, . . . most dashing, . . . most delicious, most . . . most . . .”

“Oh, you’re fun when you’re drunk. Give us a kiss then.” After a few sloppy kisses, Sherlock sighed and fell into a contented snoring against John. John sighed, and kissing Sherlock’s temple, settled himself down to sleep as well.

It was still hours until dawn when a squeak of the floor boards roused him. John opened one eye to the room. In the dim light, Anthea stood at the door wrapped around a much taller figure. They held each other tightly, fingers gripping clothing, foreheads pressed together. When they moved to take each other’s mouths in a fierce kiss, John regretted being accidental intruder to their privacy. He shifted.

Mycroft caught John’s eye as he and Anthea turned, and she pulled him down the hall. Mycroft nodded slightly, and John nodded back.
The Transformed Place Becomes Our Paradise

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock spend a special evening together for Lovers Eve.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter comes from a quote “The transformed place becomes our paradise as well, and in that world, we’re welcomed home.” attributed to Albert Pinkham Ryder an American painter and eccentric who lived 1847-1917.

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The snippet of poetry in the chapter is from Shakespeare's sonnet 151.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John woke to dawn trickling in the windows, and an aching head as Sherlock shook his shoulder. “Here” Sherlock put a mug of tea on the floor next to him. “Drink this, you’ll feel much better.”

John pushed to sitting to reach the cup. The first sip was delicious – lemon and ginger. After just a few swallows, John felt amazingly better.

“Anthea’s hangover cure.” Sherlock told him. “Drink up, and let’s get going.”

“I saw Mycroft . . .” John started.

“I know.” Sherlock told him. “I think they’ll appreciate some privacy for their family today.”

After a quick wash-up in Anthea’s sink, while John looked longingly at her small bath tub, they dressed, and made ready to go. Sherlock grabbed a number of jars and packets on the shelf by the door and wrapped them up into his bag.

“Should you take those without asking Anthea?” John asked.

“It's fine, she leaves them here for me.” Sherlock told him.

They exited the flat quietly, taking the steps to a back door that let out into the alley behind.

Sherlock led them off to Baker Street at an easy pace. John was almost starting to get the hang of the route when they took a whole new twist, and he just resigned himself to following Sherlock around generally half-lost. They stopped off to grab cups of tea and sausage rolls at a stand after John complained about being hungry, and arrived back at the flat not too much later.
John collapsed onto the couch once Sherlock opened the door. “Do we have anything on for today? I’m ready for a kip.” He yawned.

“No, today can be quiet. Tomorrow is soon enough for my rounds.”

“Your rounds?” John asked scrubbing his hand through his hair.

“Yes, I can’t wait to show you some of my favourite haunts around the city. But I agree the back-to-bed idea is an excellent one for today.” Sherlock dropped his things around the room, and stretched his back.

“Too bad I’m too tired to shag your brains out.” John yawned again so widely his jaws cracked, “but give me a few hours sleep, and arrangements can be made.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Sherlock gave his behind a quick squeeze as they pulled off clothes, and headed to the bed.

“Sherlock,” John said as he settled under the blankets. “I hate to mention it, but we’re going to have to figure some things out for the flat.”

“Well, we need to hire a laundry service. These sheets aren’t getting any fresher, and we need to get some food into the flat. We can’t eat out every meal. I’m going to need some petty cash for things . . .” He trailed off as Sherlock craned his neck back to look up at him horrified.

“John. I’m so sorry. I’ve been an idiot. I’m not doing a very good job of spoiling you, am I?”

“I have all the riches in the world with you in my arms.” John smiled. “But yeh, clean sheets and pants are nice too.”

“I’ll take care of it, don’t worry.”

“Not worried.” John yawned as they curled in against each other and drifted off, dozy and warm.

John woke alone in the flat. A note on the pillow read

"Running errands. You snore beautifully. Back soon. – S"

The back of the note read

" Love is too young to know what conscience is, Yet who knows not conscience is born of love? ”

It was obviously left over from Sherlock’s poetry writing campaign of the week before. John smiled, and found himself sentimentally tucking it away inside a favorite book. He used the loo, drank some water, and pulled on leggings and a tunic. After straightening the flat, he felt at loose ends again with nothing in particular to do. He realized that he hadn’t done any of his usual meditations in days, and that at least he could remedy. He sat cross-legged on the bed, and slowed his breathing, pausing before each deep inhale and exhale. He let his mind settle, visualizing energy like tree roots sinking from his spine into the earth below. It was a relief to let the chatter of his mind fall apart like clouds in the sky.
When he opened his eyes, Sherlock was sitting on a chair by the doorway watching him thoughtfully.

“Oh good you’re back.” John smiled warmly at him.

“I haven’t done that so much lately.” Sherlock observed motioning his chin to John on the bed.

“It’s helpful - clears the mind. You might want to pick it back up again.” John shrugged, then rose to stretch. “What have you been up to, love?” John padded over to where Sherlock sat, bending down to kiss his forehead.

“Oh this and that.” Sherlock said catching John’s hand and tugging him close. “I may have found us a maid of all work to take care of the flat. Mrs. Hudson suggested someone to try out.” He blushed a little. “She gave me an earful in the proper treatment of one’s beloved.” Sherlock wound his arms around John’s middle, burying his face against his belly.

“John, why are you wearing so many clothes?”

“I could say the same of you.” John smiled. “It’s easily fixed, but I’m starving. Unless you have food, we’ll need to go out and forage.”

“I already foraged.” Sherlock waved at the basket and bags next to him on the floor.

“Brilliant!” John exclaimed dropping to his knees to peer into the closest sack. He pulled out a large bouquet of flowers and some rose-scented candles on top.

“This is fancy. What’s the occasion?” He asked.

“John,” Sherlock turned his prism eyes to him, and scrunched his nose. “It’s Lovers' Eve.”

“Oh, Gods. Tomorrow’s May first.” John lightly smacked his hand against his forehead. “I lost track of the days.”

“This is for you too.” Sherlock joined him on the floor to rummage through another bag. He pulled out a scroll of papers to hand to John.

“What . . .”

“I had my bank draft up some papers making you joint owner on my account. It’s all my own money, fees I’ve earned doing detective work. I don’t just charge mince pies from my wealthier clients. I’ll simply need your signature in a few places, and we can send it back in to make it official. John, you’ll get an annual stipend once you become my consort, but I wanted to . . .” Sherlock trailed off when he saw how John was staring at him.

“Sherlock, thank you. I completely forgot it was Lovers' Eve. It’s been so many years since I had anyone to celebrate with. I didn’t get you anything.” John stood, blowing out a breath, as he raked worried fingers through his hair.

“John, don’t be silly, you don’t have to buy me any trinkets, just having you in my life is wildly improbable, and more than enough.” Sherlock’s eyes were azure pools as he gazed up at him.

“Wait. I do have something for you.” John reached behind his neck and unhooked the chain that was hanging there. I want you to have my Gallanus pendant.”

“Oh, John, no . . .”
“Yes. I turned my back on the Gods when I lost so many in the Fever Plague. I . . . for some reason though, I couldn’t let this pendant go. It gave me strength to survive my arrow hit. It helped me come back from hell, enter the priesthood, and . . . find you. I know it’s a little beat up, but I can’t think of anything better I could give you.”

“I will be honored to wear it.” Sherlock said reaching up to touch the pendant at his throat as John clasped the chain behind him.

“John.” Sherlock rose to pull him into his arms. “Sometime I think I must have dreamed you.”

“Nope. I’m really here.” John wound his arms around Sherlock and squeezed. “Thankfully you feel pretty solid too.”

John’s stomach rumbled loudly then. They both laughed.

“I’ll get dinner unpacked.” Sherlock smiled.

“I’ll just grab some water for the flowers.” John answered. “Eat in bed?”

“Bed.” Sherlock agreed.

“Poor table” John mused finding something big enough to hold the flowers with some water from the pump. “Maybe we can just keep plants on it?”

When John made it back to the bedroom, Sherlock had lit candles around the room, and was busy laying out a picnic on a cloth over the bed. John put the flowers on the small table beside.

They stripped down to their underwear to sit cross-legged on the bed, “This looks formal.” John observed. “We should at least keep our pants on, yeh?”

Sherlock grinned as he unpacked crusty bread, several cheeses, sausages, pickles, jars of olives, and a basket of strawberries. Last was a large bottle of wine and two new pewter goblets to drink it out of.

“We didn’t have any wine glasses.” Sherlock said by way of explanation.

They set to it, pulling apart the bread, cutting slices of cheese, and sausage, passing food, and feeding each other strawberries. As the sun set outside, the shadows lengthened, leaving the cheery glow of the candles to gently illuminate the room.

John looked over at Sherlock, and sighed. The planes of his face caught the light so beautifully. He looked fey, like some fairy creature wandered briefly into the lesser world of men.

“What is it?” Sherlock caught him staring.

“You.” John answered.

“What about me?” Sherlock asked lifting an eyebrow.

“You are so beautiful.” John breathed, laying one hand over an elegant cheekbone. Sherlock turned his head to kiss John’s palm.

“John.” Sherlock smiled. “Are you finished eating?”

“I am.” John said “That was delicious. Thanks for getting dinner.”
“Would you like to play a game now?” Sherlock asked in a light tone.

“What sort of game?” John asked.

“A lovers’ game.” Sherlock looked up from under his lashes, a small smile playing at his mouth. “I think you’ll like it.”

“I generally like your games.” John grinned back. “Let’s just clear off the bed.”

While John took the leftovers into the kitchen to store, Sherlock set up in the bedroom. John returned to see a number of things gathered on the bedside table—jars, cloth, and a large feather among the collection.

“What do you need me to do?” John asked.

“Make yourself comfortable on the bed. You might want to sit up against the head board.”

“Right-o.” John climbed over to get into place, pulling pillows up behind him.

“I want to start with this first.” Sherlock said, lighting a stick of incense in a holder. A spicy scent wafted out with the plume of smoke rolling off the stick. Sherlock circled the bedroom with it, then placed it on a shelf across the room, before returning to the bed. He crawled over to kneel between John’s legs, nudging them aside to make room for himself, his eyes dancing like a blue-green flame.

“I call to the east, the place of dawn and new beginnings.” He leaned forward to reverently kiss John’s forehead.

“I call to the south, a place of noonday sun and passion.” Sherlock scooted back to lay a chaste kiss atop John’s underwear over his cock.

“I call to the west, a place of sunset, and loving kindness.” He kissed John’s chest.

“I call to the north, a place of dark stillness, and strength.” He pressed a kiss to John’s belly just below his navel pushing the waistband of his shorts down to reach the skin.

“Be most welcome to this sacred place. Blessed be.” Sherlock finished with a kiss at John’s lips.

“Blessed be.” John breathed out in reply as Sherlock pulled away.

Sherlock reached over then, and extracted a long red silk scarf from the tangle of items on the table. “Just relax.” He told John winding the scarf around his eyes and securing it tightly in the back.

“This part is called ‘Waking the Senses.’” He whispered against John’s ear. “Don’t think . . . just feel. Let go, and become one with the sensations as they come to you.” He felt Sherlock move off the bed.

John relaxed back as the cool swish of some fabric dragged over his chest, arms, belly, and legs. It was . . . pleasant. He heard Sherlock unstopper a bottle, and his nostrils filled with a delicious fragrance, sweet, yet woody. John tried to place the smell, then remembered he was meant to simply experience it. Something that could only be the large feather dragged over him, tantalizingly light across his skin. It tickled when it brushed under his arm, and John burst into giggles. Sherlock’s palm lay warm and steady against his belly until he quieted again.

Another fragrance reached his nose, this one light and floral. Small bells rang softly around his head from one side round to the other. John heard another jar opening before a finger was at his mouth
pressing against his lips. John opened, and it slipped inside bringing a thick sweetness to his tongue—honey, of course. He sucked it down. Suddenly, at his wrist, he felt the shock of something cold but smooth, it ran up one arm, over his nipples, down the other arm, over his legs, and across the soles of his feet. Something light and silky fell across him—a veil? a scarf?, sounds of moving, shuffling, and then . . . the most amazing sound washed over John’s ears. Music spilled over the room, rich, warm, hauntingly lovely. It stuttered to a halt when John reached up to take off his blindfold, Sherlock catching his hand.

“No, John, wait. Just listen.” John sat back, opening himself, and listened. This wasn’t just music, this was a river of sound bouncing over the rocks of his mind. It caressed him, buffeted him, swallowed him as his entire body vibrated with it. It seemed as if the language of the heart had been suddenly translated into pure sound. When the last sweet strains finally drew to a close even the silence was a part of the music, the last note still vibrating in the stillness as a ghost of itself.

John pushed the blindfold off then to see Sherlock standing in the center of the room holding a violin and bow loosely by his side.

“What . . . what was that?”

“Partita 2 in D minor for the violin.” Sherlock told him.

“No seriously, what WAS that? I didn’t know you could play music like that. I didn’t know anyone could play music like that. Can you, . . . can you play something more?” John asked him.

“There’s more to it.” Sherlock said. “I’ll play the next movement.” Sherlock tucked the instrument under his chin, drew the bow over the strings, and launched back into his concert, closing his eyes and swaying along to the flow of the unearthly sounds.

John’s eyes were shining when Sherlock finally laid the violin and bow down, and joined him on the bed. John was almost afraid to touch him, he seemed so otherworldly like he might be made of spun glass, or soap bubbles, but when he bounded into John’s arms winding himself around he felt as warm and as wonderful as he always did.

Sherlock’s mouth found its way to John’s, and lips and tongues reacquainted themselves in a delightful dance. The taste of the wine they’d drunk with dinner clung to Sherlock’s breath adding a top note to the delicious spice that was Sherlock all alone. When they pulled back for a breath, Sherlock laid his forehead to John’s.

“I haven’t played anything in years. I used to play the violin all the time, but it got left behind when my grandmother died. Somehow I just never found my way back to it. But today . . .”

“Thank you. Thank you for sharing that with me. Your playing is . . . incredible. You are incredible.” John rained kisses across his face, over closed eyelids, and cheekbones to jaw.

“I’ll play for you whenever I can, John.” Sherlock whispered.

John caught his lips in a deep kiss then, pulling him as close as he could, drinking at his lips with a surging need. He scooped his hands over Sherlock’s arse, pulling him tighter till they were a hair’s breadth apart from chest to groin, and rocked up.

Sherlock groaned against him.

“Pants off?” John nipped at his earlobe, and kissed over the shell of his ear.

“John, wait, I want to try something different.” Sherlock pushed back to look him in the eye. “I
know I always race over you . . . I wanted to take it slow. It’s part of a meditation, a lovemaking that engages the spirit as well as the body. Some call it the slow burn. Others call it riding the waves of bliss—if it’s done right.”

“I’ve heard of that. I’ve never done it before though.”

“I haven’t either. I wanted to try it with you. I know non-mages can do it, but I thought we could bring something even more special to the proceedings.” An impish look flashed through Sherlock’s eyes.

“All right, love.” John kissed the tip of his nose.

They parted to slip underwear down and off.

“How do we start?” John asked

“We probably need to back up a bit, or I’m not going to last. We need to put off release as long as possible for it to work.”

Sherlock had them lie down on their backs opposite each other, head to feet. They reached out to lay hands over each other’s bellies.

“Just breathe, and feel my breath.” Sherlock told him. “Let everything else leave your mind.”

John relaxed under the warmth of Sherlock’s hand on his middle, concentrating on the slow rise and fall of Sherlock’s abdomen under his touch. Eventually, their breathing settled in to match each other’s.

After several minutes, they sat up to sit cross-legged facing each other.

“An attunement is good now, but let’s not engage any magecraft yet.” Sherlock suggested. They reached out to lay hands over each other’s hearts - right hand on their partner, left covering the hand on their own chest.

“Focus on my left eye.” Sherlock told him, “And breathe, letting all other thoughts but the present moment go.”

Once again they settled, breathing slowly in time with each other. John loved Sherlock’s eyes. It was a luxury to sit and gaze into them undisturbed. They were a cosmos unto themselves. John marveled at the iris, a swirl of grey, green, and blue across the center, the darker rim, and the speckles of brown that shifted them to every color depending on the light and Sherlock’s mood. Sherlock gazed steadily back at him, his pupils open and wide, a soft smile curling over his lips. John felt a shift come over him just from the simple exercise, like layers over his heart he didn’t even know he had were peeling away.

“Ah.” A small sob broke from John’s throat, and Sherlock squeezed his hand gently over his heart, a soft look in his eyes. After time that might have been a few minutes or a whole day, Sherlock shifted them. "We need to sit closer, touching now. I think it will be easier if I’m the receiving partner this time.”

Sherlock set up the pillows for John to sit cross-legged with his pelvis tilted forward, and Sherlock to settle onto his lap.

“Again we just sit, getting synched.” Sherlock explained.
They pressed their half-hard cocks together, and settled hands around each other one on the back, one around the shoulder.

“Hello.” John smiled.

“Hello, my love.” Sherlock smiled back.

“I want to move against you.” John admitted.

“Ah, now I’m the one asking you to slow it down, my warrior priest.” Sherlock quirked up his mouth.

John sighed. “No pain, no gain, hmmm?”

“To the devoted come the rewards of devotion.”

“You made that up.”

“John, I’m sure someone said that somewhere. Now, focus. Visualize the energies of your body moving from your tailbone, up to the crown of your head, and back again. Once you have that, you want to tighten your pelvic floor, engage the muscles to contain the energy.”

“I’m not sure I can . . .”

“That part takes practice. You can clench your anus lightly to start, but you want to engage the whole pelvic floor eventually. We can work on that over time.” He smiled.

John clenched as well as he could without gripping too tightly, and breathed out focusing on visualizing his body’s energies cycling up the front, and then back down again, all while gazing again into Sherlock’s eyes just above him.

“Now you come inside me.” Sherlock breathed.

“I’m not quite hard . . .” John started when Sherlock shifted, and rocked his hips back and forth against the cradle of John’s pelvis, pushing their cocks together.

“Aaaaarr.” John was shocked at how intense the simple touch hit him. His erection sprang to life, hardening instantly.

Sherlock leaned back and caught a jar off the bedside table. He pulled off the stopper, releasing the sweet, woodsy fragrance again.

“Will you open me?” he asked holding the cream to John.

“It will be my honor, love.” John scooped up a healthy portion and moved slicked fingers to gently open Sherlock’s entrance, working one, then another finger past the opening and the second ring of muscles beyond. Sherlock lay stretched out with his head thrown back, his long throat exposed. His Adam’s apple bobbed beautifully between the long sinews of his neck as he swallowed. He looked like a marble statue as the candlelight played over his pale skin. Gently John worked in a third finger.

Sherlock groaned deeply in reply.

“You gorgeous man.” John leaned over and dropped kisses over his belly, catching his cock with gentle kisses pressed over.

“Oh, stop.” Sherlock breathed out. “I don’t want to come yet.”
John helped him sit up, and they settled back on the pillows, Sherlock climbing over to line himself over John’s cock, and slowly sink home. John groaned at the feeling of his lover enveloping him. When Sherlock reached bottom, they relaxed, arms back around. Sherlock’s erection pressed gently between them.

“Oh, I want to fuck you, love.” John ground out.

“I know.” Sherlock wrinkled his nose. “This is the hard part.” A fine sheen of sweat had beaded up over his forehead. “Hold on though, slow your breath.”

They worked again to calm their breathing, focusing their gaze on each other’s left eye. John could feel his cock aching with the want to move, but he settled and let the feeling pass.

“Picture your energy moving up the core of your body.” Sherlock nearly chanted, controlled and quiet. “Then let it flow back down, only when you reach your cock, feel the energy moving up into me up through my core to the top of my head. Pull your pelvic floor up gently, and hold it if you can.”

John was amazed to feel his penis bob inside Sherlock when he clenched his inner muscles. Sherlock smiled and tightened himself, clenching his anus slightly around John. The feeling was exquisite. John struggled to focus, stay still, and visualize the energy moving. It was harder than he would have thought, but soon enough, he slipped into it, the meditative trance that let all else go. The world became Sherlock’s eyes, a steady beacon holding him through the rise of his breath, the answering breath of the man curled around him, and the beat of his lover’s heart pulsing through his entrance wrapped around his cock.

Sherlock leaned forward until their mouths were almost touching. “Breathe my breath in, and complete the circuit” he whispered.

As John exhaled, Sherlock inhaled. As John inhaled, it was to draw in the hot breath from his lover’s mouth. John pictured the energy moving around them in a circle, building as it cycled through them. It felt like a pebble dropped into a pond sending ripples out that washed over his body in wave after wave.

“Send me your mage power, love.” Sherlock whispered against him.

“Hmmm.” John felt drugged, it was an effort to bring his mind back to the spoken word.

“Give me just a bit of your mage power, a ‘be well’ sending.” Sherlock murmured.

With the sliver of his mind still working, John drew up a handful of his energy colored bright with love, and want, and the joy of nerve endings zinging. Gently he sent it into his lover’s back. The mage light joined the energies already moving. It swelled through Sherlock, and he fed it back into the cycle, expanding, vibrating the circle of power.

Suddenly, hearts beating faster, and faster, breath coming in gasps, trembling together, so much, so much . . . waves of sensation broke over John. Pleasure was too small a word for it. His body, hot, melting, merging, and Sherlock around him, inside him, was him. Breathing through two sets of lungs, opening two sets of eyes to see himself looking back at himself - a loop of seeing, and being seen. Beyond the edges of his body/not-body lay the ocean of energy that both contained them and was them. He floated in the sea rising gently to a light that rippled over the surface above.


John turned his head. He was standing in his boyhood home. The old rocking chair was back by the
fireplace, and his mother was in it, sewing her quilt squares like she did in the evenings. John moved closer to see what she was working on. There were three patches spread across her lap. One square showed an image of a flaming arrow flying across it, the next had two outstretched hands with herbs and knife, the symbol for Gallanus the healer. The third square held a gold crown with a heart inside.

“Mum!” John was surprised to see her, but then couldn’t remember why. Surely she was always in her chair at evening time, the light from the fireplace painting her face with a rosy glow.

“Johnny!” She looked up with a smile, and reached over to grab John’s hand and give it a tight squeeze. “It’s good to see you, honey. How are you?”

“I’m fine. Mum, have you been away?”

“No, sweetie, I haven’t, but you have. It’s fine though, I know you’ve been busy. Who’s this?” She craned her neck past John to look behind him.

John turned to see Sherlock standing hesitantly by the door.

“Oh, OH. Mum, this is Sherlock. He’s my fiancé. I wanted you to meet him.”

John held out his arm, and Sherlock stepped forward, more sure of himself, to stand next to John.

“How do you do, ma’am?” he asked Mrs. Watson bobbing his head, and sticking out his hand for a shake.

She looked him up and down for a moment then rose dropping her sewing to the chair. “You’ll do. I think you’ll do very well. Give us a hug, dear.” She opened her arms, and gathered Sherlock against her in a tight embrace.

“Thank you.” Sherlock returned her hug, and then stepped back to slide his arm around John.

John turned again. He was standing alone in field that looked to be high summer. The sun beat down overhead, illuminating the wildflowers carpeting the grass under him with a brilliant glare. An older bearded man dressed in a light white robe strode toward him. The wildflowers swiveled and bent their faces toward him as passed brushing over his bare feet and ankles.

“John, my good man, walk with me.” He called out as he drew near.

John fell into step beside him.

“John, you are a healer.”

“I was one once, sir.”

“No, you were a healer, and you are still a healer – an excellent one.”

“I was never that good . . .” John started to explain.

“You were just beginning.” The man boomed out. “You need to complete your training. You are an excellent healer.” He repeated.
“Thank you, sir.” John turned to tell him, but found he was alone in the field once more.

The flowers around him grew brighter and larger merging into a kaleidoscope of color that gradually resettled into the glow of the candles around his bedroom.

John found himself lying across the bed. He stretched carefully. Yup, still had two arms, and two legs all in one piece. A buzz in his head thrummed, and then blessedly died down. He blinked, and looked over to see Sherlock sprawled out next to him. Quickly, John laid a hand to his neck, but Sherlock was warm, and breathing normally, simply a dead weight against the mattress. John patted over him to make sure of his wholeness, his hand brushing over his chest, belly, spent cock, and back up his flank and side.

“Sherlock, Sherlock.” He whispered against his ear, wrapping his hand around his shoulder and shaking him gently.

The man moved finally, stretching languorously with his arms over his head, arching his back.

“John, I had such a dream.” He opened blue-grey eyes that glittered in the candlelight.

John gathered him up against himself. “You crazy man. I’m not so sure we should be walking around in the otherworld like that. We might not find our way back again.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened. “John, I met your mother.”

“I think you did.” John agreed.

“I’m glad she liked me.” Sherlock said. “I’m not sure what I could have done if she’d told you I was bad news.”

“Oh Sherlock. You are my life. How could anyone see anything different.” John smiled at Sherlock pulling him closer to kiss his cheek.

“I think we need something to eat after that, ground ourselves in the here and now. Let’s go see what looks good in the leftovers bin.” John affectionately smacked Sherlock’s rump, and rolled upright.

Chapter End Notes

When Sherlock plays the violin for John for the very first time, I envision it sounding much like this wonderful recording of Hilary Hahn playing Bach's Partita Nº 2, one of the most beautiful pieces ever written for a violin solo. You can listen to it for an audio extra if you'd like:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KaYzgofHjc

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I didn't make the holiday up out of whole cloth that John and Sherlock are celebrating in this chapter - Lovers' Eve.

May first, or May Day, or Beltane, or Walpurgis Night has long been celebrated across Europe. Falling six weeks after Spring Equinox, it marks the time when light and heat have returned in earnest. Being a holiday of spring and fertility, it is quite possible that
lovers celebrated the holiday with romance, and passion much as our lads do here.

I am quite pleased to be able to post this chapter on Valentine's day eve, a day we moderns set aside to honor love and passion - in however an annoying and cheesy way we manage it.

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I hope I didn't get too technical with the sacred sexuality that John and Sherlock practice in this chapter. Often called "Tantric sex" it can be a highly technical but rewarding practice. I got alot of my information from a book called "The Art of Sexual Ecstasy" by Margo Anand, though I'm sure there are many other good books out there for those who want to do some, ahem, more research.
Making the Rounds

Chapter Summary

Sherlock shows John some of his usual haunts around Delphium, but the addition of a holiday adds something special to the day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John hurried to keep up with Sherlock’s long legs. They were off on yet another tour of the back alleys of Delphium that he had never stopped to notice before. Somehow Sherlock knew the most esoteric routes to any place in the city. Sherlock had woken with a bounce that morning proclaiming that they had places to go and people to see. After a perfunctory kiss, morning ablutions, and a croissant grabbed at the Hudsons’ bakery, they were off. At length, Sherlock’s ramblings led them to a low, brick building on a quiet side street. The weathered sign over the door read “Golden’s Gym.”

“It’s a gymnasium and boxing club I belong to.” Sherlock told John. “But the best thing here is the morning classes that Master Ang teaches.”

Sherlock pushed open the door, and John followed into the musky air beyond. The large open room echoed with the good-natured cacophony of men at play. Several smacked at the punching bags suspended from the ceiling as a pair sparred in the boxing ring whilst on-lookers cheered at the sidelines. John stopped to bow quickly to the statue of Mithre, God of Soldiers, tucked into an alcove by the door. Someone had lit a stick of incense before him, and looped a necklace of flowers over his neck – mostly likely a recent addition for May Day.

Sherlock exchanged nods with a few of the men they passed as he led John into a smaller side room. Padded mats covered the floor where a half dozen men and two women stretched and jumped in place. A jumble of shoes lay heaped at the entrance, and they stopped to add their own foot gear to the pile. Sherlock stripped down to his undershirt, and John followed suit, hanging their things on pegs on the wall.

John turned as an Asian man, who he noted with some pleasure was shorter than he was, moved closer to greet them.

“Sherlock! Good to see you, my friend. We missed you!” He clapped a hand over Sherlock’s upper arm.

“Sorry, Master Ang. I’ve been busy.” Sherlock apologized. “I’d like you to meet my fiancé.” Sherlock swept his hand back. “This is John. He’s not familiar with this style of fighting, and I wanted him to experience it for himself.”

“Fiancé?” a large grin creased the man’s face as he looked between them. “I can see why you been busy.” He winked at Sherlock, and stuck out a hand to John. “Welcome to the class.”

“Thank you, sir.” John smiled shaking his hand. The man’s hand was small, but his grip was very
“Just follow what you can.” Master Ang told him. “We are all beginners once.”

Master Ang walked to the center of the room and clapped his hands. Instantly, the students fell into a line facing him, straightening their clothes to stand tall. John followed Sherlock and they joined the end of the row. Master Ang faced them for a moment, then swiveled to the wall behind. He clapped his hands against his thighs as a sort of signal, and led the class in a bow to a framed portrait of an older man hanging in a place of honor. Master Ang turned gracefully back to face them again, bowed to the class, and they bowed in return. Frustrated, John followed just a beat out of time with the group who clearly knew the drill better than he did.

“Good morning friends.” The teacher intoned.

“Good morning, Master Ang.” Everyone called back.

“Happy May Day. Today we have a new student with us. I hope you will be mindful of his first steps on the path.” Master Ang nodded to John. As heads turned to look at him, he waved weakly. Several people nodded back at him.

“Now we begin.” The teacher turned back to face the far wall.

“This is a warm-up.” Sherlock whispered to John out of the side of his mouth. “Just watch me and follow as much as you can.”

The class spread out over the mat, and moved through a series of steps almost like a dance, feet sweeping over the mats, arms circling over head as they changed directions and shifted weight back and forth in the different stances. John got lost quickly, but jumped in whenever he could to match the strange movements. Next they dropped to the mat to practice rolling from a crouch, over one shoulder, and then the other. John was chagrined at how awkward he found it all. Finally they drew to a close, and Master Ang clapped his hands again. The class scurried to sit on their knees at the edge of the mats to watch the teacher.

“This morning we practice overhead strike.” Master Ang explained. “I need a volunteer. Sherlock, you not been here in awhile. Let’s see how much you forget.” The class chuckled as Sherlock pushed to his feet to join the teacher on the mat.

How beautiful Sherlock looked, all long, lithe grace as he strode across the room, that fall of dark curls framing eyes gone steely with focus. John cut his gaze over to the rest of the class watching his love, and felt a curl of jealousy wind through his belly. He took a breath and reminded himself that dealing with people noticing Sherlock was going to be a life-time occupation.

After bowing to each other, Ang nodded “You attack first, please.”

Sherlock lifted an arm and rushed at the teacher, and then he was not attacking the teacher, but flying across the room to somersault arse over elbow, landing neatly on his feet.

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“Attack again.” Master Ang commanded.

This time when Sherlock came at him, the teacher caught his arm at the elbow, and used his momentum to spiral him down, twisting his arm to lie behind him as he locked him to the floor. Sherlock tapped the mat with his other hand, and Master Ang released him. John felt his mouth water just from watching Sherlock being pinned.

“You see, slow and gentle.” The teacher told the class as Sherlock climbed back to his feet. “You
invite your attacker to lie down on the ground.”

The teacher turned then and bowed to Sherlock. “Now I attack.”

Master Ang swept his feet over the mat advancing at Sherlock with arm raised. Sherlock met his arm, pivoted, and then the teacher was suddenly across the room rolling gently to regain his feet.

“Good.” The teacher smiled at him. “You not forget so much.”

“Your turn.” He clapped his hands at the class, and everyone jumped upright to pair off.

“Let’s split you two up.” Master Ang said heading Sherlock off before he reached John. “Here you practice with Hannah.” He told John, towing him by the wrist over to one of the women in the class. “You about same height.” the teacher explained and left them together.

Hannah was the smaller of the two women in the class, a wide-faced brunette with an infectious smile, her long hair caught in a braid down her back.

“Do you want to attack first?” she asked him. “It’s easier if you don’t know the move well.”

“Yeh, all right.” John moved hesitantly toward her afraid of putting much force into the attack. She lightly met his arm and pushed him back.

“No, really come at me, don’t worry. I won’t break.” She chided him. “I don’t have any energy to work with if you don’t act like you mean it.”

John shrugged and returned to lunge at her with a bit more force. The next thing he knew he was sliding face first into the mat. Hannah released him instantly, and stepped back. They repeated it a few more times until John’s knees and elbows, and a bit of his pride were feeling quite sore.

“Why don’t you give defending a try, now.” Hannah told him. “We can walk it through slowly first.” They cycled through part of the move until John thought he had it. When Hannah came at him with full force, John somehow tripped over his own feet, and they toppled to the ground, Hannah sprawled over him. Her breasts were incredibly soft pressed against John’s chest. They laughed as they struggled to untangle, and push back to their feet. Sherlock was standing over them, his blue-grey gaze snapping as he reached a hand down to pull John up.

“All right, John?” he asked in frosty tones.

“Yeh, fine.” John dusted himself off, raising an eyebrow.

The teacher came over to clasp John on the shoulder. “You train in another style of fighting?” he asked John.

“Yeh, I was a foot soldier in the Gallatian wars.” He admitted.

“Ah, it may take awhile to unlearn old habits.” Master Ang told him. “Once the old is gone, the body can learn new ways of being. You will understand in time.”

The teacher clapped hands then, and the class bowed to their partners to return to sitting. “Thanks for your help.” John smiled at Hannah as they bowed, and separated to find places to kneel at the edge of the mat. Sherlock seemed to take special care to sit by John on the side closest to Hannah.

The next move involved getting out some wooden knives to practice warding off cutting blows which John enjoyed immensely. He ended up paired off with a wiry older bloke that didn’t seem to
raise Sherlock’s hackles, and the rest of the class passed quickly before the teacher was clapping hands for all to assemble for final bows.

As the class broke up, Hannah called good-bye to John before she left, and he waved back.

“Come on, they have a steam room and splash baths here for the men.” Sherlock told him. “Unfortunately, it’s not quite the public baths. We need to behave ourselves. No canoodling here.”

“Oh, and I was looking forward to some canoodling.” John smiled at him. “Ah well, a steam bath sounds good too. I think I pulled my shoulder a bit.” He shrugged the shoulder in question up and back a few times.

John and Sherlock gathered their things, and moved into the changing area of the gym. Stowing their clothes on shelves, they grabbed towels to wind over the waist, and entered the steam room. A burst of heat greeted John, catching his breath for a moment. He glanced around duly noting the three portly, older men already relaxed about the room. One still had his towel on, but the other two had draped themselves quite comfortably starkers on the tiered benches lining the sauna. Being all very “eyes above the waist,” they moved carefully around them to find their own seats. John settled onto a lower bench a good two feet away from Sherlock with a sigh. He closed his eyes, and let the heat seep into his tired muscles. Bliss. Then he made the mistake of glancing over at Sherlock.

Great Gods on a backwards pony.

Sherlock was sprawled nude over the bench with his towel open beneath him. His head lay artlessly tilted back against the tier above, eyes closed, mouth slightly parted. His dark hair hung in heavy ringlets over his forehead and neck, dripping down with the wet heat of the steam. A bead of sweat rolled a path down his long curved throat to catch in the notch above his collar bones. John could just imagine how wonderfully salty his skin would taste if he dragged his tongue over it right now. He licked his lips at the mere thought of it. Sherlock's wide shoulders tapered down to his lean, muscled chest, and John watched as a light pink flush from the heat deepened across his upper breast. His long pale arms lay akimbo, one hand just a few inches from John's thigh. If he just shifted over a bit, they would be touching, but no, not here, John chastised himself. Still how beautifully made his lover's hands were. John couldn't help noticing the slight bump of veins laid across the long carpal bones, the dramatic curve of his wrist leading up to the ropy muscles of his forearms... GODS.

John closed his eyes, and shifted slightly on the bench.

When he opened his eyes back up, it was of course to land right on the dusting of fur at Sherlock’s belly, a dark arrow pulling the gaze ever down to the patch over his groin. The dark hair was such a lovely contrast to his pale skin, a sweet nest for his cock, relaxed and slightly unfurled in the warm air. His elegant legs stretched on and on to skinny feet splayed out at least half a mile away. John fingers itched to touch. If he could just give a stroke, a pat, maybe one small squeeze... He stifled a groan, and after a strategic shifting of his towel to better cover his rising erection, sat firmly on his hands.

Sherlock turned his head to glance over at him with a little half smile hovering over his lips. The man was simply a sensual menace. “Come on, John. To the baths.” He tipped his head toward the door, and wound his towel back around his hips to leave.

John followed him out of the heat of the sauna and into the welcome cool of a tiled room next door. It was obviously the bathing room set round with tubs of water on a platform that several youths were busily hauling buckets over to refill. Several men were in the process of soaping themselves up, and standing by the drain in the center of the floor to pour water over themselves to rinse clean.
Sherlock of course passed the tubs that were faintly steaming to head straight to a cold tub first. “It’s the best thing after the steam room.” He assured John scooping out a dipper of water to pour over himself. John raised an eyebrow watching Sherlock wince at the shock of the cold water, but followed his lead, dipping out his own measure to pour.

“Sweet Gods! And that’ll wake you up in the morning!” John cried as the cold water cascaded over his protesting skin.

“Bracing! John. Bracing!” Sherlock crowed dousing himself with yet another icy dipperful, eyes bright as his dark curls streamed down from his head.

They soaped, rinsed with the warmer water, and dried themselves briskly before moving to the changing room to dress, and head back out.

“What’s next on the agenda, my dear sir?” John asked as he tied off his boots.

“A trip to my office is in good order next I think. Plus we can get something to eat there.” Sherlock told him.

“I didn’t know you had an office.” John mused running his fingers through his hair to settle it into something approaching respectable. He hadn't thought to pack a comb on his outing.

“All men of business have an office, John. Come on, let’s get there before the lunch rush starts.” Sherlock’s own riot of curls seemed to settle into its usual configuration no matter what he did or didn't do to it.

A slightly less round-about route took them a few blocks away to Regents Street. Sherlock led the way to a cheerful looking tearoom that proclaimed itself the “Regents Tea and News Café” with a large sign painted in bright curling script.

“I have advertisements for my detective services around town, and I maintain a post box here for all inquiries.” Sherlock told John as they neared the door. “It’s also an excellent place to keep up with the current news sheets, and any trendy gossip.”

“You had to chose Regents café, didn’t you?” John asked with a half smile.

“Never let it be said I don’t have a sense of humor, John. Besides they have the best sticky buns outside of Mrs. Hudson’s in the whole city.”

Sherlock led the way in to the warm, cinnamon-scented room. The customers ranged from the well dressed to the more down-in-the-heel, and everything in between. They sat either at the tables with food and pots of tea, or lounged on the padded seats by the racks displaying all the current news sheets. John managed to glance over the headlines as they passed noting that the birth of Prince Fergus seemed to have top billing for the day. Sherlock secured them a table near a window where they dumped their outer cloaks and bags before moving back to the counter.

“Philip, my good man.” Sherlock addressed the mustached fellow behind the counter. “What delights await me in my box today?”

“Oh, you have quite a stack, Mr. Holmes.” The man turned back to the rows of letter boxes behind him opening up number 42 to retrieve the scrolls and cards within.

“Excellent.” Sherlock nodded to John to take the pile while he fished in his purse. “This should cover me for the next few months.” He said passing over a handful of coins.
“Of course, sir.” The man bobbed his head.

“We’ll have a pot of earl grey, a plate of pasties, two sticky buns, and the soup of the day, please.” Sherlock told him before sweeping them back to their spot.

“How much does it cost to maintain a post box?” John asked him dumping the stack of papers across the tabletop. “That was quite a lot of silver you just passed over!”

“I don’t just pay for the box, John. I pay to make sure that Philip informs me of anyone asking about me, and pay to make sure he tells them nothing about me in return. It’s insurance.”

Sherlock pushed half of the letters towards John. “Here, see if there’s anything unusual in this lot. I only accept the interesting clients.”

John opened a few of the scrolls and read aloud.

“Dear Mr. Homes,
My husband is late coming home from werk. I want to no if he is seeing that whore Lavinia.
Sincerely, Mrs. Jones”

“Obviously her or someone like her.” Sherlock answered absently with a wave of his hand.

“Dear Mr. Holmes,
Can you help find my dog Rex? He’s been missing for two weeks.
-Mr. Lumpkin”

“Nope.”

“Mr. Holmes,
I think my daughter ran away to join the circus. Can you help me find her, and get her back home? She's called Beatrice.
Yours Truly, Alyce Wellton.”

“Typically people who run away do not wish to be found. Next.”

“Didn’t you want to do that when you were younger?” John asked him a bit dreamily.

“Do what?” Sherlock asked looking up from the scroll in his hand to focus on John.

“You know, run away and join the circus, when you were little? I know I did. A wonderful circus came to town when I was eight, and I almost ran away to follow them. It was all so much more exciting than anything Dullenshire had to offer.”

“Why didn’t you go?” Sherlock tilted his head to the side, and watched John carefully.

“Oh, I dunno. I guess my mum made lemon cake that night so I decided to stay.” John laughed.

Sherlock continued to stare raptly at John as though he were a particularly fascinating sort of insect worthy of further observation, and perhaps even cataloging.

A girl interrupted arriving with their tea, a lit candle, and small vase of flowers, “It’s for May Day.” she explained, returning shortly thereafter with their food on a platter. Several minutes were spent rearranging everything to fit on the table, and several more digging into the food which John found to be quiet delicious. He spooned the chicken vegetable soup up with gusto.

Sherlock continued flipping through the rest of his papers in between sips of tea, but then pushed
them all away with a sigh.

“Ah, there’s nothing worthwhile in the whole lot.” He complained with a frown.

“Were you expecting something in particular?” John asked around a bite of pastie.

“I had several contacts still looking into the MacMillan angle. I was sure there was something important to all that. Nothing solid has come through though.”

“It’s still a month and a half till Mid-Summer.” John shrugged. “You may get a lead yet.”

“Indeed, my love. Pass me a pastie before you consume them all.”

Once he finished eating, Sherlock got some writing things from Philip at the counter. He spent some time penning letters back to a few of his inquires that he sealed with wax and left to be posted.

“John.” Sherlock returned to perch opposite him.

“Hmmmm?” John looked up from his newspaper, and third cup of tea.

“I want to apologize for playing the caveman at the gym earlier today.”

“Oh, that woman, Hannah. It was nothing . . .” John began.

“Just, so.” Sherlock looked uncomfortable, staring down a moment. He raised his eyes to John’s. “I know you are attracted to women as well as men. If you would ever . . . care to take a woman as a lover, I would understand.”

“Oh, love. Thank you, but . . . I don’t know. Maybe if you were there to watch. It’s something we can talk about much later when I can take my eyes off you for longer than five minutes.” John scooped up Sherlock’s hand from the table, and pulled it close to drop kisses on his palm and wrist.

“Right now I’d be more than happy to just take you home to bed.”

Sherlock’s eyes deepened to pools of blue lava. “I think we’re done here.”

Sherlock left some coins on the table, and they pushed back out into the afternoon. It was an overcast day, but mild, the sweet smell of things abloom in the air. John inhaled deeply, and followed Sherlock with a jolly spring in his step. Two blocks over, they ran into a street fair. The roads were closed to traffic, and any number of booths and merrymakers spilled over the street.

“Oh, I haven’t been to a May Day fair in years.” John exclaimed with wide eyes. “I wonder if they have any treacle tarts?”

“John, you just ate.” Sherlock complained, but allowed himself to be towed into the holiday bedlam at John’s behest anyway.

A jester on stilts walked by, and pretending to find Sherlock very short, rested his forearms on top of his head for a quick nap. Sherlock was not amused, but softened when he saw John doubling over with giggles. They stopped next at a couple playing a haunting tune on a lute and harp. John listened while Sherlock kept an eye on the pickpockets. At John’s nudging, he fished out a small coin for their tips basket.

They skimmed past stalls selling all manner of flotsam and jetsam - scented soaps, rag dolls, flower wreathes, charmed bracelets, and small drums and flutes. Sherlock perked up at finding a table selling knives, but John pulled him away as he’d spied the game booths.
“John, you know they rig these games to be almost impossible to win.” Sherlock chided him.

“Yeh, I know. Pass over some bronze coins. I’m winning the stuffed dog.”

John stormed the "knock the milk bottles over" booth. They didn’t know what hit them. John ended up giving the giant stuffed dog and a collection of smaller rag dolls to three little girls in the audience that quickly gathered to watch John collapse the stack of metal bottles with every . . . single . . . ball he threw. He kept the handful of ribbons he’d won though, and handed the racy little statue of Arianne, Goddess of trysts, to Sherlock.

“Thank you! Thank you!” John called bowing deeply to his clapping admirers, and the unhappy booth owner as he and Sherlock moved on.

“John, I’m impressed. You’ve been holding out on me. You remain a man of many hidden talents.”

“You’re looking at the all-round best cricket player of Dullenshire for five years running,” John smiled proudly. “Too bad you can’t wear the ribbons in your hair, you have such sexy curls.” John looked sideways at Sherlock. “Maybe I can just tie them around your cock when I take you next.”

“John, I’ll wear ribbons anywhere you want me to.” Sherlock told him catching John’s hand to thread their fingers together.

After several cups of cider, two pickled eggs, a shared Devonshire tart, and a hat with a feather Sherlock had insisted on buying for him, John finally declared himself done with the fair. They were nearing the edge of the festival when Sherlock spotted the kissing booth. A sign explained it was to raise money for some charity, but judging by the three pretty girls providing the kisses, and the men lined up to pay for their wares, foundling homes were not paramount on people’s minds at the stand.

Sherlock stopped their progress. “John, I want you to visit that kissing booth.”

“Yeh?” John wrinkled up his brow.

“You said earlier today I could watch if I wanted.” Sherlock looked at John from under his lashes.

“Oh. OH.” John looked from the booth to Sherlock. “I’m picking the brown-haired girl with the short line though. The blondes get too much attention.”

“Your choice, of course.” Sherlock told him handing him a few silver coins to contribute.

John plopped the feathered hat on Sherlock’s head where it looked ridiculously good, and joined the line where a couple of blokes waited to kiss the small brunette woman. The busty, haughty blondes had much longer lines waiting for them, but John didn’t see why. When it was his turn, he stepped up and handed her the coins.

“Hi there. I’m John.” He smiled broadly at the woman, and held out a hand to shake.

“Hello. I’m Tilly.” She smiled taking his hand. She was cute little thing with a stub nose, and dark brown hair pulled up in a bun.

“It’s nice of you to do this—raising money for charity.” John told her.

“My sister works as a healer part time at some of the foundling homes in the area. After some of the stories she’s told me, this was the least I could do to help out.”

“I’m sure the homes will really appreciate the money you raise today.” John smiled broadly at her,
laying a hand lightly across her forearm.

“I hope so.” The woman's smile faltered, dazzled as she was by the full beam of John’s grin.

“Do you mind?” John asked dropping his voice a bit as he leaned in closer.

“No, of course not.” The woman had gone a little breathless as she tilted back.

John cocked his head to the side, and slipping a hand to hold the back of her head, brought his mouth to hers. He started it slow, a gentle slide of lips and exchange of breath, and gradually increased the pressure. Soon, they were pressed tight, tongues stroking deeply against each other. John worked both hands up into her hair, while she gripped his shoulders for support. The woman groaned as John eased off for a breath, changed direction, and dived back in. When John finally pulled back, Tilly made to follow, looking utterly dazed. The two pinched blondes, and their line of visitors had completely stopped their kissing ministrations to stare at them open-mouthed. Someone wolf whistled from the back of a line. A couple of blokes clapped.

“Thank you Miss Tilly. That was a pleasure.” John lifted her hand for a final kiss dusted over her knuckles.

“Ah . . . any time.” Tilly faltered, reaching back to pat ineffectually at her ruined hair.

John strutted back to where Sherlock waited, tracking John's approach with eyes gone suddenly bright.

“Oh, you’re good, Watson.” Sherlock curled up one side of his mouth.

Without missing a beat, John pulled Sherlock down into a deep, wet snog. Curving one hand over the back of his neck, and grabbing a handful of lush arse with the other, he hauled Sherlock up against the thigh he snugged between his legs. Even more whistles and clapping accompanied this kiss, but John and Sherlock hardly heard it as they separated to stare into each other's eyes.

“Home, love?” John asked.

“I know a quick route.” Sherlock fairly twinkled at him, and they were off.

Chapter End Notes

The martial art that is featured in this chapter is based on the Japanese fighting style called Aikido. Developed by Morihei Ueshiba as a synthesis of his martial studies, philosophy, and religious beliefs, Aikido is often translated as "the Way of harmonious spirit." Ueshiba's goal was to create an art that practitioners could use to defend themselves while also protecting their attacker from injury. When practiced properly, the style often resembles an intricate dance more than a fighting technique.
John and Sherlock enjoy a honeymoon of sorts settling in at 221B.

John made desperate noises in the back of his throat as Sherlock’s mouth took him apart. In his saner moments, he hoped the neighbors weren’t hearing every wanton moan tumbling from his lips, but then sensation crested over him, and he just couldn’t be arsed to care. Sherlock seemed to take pride in reducing him to the loudest, most incoherent ravings possible.

“Love, you need to come with a warning sign.” John sighed as Sherlock crawled up the bed to collect him against his chest.

Sherlock buried his nose in John’s hair and inhaled deeply. “I’d like you to come with a sign that says ‘MINE,’ but I know that’s not right.”

“I am yours.” John smiled and ran a hand up Sherlock’s flank. He curled in to better lap his tongue over his lover’s throat and collar bones, finally able to taste the salt on his gloriously pale skin. “How shall we take care of this, hmm?” he asked, sliding a hand to cup the erection tenting Sherlock’s shorts.

“Can I take you?” Sherlock asked quietly. “I understand if you don’t feel up to it . . .”

“Oh Gods, come and fuck me hard, love.” John mouthed against his adam’s apple.

With a groan, Sherlock pulled the jar of cream off the bedside table. He slipped out of his pants, and slicked himself and John’s arse, carefully working his long fingers up into him. When John moaned and thrashed feverishly under him, arching his back off the mattress, Sherlock slid his cock inside.

‘Mine.” Sherlock whispered as John quivered, adjusting to the feel of him.

“Mine.” He chanted thrusting slowly, then building momentum to pound into him, forcing them slightly up the bed with each blow. “Mine, mine, mine.”

John bucked back meeting the onslaught as best he could. All too soon, Sherlock was stuttering cries, emptying himself and collapsing down over him. They lay together, panting, until Sherlock slipped out and rolled over, scooping John up to lie against him.

“Don’t go. Don’t ever go.” Sherlock whispered over John’s skin.

“No, love, not going anywhere.” John held him tight.

Later, after washing off, and drinking water, they lay quietly tangled together under the blankets. John lifted Sherlock’s hand to trace the long fingers with his own, holding their hands palm to palm to marvel at how much longer Sherlock’s elegant fingers were than his own.
“I notice we’re doing an excellent job of not talking about your wife.” John observed.

“Oh, John, ugh.” Sherlock whuffed into John’s shoulder. “I know. I’m sorry. I have a habit of pushing details aside that aren’t important. I know this one will become important soon enough.”

“What do you know about Princess Irene?” John asked.

“Not much I’m ashamed to admit. Mycroft gave me a report on her. I left it at the palace.” Sherlock turned his face against John’s side to burrow under his arm.

“I think it’s getting time to think about it.” John replied quietly threading his hand through Sherlock’s tangled curls. “You know it’s not her fault. She’s probably being sold like a pony at the horse show just the same as you.”

Sherlock nodded against him.

“Will she live at the palace?” John asked.

Sherlock turned his face slightly back up. “She’ll most likely be required to spend some months at the royal court each year, but otherwise she can divide her time between some country properties with an allowed visit to her homeland once a year.”

“That sounds hard.” John mused. “When does she arrive?”

“Some time in the next few weeks.” Sherlock admitted.

“That soon?” John sighed.

“She’ll be spending the summer at the castle before the wedding. I’ll have to meet with her.” A small shudder passed through the length of Sherlock’s body.

“I think we need to work at welcoming her.” John replied, stroking a hand down Sherlock’s back. “She’s not the enemy, you know.”

“That remains to be seen.” Sherlock drawled. “But I will keep your thoughts in mind.”

“I’ve seen three in a relationship go very sour if everyone involved didn’t work together.” John said shifting his weight to roll onto one shoulder. He reached up to rub the back of his neck. “Gods, I think I really pulled something this morning.”

“John this is a sham wedding for the sake of my golden noose. We will not BE in a relationship of three.”

“That’s not true love, we will be together whether you like it or not. We can make it a heaven or make it a hell depending on how we treat each other.”

Sherlock leaned back to look into John’s eyes. “John, you remain my conscience as always. Roll onto your front, and I’ll rub your shoulders.”

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Over the next fortnight, they settled in a domestic routine of sorts. One night was spent staking out a
warehouse for a widow who hired them to catch her husband’s murderer. The culprit turned out to be his business partner who feared detection of his embezzling. They caught him and his two hired grunts red-handed illegally moving goods out of the company’s storehouse. John and Sherlock left them trussed up like sheep on the warehouse's floor, and contacted the widow and the night watch to come find them on their way home. John had used some down and dirty army moves to knock out one thug, but Sherlock had been a flying wonder flipping the thief and his walking lump of muscle to the floor with graceful ease. John agreed then and there to continue the martial arts classes with Master Ang.

Beyond that, they ran some errands. Sherlock took John to his bank and had him instated as co-owner of his account as promised. John dragged Sherlock shopping and they bought some boring, but necessary things for the flat. “John I don’t care what color towels you get as long as they aren’t scratchy.” Sherlock complained.

When a shop woman got snooty with them for not looking posh enough to be in her fine furnishings establishment, Sherlock told her the store would probably be closed in six months if she didn’t manage to pay her creditors soon. After he deduced that the woman’s husband was sleeping with her sister, John had to drag Sherlock out of her sputtering face, and they simply bought an armoire at a slightly less poncy shop.

John enjoyed the tour Sherlock gave him around town. Sherlock showed him a park that had six fountains shaped like mythical beasts, a bridge that gave the most amazing view of the city, and three small bolt holes he still maintained around town as favours from past clients -- places where he kept spare clothes, money, and supplies in case he needed to disappear for a day, or leave the country entirely.

One hidey hole was a room at the top of a garment factory, one, a shed behind a school, and the other a small storeroom off a noodle shop that sold the most amazing noodle soup that John had ever tasted. They had quite the romantic evening ensconced at one of the booths in the restaurant while the owner kept bringing them more plum wine, and crispy noodles. John groped Sherlock under the table, and they ended up making heated love standing up, bringing each other off in the store room that wasn’t quite as sound-proofed as they had hoped. The kitchen staff applauded them with grins when they finally left.

Sherlock had an earth mage in to add security spells around their flat, and John had a wonderful chat with the man about his focusing methods until Sherlock got so completely jealous that he started deducing the man’s kink preferences in a loud side voice to John. John made Sherlock apologize, and dragged him over to meditate at Temple of the Small Gods, whilst he said hello to his former temple mates, leaving the mage to work in peace.

On a Tuesday, Carmina, their new maid of all work, showed up. Mrs. Hudson gave John an earful about her that morning when he stopped by the bakery to pick up some scones and currant buns.

“Thank you for giving Carmina a chance. Poor thing. She moved here from Arabonia as a house servant with a wealthy family a few years ago.” Mrs. Hudson confided leaning over the counter.

“The husband had his way with her, and when she turned up pregnant, the toffs cast her out on the street without so much as a by your leave.”

“But that’s illegal!” John bristled.

“Not for immigrants, dear.” Mrs. Hudson tutted. “She couldn’t go back to her people, they’re so strict about those things in Arabonia – said she was no member of their family now. Barbarians. She’s had trouble keeping steady work ever since. She has a daughter her neighbor watches, but she keeps losing her position when wives catch their husbands going after her. She’s quite the dish, but
good people – it’s not her fault. I knew she’d be safe with you boys.” She winked at him and handed over the bag of pastries.

“Ah, we’re happy to give her a chance.” John replied not knowing quite what else to say.

Carmina rapped at the door later that day with a basket of cleaning suppliers, and a hopeful, tense face. With large, melting brown eyes, waves of deep auburn hair caught back in a bun, and ripe breasts that sat like quivering mounds of custard against the high neckline of her homespun frock, she was a Goddess come to walk the earth. She probably could have made a burlap sack look the height of fashion. John cleared his throat and did an excellent job of calmly welcoming her through the flat, and showing her what needed to be done whilst Sherlock merely waved briefly from his "thinking pose" across the couch.

Carmina was a domestic wonder. She cleaned, tidied, got down on her knees to scrub the floor, bought food at the shops, and had a big pot of spiced bean soup simmering on the wood stove by the time she left. John could have kissed her feet for the soup alone. They agreed she would come in three half-days a week, running errands as needed.

After she left, gratefully thanking them again and again for the job, John literally attacked Sherlock pulling him to the bedroom to consume him. After he had thoroughly rogered him into the mattress, and they lay tangled, sweat-soaked hair matted to their foreheads, John looked Sherlock in the eye.

“Sherlock, I promise you, as the Gods are my witness, I will never lay a hand on that woman, but if I am home when she scrubs the floors, I will fuck you as soundly as I can when she leaves.”

“That’s . . . that’s an acceptable arrangement.” Sherlock managed from his dazed condition, sprawled over the bed.

“Was she meant to be some kind of test?” John asked him rubbing a hand over his face.

“No, John, of course not.” Sherlock smiled weakly. “Mrs. Hudson made me hire her.”

When Carmina came to work on her third day, she was in shaking, in tears. John got her a glass of water, and calmed her down while Sherlock looked on.

“Here, drink this. Just take a deep breath and tell us what’s wrong.” John patted her shoulder.

“This man in my flat building, he always bothers me. I tell him ‘no,’ so many times. Today, he was drunk, he grabbed me, he said he knew where my daughter was, and he would hurt her if I didn’t . . .” she teared up again.

Sherlock’s eyes had gone flinty. “Tell me everything about this man.”

After listening to her, Sherlock told John to stay with Carmina while he dealt with it. John stopped him with a hand to his arm outside on the stoop.

“What are going to do?” John asked him quietly.

“Make sure this man never bothers Carmina again. She’s one of us now, and no one messes with one of mine.” Sherlock bared his teeth.

“Nothing illegal.” John warned.
“No deaths, no maiming.” Sherlock promised.

“No, John. It’s better if you don’t come.” Sherlock’s eyes were ice.

“All right, love.” John nodded. With a quick, hard kiss, Sherlock was gone.

John went back in to sit with Carmina.

“You shouldn’t have to deal with people like this.” John told her. “I’m so sorry.”

“Mr. John, it gives me hope meeting men like you and Mr. Sherlock. Not everyone is bad.” Carmina came to sit back down while the water boiled. “In my country, for women, when you are with your family, or married, you are protected. If you are not, you are . . . fair game. Here, I thought it would be different, but it isn’t always so different.”

“It should be different.” John huffed. “No one should be harassed like that no matter if you are male or female.”

“I am like the Princess Irene from my country, who is to marry the Prince William from this country.”

“Oh, really?” John couldn’t help perking up instantly. “How so?”

“She was found with a man not of her family before marriage. This makes her a woman without honor and in Arabonia, no one would marry her. She is lucky to find a match in another country. Here in Brettona, you can find second chances.” She smiled a bright, hard smile.

“Well, we all deserve second chances don’t we?” John replied weakly just as the kettle whistle sounded. Carmina jumped back up, and moved through the kitchen. While she busied herself make the tea, John looked out the window and thoughtfully chewed a knuckle.

Sherlock returned to the flat a few hours later. All he would tell Carmina was that her problems were through, but John and Sherlock walked her home just the same to her flat in Little Arabonia. The lecherous neighbor moved out the next day, and everyone in her building, including her street treated her with the utmost respect after that. Some would mouth “mafioso” and cross themselves after she passed, but to her face, they were unerringly polite.

The fortnight at 221B with no word from the palace was a bubble of time, and they knew it. Sherlock left to make some rounds without John, meeting with contacts alone, but for the most part, they played house, enjoying a honeymoon of sorts. Even knowing they were waiting for the other shoe to drop, it was still a bit of a shock to wake one morning to a courier banging at the door. John accepted the scroll and handed it to Sherlock still in the bed. Sherlock worked his thumb under the seal and popped it open to read:

“Your intended has arrived. 
Your presence is required.
-M”
Sherlock took one look at the message then turned eyes gone storm grey to John. “Showtime.” He simply said dropping the scroll to the sheets.
Sherlock took them on a roundabout way behind the flat to avoid the unmarked black coach and four waiting for them on Baker Street. They climbed through a back garden, and hurried down two alleys to a taxi spot several streets over. After catching a cheap cab, Sherlock had them get out a few blocks away from the palace near the public gardens.

“Fuck Mycroft.” was all Sherlock would say by way of explanation, and John just smiled fondly over at him.

“This brings back memories.” John let out a whoosh of air looking at the Royal Library across the street.

Sherlock had stopped them to drop to one knee and rummage through his bag. He paused, looking up sharply to scan John's face. “Oh, Gods. John, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I can do to make that up to you. Tell me what I can do.” His eyes had gone wide and pale.

“Have your way with me on one of the tables in the archives after hours.” John grinned down at him.

“I like the way you think, Watson.” Sherlock quirked up one side of his mouth, reaching out to touch John’s hand.

John felt something drop into his palm when Sherlock’s hand pulled away. “What’s this, then?” He asked holding the sturdy leather tag up for inspection. It had a crown and quill embossed into it and a hole on one side for a strap.

“Royal courier pass. Dead useful thing to have.” Sherlock reached around to unhook the Gallanus pendant around his neck, threading his own pass onto the chain. “I have to get you another necklace.” Sherlock told him reaching into his bag to hand John a leather cord to hold his tag. “Just hang this around your neck. Flash it to the guards like you can’t be half arsed to show it, and they’ll let you in anywhere.”

“A nice thing to have.” John observed pulling the cord over his head.

“Come on.” Sherlock motioned to John, and they raised the hoods of their cloaks, shouldering their bags to cross the street to the archive entrance.

As promised, the guards at the doors merely glanced at their passes, and let them push their way into the building with little fuss. The musty smell of paper, and gathered history washed over John’s nose once more as they moved inside from the foyer. A librarian looked up, and left her table, her chair scraping on the floor, to come greet them.
“Good morning, can I help you?” It was that sweet woman, Molly, again.

“No need, we can find our own way.” Sherlock told her as he and John pushed their hoods back.

“Oh, Prince William, I’m so sorry I didn’t know it was you, sir.” Molly blushed hotly.

“You weren’t meant to. I’m sneaking in a back door again.” Sherlock winked at her.

Molly saw John then, and visibly started. “Oh is this . . .” she trailed off looking between them confused.

Sherlock made a grand sweep of his hand toward John. “Molly Hooper, may I have the honor of introducing to you my intended Royal Consort, Brother John Watson?”

Molly’s eyes opened wide. “Oh my, but that’s . . . wonderful.” She stammered, belatedly dropping into a curtsy toward John.

“Oh no, please don’t get formal with me.” John said. “We didn’t need it last time we met, and I’d like the keep it that way.”

“Of course, sir.” Molly said.

“Just John is fine.” John reassured her, reaching out to grasp her hand. “I hope we can be friends. I’ll definitely be back down here to look at some medical scrolls later if that’s all right.”

“Of course, sir, . . . John. You can ask for me, or any of the librarians on duty if you need help.” Molly smiled shaking his hand.

“Thank you, I appreciate that.” John smiled back at her.

“Well, this was a pleasure, but unfortunately we do need to be moving on.” Sherlock cut in. “Not that I wouldn’t rather spend the day here instead, but we do have people to see, things to endure.”

“Good bye, nice to see you again.” John told Molly.

“You too, John, your Grace.” Molly bobbed at the two of them as Sherlock nodded, and urged John toward a hallway with a hand at the small of his back. They made their way down a corridor, turned and came upon an unmarked heavy wooden door. Sherlock placed his palm over the center of it.

“Here John put your hand over mine.” Sherlock told him. John crowded in to lay his smaller hand over Sherlock’s simply enormous one. He felt a small shiver go through his palm.

“What was that?” John asked Sherlock.

“Protection spell. Only opens for members of the royal court. You should be keyed into the spell now. The door should open for you even if I’m not here.”

“Oh good. If I don’t get totally lost, I’ll be able to sneak back here, and putter around.” John told him.

“I spent half my childhood doing just that.” Sherlock looked at him. “Oh, John, I wish we could get lost in the archives today.” He pulled John against him and pressed their foreheads together.

“Courage, love. I’m coming with you, remember?” John whispered. He slipped one hand around Sherlock’s waist, and with the other under his jaw, tilting his head for a kiss. One sweet slide of lips, and Sherlock broke away to pull open the door revealing the dark staircase beyond. Sherlock
reached out and waved a hand over a panel. Instantly, a row of mage lights hanging along the wall winked on throwing puddles of light across the passage.

“I can’t get over how great that is.” John smiled at the lamps.

“Into the breach, dear friend.” Sherlock waved on, and John followed him down the stairs to the stone-paved tunnel beneath. The door closed with a solid thud behind them.

The tunnel dumped them out at a side corridor in the palace. Sherlock opened the door a crack to make sure the coast was clear, then ushered John out and down a series of servant hallways to reach his rooms as unobserved as possible. The place was a flurry of activity though, and they passed a number of servants toting burdens and hurrying along. Very few people gave them any notice. One teen-aged boy saw them and did a double take stopping to grin at Sherlock.

Sherlock clapped him on the shoulder. “Hey, Tommy. Go tell Goodson to meet me in my chambers as soon as possible, there’s a good lad.”

“Yes, sir.” The boy bobbed and scurried off in another direction.

Fairly undetected, they reached Sherlock’s rooms, and pushed in the doorway to the cavernous space of his suite.

John dropped his cloak and bag to a chair, and looked over at the bed piled high once more with dainty cushions and ruffled pillows.

“I think I’m going to have to . . . yep . . . no helping it.” John mused as he took a running leap and launched himself into the mound of pillows. Several scattered off the bed as he sank into the remaining heap. “Okay, your turn, love.” John called back rolling over to the side. Sherlock gave him a bright-eyed look, and then he too was flying through the air to land in the midst of the silly cushions.

“Tell me you used to do that as a child.” John pulled Sherlock against him to mouth at his jaw and neck.

“I stayed in the nursery with a nanny for my younger years, and then I spent more time in my grandmother’s rooms than here, and then . . . I was mostly elsewhere. I’ve really not lived here for any length of time.” Sherlock admitted.

“Huh, I guess I could see that.” John mused looking around. “This room really doesn’t feel like you at all.”

“How would a room feel like me?” Sherlock asked rolling on to one elbow to look down at him.

“A room that feels like you has a sick-up green couch with orange flowers, and books about torturers, and skeletons of sea creatures, and things piled all over the floor.” John informed him with a smile.

“Yes, that does sound much nicer.” Sherlock admitted.

Sherlock stared down into John’s eyes. Something he found there melted him. He shifted, flowing across John like a tsunami washing over the shore, seizing him, catching his mouth in a crushing kiss. John wrapped his arms and legs around Sherlock, opening his mouth to drink his saturating kisses down. He groaned deeply as Sherlock rolled fully on top of him, pressing their hardening erections into each other. Sherlock rocked them together, over and over, dragging himself across John’s groin until their breathing grew ragged and hot, and John arched his head back against the
bed. Sherlock pressed his lips to John's ear whispering dirty and low, “I want to fuck you on this bed till all you remember is how to scream my name,” and bit into his earlobe. John exploded, coming in his pants in a fiery burst as Sherlock stuttered and cried out over him.

“Well.” John said a few minutes later. He licked lips gone dry feeling utterly chagrined. “I haven’t done THAT in about a decade.”

“John.” Sherlock pressed their cheeks together then pulled back to meet his eyes. “You don’t know what it means to me that you trust me enough to let me do that.”

“Oh, love. I enjoyed it too.” John softened, smiling his Sherlock-you-are-such-a-berk-but-I-am-mad-for-you smile, and lifted a hand to run a thumb over his lover’s cheek.

“I suggest we retire to the washroom.” Sherlock sighed. "We have to change anyway, but I’d like to get out of these clothes sooner rather than later. Plus Goodson has been waiting outside for a good five minutes.”

John huffed out a laugh and let Sherlock pull him to his feet. He headed to the loo while he heard Sherlock sticking his head out into the hall to inform the valet “Goodson give us half an hour in the bath, and we’ll meet you in the dressing room.”

Sherlock shut the door to the bathroom firmly behind them. John pulled off his things while Sherlock bent down to turn on the taps for the lovely sunken marble bathtub. He added a capful of soap, and then pulled off his own clothes.

“John, join me in a wash?” Sherlock quirked a small smile and held out a hand to him. Carefully, they climbed into the bubbles, threading legs to face each other, and leaned back to slide down against the sides of the giant clam-shaped tub.

“Sherlock, I think I might marry you for this bathtub alone.”

“Good to know I’m so important to you.” Sherlock quipped.

“Oh love, you are everything to me.” John lifted Sherlock’s foot to pepper small kisses along his ankle and instep.

They took turns soaping each other up, washing their hair with a shampoo that smelled like the ocean. When they finished rinsing, they slipped back to relax, Sherlock between John’s legs, his head pillowed against his shoulder.

“So who are we meeting with today?” John asked him drawing soapy circles over his belly.

“Oh simply everyone.” Sherlock huffed. “Well everyone except Queen Norah who’s in her month of confinement with Prince Fergus, and mummy who’s still in the country. She avoids the court like the plague. We’ll probably see her in a few weeks. She’ll be here for the Mid-Summer festival. The rest of us could be out of the palace until then too if it weren’t for my accursed upcoming wedding. Well, and the birth of the new prince of course.” He sighed deeply. "You'll need to watch out for my brothers, and Sherringford’s wife, Prunella, the Arabonian delegation, and of course . . . Princess Irene will be there.”

John squeezed Sherlock briefly around the middle, he could feel him tensing, and leaned in to kiss the nape of his neck where one sweet curl hung low. Sherlock sighed and settled in more deeply against John. They let the tides of their breath calm them, matching the rising and falling of each other's chests.
A knock at the door startled them out of their reverie. “Pardon me for disturbing you gentlemen.” The valet called through the door. “I do need to have you dressed in time for the meeting with the Arabonian delegation.”

Sherlock sighed. “Out in a minute.” He called back. “All right, time to dress for battle.” He murmured to John, reaching forward to pull the plug letting the water drain away from them.

John followed Sherlock into the West Parlour where the delegation gathered. Goodson had dressed him in a remarkably sharp faun-colored suit, but Sherlock simply radiated in a deep blue ensemble with a deluge of ruffles down the front of the shirt. For some reason, Sherlock insisted on playing the dandy for the royal court when John knew he generally couldn’t stand anything fussy or itchy. The effect was overblown, but still mouth-watering. Sherlock looked like a pastry set out for display on a lace doily.

“Love, can I unwrap you later?” John had whispered into Sherlock’s ear as they left his bedroom. Sherlock’s eyes had sparked back at him, but now they were all business as the two of them pushed into the meeting room ahead of them.

So many richly dressed people milled about the room it was like walking into a flock of tropical birds. Some leaned by the fireplace while a merry mage fire crackled, others sat in high-backed padded chairs and sofas about the room.

“Ah, here he is my brother, Prince William, the man of the hour.” Mycroft swept forward with a broad smile that did not quite meet his eyes. Heads swiveled to mark their progress as people stepped forward to greet them. John’s eyes slid like a magnet drawn due north to lock on a woman standing quietly in front of the fireplace.

John was struck with the notion of seeing a reflection of Sherlock in female form. The woman by the fire was pale and lithe, with icy blue eyes that glittered in her sharply pretty face. No way to tell if her raven black hair curled as it was caught back in a series of looping braids pinned to her head, but it shined blue-black in the light like a thing alive. She wasn’t any taller than John, and yet somehow she seemed to be taller by the way she held herself. A white wool dress unadorned save for an embroidered border of ruby-red flowers at throat and hem hugged her curves to fall to the tops of her red slippers.

She moved forward, people parting around her to stand before Sherlock. She curtseyed deeply, ducking down to let the front of her dress fall open giving anyone before her a glimpse of the snowy white mounds beneath her bodice. She looked up from under long, dark lashes.

“Your Majesty.” She intoned in a voice smoky and low. It could be no other than the Princess Irene.

Sherlock held himself elegantly upright, bending to sweep into a bow that was most surely the exact degree of motion needed to greet a princess from a foreign land.

“So nice to meet you again, Princess Irene. I trust your journey was pleasant.” Sherlock drawled rising to take her hand, and sketch a kiss across the knuckle of her long white glove.

“It is the company that makes any journey pleasant, your Grace, and I had many amusing companions at my side. So yes, thank you, it was a good trip.” She replied with a glittering smile.
“How fortunate that so many of your countrymen were able to join you with their goodwill on this venture to Brettona. We of course hope to give you as warm a welcome as matches the depth of feeling with which Arabonia sadly bade you farewell.”

“Indeed, your Highness. I am nearly overwhelmed with the depth of welcome I have enjoyed thus far in your fair country.” Irene volleyed back.

“Ah, Lady Irene, surely you must start saying “our” country as it is soon to be your sovereign home as much as it is mine.” Sherlock returned.

“Yes, thank you for that kind reminder, Prince William. I look forward to becoming better acquainted with my new homeland.” Irene’s bright smile had grown a bit thin.

Great Gods. John thought. It was like watching wolves circle. What am I doing here. I am so out of my league.

As if she had read his mind, Princess Irene glided over to speak to John as soon as a knot of men had swallowed Sherlock into their buzzing midst. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, sir.” She smiled at John skewering him with her clever gaze as she extended a hand.

“How do you do, Princess Irene, I’m Brother John Watson.” John took her hand and pressed a warm kiss to the back of it.

“You see, it is so unfair that everyone knows me already, and I know so few here.” She dropped her eyes to peer back up at John from under her lashes.

“I believe we are in much the same boat. I’m new to the palace as well.” John told her.

“Ah, and what position do you hold at court? Forgive my ignorance for asking such things that anyone here would already know.”

John hesitated for a moment. This wasn’t how he had envisioned things going tonight. “I . . . am Prince William’s intended Royal Consort.” He told her. “I hope that we can get to know each other, and become friends. I realize this is a hard situation for you.”

“Ah, but you are a priest who will marry.” Irene exclaimed. “I have heard that in this country, priests and priestesses are allowed to marry. I wasn’t sure if it was true.”

“Yes, it’s all true.” John told her.

“We only have priests in my country, and they do not wed. They are said to pledge themselves to their duty to the One Father, the one true God.” Lady Irene gently tapped a finger just under her full red lips as she spoke.

“In Brettona, you will find that we worship a multiplicity of Gods. We find that there are many different paths to the truth, and each of us must walk our own way.”

“But how confusing this must be for you all!” Irene burst out in a small laugh.

“Not really.” John answered her. “But I’m sure you would be more comfortable finding those to worship with who share your faith. There are some here in Delphium who worship the One Father. Perhaps I can ask around and find a suitable temple that you might be able to visit.”

Irene narrowed her eyes slightly at John. “That is so kind of you, but surely I must work at fitting in to my new home, not bring the bags of my past with me.”
John reached out to touch Irene’s shoulder. “No one should be asked to leave everything of themselves behind simply because they have moved to a new place.”

Irene looked startled for a moment. She opened her mouth to reply, but at that moment a large gentleman in a maroon coat swept in between them. “Ah, pardon me. Princess Irene, there you are. You must come and meet this man...” he said drawing her away to another crowd in the room.

John spied Sherlock in his own crowd still being passed from person to person, and he resigned himself to going things alone for awhile. He managed to grab a small glass of sherry off the tray of a passing servant, and looked for a quiet corner to sit and drink it. He found a small, mousy-looking woman with her own glass on a settee who seemed to have already had the same idea.

“Is this seat taken?” He asked her pointing to the other half of the settee.

“Oh, no, have a seat.” She replied.

“Quite the crush isn’t it?” John remarked looking around at the swirling royalty and dignitaries.

“I’ve seen worse.” The woman shrugged.

“Forgive me for not introducing myself, I’m Brother John Watson.” John told her.

“Oh, you’re Prince William’s poof.” She said widening her eyes. “Oh, I wasn’t meant to say that out loud.” She popped a hand over her mouth.

John leaned a bit closer. The woman’s pupils were huge, and her hands were shaking slightly. Some kind of narcotic was obviously chasing its way through her system.

“And what are you called?” John asked her kindly.

“Pruney.” She answered him. “Lady Prunella.”

“Oh, you’re Prince Sherringford’s wife?” John asked.

“That’s right. Old Pruney and Scary. That’s what they say. Watch out or we’ll make you pay.” She answered in a sing-songy voice like a small child might.

Prince Sherringford, as if invoked by his name like some mythical demon, had materialized at John’s elbow.

“Prunella, dear. Are you taking on again? Having another one of your fits?” Prince Sherringford leaned into her smiling with too many teeth. She looked up at him confused, and frightened. “Come on dear, let’s have you lie down now.” He bundled her off to one of the serving women in the room with instruction to have the Lady Prunella safely sent to bed with her medicine. Once the woman was taken away, Sherringford swooped back in on John.

“Well, my feisty little priest. Intended Royal Consort now, is it? You seem to have risen much farther than I originally expected.” He peered down at John.

John stood up from the settee to avoid getting a crick in his neck talking to someone looming over him.

“Good evening, Prince Sherringford. What a pleasure to see you again. I’m curious, what’s wrong with your lady wife?”

“The Lady Prunella is not well. Her mind has not been well for some time now.” Sherringford shook
his head slightly as he spoke.

“What medication is she taking?” John asked him.

“My little priest, I thank you for your concern, but this is really none of your business. I have some of the finest healers in the land attending her.” Sherringford clipped out.

“Yes, but . . .” John started.

“But nothing. You can keep your nose where it is wanted in my brother’s crotch, and out of the affairs of your betters.” Sherringford snarled before stalking away.

“Well, I guess that’s told me.” John mumbled to himself before throwing back the rest of his sherry.

Finally, dinner was called and the whole assembly roused to migrate slowly to a dining room down the corridor. Sherlock managed to catch a moment alone with John in the chaos of the relocation. They nipped quietly into a small storage room when no one was looking. Sherlock pulled John against him instantly to breathe deeply into his hair.

“Gods, this is a nightmare.” Sherlock ground out.

“Steady, love. Surely it’s half-way through by now?” John rubbed soothing circles over Sherlock’s back.

“We are stuck in a never-ending hell where this evening goes on forever.” Sherlock whimpered.

“No, it will end. Eventually.” John told him firmly. “Now, what did you think of Irene? Most of the rest of these people will go home. She’s the one who’s staying.”

Sherlock pulled back abit. “She’s clever. She’s more interesting than I remembered from the last meeting at least.”

“Well, that’s something.” John agreed. “Try to be nice, love. I think she’s really scared. Remember what Carmina told me, that Irene was a woman without honor in her own country. It’s uncivilized, really, to think someone loses their honor if they did or didn’t have sex with someone.” John snorted. “Did you ever find out any information on what happened to Irene? I hope it wasn’t anything traumatic.”

“No, I didn’t manage to unearth anything new on Irene’s nefarious past, but it does explain why Mycroft was able to negotiate a clause for Royal Consort for us with the Arabonians so smoothly. What do I care really though?” Sherlock managed a careless shrug. “I don’t need to know the woman. I get married, duty is done, and we get out of here. Simple.”

“Sherlock.” John looked him in the eye. “Be nice to her. For all our sakes.”

“John, you are so good. Let’s sneak out to the archives now.” Sherlock rocked against him and mouthed at his ear.

“Sherlock. Behave. Come on, the end is in sight.” John kissed him on the forehead, and pushed them back out to the dining room before they were missed.

John found that this dining hall was even larger than the one he’d been in his first night at the palace. Of course, Sherlock was again at the head table with the royals, and he was stuck in a distant corner with the rest of the rabble. He could at least catch glimpses of Sherlock up at the long table looking terminally bored, huffing irritably at Irene as she all but danced around him trying to catch his
“Come on, love, play nice.” John muttered under his breath. He had hopes that the dinner might not go too badly for all concerned. At least the food should be good he thought. Then he met Lord Sebastian Wilkes. The man was obviously already drunk. He leaned into John’s face and breathed fumes all over him.

“Lord Sebastian Wilkes, Earl of Tweaksbury, at your service.” He introduced himself. "Do you like titles?" He asked, wagging his eyebrows suggestively at John.

“John Watson.” He nodded back. “Can’t say I’m overly fond of titles, no.”

Lord Sebastian looked disappointed for a moment, then leaned in and dropped his voice. “Is his jizz running down your leg?”

“I BEG your pardon?” John stared at the man in disbelief.

“You’re Sherlock’s bit of rough, aren’t you? I know he likes the saucy ones.” Sebastian winked broadly at him. He’s going to be a little occupied with the new wife for awhile though. I’d be happy to keep you company while he’s busy.”

John took a deep breath before replying. “Lord Sebastian. I’m flattered, but I think you have misread the situation. I am not a prostitute, and I am not dating. Sherlock and I are engaged.”

“Oh, that’s not going to work.” Sebastian frowned comically at him. “Got the Princess Irene there. He’ll be busy all right. I know I’m not as pretty as Sherlock, but I’ll treat you well.” He put his hand on John’s thigh and squeezed.

John almost jumped out of his chair.

John peeled the man’s hand away. He turned to look Sebastian in the eye. When he was sure he had the man’s full attention, he growled at him. “NO.”

“Oh you ARE fun.” Sebastian grinned. “Look, don’t get your pants in a twist.” He raised his hands in the air, and backed off. “Just keep me in mind. I know Prince William Sherlock is going to have to put the royal cock in service for awhile. If you get lonely, drop me a note. I maintain a house in town.” With that he pushed a card into John’s hands. John almost jumped out of his chair.

John peeled the man’s hand away. He turned to look Sebastian in the eye. When he was sure he had the man’s full attention, he growled at him. “NO.”

“Oh you ARE fun.” Sebastian grinned. “Look, don’t get your pants in a twist.” He raised his hands in the air, and backed off. “Just keep me in mind. I know Prince William Sherlock is going to have to put the royal cock in service for awhile. If you get lonely, drop me a note. I maintain a house in town.” With that he pushed a card into John’s hands. John looked up then to see that Irene had finally hooked Sherlock in. Sherlock had turned his piercing gaze to her face, and they were laughing over something together. She reached over to touch his arm. It was nothing, it was what Sherlock was supposed to be doing, but for some reason, his stomach slid sideways.

The dinner went on forever. Soups, and salads, jellies, and roast meats, seafood, and pies came out in a steady procession, but John found himself picking over it all, his appetite gone. When Lord Sebastian launched into some rambling tale about a horse show he’d gone to recently, John actually sat and listened. Irene was feeding Sherlock tidbits from her plate at that point, and John was tired of watching them.

When the meal finally drew to a close, and people were drifting to another room for drinks and gaming tables, Sherlock and John met around a corner behind a door.

“Can we get out of here now, love?” John whispered.

“John, I’m sorry. Princess Irene wants me to come back to her rooms to discuss some details to the marriage agreement – where she spends summers. I told her I would give her a few minutes. It won’t take too long. You can go back to my bedroom, and escape all this. Our public appearance has been satisfied.”
“All right.” John nodded. “Listen, who the hell is Lord Sebastian Wilkes? He tried crawling into my pants over the salad course.”

“The bastard. I’ll have him killed.” Sherlock swayed a bit on his feet, and John realized he was more than a bit drunk.

“No, it’s fine, love. I told him no, and he backed off. Who is he though?” John asked.

“That congenital idiot is my second cousin. We ran together for a few years when I was out of my mind on opiates. He’s a bleeding imbecile. Let me know if he bothers you anymore.” Sherlock narrowed his eyes dangerously.

“Don’t worry. I can handle myself.” John smiled at him and pushed the curls back off Sherlock’s forehead. “You’ll be along soon?”

“As soon as I can.” Sherlock ducked down to press a kiss to John’s lips. “Warm up the bed and I’ll be there before you know it.”

Sherlock grabbed one of the servants to show John back to his rooms. It was still a rat warren as far as John could tell, and he was glad of the native guide. John used the loo, washed up, heaved all the stupid cushions off the bed seeing how far he could chuck them, then settled under the covers to wait. At some point he turned off the lights, and must have fallen asleep waiting for his love to return.

John woke to Sherlock’s sleeping form heavy on the bed next to him. By the morning light seeping in under the window dressings, he could just make out Sherlock sprawled on his belly, and the mess of newly-raised welts striping his back.
John shocked himself with the angry, visceral wave that crashed through him. The marks on Sherlock weren’t anything he hadn’t seen before. Hell, John had spanked marks onto his arse himself a few weeks ago. Yet the “mine” that Sherlock had pumped into John went both ways, and his heart growled at the trespass. John wanted to go choke the Arabonian bitch with his bare hands for leaving Sherlock’s back like that. He took deep breaths, and ran his hands over his face slowing the surge of his blood to a more reasonable rate.

When John had sufficiently calmed, he nudged Sherlock’s shoulder. "Hey, you." The man slept on. John nudged him harder calling “Sherlock!” near his ear. No response. Finally, John gave him a full shake. A groan escaped Sherlock’s lips, but he remained deeply under. If the woman had given him drugs . . .

John was out of the bed like a shot rummaging through the dressing room to the corner that held his things. He pulled on the first reasonable clothes he could find, and charged out of the room into the hallway. He stopped the first servant he ran into.

“Pardon me, miss, I’m looking for Princess Irene’s rooms?” John smiled tightly at a young woman carrying laundry.

“Of course, sir.” The woman looked a little frightened as she bobbed, and hurried to show him the way. She took him down the hallway, two twists, and they were there at some white double doors. The woman waved at the entrance, “This is it, sir.” She told him before bobbing again, and scurrying away.

John knocked and waited. A bolt was drawn and a pretty ginger-haired woman stuck her head out. “Yes?” she asked raising her eyebrows at seeing John there.

“I need to see the Princess Irene.” John ground out.

“I’m afraid the Princess is not ready to receive callers . . .” the woman started when John cut over her.

“Oh, she’ll bloody well see me.” John nearly growled. “Shove over if you don’t want to be knocked out of the way.”

“I don’t . . .” the woman frowned, but was interrupted by a voice calling from behind her.

“It’s all right, Kate. Let the man in.”

The woman quirked an eyebrow, but stepped back, swinging the door open to allow John to pass.
John brushed by her and entered a room flooded with the morning light. Irene sat curled in a dressing gown before a table with breakfast set for two across its top. Her dark hair was pulled into a long single braid that swept the length of her back. Escaped tendrils hanging about her face made her look much softer than she had the night before.

“What the hell, Irene?” John barked out in lieu of a greeting.

“Kate, dear, please leave us for a few minutes.” Irene turned to the servant hovering nearby.

“Are you sure?” the red-haired woman asked.

At Irene’s nod, she quietly slipped into a side room, pulling the door closed behind her.

“Brother John, have you broken your fast? Please, sit, join me.” Irene smiled up at John.

“What did you give him?” John asked, his eyes boring holes into hers.

“What do you mean?” Irene asked lightly in return.

“What drugs did you give Sher . . . Prince William last night?”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.” Irene looked guilelessly up at him.

“The man is nearly comatose this morning. I will only ask you one more time, what the hell did you give him last night?”

“I only gave him a pain killer before he left. It is very mild, children take it.” Irene looked a little confused.

“Thank the Gods.” John sank into the chair opposite her, running his hands over his face. “The man is a recovering junkie. Did you know that?” John looked sharply back up at her.

“Junkie?” She puzzled.

“Drugs addict.” John barked out. “Did you talk about anything last night before you started whipping his arse?”

“I’ll admit we didn’t get much talking done last night.” Irene smiled abit.

“Brilliant.” John huffed.

“Brother John, have some tea.” Irene reached over to fill a cup from the teapot, and set it before him. “Lemon, sugar?”

“No, plain is fine.” John told her, taking the cup and swallowing a mouthful down. “Listen, Irene. Whatever the two of you want to do between yourselves is your business. Play your little games, mark each other up, have a ball. I just don’t want you to really hurt him. You’ll have me to answer to if you do.” John turned his gaze to drill into hers.

“You really care for him, don’t you?” Irene breathed out.

“Oh, I bloody well care for him.” John sputtered. “Why would I be marrying him if I didn’t care for him . . .” John trailed off as realization washed over him. “Oh, I’m so sorry, that was thoughtless of me.” John raked a hand through his hair.

“John, let me tell you a story.” Irene leaned back in her chair cradling her cup between her hands.
“In Arabonia, a woman is owned by her father until a man claims her as his wife. She can own no property of her own. Her public voice is that of her menfolk’s. If she is treated well, she is lucky, if she is not treated well, it is somehow her own fault.” Irene paused to drink from her cup.

“My mother died when I was but a girl, leaving me and my two sisters to fend for ourselves in a house of men. My father hired a tutor to teach me the ways of being a woman. She taught me . . . much more than my father ever bargained on, and I was not one to tell him differently.” Irene curved up one side of her mouth, and took another sip of her tea.

“My tutor taught me many secrets of the bedroom — ways that a woman can find power over men who would seek to control her. I learned of a certain fire that sings in the blood from things that might otherwise harm us. I could tell that Prince William shares that fire when I met him. You, not so much.” Irene tilted her head to study John. “I must make my way through the world using the power that I have at hand.”

“Ah, and you were not able to make your way in Arabonia after using these talents, so Brettona is your next best chance?” John asked her.

“I see that the rumors have preceded me.” Irene quirked up an eyebrow. “Such powerful things are rumors. They can ruin a life with no more than a whisper from someone’s lips.” Irene set her cup onto the table and leaned back. “Tales that came to my father’s ears were both right and wrong. It is the way of my people that a woman cannot marry unless she is a virgin. Would it surprise you to know that I have never been penetrated by a man? Yet what I have shared with a few goes far beyond something as simple as rutting. The evidence against me was enough to brand me a whore. I am lucky, Brother John, for this chance to marry a prince of Brettona. I am blessed beyond all measure.” A sheen of tears glazed the eyes she raised to John.

John reached over to lay his hand over hers on the table. “Princess Irene. It isn’t right that you should be denied the rights to love as you will, and to marry as you will. I am sorry. Prince William is a fair man. He does not wish you any harm. He may not always be aware of . . . things. You must make your needs and wishes plainly known to him. But if you do not seek to harm him, he will do everything in his power to give you your own life to live as you see fit.”

Irene nodded, and withdrew her hand to dash at her eyes. “You love him.” She mused.

“I do, with all my heart.” John admitted.

“And yet, you would let him lie with another with no thoughts to yourself?” Irene raised her eyebrows as she faced John.

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll have thoughts.” John laughed. “Princess Irene, as you have no doubt heard, in Brettona, we are free to love and marry more than one partner. We don’t own the ones we love, but we do deeply honor the place they have in our lives. You and I will share much. I would like it if we could be friends.”

“That would please me as well.” Irene said thoughtfully. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” John nodded back to her. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to go check on his Royal Arseness and make sure he hasn’t swallowed his tongue.”

Irene burbled out a laugh, and looked surprised at herself.

“Good Day, Princess Irene.” John rose, and bowed to her.

“Good Day, Brother John.” Irene nodded thoughtfully back.
John was pleased to find his way back to their rooms without getting lost or asking for directions. The room was still shrouded in darkness, and Sherlock still passed out across the mattress when he returned. John pulled a few curtains away from the windows to let in some light before crawling up to sit next to the still form on the bed. He lay a hand to the side of Sherlock’s throat, happy to feel that his pulse and breathing were regular. Sherlock roused finally at John’s touch, blinking open his eyes. He rolled onto his side to face John, wincing noticeably as he did so.

“Well, aren’t you a pretty picture, my fine sir.” John mused evenly.

“John.” Sherlock’s voice sounded like it scraped over broken glass to reach John’s ears. Sherlock squeezed his eyes closed, and drew in a shaky breath.

“Love, it’s all right. What’s wrong?” John leaned in to place a hand over his head.

“I’m sorry, John.” Sherlock breathed. “I didn’t mean to . . . I meant to push her, see what made her tick, I didn’t mean to . . .”

“What . . . get carried away? Connect with another person? Have a good time? I can’t say I’m happy to see skin taken off your back, but it looks like you enjoyed yourself. Did you have a safeword?” John asked him.

Sherlock opened eyes gone hollow. “I thought I was done with this. The drugs, the pain, it was all wrapped together, I thought I put it behind me. I thought . . .” Sherlock squeezed his eyes closed again and shuddered.

“All right, you’re scaring me now.” John slid in next to him. “Give me your hands. Let’s do a healing on you.” John took Sherlock’s hands in between his palms, closed his eyes, and hummed in the back of his throat. He gathered up a ball of energy and slid it carefully into his love. John was relieved to feel Sherlock accept it, build it inside him and return to him bigger and stronger. When John carefully fed the enhanced healing through Sherlock, he directed it to the skin and muscles of his backside, though he knew his body would absorb the energy where it needed it most. After a few moments, the man shuddered, and finally relaxed.

“Oh Gods, that’s better.” Sherlock rolled his shoulders and stretched across the bed, until a realization rolled over him, and he groaned. “Ugh, I don’t deserve to feel better.” He pulled a pillow over his face.

“Why don’t you deserve to feel better?” John asked pulling the pillow away. He reached out to cup a hand over Sherlock’s check. “Love, it’s me. Talk to me.”

Sherlock refused to meet John’s eye. He rolled miserably against him, and tucked his head into his shoulder. John ran his hand up and down Sherlock’s smooth back relieved to feel it whole again.

“John, I used to do such terrible things with myself in the bad years. It was a game – how far can I walk on the edge, and not fall? It was such a thrill, would tonight be the night I let go? I would chase the pain, the dark bliss that blotted everything else out. There were so many people willing to play that game with me. I don’t want to do that anymore, I don’t want to BE that anymore. Irene brought out her toys, and I was right back there again, lost, begging on my knees for another lash. It makes
me sick.” Another small tremor shook through Sherlock’s body.

“Sherlock, if we say all acts of love and pleasure are rituals of the Great Mother then we mean all acts, not just the pretty ones. You can’t help what calls to you. I agree though, I don’t want you doing anything reckless anymore. You aren’t allowed to be careless with yourself, love. You just . . . you can’t. There are ways to keep limits.”

“I don’t know how.” Sherlock spoke into John’s chest. “It just swallows me whole. It scares me.”

“Did Irene notice this last night? It seems to me she’s had a little bit of experience with this sort of thing.”

“It was all about the game last night.” Sherlock tensed. “It was all about who could beat who. I guess you saw who lost.”

“Yes, I guess I did. I went to see Irene this morning. I see two people who are losing. I think you need to stop playing each other, and TALK to each other.”

“You saw Irene?” Sherlock rolled back over to look up at John.

“I did. You were lying here in a coma. I thought she had drugged you. I wanted to know what I was dealing with. You do realize that according to Arabonian law, you will own Irene? She would be your property.”

Sherlock huffed. “Well, she won’t be living in that barbarian place anymore. We have laws here, and slavery is illegal.”

“I know that, but does she know that?” John asked him. “Show Irene that she has rights. Deed her some property to call her own. If you can meet each other as equals, you don’t need to make the bedroom a battleground. I don’t think I could hurt you like that, but I understand it. If you have desires for pleasure-pain, I want you to meet your needs . . . safely.”

“John, it doesn’t always have to be hard like that for me.”

“I know love. Come here.” John undressed them both, then returned to gather Sherlock against him. He kissed him as tenderly as he knew how. He mapped his face with sweet kisses, turning him over to kiss the curves of his back from nape to thigh, taking the formlessness of Sherlock and making the edges solid again under the press of his lips. He wrapped Sherlock up against him as tightly as he could letting their breath settle and synch.

When someone knocked at the door, John called “GO AWAY!” When they kept knocking, he got up stark naked and threw open the door. “WHAT?” He accepted the covered tray from the shocked young woman standing there, and told her politely, “Thank you. Please see that Prince William is not disturbed today.” shutting the door firmly in her face. John found a place to set the tray down then searched the door before finally finding a bolt near the top that he locked home. He crawled back into the bed and tucked Sherlock up against him, fitting his mop of curls under his chin. “Well, love, should we sneak out and go back to Baker Street today, or maybe just run away? I fancy a trip to the country about now.”

Sherlock let a whuff out against his chest. “That sounds lovely. But I promised Mycroft I’d attend a trade meeting with the Arabonians tonight. After that, we’re free for awhile. We could take a holiday somewhere. I’d like to show you Rosewood Manor if you’d like.”

“I’d love that.” John smiled into his hair “But I’d love going anywhere as long as it’s with you.” After a long while, John unwound himself from Sherlock, and got up to fetch the food tray. They ate
cold toast and eggs with their fingers sitting naked, cross-legged on the bed. When John said, “Now this feels more like home.” and Sherlock laughed, John relaxed a tension he didn’t realize he was holding.

When they finished eating, John pulled them to the washroom, and filled the giant tub almost to the brim with hot water and bubbles. They slipped in, spending over a solid hour draped across each other adding hot water when needed. Sherlock lay back between John’s thighs, his head on his favourite spot on his shoulder. John leaned down to kiss along his hair line. “You are delicious.” John told him. “I will never get enough of you.”

“Not even when I’m seventy and wrinkled up?” Sherlock asked him.

“Well, I’ll be seventy-two then, and I’ll just chase you around with my cane, because you will still be the hottest piece of arse I know.” Sherlock rumbled a chuckle against him and John thought it was the best sound he knew.

“John?” Sherlock ventured at length running a finger down John’s thigh. “How many men did you have sex with in the army?”

“To be honest, love, I kind of lost count. You weren’t the only one who had some bad years.” John admitted.


“Cor, under a hundred. I wasn’t THAT busy.” John huffed.

Sherlock pulled the plug to let the water drain out from the tub. “I want to know how many mouths and cocks I need to make you forget.” A devilish gleam danced in his eyes as he slipped around in John’s arms to face him.

“Did you fuck them fast?” He asked resting a hand over John’s cock bobbing in the warm water.

“Sometimes.” John closed his eyes and slid further down the side of the tub.

Sherlock closed his hand around the base of John’s rapidly hardening shaft and squeezed gently. As the water receded, John’s belly and penis rose out of the water, gradually revealed. Sherlock reached over for a bottle of oil by the tub. Coating his hands with it, he leaned in to glide his slick palms over John’s chest and belly down to his thighs.

“Were you quiet while they sucked you off, so no one would hear?” Sherlock slid a hand back over John’s chest, catching a nipple between his fingers as he stroked.

“Yes.” John sucked in a breath.

Sherlock moved his hand farther down to rub circles over John’s belly, grazing his erection with each pass. A small moan escaped John’s lips.

“I can just see you, up against a wall, some bloke on his knees between your legs.” Sherlock moved in until his lips hovered over John’s cock, his hands pressing near the base.

“He’s got your hard-on down his throat, bringing you off, dirty and fast.” Sherlock was so close now, John could feel the warmth of his breath ghosting over him.

“You bite your lips to keep from crying out when you fall apart. You were so careful to stay silent, weren’t you? As you came in his mouth?” Sherlock’s lips just brushed over John’s erection.
“Yes.” John whispered, arching his back.

“Good. I want you to make as much noise as possible for me as I suck you off.” Sherlock finally slid the head of John’s penis into his waiting mouth.

Sherlock was slow, meticulous. He laved John’s frenulum with the flat of his tongue, ran his mouth up and down the shaft and gently sucked his balls before returning to swallow him down. With agonizing slowness, he slid his mouth down John’s penis, pressing the head against his palate with his tongue on each pull back. He cradled the base with one hand, while the other stroked lazy circles over John’s chest and belly . . . so very slowly. John trembled under him. He was not quiet in the least.

“OH MY GODS, Sher . . . Sher . . . aaaah, . . . please, . . . aaaah, GODS . . . UUUUUUUnnnh.”

John came with a deep, guttural moan that shook him to his toes. Sherlock held him gently in his mouth until the aftershocks faded away, then pulled off to wipe his mouth. He smirked up at John like a cat that had gotten the cream, which in a way he had.

“Thank you, love . . . that was amazing. I think I’ll keep you.” John smiled down at him threading a hand through his tumbled wet curls.

They ran more water into the tub. Sherlock sat back between John’s knees, and John poured oil on his hands to rub over Sherlock’s shoulders and back. When he moved his hands around to stroke Sherlock’s belly and made to reach lower, Sherlock caught his wrist.

“Not now, my love.” Sherlock said shaking his head.

“All right.” John squeezed him around the middle. He contented himself with working his hands over Sherlock’s shoulders, digging thumbs in at the back of his neck until his lover nearly purred. When everyone was feeling waterlogged and pruney, they finally let the water go for good and dragged themselves out of the tub.

They grabbed towels to wrap up in, and made their way to sprawl back across the bed.

“If only the Hudsons’ bakery were next door, we’d be in heaven.” John sighed, reaching out to run his thumb over one of Sherlock’s elegant cheekbones. “I’m starving.”

“Well, amazingly enough, food can be found in the palace if you know where to look.” Sherlock quirked a small smile at him. “Come on, it’s time I gave you a proper tour of the place.”

John put the things back on he’d tossed over the floor, and Sherlock found simple clothes in the back of his dressing room.

Ready to go, they peered outside, and finding the hallway empty, slipped out, pulling the door closed behind them.

Sherlock took John on a thorough insiders’ tour of the palace starting near the kitchens. He showed him back staircases, servant hallways, and little-used routes, making John memorize what twist led where. They only passed a few servants who paid them little mind. Sherlock showed John the small dining room that the royal family ate in when they took meals together, then led him down steps to a corridor that dumped them out into a servants’ dining room where covered dishes lay spread on a sideboard.

“The kitchen puts out full meals twice a day for the servants, but otherwise, they leave a buffet out for guards and those who eat at odd hours.” Sherlock explained. John lifted covers to find sliced bread, cheese, pickles, cold chicken, and spiced buns. They poured lemonade from a jug into cups, and bundled food into napkins to escape with their spoils. The only staff they encountered was a
young footman coming into the room as they were leaving. Sherlock ducked his head, reaching up to rub at his brow as they passed.

“Oi, how’s it hangin’, mate?” Sherlock greeted him, nodding genially as they passed the man.

“All right.” The footman nodded back a little confused.

Sherlock pushed them through a door into a side passage, and they quickly made their way up to a small sunroom filled with plants to eat their meal on some benches there.

How do you manage not to get recognized everywhere you go? John asked him biting into a chicken leg.

“Speed, misdirection, and being out of context.” Sherlock shrugged. People generally see what they expect to see. Of course some of the servants have been here long enough to actually know me, but a number of them don’t really know the royal court by sight. It’s the clothes someone’s wearing that signal ‘drop and curtsy’ to them.”

They finished their food and continued on the tour. Sherlock showed John how to get back to the Grotto. The panel on the front door was slid to “Don’t Enter” red, so they passed it by. Otherwise John would have been tempted to visit again. “Another time.” Sherlock promised him. They passed through a gym, and a small neglected ballroom, before finally fetching up at a bright yellow door that Sherlock said led to the nursery.

“Is Prince Fergus up here?” John asked.

“He might be.” Sherlock said thoughtfully. “Do you want to see him?”

“I’d love to. Don’t you?” John asked back.

“Ugh, babies.” Sherlock gave a mock shudder. “There’s really hardly anything interesting about the tadpoles until they can walk and talk.”

“Oh come on, if we aren’t in the way, I’d love to meet him.” John nudged him.

Sherlock pushed open the door and they entered a cheerful, airy room. John glanced around to see thick rugs on the floor, a rocking chair, shelves filled with books and toys, and a wooden rocking horse with what looked like a real horsehair to one side.

“That’s lovely. Did you ride that as a child?” John pointed to it.

“I must have, though I don’t remember.” Sherlock told him.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” A woman called from a side room.

“It’s only me Sadie.” Sherlock called back.

“Ach, Prince William.” A heavyset woman bustled into the room smiling. “It’s been too long. Give us a hug, ducks!” The woman enveloped Sherlock in a squeeze that left him a bit breathless. “And who might this fine fellow be?” She turned to look John up and down.

“This is my intended, my fiancé, Brother John Watson.” Sherlock swept his hand back proudly to rest on John’s lower back.

“Oh, it’s as I heard. He is a looker.” The woman winked at John.
“Please to meet . . .” John stuck out his hand, but the woman pulled him in for another bear hug, whooshing the air out of his lungs.

“Oh, we won’t be standing on formalities in the nursery.” She patted his back once as she let him go. “Congratulations to the both of you.”

“Thank you Sadie. “Is my nephew here . . .” Sherlock trailed off, looking back toward the bedroom

“Aye, the wee bairn is with the wet nurse now. Let me see if he’s ready for company.” She popped back in to the side room to return a few minutes later with a blanket in her arms, and a fuzzy head peeking out of it. Sadie tilted him a bit and they could see the bright grey-blue eyes in a sweet, round little face.

“Oh, here’s a looker.” John smiled. “What a handsome lad.” He glanced over at Sherlock. The man was transfixed – his eyes locked onto the baby, his face melting into a soft smile.

“Here, Your Grace, why don’t you hold him.” Sadie carefully transferred the lump to Sherlock’s arms. Sherlock moved a hand to cradle the back of his head, scooping up his body with the other.

“Well, hello Prince Fergus Rupert Barnaby Lachlan Holmes Carrington. Aren’t you a fine young man? You don't look too much like your father, so you're lucky there.” Sherlock crooned as he lifted the boy up to his shoulder.

Fergus burped, and dribbled down Sherlock’s shirt. “Oh dear, I believe the heir to the throne of Brettona has just sicked up on me. Sadie, do get me a towel, please.”

After a towel was fetched, Sherlock took the baby on a tour of the room, keeping a burbling patter going as he went. “Have you noticed this great ugly painting of a demented cow yet, Fergus? It used to give me nightmares. I can’t image why they still have it hanging here.”

Oh, look at him with the babe.” The nursemaid confided to John, holding a hand to her bosom as they watched Sherlock circle the room with Fergus. “He was so good with the other one, Princess Kaitlin, too. He used to come visit her all the time. It was such a tragedy when she passed in the Fever Plague, so sad that was. Like to break all our hearts.”

John watched Sherlock lean down to drop a kiss on the baby’s forehead. It hit him in the gut that Sherlock would not only make a good father, he would most likely soon be a father. Having children with the Princess Irene was of course part of the point of a royal wedding after all. Knowing it though, and seeing Sherlock holding a real baby in his arms, was a world of difference. It washed over John that Sherlock would one day be a father, and he most likely would not.

Sherlock looped back their way. He glanced at John’s face and frowned at what he saw. He carried Fergus straight over to John’s arms then. “Here, it’s your turn to hold the baby.” He said. To the baby he simply said. “Fergus, meet your Uncle John.”

John carefully took the tiny life into his arms. He had attended a birth three times in his days as an apprentice healer. It just wasn’t something that got old— watching a new person come into the world. Amidst the mess and the pain, it was an absolute miracle.

“Hello, my fine sir. How are we doing today?” John sing-songed to the small boy.

Fergus yawned in reply, and it stretched his mouth into a perfect oval. Something shifted in John’s chest. It struck him that even if he never had natural children of his own, any child of Sherlock's would be a child of his heart, and he would surely love it fiercely. John brought the baby against his chest and breathed in the smell of his head. It was sweet and fresh like a new life begun. What a
heavy responsibility such a tiny person was.

“Oh, he’s perfect.” John said meeting Sherlock’s eyes gone luminous. Sherlock smiled at him, as the
door behind them opened. Their heads swiveled toward the noise as a woman pushed loudly into the
room.

“What is the meaning of this? Who is this man holding my son?”

The Queen of Brettona was a thin woman, with pale hair pulled tightly back. Her frame had
obviously grown a bit softer around the edges from motherhood, but the eyes that flashed from her
face were brittle and sharp.

“Ah, Norah, lovely to see you again.” Sherlock faux smiled at her. “Please meet my fiancé, Brother
John Watson.”

“Did you even wash before you picked him up?” she demanded. John opened his mouth to reply
when the queen charged over and scooped the baby out of his arms.

“Norah, really. John is a healer, and a priest. He is qualified to see a person both into and out of this
world. As for washing, we’ve both had a two-hour bath today. We’re as clean as a person can get.”
Sherlock retorted.

The queen snorted as she jostled the baby closer. “Spare me the details of your sex life, William.”

Unfortunately, her quick movement startled Fergus, and he launched into a howl. “See what you’ve
done now! You’ve made him cry.” Norah snapped angrily at them over the high-pitched wail.

“Sadie, attend me, and send these clowns away.” The queen tossed over her shoulder heading into
the bedroom with the baby, slamming the door behind her.

“Ah.” John finished, closing his mouth.

“Now, now. Women can get a little funny when they’ve just had a bairn.” Sadie reached out to pat
John’s arm. “Don’t you take any mind to it. You’d best leave now though, and not upset her
anymore when she’s all riled up. It’ll pass soon enough. John, it was GOOD to meet you.”

“Thank you.” John told her. “It was lovely to meet you as well.”

“Prince William, don’t you be a stranger around here.” Sadie reached out to pat him too.

“Thank you, Sadie. And I do believe that is our cue to leave. John?” Sherlock turned and swept over
to the door, holding it open for John to pass before him. “Farewell sweet Sadie, yours is not an easy
lot, and you are a perfect angel for what you do.”

“Ah go on with you.” The woman shooed them out, but smiled as she did so.

They made their way back to Sherlock’s bedroom a bit more quieter, digesting the latest
confrontation with Sherlock’s family. When they reached the turn to his bedroom, he stopped John
with a hand to his elbow. “Wait John, there’s something else I need to show you.” They took a
different turn down the corridor to reach a pale cream door that Sherlock opened to lead them inside.
The room within was a corner space with wonderful warm honey walls and windows to catch both morning and afternoon light. It was of a much more personable size than John had seen yet at the palace. This front room was obviously a sitting room with several comfy seats in a group, and a table and chairs against a far wall. Several other doors led to adjoining rooms.

“Have a look around.” Sherlock told him, sweeping a hand out.

“This is lovely.” John said, poking his head in to glance at the other rooms. The bedroom was a pale green with a wrought-iron bed, and the washroom had an sunken oval tub nearly as big as the one in Sherlock’s room. Another door opened to a library lined with books, and padded seats under the window. John whistled. “Nice. Whose rooms are these?” He asked coming back to the main sitting room.

“They’re yours.” Sherlock admitted grudgingly.

“MY rooms? You’re kicking me out already?” John teased him.

“I knew it would seem like that, curse Mycroft.” Sherlock frowned.

“Hang on, what about Mycroft?” John asked rubbing his forehead.

“He made me promise to show you your rooms today. Royal consorts get their own place at the palace, along with a yearly annuity. It’s part of the marriage contract.” Sherlock moved to fling himself onto a sofa before the empty fireplace. “Mycroft assured me it was necessary.” Sherlock said looking down at his hands. “John, you may need times away from me, a place to call your own to retreat to.”

“Did Mycroft say that too?” John asked coming to sit next to Sherlock on the couch.

Sherlock nodded miserably.

“I suppose that might eventually be true, but at the moment, the only place I want to be is next to you.” John reached out to catch Sherlock’s hand in his. “I like these rooms though, they’re manageable, cozy.”

Sherlock nodded, glancing around the room. “I’ve always like them too. This used to be my grandmother’s suite. No one’s used it in a number of years.

“Let’s move in here then.” John told him. “This place feels much more homey than that cavern assigned to you, and . . .” John stood, and walked over to inspect the outer door, “Yes, it has a very nice lock on the door.”

“As an added bonus, the servants aren’t used to coming down this way.” Sherlock added quirking up an eyebrow. “We might shake them for awhile staying here. I’ll have to keep most of my clothes in the other room though. The dressing room here isn’t half the size of mine.”

“That’s quite all right with me.” John nodded. “Some of those outfits you have are frightening enough to induce nightmares.”

“I beg your pardon. I only employ the latest fashions in my attire.”

“The pink thing with the gold braid? The green horror with the stripes? The GOLD thingie?” John shuddered extravagantly gesturing at his front to indicate any manner of ruffles and bows.

“They’re all hideous.” Sherlock conceded. “I only use them for camouflage generally . . . and to piss
off Mycroft. He always knows what I’m doing though. It takes half the fun out of it.”

“So, should we go check out the bed? See if it’s comfortable?” John asked him. “Just for a kip, love. I’m knackered all of a sudden.”

“Please.” Sherlock sighed as John pulled him to standing and led him to the bed where they pulled back the new sheets and slipped inside. Rolling together like magnets drawn in to each, they cocooned in the warmth, soon drifting off into a deep sleep.
John woke to Sherlock kissing his fingers. Dusk darkened the room where they lay entwined. “Oh, hello, love.” John smiled down at him. “It’s always such a wonder to wake, and find you still here.”

“John you are nothing short of a miracle in my life.” Sherlock looked up at him with eyes wide like the sky. “I keep feeling like I’m about to do something utterly terrible to chase you away.”

“Nope.” John said winding his fingers into Sherlock’s hair to stroke his scalp. “You aren’t getting rid of me that easily.”

Sherlock moved up to bury his face against John’s neck and inhale. “I love you.” He whispered.

“I love you too.” John turned, and caught Sherlock’s lips with his own in a dance of breath and tongue.

“So what’s the schedule for tonight?” John asked many minutes later when they finally pulled apart.

Sherlock sighed, and rolled back to prop his head up on a bent arm. “I have to meet with the Arabonians in a special dinner for key people. I can’t have you there, more’s the pity. There’s a larger dinner for the rest of the nobles gathered. You’re free to join that or you could have a tray brought to your rooms. There’s a bell pull by the door to call a servant should you want to. I generally prefer not to.”

“Hmm, I don’t think I fancy eating alone tonight. I suppose I’ll go brave the crowd downstairs.”

“It’s in the big dining room in the west wing that we met in last night.” Sherlock told him. Do you remember how to get there?”

“I think so. I’m finally starting to crack the code on the maze of this place.”

“Good.” Sherlock nodded. “I want you to know how to get around here. I still need to show you two other ways of getting in and out of the palace undetected.”
“All right Mr. Cloak and Dagger.” John smiled at him running a finger through his fringe. “So, will you be meeting again with Irene tonight?” he asked in a light tone that wasn’t really light at all.

“No. I think I need to wait a few days before I try that again. We have weeks until the wedding. Some things will keep. Unfortunately, this trade talk will not. It might be late when I get back, but I will join you as soon as I can. This room?” Sherlock asked.

“Yes, I think this bed passes the comfy test. We can definitely stay in this room.” John agreed.

“John, I’m sorry, when you touched me earlier, I needed some time . . .” Sherlock trailed off, looking down at the mattress.

“It’s fine, Sherlock. Really, it’s all fine. You can have all the time . . .”

“John, take me in your mouth.” Sherlock turned his gaze gone molten up to lock eyes with John.

“Of course, love.” John breathed. He rolled up onto his side, and softly kissed Sherlock's mouth. Pushing Sherlock onto his back, John climbed between his thighs. He ran fingers down to unbutton his trousers, feeling the tremble across Sherlock’s skin as he bent to kiss his way across his belly, down to the sweet hardness awaiting his touch.

John was regretting the hubris of thinking he could find the west dining hall by himself on his third wrong turn. When he finally rounded a corner to see the familiar double doors ahead, he sighed with relief and joined the small queue to enter the room. He knew Sherlock wouldn’t be there, but still his eyes fell on the head table searching for his face anyway. Prince Sherringford, his middle brother, seemed to be the only one of the royal family holding court there tonight – along with Princess Irene, and several attractive well-dressed women all simpering in Prince Sherringford’s direction. John tried to nod at Irene, but she sat with her eyes glued to the table, obviously uncomfortable with the harem reaching around her to fawn over Sherringford.

John sighed, and glanced around the crowded space looking for an open seat at the tables. He was dismayed to spot Lord Sebastian Wilkes in the mob. John debated pretending he hadn’t seen him, but the man had obviously spotted him, and was making his way over. With a sigh, John pasted a pleasant expression on his face that faltered as Sebastian drew near, and John could see the bruises about the man’s left eye and throat.

“Ah Brother John Watson, just the man I wanted to see.” Sebastian nodded. “I must apologize. I believe I was a bit juiced up last night, said some things I shouldn’t have. I wanted to beg your pardon, and offer my most sincere regrets.”

“Think nothing of it.” John nodded. “Just wondering, by any chance did Prince William talk to you last night?”

Sebastian went a bit pale. “He, uh, sent a message last night, delivered by one of his . . . larger footmen.” The man twitched slightly, and then extended a hand to John. “No hard feelings, sir?”

“No, of course not, Lord Sebastian.” John reached out and shook his hand.

“Ah very good. Well, I must dash. Things to do, people to see. Take care, Brother Watson.” With a
final nod, the man made his way to the door, and disappeared into the corridor. John rubbed his forehead with a thumb, and moved on to find a place to sit for dinner. When he spied a group of pleasant-looking locals, (he didn’t fancy having foreign tongues he couldn’t follow spoken around him all night) he stopped and bowed. “Pardon me, is this seat taken?”

“No at all, please join us.” A man in a high-necked collar waved congenially at the chair in question. “Lord Fitzwater.” The man introduced himself with a nod, and stuck out his hand.

“Brother John Watson.” John shook his hand, and nodded back with a smile. Some eyebrows shot up at this information, but the man plodded on introducing everyone at the table.

“May I present my wife, Lady Fitzwater, and our dear friends, Lord and Lady Smelton, and this reprobate is Mr. Dashwell. John nodded and shook hands as needed as the introductions were completed, and slid into the chair between Lord Fitzwater and Dashwell.

“Brother Watson,” Lady Fitzwater leaned in, “forgive my forwardness, but is it true, you are intended as Prince William’s Royal Consort?” She was obviously more interested in getting the information from John than noticing her husband who was staring daggers at her.

“Well, it isn’t official yet.” John cleared his throat. “The Royal Wedding with Princess Irene will take precedence, but yes, I am engaged to Prince William as his Consort.”

The women at the table erupted into giggles. “Oh a love match, how delightful.” Lady Smelton reached over to pat John’s arm. “You’ll be setting examples among the beau monde with this you know. Threesomes and love matches will be all the rage after your wedding. You wait and see.”

John smiled weakly at the women, disliking being the focus of everyone at the table. When Lady Fitzwater remarked that an Arabonian Royal Bride would surely make Arabonian fashion quite the rage as well, and talk galloped off in that direction, John was grateful to be out of the spotlight. He relaxed when the servant brought the first course of soup, and an excellent white wine.

“They mean well,” Dashwell leaned in to speak quietly to John as the others chattered on, “but they can be gooses with feathers between their ears.” He gestured out to the room with an open hand. “It’s quite a jump into deep water coming upon the Royal Court your first time, isn’t it?”

“I must admit, it’s a lot to take in.” John agreed.

“I’m called Thomas, Thom for short.” The man nodded at him and smiled. He had quite a nice smile.

“So nice to meet you, Thom.” John smiled back.

“So where did you study for the priesthood?” Thom asked.

“I was at the Sophae College and Temple, and then spent half a year at Temple of the Small Gods, before I decided against pledging myself there.” John told him.

“I spent a year at the Temple of Memir in Brixto back in my tender youth before I decided the priesthood was just not for me.” Thom chuckled wryly.

And the conversation was off and running. Several hours flew by as dishes came and went and John thoroughly enjoyed discussing theological points, and laughing over the downsides of temple life with someone who had been there. John was a little surprised, but hardly shocked when the man laid a hand over his arm, and slipped him a card with his address on it toward the pudding course.

“John, if you ever find yourself at loose ends, and need a friend, please do contact me.” Thom
smiled.

John took the card, and laid it on the table. “Thank you so much, but I think I will be busy for some
time with all the hoopla at the palace.”

“Down the road, then.” Thom smiled and took a swallow of wine. “You can never have too many
friends.”

His smile was so genuinely friendly, that John found himself trying to double guess whether the man
was trying to pull him, or just being sociable. Damn, I’m really not qualified to mingle at court he
thought as a snippet of conversation across the table caught his attention. He turned around to listen
better.

“. . . but I told Poppy I couldn’t go with her to the MacMillan circus then – this week is the Crickton
Garden Fair, and I’m showing my prize petunias. She was so put out with me. But I told her they’d
be back in town for Mid-Summer, so really she had no right to be so stroppy. ”

“Excuse me,” John asked the woman, he thought it was the Fitzwater one, “What were you saying
about a circus?”

“Oh do you like the circus, Brother Watson?” Lady Fitzwater smiled. “There’s a simply excellent
one called MacMillan Circus and Oddities showing in Chesterton. Everyone’s been raving about it,
but I am sadly occupied and will have to miss it. They’re to head up to the north country after this
week, but then they’ll be back in town for Mid-Summer. Rumor has it they’ll be performing on the
palace grounds as part of the festivities. So those of us with important things to do this week will be
able to enjoy them then.”

“Ah, that is good news.” John smiled at her, while wheels raced round his mind. He wondered what
Sherlock would make of this tidbit.

“Brother John, do you think you might announce your engagement officially by Mid-Summer?”
Lady Smelton looked at him from under her lashes. She was obviously already planning grand
Threesome Parties in her mind.

“I’m so sorry, Lady Smelton, I really couldn’t say. Things are still a bit up in the air.” John smiled at
her.

“Oh I say, I love Mid-Summer, don’t you?” Lord Smelton jumped in. “Those colored ices with the
paper umbrellas that the vendors sell? Just top notch!”

Much later, John was dozing by the light of a single candle when he felt a warm body slide into the
bed, and wrap itself around him.

“Mmmmm, you smell good.” A warm tongue traced under John’s jaw to lap delicately around his
ear. “You taste good too.” The deep voice purred. “I might just have to eat you whole.” Sherlock bit
gently along the side of his neck, and John was hard before he’d even completely woken up. He
rolled over into Sherlock’s arms, meeting him in a sweet, drowsy kiss.

“Mmm, missed you.” John smooched at Sherlock’s lips then roamed farther afield to kiss over his
jaw and down his neck. When his lips encountered a metal chain at his collar bones, John smiled and opened his eyes. Sherlock had the Gallanus pendant hanging around his neck. John smiled, and curling his finger under the chain, pulled it to the side to continue mouthing at his lover’s throat.

“You smell like cigars, love.” John breathed at his hair.

“Ugh, it’s from the stupid trade meeting. It went on forever. My only saving thought was that I would come and have my wicked way with you when it was done.” Sherlock hooked a leg around John’s thigh, and pulled him closer.

“Well, you’ll have to hurry, I’m expecting my boyfriend back at any minute.” John ran a hand up to cup Sherlock’s arse, and nibbled under his jaw.

Sherlock reached between their bodies to palm John’s erection, stroking him slowly through the fabric of his shorts. “Forget him and run away with me.”

“No, sorry, he’s a prince of the realm.” John closed his eyes and arched his back, pressing himself closer to Sherlock’s hand. “He’ll probably have you hunted down and killed. . . Oh Gods.” John flopped back, as he remembered Sebastian Wilkes.

"John . . . what?” Sherlock frowned at him, puzzled.

“Lord Sebastian . . . honestly, Sherlock. Was that necessary?” John glared at him.

“Why are we speaking of Lord Sebastian whilst my hand is on your cock?” Sherlock grumbled darkly.

“No, really.” John rolled over to sit upright. “Did you actually have Sebastian Wilkes beaten just for chatting me up?”

“John.” Sherlock sighed. “I had to make an example. It wasn’t just about Sebastian. If I have one of the scum of the court roughed up abit, that’s ten who will get the message that you are not to be trifled with. Besides, don’t worry about Sebastian. He probably enjoyed it.”

“So you don’t trust me to take care of myself?” John looked sideways at him.

“John. It’s not like that. The court is a sandpit of treacheries. I wanted to smooth your introduction to it as best I could.”

Sherlock looked so worried at John’s anger, that it dissolved like a soap bubble in the sun. John softened, reaching out to cup Sherlock’s cheek. “All right, yeh, I get it. I know spit all about how the royal court works, right?”

“I know all this is still very strange for you.” Sherlock looked at him warily.

John couldn’t stand the lost look on Sherlock’s face. He rolled back down and pulled Sherlock flush against him. “Look I trust you, love.”

Sherlock wrapped an arm around John’s middle, and breathed into his hair.

“Hey.” John pulled back abit to meet Sherlock’s eyes. “I almost forgot to tell you. I heard something at the dinner tonight. It might be nothing, but some women were talking about a circus performing in the area? It was called the MacMillan Circus. They said it was showing in Chesterton this week, going up north for awhile, then back in town for Mid-Summer— maybe even performing on the palace grounds. What do you . . .”
Sherlock’s eyes were nearly shining in the dark. “John, you clever, clever man.” Sherlock squeezed John’s shoulder. “I think this is it! The lead I was waiting for. Trust you to find it. This circus definitely bears a closer inspection.” Sherlock grinned widely. “John, fancy a trip to the circus tomorrow?”

“Yeh, I do in fact.” John smiled back.

“I’m sorry. This means we’ll have to postpone our trip to Rosewood Manor.” Sherlock’s smile faded.

“It’s fine, love. We’ve plenty of time. I haven’t been to a circus in years. Looking forward to it.” John assured him.

Sherlock yawned wide enough to crack his jaw. “John, I’m actually exhausted. Can I have my wicked way with you tomorrow?”

“Always, love.” John kissed him on the forehead then sat up to blow out the candle on the nightstand. “Come here, you.” He crawled back into bed and bundled Sherlock against him to slip into slumber together.

John was somewhat annoyed to wake in bed alone the next day. He stretched, used the loo, dressed, and spent some time poking around the library. It really held an astonishing array of books on a variety of subjects stacked neatly across the shelves. You could tell a lot about a person by the books they kept, and John was certain that Sherlock’s grandmother had been an interesting soul. He took a book back into the sitting room, and was just considering venturing out to forage for food when Sherlock bounded into the room bearing supplies and information.

He set a napkin of pastries, and pitcher of juice onto the table, and dropped into a chair to search through the bag he was carrying.

“John, I spoke to the head housekeeper this morning. Mrs. Morgan said they chose the MacMillan circus to perform here at Mid-Summer due to Queen Nora and Lady Prunella’s request. Apparently circuses are all the rage with the upper crust these days.”

“Does that mean anything significant?” John asked coming to join him at the table.

“It might, but it’s too soon to tell.” Sherlock said off-handedly, still rummaging through the bag.

“Listen Sherlock, I hate to bring this up, but Chesterton is right next to Brightsfield where my sister Harry lives, and I’ve been meaning to see her forever. Would you mind if we stopped in . . .”

“Of course not John.” Sherlock finally looked up to answer him. "I’ve tortured you with my family long enough. I’d be honored to meet your sister.”

“Well, I don’t know if ’honored’ is the right word, Harry’s a right arse, but it seems like the decent thing to do, tell her in person about the engagement before it goes official.” John said with a sniff.

Sherlock merely hhmphed, and set about spreading paper, ink, and quill on the table as John divided up the food.

“What’s that, then?” John asked him biting into a pastie.
“I’m sending a note to Carmina via Mrs. Hudson that we’ll be out of town for a few days, and I’ll have a page deliver a note to Mycroft at least four hours after we’ve left that we’re taking a trip. No sense giving anyone time to track us.”

“Oh, I forgot about Carmina.” John said.

“I have a few chores for her to take care of—she should be fine in our absence.” Sherlock replied, bending to his task.

Sherlock took John on another of his infamous back routes through the palace. Dressed in simple clothes with hoods up, they escaped undetected out a servant’s entrance and through the stable yards. Sherlock led the way to a stone wall behind the carriage house, and making sure no one was watching showed John how to press on several stones at the same time at eye level. A small secret doorway, utterly hidden before, swung out neatly from the wall.

“I had trouble reaching this as a boy.” Sherlock confided to John.

“I’m sure that didn’t stop you.” John mused.

“Very little does once I’ve set my mind to a thing.” Sherlock winked at him.

They slipped through the entryway to the alley beyond, swinging the stone door closed behind them. Once the passage had sealed, Sherlock had John practice several times opening it again from the outside until he could do it with ease. They walked a few blocks through the city before Sherlock hailed a cab to take them to a coach stop on the outskirts of town.

“We’ll take a carriage to Brightsfield today, see your sister, spend the night in town, then make it over to Chesterton tomorrow for a day scouting the circus.”

“I’m sure Harry will want us to spend the night once we come. If that’s all right . . .” John looked uncomfortable. “She has a dairy farm with her new wife, Evie.”

“That’s fine, John. I’ve slept anywhere from palaces to open fields.” Sherlock assured him.

“This will be like sleeping in a boxing ring, but, yeh, it’s got to be done.” John nodded. “Harry will have my head if I marry into the royal family without even telling her ahead of time.”

They shared the coach to Brightsfield with another family—two women, a man, and their three children. One of the mothers kept trying to shush her son who wanted to talk to Sherlock about insects, his latest interest, until Sherlock told her it was fine. He regaled them all with tales of locusts who could strip whole fields in mere minutes, termites who can build mounds up to 40 feet in height, and a type of fire ant that in a swarm could consume an entire human in under an hour. While the rest of the passengers were not as enamored of Sherlock’s tales, everyone was happy that the children sat enthralled listening to him. It only took an hour and a half to reach to Brightsfield, but John was grateful for the fresh air, and an end to the tales of killer insects when the carriage stopped. They said farewells to the family who were traveling onward, got their bags from the top of the coach, and slung them on their backs for the few-mile walk to Harry’s place.

“Great Gods.” John groaned “Why am I doing this again?”

“We don’t have to visit your sister if you don’t want to, John. With a few notable exceptions, I can’t
stand anyone I’m related to.” Sherlock turned crystal eyes to meet his.

“No, come on we’re doing this. Look alive, soldier. Forward, MARCH!” John mock saluted, and pointed to the road ahead.

“Aye, aye, sir.” Sherlock returned his silly salute, and they fell into an easy pace walking together along the road's edge.

“You know,” John ventured after awhile. “I hear you say you hate Mycroft, but I think deep down you do care about each other. He acts all scary, but he’s got your back. I think he really appreciates the way you look out for Anthea, and Loralee.”

Sherlock made a rude snort. “I spend time with Anthea and Loralee because I like them. It’s not for Mycroft’s sake.”

“Aw, come on.” John shoved his shoulder against Sherlock’s. Sherlock made another snort, but this one was softer.

“It’s hard on him, the life he lives. He carries a lot being king.” John mused.

“It is one reason I keep an ear to the ground for treason plots.” Sherlock answered. “If Mycroft is killed, it brings me one step closer to the throne. And the thought of Sherringford ruling, ugh. It doesn’t bear considering.”

“Sherringford—he’s a bit mental isn’t he?” John blew out a breath. “And that wife of his. Gods. I couldn’t get a straight answer about what medicine she was taking, but she was high on something when I met her.”

“Sherringford is a horror.” Sherlock agreed. “His wife wasn’t always so unbalanced, but she seems to have gotten worse lately. John, being at the palace – it can warp you. Sometimes I wonder if I made a mistake taking you there, exposing you to all that. You might be better off if you’d never met me, but I’m too selfish to let you go.”

“Hey, enough of that.” John stopped on the road, dropped his bag, and swung around to face Sherlock. “Watsons are tough, but Watson-Holmes are unstoppable. We are not a mistake, we are a team. Never forget that.”

“John.” Sherlock said, his mouth a tight line as he dropped his own bag, and swept John into a fierce hug. John hugged him back just as tightly.

"All right, enough of the wobbly.” John patted Sherlock's arse, as he pulled away. “Let’s go tell my sister I’m marrying a royal. I can’t wait to see her gobsmacked face.”

Harry’s farm sat tucked to the side of a country road, a number of barns next to the low, white farmhouse. John led the way to the closest outbuilding, a large shed with a wooden sign on the front that read “Watson-Brown Dairies: fine cheeses and dairy products.” John held his hand up for Sherlock to wait, and poked his head just round the open door. A woman in work trousers, her sandy hair pinned up in braids had her back to them as she stacked rounds of cheese on a shelf. John put a finger across his lips for silence, and stepped back to bang on the outside of the door.
“Oi, woman! I’ve a complaint about me milk - it’s all gone sour!” he boomed out in a deep voice.

“I’m sorry, sir, when . . .” Harry came out of the building wiping her hands on a cloth. When her eyes fell on John, she dropped the cloth to the ground as her face lit up. “Johnny! You little shite! I haven’t seen you in bloody forever!”

John just grinned as Harry grabbed him in a squeeze tight enough to knock the breath from him. He was a bit annoyed to find she was an inch taller than him with her work boots on. He finally got a good breath when she pulled back to view him at arm’s length. “Look at you, you look grand little brother. Why didn’t you tell us you were coming? Evie will have my leg that I didn’t give her warning to make something special for tea.”

“It’s good to see you too, Harry,” John smiled at her “but we didn’t know we were coming until last minute. We’ve come to see the circus in Chesterton before it leaves, and thought we’d stop in on the way.”

At the “we” Harry finally looked round and spied Sherlock nearby looking down at them, his lips pressed together to stop an amused smile from escaping.

“Oi, I didn’t see your friend there.” Harry said.

“He’s more than my friend, Harry, this is my fiancé, Sherlock.” John beamed clapping a hand to Sherlock’s arm.

“Oh My Gods, Johnny, you never. Really?” She put her hand out to shake, and Sherlock took it to pump twice.

“How do you do?” Sherlock nodded so politely.

“Sherlock, may I present my sister, Harriet Jules Watson-Brown.” John said formally introducing the two of them. “Harry, this is my fiancé, Prince William Sherlock Scott Holmes Carrington, peer of the realm.”

Harry twisted her mouth to the side. “All right. Ha ha. Very funny, Johnny.” Harry swatted at John’s flank. “What’s your real name, luv?” She squinted up at Sherlock in the sunlight.

“I regret the lack of warning, but I am indeed Prince William Sherlock Scott Holmes Carrington.” Sherlock swept down into the most elegant of bows. “But I’d appreciate it if you didn’t let it get around. We are traveling incognito.”

“Oh you two. Go on and pull the other leg.” Harry smirked.

Sherlock reached into an inner pocket and pulled out a gold ring with the royal crest across the front of it. He plopped it onto his finger and held it out for her inspection. Harry caught his hand, and peered at the ring going a bit pale.

“Cor, if that’s not real, it’s damn close. Johnny, you swear you’re not having me on?” Harry turned a hard look on her brother.

“I swear on Da and Mum’s graves, I’m not having you on.” John assured her, one hand over his chest.

“Great Mother on May Day. Johnny, you should have let me sit down for this one. How, what . . . should I be curtsying?” She looked back up at Sherlock, her forehead wrinkled up.
“Aw no, Harry, Sherlock’s not like that . . .” John started.

“As my sister-in-law, you needn’t curtsy to me.” Sherlock cut over him. “In formal settings, a half-bow upon any initial greeting will suffice, or a nod upon subsequent meetings, but in informal settings, whatever is customary behavior for salutations is more than acceptable. “

Harry did look utterly gobsmacked at that. “Well, if that didn’t convince me you were a royal, nothing else would.” She blew out a big breath, and rubbed a thumb over her forehead.

“All right, come on, come inside. You’re staying the night? Evie would be so put out if you don’t.” Harry asked.

“If it’s no bother.” Sherlock answered smoothly.

“Of course not. Johnny and his man are always welcome at the house, yeh?” She smiled at him. “Oh, Evie is going to absolutely kill me that I didn’t clean up the sitting room last night.” Harry muttered to herself as she stooped to pick up the cloth she had dropped. “Royalty. We’re going to be related to royalty.” She shook her head, and led them back up a stone path to the farmhouse beyond.

Evie was a charming woman with straight black hair and sparkling light brown eyes. She came at Harry’s call, and despite Harry’s misgivings, didn’t look the slightest bit put out at having unexpected house guests drop in. She did however turn quite pale, and sit down when they told her who Sherlock was. Harry went and got her a glass of water.

“In my house? A peer of the realm?” Evie opened and closed her mouth like a fish.

“Please don’t hold it against me.” Sherlock told her, and they all laughed, and suddenly everything was all right again.

Harry showed them to a guest bedroom to stow their things. A beautiful quilt in blues and greens was spread over the bed. The pattern, a collection of straight pieces – squares, diamonds and triangles somehow came together to give the impression of circles and wavy lines meandering across the quilt.

“Is that one of Mum’s?” John asked quietly running his fingertips over it.

“It is.” Harry told him.

“I always liked this pattern.” John mused. “What’s it called again . . . ?”

“This one is ‘storm at sea,’ I like it too.” Harry replied, her lips tight at the edges.

“I can see why you took it with you.” John mused, not looking up. “When you left.”

“Johnny . . .” Harry started when Sherlock cut neatly over her.

“Could you show me where the privies are?” Sherlock asked in his politest tones. ”I’m afraid it was rather a long coach ride.”

“Oh, of course, this way.” Harry said automatically, turning back to the hall.

Sherlock looked back at John still running his fingers over the quilt. He touched his shoulder in silent reassurance. John looked up, and gave a small smile before Sherlock followed Harry into the passageway.
Dinner was a delicious spread of cottage pie, stewed greens, oat bread, cheese, and rhubarb cobbler with cream. Evie’s younger brother, Robert, who lived with them was excited to hear that Sherlock was a prince, but they got him to double swear he wouldn’t repeat the tale at the pub until they had officially released the news. He looked like he might burst on having to keep the news under wraps, but felt better when Sherlock promised them all front row seats at the royal wedding with Princess Irene.

“You are of course invited to my and John’s nuptials as well, but that will not have the pomp of a royal event. It will be a much more intimate affair.” Sherlock told them looking fondly at John over the table candles. John beamed back at him, and reached out to catch up his hand next to the greens.

“Aw, look at the two of you making calves’ eyes at each other.” Harry chortled. “No mistaking this as a love match.” She said looking between the two of them. John stuck his tongue out at her.

“Harry, leave them be. Reminds me of someone I know.” Evie said nudging her wife. “I met Harry at the county fair. She was working as forewoman for a rival dairy. She couldn’t keep her eyes off me. When I asked her if she knew what Goodwoman Taylor put into her herbed cheese spread, and she told me, I knew it was love. I stole her away from the Taylors, and we were married two months later.”

Harry smiled her own fond smile at her wife as Evie leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

“Well it was lovely meeting you Prince Will . . . Sherlock, but I’m afraid Robert and I have to be awake with the cows tomorrow. Why don’t you all stay up though, catch up abit? I know how much Harry has missed you, John.” Evie smiled at them and gave Harry another quick kiss before bidding them a good-night, and herding her brother down the hallway to the bedrooms.

“So what’s up with that temple – Temple of the Whosi-whatsit?” Harry asked John. They had moved to the sitting room with a pot of chamomile tea between them.

“Temple of the Small Gods, and I left it.” John told her. “Initiates have to pledge celibacy to become full members, and that wasn’t going to work out with my new plans.”

John reached out to pat Sherlock’s arm. Sherlock chuckled that rumbling deep laugh that generally melted John’s bones. He had his long legs crossed before him, and a cup of tea resting on a saucer on his lap.

Harry looked more sharply at John. “So how’s your shoulder Johnny, you look so much better.”

“You won’t believe it Harry, it’s completely better.” John pulled his shirt off and showed her.

Harry reached out to brush her fingers over his shoulder as if she couldn’t believe it. “Johnny, that’s amazing. You must have seen a special master healer. No one we found could fix it.”

John blushed abit pulling his shirt back on. “Not exactly, Sherlock healed me.”

Harry turned wide eyes to Sherlock. “You’re a master healer?”

“No, actually I’m just a low-grade chameleon mage. I can mimic a person’s talent for a few minutes at a time. For some reason I was able to reflect John’s talent back to him, and it performed this miraculous recovery.” Sherlock confessed.
“Yeh, a healer can’t heal themselves, right?” Harry mused. “If anyone could help heal themselves though it would be our Johnny. They didn’t know what to do with him down at the Dullenshire Healers’ Sanctuary. Thought he was a bleeding miracle when he first showed up. Surprised them all what with our Da being the town drunk. Oh, don’t shush me Johnny. You know it was true. We saw the inside of a pub before a schoolhouse going with Mum to fetch Da home so rat-arsed he couldn’t walk home in the morning. Mum was the town seamstress. Kept us together body and soul.”

“Aw Harry . . .” John started, but his sister was on a roll and she plowed on.

“Johnny, he had such a future to him. Mum was already so proud when he apprenticed at the Sanctuary. He was the first in the family to get any higher eduction. But she was properly over the moon with Johnny getting the scholarship to a Healer’s College in Cornford. The healers in town said he was so bleeding gifted, it was a crime if he stayed in Dullenshire to treat sprained ankles and gout.”

“I remember.” John looked quietly down at the cup in his hands.

“Then that ninny Annalisa dug her hooks in. Turned Johnny’s head right around. He was all set to go, and suddenly it was Annalisa this, and planning the wedding that. He let the scholarship go, said he couldn’t see leaving Dullenshire. Like to break Mum’s heart, he did.”

“Oi Harry, it’s ancient history, let it go, yeh?” John rubbed his forehead.

“Then the Fever Plague hit us.” Harry shuddered. "Turned the world upside down. Killed half the town in a few weeks. What a horror. When Mum, Da, and Annalisa died, a light went out in Johnny. He wasn’t even there anymore. Started drinking the town dry, following in his father’s footsteps.”

Harry took a swallow of her tea.

“I wasn’t the only one hitting the bottle.” John snapped.

“I know I was drinking then too, Johnny. All of us left were the walking wounded. I wasn’t falling down blind over the grog like you were though, was I?” Harry’s voice rose.

“I wasn’t that bad.” John snarled.

“You were a ghost, Johnny . . . when you weren’t throwing things.” Harry replied darkly.

“Well you conveniently left, and I was there all alone to deal with the mess, yeh? I let the creditors take it all, didn’t I? They got the house, most of Mum’s quilts – the whole lot after I let things go tits up. Stupid me, if only I’d had my loving sister there to help.”

“John . . .” Sherlock tried to cut in.

“Johnny, I tried. I did all I could. You wouldn’t listen to me, and you were like a devil when you got blotto which was most of the time. It scared me, and I couldn’t take it.” Harry bristled.

“Don’t put this on me, Harriet Watson, you bleeding drunk. You followed the first meal ticket out of town, because it was easy.” John voice rose as well.

“John . . .” Sherlock tried again.

“EASY? Fuck you, Johnny. Was it easy to grind Clara down? Burn the heart out of her before she finally kicked me out? I haven’t had a drop to drink in four years, Johnny. You know that, and none of it was bleeding easy. How about when you threw being a healer away? Was that easy for you?”

The siblings had half-risen out of their chairs to glare at each other when Evie swept back into the room.

“All right you two. We’re not doing this again. I think it’s bedtime for all.” Evie gave Sherlock a small, sad smile as she led her wife to their bedroom.

John rubbed his hands over his face. “Come on, let’s bed down ourselves.” Sherlock followed John to the guest room. They undressed in silence, turned down the blankets, and crawled under. Sherlock leaned over to blow out the candle, then returned to John. He was lying stiff as a board, facing away to the side wall, smoldering. Sherlock laid a soft hand over his shoulder.

“John . . .” he tried speaking to the angry shape.

“I’m knackered, Sherlock. Let’s just call it a night, all right?” John's voice was quiet in the dark.

“All right.” Sherlock curled in around John’s back, spooning him tightly. He felt John sigh, and the tension drain from him as they finally drifted off to an uneasy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

My mother quilts extensively, and though I know arse-all about quilting myself, I know what I like. I found this lovely pattern online as an example of the spread that Harry has on her guest bed from her mother.

John woke to a beam of light sneaking past the curtains to burn over his closed eyelids. He stretched his arm across the bed, but of course the space next to him was empty. Scrubbing a hand over his face, he blinked his eyes open, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and got up to face the day. He found Sherlock and Evie, her hair wound up in braids this morning, at the kitchen table lingering over cups of tea. Evie laughed at something Sherlock had said, and John found himself envying the easy way they lounged at the table. The two dark heads turned to the door as he entered.

“John.” Sherlock’s bright blue eyes were warm, welcoming as always.

“Good morning sleepyhead.” Evie greeted him. “The rest of us ate hours ago, but there’s tea, and I could fix you some eggs if you’re hungry?”

“Yeh, thanks, that’d be great. Sorry I slept so long. I guess I was more tired than I thought.” John rubbed a hand over the back of his neck.

“Don’t worry, guests don’t have to be up with the cows . . . unless they want to.” Evie quirked a smile briefly at Sherlock before rising to move a heavy iron pan onto the wood stove.

“John, I’ve never milked a cow before. It was fascinating.” Sherlock grinned up at him. John smiled and laid a hand over his mess of curls before lowering into the chair opposite him. He poured himself a cup from the teapot on the table, added milk and stirred. After several swallows, John was feeling almost human again. He looked up as Evie slipped a plate of eggs, beans, and toast in front of him.

“Ta, Evie.” John tucked in. He was halfway through before he looked back up. “So, is Harry not around?”

“She went out on the delivery run this morning, and to pick up something from a neighboring farm.” Evie answered not meeting his eyes.

“I thought you had some boys to do that.” John answered.

“Harry thought it best if you two had some space this morning.” Evie poured herself more tea. “You two got a little overheated again last night.”

“I’m sorry about that.” John put his fork down.

“Don’t worry about it. I know Harry adds her fuel to the fire. You know, I lost my parents in the Fever Plague too.” Evie turned bright eyes to John. “It was something that Harry and I understood about each other right away. John, you know Harry loves you very much. Sometimes, we have
trouble saying what we really mean to the people closest to us. Harry . . . worries about you. It’s not easy to stop being a big sister to your baby brother even when he’s all grown up.”

“Yeh, Evie, I know.” John blew out a breath. He hated the way an evening with his sister always made him feel about twelve.

“I think she might worry less now that you have this one in your life.” Evie nodded toward Sherlock who sat watching the exchange with his big cat’s eyes, drinking them in. “Who would have thought I would be related to a royal . . . even if it was just by marriage? It’s hard to believe.”

“The royal thing is all still a bit surreal to me too, “John admitted, “but Sherlock is worth all the fuss and bother.” He looked up to find Sherlock’s open gaze beaming down on him.

Sherlock reached out to catch John’s hand on the table. “*Blessed among all mortals am I, for a brush of the Gods above is found in the Earth, my gentle lover’s touch.*” He quoted pulling John’s hand up to drop a kiss on his palm.

Evie twinkled looking back and forth at them. “I think you two will be just fine.” She smiled.

Evie assured them her brother Robert could give them a ride to Chesterton as soon as he returned from his deliveries. Sherlock grew very mysterious asking Evie if she could help him with his disguise for the outing. “Unfortunately, it’s too easy for me to be recognized in normal attire at public events like this.” He explained as the two of them retired, banishing John to the sitting room with a book.

John’s jaw nearly dropped when Sherlock finally emerged from Evie’s bedroom in his new cloak and dagger get-up. On his head, he wore a gauzy scarf half-draped over a mess of braids twined round with the ribbons John had won at the May fair. His long body was covered in a layered high-necked lavender dress that beautifully brought out the color in his eyes. With a little padding at the ruffled bodice, and an artful array of face paint – his lush lips painted into a bright pink bow, Sherlock made a stunning woman.

John was speechless. He made a half-hearted waving gesture about his head as he stared at the apparition before him.

“The braids are hair extensions.” Sherlock said guessing correctly as always what John was trying to ask. “Do you like them? I finally have a chance to wear your ribbons . . . out.” It was jarring to hear Sherlock’s usual deep tones emerging from the lithesome creature turning in a circle across the room.

Evie giggled. “I think you look a right pretty picture, Sherlock.”

“Thank you so much for all your help, kind madam.” Sherlock pitched his voice higher to a warm alto, and curtsied gracefully to Evie. She merely giggled more.

“This isn’t strictly speaking, really necessary is it?” John had finally found his voice. “You could have chosen anything to wear today. You just like playing dress up.”

“John, nobles who actually know me by sight may be at the circus today. I have to dress in deep disguise to pass undetected.” Sherlock trilled at him. “Besides, what’s the point of a game if it isn’t
fun?” Sherlock sent him a most piercing glance from under lashes curled and blackened. John felt his cock stiffen slightly, and swell unbidden under his trousers’ front.

Evie’s brother Robert was initially puzzled about who he was giving a ride to until Sherlock dropped his voice to its normal rumble, and winked at him. Robert almost fell over. John sighed, and hefted their bags to the back of the cart. Sherlock, now fully in part, had already climbed onto the front bench to perch there prettily.

“What?” Sherlock asked when John huffed back around to find a seat next to him. “I can’t muss my frock. It’s silk.”

The laugh had stayed in Evie’s eyes, and she waved them a merry good-bye from the side of the yard. “Sherlock, John, DO come again as soon as you can. It was a pleasure having you.”

“All my deepest regards, Evie, you are a hostess extraordinaire.” Sherlock simpered at her setting Evie off in another fit of giggles.

“Evie, tell Harry good-bye for me, please,” John leaned down from the cart, “and thanks to both of you for having me and the Drama Queen here to stay.” Sherlock raised his/her eyebrows archly at John, but remained silent.

“Of course John. Safe travels to you two, and enjoy the circus. We loved it last week.” Evie waved a last good-bye calling out “And Robert, come home straight away. We still have that fence in the back that needs mending.”

Robert nodded, and clicked the reigns, setting the horses off down the road. The day was a mild one, and they enjoyed the sunshine on their faces, the green of the fields around them. Robert kept shifting though, and sneaking glances at Sherlock. He looked so uncomfortable riding next to Sherlock in drag that John wished he had thought to switch places before they set off.

“So, Robert, you went last week to the circus, how was it?” John asked around the gauzy person of Sherlock to distract the youth with conversation. Great Mother – the man had even doused his gorgeous self in some musky floral perfume. He smelled delicious. No wonder Robert was so confused.

“Oh it was brilliant. They had elephants, and a real tiger! Last time they came through town they only had the trick ponies and dogs. I think my favorite part though was the dancing girls. They had a private performance on the midway during the day. It was only a copper for the early show. You should definitely catch that . . . though I’m not sure you can go in dressed like that.” Robert slid his eyes back over Sherlock again. “It’s mostly just men in there, well, men who LOOK like men . . .” Robert trailed off uncomfortably.

“Robert, what acts did they have during the big top show, anything special in particular?” Sherlock used his normal voice finally, and that seemed to settle the boy down.

“Cor, yes, they had a magician, a fire mage who did all kinds of amazing tricks. The Amazing Bernouli. He was the tops!” Robert grinned at them.

Robert launched into descriptions then of the fire spinners, the acrobats who managed any number of amazing feats, and such an in-depth recounting of a particular woman who balanced and twirled inside a suspended hoop that John suspected Robert had taken a fancy to said woman. Before they
knew it, the boy was dropping them off in Chesterton. Sherlock told him to leave them at the town’s third-best inn.


“John, we are avoiding contact with those who might recognize me. Any nobles staying overnight, will surely insist on the best accommodations. Once that's full, a few will be forced to make do with the second-best inn. None of them would stay in town if they had to lodge in a third-best inn, and anything below a third-best inn will have too many tarts, thieves, and bedbugs to be worth our while.” Sherlock informed John in a suffering tone at having to explain the utterly obvious.

Robert got down from the bench to help John lift the bags out of the back of the cart. Again, Sherlock was standing to the side putting all of his energy into looking resplendent.

“Robert, thank you.” John shook his hand warmly. “You’re doing a great job looking out for Harry, and Evie, yeh? As one brother to another, I owe you, mate.”

Robert fairly glowed at the praise. “No worries. I’m glad to do it.” He grinned back at John.

“Good man. Have a safe trip home.” John clapped him on the shoulder. He watched as Robert climbed onto the cart’s seat, and held a hand up in farewell as Robert waved good-bye, and guided his horses toward the road.

“Well my divine cupcake, I suppose you’re too over-dressed to grab a bag?” John quirked a wry smile turning back to face Sherlock.

Sherlock pursed his lips, and gave John a look that said volumes, but mostly said, *Honey, you’re carrying the bags right now, but I’ll make it worth your while later.* With a sigh, John shouldered both their bags and they pushed into the Inn to see about securing a room for the night. Sherlock was kind enough to hold the door open for John as he hauled the luggage in.

They only stayed at the inn long enough to rent a room, leave their bags to be watched at the main desk, and freshen up in the facilities. It gave John a turn to see Sherlock sashaying into the ladies’ retiring room, but he figured what people didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. John changed into a fancier outfit, and the dramatic hat Sherlock insisted he wear. Sherlock came back out with even more flashy makeup on - a small gold star attached to his cheek.

“A woman in there gave me the most cunning patch. What do you think John?” Sherlock preened before him.

John rolled his eyes. “You know they all think you’re my doxy.”

“But I chose such a non-revealing dress!” Sherlock argued.

“Come Lady Wife, the circus awaits us, my pet.” John said loudly, crooking his elbow for Sherlock to thread his arm through, and walk alongside him. John had to admit he enjoyed having Sherlock cozy up to him even if it was just a performance for any onlookers.

The inn offered a taxi service for guests visiting the circus, and they joined another couple waiting outside for the next carriage. They exchanged pleasantries, and fell into conversation with them on the ride over. It turned out this was their second time seeing the circus, and Sherlock spent the whole ride asking the wife if the big top show was too over exciting for those of delicate sensibilities. The husband caught John up in talk of some local cricket team that he didn’t know, and he was glad when the carriage finally rolled to a stop next to the “MacMillan Circus and Oddities” sign that marked the beginning of the midway.
John and Sherlock nodded good-bye to their acquaintances, and made their way into the gathered crowd enjoying the daytime delights of the circus. The aroma of hot, spiced nuts followed the breeze stirring the pennants on the booths and small tents lining the field where the circus had landed. The big top loomed at the side, waiting for the evening’s main show, but any number of smaller performances beckoned on the many stages of the midway. John could hear overlapping cries of the buskers as they called to passersby trying to lure anyone willing to part with a few coins in to see the wonders waiting just behind a tent flap. They passed signs for the “Astonishing Freaks of Nature Museum.” A two-headed woman with long blonde hair sat waving halfheartedly on the platform out front, and John couldn’t help rubber-necking as they drew near.

“Co-joined identical twins, obviously.” Sherlock informed him from the side of his mouth.

“Right, right.” John said as Sherlock pulled him past. “Great Gallanus, I wonder how many legs are under that skirt?”

“Well, for that information, we’d have to pay for an insider’s tour, and I’d rather explore the rest of the grounds. John, focus, we are on a mission here.” Sherlock reminded him. “Keep your eyes open for anything out of the ordinary.”

“That’s going to be a little hard to narrow down.” John observed wryly over a wild noise as the crowd parted for a small parade of midgets marching by with horns and drums.

They passed a pony rides corral for the children, and an even-more impressive elephant rides area for the adults. John wanted to the try it out right away, but the queue to ride was long, and Sherlock urged John to keep moving. “We’ll ride later if there’s time.” Sherlock promised him.

John bought them some sugared fried dough, spiced nuts, and a cup of fruit punch. Sherlock demurred on the nuts, but shared the pastry and drink with John as they meandered past some jugglers, a man offering to guess their age or weight, and a booth with signs for the world’s most tattooed lady inside. When drum beats led them to a crowd gathering around the dancing girls Robert had mentioned, John insisted they stop to watch.

“Hey, I missed seeing most of the show the night you dragged me to that tavern.” John nudged Sherlock in the ribs. “We can wait a few minutes.”

They joined the knot of people grouped in a semi-circle around a show that revealed itself to be four women dancing on a grassy area before a patched tent. A man with a hand drum on a strap slung over his hips pounded out a sultry beat while the dancers pranced about more or less together. John glanced around noting that while most of the audience was indeed male, a family with children had also stopped to watch, so Sherlock didn't particularly look out of place in his woman's togs. John placed a steadying hand over Sherlock's low back. It was some kind of male reflex, but John couldn't help feeling protective of this female-looking Sherlock, even though reasonably speaking, his love could probably kick his arse anytime he really cared to.

The dancing girls’ costumes weren’t as nice as the performers at the dinner John had crashed, but there were veils and bells, and wiggling going on, so he was happy. Sherlock, on the other hand, curled his lip and started a low-voiced commentary on the dancers’ moves in John’s left ear.

“Do you see how mushy those hip drops are? You call those snake arms? Deplorable. That one can’t even keep up with the rest of the group. She’s utterly missing the beat. Are her ears clogged?”

“Sherlock, hush!” John warned him, and Sherlock settled into a grumpy silence as the girls finished out their jiggling, flailing dance.
After the women had bowed to applause, and scurried away, the drummer stepped forward to call out loudly to the crowd. “Dear friends, if you enjoyed this amazing showing of our lovely ladies, and their rare, exotic dances from the Far East, please join us in an hour’s time inside the tent for an even more scintillating performance. For a mere three coppers, you can experience so much more of their charms and graces up close and personal from a comfortable padded seat.”

“Lap dances.” Sherlock sneered quietly to John. “So unoriginal.”

John snorted a laugh and looked over at Sherlock as the crowd dispersed around them. Curls had escaped from his braids and head scarf to halo around his face. He had eaten off his lip paint, but the fruit punch he’d drunk had stained his lips a darker red. His eyes looked the color of a sea after a storm in the afternoon sunlight. John’s breath caught in his throat at the sight. No matter what he wore, Sherlock remained achingly lovely.

“What is it?” Sherlock wrinkled his brow at John’s stare.

“Come this way.” John said, and caught Sherlock’s hand to pull him along until they found a place between two tents that wasn’t easily seen by passers-by.

“You gorgeous creature. I absolutely must have you now.” John said pulling Sherlock down into a full-mouthed kiss. Sherlock’s arms slipped around John’s shoulders to steady them as he parted his lips, and joined the kiss with enthusiasm.

“John.” he gasped as they broke for air.

John reached around to grab Sherlock’s arse and pulled their hips closer. “I like feeling your cock in this pretty dress.” He whispered over Sherlock ear as he ground their pelvises together. Sherlock made a delicious sound in the back of his throat, and pressed in tighter.

“All right, love birds, that’s enough!” A high-pitched voice burst through the haze that had risen to cloud John's vision. “Sorry, but you can’t be over here. Staff only.” A bald woman with an impressive collection of small hoops up both her ears, and a wealth of tattoos covering most of her visible skin glared up at them. “Back to the walkway.” She scolded, jerking a thumb towards the way they’d come. “We’ll be in trouble if the big man catches the likes of you roaming around in here.”

John turned cherry red. “Oh Gods, sorry.” He mumbled. Sherlock merely smirked, and batted his eyes at her.

“Find a room in town, huh?” The woman winked, and smiled not unkindly as she shooed them onward.

John blew out a breath, and pulled Sherlock along, busy tucking his head scarf back into place, around the tent to rejoin the main thoroughfare.

“I’ll take a rain check on that seduction, shall I?” Sherlock smiled fondly down at John running a finger across his cheek.

“Yes, and maybe you could dance for me some time at home . . .” John smiled back.

“John, you continue to be a font of excellent suggestions.” Sherlock purred at him. He leaned in for one quick kiss at John's lips, and then tucked John's arm over his to continue strolling down the midway. They had only gone a few steps when Sherlock glanced at the crowd around them, and started.
“Oh Small Gods curse us. It’s bleeding Sebastian Wilkes, and he’s headed right this way. Quick, John, we need to hide.”

“I thought we were meant to be in deep disguise, yeh?” John teased him.

“Oh, he’ll recognize you right off, and besides, he’s seen me dressed as a woman far too many times for it to be any disguise.” Sherlock huffed.

John’s eyebrows went to his hairline at that, but Sherlock was too busy pushing him toward the nearest tent to notice. It was a fortuneteller by the sign out front— “Madam Blatsky’s All Seeing Eye for prognostication and enlightenment.” A smaller plaque hanging by the entrance read “come in.” Sherlock flipped it to “busy” and pushed John inside ahead of him through the tent flap.

“Welcome, dear friends, to the precipice of the great beyond.” A deeply accented voice rolled out from the dim interior. "Come in, come in and tell Madam Blatsky what wisdom you seek from the spirits today.” They worked their way past the gauzy material hung round the entrance to discover the veiled woman waiting on them inside. She waved arms covered in bangles in greeting, and gestured grandly to some folding chairs before her table. "Please, be seated, good folks."

John followed Sherlock to take a seat before the small table that held the standard props of the trade – a crystal ball, deck of cards, covered candle providing scant light, and a burner giving off a sickly-sweet incense that made John’s nose twitch. The gloom in the tent came from the many layers of material draped all along the sides, giving the place the feel of having crawled into a fabric cave. Even the woman facing them was swathed in her own layers of scarves leaving only dark kohl-rimmed eyes to peer out at them over the shimmering veil covering the lower half of her face.

“Please, make yourselves at ease, my friends, and tell me what lies heavy in your hearts today.” She crooned.

“We don’t require your services.” Sherlock informed her archly in his strange contralto voice. “We merely require a place to retire for a few minutes.”

“I’m sorry, dear ones, I can only expose those who wish to make a pilgrimage to the other side to the delicate energies of the sacred space of Madam Blatsky.” She intoned.

“Oh, please. You aren’t a Blatsky unless it was by marriage. You’re probably a Smith or a Jones. You grew up near Davonshire. You’re divorced, in your late thirties, have one child, and have worked as a waitress, a singer, and a laundress before taking on the role of “all-seeing eye.” You are also running behind with your creditors, and you’re no more of a prophet than I am.” Sherlock extracted a silver coin from the purse at his waist, and neatly flipped it to the middle of the table. “We’re happy to pay you for the use of your tent for a few moments as a place to rest though.”

“Oh you’re good.” The woman dropped the phony accent, and flipped back her veil to reveal a pleasant-enough looking woman with a few lines grooved around her mouth. She scooped up the coin and dropped it into a pocket. “And you’re a man. You nipped in here to hide from someone. The two of you are a couple, and you’re absolutely frustrated that you didn’t have sex last night. Staying with the in-laws?”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at her. “You’re not so bad yourself.” He replied in his usual lower tones.

“Mind if I smoke?” The woman asked with a lifted eyebrow.

“Be my guest.” Sherlock waved a hand.

The woman produced a packet of tobacco from somewhere on her person, rolled a fag, and lit it from
the candle on the table. She blew a big ring of smoke toward the top of the tent.

“Great Mother, that’s good.” She said after a few drags. “So, I’m not a real fortune-teller, but that’s a raw deal to have anyway. You never tell anyone anything they want to hear, but I can read cards and palms. You’ve paid to be here so I’m happy to read for you. Most people usually enjoy it.” She shrugged a shoulder carelessly.

“No thank you.” Sherlock declined, and rose to go peek surreptitiously out the tent flap.

Madame whoever-she-was turned to John, and raised her eyebrows at him “How about you, dear?” John glanced at Sherlock who looked at him and shrugged. “It’s harmless enough.”

“Yeh, all right, why not. How about a palm reading?” John agreed.

The woman stubbed out her cigarette in a small bowl she lifted from under the table, and then placed back out of sight.

“Give me your dominant hand.” She said wiggling her fingers at John. John put his left hand up on the table, and the woman took it between her palms to peer at the lines there.

“You’re head strong, brave, and adventurous, like to try out new things. Lucky in love, a heartbreak in the past, but true love to warm you now. Of course I could look at tall, dark, and intimidating over there to tell you that one.” She tilted her head to indicate Sherlock who was still peering out of the tent. Sherlock harrumphed at her, but didn’t look back. “You’ve had a number of professions, but it looks like you’ll be returning to something you did before. You’ve had passions blocked, and you need to move some obstacles to reach your goal. Hang on a tick, there.” She said creasing her brow. She held John’s hand between both her palms, and closed her eyes. Sherlock came over to the table as a faint glow manifested over their joined hands.

She opened her eyes wide to look at John. “You’ve got a real block there, sweetie. Someone's done a binding on you, no mistake.”

“You’re an actual mage.” Sherlock raised his eyebrows at her.

“Not much of one.” The woman admitted. “I can sense energies sometimes – not always good for much, though it comes in handy working as a fortune-teller. It’s how I knew you two were frustrated for each other.” She grinned. “But this one.” She nodded to John. “He’s got a huge force of energy running through him, I see that now, but it’s shielded, blocked. It’s very subtle, the binding. I wouldn’t have found it if I wasn’t specifically poking around. You have a talent that someone has bound to itself. Got some enemies, dearie? Someone who wanted to knock out your power?” She squinted more closely at John’s face.

John had gone suddenly quite white. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. After a moment, he cleared his throat. “Annalisa.” He finally managed to whisper.
“Eat something, you’ll feel better.” Sherlock nudged John’s bowl of stew closer to him. “You’ve had a shock.”

Sherlock had bundled John up from the fortune-teller’s tent after flipping her another coin, and spirited them off to their inn. They sat tucked into the side of a booth at the rear of the inn’s bustling tap room. A meal of ale, stew, and bread lay spread before them, but neither of them had touched it. John managed a few spoonfuls before looking back to Sherlock.

“It makes sense. It does. The healers at our sanctuary told me I was probably a master-class mage. My power was still just coming in, I was a late bloomer,” John shrugged. “But they told me I was off the charts with the testing they did.” John raked his fingers through his hair. “Then for some reason, my abilities started slipping, regressing. Before they could get to the bottom of it, the Fever Plague struck. We lost our top healers to it.”

Sherlock sat back, fingers across his mouth as he listened. John blew out a breath and continued.

“Annalisa and I had been off and on again for years. We were back off, and I was planning to move to the Healer’s College in Cornford when suddenly I completely changed my mind about going. It was fast, I remember that, suddenly we were planning our wedding, and Annalisa was all I was thinking about.”

“I suspect a powerful dark love spell, probably one put into your food or drink.” Sherlock mused. “It went awry when Annalisa died a few weeks later in the plague, and the object of your affection was removed. The spell turned in on itself. Generally, it would have run its course and be done in a few months. I suspect this one is drawing energy from your own power to renew itself. Foolish girl. You would have hated her once the spell ran its course. She probably paid extra for one that would last longer.”

Sherlock’s eyes blazed as he reached out and took John’s hand. “It explains why my chameleon magic seemed to be amplifying your talent. I was still just echoing a lesser degree of your energy, the true strength of it caught behind this block. I suspect we may have loosened the binding a bit with our energy work together, but you need to see some master healers to remove the spell completely.”

“Great Gods. I really have been sleepwalking through the last few years.” John let out a half-laugh that strangled on itself. “I think Annalisa tried to tell me about it before she died, but she was raving at the end. Nothing she said made any sense.”

Sherlock slid his arm around John as he turned his face into Sherlock’s shoulder, rubbing his cheek.
against the smooth fabric. Sherlock squeezed him close. After a moment, John sat back to meet Sherlock’s eyes with a terrible look on his face.

“I wonder if I could have helped cure the Fever Plague if my power had been running at full strength, if I could have saved people.”

“I doubt it, John.” Sherlock lowered his voice. “Our best healers in the city worked on it, and couldn’t stop it in time. It wasn’t a normal disease. It was a mage-born illness, really it was chemical warfare.”


“We kept it under wraps. The information was too sensitive to let out into the general public. Our healers had never seen anything like it. The disease was something totally new. Some thrice-cursed dark mage took a simple bacteria, and paired it with a mage-born bug. It was obviously water-borne. Whoever wanted to target Brettona dropped it first in some of the rivers outside Delphium as a practice run. It hit the towns along the river like Dullenshire and Brightsfield before it reached the capital proper.” Sherlock steepled his hands under his chin.

"Like a mage-born bug, its power only lasted a short while, but being paired with an actual bacteria gave it a longer life. The disease could be passed from person to person at least twice before its power ran out. It wasn’t designed to kill the whole of the population, just wipe out a few.”

“That’s just . . . evil.” John shuddered.

“I agree.” Sherlock nodded. “By the time our healers had created an antidote to the disease, it had already run its course, cutting a swath through the southern part of our population. We think it was a weapon meant to target the royal family, and the widespread dissemination of it was a cover, making it look like a real illness. Remarkably, Mycroft, his wife, and I were traveling the week it hit Delphium, but our trip was last minute and not planned in advance. Mycroft dragged me along on a meeting with the royals in Eran. We missed the bulk of the devastation. It was . . . it was a hell of a thing to return to.” Sherlock swallowed.

John fisted his hands tightly in his lap. “How could a person knowingly do something like this to other people? How is that even possible?”

Sherlock reached out to cup John’s cheek. “John, the fact that you can even wonder that makes me love you even more. You are a good man.”

John turned his face and kissed Sherlock’s palm. “I wish I could have helped them fight the illness.” John’s eyes burned.

“And you can for the next one.” Sherlock assured him. “We’re getting you to best healers when we get back to Delphium. I can’t wait to see you with your fires burning on full, my love. Now finish your food. We have work to do this evening.”

“What do you think of the circus so far?” John asked him dutifully spooning up more of the stew.

“There’s definitely something fishy about the MacMillan Circus.” Sherlock mused. “Their long-term holdings – tents and props are old and worn. I can see that things have been kept and mended over a number of years instead of being replaced. In the last year though, they’ve added new acts, and acquired a number of exotic animals. This costs money – large amounts of cash they didn’t have before very recently. That in itself doesn’t mean they are colluding in a plot of treason against the crown, but it does throw up a red flag about them. I want to get into the owner’s office this evening.
and have a closer look at his records. I saw where the caravans are parked. Our best chance of sneaking into the owner’s wagon will be during the show’s big finale. From what I’ve heard, most of the circus gets pulled into it for one thing or another. It will be the one time in the evening with the fewest people around to notice our movements."

“And what will I be doing whilst you break into this circus caravan, my dearest cupcake?” John asked reaching over to slide one of Sherlock’s small braids between his thumb and forefinger.

“You will of course stand guard and run interference.” Sherlock waved his hand away. “John, careful with my braids. They’ll come undone if you pull too hard.”

“Is there a cover story, or do I just make something up as we go along?” John smiled at him.

“I think a good story is that we are Lord and Lady Greenwood, and we are most anxious to speak with the owner about hiring performers from the circus to appear at our annual garden party after Mid-Summer. Keep it as simple as possible.”

“All right. Mad plan, here we come. But you need to finish your stew too. Can’t have you losing those lovely curves.” John nudged Sherlock in the ribs. Sherlock made a rude sound in return, but ate half his bowl nonetheless.

The circus had transformed itself after sunset from a fairground to a fairyland. Bright torches burned at the entrance to a path strung along with glowing paper lanterns leading the guests to the lit-up big top itself. Further sparks winked along the edges of the crowd in the form of mage-lit bracelets, and anklets worn by the performers who cavorted about like will o’ the wisps warning all away from the dangerous dark beyond.

The tent itself shone like an illuminated jewel set into the velvet night. It beckoned like a beacon, a portal to the unseen worlds calling the foolish, the brave, or the fey – any who might dare cross over. Sherlock had transformed himself as well – into a fine lady of mystery. He wore a layered deep burgundy dress that flowed around him like water, and a dark purple veil shimmering with tiny spangles that covered his head, and looped across his face. Only an inky curl over his forehead, and bright eyes lined with sparkling make-up were left to hint at his identity. Generally it was Eastern women who went out in full veils, but John was certain that if Sherlock ventured out too many places dressed so, it would soon catch on as the height of Brettonian fashion. He looked that stunning.

John bought their tickets, and led them to join the queue to enter the tent. The crowd around them fairly shivered in anticipation of the show to come. A jolly clown in bright face paint danced about juggling to entertain those waiting in line. When he got to the magnificent figure of Sherlock, he pretended to swoon, dropping his juggling balls, and grabbing off his belled cap to fan himself with it. With a hand to his heart, he swept into the dramatic bow of a gentleman honoring his magnificent queen. Sherlock affected an offended air, and waved the performer away. With a grin, the man replaced his hat, snatched up his balls, and returned to juggling for the crowd around them. John kept a hand at Sherlock’s low back, and guided them through the tent entrance into the flurry of activity within. More clowns gamboled about amusing those finding seats among the risers set for the audience.
“John, we need to secure seats by that side entrance.” Sherlock pointed as they made their way through the benches.

“Excuse me, would you mind budging over, please?” John asked a fresh-faced couple at the end of a row. “My wife is expecting, and will most likely need the facilities during the show. We’d hate to disturb anyone with our leaving.” Sherlock hunched over a bit, and tried to look rounder.

“Oh, of course.” The young woman beamed at them, and made her husband shove over with her to make room for them.

“Thank you ever so much.” Sherlock clucked at them, and plopped down on the end with John sliding in beside.

Sherlock waved off the vendors circulating with roasted nuts and salted pretzels for sale, and leaned down to whisper against John’s ear. “When the fire mage comes out, they dim the lights and that kicks off the grand finale. That will be our cue to make our way outside.”

John nodded, then soon lost himself in the magic of the show unspooling around them.

The ringleader, a large man in the top hat and red coat of his profession strutted out to the center of the ring, to boom out an opening. “Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages, we welcome you to the MacMillan Circus, the finest dramatic spectacle to delight and dazzle all of Brettona!”

With the crash of a gong, a troupe of trick horses, and their bejeweled riders burst onto the scene to the claps and whistles of the crowd. John was indeed bewitched by the performing acts that graced the ring one after the other – ribbon dancers, trained animals, jugglers, acrobats – each show more amazing than the last. They had a bit of a bad turn when the three stately elephants paraded out, and one seemed to break formation and lumber toward the audience. The ringmaster darted forward and placed a gentling hand over the leg of the beast, and it settled and rejoined the routine. The crowd sighed its relief and cheered.

When finally the house lights dimmed, The Amazing Bernouli, and his assistant, a slim brunette clad all in glimmering black, sailed out to take center stage. Sherlock nudged John and nodded that it was time to begin their descent from the risers. John watched as long as he could walking backwards as they neared the exit. The fire mage made shapes of flame that twisted and danced in the air before dissolving. He created blazing stripes across the floor that the woman assisting him leapt and rolled over in rapid succession. Amidst the wild applause of the audience, John heard Sherlock asking the man guarding the door “Where are the privies my good fellow, I have urgent need.”

Sherlock hooked an arm around John and pulled him out the tent flap into the night beyond. They stood a moment letting their eyes adjust to the dark. Sherlock pulled off his veil and flipped it to face the other side out, a dark sheet unmarked by decoration and rewound it back about his head.

“Come John, this way.” Sherlock strode off briskly toward a set of torches flickering in the distance, and John followed behind avoiding the whipping hem of his skirts. John saw the enclosed wagons in a row as they neared the island of light. A campfire with a few of the circus folk lay to one side, but Sherlock kept them in the shadows as they slipped around another way until they found the caravan Sherlock wanted.

“John, you wait outside. If anyone shows up, talk loudly so I can hear you.” Sherlock squeezed his shoulder, and uncapping a small jar of mage fire to light his way, disappeared into the wagon behind them.

John shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and stood by the wagon trying to look innocent of any wrongdoing. Just waiting in the dark here, just waiting, yep, nothing going on to see here. He was
beginning to wonder if Sherlock would ever reappear when the sound of voices reached him – several men talking loudly and heading his way. John felt certain Sherlock could hear them, but still he dropped his hands to stand tall and greet them as they rounded the corner of the nearest caravan.

“Hail good fellows, I wish to speak with the owner of this establishment. Might you know where I could find him?” John called out. As the men drew nearer, John realized it was the ringmaster minus his top hat, and the fire mage, the Benouli chap, looking very flushed and haggard up-close.

“I’m the owner.” The ringmaster said, a wary frown creasing his forehead. “Who wants to know?”

“Ah, Lord Greenwood at your service.” John smiled too broadly, and nodded, extending a hand to shake.

The man took his hand, and shook it once before dropping it. “Duncan MacMillan, and what’s all this about? Guests aren’t meant to be wandering around back here. You never know when the tiger might be loose and looking for some dinner.” Mr. MacMillan bared his teeth in an expression that was barely a smile.

“Ah, quite right, quite right, I’m sure.” John bobbed his head contritely at him. “Sorry for any irregularities, but I wanted to be sure to catch you. My wife and I so enjoyed . . .” as if on cue Sherlock drifted in from the shadows to join them, sliding an arm around John to face the men. He somehow managed to curve himself inward looking much smaller and meeker than he usually did. The man was a chameleon all the way around John thought beaming at his beloved. “Ah there you are, dear one.”

“Here now, how many of you are sneaking around out here?” MacMillan burst out at Sherlock’s entrance.

“I beg your pardon, the Greenwoods do not sneak.” John stood taller to sputter at the man. “May I present my Lady Wife, the Lady Greenwood. Did you find the facilities all right, dearest?”

“Yes, dear.” Sherlock simpered at him. “Oh is this the Amazing Bernouli!” Sherlock’s eyes flew wide at spotting the tired-looking man a step behind the ringmaster. “I was just overcome by your performance this evening!” Sherlock exclaimed loudly.

Bernouli smiled wanly. “You are too kind, dear lady.”

“No, not all all! You were extraordinary! I simply must have your autograph!” With that, Sherlock made a great flurry of extracting a small purple journal, quill and ink pot from a bag. Sherlock fluttered around until he had managed to get both the circus owner, and the fire mage to sign their names on pages in the book, MacMillan with an impatient flourish, and Bernouli with a shaky scrawl. “Oh, thank you, thank you so much!” Sherlock cooed.

John faced the two circus men again with a broad smile. “As I was saying, Topsy and I, uh Lady Greenwood and I, were quite taken with your delightful show this evening. We’d like to hire you to perform at a little shindig we throw each August. Your group will be just the thing to spice up our garden party!”

“Not interested.” MacMillan ground out. “Now if you two will excuse us.” He made to brush past them.

“Oh come now, we’re both men of business here, how much will it take to hire at least some of your performers? Surely there’s a price we can both agree on?” John reached fingers toward an inner pocket.
The ringmaster stopped him with an outflung hand. “No, it’s not possible. We’re retiring after Mid-Summer this year, letting the circus go. You’ll have to contact one of the other circuses in the area who will be taking the remains . . .” Whatever he was about to say was stopped as Sherlock’s scarf slipped aside and the nearby torchlight fell full across his face.

“Prince William!” the ringmaster exclaimed in shock. Bernouli gasped, equally shaken, next to him.

In an instant, Sherlock stepped forward and grabbed MacMillan’s forearm, and Bernouli’s shoulder. A small glow emanated from the contact with MacMillan, and spread to his hand on Bernouli.

“You don’t know us.” Sherlock said forcefully. “You will forget talking to us after we leave. We are no one.”

At the sounds of someone new approaching, Sherlock stepped back, and quickly rewound the scarf securely around his face.

Bernouli’s assistant rounded the corner, the brown-haired girl looking much younger out of her costume and wrapped in a pale dressing gown. “Papa, where are you, you know it’s time for your tea . . .” she trailed off as she noticed John and Sherlock. “Oh, excuse me.” She wrinkled her forehead, puzzled, looking back and forth between all the people standing there.

“No, please excuse us! By no means do we wish to keep you from your well-deserved rest after such a stellar performance.” John gushed. “Thank you, thank you again for the autographs. All our best! A good evening to you! Cheerio!” John smiled and bobbed at the vaguely bemused men, tipping his hat. "Come, pet, we must dash." He tossed off, catching Sherlock’s elbow to hurry them toward the more populated areas of the circus as fast as dignity would allow.

At that moment, a flash of light exploded over their heads to illuminate the night sky. Pinwheels and fountains of color burst overhead in quick succession. It was an impressive fireworks display to conclude the evening’s show, drawing people from the tent and on their way. John glanced upward as he propelled them onward into the thankfully concealing crowds where they quickly lost themselves in the lines queueing for taxis.

John shut the door to their room at the inn firmly, and slid the bolt home. He whirled to face Sherlock who had gone to crouch by the small fireplace that held wood neatly stacked, and set the fire going with his jar of mage flame.

“All right, love, what in seven hells was all that about tonight?” John asked running a hand over the back of his neck.

“Go ask for some wine to be sent up, and I’ll explain what I know.” Sherlock replied quietly.

John sighed, and reopened the door to stomp downstairs and give their request. When they were settled in the chairs by the fire with cups of wine, Sherlock crossed his legs and pushed braids back from his face. He still had the dress on, but the scarf and face paint were gone giving him an oddly jumbled look.

“I searched MacMillan’s office. He did indeed have records of a large influx of money starting eleven months ago, and no clear trail of where the money came from. Again, not immediately an indication of illegal activity. I searched further and found the letter securing them to appear at the Mid-Summer festivities at the palace. That wasn’t suspicious in itself, but the map drawn of the royal
parade grounds where they will perform with detailed information on how to reach and breach the security of the royal pavilion was extremely damning. I drew a copy of what they had. That map plus the fact that both Bernouli and MacMillan had easy knowledge of my face means they’ve been getting a great deal of information from someone at the palace.”

“Great Gallanus.” John took a swallow of wine. “Why would circus people want to get involved in a plot to kill the king though?”

"Oh, any number of reasons I'm sure." Sherlock waved a careless hand. "Mycroft has made some policies in the last few years that not have sat well with the populous. There’s been a small, but vocal group asking to have him step down in the Council of Nobles. MacMillan may have political connections to groups like that. But of course, large sums of money are always a factor for anyone's motivations. You heard MacMillan say they planned to retire this summer. Of course the fire mage was intriguing all on his own. He’s dying.”

“I agree that's quite possible. He didn’t look well at all after his performance.” John nodded.

“His face was a ruddy color, his breathing labored, and his hand was shaking so he could hardly hold the pen to sign his signature in my journal. Plus his daughter was anxiously searching for him, worried that he hadn’t drunk his tea – most likely a medicinal brew to take after their performance.” Sherlock drained his glass of wine, and placed it on the floor next to his chair. “My thoughts are that if he were dying, a ready source of money to leave to his family in his absence would be a strong motivating factor to attempt treason.”

“But how did you get them to forget you and let us go?” John furrowed his brow.

“My chameleon magic. MacMillan has a power of persuasion. I saw him use it on that wayward elephant during the big top show. I just borrowed it, and reflected it back on him and Bernouli. Hopefully it will be effective enough to scramble their memories of us.” Sherlock sighed and reached up to begin tugging the braids out of his hair.

“Here, love, let me do that.” John rose from his chair to stand behind Sherlock. Gently, he worked his fingers into his hair to untwist the false braids. He carded his hands through Sherlock’s curls as the hair extensions came loose. Sherlock relaxed back, nearly purring at the feeling of John’s hands in his hair.

“It’s not easy being a royal, is it? John asked.

“Not if you want to live to a ripe old age.” Sherlock agreed. “And I would prefer to see that Mycroft stays on the throne as long as we can manage. He may be unpopular with some, but his reasoning is always sound, and his judgments are good for Brettona’s long-term interests. People can be so blind with their petty desires of the moment.”

“I have a desire of the moment…” John leaned forward to brush his lips over Sherlock’s ear. "It's shagging you senseless.” He finished, sliding his mouth to nip at the soft spot just under his earlobe. The adrenaline of the evening still thrummed in John's veins, and his want for Sherlock had only spiked with it.

Sherlock’s breath hitched as John sucked under his jaw, and he tilted his head back to give him better access. “John.” He moaned, obviously just as eager to put the day’s events behind them.

John mouthed down the length of Sherlock’s neck, tasting his lover’s sweet skin, then moved to drop to his knees before this gorgeous creature. “I have wanted to get you out of this dress all blasted day long.” John purred pushed the silky skirts up his thighs revealing leggings underneath. He lay his
mouth over Sherlock's hardening erection to blow hot breath through the fabric.

"Are you hard for me, love, so hard under your pretty things?" John felt Sherlock's cock twitch in reply. "Oh, I think so." he chuckled a bit and reached up to roll leggings and pants downward. Sherlock shifted his hips as John peeled the underclothes down to his thighs. His hard cock sprang free between them, and John smiled as he reached up to drag the slick material of the dress over his lover's erection.

"You naughty boy, so lovely in your dresses and ribbons. How about you next time, you keep your lip paint on, and get it all over my cock?" John crooned. Sherlock merely groaned in reply.

John pulled Sherlock's underclothes the rest of the way off, returning to kiss softly up his inner thighs. Sherlock reached down to thread a hand through John's hair.

"John, Gods. Please, take me in your mouth."

"In my mouth?" John pushed the fabric of the dress back to ghost his lips under the head of Sherlock's cock. "Like this? Hmmmm?" He teased, barely touching.

"Please, John." Sherlock begged, eyes screwed tight.

John answered by parting his lips, and allowing the wet heat of his mouth to engulf Sherlock's hard prick, sinking down in agonizing slowness.

"Faster" Sherlock moaned fisting up a handful of John's hair, but John took great delight in ignoring him. He kept a slow slide, moving his mouth languidly along Sherlock's cock as the man fairly quivered under him. Finally taking pity on his love, he pulled off, and reached into one of the nearby bags to return with a familiar jar of cream. The smell of honey filled the room as John popped off the top and dug out a scoop of ointment. A slick hand wrapped around Sherlock's cock then to pump as fast as he liked. John crushed his dress up in the other hand, pushing it higher to uncover Sherlock's taut belly. He bent to lick over the glorious pale skin revealed, mouthing at the treasure trail of dark hair leading to his groin as Sherlock rumbled something deep and low. John leaned back to watch Sherlock's face laid so beautifully bare as his hand moved relentlessly over his cock. How utterly debauched his lover looked, head thrown back, fancy dress rucked up over him, limbs sprawled in utter abandon as John worked him over.

"Come for me, love." John coaxed pumping his hand even faster. "Make a mess on your pretty things for me." Sherlock groaned out a sound of pleasure so intense it was almost anguish as he jolted, bowing his back to pump white stripes over his stomach.

Sherlock opened groggy, half-focused eyes to watch as John stood and efficiently stripped off his clothes in less than a minute. John climbed onto Sherlock's lap to slide his hot cock against the ejaculate across Sherlock's belly. He slid his upper body over the cool, slippery fabric of the dress bunched between them while his cock rode over Sherlock's warm body beneath.

"Jaaaaawn," Sherlock moaned, lips pressed against John's throat, long fingers splayed over his back as John rutted against him. Sherlock licked up the side of his neck, latching on to suck. John lost himself, exploding in a white-hot burst.

They leaned together afterwards, holding tight waiting for breath to even out. John sighed and dropped a kiss to Sherlock's forehead. "You ARE dangerous, love."

Sherlock bent to touch his tongue to the small purpling mark he had left on John's neck. "You love it." he smirked.
“I do.” John chuckled weakly, "Gods help me, I do." and he pulled Sherlock into a slow, deep kiss, a beautiful counterpoint to the frantic sex they had just shared. Cooling spunk finally pushed them to unwind, and clean up. Sherlock pulled off the wrinkled, soiled dress, and padded chemise, and they wiped off with hand towels wet from the pitcher of water in the corner.

“I hope that dress is washable - I'd like to have you again in it sometime.” John mused at the pile of dirty things strewn across the floor.

“Oh, no worries.” Sherlock answered with a soft smile."I've got more dresses if that one doesn't make it."

They were much too tired to unearth any night clothes to sleep in, so they simply tumbled into bed stark naked wrapped around each other, breathing in synch till slumber drew them under.
A Trip to the Healers

Chapter Summary

Sherlock makes sure that John sees a Healers Sanctuary when they return to Delphium.

John woke alone in the bed again, but at least this time Sherlock was merely across the room busy penning letters at the room’s small table. John’s hopes for a morning cuddle were dashed though when Sherlock told him to hurry and get dressed so they could catch the first coach back to Delphium.

“So are you telling the king about what we found?” John asked around a yawn, rooting through his bag for clean pants.

“No, I’ve decided we should keep things under wraps until we know more about who the weak link at the palace actually is.” Sherlock spared John a long glance before sealing the scroll with wax dripped from a candle.

“Are you sure? Mycroft is the object of the attack, yeh? Doesn’t he have a right to know?” John wrinkled his brow.

“John, a treasonous plot is a multi-limbed beast.” Sherlock explained, finishing with his letters, and turning to face him fully. “Unless we find out who is turning the head, and cut them off at the top, the creature’s claws will continue to tear. No, I want to be sure I have the whole of the picture before I tell Mycroft.” Sherlock stood, and carefully fit the finished scrolls into his bag.

"All right." John shrugged. "You know best about all things royal."

“The men we heard plotting at the Rose and Pony Inn said 'with the help of the Macmillans' wares it will be . . . illuminating.' It is possible they were talking about fireworks. We saw some at the show last night. Conventional weapons can't be brought through the wards of the royal pavilion, so it needs to be something unexpected. Fireworks would fit the bill. Still, they'll need an inside contact at the palace to pull it all off.” Sherlock fixed John with a piercing stare. "I'll need you to keep your eyes and ears open at the palace over the next few weeks. We’ll need to ferret out the rat carefully before Mid-Summer.”

“I’ll do what I can,” John promised "but I still think we need to tell Mycroft about all this sooner rather than later."

Sherlock had redressed in men’s clothes, but thrown on a long cloak and wound a filmy scarf about his head for the staff expecting to see that nice man, and his flirty wife leaving together that morning. Once they had left the premises, Sherlock simply took the scarf off, and stuffed it into his bag.

The weather had taken a turn for the worse, and the day seemed bled of all colour, cloudy and spitting rain as they boarded a coach back to Delphium. They shared the carriage with two other male passengers who at least had the good graces to nap, and not chit-chat, so the ride back to town
was a quiet one. Sherlock tucked his hand into John’s and stared out the window at the gloom for most of it.

Once back in Delphium, Sherlock burst into activity, dispatching his letters at the nearest courier office, and hailing them a taxi. “To Pennymarket Row” He told the driver as they climbed inside.

“Where are we off to then, I thought we were back to Baker Street?” John asked with a stretch, hoping to be done with traveling soon.

“Anthea’s. I want to ask her about your condition. She isn’t a healer, but she knows every decent one in town. She’ll know who’s the best one to help you.” Sherlock turned eyes as clouded as the day toward him, then folded back in on himself to think.

The bells on the door of “Anthea’s Apothecary – potions, lotions, and sweets” chimed sweetly as Sherlock pushed it open. John paused, bowing automatically to the Gallanus statue, his fingers ghosting over his forehead, heart and lips, then followed Sherlock to the counter. They dropped their bags to the floor as a skinny young woman with hair dyed a very un-natural shade of red sailed through the beaded curtain leaving it swinging in her wake.

“May I help you . . . , oh, it’s you Sherlock.” She grinned at the man, himself. “Anthea’s in the back room, I’ll tell her you’re here, shall I?” She gestured toward the rear of the shop with a tilt of her head.

“Yes, Bridget, thank you.” Sherlock nodded at her, distracted.

In just a few moments, Anthea set the strands of beads swinging again as she joined them at the counter. She looked as if she’d been interrupted from something, pulling off her stained apron, and tucking strands that had fallen out of her long braid behind her ears. “Sherlock, John! How are you? Loralee’s still in school - she’ll be so sorry she missed you.”

“Sorry, Crumbs.” Sherlock grimaced. “Everything’s been at sixes and sevens lately. I’ll come by and see Loralee soon I promise. Today is a business call though. I need some professional advice.”

“Ah well, step into my office then good sirs.” Anthea gave a quick nod shifting instantly to all business. She swung open the partition in the counter, and ushered them into a small room just inside the back area. A couple of chairs sat next to a table covered with pamphlets, glass jars of herbs, and a large bushy fern. Anthea closed the door gently behind them, and took a seat, waiting for John and Sherlock to settle as well. “What can I do for you today?” she asked, leaning forward slightly.

“We’ve recently discovered John’s been under a dark spell for at least five years.” Sherlock told her with no preamble. “It’s been binding him, strangling his healing power to feed itself. He needs a professional healer to clear it, he needs the best . . . and he needs someone discreet. I knew you’d know the right person to see.”

Anthea turned a shocked face to John. “May I scan you, John?” Anthea asked him. “I’m a potions mage, not a healer, but I can sense energies. I’ve . . . never had a case like this before.”

“Of course.” John nodded at her.
Anthea reached out and took John’s hand between her own. As she closed her eyes and concentrated, a soft glow grew over their joined hands. “But this is extraordinary. I would never have noticed this on first glance. It’s almost ducking to avoid my seeing it, but I’ve got it now. It’s like knotwork, it’s so complicated.” Anthea released John’s hand and reached out to squeeze his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, this must have been so hard for you.”

“Really, I had no idea,” John shrugged, “but knowing about it helps put a lot of things into perspective as I look back.”

“It was a dark love spell, a compulsion gone wrong when the object of the attachment died.” Sherlock chimed in chewing a thumbnail.

“Ah, that would explain the twists of it.” Anthea nodded a bit.

“And, has the dark spell just been sapping John’s mage powers, or has it been affecting his behaviour as well?” Sherlock’s narrow gaze bore down on Anthea’s face.

Her eyes widened a bit. “That’s hard to say. John doesn’t act like someone still in thrall to a compulsion, but the spell is complicated. It’s hard to speculate.”

John blew out a breath he’s been holding, and reached up to rub the back of his neck. “It’s all a little creepy, yeh? I’ll just be happy to get it removed.”

“Indeed.” Anthea tapped a finger against her chin for a moment, and then grabbed a pad of paper to scribble down a name and address. “Here, this is a healer my mother worked with. Her name is Lupita Markson. She is beyond excellent, and she can be very discreet. I can send a letter explaining your situation to her this afternoon if you like.”

“Ta, Anthea, that sounds wonderful.” John quirked a half smile at her.

As they stood to exit, Sherlock stopped Anthea with a hand to her arm. “Crumbs, you’re being careful, with you and Loralee?” He asked in a low voice.

“No, of course, we’re always careful. Why do you ask?” Anthea raised her eyebrows.

Sherlock shrugged. “A royal wedding is coming up this summer. Anti-royal tensions will be running high. I wanted to make sure you’re remembering to be . . . careful.”

Anthea smiled tightly, and reached up to pat his cheek. “Don’t worry, Shadow, we’re always careful.”

John was relieved when they finally climbed the stairs to 221B. Sherlock unlocked the door, and held it open for John to follow. “Ah, the ugly couch, now I know I’m home.” John smiled and dropped his bags to collapse across it. The flat looked unusually tidy, and something was simmering on the wood stove. John inhaled deeply. “Mmmm, Carmina must have been by. That smells divine. Gods, it feels like we’ve been away for weeks instead of days.”

Sherlock looked more nervous than usual, hovering over John instead of sitting down next to him.
“Sherlock, stop looming. Sit down or find something useful to do. What’s gotten in to you?” John squinted up at him.

“John, I need to ask you about the bedroom curtains.”

“The bedroom curtains?” John repeated, frowning.

“Yes, I’m thinking of replacing them. I want you to come look at the fabric samples I have in place to see which one you like best.” Sherlock waved a hand toward the bedroom. He looked so concerned that John hauled himself back off the couch to follow him to the bedroom.

“Well, generally I care sod-all about curtains, but yeh, all right . . .” John stopped as soon as he passed the doorway and got his first good look at the room. There in the side corner by the windows sat a new section of tiles under a gleaming copper bathtub all set with taps and pipework, and a large folding screen to the side. John’s mouth dropped open.

“A tub, at our flat? Oh you mad genius!” John reached over to grab Sherlock into a tight squeeze. “How did you manage this?”

Sherlock looked a little sheepish. “I called in some favours from a past client, and had Carmina and Mrs. Hudson oversee the work. It wasn’t hard, John. Do you like it?”

John’s eyes lit up like fireworks. “Like it? Oh, I LOVE it. Let’s try it out right now.” John darted over to plug the tub, and twist the taps to start the water running.

“Well don’t you take the first bath alone? It’s really designed for just one, and I have a few things I wanted to sort.” Sherlock smiled crookedly at him.

“Yeh, all right. Thanks. This is perfect!” John hugged Sherlock around the middle again, and then set to work finding soap to pour into the faintly steaming water filling the tub. Sherlock shut the door behind him quietly as he left.

After a heavenly soak that leached much of the tension of the last few days from his muscles, John threw a towel around his hips and headed into the sitting room. Sherlock was curled on a chair by the fireplace pouring through a book.

“Hey sexy, how about joining me . . .” John drawled, loosening the towel. At just that moment, Carmina swept into the front door holding a basket of laundry. “CARMINA, hi!” John blushed hotly. He made a snatch for the towel before it completely headed south, and nipped back into the bedroom, slamming the door behind. He could hear Sherlock talking with Carmina in the other room.

“Wonderful. You’ve done an excellent job, Carmina. Now we’ve got more laundry, and you’ll have to tell them to take extra care with the fabric of this one . . .”

John dressed in a hurry, and rejoined the two of them in the sitting room. “Hi, Carmina, sorry about that.” John’s ears were still a bit red.

“Oh, Mr. John. It's nothing. You LIVE here. I'll knock loudly next time.” She smiled and gave him a wink, going in to the kitchen to fuss with the pot on the stove. “Are you hungry?” She called back. “I have Wedding Soup ready if you are.”

“Starving.” John said. “And it smells delicious, but whose wedding?”

“What wedding?” Carmina asked coming in the sitting room to set a basket of rolls on the table.
“Whose wedding is the soup from?” John asked.

“Oh, it’s just the name of the soup.” Carmina shrugged. “It is often made for weddings I suppose. And speaking of weddings,” Carmina looked hopefully between the two of them, "Mr. Sherlock tells me you two will have one soon, yes?” Carmina clasped her hands before her prodigious bosom. “I would be so honored to make this soup for your wedding.”

“Yes, and speaking of that, there’s probably something we should be telling you, right, Sherlock?” John wagged his eyebrows meaningfully at the man.

Sherlock looked flustered. “Oh, yes, right, right. Carmina, you may want to sit down for this.”

Carmina didn’t believe them at first when they told her Sherlock was really Prince William, in line to the throne of Brettona. She thought they were having her on in some silly prank. Only Sherlock’s ring and royal seal convinced her otherwise. He hands flew to her face when she finally accepted it.

“Dio mio!” she exclaimed in shock.

When the long sleeves of her dress slipped back, Sherlock took one look at the shiny bracelet wound around her arm and gasped. “Carmina, you’re dating someone. I specifically told the company they were only to send over women and old men to install the bathtub. I didn’t want anyone here to bother you.”

Carmina’s face softened. “Oh no, Mr. Sherlock, Neville wasn’t like that all. He was a proper gentleman.”

“Sherlock, we aren’t Carmina’s nannies. She’s free to do what she likes on her private time.” John frowned at Sherlock. “That’s wonderful Carmina, I’m happy to hear it.” John turned back to smile at her.

“Thank you Mr. John. Neville has been wonderful. He’s the nephew of the company owner. He took me out to dinner last night. We had . . . a very nice time.” She smiled shyly.

Sherlock harumphed a little, but said no more. John’s stomach rumbled.

“Carmina, I heard tales of some soup for lunch?” He asked hopefully.

“Oh, the soup. Of course. Ready in a moment.” Carmina bounced up to get the food from the kitchen.

After they had finished the excellent lunch, and complimented her several times, Carmina remembered a letter they had received earlier. “I almost forgot. This came while you were out.” Carmina fetched the scroll from a side shelf and handed it to Sherlock.

Sherlock split the seal on it, and scanned it quickly. “Oh how tiresome. Mycroft wants us back at the palace for a family dinner with Princess Irene as soon as possible.”

Carmina squealed at hearing that news as she gathered up their dishes for washing, but Sherlock ignored her, turning to John. “I want you to be seen by the healer first before we go back to the palace, and have time to recover after. That shouldn’t take more than a day or two. I’m going to write Mycroft back and tell him we have stomach flu, and will be incapacitated for the next several days. Even Mycroft won’t want us there if he thinks we might be spewing over the salmon croquettes.”

“Mr. John is sick?” Carmina asked with a worried frown.
“It’s an old trouble.” John told Carmina. “I’ve had a dark magic spell binding my mage power for a few years.” John flicked his eyes to Sherlock. “We’re hoping a master healer can help unravel it.”

“Ah, my uncle had a spell on him once for a whole month when he lost a bet. He believed he was a rooster. My aunt thought it was cute, and just waited until it wore off. He was fine after, though he still got up to crow at dawn sometimes.” Carmina shrugged, and went back into the kitchen.

“Carmina,” Sherlock got up to follow her. “John should be fine after the procedure, but I was thinking you could get some invalid foods into the house just in case he feels under the weather afterwards. . . some custard, mint tea, and that bean soup?”

“Of course, Mr. Sherlock.” Carmina hurried to make a list.

After Carmina had left for the day, another scroll arrived by courier from Healer Lupita Markson letting them know she was available to see them the next morning if they were free. Sherlock sent the courier back straight-away with the answer that they would be there bright and early.

Later, John looked over at Sherlock curled into his chair by the fireplace again lost in thought. Even though it wasn’t cold in the flat, they’d lit a small fire for the cheer of it. “Hey, you aren’t worried about this thing tomorrow are you?” John asked him quietly.

“I do. Come on you big berk, it’s going to be fine.” John started to climb into Sherlock’s lap to kiss the lines away, when another knock sounded at the door. “Gallanus, it’s like the central market around here tonight.” John rolled his eyes, and went to answer the door.

Another courier stood on the stoop with a delivery for Sherlock from the Royal Library. The young man emptied out his bag to deposit several scrolls, and bound books onto the table. John caught a few titles “Cursed for a Hundred Years,” “Signs of the Soul-Bound,” and “Dark Spells for Fun and Profit” before Sherlock scooped the lot up in his arms. “John, pay the man.” Sherlock tossed over his shoulder as he retreated with his bounty. John fished out a few bronze coins in a jar by the window, and thanked the man as he closed the door behind him.

“A little light reading before bed?” John teased when he turned back to find Sherlock making a pile of his recent acquisitions by his chair.

“I had Molly at the archives find me a few things, on dark spells gone wrong. I wanted to read up on it.” Sherlock drew himself up a bit as if bracing for an argument.

“That’s fine.” John said, then covered his mouth as a yawn split his face. “Well, that’s it, I’m knackered. I’m off to bed. You coming too?” John asked, though he knew the probable answer, as Sherlock settled into his chair with the first scroll.

“Bed?” Sherlock looked up distractedly. “In a little while. I want to read some of this first. Why don’t you turn in now, and I’ll join you later.”

“All right, Mad Genius. Just don’t stay up too late.” John came over to kiss him good-night. He would have gone for the mouth, but Sherlock tucked his chin at the last minute, and John ended up dropping a tender kiss on his jaw instead.

Sherlock looked up for a split-second, his wide blue eyes searching into John’s. “All right, my Warrior Priest.” He quirked a half-smile and reached up to touch John's cheek, then buried his nose back in his reading again. John ruffled his hand through Sherlock’s dark curls, and headed off to bed.
John woke to light, and no Sherlock in the room. He was starting to wonder what he might have to do to wake up with a long, lanky, delicious genius next to him in bed some morning. Mild sedative, alcohol, maybe some sturdy leather manacles? He padded into the living room to see Sherlock sacked out across the sofa, a hand curled by his face, his mouth half open like a little boy. The book that he had obviously been reading was open on the ground next to him, and John picked it up to read randomly across the page:

“The patient was unable to recognize members of his family even after the dark curse was removed. Even making new memories of recently-met acquaintances was difficult for him. After several bouts of depression, the subject unfortunately killed himself . . .”

John shuddered, and replaced the book on the floor. Some things were just not worth angisting over, and he was determined to go into the Healers Sanctuary with high hopes. He set about making tea. The whistle of the kettle roused Sherlock from his slumber, and he struggled upright.

“John.” Sherlock said as if surprised to see him.

“Yeh. Good morning, Love.” John put a mug of tea with two spoonfuls of sugar next to him on the floor, then returned a minute later with his own mug to settle beside Sherlock on the couch.

“So how did the reading go, anything interesting?” John raised an eyebrow.

“There’s a lot of contradictory evidence on victim’s reactions to dark spells.” Sherlock huffed, taking a sip of his tea. “Very little of it was applicable to . . . our situation.” He wrinkled his forehead.

John was about to reply when another knock at the door caught their attention. “Yoo hoo, boys!” Mrs. Hudson called through. John sighed, and rose to answer. Their landlady stood on the stoop with a basket overflowing with her best pastries. John was happy to let her in.

“Oh, Mrs. Hudson, this is too kind of you.” John smiled.

“Nothing’s too good for my boys.” Mrs. Hudson said patting John on the cheek, and coming in to leave the basket in the kitchen. “Sherlock told me about your trip to the healers this morning. I’m sure it will all be right as rain. You’ll see.” She swept John up in a quick hug, and then rounded on Sherlock giving him a buss on the cheek. “So, you’ll tell me how things go?” at Sherlock’s nod, she patted his shoulder.

"Of course, Mrs. Hudson. Ta for the pastries. I know we'll enjoy them." John thanked her.

“Well, I must dash, this is a busy morning for us.” With a final wave over her shoulder, she was gone.

“Gods, am I dying, and no one told me?” John huffed a laugh closing the door behind her. He turned to bump into Sherlock who had somehow glided across the room to stand directly behind him.

“No of course not, John. We simply love you.” Sherlock wound his arms around John and buried his face in his hair.

“And I love you.” John said, hugging him back. “Look, it’s going to be fine. Anthea recommended
this lady. It’s going to be grand. Let’s go have a pastry twist while they’re still warm.” John squeezed Sherlock around the middle, then went to the kitchen to unpack the basket.

When it was time to go, a taxi was waiting for them on Baker Street. “Oh Sherlock, it’s only a few blocks, we could have walked it.” John scolded him.

“I know, I wanted a taxi for you though.”

Sherlock looked so shuttered that John relented. He thought about how he’d feel if the situation were reversed, and he realized he’d be going spare if Sherlock had to go in for some procedure. He reached out and squeezed his love’s hand.

“All right, thank you, the taxi is lovely.” John admitted, and was relieved to see Sherlock unwind a little.

The carriage dropped them off on Tottenford Way. The clinic was a cheerful building done over in peach-colored stucco with bright awnings over the windows. The waiting room was empty as they were the first patients of the day, and the receptionist called them back almost instantly to meet with the healer. Healer Lupita Markson was a beautiful dark-skinned woman with coils of black and grey braids looped over her head. She greeted John and Sherlock warmly, and made them comfortable in her office.

"John, I have two colleagues who are free to join me this morning. If this spell is as tricky as I think it is, I'll need their assistance. I’d like to spend a few minutes scanning you here and then we’ll take you back to the operating room. Your partner can wait in an inner waiting room for you, or go home for a few hours. This may take some time."

“I’m happy to stay.” Sherlock said looking anything but happy, but as if wild boars wouldn’t drag him away.

“Of course.” The woman smiled with her whole body as she leaned forward to pat Sherlock’s arm. Sherlock relaxed slightly. Healer Lupita looked at John. “May I scan you?” At John’s nod, she took his hand between hers, and settled her power over him in a faint glow. John closed his eyes, and relaxed immeasurably. He hadn’t realized how much tension was thrumming through his body until the healer soothed it away. John blinked when she finished and sat back.

“This is unusual, but very similar to something I’ve worked on before.” The woman looked serene, but somehow her smile had taken on a harder edge like a warrior about to go off into battle. “John, I have every reason to believe we’ll be able to completely reverse this with no side effects to your power.”

John found himself utterly trusting her. “I put myself in your hands.” He told her.

“Good man.” She said patting his arm as she rose. Lupita called in the other two healers who would assist that morning, a woman and a man who were both so friendly, and exuded such a competent feeling that John relaxed even more. Sherlock took them all aside to grill them with a barrage of questions before Lupita laid a comforting hand on his back, and then finally, they were moving down the hall to the operating room.

Sherlock grabbed John in a fierce hug. “Hey, hey, it’s all right.” John wound his arms around Sherlock’s middle to squeeze back. A nurse led Sherlock gently away then to the waiting room, and he flounced off without looking back. The healers directed John on to the room at the end of the hall. It was empty save for some cabinets and a narrow bed in the center, but the wall sconces, and warm pastel-coloured walls left it feeling cheery. They asked him to undress behind a screen, and he put on
the loose fitting gown left for him, the one open in that back that patients everywhere hate, and then lay down on the narrow bed to get ready.

“We’re going to put you under.” Lupita smiled down at him. “You’ll be going into a strong trance while we work. When you wake, it will all be over.” Lupita laid her hands at John’s temples and had him count backward from ten.

The next thing John knew, he was lying in another place. He blinked. Sherlock’s silhouette rose overhead like the dawn sun burning away the morning fog.

“John, how do you feel?” Sherlock’s voice seemed to drift down from far away. His beautiful, beautiful face swam into focus. Such dear features, marred only by the tight lines that bracketed his mouth and eyes. John smiled at him, and felt something like the sky opening up inside his chest.
Here I am in Your Life, It's a Beautiful Life

Chapter Summary

John recovers quite nicely at Baker Street, but Mycroft insists the two return to the palace for more fun and games with royals.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter comes from the lyrics of "Hairshirt" - a weird, warbly little song by the priests of poetry, the band R.E.M.

"Sherlock." The name tripped oddly over John’s tongue. “I feel so strange.”

“The healers warned me you’d be somewhat groggy for awhile. That’s normal. They also said the procedure went well.” Sherlock’s eyes burned brightly at him. He placed a hand over John’s chest. “It’s good to see you, my love.”

“And you.” John felt like his head and his body weren’t quite connected, and yet when he thought about holding Sherlock’s hand, he found himself reaching up to do so.

“Could you . . . could you lie here with me?” John slurred. “I feel like I’m not quite sure where my edges are.” He didn’t know if he’d actually said was what he’d meant to convey, but a moment later, Sherlock crawled onto the bed with the ease of a cat to wrap himself around John, drawing him tight.

“Ah, that’s much better.” John sighed feeling the weight and warmth of Sherlock anchoring him to earth.

“Sherlock, I want some rhubarb pie.” He mumbled into the dark curls that brushed against his chin.

“Do you, love?”

“I do.”

“Then you shall have some as soon as I’m able to get it.”

When the nurse came in to check on her patient, she found the two of them fast asleep together. She just pulled a blanket over them both, and left them alone to sleep knowing a healer would be by later. They did wake, stretching and blinking when Healer Lupita opened the door, and came to stand by the bed.

“How are you feeling, John?” She asked.

“All right, I guess. Better.” John told her struggling to sit up. Sherlock had moved to perch on the side of the bed, and helped John to push upright, propping his pillow behind him.
Lupita pulled a stool closer to sit on, and reached forward to pat John’s leg. “John, you look great. I have to say we’re all very pleased with how things went today.”

“So, am I healed?” John asked nervously.

“Well, I do have some good news and some bad news about your condition.” She told him. “The good news is we completely eradicated all traces of the dark spell. Your power should now function at its normal levels. It will fluctuate a bit for the first few days, and you may get an odd ‘pins and needles’ feeling all over. So go easy on yourself, rest, and don’t try to use your powers for at least a week.”

John felt a wave of relief flood over him. “Thank the Gods. So, what’s the bad news?”

“I’m sorry, but we accidentally took that pretty love bite off your neck during the healing.” Lupita told him with a completely straight face. “You’ll obviously have to put a new one on later.” She turned to Sherlock with a hint of a smile playing at her lips.

“I don’t think that will be a problem.” Sherlock said in a bit of a daze.

“Somehow, I didn’t think it would.” Lupita did smile then. "John, basically, you look excellent. I’ll need to see you back in a week. Try not to use your powers until then, and we can put you through a few exercises, and see how you’re progressing.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much for all you did.” John felt himself tearing up.

“I hope you don’t me saying so, John, but I was amazed at what I saw of the strength of your healing powers. For purely selfish reasons, as a fellow healer, I would love to see you what you can really do. I think the world has been missing out on your talents, young man.”

“Wow, no pressure.” John laughed.

“Not until you’re back on your feet.” Lupita smiled patting his leg again before rising. “You’re free to go home whenever you feel up to it. Just see the receptionist on the way out to schedule your follow-up.”

“Thank you again, Healer Lupita.” John smiled.

“You’re very welcome, Healer John.” She nodded on her way out.

Sherlock had another taxi called to take John home. Once there, he bundled John onto the couch with a blanket, and began plying him with tea, food, and some new books he’s gotten from a shop by the Healers Sanctuary.

“Oh, ta, love, you didn’t have to get all this.” John smiled at him accepting the armload of books. He read through the titles:

*Advanced Healing Principles Made Practical*

*More Ancient Tales of the Islanders*

*A Death by Candlelight*

*Care and Feeding of Your Komodo Dragon.*

“Oh that last one’s mine.” Sherlock darted forward to claim the book.
“Sherlock, we’re not getting a Komodo Dragon.” John told him with some alarm.

“Oh, I know. It just looked interesting.” Sherlock huffed back.

After Sherlock made sure John was set with food and tea, he wrote and went out to mail several letters to Anthea, and Harry and Evie letting them know John’s procedure had gone well. On returning, he hovered over John so much asking what he needed, that John said he needed Sherlock to sit down, and be his foot rest if that would get him to stop fussing. Sherlock obligingly slid under John’s feet settling them into his lap, but continued to fidget, looking like he’d swallowed something sour.

John set his book down and rubbed a heel against Sherlock’s belly. “All right, love. What’s wrong? I’m fine, it all went smashingly. What’s still bothering you?”

Sherlock looked a bit sheepish. “John, I have a confession to make. I didn’t deduce you cold that first night you met me at the temple.”

“Oh, do tell.” John raised his eyebrows.

“No, I had my alley kids watching you for at least a fortnight beforehand. When I got back from a trip abroad that Mycroft dragged me on, all the buzz on Baker Street was about the fit new brother at Temple of the Small Gods. I followed you on one of your afternoon rounds twice. That night I got the knife cut from a suspect in a bar fight, I walked right past a Healers Sanctuary to come wait for you in the prayer room.”

“You sodding fraud.” John laughed.

“Of course I could have deduced all that I told you on our first meeting, but I met you that night intending to seduce you. I wasn’t even sure that our trip to the Rose and Pony Inn would lead to anything . . . other than my bed.” Sherlock’s cheeks burned.

“You just wanted to dance for me in those purple trousers, didn’t you?” John breathed out, eyebrows raised.

When Sherlock nodded miserably, John couldn’t stand his long face another minute. He crawled over to sit in Sherlock’s lap. “Oh love, in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not complaining. I can’t imagine where my life would be if I hadn’t fallen arse over tit in love with you.”

“John, I love you too, that’s why the news of the dark love spell caught me so off guard.” Sherlock shuddered slightly looking down.

John frowned. “You were afraid that you had somehow switched the love spell to you, weren’t you? That night we met, and you healed my shoulder. You thought the energy exchange had left me enthralled to you?” John raised a hand to gently cup Sherlock’s chin.

Sherlock lifted eyes gone clear as glass to him. He nodded again.

“I don’t think the spell did anything, but bind my power once it turned in on itself. But it’s all gone now. It’s just me here.” John reassured him. “Still madly in love with you. On your lap . . . kissing your face.” John dropped small kisses all over Sherlock’s closed eyelids, cheeks, and nose, and slightly-quirked mouth.

“Rubbing against your lovely cock.” John rocked his pelvis to make good on his word.

“Snogging you blind.” John leaned in to claim Sherlock’s lips in a hungry, deep kiss. Sherlock
wound his arms around John, and kissed back with a rising interest. Sherlock growled, and flipped John onto his back, bearing down on top of him. “Mine.” He murmured mouthing under John's jaw. “Mine.” He kissed over John’s neck. “Mine.” He bit at John’s ear, moving to suck lightly at the sensitive skin underneath it. He rocked forward, dragging his erection over a boneless John moaning softly beneath him. Sherlock broke off abruptly, and pulled back with a start. John made a terrible little sound at the loss of him. His eyes snapped open as he grasped after Sherlock’s retreating hips.

“John, you’re meant to be taking it easy.” Sherlock creased his forehead, and sat back on his heels. Only with doing energy work. Physically, I feel fine.” John gathered a few of his wits to speak. He lay sprawled over the couch flushed, and breathless, but certainly no worse for wear. “You heard the healers. I need a new love bite on my neck.” John turned his head, and tilted it slightly to better bare his throat. Sherlock, finally seeming to agree with his argument, growled again, and pounced over John once more to lick a hot stripe up his neck.

“Oh boys, hello!” Mrs. Hudson called at the door. “Oh, bugger.” Sherlock sat up, hastily arranging the blanket over the two of them as John pushed upright beside him. “Come in Mrs. Hudson, the door’s unlocked.” Sherlock called out in an only-slightly rough voice.

Mrs. Hudson somehow managed to push open the door with her elbow whilst carrying a large pie on a dishtowel in both hands. “John, dear, how are you feeling?” “I'm great, thanks.” John dragged a hand through his hair settling it back to rights. “Mmmm, that smells like rhubarb, my favorite.” John looked so delighted that all annoyance fled from Sherlock’s face.

“Sherlock told me things went well today. He also said you were craving rhubarb pie.” Their landlady fairly twinkled at them. “Was I? I don’t remember. I’m happy to have it though. Ta very much!” John beamed at her.

“You two stay where you are, take it easy. I’ll cut you both a piece.” She called back as she took the pie into the kitchen. True to her word, Mrs. Hudson returned shortly delivering two generous slices on small plates to the couch.

John made indecent sounds of pleasure when the first forkful entered his mouth. Sherlock had completely abandoned eating his own piece, entranced with watching John savor his, chewing slowly with eyes closed.

“Mrs. H, you are a mage of the kitchen.” John opened his eyes to smile at her.

“Oh, John. I do like to watch someone enjoying his food.” Mrs. Hudson cooed. “Sherlock, eat something! You’re too skinny by far.” She turned to admonish him. Sherlock finally took a bite. “It’s quite good. Thank you Mrs. Hudson. You are a gem.” He pasted his odd “for company” smile over his face.

“Oh you.” Mrs. Hudson flicked her towel at him. “Just bring the pie tin back when you’re done. Take care, boys.” With a wave she was out the door.

Sherlock watched John licking his fork clean after his pie was gone. “Do you want another piece?”
He asked almost reverently, mesmerized by the sight of John’s tongue gliding over the cutlery.

“Better not. I’m going to get fat if everyone keeps dumping food on me like this.” John looked over at Sherlock’s plate. “Hey, you’re not going to finish that?” Sherlock looked down at the pie he had completely forgotten in his lap. “Give that to me.” John grabbed Sherlock’s plate and scooped a piece of the pie onto the fork. “Here, open up, let the horse into the barn.” He lifted the fork to Sherlock’s mouth.

“John, really.” Sherlock protested.

“Num, num.” John said opening his mouth. Sherlock found himself parting his lips in unconscious mimicry. John’s tongue slid out to glide over his lower lip as he maneuvered the morsel into Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock was so entranced watching the expressions play out over John’s face while he fed him, that he’d eaten the whole slice of pie before he noticed it was gone.

“It’s a crime to waste pie that good.” John smiled at him as he put the plate to the floor. “And now I’ll be able to taste it on you.” John pulled Sherlock back down over him slotting their hips together. “Now where were we? I believe you were about to mark me.”

Sherlock settled onto him with a satisfied grunt, finding John’s parted lips to kiss warmly, moving a tongue into the wet heat of his mouth. John sighed as he welcomed him in.

“Mmmmmm.” John hummed threading a hand up into Sherlock’s curls to hold his head in place as his own tongue dipped into Sherlock’s mouth, sliding and seeking. “You do taste good.”

Sherlock’s kisses roamed from John’s mouth to trail over his cheek and down to one ear. “Bed or couch, love? Where shall I have you, hmmm?” He rumbled dark and low.

“Not going anywhere.” John murmured, reaching out to find the jar of cream they now left hidden between the cushions of the couch.

They didn’t even bother with undressing, merely moved enough clothes aside to pull their hot erections together. John handed Sherlock the open jar to slick his fingers with enough cream to coat their cocks as he wrapped long fingers around them both. Sherlock lay half over him, propped on one hand as the other wove magic pumping their shafts together.

“How pretty we look.” Sherlock crooned gazing down at their cocks side by side. “How beautiful you are, John. My John.” Sherlock raised eyes gone crystal blue to pierce his soul.

“Yours.” John agreed, “I’m yours.” He tried to keep Sherlock’s gaze, but his eyes fluttered closed as the fire consuming his body and mind pulled him under. Sherlock exploded right after him in a wonderful full-throated moan that made John feel just a tiny bit smug. They lay quietly for a very long time together before anyone even mentioned cleaning up or moving anything.

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They spent the next two days at Baker Street. Almost one whole day was spent indolently wound together in bed. John discovered that Sherlock had never learned to blow a loud whistle through his teeth, and spent half the morning teaching him the basics. They got out of bed briefly to use the loo, and grab food from the kitchen. John happily spent the afternoon taking Sherlock apart, fucking him slowly on his hands and knees until the man shook with the strain of supporting them both.
Finally at dusk, they left the twisted sheets behind to fill the tub, and carefully climb in together. It did fit two if the bathers didn’t mind being creatively close which John and Sherlock did not.

Sherlock took John out to dinner at a new place with tall candles and white tablecloths. No one there knew them, and they simply enjoyed the food, and too much wine, and holding hands over the table.

The next morning, Sherlock mercilessly pulled John out of bed bright and early, and they made it back to Gold’s gym for the early morning martial arts class. John was a little disappointed that Hannah wasn’t there, but not too much. Master Ang split the two of them up again, and John worked hard sparring against a sweaty, muscular fellow, and then a heavyset woman who was inexperienced and kept pulling John’s arms the wrong way.

Sherlock partnered first with a tall man twice his width. John marveled at how easily Sherlock flipped him across the room, almost into a wall. Master Ang shook his head, and made Sherlock spar with him after that. The whole class stopped to watch a particularly interesting scuffle that looked like nothing so much as a circle dance, the teacher and star student whipping around like whirling dervishes. In a flash, Master Ang had Sherlock pinned to the mat. “Always something to learn.” He told Sherlock as he let him up, and they bowed together. After class and a quick splash in the bathing room, John and Sherlock stopped at the Regents Tea and News Café to grab lunch, and sort Sherlock’s mail.

“There’s all together too much dross here.” Sherlock complained sorting through the accumulated letters from his drop box as John slurped his onion soup.

“Why am I meant to care if a family is squabbling over a will, or their spouse is obviously cheating on them? Pah. Look at this one – I think my wife is poisoning me. Delusional - if it were true he'd most likely already be dead.” Sherlock flipped the offending letters to the table. “Utter rubbish. Lesser minds are able to cover this.” He reached for his cooling cup of tea with a scowl.

“Get a secretary.” John suggested around a bite of wheat roll dunked into his soup.

“A secretary?” Sherlock’s frown cleared. “John you’re a marvel at uncovering the obvious. My face is going to be much more recognized after this accursed royal wedding. It’s definitely time to delegate.” He looked over at the food on their table. “Pass me a scone, would you?” John snorted at him, but passed the plate over anyway.

The next morning began unfortunately with a loud banging at their flat door.

John nudged Sherlock and mumbled “Your turn.” When Sherlock only rolled over and made a rude noise, John pushed his shoulder harder. “Invalid, remember? I’m still convalescing.”

“Invalid, my sore arse.” Sherlock cracked one eye open. “You shagged me like a wild man yesterday. Twice.”

“Still your turn to get the door.” John muttered.

With a sigh, Sherlock rolled out of bed, shaking out his hair with both hands. He strode through the sitting room in his pants to throw the door wide revealing the surprised courier outside, one hand raised to knock again.
“Yes?” Sherlock intoned imperiously holding a hand out for the inevitable scroll. The man passed it over, and Sherlock slammed the door on the courier’s face with nary a tip. He popped open the seal on the scroll as he walked back to bed, reading aloud another demand from the King that they attend a dinner at the palace that evening, and “no” wasn’t an acceptable answer.

“Beating up the messenger for the message? No tip?” John scolded him, sitting up against the headboard, and nodding toward the door.

“Oh, Mycroft pays anyone who delivers mail here handsomely ahead of time.” Sherlock complained tossing the scroll to the floor to climb back on all fours over the bed.

“John, don’t you dare get out of this bed. Speaking of someone’s turn . . .” With a feral grin, he stripped covers aside, and dragged John back to lying prone. Sherlock made short work of John’s underwear, pulling it off with his teeth to toss it over his shoulder to the floor. With a growl, he lapped and nipped his way up John’s body to suck two small love bites low on his neck. John moaned when he pushed slicked fingers up into his hole all the while whispering a slow patter against his ear, “You want me to take you don’t you, up the arse? Fill you till you can’t move?” Sherlock finally slipped inside to ride him hard and slow, John’s knees propped over his shoulders, moving with the rhythm of John’s nearly anguished cries beneath him.

They took their time leaving the flat, but eventually, they made their way to a taxi stand and caught a cab across town. Again, Sherlock had them let out a few blocks away to walk unobtrusively up to the palace.

“I wanted to show you the last good way to get into the palace unobserved. There is one more secret entrance, but it involves climbing, and I don’t want to deal with that today.” Sherlock explained airily as they walked the length of the stone wall surrounding the palace grounds.

Sherlock led John past what was obviously a servants’ gate to a set of bushes around the corner. Sherlock pushed them through the branches, and moved a large paving stone aside to reveal something between a gap and tunnel under the wall. It was lined with smooth stones so at least the traveler wiggling through wouldn’t come out filthy on the other end.

“You were a menace as a child weren’t you?” John asked after one glance. “What am I saying, you’re a menace now!” He huffed out a short laugh.

Sherlock merely quirked a smile in reply. “After you.” He motioned for John to take the lead. Sherlock backed in after so he could slide the stone which was deceptively light and thin over the entrance behind them. They emerged behind dustbins in the courtyard, and carefully rose, brushing themselves off to join a few servants trickling into the rear door of the palace.

The dinner that evening was mercifully to be in the smaller rose dining room that the royals used for private family gatherings. John insisted that Sherlock not dress up like a complete peacock for the meal as they stood in Sherlock’s dressing room surveying his wardrobe of pomp and fluff.

“Come off it, there’s no one to impress tonight. You’re meant to be putting Princess Irene at ease, not showing her what a great stonking nob you can be.” John chided him.

“Oh, if I must.” Sherlock rolled his eyes, and had Goodson put back the shiny silver outfit he had
requested, and pick something more sedate. They both looked quite smart after Goodson had kitted Sherlock out in an elegant black suit, and John in a lighter charcoal one.

When John gazed up at him and said “I have to say it does lessen the pain of having dinner with your family to see you dressed like that.” Sherlock settled his shoulders, and relaxed a bit.

“John, you are the only thing that makes any of the palace bearable.” He pulled John in for a kiss, and would have completely forgotten about keeping their neck cloths in place had Goodson not cleared his throat diplomatically behind them.

“Pardon me, your majesty, but it is nearly time for dinner.” Goodson said slightly apologetically.

“Make them wait a bit.” Sherlock shrugged. “Isn’t it always better to be fashionably late than too early?” Sherlock leaned in to give John another thorough snog, but refrained from mussing any of his clothes. Finally Sherlock stepped back, reaching out to straighten John’s suit coat.

"Into the fray?” John asked him.

“Yes, love. Let us face the madness together. I’ve never had a date for one of these dinners before.” Sherlock mused, gazing at John with a fond smile.

“Well, now you have two.” John reminded him arching an eyebrow.

Sherlock’s smile faltered. It was easy to forget the reality of Princess Irene back at Baker Street, but the date of the royal wedding was fast approaching. Gods willing and disaster doesn’t strike, and Sherlock would have a wife in less than two months John thought.

Sherlock seemed to decide something and with one firm nod, put out his hand for John to take. For once they followed the main hallways to the dining room instead of some secret back route. John wondered why it felt so much like going into battle, and wished he had some weapon in tow, but then realized he had Sherlock’s hand in his, and his lover was weapon enough for any emergency. John almost giggled at the thought, and when Sherlock looked at him with a question on his face, John just shook his head. *Later,* his expression said back. They were already at the doors to the dining room.

Everyone was indeed already seated when they arrived, sipping at their drinks. The table was large enough to accommodate twice the number gathered. King Mycroft loomed at the head of the table with Queen Norah to his right and Lady Prunella to his left. Sherringford sat next to Prunella with Irene on his other side, facing the two empty place settings obviously left for John and Sherlock.

“Prince William, how good of you to join us this evening.” Mycroft smiled an expansive smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “We’ve so missed your company these last few days. Please sit, join us.” He swept his hand toward the two empty spaces. Sherlock plopped down across from Irene, leaving the space next to Queen Norah for John to slide into.

“Forgive my absences, brother, my many projects do call for my attention.” Sherlock replied nodding at the servant who darted forward to fill his and John’s wine glasses.

“Projects?” Princess Irene asked opening her icy blue eyes, and cocking her head slightly to one side. John had almost forgotten just how sharpened beautifully she was since last he’d seen her. She really was a stunning woman.

“My little brother fancies himself a detective.” Prince Sherringford cut in with a sneer leaning in toward Irene.
“A detective, but this is fascinating.” Irene moved subtly away from Sherringford to train her attention on Sherlock.

“It’s a game that Prince William concocts to amuse himself and pour royal resources toward his pursuit of justice and truth.” Sherringford laughed waving a dismissive hand in the air as if these were bad things.

“I don’t use any of my inheritance for my detective work, Sherringford, it pays for itself.” Sherlock volleyed back in a tight voice.

“Please, please, let’s not start any fights before the finger bowls have even gone around.” Queen Norah chimed in. “I don’t believe we’ve all even been formally introduced.” She looked meaningfully at Sherlock over John’s head until Sherlock sighed and gestured toward John.

“My Liege, my Queen, this is Brother John Hamish Watson, my intended Royal Consort.” “John this is of course King Mycroft, ruler of Brettona, his Lady wife, Queen Norah, my brother, Prince Sherringford, and his wife, Lady Prunella, and of course the Princess Irene of Arabonia, my intended Lady wife.” Sherlock gestured to each of them in turn, and John bowed his head to all in what he hoped was an appropriate manner.

“Brother John, how lovely to have you join us.” Norah trilled at John in a way that didn’t sound very lovely at all.

“Thank you so much. I’m honored to be here . . . ma’am.” John nodded again, glad for the glass of wine to sip to cover his deep embarrassment at not knowing the first thing about how to properly address anyone at the table.

Sherlock reached over to squeeze his thigh under the table. “Relax.” He told John sotto voce. “You don’t have to be an ambassador. Just be yourself.”

Thankfully, the servants swooped in to begin serving the dizzying array of finger bowls, food and drink that would appear and disappear over the next two hours. Individual conversations buzzed around the table, and John relaxed fractionally.

“How is Prince Fergus doing, your majesty?” John finally steeled himself to engage Queen Norah next to him in personal chit-chat.

The queen stiffened slightly. “My son has been ill lately, and I am concerned for him.”

“Oh, what seems to be the trouble?” John asked tilting his head, brow creased.

Mycroft turned a sharp eye to them. “Don’t worry, Brother John, it’s merely a small cold. Our son is a fine, healthy specimen. My wife does tend to overreact to the sniffles . . . as any new mother might.” He added a bit more softly.

“He is a fine-looking lad. I’m sure he’ll be fine. Though it’s a mother’s job to worry.” John smiled.

Norah flashed him a look, and opened her mouth to speak when Lady Prunella who had been studying her soup bowl finally popped her head up, and cut in.

“Brother John, have you and William set a date for your wedding, dear? It’s so romantic . . . two weddings to look forward to at the palace.” Prunella crooned, eyes wide.

“I . . .” John wasn’t quite sure what to say. It wasn’t something he and Sherlock had really discussed in detail.
Sherlock’s head swiveled and he moved smoothly into the conversation. “John and I are of course waiting for my royal wedding day with Princess Irene before publicly announcing our relationship, Prunella.”

“Of course.” Sherringford chimed in, lifting his glass of claret to catch the light. “We need to schedule the many weddings of the Great Sherlock Holmes in the proper way. Protocol saves us in delicate situations.” He shot Sherlock a small glance before taking a drink.

“Indeed, Sherringford, the rules of propriety help us in a great many situations to navigate the proper ways to treat one another in public . . . and private.” Sherlock raised his own glass of wine and swallowed a mouthful.

“Surely we can dispense with lofty codes of conduct in private, brother dear?” Sherringford countered.

“Manners, I have heard are the art of setting others at ease. Surely this is never amiss in any situation, Sherringford?” Sherlock raised an eyebrow.

“Aren’t you the pot calling the kettle black, Mr. ‘Orgies in the Grotto’ Holmes? You wouldn’t know manners if they bit you in the arse.” Color had bloomed in Sherringford’s cheeks as his voice rose.

“At least I made sure people took turns at my orgies.” Sherlock leaned in slightly, but kept his voice even. “I’ve never used my position to belittle someone which is more than I can say for you . . .”

“Orgies in the Grotto?” Irene raised her own eyebrows at the same moment the king slammed a hand down onto the table, making the dishes jump.

“CHILDREN, PLEASE.” Mycroft’s voice thundered across the room. "If there cannot be civil conversation at the dinner table, then there will be no conversation at all.”

An awkward silence hung over the table with nothing but the quiet scrape and clink of silverware to break the tension before Queen Norah turned to Prunella. “Pruney, dear, I heard the dressmaker had several new bolts of fabric available. Did you decide which colors you wanted for your Mid-Summer dresses?”

As conversations started up again, John leaned toward Irene. “Princess Irene, speaking of the Grotto, have you had a chance to bathe there yet? It is quite spectacular.”

“I have indeed, Brother John.” Irene answered him after finishing her bite of food. “Queen Norah has taken me once, and my maidservant, Kate, and I have been back several times since. I confess to being quite taken with it, though I must admit to not having stumbled on any orgies there on my trips.” Irene took a sip of water.

“Well, me either, I’m afraid. The orgies were before my day too.” John caught Irene’s eye, and they both broke into quiet giggles hastily smothered with napkins. Sherlock had the good graces to look a little embarrassed as he raised a forkful of mushy peas to his mouth.

“Princess Irene, I was wondering . . .” Sherlock began as Irene raced over him “Prince William, I was hoping you and Brother John might dine with me in my rooms tomorrow evening. There is much we might discuss while become better acquainted with one another.”

Sherlock turned to John. “John, if you have no other pressing engagements . . .”

“My calendar is quite clear at the moment. I’d love to Irene, thank you.” John replied.
“Well, then it’s a date.” Sherlock raised an eyebrow, and took another swallow of his wine.
The Game Continues

Chapter Summary

The game is on as John and Sherlock search for conspiracy around the palace.

Chapter Notes

The phrase "An it harm none, do what ye will." is a quote from a work written by Doreen Valiente in 1964. Called "The Wiccan Rede," it has become one of the main tenets of modern Wicca, a reminder that people should be free to act, love, and live as they chose as long as it doesn't cause harm to themselves or others.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dinner finally ended when King Mycroft declared he had meetings in the morning, and rose to bid everyone good night. With a nod, he swept off, and all were free to go. In a rare bit of chivalry, Sherlock offered to escort Irene back to her rooms. John begged off accompanying them.

“No, you go, have a quiet moment.” He whispered to Sherlock, and found his way to his own rooms alone. Servants had been in to tidy, and had left candles burning in the sitting room and bedroom. John decided he missed the handy magic button in Sherlock’s room that turned off the candles in one go. Have to request one of those, John thought. He purposefully didn’t wait up, just washed, stripped to his underwear, blew out all the candles but one in the sitting room, and went to bed. It was late when he felt a body tilt the mattress and slip in next to him. John woke slightly to feel Sherlock’s warmth pressed against him before slipping back under.

When next John woke, it was to daylight, and the weight of a sleeping Sherlock stretched out beside him. Sherlock had lost his coat and trousers, but still had on his shirt from dinner like he just couldn’t be arsed to strip any further. John marveled at the chance to simply watch his chest gently rising and falling. Sherlock was always such a crackling ball of energy, it felt like such a gift to have him lying here soft and unspooled. John scooted over, and inhaled the delicious scent at the back of his neck - woody, musky, home.

Sherlock opened one eye and rolled onto his back. “No marks.” He said in lieu of hello.

“Sorry?” John smiled down at him.

“Irene and I just talked last night. No whips, no marks.”

“Ah, good for you.” John said scooping his arms around Sherlock’s middle to drag him closer. “Did you talk about anything interesting?”

“We discussed a variety of topics. You were right.” Sherlock observed.
“Ooh, let’s get that framed. What was I right about?”

“She and I do better when I’m honest with her.”

“Mmm.” John hummed, and refrained from any other comment.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him. “I offered her one of the many country home properties the Holmes family has as a bride gift. I think that also went a long way toward smoothing foreign relations. Well, everything but Rosewood Manor, that’s my favourite, and the Cheltingham estate. Mummy favors that one most.”

“Do you have to run this by Mycroft?” John asked.

“He actually suggested it as well.” Sherlock admitted grudgingly.

“Some time the Holmes boys do the right thing.” John smiled

Sherlock merely snorted in return.

“So, what’s on the schedule this morning?” John asked coyly sliding in just a bit closer to let his morning erection brush against Sherlock’s hip.

“Someone knows.” Sherlock said, a far-away look in his eye.

“Hmmm?” John wasn’t particularly listening to him at this point having moved in to graze his teeth gently against the side of Sherlock’s neck.

“Someone knows.” Sherlock repeated, suddenly leaping out of bed to his feet. “Someone is behind the plot to kill the king and heir at Mid-Summer, but someone, perhaps several someones at the palace have secrets they aren’t telling. We need to shake the place down, find anything that doesn’t fit the usual pattern. We’ll start with the Mid-Summer festival planning. Come on John, the game is on.”

"All right." John sighed as he watched Sherlock stalking off to the washroom. The game indeed.

After a short time for washing and dressing, Sherlock led John down a quick side staircase to the kitchens. John absolutely insisted they stop for breakfast before doing any investigating. John was quite surprised to come across Mycroft with tea and eggs and the morning papers in the family dining room. It seemed so normal. He looked at them over the paper he’d folded in half.

“William, John. This is a surprise. Have you broken your fast yet? There’s plenty left if you’re hungry.” He motioned toward the sideboard behind him.

“Starving, Ta.” John said moving to the sideboard to grab a plate, and peer into the covered dishes set there. John heaped a plate with kippers, bacon, beans, toast and mushrooms. A servant appeared to pour them fresh tea.

“Sherlock?” John asked with raised eyebrows nodding toward the sideboard as he joined him at the table.

“Not hungry.” Sherlock said adding sugar to his tea, and pulling one of the news sheets to view. A few minutes later though, and Sherlock had nicked the toast off his plate, and then one of the pieces of bacon John nudged his way. John smiled, and looked up to see Mycroft watching them with his own amused expression.
“John, I trust your rooms at the palace are to your liking?”

“Yes, thank you, they’re absolutely lovely.”

“I’ve always been fond of that suite in the palace, myself.” Mycroft observed.

“John, I’m sure William will forget to mention it, but your family is welcome to join us for the royal wedding. Rooms can be made available for them at the palace, and I’m happy to provide transportation.”

“Wrong. I did mention it, Mycroft.” Sherlock looked up from his newspaper with a crease between his eyebrows.

“Excellent. You may give my secretary, Critchton, their information.” Mycroft took a final drink from his tea cup and set his paper down. “Well, unlike some, I have a strict schedule to keep.”

“Being a slave to the clock and routine is not the be-all of a productive life.” Sherlock huffed back at Mycroft.

“It’s a meeting with a delegation from the lake district about some land disputes this morning.” Mycroft raised an eyebrow at him. “If you’d care to sit in and learn more about the . . . family business, you’re more than welcome to join us.”

“I know more than enough about the family business.” Sherlock snorted.

“Well then. Let me bid you gentlemen good day.” Mycroft placed his napkin on the table and rose.

John half rose and bowed awkwardly as Mycroft stood and glided out the door. None of the Holmes family ever seemed to make an exit or entrance that wasn’t lavished with dramatic flair.

Sherlock pulled John off on their hunt as soon as his last bite was down. They managed to corner the head housekeeper, Mrs. Morgan, in her office near the kitchens. She of course received them politely, but Sherlock’s questions about the Mid-Summer planning were instantly brushed aside.

“That’s all settled.” Mrs. Morgan told them. “If you want to help with planning anything, your majesty, I could use some time with you and Princess Irene to finalize things for your wedding in August. The Prince’s Blessing Day at Mid-Summer will be a drop in the bucket compared to that.”

“Dull.” Sherlock muttered under his breath, but quickly followed it with a “Of course, Mrs. Morgan. I’ll speak to Princess Irene about it.”

Sherlock and John spent the better part of the day spying on servants, and roaming about the palace at large looking for any suspicious activity. They heard strange noises that they followed only to discover two footmen having a quick bang in a supply closet. Neither John nor Sherlock felt particularly qualified to reprimand them, and after an awkward, “Pardon us.” and a “No, not at all.” they closed the door, and moved quickly on.

They followed a shifty-eyed butler around for several hours before Sherlock deduced that the man was merely constipated, and not guilty of any treasonous plotting. Nothing else of note seemed to be going on beyond the usual palace activities though Sherlock did make a note to tell Mrs. Morgan of the maid they saw slipping silverware into her apron pocket. They tried to stop in at the nursery again, and see Prince Fergus, but the nurse on duty told them that by the queen’s orders, the prince wasn’t receiving visitors that day.

Finally, Sherlock agreed to knock off by late afternoon for a break and some food. They grabbed
some sandwich makings from the servants’ dining room, and heighed off to eat in the Grotto if it was free. Happily, they found it unoccupied with the panel on the door set to green. The room wasn’t quite as otherworldly as it had been after dark, but the late afternoon sun through the skylights lit the faux cave warmly. They settled in at a table by the pool to enjoy their foraged lunch.

“So, how do you know the rat is still at the palace?” John asked around a bite of cheese and pickle. “They could have leaked the information and moved on?”

“No, a plot to kill the king on the palace grounds would have to be complex to get past the guards and wards. It would need an inside man to complete the job.” Sherlock waved a hand in the air to indicate the whole of the thing. “Since Mycroft is a truthsayer, he can tell when someone’s lying. He regularly interviews all the staff to keep things secure, but he’s been busy lately. Anyone can slip up, even the king.”

“You still don’t think you should tell him what you’ve learned?” John asked.

“He won’t believe it’s a real threat until I have something more concrete.” Sherlock looked away.

“It’s hard being Cassandra, hmmm?” John asked him softly.

“Cassandra?”

“A doomed heroine from an old tale. She was gifted the talent of true prophesy from the Gods, but cursed with the fact that no one would ever believe her. As I recall she was imprisoned, enslaved, taken as a concubine, and then murdered by a jealous wife as well.”

"I can see why I've forgotten as many of the old tales as possible." Sherlock shuddered slightly.

John reached over to squeeze Sherlock’s forearm. “Hey, come on, most likely no one’s getting killed in the palace today. Let’s have a swim. We’ve loads of time before meeting Irene for dinner.”

“A chance to get in the water with you? Oh I think you could twist my arm.” A small smile curved over Sherlock’s lips. “Let’s hit the showers.”

After stowing their clothes in the changing room, and a quick wash, they grabbed towels, and headed out to the pool.

“Ah, this really is a lovely spot.” John sighed as they dropped their towels by the edge, and slipped into the heated water. "I don't think I'll ever quite get used to a cave in a building." He looked around at the luminous crystals just beginning to glow as light from the windows dimmed with the sun dropping lower.

“Believe it or not, you can actually get bored with it.” Sherlock sighed.

“Ah the troubles of the rich boy.” John teased, and skimmed a handful of water off the surface to fling over him. Sherlock ducked with a laugh. A devilish light danced in his eyes as he righted.

“Aha, I see your challenge, sir, and raise you.” Sherlock scooped up a bigger wave with his whole arm, and dashed it John’s way. Soon they were cackling and whooping, sloshing about, and working hard to douse the other with the biggest wave possible. All was jolly fun until they strayed to the deeper part of the pool and John lost his footing. He came up sputtering and flailing, unable to right himself. Sherlock darted over to grab him, and towed him to the shallower side.

“John,” Sherlock scolded him once he stopped coughing. “You should have told me you didn’t know how to swim.”
“Yeh, well I always feel like a right tit when people find out. Scared of the water as a kid.” John wiped a hand over his face, and pushed his hair back.

“Your father threw you into deep water when you were quite small. Thought it was funny.” Sherlock observed darkly. “Someone had to fish you out before you drowned, and you’ve avoided deep water ever since.”

“How do you do that . . . no never mind, you’re right as always.” John smiled wryly.

“Never mind.” Sherlock told him. “There’s nothing wrong with learning something later in life. You need to know how to swim though. It’s too much of a disadvantage to lack the skill. Come on.”

“What, you’re teaching me to swim right now?” John asked.

“Floating. I’m going to teach you to float.” Sherlock corrected him. “It’s the best thing to start with. Watch me first.” Sherlock pushed off from the pool bottom to glide back over the water, his arms and legs extending like a giant star fish. Only his face broke the surface while the rest of him, dark hair twisting in the water, and pale limbs and sweet cock, bobbed gently just below the surface. He looked so serene floating there like some merman of fairyland. John shook his head. The Grotto was truly a place that encouraged flights of fancy. Finally, Sherlock sank back down to find his feet and emerged, dripping, to hold a hand out to John. “Your turn.”

“What do you want me to do?” he asked nervously.

“Just lie back in the water. I’ll hold you up, and the salt in the water will add a natural buoyancy to keep you afloat.” Sherlock’s pale eyes bore down on him.

“Um, like this?” John stood next to him, and tried leaning back without actually letting his feet leave the bottom.

“John, do you trust me?”

“Always, love.”

“Then lean back. I have you. I won’t let go.” Sherlock held a firm hand to the middle of John’s back. Finally John leaned back into the water, and let his feet drift out from beneath him. True to his word, Sherlock supported him with one hand under his back, and another where his rump met his thigh. John relaxed, and let the small currents of the water bob him. It was an amazing feeling, something like flying in dreams. John felt his mind slipping into a light trance. It was a moment or an hour before Sherlock squeezed his leg, and helped him pull upright, splashing around to regain his footing.

“There, you did an excellent job. I knew you’d be a fast learner.” Sherlock’s eyes beamed at him. “I didn’t let go, but I could have. You were floating beautifully.”

“That was brilliant!” John exclaimed.

“Swimming isn’t too much more.” Sherlock smiled down at him, drops of water clinging to his hair and eyelashes. “You just coordinate some moving of the arms and legs, and there you are. Piece of cake.”

“Piece of cake.” John echoed pulling Sherlock down for a kiss, winding his arms around his neck to fit their mouths together, a gentle slide of lips and tongues. Sherlock tasted warm and sweet.

“I want to try something.” John murmured when they parted. “Lie down, and float on your back
again.”

Sherlock quirked up an eyebrow, but complied, stretching out as he lay back in the water. John moved in, and scooped him up to cradle Sherlock against his chest. His legs trailed off beyond, but John could easily hold him close with the water supporting his weight.

“Well then my wee bairn, where shall I take you today?” John crooned, walking around the pool with Sherlock tucked up in his arms like a child.

“I feel positively tiny.” Sherlock chuckled deep and low, snuggled against John’s middle as he was ferried about the pool.

“Hmm, you don’t look tiny. Maybe I’ll just carry you over to the pirate cave and fuck you senseless.” John growled. His cock hardened where it lay pressed against Sherlock’s hip.

Sherlock’s eyes caught fire. “That’s not a bad . . .”

The sound of the outer door opening and the babble of a crowd snapped their attention to the Grotto’s entrance. They both scrambled to stand behind one of the stone islands in the pool.

“And here we have the main pool of the Grotto.” Sherringford’s voice reached them along with the ooh’s and ah’s of the small group of gaudily-dressed men and women he was leading into the room. Sherringford’s eyes swept over the water unerringly finding Sherlock and John in their perch behind the island.

“Ah, why don’t you all get changed before I give you the full tour. You’ll find showers, and changing rooms back here. Plenty of towels and bathing costumes to borrow. Right this way . . .” Sherringford’s voice trailed off as he steered the crowd into the changing area. He was back in a moment to hiss at John and Sherlock from the edge of the pool as they waded their way back to their towels.

“William Sherlock Scott, by all that is holy. If you are not going to wear a bathing costume in here, can you at least set the door to ‘private?’

“Sorry, we were just having lunch so I left it at yellow. We decided to get in later.” Sherlock huffed before pulling himself out of the pool in a sluice of water. He stood in all his naked glory dripping for a moment before picking up a towel to run over his head and then wind around his hips – Gods, the man was sex in motion John thought. He climbed out a bit less gracefully, and quickly ran his towel over himself before wrapping it around his middle.

“Sherringford.” John nodded toward Sherlock’s middle brother.

“John.” Sherringford nodded back almost sociably, then turned back to berate Sherlock.

“We have company in the palace. In fact, we'll be crawling with visitors this whole summer long. For once you need to think before you do something.”

“I think before I do things.” Sherlock drew himself up as tall as he could. John was amused to see that Sherlock was a few inches taller than his older brother, and obviously pleased to lord it over him.

Sherringford put his hands out in a conciliatory way. “Wills, listen, I know it’s hard, getting married this summer. I’m sorry about the orgy comment last night. I was out of line bringing that back up at dinner.” Sherringford blew out a breath in a rush. “It’s been years since . . . all that happened. A lot of touchy negotiations are going on in the palace right now. It would be good if you were being a help and not a hindrance around here.”
“I am not a hindrance.” Sherlock blurted.

“Yes, well you’re not exactly helping with the ruling of Brettona either are you?” Sherringford quirked an eyebrow in a very familiar gesture. “Just stop acting out around the place. I’m sure both John and Irene will appreciate it if you can refrain from any dramatic posturing.”

Sherlock opened his mouth with a reply when the sound of the nobles making their way out of the changing rooms reached them.

Sherringford turned with a smile to the guests. “Have you met Prince William and his friend Brother John Watson? Yes, it's lovely to see them, and they were just leaving.”

John and Sherlock smiled and nodded, making polite responses to the visitors. After all the nobles had cleared out of the changing area, they were able to dress, and escape without further notice. Safely back in their palace rooms, John flopped across the loveseat in the sitting room. Sherlock paced around the room.

“Well that was unexpected.” He mused.

“What?” John asked “That group of nobles walking in on us?”

“No that wasn’t unexpected at all.” Sherlock waved the thought away with a flick of one hand. “As I said before, there’s never any privacy at the palace. No, Sherringford was unexpected.”

“How so?” John frowned.

“He’s never apologized to me before in his entire life.” Sherlock mused.

“Well, it is an odd occurrence, but people do grow up sometimes, you know.” John said scratching the back of his head.

“Or develop brain tumors.” Sherlock replied darkly.

John merely rolled his eyes in reply.

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As the clocks chimed the hour, Sherlock reached out to rap on the doors to Irene’s suite. Again, the attractive ginger-haired woman answered the door, but this time she smiled politely, and ushered them inside.

“Good evening Prince William, Brother John. Won’t you come in. Princess Irene is expecting you.”

“Thank you, Kate.” Sherlock nodded at her and swept into the room leaving John to follow behind. The room inside was transformed from the last time John had seen it. Braces of candles illuminated the many tapestries that now covered the walls, and richly colored throw pillows graced the seats and floor before the fireplace.

“Isn’t this lovely.” John said looking around. “Irene, you’ve really changed the place.”

“I’m glad you like it.” Irene said unfolding from her place by the fire. “I like a room to be . . . comfortable.” She said coming forward to greet them. A dark rose-colored dress flowed over her
form as she walked.

“A great pleasure to see you again, Princess Irene.” Sherlock bowed low before Irene, and caught up her hand to dust a small kiss over the back of it.

“Prince William, you are so charming when you chose to be. But I prefer when we are natural with each other, yes? Surely we can let formality go in private?” Irene flashed a small smile at him.

“But of course, Irene.” Sherlock gestured to the chairs by the fireplace, and Irene sat back in her seat, John and Sherlock taking chairs opposite. “I agree with John, you’ve done nice things with the place. You should make your rooms here as comfortable as possible. If there’s anything you need, let me know if I can help.”

“Thank you, William. I’ll send you a list. Drink? I have some very nice Sambuca you might like to try.”

At their murmured assent, Kate stepped forward with the bottle of liqueur, a decanter of water, and three crystal tumblers that she served around. The drink had a powerful spice to it. It near made John’s eyes water, but the other two were sipping it back daintily, so John took another small swallow and blinked rapidly to clear his vision.

“Irene, have you had a chance to review the information on the properties I sent you?” Sherlock asked her with a blandly pleasant smile.

“I have indeed.” Irene looked pleased. “I quite favor the Lorchmere estate. I’m told it’s not anyone else’s favorite, and it would suit me quite nicely. I thank you for this gift, husband-to-be.”

“Not at all, Irene. You deserve a place to call your own.” Sherlock took another drink and missed the expression that skittered briefly over Irene’s features.

At a discreet knock, Kate opened the door to admit several servants bearing the dinner in covered dishes.

“Shall we dine?” Irene asked gesturing to the beautifully dressed table nearby. John cast a worried glance over the vast array of cutlery, dishes, and glasses awaiting them as they seated themselves. Irene smiled kindly at him.

The food was excellent and John exclaimed over the clever round dumplings that Irene told them was called gnocchi.

“I had Kate work with the kitchens to show them how it’s made.” Irene confided. “I’m so glad you’re enjoying it. Gnocchi is one of my favorites as well.”

“It’s quite excellent.” John smiled and took another bite.

Sherlock muttered something about the food always being excellent in the palace, and pushed the food around his plate before taking a small bite. Kate appeared several times at the table to swap out empty dishes, and serve the next course. Irene thanked her before she slipped away.

“You’re ill treating John, you know.” Irene surprised Sherlock over the flan, turning to him with an eyebrow raised.

“How so, Princess Irene?” Sherlock faced her with his own eyebrow cocked.

“John doesn’t know how to address royalty, who to bow to, what spoon to use for pudding. You’ve
left him at a great disadvantage drifting unanchored in the currents of the court.” Irene returned, and took a sip from her coffee cup.

John and Sherlock both flushed red.

“See here, Irene. John is not anyone’s trained monkey. I don’t give a thrice damned toss what anyone thinks of his table manners, which are fine by the way.” Sherlock huffed.

“Don’t take on so. I mean no disrespect. But John knows it to be true. It’s all well and good for you to play the boheme in court if you chose, but John doesn’t have your position.” She flicked her eyes to John before turning back to Sherlock. “It puts him on the wrong foot not knowing the proper behaviour expected.”

John cleared his throat awkwardly. “She’s right.” He agreed reluctantly glancing between them.

Sherlock looked horrified as if he had gone out on errands, and forgotten John behind in the shops when he went home.

“I can help.” Irene ventured.

“Why you?” Sherlock asked her.

“You would be an abysmal teacher of royal etiquette to John. It’s too instinctual to you, and much exception is made for a royal prince. As an outsider,” Irene tapped a finger delicately against her chin, ”I have had to learn the ways of your court in detail. I would be pleased to share my knowledge with John.” Irene smiled slightly and looked to John. “If you’re interested that is.”

“Yeh, I think I would. I appreciate the offer.” John thanked her.

“If you’re free tomorrow morning? Perhaps we could meet over some breakfasts. It’s the quietest part of the day.” Irene shrugged one shoulder.

“Thank you, Irene. That sounds fine.” John nodded.

Sherlock crossed his arms and looked away. “Mrs. Morgan wishes to meet with us to discuss wedding festivities arrangements.” He swung around to fix Irene with a piercing stare.

“That sounds like an excellent idea as well.” Irene agreed. “Shall I arrange a time with her and let you know?” She cocked her head to the side to return his look.

“Acceptable.” Sherlock clipped out, glancing down to lift his coffee cup to his lips.

“I’m curious.” Irene mused swinging her gaze back to John as she propped her chin onto her fist. “Where do you spend your time when you are not at the palace?”

“We have a flat on the other side of Delphium.” John told her.

“Just a flat?” She asked, eyes widening. ”Is it bigger than your palace rooms?”

“Well, smaller actually.” John admitted. “But it’s a nice place, and next to the best bakery in town. That makes up for a lot.”

“Ah, you are a connoisseur of pastries, John Watson. I will make sure to request the best baked goods the palace has to offer for our breakfast meetings.” Irene smiled.

“Irene, you don’t need to fatten John up, I’m feeding him just fine.” Sherlock jumped in.
“Sherlock.” John sighed. “Let’s not get snippy. Irene’s just offering to help.”

“I know exactly what Irene is trying to do.” Sherlock returned.

“I am not attempting to come between you.” Irene replied quietly. “I think we all know how things are. I am merely trying to find my place in the palace, as I believe John does the same. If we can help each other, where is the harm in this?”

Sherlock made a rude sound.

“Sherlock.” John scolded him. “Really. You getting jealous over breakfast is hilarious. I had to see you come home with lines carved into your back.” He crossed his arms and glared at Sherlock until he met his gaze. “Speaking of which, did you two work out a safeword, and the times to use it?”

“Not as such.” Sherlock looked away.

“Try ‘cinnamon.’ It’s got a nice ring to it.” John suggested.

“John, you don’t like it, the dark play, do you?” Irene leaned in. “You don’t really understand it.”

“I understand it in theory.” John bristled. “I just don’t like to see skin broken.”

“I agree with you, this can look harsh, but sometimes the dangerous play is the sweetest. I don’t think you are quite such a stranger to the pleasure of pain either, hmm?” Irene reached over to flick back John’s neckcloth revealing the half-healed love bites low on his neck.

John flushed.

“Irene . . .” Sherlock warned.

“There are mysteries to be found, dark currents you might say, that dance between pleasure and pain, consent, and denial that all people respond to in some fashion.” Irene observed. “I believe we share a fascination with this darkness in common, Sherlock and I. Do you deny it, sir?” She tilted her head in his direction.

“You know I cannot.” Sherlock quirked up the side of his mouth in spite of himself.

“My dear men. Who can say what is the right way for desire to flow? There is no right or wrong between consenting adults who reveal themselves to each other - only the path of desire that leads them together.”

“One of our most cherished lines of scripture reads An it harm none, do what ye will.” John fixed Irene with a hard look. “I have trouble reconciling brute force trauma with a fun romp in bed.”

“Some say orgasm sends us to the realm of the divine. Is there a proper way to get there? I have learned not to judge what sparks another’s inner soul.” Irene returned unflinching.

John blew out a breath.

“John. Do not fret.” Irene dropped her voice as she reached over to lay a hand on his arm. “The dark play need not always be so harsh. Even a subtle twist can bring the fire to the blood. If you two are willing, I could share some things with you that might help John understand better. We fear what we do not know.”

Sherlock glanced at John. At John’s slight nod, he turned back to consider Irene. “You present an intriguing offer, Princess Irene. We accept.”
Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be quite a lot of BDSM porn. If readers would rather skip this and go on to the chapter after it, not much plot will be missed.
Begging is Not a Safe Word

Chapter Summary

Irene invites Sherlock, and John to join her in a bdsm scene, but things don't go quite as planned.

Chapter Notes

BDSM porn and some violence to follow in this chapter. If this isn't your cup of tea, by all means skip on to the following chapter, and no great plot points will be missed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Irene stood, and led Sherlock and John into the shadows of her bedchamber. A single candle and the glow of coals in the hearth threw scant light over the large space, but at a murmur from Irene, her maidservant Kate set to building up the fire, and lighting candles to set about the room. Irene gestured to chairs by the fireplace as soon as Kate had moved away. “Please, have a seat.”

Irene tilted her head to the side, and regarded the two men calmly as they settled. John shifted in his chair, the sudden anticipation thrumming under his skin. He glanced at Sherlock, but the man was still as stone, his eyes fixed steadily on their hostess. Irene's eyes glittered at them in the firelight. "I find it best to start a session with a friendly chat so that everyone knows what to expect – without giving away all of the mystery. A safeword is good. I have heard it also called your signal. You like 'cinnamon,' yes?” She raised her eyebrows, and glanced back and forth between the men.

John cleared his throat. “Yes . . . that will do.”

Sherlock had steepled his hands at the base of his chin, and continued to regard Irene with a piercing stare. He nodded once.

“Sometimes though, the mouth is busy. In this instance, two grunts, quick and close together, or two taps from the hand can also be a signal. If the play is rough, but not intolerable, the player may wish to slow down, but not stop. For this, I watch their hands. If they keep them loose and lightly curled, I know all is well. As the play grows stronger, their hands tense, and the fingers spread. When the hands are held out rigid” Irene splayed her fingers out, tensed to illustrate. “I know they are having trouble receiving the sensation, and I gentle things. Tonight though, we will keep things light.”

Irene turned to John. “You will be here to watch, but also join in as you feel comfortable. I will be in charge. If you wish to do something, you must ask first. If you wish to talk, you must raise your hand and ask permission. I will be addressed as ‘mistress’ or ‘ma’am’ only while we are in play. Do you agree?” Irene quirked an eyebrow and waited.
John thought a moment. "Yeh, all right."

Irene turned her sharp eyes to Sherlock "Yes." he answered her simply, one eyebrow raised.

"Good." Irene nodded slightly, then stood to speak with Kate who waited at the side of the room. "My small case . . ." John caught part of what she said to her maid before she turned back to address them.

"John you may wish to get comfortable, remove your socks and shoes, and jacket. " A hint of a smile played at the corners of her mouth. When she turned to Sherlock, all softness had fled her expression. "You . . . strip. Then wait for me in front of the fire. On your knees." She waited for his low "Yes, mistress," before adjourning to her dressing room.

They both rose to comply. In silence, Sherlock methodically removed each item of clothing, folded them neatly, and placed them over a small side table. John took off his suit coat and hung it over the back of his chair, toed off his shoes, and sat to remove his socks.

Once Sherlock was nude, he dropped to his knees on the rug before the fireplace. He sat back on his heels facing out toward the room, placed his palms over his thighs much like at martial arts class, and waited. John settled into his chair a few feet away and waited as well, his eyes playing over Sherlock's bared form. How beautiful his love looked—all lean angles, and creamy pale skin that contrasted so with the dark curls on his head and dusting of hair over his body. He was like moonlight wherever the fire's light didn't reach, and honey along his backside where it did. Seeing Sherlock in the all together never failed to make John’s heart skip a beat. He drew in a sharp little breath without meaning to, and Sherlock made the mistake of sliding his eyes to catch John's gaze. They burst into giggles then, Sherlock's deep rumble, vibrating his chest, rolling out under John's higher laugh.

"There’ll be none of that." Irene’s voice cut sharply over them as the high heeled shoes she had changed into clipped across the hard floor. Her footfalls muffled as she stepped onto the rug before the fireplace. John couldn't helped staring at the vision before them. Irene wore a long black peignoir that cupped her breasts behind panels of lace, thin straps that left her arms bare, and a slit skirt that closed demurely when she stood still, but played peek-a-boo with her lovely legs whenever she walked. Her raven hair had been redressed in a single pony tail that cascaded down her back and swayed about her hips with every move. She looked like a Goddess of lust, and by the gleam in her eye, she was quite aware of the fact. Kate joined her long enough to place a brown suitcase on a nearby end table, and then quickly withdrew. “Thank you, Kat.” Irene spared her a fond glance before swinging her attention to the tableau awaiting her before the fireplace. Irene walked slowly forward, stopping only when she stood a few paces before Sherlock.

"Up on your shins. Eyes down." Irene commanded, her voice as sharp as a whipcrack.

Sherlock flowed upright keeping his gaze trained on the floor as he complied.

"Hands on your head."

Sherlock instantly obeyed. He laced his fingers together to keep his hands steady on top of his head, and waited. Irene walked over to her case, deliberately unsnapped the clasps, and slowly raised the lid.

"I’m sure this is nothing new for you, my dear." She cut her eyes to Sherlock, “but this may be new to you, John.”

"Clamps." Irene drew out two small clipping devices dangling at the ends of a thin chain that she
held high for John to view. Sherlock flicked his gaze briefly toward her before returning it to the floor.

“I said eyes down.” Irene placed the clips back, and stalked over to stand just behind Sherlock. "That means they stay down." She hissed, bending down to slap her hand across Sherlock's arse. The smack rang out obscenely loud in the quiet of the bedroom. Irene gripped one of Sherlock's arms to hold him still as she smacked his rump again, harder. Her raven hair shone almost blue-black in the firelight flowing around her as she swung her arm again and again connecting her open hand to his bare backside.

John's eyes flew to Sherlock's face, and though he had shut his eyes tight, his mouth hung half open in what looked more like ecstatic trance than pain. John swallowed around a mouth suddenly gone quite dry. Irene slowed her spanking to end with a final caress, rubbing lightly over Sherlock's reddened bum. Her captive moaned in the back of his throat, his cock swelling before him. Irene flipped her ponytail back over her shoulder as she straightened and walked back to where her case waited.

John watched Sherlock. His unfocused eyes had drifted open again, and though his muscles quivered, he kept to his position balanced on his knees. John felt as if all the heat in his body had dropped to pool solely in his lap.

“Clamps cut the blood flow, so it’s best not to keep them on too long.” Irene informed them swinging the clips from the chain over her index finger as she walked to stand before Sherlock again. She regarded him for a moment, but he kept his eyes locked down near her feet. Irene secured the clips to a ruffle over her bodice to stow them, and leaned down to pinch Sherlock's nipples watching them pebble up with her ministrations.

“Good boy.” She murmured as he kept his gaze trained to the floor.

Grabbing up a small tent of flesh behind his nipple, Irene set the first clamp onto him. Sherlock’s eyes slammed shut. He grunted and bowed back as he struggled to stay upright, a look of agony washed over his face to fade to . . . something else. Irene waited a moment to study him, and then applied the second clamp over the next nipple. Again, Sherlock jerked, and grunted. A small sheen of sweat had beaded up over his forehead, but he remained upright. The small chain hung down between the clamps, moving slightly as he struggled to get his breathing under control. His twisted features relaxed slightly, but remained . . . on alert.

Irene petted over his shoulder, letting her hand trail lightly down his back. “Good boy. Good job, baby. Now hold it. Just like that. Keep your eyes closed. You may thank me.”

“Thank you, Mistress.” Sherlock's voice was a harsh croak.

She circled slowly around him, the peignoir shifting around her, catching the firelight as she walked. Sherlock struggled to hold his pose, swaying slightly, his hands on his head, back arched, chest pushed forward adjusting to the clamps that held his nipples tight. John had gone hard as a rock. He shifted slightly to ease the pressure on his swollen cock. Irene cast him a knowing look, and then walked back to the case. She drew out a circle of black leather with metal clasps that jangled slightly as she carried it back to Sherlock.

“Open your eyes.” Irene commanded. Sherlock's eyelids slid open in response to reveal blue diamond chips locked onto the toy in Irene’s hands. “Hands by your side.” Sherlock obediently dropped his arms to hang loose beside him.

“I don’t let just anyone wear my collar.” Irene explained as leaned in to slide it around Sherlock’s long white neck, brushing aside the lower curls that hung over his nape to buckle it into place. “This is special, for my favorite royal puppy.” Her hair swung down to cascade over his shoulder as she bent
to secure the end of the collar into the loop. Sherlock’s eyes slid closed again, and he breathed through his nose. Once the collar was in place, Irene hooked a finger under it and gave it a few experimental tugs. “There, not too tight. You may thank me.”

“Thank you, Mistress.” He whispered.

Irene moved back to the case and extracted a coiled leash that she returned to attach to the collar around Sherlock’s neck. “Down on all fours.” She ordered.

Sherlock dropped forward to balance his weight on palms and knees. Irene stood next to him holding the leash lightly in one hand. “Aren’t you lovely to see?” Irene mused. “Such a good puppy.” She reached down to run her fingers through his curls, rubbing along the side of his head as if she were scratching behind a dog’s ears. Sherlock closed his eyes, and leaned into her touch.

“I want you to stay next to me as I walk you.” Irene commanded, holding the leash in one hand and keeping the slack tight with the other. She set off at a gentle pace that she increased as they circled the room several times. Sherlock kept up crawling alongside her, gasping whenever they left rug to pass over hardwood floor.

John was utterly torn. Half of him wanted to go up and knock Irene across the room away from Sherlock, the other half was fucking enthralled. He couldn’t tear his eyes off the picture of Sherlock all pale gracefully lines prowling along on all fours, next to the artfully swishing black fabric and swaying hair of Irene, and that staccato click of her heels . . . Nope. He was back to wanting to see Irene sprawled somewhere, preferably with something binding her neck.

John could feel a growl building in his throat. Irene sensing John’s unrest brought Sherlock back to the rug before him and unhooked the leash. “Stay in place, keep your eyes down.” Irene commanded. She recoiled the leash as she walked back to her case leaving Sherlock on all fours, panting slightly, his eyes glued to the floor.

Irene stowed the leash, and took something else out of her case returning to stand over her slave. She held a thin black riding crop in her hands. She whacked it slightly against her palm twice enjoying the sound before she walked over to John and presented him with it. “Here. Hold this for me.” John accepted the crop. It was black, about two feet long with a grip on one end, and a small triangle of leather on the other. John ran his hand over its length before placing it in his lap, both wary and fascinated with the thing at once.

Irene returned to stand before Sherlock. “Up. Sit on your heels, and hands on your thighs.” She told him. He swayed getting into position, but complied. Sherlock’s face and upper chest were flushed a light pink, and his cock had expanded to half mast. John couldn’t have torn his eyes away for love or money. He licked his lips watching the two of them. The idea of jungle cats facing off flitted through his mind unbidden.

“You may look at me.” Irene snapped at Sherlock. Through a tumble of curls that had fallen over his forehead, Sherlock raised his steely gaze up to bore into Irene’s. Not so much compliance there. Irene stepped closer and tugged slightly on the chain hanging between the nipple clamps. Sherlock inhaled quickly, closing his eyes as he arched his back.

“You pretty boy.” Irene reached out to run her fingers through his hair. She pushed the fall of hair out of his eyes, and continued carding her hand through his curls, finally sweeping her hand down to scratch her fingernails lightly over his shoulders. He shivered under her touch. “I’ll bet you’ve never given a signal in your life, have you? Maybe sometime I’ll order you to give it.” John’s cock twitched against the confines of his pants.
“I’m going to remove the clamps, now.” Irene said quietly. “It’s going to hurt as the blood re-enters the tissues. It will sting for at least half a minute, but that will soon pass. Are you ready? Nod your head if you are.”

Sherlock kept his eyes closed as he swallowed, the muscles of his throat working around his adam’s apple, and nodded. Irene leaned forward and deftly plucked both of the nipple clamps off at once. Sherlock cried out, and twitched, nearly falling over. He gritted his teeth, but no more sound escaped his lips. Irene waited a moment watching him before walking back to her case to drop the clamps inside. She returned, moving to stand but a hair’s breadth beside Sherlock. Reaching a hand up, she trailed her fingers lightly over the collar, up his throat, and under his chin, carefully tracing the outline of his half-parted lips. When she stilled her fingers against his mouth, Sherlock kissed them.

“Oh my baby. What a good boy you are.” Irene purred. She stepped back to walk a slow circle around him. “On your hands and knees again.” She commanded. Sherlock struggled to obey her.

Irene paced over to John, and put her hand out for the riding crop. “The crop, please.” She told him calmly. John locked eyes with Irene, and held her gaze. Irene waited. John handed her the crop. “Thank you.” Irene said with a small quirk of her lips, and prowled back to where Sherlock waited on hands and knees. Irene trailed the tip of the riding crop over the whole of Sherlock starting at his curls, and moving across his back, and rump, down his thighs and over his calves to tickle his feet. She dragged the crop lightly back and forth over his low back, and buttocks then, narrowing each pass, until the switch rested across the middle of his arse.

“Are you ready to begin? You may answer me.” Irene informed Sherlock.

“Yes, Mistress.” He breathed.

“Louder, I can’t hear you.”

“YES, Mistress.” He rasped out louder.

“You may tap your hand twice, if you need to slow down at any time.” Irene told him. She raised the crop in her hand, paused, and laid it across his rump. Sherlock made a soft sound at the back of his throat at the impact. Irene struck, lightly, methodically hitting different parts of Sherlock’s arse with each swing, gathering speed, and strength as she settled into a rhythm. Sherlock closed his eyes, and parted his lips. He looked as though he were listening to music. John had to admit the repeating sound of leather striking flesh was intoxicating. He squirmed in his chair, transfixed at this wicked dance of whip, and arm, and willing captive receiving each blow.

It was difficult to track the time, but finally, Irene slowed and paused. She walked closer, and bent down to run her hand leisurely over the rosy blush spread over Sherlock’s arse. Sherlock had dropped his head to hang between his arms. Irene moved up to grab a handful of his hair, and she pulled his head back to purr against his ear. “Baby, go kiss John’s feet.” Sherlock opened his eyes, dazed. Irene swatted him on the rump with her hand. “Go. Go kiss John’s feet.”

Irene straightened to fix John in a tight stare. “John, no talking and no touching. Tell me if you understand.”

John felt his head nodding involuntarily as he watched Sherlock crawl between his feet, and bend his head to drag his lips over John’s right instep. John shuddered. “Gods, Sherlock . . .” John reached a hand to his curls.

Sherlock moved as if underwater with a slow, languid pace. He kissed over the top of John’s right foot, dipping his tongue between his toes. He turned to begin again on the left foot, pressing kisses and swirling his tongue on the soft skin just under John’s ankle. John closed his eyes and sucked in a breath. *Gods, it was amazing. It felt like nothing he'd ever...* he gripped the armrests of his chair until his fingers were white, but remained in his seat.

Irene snapped her fingers. “Sherlock, to me.”

Sherlock remained where he was, sucking lavishly at John’s toes.

Irene snapped her riding crop against her palm “TO. ME.”

Her words sailed right past Sherlock and John as they floated in some other world. Irene snarled. She sliced the air with the riding crop, bringing it down over Sherlock’s backside to catch his attention. It connected with a smack. Sherlock twitched slightly, but otherwise completely ignored her. She brought the riding crop up to strike a second time. John struggled out of his stupor to put a hand out. “Irene, no...” but Irene was already swinging down, and the riding crop caught him across the back of his hand. John cried out at the sudden blossom of pain. In the blink of an eye, Sherlock had surged upright to his feet, grabbed hold of the riding crop, and jerked Irene around in a circle to lose her balance. When the flurry of movement stopped, Irene was flat on her back on the carpet with Sherlock kneeling over her, the riding crop between his fists pressed against her throat.

“Cinnamon.” Sherlock hissed out between clenched teeth.

Irene stared up at him, her eyes gone wide. She cleared her throat. “Cinnamon.” she agreed carefully.

“Sherlock, look out!” John cried. A scream split the air as Kate burst in from a side door, hurling the ceramic pitcher in her hands at Sherlock’s head. Sherlock ducked and rolled taking Irene with him. The pitcher landed to smash harmlessly on the floor beyond them.

“Kate, peace!” Irene called out. The ginger-haired woman stopped, losing steam like a puppet with its strings cut. She stood in the middle of the room, her face collapsing in horror at the wreckage across the floor.

“But this is fascinating,” Sherlock said, shifting back to look between the women. “You two are lovers.”

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to say that in Irene's defense, in this world, she is a very inexperienced dominatrix. Give her another decade or so of practice, and the smooth, suave woman of Sherlock canon will appear. For now though, the baby dom isn't always completely sure what she's doing. Humiliation play is always a very fine line to walk.

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The title for this chapter is a quote taken from "SM 101: A Realistic Introduction" by Jay Wiseman. I don't know if it's a really great BDSM primer that I would recommend, but I went to a talk he was giving and bought his book, because, you know, support authors. :(
Love as Thou Wilt

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock continue to uncover secrets lurking around them.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter is a quote is from a series of novels by Jacqueline Carey collectively known as "Kushiel's Legacy." This guiding principle allows the people of Terre D'Ange to accept polyamory, BDSM, homosexuality, and all the many forms that mutual and consensual love can take.

As John Watson might say "It's all fine."

“But this is fascinating,” Sherlock said, shifting back to look between the women. “You two are lovers.”

They had retreated to the chairs in the sitting room, Kate and Irene sat on one side, while John and Sherlock faced them on the other. The bedroom had become too charged for the conversation that needed to happen. Sherlock had dressed, wincing as he pulled his clothes back on, and rung for tea. John accepted the tray at the door reassuring Sherlock that his hand was fine, and brought the things back to the low table by the chairs. Poor Kate sat closest to the fire, but continued to shiver. Irene who looked positively matronly in the fluffy dressing gown she had pulled on, pushed a cup of tea with sugar into Kate’s hand. With a grateful look, Kate accepted it and took a sip. Some color returned to her pale cheeks. Irene moved her chair as close as was possible to Kate’s. After reaching out to squeeze her knee, and a silent exchange of looks, Irene sat back to regard John and Sherlock.

“I apologize.” Irene said stiffly, glancing back and forth between the men. “I let things get out of hand, and I behaved badly.” She clasped her own hands tightly in front of her. "Kate is not to blame for thinking she needed to defend me."

Sherlock waved her off. “I apologize for my own actions as well. We are new to each other. Mishaps in communication will happen.”

“This is easy for you to say.” Irene said studying her hands. “I’m afraid such a further ‘mishap in communication’ might result in a permanent demotion for Kate or myself.” She raised flinty eyes to Sherlock.

“It was one of the few things in the marriage contract that you insisted on, keeping Kate as your maidservant, wasn’t it? I’m beginning to see why you fought for that.” Sherlock tilted his head to study her.
Irene flushed under his scrutiny. “There are small things a woman can do to make her way in a man’s world. Having Kate was the most important thing to me, but only by appearing not care too much about the result was I able to insist on it.” She reached over and clasped hands with Kate.

“It’s serious between you two, isn’t it?” John leaned forward to smile kindly at the young woman.

“Irene is the love of my life.” Kate admitted, looking instantly shocked that she had admitted this aloud.

“Do not be afraid to speak truth before me.” Sherlock looked at her sharply, but softened his tone.

John had to shake his head. Only a few minutes ago, Sherlock had played a dog being whipped on the floor. Now, he sprawled so elegantly in his chair, his incongruently bare feet crossed neatly at the ankles, commanding the room with a tone and manner so unconsciously regal, it must be, as they say, a thing born in the blood.

Sherlock turned his gaze back to Irene. “Our marriage contract with Arabonia does not allow either of us to take other full marriage partners, but as it is a Brettonian custom, you would be free to take a consort as well if you chose. Kate would be protected with full status in court as your partner this way.”

Irene sighed. “It is a sin in my country to love someone of your own gender. I have two younger sisters below me hoping to marry soon. If it was known, if it was even rumored that I was . . . like that, they would be tainted by my bad blood. Their chances for a good match would fly out the window.” Irene lifted heavy eyes to first Sherlock and then John. “I cannot afford for my secret, for our secret to be known.” Irene shared a glance with Kate. They turned their stiff faces back to the men in one movement.

“Your secret is safe with us.” John assured them. “I think it’s safe to say we understand your situation.”

A droll expression passed over Irene’s face. “Look at us both,” She laughed wryly turning to catch Sherlock with a piercing look, “a couple of inverts forced to make a marriage for King and country.”

“We don’t use the term ‘inverts’ here.” Sherlock twitched his upper lip at the word.

“Oh, what term do you use?” Irene asked, tilting her head slightly.

“We generally say people.” Sherlock replied. “The gender of who we love is not a determining factor of our character. ‘Love as thou wilt.’ is a common saying we have.”

A small smile worked its way across Irene’s lips. “You know, I am starting to think living in this heathen land may grow on me.”

“Princess Irene, we have no reason to court enmity between us, and every reason to become each other’s allies.” Sherlock drew up to sit taller. “I propose a truce, and a pact to hold the secrets safely between us that are no one else’s business. Do you agree?”

Irene regarded him a moment. She glanced at Kate. A hot, hopeful expression, almost painful in its intensity, flickered over the ginger-haired woman’s face. Irene turned back to Sherlock with a hard smile. “Your Grace, I do agree, with all my heart.”

“Well, then let us shake on it.” Sherlock raised one eyebrow. “I haven’t done this in years, but . . .” He raised his hand under his chin to spit generously into his palm. He extended his wet hand to Irene. She curled one lip in puzzled disgust.
Sherlock laughed. “Come now, I’m sure you’re used to some bodily fluids exchanged when important things are done.”

With a small smile, Irene spat into her palm, and placed it over Sherlock’s. Sherlock looked back at John, and raised his eyebrows. John laughed, then leaned over to spit into his own hand and placed it over Irene’s. All three of them turned to Kate and waited. Shyly, she spat into her hand, and slipped it over John’s. Sherlock ended the pile with his other hand covering Kate’s, and solemnly intoned “We agree to a pact born in free spirit, freely spoken, and freely given. Do you so agree to keep each other as comrades-in-arms?” They giggled, but each agreed “I do.”

“Irene, I think this calls for a toast!” Sherlock announced as everyone surreptitiously wiped their hands on their thighs. "What liquor do you have in here? I can call for brandy if you’re low on supplies.”

John and Sherlock stumbled back to their rooms well-oiled after polishing off the rest of Irene’s sambuca, followed by bottles of port, and brandy that Sherlock had rung for, plus a small bottle of elderberry wine that Irene had turned up from her personal stores. They had tossed back many toasts with Irene and Kate starting with King and country, and moving down to things like your Nana, good Eccles cakes, sunsets, and baths that stay warm longer than you were expecting.

When Kate and John started in on the fourteenth verse of the ballad of the brave mage who lost his big staff in battle (insert dick joke here), Irene finally kicked the men out. She told them the bottles were empty, and she needed to be up too early for a dress fitting the next morning. They were feeling no pain when John finally managed to turn the doorknob, and spill them into the sitting room of their suite. Sherlock tripped and nearly fell over, but John managed to right them both at the last minute.

“JOHN, did someone move the carpet? I don’t remember there being such a DROP OFF there before.” Sherlock observed rather loudly.

“Sssshhhhh” John told him, turning to shut the door behind them. “PEOPLE ARE SLEEPING.”

“DON’T WORRY.” Sherlock annunciated clearly. “WE ARE FAR FROM OTHER ROOMS HERE.”

“WHEW, so knackered. Whada night!” John said passing a hand over his face. “YOU. You.” He struggled to point in the right direction at Sherlock who had moved to collapse over the sofa. “You are a SEXY man.”

John staggered over and climbed on top of Sherlock. He landed on him with a whoof. They managed to shift slightly so that John could lie half on and half off him, and Sherlock could still breathe.

“Sexy thing.” John mumbled kissing a line under Sherlock’s jaw, scraping his teeth over the light line of stubble sprouting there.

“Jaaawn. You’re the sexy man.” Sherlock slurred stretching his head back to better expose the length of his throat to John’s questing lips. John mouthed his way down, impatiently opening buttons on Sherlock’s shirt to lap into the notch above his collar bones. When he was satisfied with his work
there, he licked his way back up to gnaw under his ear.

Sherlock groaned, and melted farther into the cushions. He managed to get a hand free to grab a comfortable handful of John’s arse. Tipping his face to brush his nose over John’s hair, he inhaled deeply. “You smell like fires, and berries, and crime scenes.”

“Izzat good or bad?” John leaned back to bring him into focus, a small line creasing between his eyebrows.

“The BEST.” Sherlock grinned pulling him into a deep, wet snog.

They swapped sloppy kisses that tasted of sweet wine, before Sherlock broke off with a snarl, frustrated at trying to get his hands down John’s fitted trousers, and not finding an inch of give. He managed to wiggle one finger under the waistband before John huffed a laugh and sat back. “Hang on a tick.” He reached down and unbuttoned his flies, swatting away Sherlock’s hands when he tried to help and only slowed down the proceedings. As soon as the last button popped undone, Sherlock slipped fingers in to release John’s hard cock, letting it spring forth before them. John sighed at the release of pressure.

“Hellooooo Little John, or should I say BIG JOHN?” Sherlock grinned.

John dissolved into giggles that slid right into a groan as Sherlock wrapped his long fingers around his erection and pulled, slow and firm. Sherlock ran his hand over the tip to grab the wetness gathered there and spread it down. It wasn't quite enough lubrication, and after a moment of fumbling a hand under the sofa cushions he returned with a mostly-empty jar of cream. “Aha.” He cried in triumph.

This one smelled of honey when he unstoppered it, and they both inhaled deeply at the familiar scent. Sherlock scooped up what was left in the bottom, and tossing the now-empty jar aside, brought his slicked hand to coat John's penis. The tip of his tongue just peeked out as though he were deeply concentrating, and he set up a lovely rhythm sliding his fist up and down over John’s cock. John simply moaned as he closed his eyes, and canted his hips to better thrust into Sherlock’s hand.

“Beautiful, so beautiful.” Sherlock chanted watching John’s face. They pushed and rocked together. Heat uncoiled in John's belly, building, but not cresting. John frowned, stuttering in his rhythm unable to cover the last stretch to finish. “Come on me, come all over me. I’m yours.” Sherlock growled out dirty and low, increasing the pace of his strokes. John cried out as the waves of pleasure broke over him. He shuddered, and finally fell apart, stars bursting behind his eyelids as he splashed wet between them. John collapsed over Sherlock with a groan. They lay breathing together. Sherlock reached up to slide a hand into the short hairs over John’s nape. He cupped the back of his neck while his thumb stroked a soothing line along the curve of his skull.

“My John, my John.” He murmured into John’s hair.

“Yours.” John agreed sleepily. “Do you want . . .” John ran his palm over Sherlock’s hip, unable to reach his penis tucked between their bodies.

“No,” Sherlock spoke quietly, his lips moving against John’s hair. “Just want . . . hold you . . .”

John whuffed into his shoulder, and they drifted off to sleep tangled as they lay across the sofa.
John woke, still on the sofa, to daylight, and wished he hadn’t. The remains of a furry animal lined his mouth, while someone beat a merry rhythm on a congo drum they had obviously wedged around his head while he slept. To top his misery off, his arm had fallen asleep where Sherlock had rolled on it during the night, and he desperately needed a piss. It had been some time since John had greeted a morning with a hangover this bad. John groaned, pulling his arm out, and jostled Sherlock, who twitched and woke as well. He made his own growly noises, as he pushed to sitting, obviously faring no better than John.

“Great Memir, my brain has been replaced with thumbtacks” Sherlock groaned running his hands over his face. “John, wait, I have . . . be right back.” He trailed off as he stumbled to his feet and made a bee line to the washroom.

John pushed upright, struggling to swing his legs down in front of him. In a moment, Sherlock returned with a packet of powder and a cup of water. He emptied the packet into the cup and stirred it with his finger. He downed half of it in a gulp and offered the rest of John. John accepted the cup, tipping it back to drain it. The drink was light, and sweet tasting, and went down smoothly, but the remarkable thing was how his headache and nausea cleared as soon as he finished swallowing.

“Ooh, that’s a powerful spell.” John sighed, smacking his lips appreciatively as he stood to stretch. “Must be some of Anthea’s excellent hangover cure, yeh?” he called over his shoulder on the way to the loo.

“Yep. It is one of her most popular remedies.” Sherlock called after him, collapsing back on the sofa. “I probably need to stock up on more.” He mused as John returned.

“You probably need to get more from her . . .” John said at the same time on his way back from the loo. They chuckled together as John dropped to sit beside him.

“Speaking of Anthea,” Sherlock said, “I promised her I’d come see Loralee soon. She wrote me that there’s a puppet show tomorrow I could take her to. I hope you don’t mind . . . I wanted to spend some time with Loralee, just the two of us, but if you want to come . . .”

“Of course not. You should definitely have some time alone with Loralee. I have my follow-up appointment with the healers tomorrow as well so that works out.” John assured him reaching over to cup the back of his neck.

“Oh John, I forgot. Did you want me to come with you for that? I can take Loralee out another time.” A small crease puckered Sherlock’s brow.

“No, don’t worry about it. It will be a bunch of boring tests on my healing power. It will take forever. It’s better if you have something else to do.” John smiled fondly at him. “How’s your backside, and your frontside for that matter this morning?”

Sherlock shifted on the couch. “Surprisingly fine.”

“I don’t believe you.” John frowned at him. “I know I’m meant to wait to use my energy, but it’s been almost a week. Come here.”

“John, maybe you should wait until you see the healers.” Sherlock frowned at him.

“Oh sod that.” John shifted sideways to face Sherlock, and placed a hand on his love’s chest and back. ”I’m fine, and this will only take a minute. Just relax now.” Sherlock nodded, and settled back
as directed. John closed his eyes, and focused on gathering his energies to send a healing.

A warmth like a small sun roared to life inside his chest and streamed out to his extremities. John opened his mouth in a gasp. It was like falling into the middle of a strong river current without warning. From far away, he could hear Sherlock’s voice calling him, but the waves of energy were rolling over him unbidden. He gathered up a scoop of the power and sent it into Sherlock. The contact was electric. It was like sex. He could feel their energies mingling, sense the currents of Sherlock’s body from his blood pulsing through his veins, to the thoughts firing across his brain, to the nutrients making their way into his tissues. What beauty, what perfection of form was this human machine! Sensing deeper, within the music of the body humming together, he could find every sour note where something wasn’t working as it should be. He effortlessly soothed the hurt flesh of his lover’s body, like a mother might comfort a child with a hug. He felt the tiniest imbalance at Sherlock’s heart where a valve wasn’t working quite as it should be, a murmur, probably with him since birth. He made a note to come back and work on it later after he’d had more training. He found strained muscles in Sherlock’s legs and arms, and gently pushed them to flow straight. Something else called to him then, a softer hum just tantalizingly beyond reach. If he stretched, he could almost feel the place where new cells unfolded, and the hidden space where the blueprint of form resided—it was like a whole new wonderous universe opening before him. A small, rational thread inside him was pulling at him, throbbing out a warning, and he made himself turn around, and swim for surface, arriving in his own body with a wrenching pop.

John opened his eyes to see Sherlock passed out in front of him, a look of utter bliss plastered over his face. Hot shame washed over him, that he had just used Sherlock’s very being like a playground without permission for such. On the heels of the shame came an exhaustion that sucked at his very bones. He felt himself collapsing over Sherlock as darkness pulled him under.

John woke to Sherlock calling his name, and shaking his shoulders.

“Love, I’m sorry, sorry.” John slurred out when he could form words with his mouth.

“Who’s the madman today, my mad healer priest?” relief colored Sherlock’s voice as his hand clenched over John’s upper arm. “I want to borrow a shadow of your power and send you a ‘be well.’ Don’t send me any power, just let me mimic you. All right?”

“All right.” John agreed.

Sherlock took John’s hands into his and closed his eyes. A small glow of light formed over their joined hands, and a smooth wash of peace that pushed his exhaustion away swept over John. He sighed.

“Don’t try anything like that again before you know what you’re doing. Don’t think I didn’t feel how deep you went!” Sherlock scolded John once his eyes were back open.

“I didn’t realize . . . how vast it would be. Love, your insides are beautiful.” John beamed at Sherlock.

The worry lines on Sherlock’s face smoothed out to a look of wonder. He ran a single finger down John’s cheek to his jaw. “How can I be cross with you when you look like a Star Child fallen to earth? Promise me though. Promise me you won’t try anything like that again until after you’ve been seen by Healer Markson.”

“I promise, love.” John smiled softly at him. “And I’m sorry I didn’t ask your permission to dive inside you like that.”
“You always have my permission.” Sherlock looked confused. “I just don’t want you to do something you can’t come back from. I don’t want you to go where I can’t follow.”

“Never.” John smiled at him. “Now, how about you ring for some food while I go run water for the bath?”

“We could go find food.” Sherlock suggested.

“No. I’m tired and you stink. Go ring for food.”

“ME?” Sherlock look mock horrified. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but you smell like you got properly pissed, and had sex all over the couch.”

“And whose fault was that?” John grinned at him. “Fine, go nick food from the kitchens smelling like an alley cat, and I’ll meet you in the bath when you get back.”

They left the palace that evening, slipping out the secret door in the wall behind the stables, and walked a few blocks to find a cab to ferry them to Baker Street.

“The palace is nice and all, but it’s good to get home.” John sighed as he shut the door to the flat behind them.

“You really mean that don’t you? You prefer this little flat to the whole of the palace.” Sherlock asked throwing his bag to the floor.

“Of course I do, don’t you?” John turned back to him.

“Always.” Sherlock said. “I just thought you’d get tired of it once you’d grown used to the grandness of the palace.”

“Oh, so you think I’m marrying you for your money, is that it?” John sauntered over to loop his arms around Sherlock’s waist, and pull their hips together.

“Not for an instant, John Watson.” Sherlock’s eyes twinkled at John as he swooped in for a kiss.

John was still asleep when a fully-dressed Sherlock leaned over to kiss his forehead in the morning light.

“Hey, you.” John smiled sleepily up at him. “Oh, you’re dressed already.” He said, disappointed to see Sherlock sitting on the edge of the bed obviously ready to go out.

“Fraid so.” Sherlock quirked one side of his mouth up. “I have some rounds I need to make before I head over to Anthea’s. Need to make an early start of it.”
“Thanks for waking me up to say good-bye.” John said, rubbing sand out of one of his eyes.

A soft look passed over Sherlock’s face. He leaned in to inhale from the side of John’s neck. John laughed as the mass of dark curls brushed over his face. He reached up to hug Sherlock with one arm and tugged him sideways, toppling him across him, to land sprawled on the bed. John immediately took advantage of his lower position, pulling the felled man into a long, sweet kiss.

“You didn’t expect me to let you go without a proper snog, did you?” John teased looking into Sherlock’s blue-grey eyes shifting color in the light each time it flickered from under the curtains.

“John, I don’t expect anything from you.” Sherlock told him earnestly. “Whatever you give me is an appreciated gift each and every time.”

“Oh no, you can’t go saying things like that, and then think I'll just let you out of my bed.”

“Well, I do have a few minutes.” Sherlock confessed.

“I can do a lot with a few minutes.” John promised already unbuttoning Sherlock’s shirt.

When they finally parted, Sherlock was back in his street clothes, only slightly rumpled, and John had a sheet wound around him to see him out the door.

“I hate saying good-bye.” Sherlock told him.

“We have been in each other’s back pockets lately though, haven’t we?” John laughed.

“John, if you need more time for your own . . .” Sherlock started.

“I’m not complaining.” John shook his head. “Hey, we’ll get busy with other things, . . . and people, soon enough. Anyway, enjoy your visit with Anthea and Loralee. Send them my love.”

“I will. And tell me everything that happens at the healers’.”

“Of course. Now go, before I take your clothes back off again.” John went up on his toes to kiss Sherlock’s cheek.

“I should be back by dark.” Sherlock said reaching a finger to trail under John’s chin. You’ll be all right all day?”

“Of course I will. GO.” John swatted his rump and pushed him toward the door. Sherlock leaned down to grab one more quick kiss from John’s lips, and in a swirl, he was out the door and gone.

John let the receptionist at the Tottenford Sanctuary know he was there for his appointment, and took a seat in the waiting room. The place was much more lively in the middle of the day with a number of other people already waiting. A mother and her little girl sitting nearby caught his eye. The girl kept wanting to go and dig in the dirt of a potted plant by the door, and the ever-exasperated mother kept collecting her back to the chairs. It was a relief when a nurse called them in. John had barely read a page or two of the book he’d brought along when he was called to see the healers as well.

He waited in an inner room for a few minutes before Healer Lupita Markson knocked on the door
and joined him. “John, how are you doing?” She asked him bustling in with a broad smile.

“I’m doing good, yeh.” John nodded. “But I had a little incident.”

John reluctantly told her of his unsanctioned adventure through Sherlock’s bloodstream. Lupita listened to him with slightly raised eyebrows. “Not that many healers can go that deep into the tissue structures.” She commented. “That was a dangerous thing to do without higher training though.”

“I know.” John told her sheepishly. “I won’t do that again before I know more.”

“That sounds to me that your powers are functioning excellently, but why don’t we run through some exercises so I can tick off a box that we did this?”

John smiled at Lupita, and agreed. They cycled through a number of visualizing and energy exchange practices until Lupita was satisfied and nodded her approval.

“Yes, I’m happy to say your talent is functioning perfectly. No residual problems remain from the dark spell. And as I first suspected, you are definitely a master class Healer. It is absolutely imperative that you continue your training to insure that you don’t accidentally hurt yourself or others.”

“All right.” John nodded slowly.

“John, there are a number of places that I might recommend you look at, but I want to suggest the Upper Delphium Healers College. As one of the heads there, I’m a little biased about its merits, but it’s local, and has an excellent program for master healers. They are accepting new students in the fall, and I’d love to offer you a place there.”

“Wow, all right. Yeh. I need to talk to my partner, Sherlock, about it, but it sounds like a great idea. We’re getting married this summer. I . . . mean he, “ John hesitated. “He’s actually Prince William Sherlock Scott Holmes Carrington. I’ll be his Royal Consort.” John confessed.

“I know.” Lupita told him quietly.

“You do?” John asked her.

“I used to be on call to the palace some years ago. “Lupita confided. “Prince William probably doesn’t remember me very well. He was generally strung out on something euphoric or hallucinogenic whenever I saw him.”

John looked down at his hands. “I know, he told me about all that.” John raised his eyes to meet her gaze. “He hasn’t used drugs in years. Not since the Fever Plague hit. He told me wasting time on drugs seemed stupid after watching so many lose their life.”

“We did lose many then. I was at the palace when the old king, and Princess Kaitlin died.” Lupita told him, her brown eyes darkening as she looked away. “Things were so mad then, so topsy turvy. In some ways it feels like a thousand years ago, and in other ways it seems like only yesterday.” Lupita shook herself, and turned her gaze back to John. “I’ve never seen the prince looking so well as when he came in here with you last week. I think you’re good for him. And I think he’s good for you too. Without the energy work you two had been doing, I don’t think we would have had such a successful time of removing that spell from you. You two had already picked half the knot apart as it were.”

“Ah, that’s great.” John felt a blush stealing over his face.
“John, I know that for many being ‘Royal Consort’ would be job enough for them, but with your talents, well, the healing community needs you. If we ever faced something like the Fever Plague again, I’d feel much safer with someone like you working by my side.”

“Thank you.” John blushed in earnest then. “I didn’t fancy much being a ‘kept man’ my whole life. I’d really like to finish my training, and get back to healing. I realize how much I’ve missed it.”

“John, you’re a good man. Let me know in the next couple of weeks if you are interested in the Upper Delphium college for the fall, and I’ll have your place confirmed.”

“I will, Healer Lupita, thank you. Thank you for everything.”

Leaving the Healers Sanctuary, John decided on a ramble, taking the long way home. He passed by a bookshop a few doors down, and realized it must be the place Sherlock had gotten books from last week. His feet led him inside before he’d even made the conscious decision to stop by. John chuckled at himself and pushed open the door to set the bell hanging at the top jingling.

He found a nicely-stocked medical section, which wasn’t too odd seeing as it was two doors down from a large healers sanctuary. He selected a few small books that he thought he could afford and brought them to the desk. When the clerk asked his name, he was told he had a running account already set up for him there by Sherlock Holmes. John sighed and went back to the shelves to select a few larger books that he’d had his eye on. It was incredibly thoughtful of Sherlock, and John was grateful to get the extra books, but part of him wondered how soft he was going to get being a “kept man.” The idea of going to uni in the fall sent a shiver of excitement up his spine. He’d probably be years older than all the other students, but the idea of really learning what he could do with his talents was intoxicating. He whistled all the way back to the flat.

It was dark when Sherlock returned to 221B. John had made a simple fry up for dinner, washed the dishes and settled down by a brace of candles with his new books when Sherlock breezed in.

Sherlock glanced around the room the instant he walked in. When his eyes found John reading in his chair, he face lit up like a fire catching on tinder. “John.” Was all he said.

John sucked in his breath. What have I ever done to deserve this man looking at me like this? He thought. Please, Gods, whatever it is, don’t let me stop doing it. He let his book slip to the floor, and rose to catch Sherlock in an embrace.

“What is it, love? Did something happen? Are Loralee and Anthea all right?” John asked as Sherlock burrowed his face against John's neck and held on tight.

“No, nothing happened, everyone’s fine. The puppet show was inane, but Loralee enjoyed it.” Sherlock answered, somewhat muffled against his neck. With a final squeeze, he stepped back and led John to the couch. “I have something for you.”
“All right.” John nodded, mystified, and followed Sherlock to sit down. Sherlock reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold chain with a pendant, stamped with the two hands holding a bundle of herbs and a knife that symbolized Gallanus, swinging on its end.

“Oh, love, this is gorgeous. It’s much finer than the one I gave you. Thank you.” John said as Sherlock dropped it into his palm.

“This is the first one you had.” Sherlock said grimly dipping into another pocket to pull out a pendant and chain gone pitch black. It stank slightly of rotten eggs.

“What happened to it?” John asked, eyes wide.

“I took it to an Earth mage I know to have it tested. I was thinking about your dark spell having an extra component to make it renew. What was something physical that you kept with you that might hold a spell? Answer - this pendant. The Earth mage confirmed it. You probably ingested the original love spell that bound you via food or drink, but the thing keeping the spell going was in this piece of jewelry. That is until the two spells merged, and hooked into your own power. When the mage tested your pendant, the charm broke out of it leaving it like this.”

“Oh, ugh, and then I gave you that necklace. I’m so sorry. I’ll do better with my next gift.” John tried to joke.

“You didn’t know. How could you, under its spell?” Sherlock asked. “You said it yourself, you wore it all the time.”

“I did.” John agreed. “Annalisa gave it to me at a May Day party. I wore it all the time after she and my parents passed. Great Gods. I didn’t even think about it. Did it hurt you when you wore it?”

“Thankfully not really. I didn’t have a spell on me to reinforce, but it did leave me feeling a little off.”

“Gods.” John passed a hand over his face.

“May I put the new necklace on you?” Sherlock asked, holding out his hand. “It’s guaranteed dark-spell free.”

John dropped it into his outstretched palm. “Please.”

Sherlock held it up, dangling the chain from his fingertips to watch the candlelight sparkle over it. John smiled, and turned slightly to allow Sherlock to loop the chain around his neck and fasten the clasp in the back. Sherlock leaned in and dropped a kiss on John’s nape when he had finished.

“There. For my favorite healer.” He said. “Speaking of healers, how did your visit with Healer Markson go?”

John turned back around to face him. “Brilliant. It went really well. She said my powers were functioning normally, and at master class healer levels.” He lifted his chin proudly.

“I’m not surprised.” Sherlock’s eyes danced back at him.

“She offered me a place at the Upper Delphium Healers College in the fall . . .”

“Go.”

“You’re sure. . .”

“Go.”
“It’s a wonderful offer. It’s exciting, but it’ll be a lot of work.” John confided.

“You will be amazing.” Sherlock told him.

“Of course this is assuming we aren’t all blown sky high in some treasonous plot at Mid-Summer.” John raised an eyebrow.

“John, maybe you shouldn’t be at the palace at Mid-Summer, in case something goes wrong that I can’t prevent.” Sherlock chewed on his lower lip.

“Oh, no. You’re not getting rid of me that easily. If you’re there, I’m there.” John leaned in, raising his voice. “Who else will have your back when you do something mad?”

“I love you.” A wild light shone in Sherlock’s eyes.

“I love you too, you big git.” John grinned, and pulled him in for a kiss.
We're All Mad Here

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock find themselves dancing to the tune of palace demands.

Chapter Notes

The chapter title is of course a quote from "Alice in Wonderland."

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I'm a bit ambivalent about mucking about with men's hats in the story. If you would prefer picturing that all the gentlemen were wearing some smashing headgear at formal events, by all means do. If you like them bare-headed, it's an AU, and we can dance if we want to, we can leave your friends behind. (ahem, subtle "Men Without Hats" reference. Go ask your mum, or search Youtube.)

Of course if most of my dear readers feel like the story just can't exist without more men's hats in it, let me know, and I'll see what I can do about it.

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John woke to the sound of Sherlock's violin keening in the sitting room of 221B, emitting something heartfelt and slow. John pulled on his dressing gown, and slipped in quietly to take his chair and listen. Sherlock played as if he were dancing, eyes closed, swaying with the music as he caressed the bow over the strings. It was some minutes before he finally paused and opened his eyes to see John sat there in audience.

"John, I didn’t mean to wake you."

"You didn’t, or if you did, it’s just as well I was up. I can’t get too used to being a man of leisure who stays in bed till lunch time.” John yawned, and shuffled into the kitchen to make tea. He filled up a kettle and dropped several of their warming stones inside. “When are we due back at the palace?” He called to Sherlock.

“This afternoon.” Sherlock answered. “Mummy is holding a tea and croquet party, and she insists on our presence.”

“Your presence you mean.” John corrected sticking his head out of the kitchen. Queen Violet, the Queen Mum, had arrived several days ago at the palace, and while she had fussied over Sherlock, and made much of meeting Princess Irene, she had merely greeted John with a frosty “How do you do?”

“Our presence. We’re a team.” Sherlock replied and tucked his violin under his chin for another
piece, this one much more lively.

When Carmina bustled into the flat with a basket of food to cook for breakfast, John could have kissed her. They were out of everything. She stopped to listen to Sherlock play after she unpacked her things, leaning against the worktop.

“Oh, Mr. John. It’s a shame Mr. Sherlock is so rich, and doesn’t have to perform.” Carmina sighed. “He plays so well. I go sometimes with friends to a dance at an Eran pub on Fridays. Mr. Sherlock is better than anyone who plays there. I wish he would come fiddle some time.”

“I agree, Carmina.” John said taking a swallow of his tea. “Sherlock does hide his light under a basket. Maybe I’ll convince him to take some fiddling gigs. Let others hear him play. It’s a shame we’re the only ones who get to hear how brilliant he is.” As if in direct response, Sherlock switched from his sweet tune to a manic song, a mad scramble of notes screeching out from the sitting room. “Then again, we are sparing people from him, too.” John raised his eyebrows. Carmina giggled, and set about building up the fire in the wood stove, and getting out the pans.

It had been a busy couple of weeks spent going back and forth between Baker Street and the palace. Frustratingly little progress was made toward solving the mystery of the treasonous plot and the mole in the palace. Much time had been spent on the “folderol” that Sherlock despised from palace living. Nobles from far and wide had flocked to the palace for the entertainments of Mid-Summer week. Sadly, the celebrations involved a slew of never-ending dinners with Sherlock displayed at the head table, and John, still not yet officially acknowledged as Royal Consort, stuck in the back with the hoi polloi.

At least Sherlock and Irene got to sit together and keep each other company. John sulked a bit at them over the crowd, watching them enjoying their conversations while he fielded questions from yet another overdressed matron asking about his and Sherlock’s upcoming nuptials. “It hasn’t been decided yet.” He’d reply with a tight smile. “We’re waiting until after Prince William and Princess Irene’s wedding before announcing anything official. Thank you for asking though.”

John’s knowledge of palace life was expanding greatly as he met Irene some mornings in her rooms for etiquette classes. She went over proper greetings and addresses for royalty, when to bow and when not to, and polite remarks for official gatherings until John’s head spun.

“Irene, I’m not sure I’m going to remember all this.” John complained.

“When in doubt, bow midway, and then remark on the weather.” Irene suggested. “John, you do realize, that upon marrying Sherlock, you will become a Lord yourself, don’t you? People will be bowing to you as well.”

“Gods help me.” John put his head into his hands. ”Maybe I can just not tell people who I am?”

“Oh, John.” Irene clucked. ”Everyone knows who you are by now. You’ll get this. It just takes practice.”

By the fourth class, they had moved on to posh table manners. John joined Irene for lunch in her rooms, arriving at noon to see that she had ordered a sumptuous luncheon and full table settings for the lesson. Irene took the part of servant so that she could better observe and direct (boss) John’s
behaviour, while Kate was pleased to play the part of grand lady seated next to him.

“How do you do, my Lady? May I present myself? Lord Stuffington at your service.” John bowed extravagantly to Kate. Stifling giggles, Kate daintily held up her servant’s gown and dipped a curtsy in return. “So pleased to meet you, good sir. I’m called Lady Gabsalot.”

John helped her into her seat, and settled next to her. John was instantly amazed to learn from Irene that how he unfolded his napkin before placing it on his lap was a reveal on his level of upbringing. As Irene ruthless picked apart each and every movement of his – no elbows on the table, jacket stays buttoned, greet the diner on each side of you, John thought he might starve before actual food touched his lips. To add insult to injury, after serving up the soup, Irene sat in a chair to the side eating nibbles from a plate on her lap with her bare fingers whilst correcting him.

John reached out to a water glass, but Irene’s scold stopped him. “No, that glass is Kate’s. You must remember your glass will always be on the right of your place setting. Just remember ‘left is lumpy’ and ‘right is runny.’ Solid things like your napkin, and bread plate are on the left, whilst things to drink will be set to your right.

“Oh, sorry.” John nodded and drank from the correct glass.

“Now you must wait until all the people at the table of higher status than you have begun eating before you do. The servers will always start with ruling king, and queen, then dowager queen, then other royal family in order of rank before serving the rest.”

John looked at the array of silverware and shrugged. “All right, Irene, which spoon?”

“Start from the outside and work in.” Irene advised him. John located the right spoon, and dipped up some of the soup.

“No.” Irene called out, “Watch Kate. You must always spoon away from yourself, never toward.” She smiled and ate a meatball off her plate, licking sauce off her fingers with great relish.

John sighed and watched Kate delicately spooning up her soup. “You’re doing fine.” Kate winked at him.

Irene set her plate aside to serve them the next few courses, hovering nearby to correct John at each turn. “You must only butter each bite of bread in turn, never the whole roll at once. Silverware never touches the table after you pick it up. Lean it on your plate when you aren’t using it. Always finish chewing and wipe your mouth with the napkin before taking a drink. Never hold a wine glass by its bowl, only the stem.”

John was a bundle of nerves by the time the main course was served. “Irene, honestly, am I at least CHEWING correctly?”

“For the most part.” Irene agreed. “Try to pace yourself, and eat at the same rate Kate is though. You want to finish your plate at the same time as those dining around you.”

John rolled his eyes, and soldiered on with his sliced beef and carrots, moving his grip graciously when Irene corrected how he was holding his knife. Irene relented at pudding, and joined them at the table to eat the berry cobbler with cream where everyone was allowed to slouch and talk with their mouth full.

“You see, John, what you are doing is creating a public persona of yourself. It’s a disguise that allows you to blend into the background, and only expose as much of yourself in public as you wish.” Irene smiled, and licked cream off the back of her spoon.
“Oh, sweetie. You’ve berry on your lip. Just there.” Kate smiled warmly at Irene, and pointed to her own mouth.

“This side?” Irene asked mirroring her, pointing to the right corner of her mouth. At Kate’s nod, Irene wiped it clean with her napkin.

“Pardon me for being nosy.” John started. “But Kate, you don’t sound like you’re from Arabonia.”

At a quick glance to Irene, Kate answered him. “I’m not. I’ve only lived in Arabonia for the last five years. I was actually born here in Brettona, but my mother is from Gallatia, and we moved there when I was a child. I was working as a servant for the royal family of Gallatia when I first met Irene.” Kate’s face softened at the memory.

“Yes, I spent the summer with the Gallatian royal family when I was eighteen. We are kissing cousins to each other, you know. The visit was meant to ‘broaden my education’ of course.” Irene smirked. “When I came back to Arabonia, Kate followed me home. I needed to get Kate out of Gallatia before the wars started there. It was lucky I was in such desperate need of a new ladies maid, yes?” Irene tilted her head to the side to twinkle at Kate. She slid her hand across the table to gather up Kate’s hand, and squeeze. Kate squeezed back, and returned her moony look.

John couldn’t help smiling at them both. It struck him then how unfair their situation was. “Lady Irene, Kate, I’m so sorry that you have to hide your relationship this way. It must be very hard.”

The two of them shared a tense look, but Irene turned a smile to him. “John, what we have is so much better than what could have been.”

“I know things are different in your home country, Princess Irene, but you should know that nobody owns you in Brettona. You have control of your own lives here.” John insisted.

“Ah, Brother John, ever the source of hope. You know this is not completely true. We are all beholden to our families, to our country, to the obligations that hang on us from many sides.”


“Thank you, John.” Kate reached out to pat his arm. “You are a good man.”

“I’m curious.” Irene said to John. “You call the prince, Sherlock, when no one else does.”

John flushed a bit. “It’s sort of a nickname, his middle name, you know.”

“It is his secret name, isn’t it? A secret hidden in plain sight – that’s the best kind of secret.” Irene said tapping her finger against her chin.

“He says things just like that all the time. You really do have a lot in common, Lady Irene. I hope you are finding . . . your common ground together.” John mused.

“I think we are. I do think we are at that.” Irene looked thoughtfully at him.

A carriage was due to pick them up at Baker Street just after midday. They had been going back and
forth so much to the palace that Sherlock had relented on not accepting Mycroft’s rides. Every other
day it seemed, one of the sleek, black carriage appeared to spirit them across town to the palace
where more “festivities” awaited them.

The weather had been steadily warming as the days lengthened to Mid-Summer. The sound of Mrs.
Hudson’s grandchildren playing in their back garden drifted up to them as they stepped outside onto
the porch. Sherlock watched them as John locked the door behind them.

“How easy it is for children to amuse themselves pleasantly together. It gets so convoluted, and
horrid when you become adults.” Sherlock mused watching the children kick a ball around the yard.

“Just curious. Did you play with many other children when you were a kid?” John asked, joining
him at the railing.

“Hardly any.” Sherlock answered

“Ah. Well, don’t worry. Kids can be just as horrid to each other as adults. Even more so since they
haven’t learned to hide their baser impulses yet.” They watched as one of the children, a little girl—
Pippa, John remembered she was called — cried out, and pushed the younger boy into some mud.
The boy struggled up, wailing, to take his complaints indoors.

John merely raised his eyebrows in comment. Sherlock harrumphed. “Come on,” John shouldered
his bag. “I’m sure our ride is waiting out front.”

They arrived at the palace with plenty of time to get ready for Queen Violet’s grand tea party. John
and Sherlock made their way by necessity to Sherlock’s dressing room where most of their finery
resided. Their valet, Goodson, was quickly on hand to help with the selection process. John chose
something fairly simple to wear, but Sherlock insisted on being perverse.

“Goodson,” He called,

”Find me the most eye-blistering thing you can in here. I want to look
positively monstrous.”

“Of course, sir.” Goodson kept a completely straight face, but John, who was starting to speak
“servant” saw the utter delight dancing in his eyes as he came back with a horrific ensemble in
mustard yellow with fuschia trim. Sherlock was of course thrilled with it. It did make John a tad
queasy to look at him once he was in it, so of course, mission accomplished.

They gathered on the sweeping side lawn of the palace along with the rest of the throng who had
been invited. Many tables and chairs had been assembled on the verandah and lawn, with a band of
musicians tucked to the side under a small pavilion providing soothing background music. John
made sure to steer them past Prince Sherringford who was entertaining a circle of women in well-
feathered hats hanging on his every word. It seemed that looking like a mad chicken was all the rage
this summer. John saw Sebastian Wilkes in another knot of people, but the man turned, and made a
quick job of being elsewhere once he had spied John and Sherlock. John sighed and wondered if he
was doomed to spend the rest of his life dodging and being dodged at events like this at the palace.
He could see why Sherlock found the whole thing so very tiresome. Still it was a nice day, the sun
had even broken through the clouds, and servants were circulating with platters of nibbles, and
glasses of champagne. John snagged two glasses from a passing tray and handed one to Sherlock.
“Cheers.” He said grimly and took a sip.

“Oh, John, I’m so sorry. You don’t have to be here, you know. You could bugger off and no one would notice.”

“Great Gods. Thank you so very much.”

“Oh, that wasn’t what I meant.” Sherlock fumed. His eyes were nearly green in the sunlight today.

“Sherlock, do you want me to be here?”

“More than life itself.” Sherlock answered almost feverishly.

“Then wild horses couldn’t drag me away.” John announced firmly, reaching over to catch up Sherlock’s hand and run his thumb over the back of it.

Such a profound look of relief passed over Sherlock’s face that John remember why he loved this man so much. Sadly the look shifted quickly to haughty boredom once a pretty woman in a poofy lime green frock attached herself to Sherlock’s arm, and launched into a litany of how utterly brilliant his outfit was. When she insisted he come and speak to a group of her friends, Sherlock looked horrified back over his shoulder at John, but seemed unable to resist the force of her will as she steered him away.

John waved good-bye to him, sighed, and took another sip of champagne. He almost jumped when a voice from just behind his elbow addressed him.

“I loathe these things, don’t you?”

He looked over to see Irene in a perfectly gorgeous white muslin frock holding her own glass of champagne.

“How do you stand parties like this?” John asked her.

“Generally? I usually find some man that I would like to impress, and I flirt with him shamelessly until I have him wrapped around my little finger.” Irene smiled.

“All right then.” John said. “Flirt away.”

“Oh, John, I don’t have to impress you. I can just tell everyone here you didn’t know what a runcible spoon was, and humiliate you mercilessly.”

“Blackmail, eh?” John snorted “Surely that’s beneath you.” and bumped his hip against Irene’s.

“A girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do.” Irene teased, and bumped him right back.

Irene took a sip of her champagne, and glanced back toward the palace. Now that John knew what to look for, he could see the wistfulness in Irene’s gaze. She probably wished Kate were out here being bored with her on the lawn on this fine day. John made a mental note that when things were quieter, He and Sherlock would have to take Irene and Kate out somewhere far from the palace, and they would sit out in the sun, and make loud rude jokes, . . . and eat messy food with their fingers for as long as they wished.

“You miss her don’t you?” John asked quietly.

“Always.” Irene answered just as quietly.
“Look, I hear there’s a croquet game somewhere around here.” John stuck out his arm for Irene to take. “Care to join me in a round?”

“Why thank you, grand sir, I would be most delighted.” Irene smiled back taking his arm.

“Now if you could just tell me how you actually play croquet . . .” John admitted, and Irene burst into a tinkling laugh.

They stopped at the chattering crowd that had an ill-looking Sherlock trapped in its center. Irene managed to extricate Sherlock smoothly from his flock of admirers, announcing that she and her betrothed needed to discuss some finer points of their upcoming wedding. The crowd tittered like an upset flock of birds, but allowed her to tow Sherlock away.

“That was amazing, Irene, thank you. I was about to chew my leg off to get away.” Sherlock told her with a shudder.

“Sherlock, didn’t you ever learn how to escape a tiresome conversation?” Irene scolded him linking her arm through his.

“As I child, I perfected vomiting on command. Later, I just turned around and walked off. I was trying to be polite today.” Sherlock admitted archly.

“You silly men.” Irene laughed. “What would you do without me?”

One side of the lawn was set up for several croquet games. The three of them joined up with a group needing eight to start. It turned out that Sherlock was an absolute shark at croquet, and was quickly far ahead of any of the other players.

“It’s science, John. You just need the correct angle and force to get the ball where you want it to go.” Sherlock explained with a wave when John complained.

John just rolled his eyes. He was frustrated to find that his cricket skills had him hitting the balls too hard. He kept knocking them all out-of-bounds, twice into the other games being played, and once into the koi pond. They hadn’t quite finished the game when a page interrupted to tell them that Prince Sherlock and Princess Irene were requested to attend the Queen Mum. John was more than happy to hand his mallet off to someone else, and follow along.

Queen Violet was holding court on the verandah behind the palace. She was seated at a table with pots of tea, glasses of champagne, and plates of canapés, looking marvelous in a ruffled coral dress and matching hat. Queen Norah and Lady Prunella sat to one side of her, whilst a collection of well-dressed cronies filled out the rest of her table, and the ones nearby.

“Ahh, chickie, there you are.” She simpered when she saw Sherlock approaching. She held out her hand, and Sherlock bent to kiss it. “Mother.” He said simply.

“Princess Irene, dear.” Queen Violet turned to Irene, and extended her hand to her as well. Delicately, Irene bobbed and kissed it. “Your majesty, so pleased to see you again.” She all but purred. John stood awkwardly to the side trying not to look too out of place, and failing miserably.

“Everyone, everyone.” Violet called out over the chatter, clapping her hands. “Bernard, tell everyone to hush.” She motioned to one of the servants. Soon several of the servers were walking around shushing as much of the crowd as they could reach.

Queen Violet spread her hands out as if in benediction. “I want to make a toast to my youngest son, Prince William, and his intended, Princess Irene of Arabonia.” She lifted her glass of champagne,
and everyone around her followed suit. “Congratulations dears, and best wishes for a felicitous and prosperous union!” Her pronouncement was followed with coos, and congratulations, and a smattering of applause as the party-goers cheered, and drank in their honor.

“Here we saved seats for you, join us.” Queen Violet announced glaring hard at two women across from her who quickly got up and relocated.

Sherlock stood before her, locked in place, looking like nothing so much as a kettle about to boil over. “Mother.” He ground out. “Don’t forget about John, he is also my intended.” John stepped forward to lay a light hand on Sherlock’s arm. “Yeh, it’s fine, don’t make a big deal . . .”

“Yes, it is a big deal.” Sherlock continued in his low monotone looking eyes with his mother.

Queen Violet widened her eyes briefly, and then called to the servants. “Bring us another chair for the table.”

A chair was brought over and left at the table’s corner. Sherlock and Irene then took their seats across from the Queen mum, and John found himself wedged in awkwardly between Lady Prunella and a large woman in a purple frock and bejeweled turban. Servants hurried over to place fresh cups and plates before the newcomers.

“Why aren’t Mycroft and Sherringford here for your lovely tea as well?” Sherlock spat out at his mother.

“Oh, you know Mycroft, always working, just like his father.” Queen Violet waved her hand dismissively as though ruling the country were an odd and time-consuming hobby. “Sherringford is around here somewhere. I just saw him . . .” The Queen leaned forward to pat Irene’s arm. “Now Princess Irene, my dear, do tell me, how are you finding Brettona?” Sherlock crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair clearly determined to ignore as much of the party as possible.

Conversation bubbled around them, and John turned to find himself staring into the eyes of Lady Prunella. At least her pupils weren’t blown wide on some drug this day, though she did seem to be making short work of her glass of champagne.

“Ah, Lady Prunella, how are you?” John asked her politely.

“You shouldn’t let her push you around.” Prunella told him quietly, but emphatically.

“I’m sorry?” John asked, looking up as a server left a glass of champagne before him. “Ta” he said gratefully taking a sip from it.

“You shouldn’t let Violet push you around. You give people an inch and they take a mile.”

“I see. Well, sometimes discretion is the better part of valour. It never pays to make a scene at a gathering.” John smiled warmly at her.

Prunella harrumphed. “Once people think you’re a doormat, it’s all downhill from there.” She said finishing off the last of her champagne, and waving to a servant for another.

John waited until the man had finished pouring her drink before he leaned in and spoke again. “Lady Prunella, has anyone been treating you like a doormat?”

“No, of course not, what an odd thing to say.” Prunella creased her forehead at him.

“Forgive me for prying, but is your health well? I spoke with your husband briefly about medication
you were taking, and I just wondered . . .”

“I take herbal soothers for my nerves sometimes you see,” Prunella explained airily, “really it’s nothing to worry . . .” Sadly the rest of her sentence was interrupted by a muted crash, followed by a high-pitched scream that cut through the noise of the party.

All heads turned in a wave as a serving woman dashed out of the palace, her hands twisted into her apron crying “SHE’S DEAD! GREAT MOTHER! LIZZIE’S DEAD!”
Secrets like Stones in Your Heart

Chapter Summary

Who is behind the murder and plot at the palace? Theories get thicker, as danger draws nearer.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter was inspired by a James Joyce quote:

“Secrets, silent, stony sit in the dark palaces of both our hearts: secrets weary of their tyranny: tyrants willing to be dethroned.”

Sherlock was of course one of the first to leap to his feet and reach the hysterical maid. John was hot on his heels behind. “Where?” was all Sherlock asked the woman, laying a comforting hand on her upper back as he turned her toward the palace.

The shaking maid led them back inside. They quickly followed her through a hallway by the kitchens, and into a pantry where another maid lay quite still, facedown, sprawled across the floor. “I just found her, found Lizzie lying there, cold as a fish!” The woman sobbed.

“Let me through, I’m a healer.” John called out to push his way through the small knot of servants who had gathered in shock to stare.

“OUT!” Sherlock yelled, shooing the gawkers out of the pantry. “Everyone out!”

John knelt beside the fallen woman, and touched the pulse point on her neck. There was no movement, and the skin was quite cold to the touch. Without thinking, John closed his eyes, and sent a tendril of his healing power questing into the woman’s body. Her song was gone. Where once processes had hummed together in intricate dances, there was now nothing but an empty house. Something that might as well have been made of earth and stone lay before him. John realized he could do nothing for her. With a shudder, he withdrew, and opened his eyes.

“John.” Sherlock’s hand gripped his shoulder. John shook his head. The woman was quite gone. Chaos swirled beyond the pantry as official healers of the palace were summoned, and orders were barked out for sangria, and flaming rum punch to be made to soothe the party goers.

John passed his hand a few inches above the woman drawing a five-pointed star across her.

“Blessings and farewell, as you travel westward. May the Dark Mother carry you home. Go in peace, beloved child.” He touched the back of her head before sketching a movement over his own forehead, heart, and mouth. He looked back to see a narrow-eyed Sherlock crouched beside him.
“What do you think killed her?” John asked him quietly.

“Poison.” Sherlock deduced, pointing at the woman. “The killer obviously hoped it would look like a death from natural causes, but look at this small mark on the back of her neck. It was introduced here, most likely by a pin prick of some sort. It was potent, but took long enough to take her down, that the killer was able to get away before she collapsed. I’d say Miss Lizzie was sweating and feeling poorly for at least an hour before she succumbed, see how damp the back of her dress is? John, do you recognize her?”

At John’s head shake, Sherlock reminded him. “She was the maid we saw sneaking silver into her pockets that afternoon we cased the servants. I’ll hazard that sneaky Lizzie overheard something she wasn’t meant to, and tried a spot of blackmailing. Obviously it was over something big. Whoever wanted to keep her silent thought murder was preferable to having a loose end left around. I’ll stake my eye teeth that Lizzie knew who the rat in the palace is, the one behind it all.”

“Sherlock, we’re running out of time. Mid-Summer is in two days. If someone plans to kill the King and heir, we need to tell Mycroft what we know, NOW — even if we don’t know who the head is.” John hissed back at him.

“I might be able to help you with that.”

They turned, surprised, to see Irene leaning against the doorframe, watching them through slitted eyes.

“Irene!” John exclaimed.

“What do you know?” Sherlock growled out.

“Not here.” Irene cautioned, raising a hand. “Meet me in my rooms in an hour. It won’t do if we all go mysteriously missing right now.” With that she peeled away from the doorway and made her way back to the party.

Sherlock spent several minutes questioning the staff. Who had last seen Lizzie alive? What had she been doing prior to collapsing in the pantry? Who were her friends, and what did they know of this?

It turned out that the woman, Elizabeth Smith was her name, hadn’t been very popular amongst the other servants. Few of them knew her well, and no one could recall what she’d been doing over the last few hours. Preparations for the Queen Mum’s party had kept all of the staff hopping for most of the day. Sherlock cornered the housekeeper, Mrs. Morgan, and asked why Lizzie hadn’t been sacked when he’d left her a message about the maid’s light fingers with the silverware. Mrs. Morgan obviously already in a state of shock, was genuinely surprised at his questions, and insisted that she had received no such note.

One of the palace healers, an older bearded man called Winston, arrived in a flurry and pronounced the maid dead due to heart attack. Sherlock’s lips curled at the man’s incompetence, but since letting this story circulate around the palace would pacify the killer, he held his tongue.

The party broke up soon after the hysterics despite the flaming rum punch being circulated. The guests were told that a servant had merely fainted, and all was well, but even the flightiest of the nobles had a self-preservation instinct that had them suddenly remembering other appointments, and long rides home.

The Queen Mum was so put out as she watched the last of the feather-hatted ladies bobbing away. “The nerve of that maid.” She complained. “How dare she collapse in the middle of my party, and
John and Sherlock managed to arrive at Irene’s rooms an hour later without anyone particularly noticing. Sherlock rapped smartly on the doors, and Kate opened them almost immediately to usher them in. John looked behind them before following Sherlock inside. He wondered why it was so hard to act like you weren’t doing anything sneaky when you felt like indeed you were doing something sneaky. How did criminal masterminds actually manage it?

Irene was waiting for them in the sitting room in an armchair, her feet tucked up under her. “Come in, sit down.” She waved to the chairs nearby. As Kate made to move away, Irene grabbed her wrist, “No, stay Kate.” Kate nodded, and took the seat beside her.

“So what did you mean back there when you said you could help us?” Sherlock fixed Irene with a piercing look. “You know who killed that maid?”

“Not precisely.” Irene answered slowly, but I might be able to shed some light on the whole picture. I have a story to tell you.”

“I’m listening.” Sherlock drawled, sitting back in his chair to steeple his hands before his chin.

“Five years ago as I told John, I met the lovely Katherine Hill when I spent the summer with the Gallatian royal family.” Irene flashed a look at Kate, reaching over to touch her arm. She turned her eyes back to Sherlock. “What I didn’t tell him is who else of note I met that summer at the Gallatian court.”

“Oh?” Sherlock raised an eyebrow, and waited.

“I also met Prince Sherringford that summer. He and his wife were there with a Brettonian delegation to talk with the Gallatian king. Sherringford was quite forward in his attentions to me, and I spent most of the Brettonians’ visit avoiding him. I saw him late one night though. It had become my custom to slip out and meet a certain someone after dark in the gardens, and steal back to my bed before anyone noticed my absence.” Irene smiled slightly at Kate who blushed slightly in return.

Irene turned back, and sobered as she continued speaking. “I passed through a library as a shortcut on the way back to the bedrooms. When I heard someone coming, I slipped behind some curtains to hide. I meant to simply wait until they were gone, but when I heard what they were talking about, I peeked between the curtains, and paid closer attention. It was a meeting between two men. They were well-cloaked, I never saw their faces, and they were speaking in Brettonian, not my best language at the time, but what I understood chilled my blood. One of them, the one speaking with a Gallatian accent pulled out a small carved wooden box, and gave it to the Brettonian man. He told him that it had a false bottom that contained the spell he needed – a mage sickness that would wipe out the Brettonian royal swine once and for all. The Gallatian man gave directions on how the spell was to be set into water to release its deadly force. They laughed about it, clasped hands, and parted ways. The next day, I saw Prince Sherringford with the box. He gave it to Lady Prunella at lunch, told her he saw it in the marketplace, and thought she could keep her favorite ear bobs in it. The best secret is one hidden in plain sight is it not?”
“You never saw the faces of the men in the library that night?” Sherlock asked her.

“No.” Irene admitted.

“You cannot confirm that it was Prince Sherringford in the library.”

“No, but he had the box the next day . . .”

“Your story supports that the Fever Plague came from Gallatia which is something we long suspected. Strained relations with Gallatia led to the wars that broke out at the end of that summer. However, your tale does not confirm that it was Sherringford in the library, that he knew what was in the box he gave his wife, or even if it was the same box.”

“It was a very distinctive box.” Irene protested.

“Even so. This is circumstantial evidence at best. I’m curious though. Why wait to come forward with this story until now?”

“I witnessed a plot to kill the Brettonian king. Who stands to gain the most from such an act? Generally those who inherit the throne.” Irene raised an eyebrow.

“You suspected I was involved in a plot to kill my father?” Sherlock asked.

“It was a reasonable assumption.” Irene defended. “Better to assume guilty until proven innocent when one moves in the circles we do.”

“This is true.” Sherlock acceded. “What changed your mind about trusting me?”

“Several things.” Irene admitted shrugging. “Starting with your complete lack of interest in ruling your country to your desire to uncover the truth in things.”

John rolled his eyes. “Fine. We’ve established that Sherlock isn’t a heartless murderer, but how do we know Sherringford WASN’T involved?”

“John, my brother may be a revolting flirt, and a complete arse, but he isn’t a mass murderer.” Sherlock sighed.

“How do you know?” John sputtered.

“Because my eldest brother is a truthsayer, and can sense any lies. He asked us both about it afterwards. Neither of us knew anything about the origins of the Fever Plague. Sherringford is guilty of many things, but murder by mage plague isn’t one of them.”

“What if Mycroft was behind the Fever Plague?” John sputtered as the horrible thought rolled over him. “He did gain the throne after your father died.”

“And his own daughter died as well. Think, John. Mycroft is smarter than that. If he’d been in charge of the mage plague, Kaitlin would be alive today. No, someone else released that horror on us. And the kingpin of this summer’s assassination plot couldn’t possible BE Mycoft if he and Prince Fergus are the target.”

“Oh, right.” John mumbled. “But what if it’s the same person?”

“Hmmm?” Sherlock asked him obviously starting to turn wheels in his great brain.

“It might not be Sherringford, but what if the same person who orchestrated the mage plague is the
same one planning to kill the king and prince this summer?" Irene cut in.

"Everyone on that delegation was cleared though. Mycroft questioned them all when they returned from Gallatia." Sherlock waved a careless hand.

"Who could have fooled a truthsayer?" John asked.

“That, my dear fellow, is an interesting question." Sherlock sat up higher in his chair. "Why don't we find out who was on that delegation to Gallatia, and see if we can get anything interesting out of them.”


“John, I have spoken to Mycroft. Several times. He knows there’s a plot brewing around Mid-Summer. He assures me has extra security in place for the event. He . . . he has forbidden me to mention it to him again.” Sherlock admitted.

“I want to help.” Irene said. “It will look odd if you start questioning everyone who was on that trip suddenly. It might tip off the kingpin, as you say. I think a more subtle approach is called for. I can speak to some, and Kate has an in with any servants you want to know about.”

“I'll help any way I can.” Kate agreed.

Sherlock’s eyes sparkled. “Excellent. It can’t be anything obvious. No questions about plagues or plots to kill the king, but anyone acting suspicious. Anyone who doesn’t have obvious plans for the rest of the summer . . . that would be a clue. I will get a list together by this evening of the names of all who made that trip, and divide it between the four of us.”

Sherlock put his hand out between them. “We can speak of this to no one else. Shake?” One by one, the other three layered their hands on top of his. Sherlock laid his other hand on top of the pile and said “Bound together do you agree to work as one. Do you so swear?” They all agreed.

“I liked that much better without the spit.” Kate said without thinking, then gasped and put her hand over her mouth when she realized what she’d said.

“Well, me as well, quite frankly.” John agreed, and even though it wasn’t that funny, it split the tension, and they all laughed until they wiped tears out of their eyes.

“I trust you.” Sherlock told Irene and Kate when they were prepared to leave. “I’ll get you that list as soon as I can.”

“I understand.” Irene nodded as John and Sherlock rose. Kate followed to open and close the door behind them. John touched her hand in reassurance, and she gave a thin smile in return as Sherlock swept ahead leaving John to catch up.

“John.” Sherlock paused suddenly when they were halfway down the hall. “I have a bad feeling about Crumbs and Poppet.”

“I understand.” Irene nodded as John and Sherlock rose. Kate followed to open and close the door behind them. John touched her hand in reassurance, and she gave a thin smile in return as Sherlock swept ahead leaving John to catch up.

“John.” Sherlock paused suddenly when they were halfway down the hall. “I have a bad feeling about Crumbs and Poppet.”

“I can see that.” John agreed.

“I'll be busy for the next few hours getting this list together. Would you . . .”

“Yeh, of course, I can go check on them.” John offered.

Relief washed over Sherlock’s face. “I think the best thing would be for them to get out of Delphium
completely. Go visit family or friends somewhere else if they haven’t already. Let me get a purse of money in case they need traveling funds. Can you go now?”

“Of course,” John agreed “Just let me change out of my fancy togs, and into something reasonable, and I’m off.”

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Sherlock showed John again how to reach the door leading to the tunnel for the library. They looked around, making sure no one was in the corridor before Sherlock pressed his hand over the door to unlock it, and hurried them both inside. With a swipe of his hand over the panel on the wall, the row of mage lights leading down the staircase and into the tunnel blazed to life.

“John.” Sherlock looked down at John with eyes that flickered green and gold in the mage light. The landing was narrow and the two of them stood chest to chest. “Take a cab to Baker Street first, and then walk the rest of the way along the back alleys. I want to make sure you aren’t followed.”

“I thought there were wards on Anthea’s shop?” John asked.

“There are, but nothing is fool proof.” Sherlock shrugged. “John, be careful, all right?” He slid his hand to cup around the back of John’s neck.

“Of course.” John agreed.

“I’m sorry to drag you into all this . . .” Sherlock began, but John cut him off, pulling him into a fierce kiss.

“Hang on . . .” John said breaking off, and nudged Sherlock to move one step down on the stairs. Once they were facing at eye level, John wound his hands into Sherlock’s curls, and resumed his heated snog. Tilting his head for better entry, John drank Sherlock down like a cup of water on Mid-Summer’s day, which of course it almost was. Sherlock groaned when they parted, and rested his forehead against John’s as they caught their breath.

“You aren’t dragging me in to anything. I’m part of this too.” John said quietly, pulling back to catch Sherlock’s eye.

Sherlock nodded and gave John's arm a final squeeze. “Be safe. I’ll see you when you return.”

“Of course. Back soon.” John touched his face once, then brushed past him down the stairwell, resisting the urge to glance back as he reached the tunnel, and hurried on.

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John knocked at Anthea’s shop for the second time. Yellow paper suns were hung about the glass windows for the holiday, but the shades were drawn, and the welcome sign flipped to “closed.” He was just turning around to try the rear entrance when a movement in the front window caught his eye – a shade twitched slightly aside. With the scrape of the lock turning, the door creaked opened a
crack. One of Anthea's eyes appeared, quickly scanning the street behind him.

“John, get in.” She opened the door half-way, and all but yanked him inside, shutting the door behind him in a jangle of bells to quickly slide the bolt home again. “What is it, what’s happened?” Anthea rounded on him. She looked a state, her hair half out of her braid, and her eyes gone quite wide. “I got a note from Mycroft to close up the shop, and leave Delphium as soon as possible, but he didn’t say any more.”

“A maid was found dead during the Queen Mum’s tea party this afternoon, poisoned. We think someone is planning to kill the King and . . . heirs by Mid-Summer, and the maid knew something about it. If they’re serious enough to start the killing, the threat is real. You and Loralee need to go. It isn’t safe. Sherlock sent money if you need traveling funds.” John pulled the purse out of his pocket and put it into Anthea’s hands.

A small smile quirked her mouth. She pulled a heavier purse out of her pocket. “Don’t worry, Mycroft already sent money. But I’ll keep this for Loralee for later, thanks.”

“Where is Loralee?”

“Upstairs, packing a bag. I already have things ready to go, but she had toys she wanted to bring. I told her only four dollies.”

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“I have a brother out in the country. He’s been at us to visit for ages, and have Loralee see her cousins, but this is my busy time. I didn’t want to close the shop for more than a day or two. Looks like a holiday for us after all.” She sighed.

“I’ll help you with the bags.” John told her. “There’s a taxi station just around the corner.”

“That’s not necessary.” Anthea told him. “Mycroft said he’d have a guards and a carriage waiting for us in the alley behind the shop, but I appreciate your coming to help, John.” She reached out and squeezed his hand.

“Of course. Let’s get you two going.” John smiled.

The sound of thundering feet pounding down the stairs proceeded Loralee bursting into the shop. “Mummmeee, I want to bring pretty pony, AND Mr. Jumbles, I don’t want to chose.” Loralee ran through the open panel in the front counter with several toys clutched in both hands.

“Oh hullo, Mr. John.” She said, stopping just before she ran into him.

“Hello, honey.” John leaned down slightly. “How are you?”

“Good.” Loralee grinned at him revealing a big gap in her smile where a tooth had obviously left recently. “We’re going on a trip.” She told him proudly.

“So I hear, why don’t we head upstairs, and finish your packing so you can be ready to go?” John suggested.

“Mummy, you promised we could bring some sweets for the carriage ride first!” Loralee rounded on her mother.

“All right, lovey, I did. Why don’t you and Mr. John go finish packing your bag, and I’ll grab a few of all your favorite things?”
“All right.” Loralee agree, finally allowing John to herd her up the stairs to the flat above.

“You lucky girl, I hear you’re going to go stay with your cousins?” John asked her.

“Oh yes, I have three cousins, and they have a big pony. The last time I visited I was afraid to ride the pony, but now I’m much bigger . . .” John nodded at her story as he helped her sort her packing.

Anthea joined them a few minutes later in the sitting room with a big paper sack of candies. “There, I’ve left a note for my assistant, Bridget, downstairs.” Anthea looked around briefly. “I’ve done all I can. Let’s go.”

John shouldered the biggest two bags, leaving Anthea with the smaller ones, and Loralee with her bag of toys, and sack of sweets. Anthea led them down the stairs, and through the hallway to the back door of the shop. Loralee asked John if he liked goats. Her cousins had goats, and sheep too. John nodded at her babble, as Anthea opened the door to let them pass, then turned to lock it behind them. It was cooler in the alley, and already much darker as the day slid toward evening.

Anthea moved past the dustbins to check the alley. “Something’s wrong, I don’t see a carriage.” She told John, peering back and forth.

“Are you sure . . .” John asked just as two big men peeled out of the shadows, and moved closer carrying a large rolled rug between them.

“Oi, Luv, are you Anthea Hollingberry?” The fat front one asked.

“Who wants to know?” She asked, edging back towards the shop.

“We’ve got a delivery for Ms. Hollingberry.” He creased his face into something that passed for a smile, and it wasn't a pretty sight.

“I didn’t order anything.” She said glancing over at John who had dropped the bags, and shifted his weight to stand balanced on both feet.

“It’s a gift, see, for Mid-Summer.” Front man finished.

“LORALEE, RUN!” Anthea screamed as the men dropped the rug and closed in. Loralee turned to run, but a third man had come up from behind, cutting them off, and there was nowhere left to go.

John leapt into motion. He grabbed the man reaching for Loralee, and threw him into the other two. The first one to stand up whipped out a knife, and lunged at John with it. He managed to nick his arm before John kicked his knee out. As the thug went down, John stomped on his hand to release the knife, kicking it into the shadows. Beside him, Anthea swung her bag to crack across the jaw of another assailant as Loralee screamed and hurled her bag of sweets at them. The sack burst open sending humbugs, cinnamon balls, and lemon drops bouncing along the alleyway. The third man scrambling to his feet slipped on sweets and fell back over. In the chaos, John managed to grab one of the thugs and slam a “sleep” command into him. He threw himself over the other two doing the same. When he finally stood upright panting, he was pleased to find the three hulking brutes sleeping like babies across the alley floor.

“Are they dead?” Loralee cried.

“No, sweetie, just sleeping. Come on let’s get you two to a taxi.” John puffed.

“Oh, John, you’re bleeding.” Anthea said touching his hurt arm. “I have some herbs . . .”
“Nope, no time. I’m not sure if this lot has friends about. We need to go, now.” He grabbed the bags he had dropped, and herded them up the alley. Loralee bent to scoop up a handful of un-crushed sweets from the ground as they passed the heap of men, but allowed John to hurry them along. They rounded the alley onto a main street where people walked, and the last rays of the sun still licked over the building fronts. It was jarring John thought, like re-entering regular time after a walk through the underworld.

“Come on, this way.” John didn’t stop their near-jog until they were almost at the taxi stand.

“Can you catch a coach to your brother’s?” He asked Anthea quietly. “Or would you rather I hired a carriage and drove you out?”

“John, you might have a trace on you. I think the courier who brought us the note earlier today did. It’s the only way someone could have found us past the wards like that.” Anthea warned grimly. "It's safer for us to catch a public coach out to my brother's. Don't worry - we’ll be all right.”

John saw them into a taxi, handing their bags up after them. At Loralee’s wide eyes, John reached up to touch her cheek. “Chin up, Poppet. Have a good visit, and tell me all about the pony when you get back.” Loralee nodded, and burrowed closer to her mother.

Anthea grabbed a bandage out of the side of her bag and thrust it into John’s hand. “At least wrap your arm up. It’s lucky your shirt is dark, but I can tell you’re still bleeding.”

John took the bandage, “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine! You two have a good trip.” He stood back, smiled, and waved with his good arm like everything was fine. He banged the side of the cab to signal them to go.

“THANK YOU!” Anthea called as the cab pulled away from the kerb, and headed into the traffic.

John stood, watching until the cab disappeared around a turn, safely on its way.
What's the Plan

Chapter Summary

Final plans swirl in to place as Sherlock and Mycroft finally share what they know before Midsummer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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For the first time in his life, John caught a cab and told them to head straight to Delphium Palace. It was mad, but this was his life now after all. The servants at the gates were confused at the public taxi until John leaned out the side, and announced himself. “Brother John Watson, intended Royal Consort.” He called out. It was somewhat gratifying to watch the gates part, and the staff bow like wheat in wind, footmen racing to help him climb from the carriage, and pay his fare. He still wasn’t used to it at all. John could see why Sherlock sneaked in and out of the palace so often. It was a little unnerving.

He made his way quickly to his rooms, happy to find that he actually remembered one of the quicker short cuts. He was more than glad to find Sherlock already there, pacing in the sitting room.

“Oh excellent, you’re back, John. How . . . oh, but you’re hurt.” Sherlock stepped forward to guide John to the couch, as he searched over him.

“My right arm.” John told him. “Just a knife wound. It’s shallow, but long.”

Sherlock lost no time in taking John’s hands between his. A faint glow emanated where they joined. “Send me a healing.” Sherlock commanded. John gathered up a healthy ball of energy and passed it into him. He could feel the other man gathering the force to return it. With a warm burst, the energy streamed into him, flowing over his arm to swallow up the cut, the tissues reweaving to wholeness.

“Ah, that’s good.” John smiled, lifting his arm to flex and rotate his hand. “I think every healer should have a chameleon mage at their side. It’s so annoying, not being able to heal yourself.”

“You were obviously ambushed, tell me everything.” Sherlock’s face grew paler than usual as John recounted his trip to Anthea’s. He stood to pace the room again when John had finished. “We have to see Mycroft. Get cleaned up whilst I sent him a note. He’ll definitely want to hear about this.” Sherlock said darkly as he looked for pen and paper. He scribbled his note quickly, then popped out the door to find a servant to deliver it.

John peeled off his soiled shirt on his way to the washroom. He ran water into the sink, splashed his face and wet a flannel to wash as much as he could quickly reach. He could use a full soak he thought glancing longingly at the tub, but that would have to wait. He was pulling on a new shirt when his love returned. Sherlock stalked across the room, and instantly enveloped him in an embrace without a word.

“I’m fine.” John said, greatly muffled from where his head lay pressed against the tall man’s chest.
“Really.”

“I know.” Sherlock said, leaning his cheek over the top of his head, and squeezing even tighter. John relaxed against him, and squeezed back. Finally, Sherlock eased off, raising a hand to hold John’s cheek. The eyes he turned to John were huge. “Thank you. I wouldn’t have sent you alone if I’d thought you were in immediate danger.”

“Footsoldier in the Gallatian Wars, remember? I can take a couple of muscle-bound idiots in an alley. Besides I seem to recall someone else coming to me for help with a knife wound once.”

Sherlock had the good graces to blush slightly. “Yes, but this was an unacceptable risk. I underestimated our opponent. I won’t do that again. Come on, let’s go see the king.”

Mycroft was already in his study by the time Sherlock and John reached the door.

“Come in.” he boomed out at Sherlock's knock. Mycroft sat behind his desk flipping through some papers looking a bit rumpled in a casual shirt loose at the throat. Seeing him minus a jacket, and neck cloth, and at anything below his usual polished perfection just seemed incongruent to John.

“What is it now, William?” Mycroft sighed, flicking his eyes over them briefly. "I swear to the Gods, if this is another one of your conspiracy theories . . .”

Sherlock shut the door behind them. “Anthea and Loralee were attacked as they left the shop this evening.”

“What?” Mycroft said half rising out of his seat. Shock rippled over him before he went smoothly blank, and sank back to his chair. “Are they hurt?”

“No, they’re fine. John was there.” Sherlock told him.

Mycroft swung his gaze to John, a fierce intensity that burned like twin suns shone through his eyes. “Tell me what happened. Spare no detail.”

Once John had relayed the adventures at Anthea’s shop to Mycroft’s exacting specifications, the king relaxed back and nodded. “John, your assistance in this is beyond measure. I thank you greatly for your help with my family.”

“Of course. I’m worried though.” John said wrinkling up his brow. "They could have been followed. Anything could have happened to them on public transportation, but when Anthea mentioned the trace, I was more afraid to stay with them.”

“Don’t worry, you did the right thing. Anthea will have charms on her to keep them untrackable to followers. It was only being targeted in the space around the shop that left them vulnerable. Damn.”

Mycroft ran his hand over his face. “This business reeks of the amateur – those thugs were clearly hired local muscle, and yet whoever is behind this was able to waylay my people. Don’t go, we aren’t finished, but if you will excuse me for a moment, I need to speak to someone first.” Mycroft stood and exited swiftly into the hall without waiting for a reply.

John glanced over at Sherlock, but he had retreated into his thinking pose, hands steepled before his
chin. John amused himself as they waited with glancing about the room, at the books and the art, or what he could see of it by the few candles burning. The faces of the statues about the room looked ominous in the flickering light. It was always a bit like being called to the head teacher’s office to be Mycroft’s study John thought. He couldn’t shake the feeling of having done something naughty regardless of his reason for being there. Thankfully Mycroft cut off his train of thought, returning shortly to usher a man in black before him into the study. If John hadn’t been concentrating on looking at the newcomer, his eyes would have slid right off of him. The man most certainly had a very effective “don’t see me” charm on his person.

“John, if you don’t mind being scanned?” Mycroft asked him with raised eyebrows. “William, you as well.”

“Of course not, it’s fine.” John agreed readily. Sherlock merely snorted, but Mycroft obviously took this as consent, and the man in black moved to stand behind their chairs, touching his hands first to Sherlock’s shoulders, then moving to do the same to John. A small glow accompanied his scans flaring briefly to add to the dim light in the room, before he stepped away. “They’re clean, sir.”

“Thank you, Robert.” Mycroft nodded at that man obviously dismissing him. John hardly noticed his leaving.

“Well, it seems you two are not sullied with a trace spell. That’s something at least.” Mycroft sighed walking around the desk to retake his seat. "It was most definitely the courier that led the thugs to the apothecary.”

“Do you trust your courier?” Sherlock asked, suddenly springing back to life.

“With my life, little brother. Or rather the lives of my family. No, my courier is no traitor. Someone was able to put a trace spell on him before he left the palace.”

“You need a healer or mage with energy working skills to do that.” Sherlock said leaning closer in.

“I’m fully aware of who can lay trace spells.” Mycroft snapped.

“So, the assassination plot for Mid-Summer.” Sherlock began.

“I asked you to leave this be. I let you know I had things under control . . .” Mycroft pinched the bridge of his nose, and squeezed his eyes closed briefly.

“However, since this is obviously not the case,” Sherlock countered, “you might as well include us. You need all the help you can get. Without John’s timely assistance at the shop . . .”

Mycroft’s light complexion paled even more starkly. He swallowed. “I’m aware of how deeply I am in John’s debt for saving my family.” Mycroft turned to look at John. “John if ever there is a favour I can do, you need only say the word.”

“Thank you, your majesty, but they’re my family now too.” John smiled kindly at Mycroft’s flicker of surprise.

“Yes, if you’re done bribing John’s goodwill, Mycroft,” Sherlock cut in, “perhaps we can discuss the attempt that will be made on your life and as much of the royal family as they can get at the Mid-Summer celebration?”

“What do you want to discuss, brother mine?” Mycroft swung his piercing gaze back to skewer Sherlock.
“If you’re prepared for the attack?” Sherlock snapped out. “For the fireworks the circus will have on the parade grounds?”

“Oh obviously someone will be bringing in extra gunpowder with the fireworks that they will be placing under the royal pavilion. Naturally we’ll be dampening it down.”

“The terminally ill fire mage?” Sherlock countered.

“Will need a contact from our ranks to break through the wards on the royal pavilion for his suicide mission to explode the gunpowder during the fireworks display. We’ll have mages at the ready to subdue him.”

“And you know who the traitor is within the palace?” Sherlock demanded with his eyebrows raised.

“We haven’t narrowed it down yet,” Mycroft admitted, “but I will have ample staff available to catch them in the act, as it were.”

“And the maid found dead this afternoon? How does that connect in?” Sherlock barked out.

“Inconclusive.” Mycroft replied waving the extra detail away.

“What if if the planning goes deeper into the palace than you suspect? What if you catch some low-level flunky instead of the head? The ringleader of this plot may very well be the same person who instigated the Fever plague arriving from Gallatia.” Sherlock focused eyes gone steely grey on his brother.

“William, we’ve been over this. Not everything is part of a grand master plan. I have people in place to deal with the threats, counter plans in place, and your investigating will just stir up hornet’s nests. We will catch all the culprits red-handed at Mid-Summer.” Mycroft paused to glance between the two of them. “I thank you and John for your help, but I need no more meddling.”

“But what if . . .” Sherlock began.

“No. More. Meddling.” Mycroft raised both his eyebrows.

“Mycroft, you’ve obviously eaten so much lately that all the blood is being diverted from your brain to your digestive tract. You are not only remaining blind, but negligent if you miss this opportunity to uncover . . .”

“ENOUGH.” Mycroft had risen out of his seat to fix Sherlock with a flinty glare. “William Sherlock Scott Holmes, I will have your word that you will cease and desist with your investigations regarding the Gallatian trip, or the Mid-Summer plot.”

Sherlock crossed his arm, and all but stuck his lower lip out in a pout. “Fine. You have my word that I will not personally continue to ‘meddle’ in your affairs with my investigations. Though I maintain this is an excellent opportunity to interview . . .”

“Brother. It’s been a long day. Let’s call it a night. William. John.” Mycroft nodded stiffly at the both of them.

It was clearly their cue to leave. John rose and sank into the proper bow for one’s ruling king, if he is your in-law-to-be, and you are bidding him good-night in an informal setting. “Your majesty.” He intoned politely. All the tutoring he’d gotten with Irene was worth it for the looks that the royal brothers threw him. Mycroft’s expression registered surprised mixed with a soupcon of amused. Sherlock looked smug with a healthy dose of aroused. John decided he could get used to his love
looking at him like that.

Sherlock rose quickly, and with a wave of his hand, and a “Good night Mycroft” tossed over his shoulder, bundled John out of the room before him.

“Let’s stop by Irene’s rooms. I have the list of people for them to observe ready to drop off.” Sherlock said as soon as they were out of earshot.

“We’re still investigating? I just heard you promise Mycroft you weren’t going to continue! He’s a truthsayer. How did he not hear you were lying?” John sputtered

“He knows I’m lying about not meddling. He’s pretending not to. To be fair though, if you had paid close attention, you would have noticed that I just promised that I would not be personally involved in any investigation. In that I was telling the truth. You, Irene, and Kate will. It works out better this way anyway. For some reason, people in the palace are too nervous around me.” Sherlock informed him with a shrug.

John shut the door to their rooms firmly behind them and locked it. He could feel his paranoia about someone slipping in to kill them in their sleep ratcheting up by the minute. How did royals stand this? He and Sherlock had stopped briefly by Irene and Kate’s suite. Sherlock rapped softly but insistently at the door until Irene herself had answered it, obviously bundled hurriedly into a dressing gown. She’d snapped at Sherlock that Kate was a little tied up when he’d asked after her, but accepted their list of suspects to check out amiably enough before closing the door.

Sherlock was back to pacing around their sitting room, obviously thinking his way through things. John left him to his mutterings to use the loo, and get ready for bed. When he emerged in only his pants, Sherlock was waiting for him. “John, let me see your arm.” Sherlock pounced. John willingly extended it for Sherlock’s approval. “Fascinating. There’s no scar at all.” Sherlock ran his fingers lightly over John’s perfectly-smooth forearm where the knife wound had lain. “I did try to keep my eyes on it as the wound healed, but I couldn’t send the energy and observe at the same time.”

“That is hard to . . .” John started to reply when Sherlock dipped his head and pressed his warm, open mouth against John’s inner wrist. The touch sparked all the way down to his groin. With the tip of his tongue, Sherlock traced a line up his arm. The breath caught in John’s throat. Gods . . .

“My love.” John murmured against Sherlock’s throat, dragging his rock-hard cock over Sherlock’s
near fully-clothed erection.

“I want, I want . . .” Sherlock ground out.

“What do you want?” John whispered over his ear.

“You, closer.” Sherlock pleaded.

“Always.” John agreed, reaching down to tug Sherlock’s bottoms off. The clothes tangled on his shoes, and John wasted short time pulling off each one before sliding trousers and pants to the floor. John glanced up to the sight of Sherlock stretched before him, gloriously bare, his cock jutting out dark and swollen before him. With a growl, John stalked back over him as if he were landscape to navigate. When he lay fully over him, Sherlock enfolded him, wrapping both arms and legs around him, finally pressing them skin on skin from breast to cock.

“Aaaah.” A collective sigh escaped both their throats. They squeezed even closer, breathing each other in. John plunged a hand into Sherlock’s curls, grabbing a handful, while kissing everything he could land his lips on, advancing up Sherlock’s neck and jaw to capture his mouth in a hungry caress. They groaned as lips connected, and tongues swept deeply into each other’s mouths. Sherlock let his legs fall back to the bed, and tried to thrust up against John, but he was pinned fast, and couldn’t move properly. He whined out a frustrated sound.

“What do you need, baby?” John asked him. “Do you need this?” He eased to the side, working a hand between them to wrap his fingers over Sherlock’s cock, and slide up its length.

“Want both . . . want us.” Sherlock ground out, arching his back. John had the feeling that access to words was quickly escaping him. John reached under a pillow, and came back with a jar they kept there. With a scoop of the honey-scented cream, John slicked their erections, and gathered them side by side to pump his fist over them. The heat, the friction, the feeling of Sherlock against him was an exquisite pulse over his nerves. Sherlock groaned, and bucked like a man possessed. In only a few passes, he fell apart, coming all over John’s hand, and belly, and prick in hot spurts. John shuddered at the sight, feeling his own orgasm gathering in his balls, rising up. He grabbed his cock alone, pumping his fist hard to follow, but Sherlock caught his hand to stay the movement. He looked up at John with eyes gone clear as beach glass in the dancing candlelight.

“John, come fuck me. Come inside.”

“Gladly, love.” John breathed, and slipped a pillow under Sherlock’s hips to cant them upward. He found the jar again, and scooping another slick of cream, brought wet fingers to Sherlock’s entrance, teasing a fingertip inside. Sherlock went limp, groaning out a sound so deep John felt it more than heard it. “Like that? Like that, love?” John crooned, working one finger all the way in, then another, careful, but relentless in his goal to stretch him open. Sherlock’s barely vocalized "yeeees, Jaaaawn" spurred him on to pushing in three. Finally, when his love was twisting under him, John pulled his fingers out, and lining up his cock, slid himself home. A sharp catch of breath tore from Sherlock’s throat, and they froze, finally, finally joined tightly together. Aaaaaaah.

John breathed Sherlock in, gripped him tight. He tried to move slowly, make it last, but Sherlock bucked under him, rumbling out "more" in his deepest register. John lost it, pounding into him in a fury, the two of them pressed tight, trying to slip under each other's skin with each thrust. John came with a cry, releasing into his lover as stars exploded under his eyelids. He hung suspended for no time, all time, finally collapsing over Sherlock, the two of them bathed in sweat as if they’d run a long race.

“John if I lost you, if I ever lost you.” Sherlock mumbled almost incoherently into John’s hair.
“Hush, love. Not going anywhere.” John soothed, petting his hand down Sherlock’s side. After John found a small towel to wipe off the stickiest bits, they fell asleep tangled together, breathing in the smell of themselves — thick, musky, and briny like the sea after a storm.

The candle was almost guttered out when John woke to Sherlock sliding back into the bed.

“Hmmph?” John asked burrowing closer against the chilled body slipping under the covers.

“Just went to the loo. Go back to sleep.” Sherlock kissed him on the forehead.

“No, I’m awake for a minute.” John yawned. “You are amazing.” He smiled at his love, reaching up to trace a finger down the slope of his nose.

“I beg to differ. I believe you were the wild man shagging me into the mattress earlier.” Sherlock’s voice was smug all over.

“Well, I had a little help.” John smiled fondly at him, and because he couldn’t help himself, leaned in to kiss his lips. Unlike before, this kiss was long and languid, and they found themselves following it lazily, passing control of it back and forth like the winding of a stream. When John finally pulled back, he found his cock had stirred to half mast again. Sherlock snaked a hand through the sheets to run his fingers over John’s penis. “Mmmm.” Sherlock hummed in appreciation as it twitched for him.

John arched his back at the sudden thrum of pleasure. “Holmes, you are dangerous.” He smiled. Sherlock’s face slid into a feral smirk in answer as he scooted closer.

“Hang on, wait a minute.” John laughed, and stopped Sherlock’s advance with a hand to his chest. “You never told me who you wanted me to investigate tomorrow. It’s Prince Fergus’s Blessing day isn’t it?”

“Just so.” Sherlock agreed rolling onto his back with a huff at being stopped. “Mycroft thinks the investigation is a waste of time though.” He turned his head to peer back at John with eyes gone slitted like a cat’s.

“Fuck Mycroft.” John declared. “Tell me what your plan is.”

Sherlock rolled to his side, propping his head up over a bent elbow. He plucked at the sheet with his free hand. “Interestingly enough, most of the party who went on the ambassadorial trip to Gallatia five years ago are no longer with us. Several of them perished with the Fever Plague, or left the palace for good shortly thereafter. I have three servants for Kate to observe, and two minor nobles for Irene to chat with tomorrow. I want you to talk to that healer who examined the dead maid yesterday. Healer Eamon Winston is his name. He’s one of the personal staff for Sherringford and Prunella. He both went on that trip to Gallatia, and failed to notice a simple poisoning under his nose. Something about him feels wrong.”

“Okay, that’s it? Talk to this Winston fellow?”

“Well, he’s one of the targets in question. He may or may not go to the Blessing Ceremony at the temple, but he should be at the palace feast afterwards. The other person I want you to talk to is Sherringford.”

“Sherringford? I thought he was cleared of suspicion?” John asked confused.

“He was, but he’s too deep of a well of information about the Gallatian trip to let him go untapped. He might remember something that could help us.”
“What about his wife, Lady Prunella? She was there too, right?”

Sherlock wrinkled up his nose. “John, she’s nearly mad as a hatter, but yes, you can try talking to her if you want to. Both she and Sherringford should be at the Blessing Ceremony as well as the meal.”

“And you can’t talk to either of them about this because you promised King Mycroft you wouldn’t meddle personally?” John raised both eyebrows. “This is positively chivalrous for you.”

“John, I’m hurt. I’m not a complete savage. My word still means something.” Sherlock grumped in mock indignation.

“I don’t doubt your word, love.” John told him seriously, reaching over to chuck under his chin. “It’s always good with me.” Sherlock eyes shone bright as he caught John’s hand, and opened it to drop kisses across his palm. John watched fascinated as those beautiful lips puckered, and dipped down to brush over his skin.

“Sherringford never gives any of my questions a straight answer anyway.” Sherlock admitted, dragging his teeth lightly over the meaty base of John’s palm. John shivered. “You might have better luck getting something useful out of him.” Sherlock shrugged, and turned John’s hand over to lick between his fingers. When he sucked John’s middle finger deep into his mouth, John hissed, his eyes closing as desire spiked hot through his belly.

“Oh, Gods, come here, you.” He groaned, pulling Sherlock into his arms. The man flipped him over with a grin, pinning John's arms to the mattress above him as the candle on the nightstand finally flickered out. Very little else was said then beyond the cries that lovers make twined in the oldest dance, made new each time it is shared afresh. They made love slowly with their whole bodies, falling asleep again just before the dawn. This man, John thought before slumber pulled him under, a certain mad genius sprawled half-over him. This man is a miracle.

Chapter End Notes

Dear readers, I fear this fic may run a few extra chapters than I originally envisioned. I'll give a more accurate number as we get closer to the end. Somehow these two men always have more to say and do than I think they will.
Once You Appreciate One of Your Blessings

Chapter Summary

Mid-Summer week festivities include the prince's Blessing Day this year.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter comes from this quote:

"Once you appreciate one of your blessings, one of your senses, your sense of hearing, then you begin to respect the sense of seeing and touching and tasting, you learn to respect all the senses."

- Maya Angelou

John washed a large bite of eggs down with a swallow of tea. He shook his head as he watched Sherlock reject yet another outfit their valet had valiantly unearthed from the dressing room. They were back in Sherlock’s cavernous room, wrapped in fluffy dressing gowns, eating breakfast, and attempting to get ready as quickly as possible. Prince Fergus’s Blessing Ceremony was today, and they were scheduled to leave for it in just under an hour.

“Goodson, find me something utterly hideous.” Sherlock commanded, spooning sugar into his tea, and waving off the latest outfit that Goodson held out. “That one is only mildly offensive.”

Goodson almost huffed, but restrained himself to a dry, “As Your Highness commands.” He disappearing into the walk-in cupboard for yet another frightening sartorial option with only a small grumble under his breath.

“I heard that.” Sherlock called after him. “There will be no Summer bonus for you if you keep this attitude up, Goodson.”

“I must inform you that His Majesty, the king, has already gifted all the servants with their Summer bonus.” Goodson replied coming back with a pale purple ensemble graced with a truly stunning amount of lace and bows. “Sir.” He held it out over one arm.

“Ah, very good.” Sherlock sat up straighter. “That looks more like it. Find me a simply horrid hat to go with it, and that’s the ticket.” With a small nod, Goodson disappeared once more into the fray.

“I forget, love, “John turned toward Sherlock. “Did you tell me which temple the ceremony is being held at today?”

“West Temple of the Great Gods.” Sherlock informed him, taking a sip of his tea.
“Oh, she’s a beauty.” John whistled. “I toured that temple when I first came to Delphium.” John wiped his mouth on his napkin, and folded it by his plate. “Sherlock . . .” He started. Sherlock catching the weight of his tone, raised his eyebrows and waited. “I was wondering if you’d mind if I wore my priest robes to the temple today.” John finally finished.

“Why would I mind?” Sherlock asked cocking his head to the side. “You are a priest. They allow you to wear the robes regardless of whether you are pledged to a temple, yes?”

“Yes, of course.” John replied with a slight frown, “It’s just that I’m meant to be a royal soon, and I have all these customs to follow . . .” Quick as a flash, Sherlock was on his knees before John, reaching out to touch his cheek. “John, never confuse the game with your true self. You are always free to wear whatever you chose. I would be honored beyond belief to have you in your robes beside me today.”

“Ah, fine then.” John blushed slightly as Goodson returned carrying a huge hat with several ribbons dangling off one side. With Sherlock still kneeling at his feet, looking up at him with eyes as open as the sky, John made a quick decision. Ignoring the servant, he leaned over to slide his hands deep into Sherlock’s hair, and proceeded to kiss him as thoroughly and deeply as one possibly could at the breakfast table. When Sherlock tugged him down to the floor, and they rolled under the table to canoodle there for several more minutes, only Goodson clearing his throat in a completely indulgent way had them breaking apart, and coming back up to finish getting dressed before they were egregiously late.

It was chaos outside the palace as honored guests gathered to take carriages to the prince’s Blessing Day ceremony. Thankfully the royal family was able to board their rides at a private side entrance. The King left first, escorting his mother, Queen Violet, with a number of guards in tow. Next came a carriage for the wives, Queen Norah, and Lady Prunella, and Irene along with Prince Fergus and his nursemaid. John caught a quick glimpse of the chubby-cheeked boy as they boarded the carriage. One minute Sherlock was behind John whispering, “Take the one with Sherringford.” and the next minute, the tall, lanky man was insinuating himself in with the women, and giving Irene a peck on the cheek as he slipped into their carriage.

John sighed, and glanced around to see that he and Prince Sherringford were indeed the last of the royal party to board. Sherringford looked magnificent in an understated grey suit, every inch the regal prince. Beyond his desire to honor his temple visit with his priest’s attire, John was glad not be competing in finery with the man. He ran his fingers briefly over the golden Gallanus pendant hanging over his breast – oddly enough, he wasn’t completely without plumage today. This necklace alone was enough to destroy any vows of simple living John may have taken, but it was a token from Sherlock, and he would gladly wear it every chance he got.

“Well, Brother John. It looks like we’re the last to leave. After you?” Sherringford swept his hand toward their waiting carriage door. “Thank you, Prince Sherringford.” John nodded, and climbed into the coach, settling himself on one of the padded benches inside. Sherringford joined him shortly after to sprawl on the bench opposite. With just the two of them, they were free to stretch out in comfort. The coach jolted forward as the driver was given the signal, and the horses pulled them out of the courtyard. John was certain that the three men riding outside the coach were much better armed and trained than the usual carriage operators.
“I see Prince William has abandoned you for the company of his wife-to-be.” Sherringford observed with a raised eyebrow as he crossed an ankle over one knee. "Pity, you’ve been replaced so soon."

“Learning to share is an admirable trait to be cultivated, is it not?” John returned with a hint of a smile on his lips. Sometimes Sherringford’s prodding was just too obvious to take personally. “Besides, Princess Irene is an outstanding woman to spend time with. How can I find fault in that?”

“I think the priests robes are wasted on you, Brother John. You have all the makings of a fine diplomat.” Sherringford chuckled wryly, briefly curling his handsome mouth. John could certainly see how women were drawn to this man. He had quite a dark allure about him.

“Thank you Prince Sherringford, though priests are called to play various roles, diplomat being one of many. Surely you must agree with me though that Princess Irene is a fine woman?”

“Are you asking if I’d lure her to my bed, little priest? I admit she is a tempting morsel, but she will be my brother’s wife after all, so no, her charms are safe from me.”

John frowned slightly. He doubted that Irene would appreciate being discussed so. "Do you do that often, lure women from court to your bed?” Curiosity had John’s tongue looser than he’d intended, and the question popped out before he could stop it.

“Unless you are taking my confession, and you are not the one I’d choose for that role, that is private information, my dear fellow.” The pleased look on Sherringford’s face spoke volumes for him though as he shifted back in his seat, spreading his knees smugly. So he actually did take a conga line of women to his bed John surmised quickly. He hadn’t been certain how serious all of Sherringford’s flirting really was. John nodded, and wracked his brain thinking of ways to steer the conversation where he needed it to go.

“I believe this is not the first time you have met Princess Irene, is it? She mentioned meeting you several years ago at the Gallatian court?”

Sherringford’s face clouded slightly. “She was a skinny little thing then. I confess I didn’t really notice her as such. That was a difficult trip filled with tricky negotiations, and my mind was quite busy on matters of state at the time. For all the good the cursed visit did. We went to war with the back-stabbing bastards six months later.” Sherringford turned to look out the window, a dull red rising over his cheeks at the memory.

“That sounds frustrating. Were you hoping to build better ties with Galatia from the visit?” John asked.

“Of course we were. I had excellent trade agreements to offer them, but they only wanted to suss out our weaknesses before making a grab for several of our colonies. There was little good that came of that visit.”

“I’ve heard it said that the Fever Plague was a deliberate mage virus, and may have come from Gallatia. Do you believe that?” John asked leaning forward slightly.

“Is this what passes for pillow talk between you and my brother?” Sherringford chortled at his own joke. At John’s unmoving face, Sherringford had the good grace to wind down, and answer seriously. “There was no evidence to tie the Gallatians directly to the virus, though it certainly left our forces weakened when they struck our holdings abroad that summer. What can I say?” Sherrford asked spreading his elegant hands wide. “Sometimes the Gods’ favour does not fall on us.”
John sat back, and looked out the window watching the sights of Delphium pass by. Guards on horseback rode alongside their procession, keeping an eye on the crowds along the route. A number of well-wishers holding signs and flowers had gathered by the kerbs to watch them on their journey, and the numbers swelled as they neared the temple. Several young women in a group called out, and suddenly flashed their breasts as the carriage rolled by.

Sherringford laughed at John’s shocked look, reaching over to clasp him on the knee. “Ah, it’s good to be a royal, eh? There are always our admirers to make up for the pains and duties of governing the country.”

“Indeed.” John agreed weakly.

“So, Brother priest. You have risen far – Intended Royal Consort. How are you finding your new position at the palace?”

“Odd.” John admitted. “It was never my intention to become a royal, but it’s Prince William’s life, and to share it with him, it’s a burden I must bear.”

Sherringford spared him a sharp look. “You care for my brother.” He said, both in statement and question as he folded his arms over his chest.

“More than I can adequately express.” John told him truthfully. “I will be honored to become his Royal Consort, not for the title, but because it’s . . . him.”

Sherringford snorted in reply, and glanced out the window again.

“How are you finding being an uncle?” John ventured. “It must be very exciting to have a new babe in the family.”

“Yes, of course it is.” Sherringford’s answer tumbled out immediately as if by rote.

“You haven’t welcomed in any of your own though, have you?” John wasn’t sure what instinct had him pressing this, but it looked as if Sherringford wanted to say more.

“You are new to court, Brother John, otherwise you would know this is a sore subject with me.” Sherringford looked down at his clasped hands. “My Lady wife has suffered four miscarriages in so many years. Most have failed before the quickening. The first was almost to term though, but arrived stillborn. It was a boy.”

“I’m so very sorry.” John told him leaning closer again. “That must have been devastating.”

“Yes well, worse than that, it sickened Lady Prunella’s mind. She hasn’t been well since the death of her firstborn. Each loss has taken its toll. The Healers have warned us . . . against trying again.”

Sherringford raised troubled eyes to meet John’s.

When John laid his hand over Sherringford’s arm to give it a squeeze, it was with genuine warmth. The carriage swayed as they slowed, and the staccato clacks of the horse hooves on cobblestone drew John’s eyes back to the window. They had arrived at the temple. John remembered from his earlier visit that the West Temple of the Great Gods was one of the older buildings in the neighborhood, built on the ruins of an even older temple. Its long white columns supported a wide portico at the front, and the tall tower rising from its roof held bells that could be heard across half the city. As their carriage drew alongside a back entrance, footmen appeared to open the carriage doors and escort them inside under the watchful eye of yet more guards. The day’s outing had certainly been planned to exacting detail to keep harm at bay.
A young priest dressed in deep green robes met John and Prince Sherringford just inside the door. John tried to stand taller in his own dull, beige robes beside him. The man was attractive with long light brown hair caught in a braid down his back. He bowed in turn to them, deeply to Prince Sherringford, “Your Highness,” and then with a smile, gave a shallower temple bow to John. “Brother. If you will please follow me, we can join the rest of your party.” He led them down the hallway to an antechamber where the royal family, and a few other noble guests waited, some relaxing on padded benches, some standing, and some, like Sherlock, looming. John noted that a few more mad feather hats were in attendance again today. Acolytes circulated among them with trays, passing out small cups of juice.

Sherlock’s blue eyes lit up when he saw John. Relief washed over his face. “You took ten minutes longer than you should have.” Sherlock chided John as if he were the one driving the carriage that brought them.

“Yeah, well, I think the drivers took a slightly different route from yours.” John informed him, reaching over to give his hand a quick reassuring press before turning to bow to the royals nearby. Mycroft and Norah returned his greeting with a nod, but Queen Violet turned away, and immediately struck up a conversation with a woman in a flower-print dress beside her. John sighed quietly.

Lady Prunella stood then, and paced about the room, shaking her hands nervously at her sides. “Is it done yet? I hate the waiting. I wish we were done.” Sherringford went to her, and whispering in her ear, guided her back to a bench, motioning a nearby servant to sit on her other side.

John sighed again, and moved over to speak to Irene who sat stiffly on the edge of her bench looking a little green. “How are you holding up, sweet?” He asked her.

“Oh, I’m all right.” Irene gave him a tight smile. “Just a touch motion sick from the carriage, and his Royal Arseness who spent the entire ride telling us in detail the ten ways people can die from battle wounds.” Irene cut her eyes over to Sherlock.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows in indignation. “Norah asked me if I’d been reading anything interesting lately.”

John chuckled, and stepped over to see Prince Fergus. His nursemaid bounced him lightly in her arms to keep him soothed. The new prince had obviously left the “little old man” look of a newborn behind to fill out quite nicely. “Hello there, good sir, John smiled, and crooked a finger to tickle his round cheek. The boy locked on to his face immediately, and smiled back a toothless grin.

“He’s a fine one, isn’t he?” Sadie, the nanny, was at his shoulder. She looked much the same as the last time John had seen her in the nursery, only dressed in a much nicer frock and cap.

“Yes, he looks like he’s doing quite fine.” John agreed.

“He’s a strapping young lad, no mistaking it.” Sadie crowed. “Give us his Royal Highness, please, dear.” She told the nursemaid, “We’re nearly there,” and lifted Fergus off her lap, smoothing out his long white gown as she settled the baby against her.

A middle-aged priest and priestess both dressed in green robes entered the room, and bowed deeply to all gathered. “If you all are ready, we are set to receive the prince.”

Doors opened to a courtyard garden filled with lush flowers, small fruiting trees, and the tinkling sounds of a large water fountain set to the side. Two nude statues stood in the basin of water, a rounded woman with her head thrown back in a laugh, holding the hand of a fierce, bearded man, his heavy phallus standing proudly erect. Water spouted from her nipples, and his erection forever
falling to splash merrily in the pool of water below. The group filed into the garden, all stopping for a bow or nod before the statues of Maiya, Earth Mother, and Zaros, Sky Father. John bowed deeply as he passed. “From the Gods to us, and from us to the Gods.” He intoned touching his fingers to forehead, chest, and lips.

When all had assembled in a circle, with King Mycroft, and Queen Norah beside each other, and Sadie holding the prince next to them, the priest and priestess stepped forward.

The priestess raised her hands over her head. “May the Father all mighty, and the Mother most munificent bless you, my children.” She called out. “Who comes today to present a new life to the Great Gods?”

“We do.” Norah and Mycroft responded together.

“And who are you?” the priest asked.

“I am his mother.” Norah replied first.

“I am his father.” Mycroft rolled out proudly.

“What is the name of this baby you bring today?” The priest asked.

“Fergus Rupert Barnaby Lachlan Holmes Carrington” Norah’s crisp voice rang over the hush of the courtyard.

An acolyte stepped forward bearing a tray of items, while two others passed round small bags of petals to everyone gathered. John's gaze landed on Sherlock who had unfortunately ended up on the opposite side of the circle, Irene at his side. A slight breeze lifted the dark curls from Sherlock’s forehead, and he closed his eyes for a moment to lift his face up, basking in the sunlight pouring down. The sight of him like that caused a small ache in his chest. Not for the last time, he marveled at how beautiful this man truly was.

John looked back to the center of the circle to see the priest had picked up a small metal bowl holding burning incense. He swirled the plume of sweet smoke around the baby’s head. “Fergus, blessed be thy thoughts that they are one with the creation of the universe.” He chanted, smiling when the small boy sneezed.

The priestess picked up a full red rose and brushed it over the prince’s chest. “Blessed by thy heart that it follows the true path of your soul.”

The priest picked a bowl of salt from the tray, and at a nod to Mycroft and Norah, they both lifted a small handful to pour the salt over one of Fergus’s fat little hands.

“Blessed by thy hands that they bring forth from the unmanifest the world made good and new.” The priest intoned.

The priestess picked up a bowl of water, and with the help of another acolyte, dipped each small hand into it, then wiped them dry.

The priestess and priest held their hands aloft. “May the strength of the Father, “the priest called out, “and the yielding of the Mother” the priestess added

“Bless you and hold you all the days of your journey.” They finished together.

“Who here will be this child’s community, guiding him and nurturing him as he grows?” the priest
asked the circle.

“We will.” The group intoned at their cue.

“May you welcome into your midst, this new life. Fergus Rupert Barnaby Lachlan Holmes Carrington, blessings and welcome.” The priestess concluded with a flourish, looking pleased with herself at getting all the names right.

“Blessings and welcome.” The group responded as everyone hurried to open their cloth bags, and pull out the petals to toss over the proud family. Mycroft had taken Fergus out of the nanny’s arms to hold against him, and slid his other arm around Norah. She looked up at him with a smile as he squeezed her side. They could have been any family anywhere welcoming in their new child John thought.

Except that next they all had to adjourn to the main sanctuary of the temple to endure yet another ceremony, and the many long-winded speeches that the rest of the nobles gathered would witness. At least the royal family had a special box near the front with well-padded benches. Even with the cushion beneath him though, John felt his backside growing numb, and he shifted to bring feeling back. Prunella began weeping at one point, and Sherringford quickly hurried her out with several servants in tow. Fergus belted out a wail next, and was excused with his nanny and nursemaid. John wondered if he could be excused if he started crying too.

King Mycroft sat in the front row with Queen Norah, and Queen mum, Violet, who had deftly hooked Princess Irene into sitting next to her. John and Sherlock had ended up in the back, but Sherlock had gone immediately into thinking mode, and completely shut out the interminable service. John sighed. The latest speaker was an older priest who seemed to be reading a very long list of Fergus’s known ancestors. Since they had kept good records, he looked to be droning on for quite some time. John tried meditating, then reciting the Litany of Gratitude to himself, but his mind wouldn’t focus. He gave up, and let his eyes roam around the room instead. The vaulted ceiling was divided by panels painted with lovely scenes of young lovers in fields, and frolicking cherubs on fat clouds. Light poured in from several windows over the main altar, while splashes of color refracted down from a large round stained-glass window above. It really was a beautiful space. Finally John could stand Sherlock’s inattention no more. He nudged him out of his reverie.

“Sherlock. Sherlock.” He whispered digging an elbow into his ribs.

“Hmmm?” Focus snapped back into Sherlock’s eyes as he sat up straighter, and turned to look at John.

“Why does your mother hate me?” John whispered.

“What?” Sherlock asked, blinking.

“Your mother. Why does she hate me?” John pressed.

“John, she doesn’t hate you.” Sherlock whispered back.

“I beg to differ. She won’t even talk to me. Did I part my hair the wrong way? Bow incorrectly? Is it because I’m a commoner?”

Sherlock sighed. “John. It’s nothing to do with you personally. It’s... a break with tradition, my taking two spouses. It upsets the proper order of things for her. But it’s more than that. I think she’s jealous.”

“Jealous? Jealous of what?” John raised his voice slightly, and Queen Norah turned around to glare
“I think she’s jealous that she had to accept an arranged marriage, and I’ve been given the chance to marry the love of my life.” Sherlock continued quietly. He reached over to catch John’s hand in his, lacing their fingers together. “My father was not a kind man, and their’s was not a happy marriage. What can I say? I am blessed beyond all measure to have you. Some will be envious.”

The look Sherlock gave John nearly melted his bones. He might have pulled Sherlock down for a snog right then and there had Mycroft not turned around to nail them with a frosty glare, and hiss “SSshhhh” quite meaningfully. John and Sherlock behaved themselves for the rest of the rite, though Sherlock kept their fingers twined, absently smoothing his thumb across the back of John’s hand. It was enough to see him through.

“What do you mean there’s to be dancing? You never mentioned any dancing.” John pursed his lips in concern.

“Of course there’s dancing, it’s a Mid-Summer feast and ball tonight. Can’t have a ball without dancing.” Sherlock tossed off carelessly.

John and Sherlock were finally back in their rooms at the palace. After surviving the almost never-ending Blessing Day ritual, they had enduring a buffet lunch in the largest dining room fairly seething with the noble and the wealthy. John had tried to locate Sherringford and Prunella, or Healer Winston in the large crowd, but they had all been strangely absent. Now there was only a few scant hours to recover before the next round of festivities were slated to begin, and John had a headache.

“I don’t know how to dance.” John groaned from where he lay across the sofa. “Will I be expected to dance?”

“Not if you don’t want to.” Sherlock hedged, obviously not sure what John wanted to hear. He was sitting at the table across the room fiddling with something.

“Will you be dancing?” John asked.

“I might.” Sherlock put down whatever he was holding to focus more fully on John. I’ll most likely be expected to dance a waltz with Irene, but I don’t have to.”

“No, it wouldn’t be fair for Irene if you snub her in public.” John sighed.

“Hmm, it would make for a loss in status for her if I did that. So, yes, I suppose I will be dancing. Does this bother you, John?”

“No, I don’t know. I’ve never been much for dancing. I’ve danced around the Maypole, and been to a few country knees up’s, but nothing fancy. I don’t know all those formal steps.”

“It’s true, the group dances can get a bit complicated if you aren’t familiar with them.” Sherlock rose from the table and moved to stand in front of John. “A simple box step for a waltz isn’t too difficult especially if you aren’t leading. I could . . . coach you through the basics right now if you like.” He extended a hand to pull John from the couch.
John looked up to see a pattern of bright red blood drops beading up over the back of Sherlock’s hand. “Oi, you mad wanker, what’s all this?” John grabbed his hand and turned it over for a better look at the damage.

“I was experimenting with different pins and needles, trying to see how thin one had to be before it didn’t hurt going in.”

“Why in the name . . .”

“The maid who was killed, John. I wondered if she felt the pin prick that delivered the poison into her system or not. Just curious.” Sherlock shrugged.

“Come here.” John said darkly, tugging Sherlock down to the couch. It was but a moment’s concentration to flick a small healing into him to erase the marks across his hand.

“You’ve a headache.” Sherlock observed.

“No, it’s no big . . .” John began when Sherlock cut him off with a hand swiped down. “Stop. I can tell its bothering you. You’re all tight around the eyes, and you have your shoulders hunched up to your ears. Let me fix it, and you’ll be in a much better form for observing tonight.”

John sighed, but put his hands back out to hold Sherlock’s. He Passed him a small ball of energy, and sighed as he felt it flow back into him, running over the muscles of his head and neck like a cool, silvery shower. Before he knew it, he had his hands buried in Sherlock’s curls, and his tongue halfway down the man’s throat. Sherlock moaned, as John crawled over him, rocking their hips together. When they finally parted for air, Sherlock was a disheveled mess sprawled beneath him, his laughing eyes as bright as stars.

“Ah, Watson. I hope you get headaches more often. That was delightful. I hope to repeat that experiment again sometime soon, but for now, dance lessons?”

John smiled, and reached over to push tumbled curls off of Sherlock’s face. “Right, dance lessons. Lead on, good sir.”

John had insisted that Sherlock wear something actually nice for the ball. “If I dance with you in public, I don’t want you looking like a barmy tea cozy.” He had protested.

When Sherlock emerged from the dressing room in a close-fitting, deep violet suit with only a modicum of gold braid along the edge, John whistled his approval. “Very nice.” He said. “I mean you’re always gorgeous, but at least this outfit doesn’t hurt to look at all.”

“More’s the pity.” Sherlock sighed. “But for you, John, I’ll suffer looking passable.”

A discreet cough turned John’s eyes to the valet waiting in the dressing room’s doorway. “If you’re ready, sir, I can dress you next.” Goodson informed him.

“Of course, and thank you, Goodson. His Highness looks divine.”

“No sir, thank YOU.” Goodson whispered fervently as John joined him. John smothered a laugh.
“Sherlock, don’t do anything to mess up your suit before we leave!” John called back over his shoulder.

Sherlock had them stop by Irene’s rooms on their way to the ballroom. “We should escort her downstairs, and we need to swap information in private.”

Kate answered Sherlock’s knock at the door, letting them in immediately with a sad little smile. Irene looked magnificent in a gold-colored dress that slid nicely over her curves on its way to the floor, with her long hair piled up high and threaded through with matching sparkling ribbons. She twirled in place to model for them.

“Irene, you are a vision.” Sherlock said catching her hand up for a kiss across her knuckles.

“You don’t look half bad yourself, lover boy.” She nodded back with an amused smile. “And John, don’t you clean up nicely.” Irene curtsied grandly to John.

In his pale grey outfit with sliver trim, John mused that he and Irene would look like the Sun and the Moon against the dark night of Sherlock’s aubergine suit. John swept an exaggerated bow himself, nearly touching the ground with his fingertips before Irene. “I thank you kindly, Your Highness. You are too kind.” He rose to smile at her. “And I must concur. You look ravishing yourself.”

Irene laughed. “I will be the bell of the ball, escorted by you two pretty men.”

Kate, watching their courtly game from the sidelines, made a little strangled noise. Irene turned instantly toward the sound. “Oh, honey.” Her face crumpled at the expression on Kate’s face. She moved to Kate, pulling the woman into a tight hug against her.

John looked at Sherlock over the embracing women. ???

Sherlock looked back at him with raised eyebrows.

What?

John waved his hand around. Do something.

“Kate, . . . “ Sherlock began, and cleared his throat, only Kate stepped back, dashing tears away from her eyes and stopped him.

“No, I’m sorry I’m being such a goose. I always knew that Irene would move in circles where I couldn’t go.”

“This isn’t always the case, Kate. We could move you up to a Lady-in-waiting status, make you Irene’s companion instead of her ladies maid. You would have more freedom to join her in events like this.” Sherlock told her.

“I know,” Kate said, “we talked about that.” She nodded toward Irene.

“Only we must wait and do it later.” Irene finished. “There are too many of my countrymen still at court, and my family travels here in just a few weeks for the wedding. Once we are wed, and I am a Lady of Brettona, things will be . . . easier. Until then, we must do nothing that will bring ill talk back to my family.”
“I understand.” Sherlock nodded kindly toward them.

“Oh Kate.” John tugged the woman into a hug of his own, patting her back. She hiccupped and moved away, squeezing John’s hand.

“Thank you, John.” She smiled at him.

“Don’t worry, we’ll bring you back something fattening to eat.” John offered.

Kate laughed a little. “I don’t need anything more to eat. I’m stuffed! I spent the entire day in the servants’ dining room either eavesdropping or starting up conversations. No one you asked me to watch was doing anything suspicious,” She confided. “But I did find out something else interesting – something about the maid who died.”

Sherlock’s look sharpened instantly. “What was it?”

“One of the scullery maids, Bronwen, cut her finger the morning of the Queen’s tea party, and went to see Healer Winston about it. She saw the girl who died, Lizzie Smith, in his surgery ahead of her. They were talking loudly, and sounded angry, but Lizzie left when Bronwen came in, and she didn’t hear what they were saying.”

“Kate.” Sherlock flashed a grin full of teeth. “That was EXCELLENT work. Good on you.” He snaked over to drop a kiss on Kate’s cheek. “This is perfect. It connects Lizzie to Winston on the day of her murder. He is definitely one we need to watch for.” Kate flushed a pretty color and looked very pleased. “Irene, how about you. Did you manage to get anything on the nobles you were investigating?”

“I did speak to both of the men you had on my list at the luncheon today, and you’re welcome. The biggest bunch of bores I’ve ever come across.” Irene quirked up a half smile. “Lord Wellingford was genuinely devastated by the loss of several family members in the plague. He couldn’t have been involved. He cried on my shoulder, . . . and then groped my chest. The other one, Lord Brantson, was just an idiot. He hardly had two brain cells to rub together. No, a couple of masterminds they were not.”

“Still, ruling them out is excellent detective work.” Sherlock nodded. “Good job to the both of you. John?”

All eyes swung to John, and he sighed. “Yeh, well I spoke to Sherringford, and didn’t get much information about the Gallatian trip from him. I mean I couldn’t be TOO obvious with my questioning. I never got a chance to talk to Lady Prunella, and Healer Winston wasn’t at the luncheon.”

“Ah.” Sherlock nodded. “We’ll look for him at the ball tonight, and if he doesn’t show up, perhaps Kate or Irene can have a small accident, a twisted ankle or some such, and need to visit him tomorrow morning. I think he’ll most likely respond favorably to a woman over a man.”

“Hang on.” John complained. “Twisting someone’s ankle for an investigation is just not on.”

“Oh, John. No one needs to actually twist their ankle. A nice faked limp would do just to get in the door.” Sherlock huffed.

“Well, no one’s to see him alone under any circumstances.” John said crossing his arms over his chest. “Not if the man is a suspected murderer and traitor to the crown.”

“Of course, John.” Sherlock all but rolled his eyes as though John were being exceedingly tedious to
state the obvious.

“All right, boys. Enough scheming.” Irene declared picking up her fan, and whipping it open to hold alluringly below her eyes. “Take me to a party.”
Chapter Summary

John, Sherlock, and Irene attend the annual Mid-Summer eve ball at the palace.

Chapter Notes

I like to envision the part of Thomas Dashwell being played by the lovely Thomas Hiddleston. You might as well!

The sounds from the ballroom reached them long before they could see it past a turn in the corridor. The room simply vibrated from gathered magic, the buzz of the crowd, and the lilting strains of a harp duet skittering over it all. John tried not to gape like the country cousin come to town as they entered the double doors to the fairyland beyond. Large, colored glass baubles lit from within floated on a mage-born breeze above the heads of the guests. Occasionally one would dip lower, and someone would reach up and tap it back into its lazy orbit around the room. Lengths of gold fabric studded with glimmering crystals swathed the walls, whilst flowering vines that kept blooming, dropping blossoms, and reblooming again twined around the few columns that divided the space. The windows and doors to the balconies outside were thrown wide to catch the sweet summer air, and last of the setting sun’s rays. The guests were a decoration unto themselves. They swirled inside and out like phoenix flame in their outfits of reds, yellows, and golds in honor of the sun’s longest day. The few in darker colors, like Sherlock, stood out like embers amidst a glowing fire.

Small tables and chairs dotted the edges of the room, and Sherlock lost no time in securing them an unoccupied one by a potted bush sporting fat yellow roses giving off both a slight glow, and a divine perfume. A performer, dressed in a tight shirt and baggy red pants, passed by their table rolling a glass ball artfully over his hands and wrists.

Sherlock scanned the crowd of merry makers, and turned to John and Irene. “I need a drink. Does anyone else need a drink?” At Irene’s nod, John pushed back to stand up.

“Yeh, I’ll go.” John volunteered, and left the two of them to wind his way through the shifting crowds to a corner table with a small fountain pouring out a waterfall of fruit punch. It was almost mesmerizing watching the red liquid cascading down, only to be drawn back up and poured out again. Nearby servants dipped small cups into the liquid for the guests. John waited his turn and told them “Two, please.” He figured he could carry two glasses back, and return for a third. He turned around right into Lord Sebastian Wilkes, dressed in some gaudy gold outfit. The man looked thinner than the last time John had seen him.
“Ah, Brother John. How are you faring?” Sebastian smiled a touch too widely at him.

“Well, and you Lord Wilkes?” John asked him.

“Can’t complain, can’t complain.” Sebastian tossed off. “I couldn’t help noticing that Prince William is escorting both you, AND the Princess Irene tonight.”

“Yes, that’s right.” John agreed mildly with him.

“No, no. It’s just not the done thing with the good folk, you know. You keep the wife and the bit on the side separate, eh? William is going to give us all a bad name. Every piece of fluff is going to want a ring now. I’m quite put out with him.” Sebastian frowned, and swayed slightly on his feet. For so early in the evening, he looked rather drunk already.

“I’m sorry to hear that Lord Wilkes. I’ll be sure and let his Highness know your displeasure.” John smiled tightly at him.

“Oh no, please don’t bother.” Sebastian sputtered, seeming to come to himself. “Just idle talk you know, nothing serious. Have a Blessed Mid-Summer, Brother John.”

“A Blessed Mid-Summer to you as well.”

When John made it back to their table with the punch, he discovered a servant had already been by to drop off three glasses filled with ice, fruit, and an orange liquid giving off a small plume of fog.

“What is that?” John asked taking his seat.

“The server called it a ‘Summer Sunset.’” Irene said, blowing off the smoke to take a sip from hers. “It’s quite lovely.”

“Garish.” Sherlock declared with a sniff, and accepted one of the cups of punch from John. “John, what did Sebastian Wilkes want with you?”

Of course Sherlock had watched him from across the room. “He wanted to tell me you’re setting an unreasonable standard for the nobility – treating your spouse and ‘bit of fluff on the side’ the same.” John told him wryly. “Irene?” John asked holding up the other cup of punch to her.

“No, you keep it John. This will be enough for me.” Irene waved it off, and took another small sip from her cocktail. “Who is this Sebastian Wilkes?” She asked. “That name sounds so familiar.”

John picked up his own cocktail, and took a healthy swallow without blowing the steam away first. A shocking sweetness burst over his tongue, and the smoke wafted up his nose. He coughed several times before getting an answer out. “That one, the man in bright gold. He’s been all over the place the last few weeks.” John pointed at Lord Sebastian weaving through the crowd toward a server with a platter of small things wrapped in bacon.

“You know, I believe I’ve met him before.” Irene said thoughtfully, setting her drink down to glance back at Sherlock, then John. “I think he was there in Gallatia, that summer, with the Brettonian delegation.”

A sudden drum beat drew their attention to a stage on the side of the room. A jester in half-mask, bright leggings, and patchwork jacket, all in yellows and oranges leapt up to the space left before the closed curtains. “Good evening gentle folk! Welcome to the night’s festivities.” He brandished a rattle, swirling its trailing gold ribbons as he shook it over his head. Two women dressed in similar half masks, and flame-colored baggy pants cartwheeled in from the wings to land neatly on either
side of him. They lifted large tambourine drums painted like the sun from the stage, and set them jingling.

“Come and celebrate the Sun’s power at this Mid-Summer eve.” The jester called, capering to one side of the stage. “We must bring low,” he squatted, then danced back to the other side stretching tall “that which flies too high! Eat, drink, and dance,” he called, spinning a circle in place, “for tomorrow the Sun will DIE!” He stopped suddenly, planting his feet as the two women split open their drum heads releasing a stream of butterflies into the room. The creatures flew over the heads of the guests in a flurry of color, only to dissolve into confetti raining gently down over their upturned faces. “Huzzah!” the three performers called scampering off the stage.

“Huzzah!” the crowd called back, laughing and clapping, as the curtains pulled open to reveal an orchestra ready to play. The musicians launched into a festive air, and people gathered to form lines for the first dance.

Sherlock leaned in, talking louder to be heard over the music. “Sebastian wasn’t part of the delegation.”

“What?” John asked.

“He wasn’t officially part of the Brettonian delegation that went to Gallatia that summer.” Sherlock repeated. “He must have joined them later.”

“I recognize the name, and that weaselly face. He was definitely there.” Irene said firmly peering into the crowd to where Sebastian had lined up to dance with a plump woman in a lemon-colored dress.

“Fascinating.” Sherlock replied quirking an eyebrow up. “Irene, at first waltz, if Sebastian is dancing, we’ll change partners with him half-way through, and you can ask him about that summer.”

They watched the dancers prancing about, laughing through several sets, until the orchestra settled in to the first waltz.

”Irene, I believe this is our cue. May I have this dance?” Sherlock stood and held out his hand to her.

“But of course, Your Highness. I’d be honored.” Irene smiled and rose to join him. They both glanced down at John who waved them off good-naturedly.

“Go on, go on. Knock yourselves out. I have my drink to finish.” John smiled holding up his still-slightly-smoking cocktail.”

The dancers had cleared the space in the center of the room, and at the first strains of the song, King Mycroft and Queen Norah swept out alone to start the dance. They made a lovely picture in their matching outfits of palest gold and white. Mycroft guided Norah gracefully around until they had made a circuit of the dance space. At his nod, Sherlock and Irene, and Prince Sherringford escorting the Queen Mum, slid out onto the floor to join them. The other dancers were good, but Irene and Sherlock flowed over the space like water. Irene’s gold dress swirled around Sherlock’s aubergine suit as they pivoted together making them look like the Goddess of day, and God of night come to meet at twilight. John was seized with a panic at the thought of getting up to dance later before the many onlookers. What chance did he, a mere mortal, have compared to the likes of these mystical creatures? John shook his head at his maudlin fancy. At another signal, the rest of the dancers joined them at the center, and his two were lost from sight in the crowd.

“Excuse me. Is this seat taken?”

John looked up into the handsome face of Thomas Dashwell. The tailored crimson suit he wore set
off his dark hair beautifully. He carried a fluted glass of some amber liquid, and with his free hand
gestured to the empty chair next to John.

“Oh no.” John replied finding his tongue. “Be my guest, Mr. Dashwell.”

“Thom, please.” The man smiled sliding in next to him. “I’m glad you remembered me. I’m sure
you’ve met so many new faces at the palace.

“I have indeed.” John agreed “but you were a memorable one.”

“I’m pleased to hear that.” Thom chuckled, and took a sip of his drink. “How have you been finding
life in the palace.”

“Good,” John nodded. “and difficult. Switching from the life of a civilian to the life of a royal can
make your head spin.”

“Indeed. My family isn’t royal, but we move in circles that are. It can be like walking between the
worlds to go between the two. Some of the royals have no clue what life is like outside their
hallowed halls.”

“I know just what you mean.” John said. “I’m trying not to get too used to having someone around
to do every little thing for me.”

A rush of noise turned their eyes upward. A woman cloaked in reddish veils had whipped a fan with
a long flame-colored tail over their heads. The half-veil over her face moved in the breeze, as she
unfurled a second fan to make a pretty show of twirling the ribbons of cloth above them. Thom
smiled, and John clapped as as she bowed her head, and moved on to surprise the next table of
guests.

“They’ve really outdone themselves with the entertainment this year.” Thom mused “And the
decorations are just divine.” He added nodding to the merriment around them.

“I haven’t seen any earlier celebrations at the palace so I can’t compare, but it is lovely. No, for me,
Mid-Summer has always been rhubarb pie and the bonfire night. Can’t beat the simple pleasures.”
John nodded and reached for his cocktail only to find it had gone empty. He raised his cup of punch
instead.

“I always find Mid-Summer to be a bit of a sad holiday though.” Thom confided leaning in.

“Oh, how so?” John raised his eyebrows.

“The death of the sun, and all that.” Thom waved his hand carelessly. “It seems you just get to the
long, warm days with solstice, and then the daylight is growing shorter again.”

“That is true.” John agreed. “I suppose we throw parties to distract ourselves from the loss. Still, it’s
many months before the cold sets in. Best to eat, drink, and dance while we can, eh?” John
shrugged, and took another swallow of his sweet drink in punctuation.

“I’m sure Mid-Summer at the palace has been a mad house for you.” Thom smiled softly.

“That is true.” John found himself smiling along with the man as he set his cup down. “It’s been one
grand meal after the other. I can’t find fault with the food though. I’ve been trying not to put on an
extra stone.” John clapped a hand over his belly.

“Exercise is key to combat the sloth of royal living.” Thom nodded sagely. “Perhaps you’d care to
join me in the next dance?”

“Oh Thom, piss off, he’s mine.” Sherlock loomed over them, panting slightly, Irene at his side, fluttering her fan over herself.

“Prince William, how delightful to see you again.” Thom rose to bow, not missing a beat. “And this must be the lovely Princess Irene? We’ve not been properly introduced.”

“Princess Irene, this smooth talker is the Honorable Thomas Dashwell, my first cousin on my mother’s side.” Sherlock scowled as he motioned between the two. “Dashwell, my intended Lady Wife, the Princess Irene.”

Thomas bowed artfully to Irene, and swept her hand up to press his lips to the back of it. He lingered a heat beat, then released her to straighten up with a flourish. A giggle that didn’t sound rehearsed popped out of Irene as she fanned herself harder. “So pleased to meet you, Good Sir. But you aren’t a royal?” She asked with raised eyebrows.

“Sadly, no. My mother is the youngest sister to Queen Violet, and she married a commoner.” Thom admitted with a wry smile.

“That must have been quite the scandal at the time.” Irene mused. “Still you’ve royal blood. I can see the family resemblance now that you point it out.” She said looking between Thom and Sherlock.

“Ah my lady, I hope you won’t hold it against me.” Thom winked broadly at Irene. Smiling, he held a bent arm toward her. “Perhaps you would do me the honor of accompanying me on the next dance, Your Highness?”

“Certainly not.” Sherlock cut in. “She’s mine too. Go unleash your incorrigible flirting skills on some other table.”

“William.” Irene snapped at him. “Surely you don’t mean to forbid me to dance with anyone but you at royal functions?”

Sherlock looked shocked for a moment. “No, of course not, Irene. You are quite free to dance with whomever you chose. Forgive me for speaking out of turn.”

“We don’t have to . . .” Thom began when Irene rounded on him and took his arm.

“Nonsense. Mr. Dashwell, I would be quite pleased to accompany you. Thank you for asking.” Irene smiled brightly up at him.

“Well, then. If you’ll excuse us.” Thom nodded at John and Sherlock, and escorted Irene off to take a place among the dancers.

Sherlock slid into the other chair next to John and ran a hand over his face. “I didn’t mean to upset Irene.” He admitted.

“I know.” John reached over to pat his hand. “You were just trying to protect her, but Irene’s a big girl. She needs to find her own way in court. You can’t always be there to loom over her.”

“You’re right, I know you are.” Sherlock grabbed up the last of the punch before him and downed it in one gulp. He looked over to John with a horrified look in his eyes. “John, you weren’t interested in Thom as well, were you?”

“Love. Please. He’s nice, I like him, but I’m not here to pull your cousins. I’m over the moon to be
here with you. Well, you and Irene. I think two of you dark, gorgeous creatures in my life is more than enough to deal with at the moment.” John reached over to cup a hand to Sherlock jaw. The man closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. “Speaking of Irene, did she get a chance to talk to Sebastian Wilkes?”

Sherlock’s eyes snapped open. “She did, but I didn’t get a chance to ask her about it. How about you, have you located Healer Winston?”

“No I haven’t seen him.” John sighed, leaning back. “I suppose we’ll have to go with the turned ankle routine tomorrow morning.”

“Sherringford is here. Maybe you can bump into him and ask him about the Gallatian trip – at least get some more information on Sebastian Wilkes being there.”

“Yeh, all right, love.” John rubbed his nose.

The sun had set fully outside, and all the luminous things around them had risen to full glow in the darkened room. Servants came around and placed small lit candles on each table. Sherlock had decided to work his hand up to John’s inner thigh when a servant lad stopped to place a candle at their spot. The boy winked at John, and moved on to the next table.

“How romantic.” John said, grinning over at Sherlock. The man just smiled soppily back at him. John was certain that Sherlock had no idea how sweet he looked when he smiled like that. He decided he was never ever going to tell him. He leaned in and kissed his lips softly, quickly before anyone really noticed.

When another server with a tray of champagne happened by, Sherlock snagged them three glasses. Thom escorted Irene back to the table shortly thereafter, and though Sherlock invited him to join them, he backed away making polite excuses.

Irene looked flushed and gratefully accepted the glass of champagne that John handed her. “Thanks so much.” She said taking the drink.

Sherlock turned toward her. “Irene, I am sorry, I didn’t mean to overstep my bounds earlier. You are always free to do as you wish in court. I only meant . . .”

“I know, dear man. I understand.” She reached over to pat his arm. “I didn’t mean to be so sharp as well. Friends, again?” She asked raising her glass high.

“Always.” Sherlock agreed lifting his glass as well.

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“Always.” Sherlock agreed lifting his glass as well.

“Is this a toast?” John asked.

“I suppose it is.” Irene replied. “To friends old and new.”

“To friends.” John and Sherlock echoed. They clinked their glasses together, then tilted their heads back to drain their drinks.

Sherlock smacked his lips and set his glass down. “So. What did you learn from Sebastian?” He asked Irene.

“That he’s an idiot.” Irene returned wryly.

“Well, that was a given. What did you learn about his time in Gallatia five years ago?”
"He was on a shopping trip. Came to have some suits made, and ingratiate himself with the Gallatian court. He didn’t seem nervous about talking about it, and he hardly remembered seeing me there.” Irene shrugged.

"Hmmm, that doesn’t mean he isn’t involved in any plots, but he looks less likely.” Sherlock mused stroking a finger over his upper lip.

John spent a moment just watching the movement of that finger before shaking himself. “Sherlock. I’m curious. We were talking earlier about who could fool a truthsayer. I want to know, really, who could fool a truthsayer?”

“I have a few ideas.” Sherlock replied. John and Irene raised their eyebrows at him.

“Well, go on then. Share them with the lesser minds.” Irene turned up the corner of her mouth.

“You’ve thought of some yourself.” Sherlock tossed back at her.

“A game is it? All right. Someone who could change memory could fool a truthsayer.” Irene ventured.

“But not in front of a group.” John replied. “You’d need to touch someone to do that, and you couldn’t do that easily with several people in attendance. Doesn’t Mycroft officially question people with an audience?”

“He does.” Sherlock agreed mildly. “Who else?”

“Someone with a persuasion talent,” John suggested, “but again, they’d need to touch the person they are persuading and that doesn’t work on a whole group.” He deflated.

“Are there people who have the talent to cancel out other’s magical talents?” Irene asked.

“That’s been rumored, but never documented.” Sherlock replied. “Good idea though.”

“Do you think that’s it?” John asked.

“Unlikely.” Sherlock replied.

“Then what is it? How did someone trick a truthsayer?” John pressed.

“John, think. The person who was never questioned is the person who can fool a truthsayer.”

“Someone who was never suspected.” Irene breathed.


The ringing of a gong turned their heads to supper being announced. Servants slid side doors open to reveal a dining room next door laid out with a sumptuous buffet. The crowd naturally gravitated toward the food, and the ballroom emptied out.

“Time to mingle.” Sherlock announced, rising and rubbing his palms together. “I’m going to talk to Sebastian. Why don’t you two look for Sherringford, and keep an eye out for Healer Winston.”

“Is it all right if I eat first?” John grumped, “I’m starving.” But Sherlock had already darted off through the crowd.

“Oh ignore him. He’s like a bloodhound on a scent, yes?” Irene tucked her arm through John’s.
“Come on, let’s go investigate the prawns. I’m very fond of them.”

Servants had food stations set around the room, and the prawns were a popular choice. A large tank of live prawns sat next to a boiling pot of water. A cook obligingly scooped up the wriggling creatures and dropped them into the hot water to serve them up shortly thereafter on a plate with a slice of lemon and cup of sauce. John assumed this little show was to confirm the freshness of the food for the guests. He always felt a little queasy about food prepared live, though he realized it was hypocritical to feel that way if you ate meat. Some died so that others could live, it was the way of things. He just didn’t like to see his dinner wiggling around in front of him right before he ate it. Irene obviously had no such qualms, and grabbed two plates of the cooked prawns once they were ready. John gratefully collected some tamer sliced beef and pasta, and they looked for a spot to sit.

Several of the royal family were arranged at a prominently displayed table in the center of the room. Mycroft and Norah sat in the middle with Sherringford and his wife Prunella to one side, and Queen Violet to the other. Servants brought them plates of food because the King cannot be seen pushing through the crowds for supper, even if it is a buffet.

“Oh, are we supposed to sit with them?” John asked wondering if he’s missed yet another social cue, but Irene just winked at him.

“Let’s pretend we don’t see them.” She said, and they found a spot in the corner safely to the rear of the royal table.

They could still peer at their in-laws-to-be through the crowds though, and John saw Sherlock re-emerge to lean over and talk to Mycroft. He could see the Queen Mum obviously urging Sherlock to sit and eat, and he could almost lip read Sherlock saying he wasn’t hungry with a negligent toss of his head. Sherlock leaned over and placed his hand on Mycroft’s shoulder. If John hadn’t been watching closely, he wouldn’t have noticed the small glow of light that emanated from just under Sherlock’s hand. The sneaky chameleon mage. He had just stolen a copy of Mycroft’s truthsayer powers for a few minutes. Sherlock charged off shortly thereafter, obviously intent on testing whoever’s honestly he wanted to guarantee.

John and Irene ate their fill. She took a trip to the pasta station, and John picked up some fish fingers, and something from the vegetables display, the asparagus looked nice, before heading over to the pudding table. A spun sugar peacock that sat over the display of sweets nearly made him drop his plate when it screeched at him. *Damn mage with a twisted sense of humor.* John thought crossly. He managed to reach around its angry beak to grab several things before helping two women who were afraid to reach for the Eton mess that sat closest to the enchanted beast. John handed them two bowls of the custard to their relieved thanks, and gathered his loot to return to Irene.

“Fairy cake?” He asked Irene offering one over.

“Oh thank you.” Irene accepted it gratefully. “I see you stocked up.” She commented looking at the second plate he had loaded down with sweets.

“Didn’t want to have to go back for seconds.” John told her darkly biting into an éclair without further comment.

Just then Sherlock slid into the chair across from them. “Oooh, strawberry.” He said helping himself to one of the fruit tarts on John’s plate.

“All right, who were you cross-examining?” John asked.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows innocently as if to say *moi?* whilst shoveling down the tart.
“Come off it, I saw you sneaking Mycroft’s talent just then.” John motioned with his chin to where the King sat still finishing his meal.

Sherlock chuckled at being caught out by John. “I used to do that all the time when we were growing up. It’s become Mycroft’s second nature to keep me at arm’s length now, but he was just tipsy enough not to notice tonight.”

“So, dear man, who was your target? Spill.” Irene leaned in, and demanded.

“Lord Sebastian Wilkes of course.” Sherlock grinned at them with many teeth. “He is officially cleared of any plots against the crown past, present, or future. He really is as feather-brained as I always thought. Good to confirm.” Sherlock shrugged and reached out to divest John of one of his fish fingers. John just nudged his plate closer in case Sherlock decided to ingest something green later along with it.

As the meal broke up, the royal family made their farewells claiming a busy day on the morrow, and swept from the dining room. John wasn’t too surprised though to see Sherringford reappear some minutes later without his wife. He skulked around, quickly losing himself in the ballroom crowd. A new show had started up on the stage, and people were drifting back in steadily to join the audience. Sherlock held out an arm to Irene and then to John, and happily escorted them both in, clearly refusing to play favourites. They found a place at the back of the crowd to watch what turned out to be a clever display of acrobats tumbling over the stage. Almost defying gravity, they rolled, jumped, and caught each other to balance in alarming configurations. They reminded John nothing so much as watching one of Master Ang’s martial arts classes. His jaw dropped when they stacked themselves into a tower, each on another's shoulders with the top woman in a handstand high above. Gracefully they dismounted, each sailing down to land lightly on their feet. The crowd clapped wildly as the performers bowed and scuttled away, and the stage curtains parted revealing the orchestra as they launched into their second set.

“John.” Sherlock whispered just into his ear. “Watch Sherringford. Keep an eye on him. He’s up to something, I can feel it.”

John turned to complain that he really didn’t want to be caught creeping after his future brother-in-law, but Sherlock and Irene had been pulled into the next line dance, and John’s protests fell on empty air. With a sigh, John moved to stand in the shadows at the corner of the room. He accepted a glass of wine from a passing server, and waited, keeping an eye on Sherringford. He did indeed look rather suspicious looking over his shoulder, nonchalantly moving to the edges of the crowd. When he slipped out to a smaller balcony and closed the doors behind him, John was right at the open window nearby. He sipped his drink and pretended to enjoy the cooler night air all whilst actually listening like a stalker to the man outside. Oh, and the young woman who had obviously been waiting on the balcony for him. Ah. John blushed when he heard the sounds of the two of them kissing heatedly, going hell-bent for leather out there.

“I got your note, Kitten.” He heard Sherringford rumble. “It isn’t safe to meet here though, you know that.”

“I’m sorry, Pookie.” The softer female voice replied. “I had to see you though. It’s official. I saw my healer today. I’m expecting.”

“You mean . . .” Sherringford’s voice cracked on the words.

“You’re going to be a daddy.” The woman squeaked back.

The sounds of fabric moving, and moans rising convinced John that his eavesdropping was officially
at an end for the evening. He moved hurriedly from the window to find a seat at an unoccupied table nearby. The things he did for Sherlock. John shook his head, tossed back the rest of his wine, and waited with his arms crossed. The energetic song finally ended, and Sherlock and Irene found John at his perch, Irene limping all the way on Sherlock’s arm.

“I’m taking Irene back to her rooms. She’s been hurt.” Sherlock informed him brusquely.

“Irene, are you all right?” John asked half-rising.

“Oh, nothing tragic.” Irene assured him with a wave. “Just some numbskull stomped on my foot, and I’m exhausted. I need to call it a night.” John could see that Irene was probably missing Kate even if she didn’t say, and he smiled kindly at her. “Should I come with you two?” he asked.

“No, stay, keep an eye on things.” Sherlock wagged his eyebrows meaningfully at John. “I’ll be back in a flash.”

John did rise then to kiss Irene’s hand. “Farewell Fair Lady. The night will not be as lovely at your absence.”

“Oh you.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Good night, John.” She waved her fingers in farewell over her shoulder as she allowed Sherlock to escort her from the room.

John watched the doors to the balcony almost against his will until Sherringford re-emerged looking a bit more disheveled than he had going out. A few minutes later, a very fetching round-cheeked woman in an orange dress also left the balcony, her auburn hair hanging half out of its looping braids. She looked straight ahead as she hurried off through the crowd, and out the main doors. John sighed not sure he really wanted to hold this secret. It felt like a very personal intrusion on his part. He rubbed his hand over his face feeling suddenly very weary. Looking up to spot Sherlock swooping in from the corridor revived his soul. How gorgeous was this man in his dark suit, scattering people before him like a hawk amongst the budgies. Sherlock’s impossibly long legs ate up the space as he crossed the room in a few strides to where John waited.

“Hello, love.” John smiled up at him, cocking his head to the side.

“John, they’re playing our song.” Sherlock’s eyes twinkled green and gold at him in the candlelight as he held out one long, elegant hand.

“Our song?” John asked allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. “I wasn’t aware that we had a song.”

“Well, it’s a waltz.” Sherlock said with a shrug, “and I believe I was promised a dance with you, sir.”

“Ah, that you were.” John smiled shyly.

“Come on, the crowd has thinned, and you’ll be brilliant. Just follow my lead.” Sherlock whispered against his ear as he tugged John after him to the dance floor. Sherlock folded John into his arms, and gently led him in a close step. "Left foot back. Don't think.” Sherlock murmured to start, and they were off. John was amazed that the dance lesson had paid off so well as they flowed together. He glanced around once to see that the other dancers were by and large wrapped around each other in the dim lighting, and paying scant attention to anyone else. He was pleased to note another same-sex couple on the floor nearby - two women clearly enjoying dancing cheek to cheek. John closed his eyes, and relaxed, allowing the feeling of Sherlock’s moves to guide them.

By the end of the first song, they had given up all pretense of moving their feet in any kind of dance step, and were simply pressed against other and swaying to the music. John buried his face in
Sherlock neck, and breathed in the salty, rich scent that was all him. John wondered if he could get a cologne made that smelled of essence of Sherlock. He could take a whiff of it whenever he was feeling blue. Sherlock turned his head to kiss at John’s temple. Before he knew it, they were snogging deeply on the dance floor, hands sneaking under jackets to grip handfuls of shirt. John stopped himself just before his fingers made contact with the lush royal arse, and stepped back with a rueful laugh.

“Ah, love. I think we’d better take this back to our bedroom before this gets any more embarrassing.” John chuckled.

“I wouldn’t be embarrassed to take you right on this dance floor, I’d be proud,” Sherlock eyes glittered with a devilish gleam, “but a bed would be more comfortable.”

“All right, you.” John mock scowled at him. “To bed, my lord?” He held out a hand in invitation.

“To bed, my fine sir.” Sherlock agreed, and fingers interlaced, they moved through the remaining dancers to find the quickest route back to their rooms.
Mid-Summer Shines the Brightest

Chapter Summary

Plans and plots long spun finally come to a head on Mid-Summer's Night.

Chapter Notes

Have you ever seen people spin fire poi? It's really something. I'll add a website url here to show what the spinning performance at the Mid-Summer celebration might have looked like.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSryBfHGAA4

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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John dived into Sherlock like an ocean as soon as he kicked the bedroom door shut behind them. Mouths slid together, hands flew everywhere as they tried desperately to remove clothing before falling onto the bed. They were only partially successful. Jackets, and shoes littered the ground, and Sherlock had managed to undo John’s shirt buttons, but since Sherlock had been insistently nibbling at John’s neck, all he had managed to do was unhook Sherlock's trousers before they collapsed over the mattress. Sherlock pushed John onto his back and slid over him. “Jaaaawn.” He rumbled as he licked his way across John’s belly and chest, pausing to suck at each nipple, just grazing his teeth over the sensitive buds. “Gods” John exhaled long and low, arching off the bed.

Sherlock pulled back and balanced over John, letting his eyes drink in his face. “You are so beautiful.” Sherlock whispered. He looked almost drugged, his eyes, huge, luminous, and near grass-green in the light of the candles the servants had left burning on the night stand.

John reached up a hand to cradle his cheek, running a thumb over the slight stubble along his jawline. “You . . . you are a bloody work of art.” John breathed. “Love, what color are your eyes, exactly?”

Sherlock chuckled, and dipped his head to mouth under John’s ear. “They don’t have one color, do they? They were blue when I was born, but as I got older they started changing. My Gran said it was part of my being a chameleon mage.”

“I love all your colors.” John smiled, pulling Sherlock closer, catching his mouth in another long, searing exploration. “Love, come fuck me.” He whispered against Sherlock’s lips. “Come make me yours.”

With a growl, Sherlock kissed him harder, then wrenched away, letting the two of them work their remaining clothes off as fast as possible. Finally stripped, they pressed against each other, rutting
blindly, heat against heat. With a deep breath, Sherlock pulled back to find the jar of cream. He slicked John up with those long, gentle fingers, pushing into his arse as John rocked back against the pressure. Sherlock ran his other palm over John’s hard, swollen cock, and John went giddy at the feeling of it, laughing as though he’d been tickled. When Sherlock sank himself deeply into him, John’s breath stuttered. He nearly came unglued as soon as Sherlock canted his hips to move inside him.

Bones, muscles, and sinews, along with rational thought melted away leaving John floating, unconnected to time and space, more of a verb really than a noun – rolling, sliding, yielding, pushing, sighing, moaning. It was . . . it was . . . words had left him. Only the touch of Sherlock brought him back to himself— soft lips at his throat, fingers gripping into his thigh, and a hand stroking . . . oh Gods, yes. He felt his lover’s muscles tighten, energy coiling as Sherlock came with a choked yell, shuddering himself into John. After a moment, Sherlock wrapped his hand around John’s aching cock. One, two passes was all it took, and John quickly followed him into oblivion, writhing and near-crying as the world exploded around him. Sherlock slipped out, and collapsed next to him. They lay panting, legs tangled, Sherlock’s arm slung over John’s waist. John leaned closer and kissed Sherlock’s forehead as if in benediction. “My sweet man.” He mumbled. “John.” Sherlock breathed against him in reply, and they drifted off, sticky and spent, completely at peace.

John woke to a gentle, but insistent tapping at his side. As he blinked eyes caked with grit open, it was to the naked form of Sherlock sprawled on his belly next to him, breathing gently, and still quite asleep. Sherlock had the covers twisted around his middle. John, on his side, had a sliver of sheet covering his front, and a definite breeze across his bare backside. The tapping resumed. John looked over his shoulder to see Irene perched on a chest next to the bed grinning at him. “Good morning, handsome.” She chirped.

“Ack, IRENE.” John flipped on to his back, bringing as much of the bedding with him as he could wrench out from under Sherlock. Sherlock roused at the heaving blankets, and groggily raised his head. “Mmmff?”

“Are you two slug-a-beds having a lie-in all day?” Irene was fully dressed in a simple yellow frock, and impatiently jiggling her foot waiting for them to reach coherence.

“No, certainly not.” Sherlock blinked, and rolled over to sit straight up as if he hadn’t been sleeping like the dead just a minute previously. “What time is it?”

“Nearly noon.” Irene informed them. “Kate and I have been awake for hours.”

“Great Gods, I meant to be up earlier.” Sherlock said running both hands through his tangled curls. He leapt out of bed mother-naked, and completely unselfconsciously stalked out of the bedroom to the loo. “Kate.” John could hear him greeting Kate politely in the sitting room before the door to the washroom opened and closed.

“Irene, do you mind?” John raised his eyebrows at her as she continued to sit, and observe him.

“No, I don’t mind.” She smirked raising an eyebrow.

“Turn around, please?” John huffed.
“Interesting. How did a healer and soldier stay so shy?” Irene mused. “You have one of the most adorable bums I’ve ever seen by the way.”

John was sure he’d gone red to his ears. “Irene.”

“Oh, all right.” She stood with a flounce and went to open the curtains at the windows. John scooted off the bed holding a sheet to his groin. He bent to the floor to retrieve his pants and trousers from the night before, and quickly pulled them on.

“Today’s the day.” Irene said peering out the window at the gardens below. “I find myself nervous at how things will go.”

“I know what you mean. Sherlock always acts like nothing will go wrong . . . until it does.” John smiled wryly buttoning his trousers closed. “If you’ll excuse me?” He bowed slightly to Irene as she turned from the window, and hurried to follow after Sherlock. Kate was indeed in the sitting room dressed in a pretty but plain dress and flipping through some of the books they had piled by the armchairs.

“Good morning Kate.” John called on his way to the loo.

“Hullo, John.” She waved her fingers at him, slightly embarrassed at being in their rooms uninvited, though obviously Irene had dragged her along.

Sherlock had half-filled the tub, and was finishing with his wash when John emerged from the water closet. Sherlock stepped out of the bath, looking like a magnificent sea-god, water droplets clinging to the dark hairs across his body. John thought he would never get enough of looking at that long, sinewy form. He watched Sherlock grab a clean towel from the shelf, and run it over himself before knotting it about his lean waist. Sherlock looked up to catch John staring, and smiled broadly.

“Good morning, love.” John said.

“Good morning, John.” Sherlock walked into his arms, and caught his lips in a kiss. When they parted for air, Sherlock turned his face to burrow against John’s neck, inhaling deeply.

“Mmmm, you smell delicious, like you’ve been properly fucked.” He grinned against John’s ear. “It’s a shame, but you’d probably better wash. Busy day today.” He reached down to give John’s arse a quick squeeze.

“Yes, what exactly are we . . .” John began, but Sherlock had already swooped in for a last peck on the cheek on his way out the door. John sighed, and dropped his clothes to the floor to get into the bath himself.

When John emerged, clean, and wrapped in a dressing gown, it was to a full brunch laid out on the table in the sitting room.

“I rang for food, I hope you don’t mind.” Irene told him.

“Irene, bless you.” John said fervently, joining Irene and Kate at the table. “I’m starving.” As John filled his plate with kippers, eggs, and tomatoes, Sherlock swept in from the bedroom dressed neatly for the day. He slid into the empty chair and accepted a cup of tea and some toast from Irene waving off the heavier foods.

“John.” Sherlock fixed John with a steely glance. “What did you learn about Sherringford last night?”
“Nothing useful.” John replied, a blush rising slightly above his collar. “Honestly, I’m not spying around after your brother again like that.”

“Ah, he was with a woman.” One of Sherlock’s eyebrows rose. “Was she pretty?”

“SHERLOCK. It’s not funny. He has a right to his privacy.”

“Oh. Fascinating. She’s pregnant.” Both of Sherlock’s eyebrows rose at this deduction.

“How did you . . . no, never mind. I don’t want to know.” John sliced the air with his hand as if to obliterate the whole conversation. The blush had risen to cover his whole face, and he grabbed his cup and took a swallow of tea to hide.

“You got all that just from John’s blushes?” Irene asked leaning in.

“Well, that and the fact that he didn’t contradict anything I said.” Sherlock took a sip of his own tea with a satisfied smirk curling across his own face.

“I’m going on record as NOT SAYING ANYTHING.” John demanded.

“Of course, John.” Sherlock nodded at him.

“So, Sebastian Wilkes is out, Sherringford is only a lady-killer, and Healer Winston has been unavailable for comment.” Irene ticked off her fingers.

“Right, since Healer Winston was not at the ball last night. We need to request his services today to check him out. Irene, you are the most likely candidate to have a twisted ankle from the dancing. As a servant, Kate won’t rate his attention, John will make him nervous, and I could simply request John’s healing services.”

“Do we really need to waste time sussing this man out?” John asked. “Isn’t the plot to kill Mycroft and Fergus going to happen TODAY? Shouldn’t we be, I don’t know . . .” John waved his hand “following Mycroft around or something?”

“That wouldn’t be obvious.” Irene smiled slightly.

“Exactly.” Sherlock nodded at her. “We need to keep things as normal as possible during the day or risk alerting the conspirators that we know something big is up.”

“But how do you know they aren’t trying to kill the Prince or the King right now?” John protested.

“Timing, John, good theatrics is all in the timing. Those who wish the king dead picked Mid-Summer for a reason. There’s a circus performance in the afternoon at the parade grounds, but Mycroft and Fergus won’t be there. I believe just the royal women plan to go, yes, Irene?”

“Yes, your mother invited me.” Irene nodded. “I’m bringing Kate as my attendant.” She glanced back at Kate, and they shared a quick smile.

“All the royal family should be in attendance at the bonfire this evening though. It will be Prince Fergus’s first official public outing. What better time to show that it was destiny for the king and heir to perish than at Mid-Summer when the sun so poetically dies?”

“They used to kill a king at every Mid-Summer bonfire though, didn’t they?” Kate asked. “It was one of those awful old traditions.”

“Indeed. Good call.” Sherlock agreed with her. “However it wasn’t a true king. Brettona wouldn’t
have any royal family left if that were the case. No, the custom was to elect a mock king at May Day, and fete him until Mid-Summer when he was sacrificed. His body was thrown into the town bonfire, and his blood poured out to bless the fields. Good symbolism, but very barbaric.” Sherlock bit down on a triangle of toast with a satisfying snap.

“Kate, how did you know about that custom?” Irene smiled at her.

“My Nana used to kill a chicken each year at Mid-Summer and pour its blood on the bonfire.” Kate told them. “My cousins always thought it was hilarious, but I thought it was disgusting. When I was older though, Nana took me aside and told me why she did it. She said it was part of the old ways, like the king being sacrificed. She said blood was needed to feed the Gods so they wouldn’t take one of us in the coming year.”

“I prefer to celebrate the solstice with parades, and lemon ices over sacrifice myself.” Irene shuddered slightly, and Kate reached over to take her hand.

“Oh, but there’s always a sacrifice to be made some time, isn’t there?” Sherlock mused tapping a finger over his lips. “People always die. The question is only a matter of when.”

“Enough being maudlin. What do I do with this healer today?” Irene asked gathering herself to sit taller in her seat.

“I want to see him in action, and I want a chance to touch him, see what his talent actually is.” Sherlock’s eyes gleamed. “Irene, you can ask him about Gallatia since you were both there that summer. See what his reaction is. I think it will work better if we have him come to you rather than you to him. If you truly had an injured foot, you couldn’t make the trip. Who saw you walking here this morning?”

“Don’t worry.” Kate smiled not unkindly at Irene. “She limped on my arm the whole way here. Drama Queen.”

“If a thing is to be done, it’s worth doing right.” Irene stuck her tongue out at Kate. “Besides, I did have someone stomp on my foot last night at the ball. It is still sore.”

“Marvelous. Let’s spring our trap. Irene, get on the couch and look pained. John, you’ll have to hide in the bedroom and pretend not to be here. Kate and I will go find one Healer Eamon Winston, and roust him from his lair. Come Kate, our mission awaits.” Sherlock announced as the two of them stood from the table.

“Back in a moment.” Kate said coming over to kiss Irene good-bye. Irene slipped a hand around the nape of her neck, and kissed her soundly.

“No funny business, you two.” Irene warned as her partner stepped away. “I don’t want any killers thinking Kate needs to be silenced next.”

“We’ll be the souls of propriety.” Sherlock promised with one hand to his heart. “Come, Kate, show me your worried face. We have to convince the healer that Irene is suffering terribly.”

Kate waved her fingers back at Irene, and turned to Sherlock, pulling a long face as he opened the door for them.

“Don’t wrinkle up your forehead quite that much. You look constipated.” Sherlock’s voice drifted back to them from the hall as he shut the door behind them.

Irene’s worried face was much more realistic as she stared after them as though she could track them
through the closed door.

“Don’t worry. They’ll be fine. Sherlock is a man of no small acting talent. He’ll play a convincing enough fool for both of them.” John reassured her.

Irene turned to smile tightly at John. “I know. It’s all a game to him though, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes and no.” John admitted. “He loves the thrill of the chase, and a chance to be clever, but he knows when things are serious too.”

“I grew up in a royal court. I know the scheming that goes on behind the polite faces.” Irene rubbed a hand over her forehead. “This is nothing new, but it never gets easy.”

“I can barely imagine.” John sighed. “Why don’t we get you set up on the couch. How is your foot really?”

“It’s a bit tender, but nothing serious.” Irene said, standing and walking perfectly normally to the couch.

“Make yourself at home.” John told her. "I'm just going to pop into some proper things." 

"Of course.” Irene nodded, and John returned to the bedroom to find the easiest clothes to quickly pull on from the cupboard.

When he returned, Irene was paging through one of the books that Kate had been looking at earlier.

"So what's that one, then?” John asked drawing near.

Irene flipped back to the cover to show John Famous Garotters Through History, and raised an eyebrow at him. "Not one of yours I take it?"

"Ah, that would be one of himself's." John said, shaking his head. "He's a mad one, I know, but don't worry, he's good in a crisis."

"I know." Irene said with a sigh. "I just want this to be over soon."

"It will. Sooner than we might be ready for it all." John echoed her sigh. "Mind if I have a look?” He asked pointing toward Irene's foot.

“Not at all.” Irene said laying back on the cushions and bringing her feet up. She removed her slippers, and dropped them to the carpet.

John seated himself at the end of the couch, and slid her feet to his lap. “It's the left one, right?” At Irene’s nod, he peered more closely at it, turning it left and right. “Bit of a bruise there, hmmm. Mind if I do a scan?”

“No of course not, John.” Irene told him with a resigned air.

John placed his hands on either side of her foot. A small glow leaked out as he directed his energies down into her body. It was so easy to slip in and see the disruption in her foot, some broken blood vessels, swollen tissues. He knew with a touch of his power he could set it back to right. It was with great reluctance that he brought his mind’s eye back up to the couch. Irene was watching him closely.

“It really isn’t much more than a bruise. Listen. I was thinking, maybe if I make it look a little worse, deepen the bruise, it won’t look so suspicious that we dragged this healer in here.”
“I agree. Do you worst.” Irene quirked a half smile and settled back more fully, preparing herself.

“Don’t worry, this shouldn’t hurt much.” John reassured before closing his eyes, and diving his focus back down. It was but a moment’s work to pull more blood to the bruised area. When he opened his eyes again, Irene’s foot was quite remarkably black and blue.

“Dio bono, that . . . looks impressive.” Irene breathed in.

“It doesn’t hurt does it?” John asked her quickly.

“No, it’s fine, it just looks awful. All the better for our needs though. Thank you. You are quite good at what you do, aren’t you?” Irene regarded him intently.

John ducked his head slightly. “I haven’t had the training I need to be a full healer yet,” John admitted, “But talent-wise, I’m a master healer. I . . . can’t wait to find out all I can really do. It’s been an itch under my skin for years I couldn’t quite scratch. I was under a curse, you know. My power was stunted for years.”

“Sherlock mentioned it to me.” Irene admitted. “He loves you, you know. He’d do anything for you.”

“I know. I love him too.” John smiled, then looked up, slightly worried. “Irene, you know, he cares for you too. We both do.”

“John, my lovely man. I’m not jealous of you. Don’t worry. I’ve thanked my God and several of yours that fate brought me here. This is more than I even hoped for.” She gestured around her. “Having Kate . . .”

Their heads turned at the sound of voices approaching in the corridor.

“John, go, hide!” Irene waved at him frantically as they neared the door.

“Right-o!” he whispered, and ducked into the bedroom, barely managing to pushed the door nearly closed behind him, before Sherlock and Kate ushered the healer into the outer room. John stood barely breathing, listening quietly to the events without.

“Irene, darling, how are you? Is it worse?” Sherlock’s voice wavered slightly higher than usual.

“Let me get another cushion for you, ma’am.” . . . Kate’s voice offered.

“Good Day, Your Highness. What seems to be the problem?” A deeper voice tolled out. Obviously the healer, John thought.

“Some ninny trod on my foot last night, and I can hardly walk on it today.” Irene complained. “It’s Mid-Summer, and I don’t want to miss anything. Can you cure it?”

“Now, don’t worry your pretty head. Of course I can help. May I take a look, my dear?” Healer Winston’s voice was unctuous and oily rolling over John’s ears. After some shifting, low words muttered, and a pause, Irene squeaked.

“There, there, Your Highness. It should be fine. I have some herbs you can brew up into a tea, that should keep the swelling down, and humors in your body balanced.” The healer assured. John heard more shifting, the clasp of a bag being opened, and more indistinct words rumbling out.
“Oh, this is wonderous!” Sherlock’s voice cut loudly over it all. “We must reward you for your amazing healing skills. The Princess Irene would have missed the Mid-Summer celebrations if not for you!”

“Oh no, that isn’t necessary. It’s all in a day’s work . . .” the healer demurred, but Sherlock was having none of it.

“Nonsense, I insist. Do wait, I won’t be but a moment.” John heard Sherlock’s voice drawing closer. He barely had a chance to step back before the bedroom door was swiftly opening. Sherlock darted into the bedroom, closing the door behind. He spared John a swift glance before he was yanking open a dresser drawer and drawing out a purse. He fished out a gold coin, and then darted over to John to pull him into a kiss, wrapping a long hand around the back of his neck. John almost squeaked in surprise himself, but Sherlock’s mouth distracted him, insistent and warm, and still tasting of sweet tea. John relaxed into the kiss, almost missing the flare of power, and warm glow at his shoulder.

“What . . .” John whispered as Sherlock pulled away, but the man only pressed a finger to his lips in warning, and winked. Sherlock slipped back out to the sitting room, leaving the entry cracked behind him.

“. . . in Gallatia.” Irene was saying something to Healer Winston that John had missed.

“Indeed, your highness. They do have some elegant dances there. I did enjoy my visit there. It’s a shame, that war has kept the trading with Gallatia so low. You just can’t get a cheese in Brettona that matches a fine Gallatian semi-soft.”

“Ah, m’ good man.” Sherlock greeted him effusively. “Please accept this humble token as a symbol of our deepest appreciations.

John risked peeking through the gap at them. Irene was still stretched out on the couch, Kate hovering behind her. Sherlock was hugging the healer with much hearty slapping on the back. With his round belly and white whiskers, Healer Winston didn’t look that far off from Father Yule, John mused. He ducked back behind the door as they finally broke the embrace.

“Really, think nothing of it. All part of the job.” The healer said, obviously trying to shake Sherlock off. “If you’ll excuse me.” The man bowed and retreated to more of Sherlock’s praise following him. When he finally escaped the room, Sherlock paused, ear pressed to the closed door, waiting. When he was sure the healer had left the corridor, he turned the lock, and called back to the bedroom.

“John, quick, come out here.”

“So what was all that . . .”

“I’ll explain, but first I need to run an experiment. Irene, how is your foot?”

Irene looked down at her foot propped on its small stack of pillows. She reached down to rub across it. “It feels fine. He did clear the bruise up.”

Yes, it does look better. So we know that Eamon Winston is an actual healer. Sherlock said excitedly. “But I think he has a second talent as well.”

“John, I copied your healing talent a few minutes ago. I was going to use it to place a trace spell on Winston.”

“Was that wise?” John asked. “What if he’d caught you doing that?”
“I doubt that he would.” Sherlock snorted. “I’m quite good at what I do. In this case though, he didn’t notice, because I couldn’t put a trace on him. The healing power evaporated as soon as I touched him.”

“Did he have a ward on him?” John asked.

“It didn’t feel like a ward. It felt like my power just winked out. Come here John.” Sherlock reached out and grabbed John’s arm. He closed his eyes and concentrated. After a moment of nothing happening, he dropped John’s arm with a delighted grin.

“See, I can’t borrow your talent. I’ve been neutralized.” Sherlock chortled.

“I don’t understand.” Kate asked looking around. “Is this a good thing?”

“It’s annoying, but I’m sure it’s only temporary. The main thing is Healer Winston has the talent to negate another mage’s power. I’ve just found my first case of it.”

“Someone who could fool a truthsayer.” Irene’s eyes were dancing.

“Just so.” Sherlock agreed.

“You know, I couldn’t help noticing. Having listened in on Sherringford one night and this Winston fellow the next.” John reached around to rub the back of his neck. “Their voices are remarkably similar.” John turned to Irene. “Do you think it could have been his voice you heard that night you heard a Brettonian accepting the box with the mage plague?”

Irene furrowed her brow. “Sweet mother. You are right, John. Their voices are very similar.”

“You mean we just had a mass murderer in here to cure Irene’s foot?” Kate had turned ashen.

“Possibly. It’s circumstantial evidence at best, but it doesn’t look good for old Healer Winston, does it?” Sherlock tapped his lip with one finger.

“How could someone do that. How could a healer be involved with unleashing a mage plague?” John felt ill just thinking about it.

“Is not the power of life and death two sides to the knife the healer wields?” Sherlock asked him.

“Death to bring release from pain perhaps,” John countered running a hand over his forehead, “but not death for political gain. It turns my stomach.”

“Are things always so black and white?” Sherlock shrugged.

“No, I suppose they aren’t.” John admitted.

“I’m sending Mycroft a note. He may or may not already suspect Winston.” Sherlock cautioned. “He’ll definitely be one to watch tonight though.”

“I can’t wait.” Irene quirked up one side of her mouth. “Come Kate, let’s go pick out our battle dresses for the day.”

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The four of them managed to secure a carriage alone to the parade grounds that evening. Sherlock had chosen a ridiculous saffron-colored outfit to wear, and John had let him. The more harmless he looked, the better he thought. He himself was wearing white and thin blue stripes. He was afraid that the longer he stayed at the palace, the more outlandish his clothes would become, and he wouldn’t even notice anymore. It was the "not noticing" part that worried him most.

The city seemed to have emptied out into the streets. Guards on horses kept the roadway opened between the palace and the parade grounds, but Delphium seemed to have collectively lost her mind. Banners painted with the sun, and yellow and orange flags hung from every spot available. Couples of all ages were wrapped around each other, and snogging in public as if they hadn't a care. John grinned when they passed two fiddlers playing their hearts out on a street corner, and a nearby group jumped into an impromptu dance to their tune. Perhaps one Mid-Summer, he and Sherlock could wear something less fancy, and go slip into the streets with the regular folks. Sherlock could charm any crowd he chose to with his violin—if he was in the mood.

John recalled a few sweet Mid-Summer nights of his youth, and some memorable kisses sneaked after dark at the bonfire. Lovemaking at Mid-Summer was said to bring to luck to all concerned. There were plenty of babies born nine months after May Day, but the toll was much higher after Mid-Summer when the weather was nicer for outdoor trysting. They even had a name for the March infants born to young unwed mums — "Sun Babies." There were more than a few Bretonian children who had Zaros, the sky father, listed as their paternal parent on their birth certificate. John smiled abit just thinking about it.

Sadly though, tonight was not a time for merrymaking as it should be. John sobered as he glanced over at Sherlock still questioning Irene and Kate about their afternoon at the parade grounds. Irene looked like a Goddess of old draped in a white toga-like dress while Kate wore a simpler yellow frock befitting a servant. They sat with their hands laced tightly together as they recounted that the afternoon circus show had being quite stunning. The performance had been well done, and the crowd had loved it. The Queen Mum had even given a basket of silver coins to the servants for tossing out to the performers at her nod.

“How were Norah and Prunella behaving?” Sherlock asked.

“They seemed to enjoy the show. Queen Norah liked the trick horse riding especially.” Kate offered.

“Prunella seemed a little more twitchy than usual.” Irene observed. “One of her ladies brought her some medicine and she calmed down. She was particularly taken with the strawberry-mint ices being served.”

“Were any of the servants acting odd?” Sherlock turned his eyes back to Kate.

“No, not that I could tell. Everyone seemed glad of the chance to get out and watch the circus.” Kate shrugged. “It was a lovely show.”

Irene smiled at her, and raised their joined hands to drop a kiss to the back of Kate's. Regardless of whatever else was going on, John was glad that Irene had relaxed her guard enough to allow Kate to accompany her today. It was hard when you felt as if you were endlessly watching your back. John was thankful for the hundredth time that he and Sherlock were being allowed to wed. What if he, like Anthea, had been forced into a secret relationship to be with his love? It wasn’t a life that John wished on anyone. He let his eyes land on Sherlock and linger there, sliding over sharp cheekbones, that long expanse of neck, and those hand, those beautiful hands that danced in the air as he spoke, giving form to his thoughts. How had John been so lucky to find him? John simply thanked the Gods that he had.
Sherlock, feeling the weight of John’s gaze, glanced over. Despite his focus on the matter at hand (he’d spent half the afternoon lost in his thinking mode), his eyes melted a little and he reached over to take John’s hand as well. Even a plot to kill the king couldn’t squash all the romance and magic out of Mid-Summer night.

The carriage turned into the parade grounds, and guards opened and closed the gates behind them. More guards, and servants who were probably also guards helped them from the carriage and escorted them to the royal pavilion. They passed by some of the rows of stands set up for the gathered nobles, and others connected enough to be invited to the event. The place was packed, and the crowd abuzz with conversation and excitement for the holiday. If only the day weren't so overlaid with ominous tidings, John would have enjoyed being escorted past all the poshlings to the steps of the covered royal pavilion. As it was, he couldn't help watching his back until they were safely inside the royal viewing box. Queen Violet, King Mycroft, Queen Norah, and Prince Fergus held in the lap of one of his nurses were already there, and they all exchanged nods and greetings.

“Lady Irene, do come sit here with me.” Queen Violet waved at her, looking extremely regal in a white dress spangled with gold beads.

“I’m so sorry, mother” Sherlock stepped smoothly in. "I need to be acquainting myself with my bride-to-be this summer. I’m sure you understand that it's best if she remain by my side tonight.”

Violet huffed a bit, but said no more, as Sherlock gracefully led them to chairs in the second row, seating Irene and John to either side of him. Irene flashed him a grateful look as she took her place. Unfortunately Kate couldn’t join them, finding a spot at the rear with the other servants gathered, but she kept making trips back to Irene’s side, getting her water, a lemon ice, and a plate of sugared fairy cakes that Irene shared round.

“I’m glad I can be your consort and not your servant.” John whispered quietly to Sherlock’s ear, licking sugar off his fingers. “I’d probably have to murder you if I had to wait on you all the time.”

“I would never ask that of you John. You’re far too valuable as my sex toy.” Sherlock whispered with a cheeky smirk, watching the progress of John’s tongue over the tip of his thumb.

“Oi, how about I order you down on your knees with my cock in your mouth?” John growled quietly back.

Sherlock’s eyes flashed a particularly lovely shade of green-gold. He opened his curved mouth to say something else when Prince Sherringford’s arrival drew their attention back to the steps of the pavilion.

“Oh, Sherringford, where’s Pruney?” Queen Norah asked when it was clear he was alone.

“Alas, I must bring her regrets.” Sherringford said bowing slightly to her. "My Lady Wife was taken ill with a headache this evening, and cannot join us.”

“Drat.” Norah exclaimed. “How awful. And she picked out that lovely buttercup dress to wear dress tonight!”

“That woman is nothing but trouble.” Queen Violet grumbled to herself.

“That is a shame.” Mycroft drawled, cutting his eyes at his mother. “At least we still have your august presence to comfort us.” He nodded to Sherringford. “Please, take a seat.”

“Indeed.” Sherringford snorted at him, and moved to his chair, stopping to chuck Prince Fergus
under the chin on the way. “There’s a good lad.”

Fergus let out a howl, and the nurse jiggled him. “It’s late for him, poor lamb.” The woman apologized.

With a scowl, Sherringford took a seat in the back beside Irene. Irene nodded politely at him as he settled.

“Princess Irene, how nice to see you. You’re looking particularly fetching tonight.” He smiled down at her, his eyes following the folds of her dress.

“What’s wrong, brother dear, can’t keep up with just one wife?” Sherlock asked, leaning over Irene.

“Oh, leave off. She’s not well.” Sherringford snapped.

“What have you been doing to wear her out so?” Sherlock asked with an eyebrow raised.

“Most likely not the same things you lot have been up to.” Sherringford looked pointedly at the three of them. “More’s the pity.” He added darkly.

“How do you know what we’ve been up to?” Sherlock snorted back at him. “What have you heard?”

“Please, I was twenty-five once.” Sherringford chuckled. “And you all look so guilty now.”

“Children.” Mycroft swiveled around to fix them with a beady glare. “Please be quiet. Things are starting.”

The last golden rays of the day were quickly slipping over the horizon, and John could see the large stack of wood piled in the center of the field that would become the bonfire after dark. A group of performers ran out from behind it carrying a long, red dragon puppet above their heads. The beastie rippled and danced like a thing alive as they ran the length of field thrice, flirting with the crowd, and pretending to snap at those who stood too close. Wild applause followed them when the dragon finally slipped away. At the crack of drums, a troupe of dancers clad all in gold burst out next. They leapt onto the field cavorted and spinning around the pile of wood like glittering tops. The crowd cheered even louder at their jolly antics.

Unfortunately at the loud noise, Prince Fergus had started to cry in earnest. The nurse made excuses, “Oh the poor dear needs a nappy change.” She bundled him up in his wicker bassinet. Two servants and a guard helped her carry him off. It was but a few minutes until they returned, the prince still in his basket. John heard her telling Queen Norah “Oh, the lamb just fell right to sleep, we’ll let him lie.” As she placed the basket back on the floor of the pavilion, and continued to rock it, though John was sure the prince himself was most likely no longer in the basket. He hoped others would be better fooled.

It was nearly dark as servants came around to light the torches around the perimeter of the performing space. The crowd cheered as actors marched in solemnly carrying a large papier-mâché sun that they placed carefully on the top of the firewood. More dancers dashed out to the field, these ones were twirling balls at the end of ropes around their heads in cunning patterns. When someone brought out a bucket of mage fire, they dipped the balls in, setting them ablaze and continued to spin them carefully around themselves. The fire left trails of motion – circles and figures eights that hung in the air for a moment before the dancers switched directions. The crowd gasped together at the marvelous sight.

John felt his nerves pinging as he glanced covertly around, awaiting whatever attack was sure to
come tonight. He could see the guards milling around the pavilion, and guessed there were many more he couldn’t see. They should be fine. Whoever would play their hand tonight should be caught out by Mycroft’s extra security, but still . . .

He nearly jumped when a servant dashed up with a note and stopped, visibly halted by a barrier at the base of the steps. A guard moved quickly to speak to him.

“How can anyone get past these wards to attack, I still don’t understand.” John whispered to Sherlock.

“The wards keep off anyone not of the royal family or brought in by the royal family. They keep out all weapons, but the spell isn’t foolproof. I can’t wait to see how they do it.” Sherlock rubbed his hands together.

“Right, while we’re all sitting ducks as the target. Just lovely.” John felt the small hairs rising on the back of his neck.

The guard stepped up to the pavilion with the note for Sherringford. He opened it, his face twisting as he read it.

“What is it?” Sherlock asked craning around Irene again. “Bad news?”

“It’s Prunella. The healer thinks I should come right away.” Sherringford told them. “She seems to have fallen into a fit, and she’s asking for me.” He ran a hand back through his hair.

“Oh, Your Highness, I’m so sorry.” Irene murmured.

Sherringford nodded at her, and then stood, moving to speak to Mycroft. After a few exchanges, Sherringford made his good-byes and left the pavilion with one of the guards.

“Interesting.” Sherlock mused watching his brother’s retreating back. “John,” he said turning toward him. “Let me see if I can borrow your healing power now. If we’re attacked by many, we can both wield a sleep spell as defense.”

John nodded. “Of course.” Sherlock took his hand between his own, and focused on copying his power. John was very relieved to see the small glow that signaled the return of Sherlock’s mage power.

Sherlock leaned down to whisper in Irene’s ear, then turned back to John. “It could be any minute now. Stay calm, but keep on alert.”

John jumped when the dancers lit the bonfire. They tossed their fireballs onto the pyre, and with a huge whoosh, the wood exploded into flame. The crowd cheered wildly as the fire licked quickly up the wood to consume the papier-mâché sun on top. It had obviously been treated with a substance that turned the flames blue to green to purple as bright sparks leapt up in a column against the night. It was a lovely sight, but John only had half an eye for it as he continued to scan around them.

The first of the fireworks whistled above their heads to explode in a boom, sending gold and silver fountains of light across the dark sky. The whole crowd “ooed” in response. John could feel Sherlock tensing beside him, and he flipped to combat alert. Everything seemed to both slow down, and happen at once. A line of dancing girls in gauzy, gold pants had worked their way around the field to prance before the royal pavilion. They trailed orange and yellow scarves about them as they skipped by, and the heads of the guards posted in front of the pavilion swiveled to follow. Sadly, all four of the guards crumpled to the ground as two figures in black appeared suddenly behind them, quickly touching their backs.
Almost at once, another man in black stepped up onto the pavilion. John recognized him instantly as the fire mage, the Amazing Bernouli from the circus. An ugly look crossed his face as Mycroft turned to lock eyes with him. Bernouli raised his hands, gathered mage fire sparkling at the fingertips. The trained servants were on him in an instant bringing him down, slamming out the fire. More guards dragged another two figures dressed in black up the pavilion steps. It was Lady Prunella and Healer Winston looking as surprised as caught fish, gaping in the torchlight.

“Prune, what is this?!” Queen Norah rose half out of her seat until Mycroft pushed her back down. Bedlam erupted around them as everyone seemed to be talking at once. Prunella wailed, the King shouted orders, and the guards hauled Bernouli back to his feet, binding his wrists behind him. John alone seemed to see the flicker of movement in the old Fire Mage’s eyes. He turned his head to follow, and watched as a lithe figure in black swung down from the roof of the pavilion to land lightly behind them. He knew her too, it was Bernouli’s assistant, the brown-haired girl from the circus, her pretty features now cold with hate. As she raised hands tingling with mage fire toward the royal family, John was already up and moving, knocking chairs aside to reach her.

“Noooooo.” He cried stretching out to make contact. John gathered the sleep command to push into her, if he could just . . . As his hand closed over her wrist, and they both tumbled to the floor, John looked down to see a ball of mage fire leaving her hand. It slamming into his chest like a cannonball. John choked on the pain sweeping through him . . . burning, consuming, an agony, merging into . . . sweet relief as all went dark.

Chapter End Notes

I know. I hate when my babies get hurt too. All will be well in the end though, you’ll see.
Love is the Law, Love Under Will

Chapter Summary

John finds himself on a journey, and a road to recovery.

Chapter Notes

The title for this chapter comes from this quote - “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law. Love is the law, love under will.”

Central to a philosophical group called the OTO, it’s called the law of Thelema and was developed by Aleister Crowley, an early 20th-century British writer and ceremonial magician. It is thought to mean that we are all personally in charge of, and responsible for our own actions, but a higher consciousness and compassion must guide our decisions to be in accord with the right path.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John blinked his eyes and sat up. He rubbed his hands over his face. He had a feeling that he’d been doing something very important just a moment ago, but now for the life of him, he couldn’t remember what that had been.

Glancing around, his muddled head cleared somewhat as he realized how familiar his surroundings were. He wasn’t sure how he’d gotten there, but he was in the meadow behind his house where he and Annalisa always met at the big oak. He stood up and picked out the tree across the field, and yes, there was Annalisa waiting for him, waving. It took but a few steps, and he was there looking up at her perched on one of the lower branches, peering back down.

“Aw, Johnny, it’s good to see you.” She said, a sad little smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“Annalisa.” John smiled back at her. It seemed like he hadn’t seen her in ages, but they usually met after dinner at the tree. It couldn’t have been that long since they’d been together last. Something niggled at him again, but he couldn’t figure out what it was.

Annalisa dropped down nimbly, and stepped forward to take John’s hand. “Johnny, I had to tell you, tell you how sorry I was.”

“Annie, what’s all this? Did you lose the ribbons I got you?” John teased her.

“No, it’s a bit worse than that I’m afraid, sweetkins.” She looked embarrassed.

“What then?”

At John’s puzzled frown, she led him to the blanket spread on the springy grass, and pulled him down to sit with her. “Johnny, I wanted you to know how bad I feel about what happened. I went a
bit funny when you wanted to go away, and I was afraid to let you. I wanted to keep you close, but I realize now that wasn’t love. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Honey, forgive you for what?” John asked as a tiny ripple of fear flickered at his spine.

“At the May Day fair, I visited some of the Travelers, the ones selling fortunes and spells. I bought some biscuits with a love spell an old woman was selling. That wouldn't have gone too bad, but then I found a charmed necklace from this creepy man too. I wasn’t supposed to use them together, he told me that - not to mix things, but I did. I was a right cabbage. I never meant to hurt you though. You have to believe that, Johnny.”

Slivers of memory returned in icy trickles to John’s mind. “It’s all right, Annalisa, I forgive you, hon. I do. It’s . . . fine.”

“Ah, Johnny, you’re a good one.” She threw her arms around his neck. "You always were a good one." She didn’t smell like anything at all as he hugged her, but John patted her shoulder, and she pulled away smiling.

“You have to go back now, Johnny. It isn’t your time. You have to go.” She told him.

“Go where?” John was still struggling to bring his mind into focus. There was something he wanted to remember but it flickered away.

“John.” A hoarse voice, nearly a whisper, came from behind him, and John whipped around to find it. Sherlock stood several paces away, one long hand outstretched, his eyes like icy blue shards in his pale face as he scanned the landscape.

“Oh, love, what is it?” John got to his feet to face him. He glanced back at Annalisa, but she was gone. The tree was gone, and the field too. A fog had rolled in to cover it all, leeching the colours away to a grey blandness swirling around them.

“John, where are you? I can’t find you.” Sherlock’s voice was going oddly high-pitched.

“Love, I’m here. Can’t you see me?” John tried to walk toward him, but Sherlock remained the same distance away no matter how fast he moved.

“John, please. Where are you? If you aren’t coming back, then I’m coming with you.” Sherlock’s voice held a steely determination even as it broke.

“HERE, I’m here!” John called throwing himself forward, but the fog thickened, and he lost sight of Sherlock in the roils of mist.

“Please.” John prayed then. “Please.”

He felt the brush of a large hand on his back. “Back you go then, pup.” A kind voice rumbled across his ear, and with a solid push, he was tumbling into Sherlock’s arms.

“LOVE, love. Oh Gods, my love.”

They were wrapped around each other, hands grasping at whatever they could catch, pressing as close as possible. John could smell the earthy scent of Sherlock's sweat, but marred with a sharp tang of fear like cold metal laced over it. It was a scent a soldier never forgets, but it was his love, and he inhaled as deeply as he could.

John opened his eyes to Sherlock just inches above him, his eyes, blue beacons awash in tears that
spilled over to run down his beautiful, beautiful face. People shouting, hands touching him, the smell of gunpowder, terrible pain — it all came in at a rush, and John sighed back down into a more peaceful dark, content that other people were now in charge of whatever was going on as he slipped asleep.

When John woke next, he found himself in a room streaming with light. Crisp white sheets, and single beds in a line under the windows instantly said “Healers Sanctuary.” He turned his head, and with some relief, saw Sherlock collapsed on the bed next to him, one arm flung over his head on the pillow. Purple lines marked the fragile-looking skin under his eyes. A wash of love rushed over John as he let his eyes take in his lover. From his mop of unruly dark hair to the long feet sticking out from under the blanket, and dangling at the edge of the bed, he was lovely. He wondered how close he’d come to never seeing this sight again, and the breath caught in his lungs.

At the sound of footsteps, John turned to see Healer Lupita Markson at his other side. “John, we have to stop meeting like this.” She smiled.

“What . . .” John began and stopped at the pull of his parched throat.

“Don’t try to talk just yet.” She poured him a glass of water, and helped him sit upright to drink it.

“Let me see if I can fill in some of the blanks.” Lupita said pulling a stool up to sit by him. “You’re in the palace sanctuary. You’ve been here in an induced sleep for three days whilst your body healed. You were hit with mage fire at an attempt on the king’s life at the Mid-Summer bonfire. You sustained deep burns, and damage to your lungs. Prince William saved your life, but you probably already knew that. He kept you alive until trained healers could reach you. He had me brought to the palace that night to treat you. Actually, he had two guards escort me to the palace with no word as to why, but I would have come in an instant regardless. You’re not getting out of studying under me that easily, young man.”

John chanced a hoarse chuckle, and winced.

Lupita reached over to the table by his bed and picked something up, a melted golden blob at the end of a chain. “This pendant you were wearing actually also helped save your life. It absorbed the worst of the mage fire away from you. You were very lucky you had it on.” It was the golden Gallanus pendant that Sherlock had given him earlier. John swallowed over the dry tissues in his throat watching the shapeless lump of metal dangling at the end of the chain. Lupita smiled kindly as she set it back down on the bedside table.

“You should reach a full recovery, but you’ll be a little sore for a few days. In the meanwhile, I want you to drink plenty of spring tonic.”

John screwed up his face as a nurse came forward bearing a steaming cup of something that smelled distinctly like clipped grass and stewed fish. She set it down on the table next to him, and with a small curtsy and a smile, retreated.

“Go on.” Lupita nodded to the cup. “We added honey. You’ll need five cups of this today. The sooner you get drinking, the sooner it will be down.”

John picked up the cup. He wrinkled up his nose, but downed a healthy sip. He stuck out his tongue
at the bitter taste of it.

Lupita smiled. “Sometimes healers can be the worst patients, but don't worry, you'll be back to your old self in no time.” She reached out to pat the blankets over his knee. “I need you to spend another day here for observation, but then you’ll be free to go, with restricted activity for the next fortnight of course.”

John glanced over at Sherlock and raised his eyebrows in query.

Lupita shook her head with a small smile. “That one is a caution. He wouldn’t leave your side, wouldn’t sleep or eat. He was draining himself copying power from the healers to send you energy even though we assured him that you were doing fine. I knocked him out myself when I realized what he was doing. He should sleep for at least twelve more hours. I’d wake him up to see you, but frankly, I think you both need the rest.”

John sighed, and nodded, letting his eyes roam over Sherlock again. The man was a wreck, hair sticking everywhere, face unshaved. He looked about five years old with his face gone so soft, despite the stubble dusting his jaw. Sherlock snored slightly, then rolled over onto his side, his curls spilling over his forehead. He was beautiful even in his exhaustion.

John turned back to meet Lupita’s kind eyes. “If you’re up for it, you have a visitor waiting to see you.” She told him. “Your sister?”

At John’s vigorous nod, Lupita smiled and rose. “Take it easy, keep the talking short, and I’ll be back to check on you in a few hours.”

When another nurse led Harriet in to his bedside, John was surprised to realize how very glad he was to see her. It was the same old Harry, but in her going-to-town dress, with a worried frown creasing her forehead.

“Johnny, you scared the Gods out of me.” Harry came forward to hug him fiercely. John went to pat her shoulder, and found himself clinging back just as tightly.

“You’re the only family I’ve got left, you berk, you’re not allowed to get yourself killed.” She informed him, pulling away to dash at her eyes.

John watched as she sat down on the stool by the bed. He pointed to his throat, and pulled a sad face.

“Yeh, I know. You can’t really talk yet. It’ll make it easier I think. We’re less likely to get into a fight if only one of us can talk.” A wry smile pulled at her lips.

John mirrored it with a small smile of his own.

“Johnny, I wanted to tell you I was sorry. I judged you, and your actions without knowing the whole story. Even if you weren’t cursed, you had enough going on with Mum and Da’s death to rightfully be a mess. It was wrong of me to run off and leave you with everything like I did. I was an idiot, and I’m sorry. I’m thinking we could maybe, start over? Clean slate, yeh?”

John nodded, and reached out to take her hand and squeeze it.

“So I hear you’re a hero. Saving the king’s life?” Harry looked down at their linked hands. “And here I though becoming a royal would keep you OUT of trouble, not get you into more of it.” Harry shook her head slightly as she looked up at him.

John let go of her hand to mime writing something. “What’s that, oh you want to write.” Harry
signaled the nurse and asked for a pen, and ink, and some paper. When the nurse returned with the supplies, John carefully wrote out a sentence before passing the paper to Harry.

"Only life can kill you." She read and then chuckled. "Oh Johnny, That was one of Da’s favorite sayings, wasn’t it? Right next to his famous ‘Drink it today, ‘cuz you might be dead tomorrow.’ He was of course right on that one."

She and John shared a smile that only siblings who have grown up in the same crazy household can, one with regret, and bittersweet nostalgia, and love all mixed together.

"I love you." John croaked out, and winced.

"I love you too." Harry said, and reached over to pull him into another quick, fierce hug. "Evie was waiting with me, but she went out to get some food. Do you feel up to seeing her when she gets back?"

John realized that a deep tiredness was washing up from his bones and pulling at him like the tide to a great sea. He grabbed the pen to scribble another sentence.

"Maybe later, tired." Harry read as he wrote. "Oh, of course, luv. How about I let you rest, and we’ll see you tomorrow morning?" At John’s nod, she leaned back in to kiss his forehead. She rose to help him move his pillow, and settle down. John closed his eyes, and drifted back to sleep.

It was dark when John’s eyes opened again. A few small mage-fire lamps burned around the room giving it a cozy, dim glow. Sherlock was still passed out sleeping peacefully on the bed next to him. John crawled out of bed, and shuffled the few steps to sit next to him. It was comforting to lay a hand over his chest, and feel its steady rise and fall with each breath. A nurse appeared to ask if he needed anything. After a few gestures, and a croaked “loo,” she helped him stand, and walk over to the water closet. John hated how weak he felt, but he knew his body was spending its resources toward healing, and this was good thing. When she helped him back to bed, John was only slightly surprised to see a figure sitting by his bed, and a large fruit basket now taking up the whole of the bedside table. It was King Mycroft of course.

"Don’t keep him up too long, Your Majesty." The nurse warned helping John back into bed, propping the pillows up behind him.

"Don’t worry, Agnes,” Mycroft told her. “I wouldn’t dream of hampering the healing of Brother John Watson.”

Mycroft waited for the nurse to retreat before turning back to John. “Well, Brother John. It looks as if I don’t owe you just the lives of my family, but my own as well now. There is nothing I can do to adequately repay you for these things of course, but as a gesture of goodwill, I will be knighting you and giving you a gift of ducal lands. Sherlock and I agreed that Rosewood Manor would be a good choice. When you are feeling more up to it, he’ll be taking you out for a tour of your new estate.”

Mycroft’s eyes flickered over to the sleeping form of his brother on the next bed. “I must say, I remain infinitely grateful for both my sake as well as for his that you and Sherlock met.” Mycroft extended a hand to him. “John, I am more than honored to call you brother.”

John nodded, took Mycroft’s hand and shook it solemnly.
“How . . .” he tried to speak and coughed.

“You have questions.” Mycroft offered. At John’s nod, he cleared his throat and leaned forward to set elbows on knees. “Let me see if I can elucidate. We discovered that Lady Prunella and Healer Winston were both behind the mage plague, and the more recent attack. It seems he has the ability to nullify my truthsayer talents, and I do thank you, Princess Irene, and my brother for discovering that.” He tilted his head slightly in deference to John.

“Prunella was both wily and crazy enough to escape my attentions. Believe me, she was more than aware of what she was doing, but she was quite, quite mad. I feel I should have paid her more attention earlier.” Mycroft passed a hand over his face. “It seems that she plotted the removal of me and my heirs to allow her husband to become King and her position to be elevated in court. Sherringford knew nothing of it. He was truly shocked when he heard the news. Prunella found sympathetic help not only in her healer, but also in a distant cousin of hers, Duncan MacMillan, the chap with the failing circus. Most of the circus was blameless in the attack, but we ferreted out the ones who were principally involved in the plot.”

John pulled the writing materials out from around the fruit basket and wrote a question.

“break wards?”

“How did they break the wards around the pavilion to attack? Prunella, again, I’m afraid. As a member of the royal family, she was able to allow people to pass through the protective wards. They couldn’t bring conventional weapons through the spells, but fire mages were able to pass unhampered. I knew to watch for the older Bernouli, but his daughter, Celeste, was completely under our radar. Again, I am utterly in your debt for thwarting her attack on me. Because of you, I and my children remain safe. Thank you, John. I’m only sorry it was at such a high cost to yourself.”

John grabbed his paper to write again.

“Prunella? Winston?” Mycroft read. “I regret to report that both are dead, along with the Bernoulis, and Duncan MacMillan. Lethal injection. We’re still working our way through the other circus folk involved, but the cost of treason is death. It’s an old law, and really not up to me to change it even if I wished it. I was able to offer Prunella a choice of death or life imprisonment due to her position as a member of the royal court, but she chose death as well.” Mycroft took a long breath, and sat up straighter to look John in the eye.

“Brother John, being king has its privileges, but they often come at a very high cost. While there are many who would court the fates for power and wealth, I have found the worship of the smaller Gods of heart and home to be of much more lasting worth. My brother is a very lucky man to have met you.” Mycroft stood then, and with a final clap to John’s shoulder, was gone.

John pushed back his blankets, and made his way over to Sherlock’s bed. He crawled in beside him and burrowed his face against his love’s warm shoulder. Sherlock rolled toward him, and even in his sleep, instinctually tucked John closer, throwing an arm around him. For the first time since he had awoken in the sanctuary, John felt all the tension drain out of him. It was easy to slip back into slumber with the sleepy, warm weight of Sherlock against him.
“I guess I should almost-die more often if it makes everyone act this nice to me.” John said with a grin, spooning up his second helping of Mrs. Hudson’s rhubarb tart with clotted cream.

“Shall I do something rude and unspeakable then? I don’t want you thinking almost-dying is a good idea.” Sherlock huffed at him from the other side of the ugly couch.

“Well, you could shag me into a mattress.” John suggested flicking hooded eyes his lover’s way.

“John.” Sherlock reached out to cup a hand to John’s jaw. A crease puckered the skin between his eyes. Sherlock had been treating him like spun glass for the last fortnight, and John was growing weary of it.

“I’m fine! I feel fine. Honestly, Sherlock!”

As soon as John had been released from the palace healers sanctuary, Sherlock had spirited him back to their flat on Baker Street. John had to admit, he felt more comfortable there. Of course Sherlock knew that. An official, sanitized version of the attack on the king’s life had been released to the newspapers, and John’s involvement had been kept very mum, but those close to him knew the real story. Mrs. Hudson stopped by daily with treats for “her special hero.”

Harry and Evie had come and spent two days with them at 221B. Thankfully, Mrs. Hudson’s daughter, who had the flat below them, had a spare guest room, and was happy to let the women have use of it. Sherlock dug out a pack of cards, and the four of them played many cut-throat games of Spades into the night. John and Harry both cheated shamelessly of course, and simply declared it a Watson family tradition when Sherlock and Evie called them on it. Evie had been quite cross, and thrown spiced nuts at both of their heads, but Sherlock had merely smiled, and stroked along John’s arm.

John had happily taken Evie to a prayer service at Temple of the Small Gods one evening when she had said how much she wanted to go. They left Harry and Sherlock at home to talk about the-Gods-only-knew-what over tea. This visit was one of the best times that John and Harry had shared together since they were quite small, and he was sad when it ended. All too soon, the palace carriage arrived to take them home to the dairy. It was a teary farewell, but tempered by how much John was looking forward to having Sherlock alone to himself for awhile.

As she and Evie gathered up their bags and made to go, Harry grabbed John around the middle and squeezed him so tight he almost couldn’t breathe.

“Hey, don’t ruin all the work the healers did on me.” He laughed at her breathlessly, patting her back.

Harry gave him a watery look as she stepped away. “Johnny, you numpty. . . you just . . . worried us, you know. I don’t want to go through that again.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” John told her softly. “But don’t worry I won’t be doing anything too taxing in the next few weeks, and before you know it, you’ll be back in town for the royal wedding.”

“John, sweetie.” Evie smiled, and pulled him into a gentler good-bye hug. “Thank you both for the invitation to the royal wedding. It will be fun to see the court, but it will be nice just to see you again.” Sherlock hung back behind John, and would have just nodded his good-byes, but Evie and Harry man-handled him into proper hugs before they left.

Unfortunately John’s hoped-for couple time did not manifest as planned. As soon as Harry and her wife departed, Sherlock had been more absent than around. John knew he had his detective work to
check on, and official events at the palace – his royal wedding to Irene was only a few weeks away, but John was starting to wonder if Sherlock was actively avoiding him. Oh, Sherlock always came back to 221B to sleep, but he either sacked out on the couch, or came to bed late and left early before John was even properly awake. John got a kiss on the forehead, and a flash of blue eyes whenever he caught Sherlock coming or going, but that was about it. John had been exhausted, and easily winded the first week home, sleeping huge amounts, but by the second week, he had felt almost normal. Sherlock was still oddly keeping his distance though, and frustrated didn’t begin to cover how John was feeling.

On a good note, John had caught up on his reading – he had gotten several new medical books to slog through, and had even started Arabonian language classes of a sort with Carmina. She had fussed mightly over John when she heard of his narrow escape. He’d been plied with four different kinds of chicken soup, all manner of pottage, and enough fresh fruit sat in bowls around the flat to make it look like a makeshift grocer’s. Between Carmina’s food, and Mrs. Hudson’s baked goods, John was starting to feel like a fatted calf.

The only truly bright note in his boring convalescence since Harry and Evie left had been the day Irene and Kate came for lunch. Irene had obviously nagged Sherlock about John, and John had asked after her and Kate, so Sherlock had killed several birds with one stone, and informed Carmina to expect lunch guests for the next day.

John found it amusing to see how starstruck Carmina was at having Irene to visit. You’d have thought working for Prince William was like tending sheep on the farm next to having THE Princess Irene of Arabonia to tea. Carmina was in a total flutter getting ready. It didn’t matter how much John told her they’d be fine going casual.

“Mr. John, we need a table cloth. You can not have a proper lunch with . . . that.” Carmina had flapped her hands wordlessly at the table in the sitting room currently covered in an assortment of loose papers, dirty cups, the skull of a small animal, and a collection of builder’s nails that Sherlock had found worthy of study.

John had given Carmina a handful of gold coins from the household funds, and told her to get whatever she deemed appropriate. When John tried to help her clean the flat, she had shooed him off, and John had ended up taking a walk over to the Temple of the Small Gods to get out of her hair. He was more than pleased to find Brother Mykal free to get a cuppa with him. It was refreshing to talk with someone who wasn’t connected with the royal family, or thought he was about to keel over dead at any moment. Brother Mykal told him there were plans in the works to build an addition to the temple for a small school for the street kids, but was strangely mum about where the funds were coming from.

When John returned to 221B, it was to see that Carmina, had achieved a minor miracle sprucing up the place. Several new cushions, vases of flowers, new linens for the table as well as matching plates and glasses gave the flat quite a touch of class. Carmina herself had changed into a pretty pink frock that did nothing to hide her voluptuous bosom, and pulled her hair into a top knot that left tendrils trailing down her cheeks. John was glad to see she felt comfortable enough to dress as she liked these days. The neighborhood must be treating her fairly, or the new boyfriend working out well. He knew Sherlock had probably already deduced her recent home life in a quick glance, but John had no such prowess.

John settled for complimenting her lavishly. “Carmina, you are a wonder!” He exclaimed, settling onto the couch, shifting one of the fat new cushions out of the way. “The flat looks fabulous, and the kitchen smells . . . amazing.”
“Thank you Mr. John, I only hope it’s good enough . . .”

“Carmina, you did this out of love, and that already makes it an offering fit for the Gods. I know Princess Irene, and her companion, Kate, will love it. Really, they aren’t the stuffy sort at all.”

Carmina opened her mouth to say something else, but the sounds of someone at the door halted her in her tracks. With a squeak she flew back into the kitchen for final prep leaving John to greet Irene and Kate as Sherlock showed them into the flat.

“Oh, this is charming.” Irene said sweeping her eyes around the room. “John.” Her eyes fell right to him on the couch. She sank beside him and took both his hands in hers. “Dear man, how are you feeling?”

“Good, I’m good.” John smiled at her, looking up to include Kate who trailed along after her. “I felt like the dog’s dinner for about a week, but I’m almost back to normal now.”

“That’s a relief.” Kate smiled down at him. “We were terrified at the bonfire. We weren’t sure . . . you would be all right.”

“But as you can plainly see.” Sherlock drawled coming up behind them. “John is quite fit and hale. I haven’t stashed his lifeless body somewhere, and neglected to tell anyone.”

Irene pulled John into a hug, rubbing his back, before looking over her shoulder at Sherlock. “Well, as mum as you’ve been with details, I wanted to see him with my own two eyes.” She pulled back to meet John’s gaze. “My dear, you are quite the hero. I’ve never seen so many guards in one place after that fire mage attacked you. None of them were close enough to take her down like you were though. I think you saved the king’s life.”

Irene gave John’s knee a final pat before moving away, letting Kate come forward and squeeze his hand. “John, it really is good to see you looking so well.” She told him with a small smile.

“It’s good to be well.” John grinned back.

“Show me the rest of this charming flat.” Irene demanded of Sherlock rising to her feet.

“There isn’t much more.” Sherlock told her, leading the women into the bedroom where they exclaimed over the cunning tub in the corner. When they returned to the sitting room to inspect the adjoining kitchen, Carmina was there in a starched white apron to curtsy at them.

“Oh, but who is this exquisite creature?” Irene exclaimed coming forward to smile at Carmina.

“I told you we had a part-time housekeeper.” Sherlock sniffed, obviously irritated at repeating himself.

“I am so pleased to make your acquaintance your highness. I’m called Carmina Arabella Bartolotti.” Carmina said ducking her head and bobbing in place once more.

“You’re Arabonian!” Irene exclaimed in great delight, and at Carmina’s agreement, the three women were off babbling away in rapid-fire Arabonian that John couldn’t even hope to make heads or tails of. He followed the nodding heads, and flashing hands, occasionally hearing his or Sherlock’s name, but that was the extent of his comprehension. Sherlock merely raised an eyebrow, and waited patiently through the onslaught. Eventually Carmina was shyly urging everyone to the table, and bringing out the first course, a salad and bread. John was amused that Carmina seemed to know more about serving and table manners than he had a few months ago. She produced a light spring wine that she poured around and then disappeared back into the kitchen.
“How are things at the palace?” John asked Irene, forking up a ripe cherry tomato.

“Things have been . . . difficult.” Irene said. “Prince Sherringford and Queen Norah were both quite distraught at learning of Lady Prunella’s treason. That plus Healer Winston being guilty has turned the palace upside down. King Mycroft has been retesting all the staff to insure their loyalty. Thankfully, he cleared Kate and myself early on.” Irene took a sip of wine. “It’s dreadful to wait under a cloud of suspicion.”

“What about the maid who was killed, did anyone get a full story about that?” John raised his eyebrows, taking a bite of bread.

“It was as I deduced.” Sherlock tossed a careless hand aside. “She overheard Prunella and Healer Winston plotting, and decided to blackmail them for money to keep her silence. She didn’t realize the full extent of what they were planning, or I daresay she would have simply left the palace, and not wasted time coercing money from cold-blooded killers.“

“You were wrong though when you thought it was Healer Winston who had killed Lizzie, the maid.” Irene pointed out. She turned to John. “It was actually Prunella who pricked her with a brooch dipped in poison.”

“A technicality.” Sherlock brushed it aside. “It was Winston who created the poison.”

Kate shuddered. “It was a bad business all the way around. The staff is in turmoil. Some have already left the palace, though King Mycroft is offering a bonus to those who restate their loyalty and stay on.”

“My family arrives in a week to visit. Hopefully the palace will have settled down by then. It will be a circus in itself having them in residence.” Irene sighed.

Carmina reappeared to serve the main course, a pasta in a delicious creamy sauce with ham and peas, that Irene and Kate went into near rapture over. Irene drew Carmina back into another happy, rapid exchange in Arabonian that ended only when Sherlock huffed out, “John and I do not look like a pair of puppies together, thank you very much!” proving to John that he was indeed the only person in the room ignorant enough to be excluded from the conversation.

As soon as Carmina retreated to the kitchen, Irene leaned in, and dropped her voice to scold Sherlock. “She’s adorable. When you said you had a housekeeper, I pictured some kindly, old grandmother type. You knew that’s what I was thinking, and you let me.”

“Irene. I can’t be in charge of your erroneous assumptions.” Sherlock quipped.

“To be honest, that does describe our landlady.” John added in. “She’s the one who owns both the bakery next door, and this building. It was Mrs. Hudson who suggested Carmina to us.” John shrugged.

“You’re not stealing her.” Sherlock fixed Irene with a narrowed-eyed stare. “Carmina belongs to us. I didn’t bring you here to hire my staff out from under me.”

“Well, belongs is a strong word, but I tend to agree. You can’t have her, Irene.” John forked up his last bite of the heavenly pasta dish. “Besides I’m a decorated hero. You can’t do anything that would cause me to waste away. It’s not like Sherlock knows how to cook anything.”

Irene put on a completely innocent expression that had Kate laughing into her napkin, and so the lunch continued with a delicious rum cake with nuts that Carmina admitted she had bought in a bakery near her house. Irene insisted on getting the name of the bakery from Carmina pronouncing it
the best cake she’d had so far in Brettona.

By the time coffee was served, Irene had pulled Carmina down on to the couch between her and Kate, and the three of them were chatting away like the oldest of friends who had been parted for weeks. John and Sherlock ended up taking the nearby armchairs with their coffee cups. When their names came back around in the conversation, Irene and Kate both turned round eyes their way.

“We didn’t just hire Carmina out of charity.” Sherlock snorted. “The fact that she was a single mother out of work holds no bearing on her ability to be an excellent housekeeper.” After another burble of conversation Sherlock admitted grudgingly “All right, yes, I did beat the living shit out of someone who was harassing Carmina.” He shrugged and took a sip of coffee. “It was the only way to ensure she was safe to continue traveling back and forth to her employment.”

The incomprehensible conversation continued until Carmina insisted she needed to go clean up, and excused herself from the sitting room. Thankfully the talk turned then to more mundane matters in a language he understood, but John didn’t miss the melting looks Irene continued to throw Sherlock for the rest of the visit.

Over the next few days, John had convinced Carmina to lead him in some basic language instruction so he could at least say and understand a few phrases in Arabonian. He had picked up some Gallatian during the war, and he was pleased that it helped with learning a new foreign tongue.

“Buongiorno, come stai?” John was able to spit out along with a few other key phrases without too much difficulty.

“Very good, Mr. John, you sound just like an Arabonian.” Carmina had smiled at him, but John was sure she was being very kind in her assessment.

John was going slowly mad stuck at the flat with only the fleetest of glimpses of Sherlock for company when finally, the man himself breezed in one evening, and plopped down on the sofa next to him.

“Hello, love.” John looked up from his medical text with a hopeful glance, marking his place with a finger. “What’s up?”

Sherlock ran a hand over his face and sighed. “These gatherings at the palace are going to be the death of me. UGH. We’ve only a few days before all of Irene’s family arrives and the opera begins in earnest.”

“I know it’s annoying, but I’m sure the wedding will be beautiful.” John offered, reaching out to pat his leg.

“John.” Sherlock turned the full strength of his blue-green gaze on him, scooping up John’s hand on his thigh to interlace their fingers. “You know I’d rather be marrying you.”

“I know. Our time will come.”

“How are you feeling?” Sherlock frowned slightly.

“I FEEL FINE. I’ve been telling you that for a week now. Should I dance a jig for you?”

Sherlock chuckled. “That won’t be necessary. It’s decided then. We leave tomorrow for Rosewood Manor. I can squeeze in the time before I’m needed at the palace again.”

“Really, I can finally see it?”
“Yes. Pack your bag. We’ll leave first thing in the morning tomorrow.”

“How far is the ride?” John asked.

“Only a few hours, but it’s a world away. I think you’ll like it.”

“I can’t wait.” John smiled and leaned in to kiss Sherlock’s lips. Sherlock returned a perfunctory peck, and then gently disengaged to leap back up from the couch.

“Hey, where are you off to now?” John’s complained, tilting his head backward to peer up at the ball of energy that was his love.

“I have a few things to attend to first. Don’t wait up if you’re tired, but I’ll return as soon as I can.” With a final kiss to John’s forehead, the madman was dashing back out in a whirl. John sighed as the door closed behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Has anyone else noticed that we spend an awful lot of time on meals in this fic? I’m sorry, but I think I’m a hobbit at heart. :)
John and Sherlock are happy to find some couple time to enjoy the sweetness that life has to offer.

“IT’s really wonderful this time of year when everything’s in bloom. I’m so glad you get to meet her at her best.” Sherlock looked up at the mansion with unabashed fondness. “Come on, I can’t wait to show you everything.”

They left the footmen to tend to the luggage. Oh, it was so easy to get used to that John thought, as Sherlock all but leapt from the carriage, and hurried John along to the front door.

“The servants will want to meet you. We have a skeleton staff that lives here year-round, but I had them bring in the extra summer help as well. Generally, I would have been out here earlier in the year, but of course . . . this summer’s been busy.”

The foyer was large, a front hallway with several doors leading to other rooms and corridors, and a beautiful curving staircase that swept up to the upper level. The wallpaper pattern of big fat roses, and vases of cut flowers covering the side tables seemed to extend the garden right into the house. The fragrance of the bouquets, mixing with the homier scents of lemon polish, and old wood washed over John like a welcome. They turned to the line of servants that did indeed wait to meet them. Sherlock greeted the older couple in the lead heartily, introducing them as the housekeeper, Mrs. Brown and her husband the groundskeeper, of course, Mr. Brown. After welcoming John warmly, Mrs. Brown introduced the remaining staff, then ushered them into a side parlour where biscuits, fresh fruit, and tea awaited them. John was amazed at the variety in the bowl of fruit salad. There seemed to be every type of fruit he knew and some he didn’t. He moaned over how good it was.

“Delicious, isn’t it? All of the fruit comes from the garden out back.” Sherlock told at him. “When you’re done, I can give you a tour of the place.”
John swallowed the last of his tea. “If you’re done, I’m ready. I must admit, I’ve been dying to see Rosewood Manor for ages.”

“Come on then.” Sherlock urged.

Rosewood Manor wasn’t anywhere near as large as the palace, but it had the same rambly quality to it, and John struggled to remember what hallway led where. Sherlock took him through several lovely downstairs entertaining rooms, each in a different themed color, a library with wide windows to let in the light, a quick peek at the kitchens, and then to a side staircase that led them to the upper floors. Sherlock skipped the servants’ quarters on the top floor, but concentrated on the mid level to continue the tour. They roamed through several bedrooms ranging from the huge to the less fancy, a smaller family parlour, and a nursery. Sherlock breezed them through the bedroom he said was his. John had time to take in the green-striped wallpaper and a wonderful four-poster bed with canopy before Sherlock was throwing open the doors to the verandah and ushering him onto it. John was amazed that the large tree growing against house, close enough to touch, sported no less than three different kinds of fruit hanging from its branches.

“How is this possible?” John asked marveling at mangoes, lemons, and apples all growing together on the same plant.

Sherlock chuckled. “This house has been in the Holmes family for ages. Each generation of mages has added their own brand of magic to the place, and I fear the cumulative effect has had some interesting results. My Gran was a plant mage. We have her to thank for the multi-fruit trees.”

“Just amazing.” John smiled. “Too bad the tree can’t grow strawberries too.” He mused. He turned to look out over the sculpted gardens to a small lake farther back. “This is just divine.” He breathed in the sweet country air that always seemed so much fresher than what they got back in Delphium.

“I’ve saved the best for last.” Sherlock grinned at him.

“There’s more?” John asked raising his eyebrows. Without a word, Sherlock led him down the corridor to another door down the way.

“This is the playroom.” Sherlock said, and turned the knob to let them in. Several long windows spilled light over a room bare of furniture, but covered in what looked like hundreds of soft brightly-colored balls. Sherlock grinned ear to ear as they stepped onto a spongy base that felt more like a trampoline than a solid floor. John quickly found that they could cause waves in the mound of balls by jumping up and down. Of course a ball-throwing war started up that led to a chase with John trying to stuff balls down Sherlock’s collar before they collapsed in a heap together in the center of the room.

“You madman, why do you have a room like this in a country manor?” John wheezed, trying to catch his breath.

“Oh, it changes often.” Sherlock told him breezily. “The house transforms the room into whatever it cares to on a whim.”

“What?” John asked. “The house changes the room?”

“It does.” Sherlock agreed. “Once when I was a child, it covered the walls in butterscotch candy for a whole week. My grandmother kept sealing the door shut, but I kept finding ways to open it. I made myself sick on butterscotch. To this day, I can’t stand the stuff anymore. Gran always said the house indulged me too much.”
“So the house can like people?” John asked, creasing his forehead.

“Yes, and dislike them too.” Sherlock smiled. “I had an aunt who once said the house was too frivolous, and should be kept under better control. Her bedroom walls turned solid black, and she found so many ants and beetles in her things, that she cut her visit short, and never came back.”

“Wow, I hope the house likes me.” John said.

“John, the house just made a trampoline room filled with balls to greet you. I’m fairly sure she’s pleased to meet her new owner.”

“Galloping Gods, Sherlock, you can’t just give me Rosewood Manor.” John exclaimed as the realization that he was indeed the owner of this magical place crashed over him. “It’s not a house, it’s a member of your family.” John pushed himself to sitting, and ran his hand back through his hair. “I’ll just have to tell Mycroft I can’t accept it.”

“Oh damn Mycroft for gifting it to you. I was already planning on giving you Rosewood Manor as a wedding gift. He beat me to it.” Sherlock sniffed.

“But, Sherlock the house is sentient, or as good as. How could you just give it to me like this?”

“John, you are my husband-to-be, the center of my heart. What else could I possibly give you that matches what you are to me? Besides, when you pass, the house will just go to our children.” Sherlock rolled over to his knees to begin the tricky process of standing.

Sherlock was so nonchalant. So sure in his thoughts that a shiver passed over John. He knew how he felt about Sherlock, but this, this was something else. It suddenly struck John, that yes, they were becoming a family. With his in-laws, and the messy connections they were still working out with Irene and Kate, and the children that would surely come with Irene, John was inheriting a tribe in his marriage to Sherlock. He belonged somewhere now, and it was for keeps.

“Come here, you.” John pulled a surprised Sherlock back down to tumble into the balls, and attacked his mouth with a ravaging kiss. Sherlock wound his arms around John and returned the kiss with just as much fervor. John was somewhat disappointed though when Sherlock broke off, and rolled himself up to standing. John had hoped to put the ball room to greater use.

“Let’s go see what cook has on for luncheon. I’m starving.” Sherlock reached an elegant hand down to help John up.

After a lunch of sliced meats, and roasted vegetables in the smaller dining room, Sherlock took John on a tour of the grounds, through the gardens, and down to a pretty gazebo by the lake. The open-sided structure filled with a lovely lilting tune as soon as they stepped inside it. “What is that?” John asked with wide eyes looking around for the source of the music.

“Something new.” Sherlock observed with a wry smile. The manor is serenading you.

“What is that?” John asked plucking a blossom from the flowering bush that twined around one side of the gazebo. “I mean to help orchestrate the Fever Plague even. I can hardly imagine.”
“The who’s, how’s, where’s and when’s can be determined by facts alone, but the why’s must always be left to speculation. Power, money, love, lust, and ideals are what spur most people on. Who knows what combination of the common motivators bubbled through Prunella’s madness to lead her to her crimes.”

“It’s sad.” John said reaching over to tuck the blossom into Sherlock’s hair just over his ear.

Sherlock smiled at John’s whimsy, and caught his hand to press a kiss to his wrist. “It is at that.”

“Will Sherringford be free to marry again?” John asked him.

“He will, after a six-month mourning period.” Sherlock answered. “Whether or not he marries another political appointee, or a mate of his choosing will be up to Mycroft, though I suspect that his attitudes on the subject will have changed recently.”

The Rosewood property extended into the woods behind the lake, and Sherlock took John on a short hike into the trees. He pointing out places he had built forts over the years, and led John to a little clearing where a carpet of wildflowers grew when they happened upon two deer. They held perfectly motionless as they watched the animals, nearly transfixed. The deer merely flicked their ears at them once, and returned to their grazing before finally bounding back into the brush.

“That was lovely.” John breathed.

“Yes. My Gran didn’t agree with hunting, and I’m afraid we’ve quite a large population of deer on our hands now. I may need to allow a local hunt sometime soon.”

“Must you?” John asked thinking on how beautiful the sight of the near-tame deer had been.

“John, a balance must be maintained to keep things from ruin. You know this. Too high of a deer population will overgraze the woods, and then most of them will starve to death.”

“You’re right, of course.” John sighed. “You know, you play the jolly fool so well around court, but you’d make an excellent king.”

“Oh, perish the thought.” Sherlock rolled his eyes dramatically. “The hours of the job alone would kill me. No, I prefer to contribute to the world in my own unique way. Besides, I don’t suffer fools gladly, and ruling requires constant diplomacy.”

“That's true.” John grinned at him, as they turned to make their way back to the manor house. "Scratch that, you'd make a terrible king. Ah well, I guess we'll have to continue keeping your brothers and their children alive."

"Believe me, it remains a constant goal of mine." Sherlock quirked up one side of his mouth as he sighed.

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Supper was several courses served out on the covered back verandah to take advantage of the lovely soft summer evening. The servants seemed very pleased to have them there to fete, and the house continued to welcome John keeping all the flying insects away from their table the entire meal.

Sherlock found an older violin he kept at the manor, and played John a full concert of requests and impromptu songs until bed time. John wasn’t overly surprised when a magical counterpoint tune appeared to interweave with Sherlock’s beautiful music.
“This house is something else.” John smiled. “I can see why you love this place.”

“It is very special to me.” Sherlock agreed. “I can almost feel my Gran’s presence here, like she’s still watching over me. In some ways, I suppose she is.”

John was looking forward to bedding down together with no interruptions, and nowhere for Sherlock to dash off to, but when he emerged from the washroom, Sherlock was passed out snoring on the four-poster bed. John sighed and slid under the covers. He kissed Sherlock’s forehead before settling down next to him. Beautiful madman, John thought drifting off to sleep himself.

It was still dark when something woke John. His hand reached out to the bed beside him, but his hand met only cool sheets. Sherlock had left awhile ago. A sound on the verandah pulled John out the doors to find his love perched on one of the chaise lounges, his knees drawn up under chin. He was trying to muffle his sobs, but his back shook with crying. John lost no time in sinking down next to him, and pulling Sherlock to his shoulder. Sherlock dropped his legs to bury his face against John.

“Shhhh. It’s all right. Everything is fine, love.” John rubbed soothing circles over Sherlock’s back as the man caught his breath. “Bad dream?”

Sherlock nodded against him.

“Want to talk about it? I used to have some bad dreams of my own.” John told him. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“But I am ashamed.” Sherlock said so low.

“Of what?” John asked surprised.

“I should have seen the attack of that second fire mage coming.” Sherlock growled. “I shouldn’t have let you get hurt like that.” He turned eyes gone luminous in the moonlight to John’s face. “I keep dreaming that you die and I can’t save you. So many ways I see you killed, consumed in fire, falling from a cliff, drowning in a lake. Tonight it was rather creative.” He said with a strangled laugh. “A pack of elephants ran you over whilst I ran endlessly in place trying to get to you. Every night, I’m just a minute too late to save you.”

“Oh, love.” John drew a shuddered breath. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were healing. I didn’t need to be burden whilst you were getting better . . . from an attack I should have prevented.”

“All right, enough of that William Sherlock Scott Holmes. You are not a God as much as you may think so. You cannot predict the future, and you cannot be everywhere at once. HOWEVER, you were there when I needed you, and you did save me.” John moved a hand to catch under Sherlock’s chin to keep their eyes locked. “You are not my keeper, and I am not yours. I’m a grown man and I can make my own choices about what I do. We are however each other’s partners, and we have each other’s backs. Let me know next time you’re hurting. I love you. Nightmares and all.” At Sherlock’s nod, John pulled him close again, and they grabbed each other as tightly as they could. “Let me send you a be-well.” John said easing back. “It can help with the mind as well as the body. You’ve had a shock, and I don’t think you’ve fully recovered from it yet.”
“All right.” Sherlock extended his hands, but John reached up to place his palms on either side of Sherlock’s head. John hummed quietly at the back of his throat and watched the small glow that bathed Sherlock’s beautiful angular face in its light. John closed his eyes and focused on drawing up a ball of energy, a sending of warmth, and safety, and rightness that he gently passed over. He could feel the tension draining out of Sherlock’s body as it settled in. Sherlock opened his eyes as the glow faded, and caught John’s hands in his.

“Love, thank you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“Just let me know next time you feel like this. Healer, soldier, priest? I might be able to help?” John teased.

“You are amazing.” Sherlock breathed lifting a hand to cup John’s cheek.

“That’s good to hear.” John said huffing a small laugh. “I was thinking you were done with me. You’ve barely touched me the last fortnight.”

“I’m sorry. I was so afraid of hurting you, mucking up your healing.” Sherlock admitted.

“I know. I’m fine now though. More than fine in fact.” John voice roughened as he took Sherlock’s hand, and pressed it to his rising erection.

Sherlock groaned and launched himself against John, crushing their lips together. They consumed each other, drinking at each other’s lips, grabbing wherever their hands could reach. Finally John stood and drew Sherlock upright with him. “Bed, now.” He commanded.

“Yes, sir.” Sherlock grinned, and the two of them stripped on the way to the beckoning sheets.

Just the feeling of skin on skin after days of separation was a jolt that stunned them both. They simply lay pressed together, breathing each other in before they had the strength to move. It was like getting feeling back in a limb that had fallen asleep. Touching, tasting, nipping, stroking, they joined like a force of nature, like a summer storm that appears in a sudden clap of thunder to soak the fields. Too far gone, and too greedy to do anything coordinated, they merely rutted against each other to completion. John kissed at Sherlock’s face, over his eyelids, and cheeks, and luscious lips chanting “love, my love” until they both finally slipped back to sleep, sated and whole.

The next morning, the wallpaper in the bedroom had mysteriously turned into a pattern of interlocking hearts. In fact most of the walls in the house had turned rather alarming shades of red, purple, or pink. John was embarrassed at the glances the servants kept throwing their way, but they were all such fond looks that he had trouble getting too angry.

“How do you have any privacy in a house like this?” John grumbled to Sherlock over breakfast.

“I don’t know. I never brought a lover here before. Does it really bother you? We could ask the house to stop. She might listen.”

“No, it’s all right.” John said after a moment’s thought. “I’m not ashamed of us, and I’m glad Rosewood Manor approves. I am a damned lucky sod to have you, and I’m proud of it.”

That evening, they discovered a vine of plump, ripe strawberries growing up over the branches of the tree in reach of the bedroom verandah.
“I wonder if you could help me practice.” John mused. The two of them lay sprawled across a picnic cloth, the remains of their meal around them. Sherlock had taken John on a hike through the woods to a particularly lovely spot by a stream where they had enjoyed their packed lunch. Warm sunlight dappled down on them through the green leaves, making it feel like they were underwater, and John struggled against the general lassitude to focus on the matter at hand. “Sherlock, are you listening?”

“Hmmmm?” Sherlock drawled, but didn’t bother opening his eyes.

“You speak Arabonian, don’t you?” John asked.

“I do.” Sherlock admitted.

“Fluently?” John asked.

“Well enough.” Sherlock said opening one eye to peer back at him. “I speak four languages with some authority, and I can muddle by in five more. Why? What do you want to practice?”

“I’d like to be able to at least greet Irene’s family when they arrive.” John insisted pushing himself to sitting.

“All right.” Sherlock agreed, shifting to one side, and propping his head up over a bent elbow.

“Buongiorno. Come sta?” (Hello, how are you.) John struggled to remember the greeting phrases Carmina had fed him.

Sherlock rolled up to sitting in one fluid movement. “Buongiorno. Sto bene, vi ringrazio per avermelo chiesto, e come stai?” Sherlock’s deep voice was always a gorgeous thing to hear, but pouring over the melodic vowels of Arabonian had turned it into liquid smoke.

John gaped in astonishment. He licked his lower lip, and searched around for a response. He was pretty sure Sherlock had just thanked him, and returned the question. Why did a simple greeting sound like pure sex rumbling out of this man? “ Buono. Sono molto lieto di incontrarmi con voi.” (Good. I am very pleased to meet you.) John managed, his eyes riveted to Sherlock’s beautiful mouth, as he waited eagerly for a reply. Sherlock didn’t disappoint him.

“Grazie. Sono profondamente onorato di conoscerti.” A smile tugged at the corners of Sherlock’s luscious lips as he rolled out the sonorous phrase. (Thank you. I am very honored to meet you.)

A shiver ran down John’s spine. He closed his eyes and swallowed. This was deeply unfair. John truly wanted to practice this language, and Sherlock was unraveling him. When John opened his eyes, Sherlock had prowled closer. He hovered mere inches away, and the smile on his lips had transferred into a devilish gleam now dancing in his eyes. It couldn’t have escaped Sherlock’s attention that his words were sliding right from John’s ears down to his cock.

“Have you learned the names of the parts of the body?” Sherlock rumbled, one eyebrow quirked high.

“Noooo,” John breathed out. “I don’t believe we’d got to that yet.”

“Allow me to dispel your ignorance on the subject.” Sherlock lifted one of John’s hands and softly kissed his fingers.

“Dita.” He whispered over the digits.
“Dita.” John choked out.

Slowly, he pushed the sleeve of John’s shirt back to expose his forearm.

“Braccio.” Sherlock murmured as he kissed his way softly up to John’s inner elbow.

“Braccio.” John was transfixed watching the progress of Sherlock’s beautiful bowed lips up his arm.

Sherlock moved even closer, opening John’s shirt, to slowly strip it from him. “Collo, al torace, capezzolo” Sherlock intoned as he laid soft kisses down John’s neck on a trail across his chest to drag his tongue over John’s nipple. John moaned, closing his eyes again. All pretense at learning a new language had completely flown from his mind.

“Ti amo con tutta l’anima.” (I love you with all my soul.) Sherlock murmured as he kissed down John’s belly, and slowly unfastened his trousers. “Non posso vivere senza vo.” (I can’t live without you.) Sherlock pulled off his shoes, and bottoms, and kissed his way back over John’s feet, up his legs until he could nuzzle at the join of his thighs and groin.

“Il tuo pene è la cosa più bella che abbia mai visto.” He ghosted his lips over John’s hard cock, and ran a warm tongue over the head. John shivered in response as the words flowed like honey over his ears. Sherlock slid higher, kissing his way back up, until he lay fully over John.

“Love, clothes off, please.” John murmured running his hands up and down Sherlock’s still-garbed form. He manage to pull his lover’s shirt free, and work a hand under to touch delicious skin, before Sherlock took pity.

“Naturalmente. Per te, qualsiasi cosa.” Sherlock rumbled as he rolled back onto his heels to made short work of shucking his own clothes. When he slid back onto John, finally nothing between them, the blessed feeling of warm skin on skin flooded their senses. Sherlock’s roused first to nibble over John’s jaw, kissing his way up to his waiting mouth.

“Le tue labbra sono dolci come il miele.” He whispered before diving in to capture John in a hot, messy kiss, lips and tongues diving and devouring. John sucked at Sherlock’s plump lower lip, and the man writhed over him.

“Do we have any . . .” John managed to ask before Sherlock was shifting over to rummage through a bag, emerging victorious with a now very-familiar jar of cream. “Oh, you glorious man.” John smiled.

“I always intended to have you for dessert.” Sherlock informed him. “Tu sei il mio dolce preferito.” He added with a wicked smile. John’s cock actually managed to swell a bit further at that. Sherlock could have been reciting maths sums for all he knew, but it all sounded like the most naughty come on.

“John, open me, I want to ride your fine cock.” Sherlock breathed.

“Gladly, love.” John took a scoop of cream and worked a finger into Sherlock’s sweet entrance, stretching him with two more fingers before laying back, and allowing Sherlock to slick John’s cock, and careful sink down onto him.

The both cried out at the joy of it when Sherlock’s arse met his groin, and he sat fully sheathed over him. Sherlock opened eyes with pupils blown wide, and leaned forward to brace his hands on either side of John, locking gazes in a stare almost more intimate than their joined bodies. John bent his legs and brought his knees up, tilting his hips forward. A ragged groan tore itself from the back of Sherlock’s throat, as his beautiful green eyes slid shut. When Sherlock rocked forward, John nearly
choked. He reached up to grab Sherlock’s hips, hanging on to these fixed points as anchors as his love surged over him. Random phrases, growing simpler by the moment, tumbled from Sherlock’s lips as they rode the waves of passion together.

“Solo tu sei nel mio cuore . . .”

“per sempre tua . . .”

“Bello”

“Sì, sì, sì . . .”

John was already at a wordless moan as he met his love with each crash. Sherlock’s rock-hard cock rubbed over him, caught between their bodies in a perfect friction as they moved. Sherlock came first, clenching down on him, trembling as he splashed a spurt of warmth over John’s belly. John let go at the feeling of his lover dissolving, crying out as he too exploded in a tidal wave of bliss. They collapsed together afterwards, waiting for pulses to settle. Sherlock buried his face against John’s warm neck, and John threaded fingers into the damp curls at Sherlock’s nape.

“Buono.” John sighed.

“Buono.” Sherlock agreed.

John opened his eyes to a dizzying wash of color swirling over them. At first he had no idea what it was, a flick of some God’s paintbrush over the sky perhaps. Gradually it separated into a kaleidoscope of many-colored butterflies flitting overhead, filling the clearing around them.

At John’s gasp, Sherlock lifted his head and opened his eyes to the wondrous sight. “Oh, now the manor is just showing off.” He grumbled, but the wide smile on his face softened his words.

John reached over to slap at his flank, “Hush, you – this is lovely.” and tightened his arms around him. Sherlock settled down with a sigh, and they watched the dance of the creatures above them until they swirled back into the trees.

Chapter End Notes

Google translate assures me this is what these phrases in Italian mean in English. Since Arabonian is very similar to Italian in our world, we will assume these translations are correct. (Sherlock manages to say quite alot when he thinks John won’t understand him, hmmm?)

= Buongiorno. Sto bene, vi ringrazio per avermelo chiesto, e come stai? - Good Morning. I'm fine, thank you for asking, and how are you?

= Collo, al torace, capezzolo - neck, chest, nipple

= Il tuo pene è la cosa più bella che abbia mai visto. - Your penis is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

= Naturalmente. Per te, qualsiasi cosa. - Of course. For you, anything.
Le tue labbra sono dolci come il miele. - Your lips are sweet as honey.

Tu sei il mio dolce preferito. - You are my favorite dessert.

Solo tu sei nel mio cuore - Only you in my heart

per sempre tua - I'm forever yours

Bello - beautiful

Sì, sì, sì - yes, yes, yes

Buono - good

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Chapter Summary

Things at the palace grow most crazy as the royal wedding date approaches.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter comes from a Japanese proverb:
"We're fools whether we dance or not, so we might as well dance."

It sounds like excellent life advice to me!

It was with great reluctance that they bid farewell to Rosewood Manor after only four wonderful days spent there. Sherlock was needed back at the palace, and they couldn’t put off his duties any longer. They bid all the servants farewell with promises to return before too much more of the summer had passed.

John was shocked to find that the occupancy and madness of the palace had doubled since he was last there. Irene’s father, King Marco of Arabonia, her two sisters, Princess Sofia, and Princess Nicole, as well as a sizable entourage of servants and extended family had descended upon them. The two girls were still in their teens, and the giggliest set of creatures he had ever laid eyes on. John found that his very presence was all that was needed to set them off into barely-suppressed fits of laughter. When John finally cornered Irene about it, she sheepishly admitted that since gay men were not publicly acknowledged in Arabonia, they were finding his and Sherlock’s relationship . . . titillating.

“So glad to be amusing for others.” John sighed.

“They are young. This is all new for them, and very overwhelming. Give them time. They’ll get better.” Irene promised.

“It’s all right.” John told her, though privately, he could admit that the smirky girls, and the hard glares from their father were wearing on him.

Sherlock was likewise flagging at being pleasant to all concerned for days at a time. He did however agree to play his violin for the royal court assembled one evening. When Sherlock set bow to strings, and the near unearthly music wrapped around them, jaws dropped. The Arabonians had nothing but praise for him. As it brought smiles to the long faces of Queen Norah and Prince Sherringford, in his mourning blacks, John was glad he’d agreed to perform. Sherlock slipped John a sly wink when no one else was watching, and he knew his love was really playing just for him despite the crowd around them.
As another treat, Queen Norah had the nursemaid bring Prince Fergus down for a short visit. Irene’s sisters were enchanted with him, cooing over the fat-cheeked little boy. Norah only let Princess Irene have the privilege of holding him though before the servants swept him away. "Too many people near Fergus can upset him." Norah explained. John thought she was just being overly-cautious about colds again, but new mothers had the right he supposed.

"You look good with a baby." John told Irene later over tea as they sat aside from the rest on a stuffed settee half-obscured by a large ficus.

"I was old enough to help raise my sisters when they came." Irene quirked a small smile back at him. "I dare say, I've had enough practice."

"Are you looking forward to having your own children?" John asked her.

"I am actually." Irene admitted. "Oh, I'd like to wait a year or two if I could, but losing my own mother made me want to have children, and do it better. God willing, I will be there for them as my mother wasn't for me. I want a chance to make things right, if that makes any sense."

"It makes perfect sense." John smiled at her, and reached over to squeeze her arm. "If you want to wait to have children though, Sherlock would be fine with whatever time you chose. Just talk to him."

Irene shook her head slightly looking down into her cup. "I keep forgetting how different things are in my new home. You are right though, we can wait, can't we?" She peered back up at him.

"Absolutely." John agreed. "All the time in the world. First we just have to get done with this wedding."

"This damned wedding." Irene sighed, and rolled her eyes. "If people put as much energy into world affairs as this royal wedding, I think we would have war and famine solved by next week."

John's port in the storm of all the wedding madness was having Harry, Evie, and Robert to stay. They arrived two days before the royal wedding, and it gave John something concrete to do as Sherlock was swept away with yet more wedding nonsense. John showed his family around the palace, taking them to the Grotto, and being a native guide to all things crazy and royal. Evie and Harry had enjoyed meeting Irene, and later Kate, though the rush of formal events had kept them from spending any personal time together. John suspected that the two couples would get on like a house on fire when they finally had some down time.

Finally after weeks of formal meals, clothes fittings, and all the pomp and endless details of preparation, John was almost surprised when the eve of Sherlock and Irene’s wedding actually arrived. Sherlock surprised him more by insisting they spend it at their flat on Baker Street.

“ Aren’t you supposed to be at the palace for a prayer session at dawn before the ceremony?” John protested.

“ Even so, I want to spend our last night alone together at our flat. We can have a carriage pick us up in the early hours. We have to sleep somewhere, and I want to spend my last bachelor night at home. Please, John. ”

Sherlock seemed so fervent about it that John agreed instantly. “ All right, love. Of course. ”

They packed bags with their fancy gear, and took a carriage back to Baker Street that evening. Irene
had already retired early to spend the night with her two sisters in seclusion — some old custom of theirs, and John had given her a kiss on the cheek at lunch. She looked so pale and nervous that John had squeezed her fingers. “It will be fine. I’ll see you on the other side, yeah?”

“Thank you, John.” She had smiled wanly, and been swept off with the giggly duo, and some aunties for a night of nail painting and hair curling, and Gods only knew what else.

John felt like he had only just drifted off in their own bed when an insistent shaking roused him from sleep. “Ack, geroff. Wha’ izzit?” John slurred, cracking one eye open to bat Sherlock’s offending hand away.

“John, I can’t sleep.” Sherlock told him, his great blue eyes peering down at him.

“Just close your eyes, and think of sheep.” John said, already turning over, and starting to doze again.

“No, get up. I want to go meditate at the Temple of the Small Gods, and I need you to come with me.” Sherlock insisted.

“Can’t you go alone?” John groaned. “Gods, we already have to be up at arse o’clock in the morning to go back to the palace.”


“Can’t I counsel you here?” John asked as a last-ditch attempt to remain with his lovely pillow.

“John. Meditation room. We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

“Oh, all right, you bloody berk. I’m getting up.” John ran his hands through his hair, and pulled himself up for a trip to the loo before haring off on Sherlock’s latest mad request.

Oddly enough, Sherlock had a cup of fresh tea in his hand for John when he emerged from the water closet, and he drank it gratefully down. “What time is it any way?” he asked rubbing grit from his eyes.


“I’d like to be communing with my bed, my good sir.” John sighed, “But if we must, then let’s get going.”

Sherlock already had a light-weight cloak thrown over his clothes, and he offered one to John. Since he was dressed in a tattered pair of old leggings and an undershirt, John accepted it, shrugging it on with a grunt of thanks. He followed Sherlock out into the dark of the night to trek over to the temple. Once the cool of the air reached him, and cleared his head a bit, John smiled. He had always enjoyed the mystery and drama of the night time. He feared his latest tame living had dulled his edges somewhat.
“It’s a fine night.” He said stepping lively to keep up with Sherlock’s long legs.

“John, thank you for coming.” Sherlock turned his shadowed face back to him. “There’s no one else I would rather spend this night with.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, love. I’m sorry I was such a grump to wake.” John apologized.

“I appreciate it more than you know.” Sherlock admitted, and reached over to catch up his hand.

John was actually pleased to see the temple again after dark, and a wash of fond nostalgia hit him as they pushed through the doors to reach the meditation room. Brother Mykal was there on duty along with a few new priests he hadn’t met before. One of them slipped down the hallway as soon as they entered, but Brother Mykal came forward to greet them.

“Brother John, Prince . . . uh, Sherlock. How nice to see you two. Come for a bit of quiet before the big day?” Brother Mykal smiled at them both.

“Yeh, a little peace actually sounds good right now.” John admitted. “It’s been a crazy couple of weeks.”

“I can imagine.” Mykal nodded sympathetically. “Peace is good to clear the mind, but unfortunately, you’re not getting any tonight!” With a grand flourish, Mykal waved his arm, and people streamed in from the hallway behind him.

It was like watching his life flash before his eyes John thought looking around at the sea of beloved faces filling the prayer room. He saw Mrs. Hudson and most of her family, Brother Gregson, and all the brothers of the temple, as well as people he had seen just a few hours ago at the palace, Kate, his sister, Evie and Robert, and that nice woman from the archives, Molly Hooper. Healer Lupita Markson was there, as well as a grinning Carmina with an earnest-looking man dressed in what was obviously his best shirt, and surprisingly enough Anthea and Loralee who was jumping up and down in excitement. They all gathered around him smiling like loons, patting him on the back and cheering.

John was literally at a loss for words. He gaped like a fish pulled up from the water until his eyes landed on Sherlock standing still like the peaceful eye of a hurricane.

“What? . . . uh, what?” He couldn’t form a whole sentence, but of course Sherlock knew what he was asking.

“Welcome to our wedding, my love.” Sherlock smiled as wide as the sky.

“How . . . but you promised Mycroft . . .” John still couldn’t get a whole thought together.

“I promised my brother and the Council of Lords that I wouldn’t marry you BEFORE the day of my wedding with Irene. I said nothing about not marrying you on the day of. It’s past midnight. So, will you have me today, Brother John Hamish Watson?”

It took but a couple of steps before John had his arms around Sherlock, and his face pressed against his shoulder. The noise around them settled into a background blur. People were moving away to set up the room. Several priests carried in long garlands of greenery and flowers that everyone was helping to hang around the walls.

“Ah, you idiot. You couldn’t have warned me a little?” John sniffled into his cloak.

“I’m sorry, John. Did I do it wrong? I thought dramatic romantic gestures were good.” Sherlock had
pulled back to peer worriedly down at John’s face.

“Nope. No, you did it right.” John took a deep breath. “I’m just trying to get my brain in gear.”

“Here, why don’t you go aside with Harry for a few minutes? She has your clothes to change into.” Sherlock pointed him to Harry who waited to the side with a bundle in her arms. With a parting lingering look for Sherlock, John allowed Harry to lead him to a back guest room. Why wasn’t he more surprised that it was the same spot where he’d first treated Sherlock? Harry unfolded a beautiful suit of blue with gold trim and hung it from a peg on the wall. John sank to the bed and rubbed his hands over his face.

“Johnny, are you all right?” Harry laid a hand to his shoulder. “I told Sherlock if we gave you a heart attack, I was coming after him myself.”

“No, I’m fine, just trying to get my sea legs.” John looked up, suddenly really focusing on her.

“Harry, you old dog. How did you keep this a secret?” John stood so he could punch her in the bicep.

“Are you kidding?” Harry grinned rubbing her arm. “Himself would have skinned us alive if we’d spilled the beans.” Harry nodded back to the prayer room where Sherlock was most likely terrorizing everyone trying to set up.

“Gods, Harry.” John pulled her into a tight hug.

“I know Johnny, my boy.” Harry squeezed back. “Just look at the two of us. We’ve done all right for ourselves, I think.” She said as they stepped back.

“I’d say so.” John agreed.

“Hey, I have something for you.” Harry said. “I left it on the gifts table. It’s one of mum’s quilts. I wanted you to have it now that you’ve got a permanent place and all. Don’t open it until later though. I’d probably cry seeing you with it.”

“All right.” John nodded.

“Now get dressed. We’ve got a wedding to attend.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The priests arranged benches for the guests facing the main statues where Brother Gregson stood to lead the ceremony, looking very dashing in his formal robes. Most of the service was a blur for John. Sherlock looked insanely gorgeous in a dark grey suit with silver trim, and the two of them simply stared at each other, smiling like idiots until they had to actually say something.

John perked up when Brother Gregson rolled out “William Sherlock Scott Holmes Carrington, do you take this man to be your lawfully-wedded spouse?”

“I do.” Sherlock said, the most lovely light dancing in his aquamarine eyes.

“John Hamish Watson, do you take this man to be your lawfully-wedded spouse?”
“I do.” John said, having to push past the sudden knot in his throat to answer.

They exchanged rings of course. Anthea gave Loralee a push to skip up to them with the box holding their wedding bands. Sherlock patted her head as he took it, and shoed her back to her mother. A wave of warmth hit John at seeing the rings - the original gold and sapphire one Sherlock had first given him, resized to fit, and new similar ring for Sherlock to wear. After the bands were slipped onto their fingers, Brother Gregson opened his mouth to launch into the next step, but Sherlock motioned him to pause, and nodded to Harry. She stepped forward and handed him a gold Gallanus pendant, a new one to replace the necklace that John had lost in the attack. Sherlock turned to him with a soft smile.

“John, I wish to give you this as a token of my esteem, in admiration for all that you are, and all that you can be. I pledge to stand beside you through both prosperity and peril. I love you.”

When John’s face creased up in concern, Sherlock shushed him, and nodded at Evie. She stepped forward to hand John an almost-matching silver pendant stamped with the all-seeing eye of Memir the wise. John had secretly gotten it as a gift for Sherlock, and hidden in their rooms at the palace.

“How did you know I had that for you?” John sputtered.

“John, do you really have to ask questions like that anymore?” Sherlock asked as everyone around them chuckled.

“No, I suppose I don’t.” John admitted. He accepted the pendant from Evie with a small smile.

“Sherlock, I also wish to give you this as a token of my love for you. I pledge to stand by you always. You are my sun, and my moon, my compass, and the earth beneath my feet.”

They took turns latching the necklaces around each other. John almost dropped his as he reached up to fasten the catch around Sherlock’s neck. Sherlock caught the pendant before it fell, and slouched down a bit so John could better latch the chain securely closed. John squeezed the back of Sherlock’s neck when he was done.

When Brother Gregson pronounced them bound as legal husbands, John grabbed Sherlock by the lapels, and pulled him into such a searing kiss that the whole room applauded.

Molly Hooper stepped forward as a royal scribe with all the official paperwork for them to sign.

She winked at John as she handed him the pen, and whispered to him. “I’m so happy for the both of you.”

“Thank you, Molly. I’m pretty chuffed myself.” John smiled. He could see both of them remembering that day at the archives when Sherlock and Prince William had become one for him with terrible results. “It turned out all right in the end, didn’t it?”

“I like to think most things do.” Molly smiled back.

Once both their signatures were penned with a flourish, the party began in earnest. Sherlock had obviously hired the band that set up in the corner, and they launched into the first of many rollicking tunes on the violin, guitar, and hammered dulcimer. The priests moved the benches to the side of the room, and brought out tables that were soon groaning with food and drink. Carmina had obviously supplied her wonderful Wedding Soup, and John made sure to get a bowl. After all the formal meals that John had endured lately, it was balm to his soul to see everyone drinking ale from earthenware cups, and eating fish and chips, and meatballs with their fingers.

Mrs. Hudson revealed a gorgeous cake covered in sugared violets that she had made especially for
them, and cut it to serve around. “Oh John, anything for my boys.” She waved at John when he thanked her.

"Congratulations." Brother Gregson told them when he got them alone, grabbing John's hand, and then Sherlock's to pump up and down several times. "I'm so glad to see the two of you finally together."

"You knew." John looked between the temple head and Sherlock as stray thoughts suddenly collided together. "You knew all along that Sherlock was Prince William, didn't you, Brother?" John glanced at Sherlock for confirmation, but he merely raised an eyebrow at them.

"I suspected." Brother Gregson admitted with a chuckle. "I didn't know for sure until he came in a few weeks ago to set up the wedding, and donated money for a new wing to the temple. Thank you again for that by the way." Brother Gregson smiled, and clapped Sherlock on the arm. "The new school for the street kids will be such a boon to the neighborhood."

"It will cut down on the pick-pockets in the area." Sherlock harrumphed, but a tell-tale blush on his cheekbones belied his nonchalance.

"You did that?" John asked. "Well, that . . . that was grand of you, love." For the second time in the evening, John was near speechless.

"It seems that I owe much to both this temple, and the luck of the small Gods in my recent good fortune." Sherlock smiled shyly. "It only seemed right to return the favour."

John felt like he was full to bursting as he grabbed Sherlock in a tight hug. Brother Gregson wished them both luck, and made to move away. John surprised them both when he turned and stopped him, catching the older man in a heartfelt embrace. "Thank you Brother Gregson, thank you for everything."

"You're welcome, son." Brother Gregson said, patting his back. "We might be losing a priest from the temple, but the world is gaining John Watson-Holmes. It seems like a fair trade."

Several late-night guests of the temple drifted in, and John was pleased to see he recognized a few of them. They were all absorbed into the party with a goodwill, and John just thought it added to the perfectness of their weird midnight feast. One older man, who looked quite depressed when he wandered in was soon eating cake and tapping his toes to the music. John knew a party didn’t solve all of life’s problems, but he was glad that for a moment, they could all share this wonderful, mad time together.

Sherlock darted over to speak to the musicians, and then called everyone’s attention to announce that he had composed a song as a gift for John for their wedding. When he swept John out on the floor in time to their wedding waltz, everyone got a bit weepy. Once the band launched into a country reel, John was happy to see so many of his loved ones out jumping around. Evie’s brother, Robert, was swinging Molly about, and Carmina was dancing with Brother Mykal, while her beau, Neville, John thought his name was, escorted Healer Lupita around.

John tried to speak a moment to everyone gathered, shaking hands, and thanking all the guests for coming. He was gratified to see that Harry and Evie had taken Kate under their wing, and the three of them were thick as thieves over the pudding table. John touched Kate on the arm, and drew her aside.

“Oh, Kate, I’m sorry. I mean that you aren’t having a wedding. I mean, damn, thanks for coming.” John pulled her into a hug. “That didn’t come out quite right. I’m sorry Irene’s not here.”
“John you know I wouldn’t have missed this for anything. I’m so sorry Irene couldn’t come too. She wanted to be here, but you know, she’s stuck at the palace.” Kate shrugged.

Anthea made sure to give John and Sherlock, and anyone else who would be attending the royal wedding later in the morning some of her pepper-up pills to make it through the day. Sherlock was dancing with Loralee when John managed to catch her for a longer chat.

“Anthea, how are you two?” John asked.

“We’re good, but how are YOU? I was so upset to hear you’d been hurt in the attack on the king.”

"I'm happy to report that I'm doing splendid." John grinned.

"John, I can’t thank you enough for what you did for us . . . all of us.” Anthea's voice dropped lower.

“Well, we’re family.” John said with a smile. “You help family out.”

“You’re right, and I couldn’t be happier about having you as a brother.” Anthea pulled John into his hundredth hug of the night. “And what you’ve done for Sherlock . . . well, it's amazing.”

“I think he’s pretty amazing too.” John said looking out to the dance floor where Sherlock was twirling Loralee around in circles. “So are you and Loralee back at the shop?” John asked.

“I’ve actually decided to sell the shop. I’ve found a nice property outside the city near my brother’s farm that we’re moving to.”

“Oh, don’t say you’re going to stop making all your fabulous potions and lotions!” John exclaimed.

“Not to worry.” Anthea chuckled. "I'll be able to spend my time doing more research, so I can make more and better things. I’ve decided to let a few shops in town carry my products, and just get out of the selling, myself.” Anthea told him.

“So a new wind is blowing through town.” John said. “I don't mean to be nosy, but have you and Mycroft made any plans to change your situation?”

“It's all right. Mycroft and I have talked about it. I’m going to tell Loralee the whole story about her family soon. Mycroft is going to formally acknowledge her as a daughter, and we’ve decided she’ll spend half her time with me, and half her time being educated at court.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, we can show her the Grotto . . .” John trailed off. “And what about you and Mycroft?”

“John, I’ve thought about it, and I really can’t turn my life upside down at this point. Queen Norah would never accept me, and I just can’t see how I would fit into a role like Royal Consort. That just wouldn't work. So, we don’t have plans to get married, but we will be more open about our . . . situation. We’re tired of hiding.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” John reached over to lay his hand on her arm.

Sherlock breezed over with Loralee riding his shoulders piggy-back at that point. “Here you are, back to your mother as promised, Lady Poppet.”

“Thank you, Sir Pony.” Loralee squealed as Sherlock ducked down and slid her carefully to the floor. She yawned then, wide enough to crack her jaw.
“I think that pepper-up pills, aside, it’s time some of us were off to bed.” Anthea pronounced.

“Do you two need a ride?” John asked. “Where are you staying?”

“We’re actually staying with friends, and we have a carriage waiting outside for us, but we’d be more than happy if you’d escort us to it.”

After they had seen Anthea and Loralee safely off, John and Sherlock paused outside the temple, looking back in the windows at the party going full tilt. John reached out, and threaded his fingers through Sherlock’s. He stood, simply enjoying the feeling of holding his new husband’s hand.

“Husband, do you think it would it be horribly rude if we sneaked off,” John asked wistfully, "and got another hour of . . . rest before we have to be at the palace?” He felt an almost visceral need to get Sherlock alone, and wrap himself around him before they had to face the next crowd.

Sherlock turned and smiled at him, the light from the temple's front torches sparkling off his canine-like grin. “Husband, I’m positive it’s an old tradition for a married couple to sneak off from their wedding party as soon as humanly possible.”

“What are we waiting for?” John grinned, and the two of them hied off to 221B as fast as they could before anyone noticed they were missing, and had the bad idea of looking for them.
The Bells Are Ringing

Chapter Summary

The royal wedding is THE event of the season.

Chapter Notes

I keep adding chapters, don't I, but perhaps folks won't mind too much? I have an epilogue to add in after this one, and then finally our long romp will be through.

John yawned as discreetly as possible behind his hand. Despite ingesting pepper-up pills in the wee hours, he was still dragging as the day wore on. What a day it was. The expected sleek, black carriage had arrived to pick them up at the flat just before dawn. They had still been pulling on their finery when one of the footmen knocked on the door to hurry them along. The servants were under strict orders from the king to deliver them on time to the palace whether they were clothed or not. John decided he preferred clothed, and shrugged on the horrid lace-covered suit that had been picked for him. His only saving grace was that Sherlock’s outfit was that much worse. They held hands and dozed the whole trip to the palace. Once there, servants had swarmed over them, directing their every movement henceforth.

A morning prayer session at a small temple room in the palace led by a priest who looked as tired as they felt passed quickly enough. John breathed in the incense, and watched the back of Sherlock’s head. They’d been separated early on, and John had been making do with the occasional pining look sent across crowded rooms ever since. John was so glad they’d already gotten married that morning. He kept finding himself fiddling with his new ring, twisting it around his finger like a talisman that would get him through the long day. The servants had swept Sherlock away for further preparations, and deposited John with Harry to take breakfast with her, and Evie, and Robert in their rooms. He wasn’t that hungry after his wedding party just a few hours earlier, but they were all enjoying the steaming tea. John slumped over his third cup.

“Chin up, there Johnny.” Harry chided him. “You’ll have him back after the circus is over.”

“Yeh, I know Harry, thanks.” John did his best to smile, but it was strained at best.

Evie smiled encouragingly, and squeezed John’s arm. “You’re exhausted. Two weddings in one day is a bit much for anyone. I’m not quite sure what Sherlock was thinking.”

“No, no it’s good. I’m glad we went on and did it, got married this morning. I don’t have to wait for the other shoe to fall anymore.” John countered, raking a hand back through his hair.
“John, can I ask you a question?” Robert leaned in. Of the four of them, he was the only one actually tucking into the food provided.

“Of course, Robert, shoot.” John told him.

“You, and Prince Sherlock, and the Princess Irene . . . are the three of you going to have sex together, like?” Robert asked with eyes gone wide.

“ROBERT.” Evie blushed red, and immediately cuffed her younger brother across the back of the head. “You don’t ASK people things like that.”

"Ow, Evie, leave off!” Robert scowled at her, rubbing at his sore spot.

“No, it’s all right. Though I agree with your sister. Generally you don’t ask people things like that, but we’re family.” John smiled wearily at the younger man. “The answer is we don’t have plans to live as a triad. Sherlock is married to me, and marrying Irene, but we aren’t all marrying each other. I hope we can all be friends though. I think we will.” He was very careful to leave Kate out of the discussion. That wasn’t his story to tell.

The wedding itself was held at the largest temple in town, of course, the Great Temple of the Old Gods. The four of them had been spirited to it in a carriage behind the royal family. The crowds that had turned out to line the roads, and catch glimpses of the royals were truly staggering. At the temple, servants directed them to seats just a few rows away from the royal court.

John was amazed when Queen Norah greeted him with a weepy hug, telling him everything would be all right. John patted her shoulder awkwardly before she released him. John watched King Mycroft’s eyes flicker over his hand to land solidly on his new ring. Mycroft sighed, but said nothing to John, merely nodded politely to him. John bowed back.

Prince Sherringford actually held his hand out to John. "Well, my little priest. I hear congratulations are in order."

"Indeed." John took his hand, and shook it. "Thank you."

"Perhaps condolences are also in order for joining this family." Sherringford mused with a sad smile.

"I'll take the good with the bad." John told him. "Prince Sherringford, I'm so sorry . . ." he began when the older man waved him off.

"Let's have no ill tidings on a wedding day." He said, clapping a hand to John's shoulder.

With a final nod, John made his way to his seat next to Harry. He passed by Queen Violet who pointedly ignored him keeping her face turned the other way until he moved by. There was simply no pleasing some people John decided, sitting down with a pat from Evie who reached around Harry to touch his knee.

"Big shot." Harry whispered in his ear, and he had to smile.

Cresting music filled the space as a choir stood to sing. The ceremony seemed to go on forever, and
John yawned again behind his hand. Important words were intoned, another song sung, and a boring proclamation made. Finally Sherlock appeared with Sherringford at his side as they took their places at the front. His love looked so pale in his plum-colored suit, even more so than usual, and John’s heart flew out to him. Sherlock’s eyes scanned the benches quickly before landing on John. Across the space, they shared a look that washed heat over him. Sherlock still wore his new wedding ring, but he had transferred it to the opposite hand for this ceremony. John was glad to see that he still had it on. As if he knew what John was thinking (and didn’t he always), Sherlock reached up to touch it, turning it around his finger, as a small smile pulled at his lips.

The music swelled even higher as Princess Irene entered, looking magnificent in her dress with its long train, and a circlet of blossoms covering her brow. Her giggly sisters helped settle the long dress behind her when she finally reached Sherlock. The bride and groom nodded at each other, then knelt before the priest and priestess who rained blessings down over their matching dark heads. John had to admit they looked well together. The two stood when asked, faced each other, and exchanged their vows. Irene was as pale as Sherlock, but the two of them repeated their words with steady breath. Finally they were declared husband and wife. Bells pealed out overhead announcing the news far and wide. The two of them walked back down the aisle arm in arm, Sherlock looking stiff as a board, and Irene managing a smile that appeared almost convincing. Servants jumped forward to carry Princess Irene’s train behind her, and the couple disappeared out the double doors.

John blew a breath out he didn’t realize he'd been holding. The whole ceremony had been a staunch, and unfeeling tide of pomp he thought grimly. John was glad to know that both Sherlock and Irene had someone waiting to wrap themselves around them later. John simply ached to pull Sherlock into his arms, and kiss the scowl off his face. He pitied all who were forced into arranged marriages with no other options. He scanned the crowds for Kate, and realized he hadn't seen her all day. His eyes landed on the royal family nearby. Queen Violet sat ramrod straight like the figurehead of a ship braving the waves. Queen Norah pressed a handkerchief to her nose and wept, and King Mycroft looked nothing so much as like a hawk that had been stuffed and mounted. John sighed. When it occurred to him that he really was officially part of the royal family now, a fit of nervous giggles bubbled up his throat. He fairly shook with the effort to keep them from tumbling past his lips. John had to wave Evie off when she asked if he were all right.

Harry just punched him in the arm. “Stiff upper lip there, Johnny. I’m sure there’s grog at the reception.”

The wedding dinner was by far the gaudiest affair that John had seen at the palace yet. The largest dining room was filled to bursting, and covered in heart decorations of every shape and size. Vases of flowers that gave off a faint chime when brushed covered every surface in the room. Robert was amusing himself playing a tune on the floral arrangement that graced the center of their table. John was just happy that at least their spot was in sight of the head table where Sherlock and Irene sat front and center for all who wished to speak to them. Sherlock looked like he was stewing up a fine tantrum, but Irene whispered something in his ear, and he relaxed enough to at least ape civility to the groups of well-wishers stopping by.

The servers were dressed all in white with little pink wings attached to their backs in honor of Ongus, the God of Love. Slips of paper and pencils shaped like small arrows sat at each table for the guests, and the servants circulated, slyly encouraging all to write love missives that would be
delivered throughout the party. John could see Sherlock rolling his eyes at it all from across the room. Half-way through the sumptuous feast though, a servant bent down to deliver a folded note addressed to John.

“This is for you, sir.” She said with a wink.

“Thank you.” John told her, and unfolded the letter to a familiar looping writing that said:

“Cupboard by the washrooms, five minutes – S”

John grinned, and pocketed the note. He glanced back at the head table, and saw that Sherlock was already missing.

“Someone trying to pull you?” Harry asked leaning over to nudge him in the ribs.

“Just a note from Sherlock telling me how bored he is.” John informed her with a shrug. When he stood, dropping his napkin to his chair a few minutes later with an “Excuse me for a moment, I’m off to the loos,” neither Evie nor Harry looked particularly convinced that he was just off to the washroom. They let him go with nothing more than a knowing smirk though. Robert was busy chatting with a young woman in a green dress who had been seated at their table, and thankfully missed the whole exchange.

In the corridor, John stood confused for a moment looking back and forth between what appeared to be two cupboards past the washrooms wondering which one to chose. Only one of them cracked open to reveal a long, pale hand over a brocade sleeve beckoning him onward. John smiled and moved closer so that the hand could grab ahold of him and drag him into said cupboard, slamming the door behind. Sherlock crushed John so tightly against him, he found his face embedded in a fall of lace. He had to turn his head to take in a proper breath, sucking in a great lungful of essence of Sherlock.

“John.”

John titled his head back as Sherlock swooped in, and covered his mouth with his own. They kissed like they were inventing kissing, like they’d never kissed before, and might never again. Sherlock pressed John up against the back of the door, and half lifted him up, urging a thigh between his legs, devouring his mouth. John wound one hand up into Sherlock’s curls while the other settled firmly on the royal behind.

“No, wait, we can’t come in these clothes.” John ground out, pushing Sherlock back.

“You’re right.” Sherlock slid away just enough for them to lay foreheads together and pant, waiting for breath to settle.

“Yes, you can. You’re doing brilliantly.” John told him pulling him in for another sweet kiss.

“You’re almost done. Gods, you looked amazing out there today. I almost forget how beautiful you
are until I see you again.”

“Glad I’m so easy to forget.” Sherlock quirked up one side of his kiss-swollen mouth.


Sherlock turned serious again. “John. You aren’t just beautiful . . . you are . . .” Sherlock looked frustrated in the gloom of the cupboard as words escaped him. “You are . . . everything.” He finished pulling John into another kiss that left them both breathless. John managed to work Sherlock's shirt up enough to wriggle a hand in to touch the amazing, warm flesh underneath. A shudder ran through him as Sherlock pulled aside his neckcloth, and ran a hot tongue over his throat. John groaned, and arched his neck back for better access.

“Aaaaaah. Love, please. I can’t do what I want to you in this damned cupboard.” He gulped air, and firmly set Sherlock aside. “We have to stop.”

Sherlock heaved a breath, his carefully-tamed locks falling over his face, still looking like he wanted to eat John alive. “I know, and we have to talk.”

John raised his eyebrows, *Oh what?*

Sherlock just shook his head, *Wait a minute, clothes first.*

They stepped far enough apart to tidy themselves as well as possible, rearranging clothes and smoothing hair back.

“I had a meeting with Irene and Mycroft, and King Marco this morning as we signed the wedding contract.” Sherlock began, pausing to blow out a breath. “It seems that Irene’s father has enacted a sleeper clause in the contract that requires an official witness to view the consummation of the marriage tonight.”

“You mean . . .” John asked.

“Yes, the King of Arabonia has a professional peeper to watch us fucking to prove the validity of the union.”

“Is this usual?” John asked reaching a hand out to push a wayward curl that had fallen back over Sherlock’s forehead.

“It seems to be an old tradition amongst the Arabonians that many have let fall by the wayside, but the nobles of course feel the need to keep it alive. Irene was furious. She had been told earlier it wasn’t necessary.”

“I suppose I know why they changed that.” John clenched his jaw, and looked down.

“John, It’s not your fault the Arabonians are homophobic cretins.” Sherlock set fingers under John’s chin to tip his gaze back up to meet his. “My half of the union is allowed a witness as well. I chose you.”

“Did Mycroft . . .”

“Irene’s father tried to say that wasn’t acceptable, and Mycroft tongue-lashed him into silence. He seemed as disgusted with the whole business as I was.”

“Why couldn’t Irene chose someone of her own, I mean Kate . . .” John offered.
“That would have been an excellent solution, except the bride is not allowed to pick a witness, the bride’s father chooses the witness.” A wry smile twisted the side of Sherlock’s mouth up.

“Kinky.” John said arching an eyebrow.

“I thought so.” Sherlock agreed. He shifted slightly away from John, looking uncertain, and younger than he usually did as he chose his words. “John, I might need you there anyway, to do this . . . perform in front of someone. If it were just the two of us, I know Irene and I could work something out . . .”

“Shh.” John stopped Sherlock’s floundering, and pulled him closer, winding his arms around him. “I’m there for you, whatever you need . . . whatever Irene needs. I’m your official peeping-tom.”

“John.” Sherlock relaxed against him, wrapping arms around John's shoulders, and leaning his cheek against his forehead. They stood content to simply breathe each other in when a sharp rap at the door startled them out of their temporary cocoon.

Someone in the corridor cleared their throat. “Your Majesty? His Highness, the King, wishes to let you know your presence is required at the high table.” An unfortunate footman stood outside the door awaiting a reply.

Sherlock sighed. “Give me a moment. I’ll be right out.” He called back.

“Very good, sir.” The man stepped back, but didn’t leave.

“It seems our secret meeting space is not so secret.” Sherlock smiled into John’s hair.

“Did you really think it would be?” John smiled back.

“No, but I thought that you being a decorated hero would buy us a few more minutes alone.”

John sighed. “Obviously not. Well, duty calls.”

They stepped back to inspect each other’s appearance, smoothing out a few wrinkles, retying neckcloths.

“Love, it’s almost over.” John reached out to squeeze Sherlock’s hand.

“I know.” Sherlock nodded. “Why don’t you wait a few more minutes before you go back in. Continue the charade that we weren’t snogging in a supply room for anyone who cares.”

As John laughed, Sherlock darted in to press one last chaste kiss to his forehead before disappearing out the door. John sighed as he stood alone. He counted his breaths for a few minutes as he waited for his cock to be presentable enough for polite company.

The rest of the meal was grand and delicious, and a torture to get through. John kept sneaking glances back at the head table. King Mycroft and King Marco, both looking jolly enough that they’d orchestrated this merging of nations so nicely, were tucking into their meal. Irene looked much more dyspeptic than usual, and Sherlock was pale and sullen, but then he always looked that way at formal functions. Both of them were merely pushing things around on their plates. It was a shame that the artistry of the wedding meal seemed to be utterly lost on the bride and groom. John was happy he’d eaten the food at his own wedding. No, best not to think of their wedding just this morning, an eon ago. It made him want to hold Sherlock against him even more. He thought about sending a missive of his own to Sherlock, and decided it would just make things worse. Sherlock was already mooning across the room at him when he thought no one was looking. Everyone was looking. John was
happy that soon they could publicly announce their wedding, and then he could just sit at the main
table on the other side of Sherlock, and this pretending-to-ignore-each-other show could be over. The
Arabonian delegation would be gone by the end of the week he reminded himself.

A final dessert of round plum puddings, one for each table, was wheeled in and set ablaze to the
appreciative ooh’s of the crowd. A servant dressed in a flowing gown and a floor-length blonde wig,
obviously a costume for Arianne, Goddess of trysts, announced loudly that a gold ring had been
hidden in each of the puddings. Whoever got the slice with the lucky token could claim a prize from
a basket of wrapped boxes by the door.

John sighed as he bit down on a ring in his slice. "Ah lucky me, looks like I got one." John held out
the bit of cheap jewelry on his palm. "Good I didn't break a tooth on it." The ridiculous theater of the
royal wedding was wearing thin on him.

"Ooh, wonderful. You get to claim a prize!" Evie smiled at him.

"Honestly, Evie, I don't really care much about it." John shrugged.

"Sourpuss." Evie scrunched her nose at him. "Here, give me the ring, and I'll go collect your prize."
When she returned with the small box, John unwrapped the beribboned thing only to discover a
purple anal plug inside. Charming. He thought, and sighed again holding it up for all to see.

“Cor, what IS that?” Robert asked, leaning in for a better look.

“We’ll tell you when you’re older.” Evie said, and quickly motioned John to put it away.

John quirked a half-smile, and dropped it into his pocket. He waited a few minutes, and then pulled
Robert aside to tell him in great detail what the toy was for as he slipped it to him. No sense leaving
the young man ignorant he thought. Perhaps Robert’s future lovers would thank him, but more
importantly, younger brothers always had to stick together against bossy older sisters.

By the time Sherlock had finished with his social obligations, and been allowed to leave the crowds
behind, they had but a few minutes alone in their suite before the next act. It was almost time for the
“official marital coitus performance” as Sherlock sarcastically called it. Irene had been swept away
some time earlier to prepare for the grand event. The two men collapsed on the couch in their sitting
room grateful for a few moments of calm. Sherlock dropped his head on John’s shoulder, breathing a
sigh of relief. “That was ghastly.” He shuddered.

“The lilies in the men’s washroom were playing love songs until they went off, and started squealing.
A servant had to throw them out the window.” John chuckled. “At least that part of the day is done.”

“Now it’s just the peepshow left.” Sherlock groaned. “Ugh. How do I let myself get into these
things? Maybe we could just sneak out of the palace now whilst no one is looking.”

“Irene needs this to be done with her father.” John reminded him quietly, smoothing a hand down his
side. “His control over her ends when the marriage contract takes effect.”

“I know.” Sherlock sighed, and pressed his face against John’s neck.
John tightened his arm around Sherlock’s shoulders. He took a deep breath, suddenly nervous, wishing all of it over already. “What am I meant to do exactly?” John asked him.

“As far as ‘observe, and swear later that you witnessed the marital act performed’ the duties are not enumerated.” Sherlock replied. “However, there is nothing that states what you cannot do. I hope you might . . . make this easier for us.” He finished trailing off.

“Whatsoever you need.” John reassured him, leaning in to kiss his brow. “Always.”

“John, I am blessed beyond measure to have found you.” Sherlock lifted his head to find John’s gaze. His eyes had gone a stunning turquoise color, and John would have been content to bathe in it had a knock not sounded loudly at the door.

“Curse it.” Sherlock growled tensing against him. “It’s time.”

The marital performance was to be held in a neutral space, a bedroom at the end of the guest wing. Servants escorted John and Sherlock to the door, and discreetly bowed aside. The room was done up in beige tones – so banal a setting for so odd an event John thought. At least sweet-smelling candles burned on the dresser, and some jars of oil and cream sat on the bedside table – a nod to the ritual to come. An older woman wrapped in a dark shawl already sat in one of two chairs opposite from the bed. She looked up as they entered, and John nodded politely whilst Sherlock ignored her completely to drop heavily to the edge of the bed.

“Good evening.” John greeted the woman who was obviously King Marco's witness.

“Good evening.” She replied in a chilly Arabonian accent, and offered no more.

John sighed. He was certain the woman knew exactly who he was, and disapproved. He took the chair near her, settling as best he could next to her icy shoulder. Sherlock flopped onto his back, leaving his feet flat on the ground, and blew out a huff of breath. As awkward as this was for John, he knew it was doubly nerve-wracking for Sherlock. As confident as his mad genius always appeared to others, John knew how vulnerable the man could be behind his public façade. As the Gods were his witness, John thought fiercely, he would not let anyone shame either Sherlock or Irene tonight. Neither of them deserved this.

The door to the washroom opened and Irene stepped out in a silk, ivory-coloured dressing gown belted over a matching chemise. Her pale clothing set off her colors so strikingly. The black of her loose hair, crystalline blue of her eyes, and alabaster of her skin made her look more like a creature of fey than a woman of Earth. Irene would have looked gorgeous if not for the pulse of terror beating just under the bland expression pasted over her face. Her eyes flickered across the room as she walked to stand before the bed. John tried to smile as kindly as possible when her gaze landed on him. She nodded slightly his way. Sherlock for once seemed utterly graceless as he struggled to sit upright. He seemed unsure of where to put his hands, and ended up clasping them tightly together in his lap.

“Good evening, Prince William.” Irene curtsied prettily to her new husband.

“Irene, you look lovely.” He told her.
“Thank you, Sher . . . Prince William.” A tiny smile flickered over her face.

Sherlock stripped off his jacket and tossed it to the floor. He toed his shoes off awkwardly, then patted the bed next to him. “Why don’t you take off your coat, and stay awhile?” He tried to joke, but it came out flat.

Irene said nothing, but turned to remove, and fold her gown revealing a small charm bracelet tied around one slim wrist. She laid the clothing carefully over a nightstand next to the bed, and slowly turned to face them. The old woman shifted, and cleared her throat, peering impatiently at them.

This was awful, like watching lambs being led to slaughter. John refused to watch them suffer any more. He clapped his hands together. “Right then. Who’s for a game of strip poker?”

The chaperone’s head swiveled toward him. “What? What is this?” She asked.

“A game.” John informed her. “A card game. It’s considered foreplay in Brettona.”

“I have never heard of this.” The woman snorted, unconvinced.

Sherlock turned on her. “Are there rules in the marriage contract against there being strip poker during the bedding ritual?” He asked innocently.

“Well, no,” She conceded, creasing up her forehead, “but this is very irregular . . .”

“Case closed then.” John nodded.

Sherlock’s eyes danced with laughter, and the rigid line of Irene’s back softened as John rang for a servant. He requested a pack of cards along with a bottle of whiskey and three glasses. “If we’re doing this, we’re doing it right.” John declared. “The losers of each round must remove an item of clothing of their choice, and down a shot.”

John shed his shoes and jacket. Irene put her dressing gown back on, and John gave her his socks to wear, and Sherlock, his neckcloth so she wouldn’t be so far behind them going in. Once the supplies arrived, the three of them climbed onto the bed, and John poured out three shots to sit on the side table. Sherlock played dealer counting out cards to all. He looked over at the chaperone, and tilted his head, gesturing at the cards to ask if she cared to join. She just frowned, and shook her head tightly. He shrugged and finished dealing. It soon became apparent that Sherlock was cheating shamelessly to lose, but all of them were steadily removing bits of clothing, and downing shots as the rounds grew more blurry, and even more silly.

The Arabonian witness complained when John peeled off his trousers after Irene’s full house and Sherlock’s two of a kind beat his flush, but John reassured her with a slurred “Not going pas’ the pants. Don’ worry. Only the royal cock out tonight.” This put the three of them into hysteric. John was down to his underwear, Sherlock in his pants and one sock, and Irene in her chemise when they collapsed together laughing. John ended up tumbling face first into Irene’s lap. He took the opportunity to breathe a hot breath into the fabric. Irene’s laughter died off as she stretched out under him, arching her back.

“May I?” He asked her looking straight up into her eyes. Irene nodded and bit her lower lip. John pushed her chemise up to uncover the dark triangle between her legs. He leaned in, pressed his lips against Irene’s mons, and hummed.

“Don’t forget ‘cinnamon.’ Lemme know if I do it wrong . . . or right.” He grinned up at her, lifting her hand to the back of his head. Irene wound her fingers into John’s hair, and hung on as he leaned in to gently rub his mouth against the outside of her nether lips. He pressed in, and hummed again.
John imagined he could feel the hostile glare of the old woman behind him burning holes into his neck. Ignoring her, he darting out a tongue to lick up the length of Irene’s cleft, flicking gently over her clit at the top. Irene whimpered slightly, and squirmed under him. John glanced back over at Sherlock on his side beside them. He watched with hooded eyes gone melting hot, his lush mouth slightly open. Irene turned her head to observe him as well. A smile curled across her face.

“Why don’t you touch yourself, baby?” Irene purred at him. “Get yourself hard while you watch.” Sherlock didn’t need to be told twice. He pushed his pants down to take his swollen cock in hand, and stroked.

“You naughty girl. We’re all watching you.” John growled at Irene before diving back in to gently push her outer lips aside, and lick around the entrance of her pussy, occasionally darting his tongue to sweep inside. When he pulled back, face wet and asked Sherlock “Cream?” Sherlock looked utterly dumbfounded for a moment. He shook himself, and reached over to the bedside table, coming up with a small jar.

“Open?” John smiled. Sherlock popped off the top, releasing a wonderful rich, musky scent. They all inhaled in unison. John took the jar and scooped out a handful to smear along Sherlock’s erection. His hand stroked up the shaft, and passed over the head while Sherlock groaned in appreciation.

John reached back for a second scoop that he stroked over Irene’s pussy. Irene gasped as he eased a finger into her entrance. He trailed his other hand along her inner thigh, petting her, as the finger inside her pumped slowly in and out. Irene moaned and reached up to run her fingers over her hard nipples pebbled up through the smooth fabric of her chemise.

“So beautiful, how beautiful you are.” John crooned looking down at her sprawled before him, her long dark hair fanned across the bedspread. When he leaned close, and wrapped his lips around her clit to suck, Irene cried out, and bowed her back off the mattress. He felt her rhythmically clenching over his finger, and let her ride out every aftershock before he pulled away, gently kissing the insides of her milky white thighs as he left. He crawled back up to kiss her lips letting her taste herself, and the cream on him. “John, thank you.” She whispered.

John smiled at her. “Milady, may I present your husband?” He gestured over to Sherlock lying next to them still trailing his hand over his cock, and looking drugged. Irene pushed herself to sitting. She was back. She leaned in and kissed Sherlock on the forehead.

“I’m going to ride you, darling. Get on your back.” She breathed into Sherlock’s ear. “Hands flat on the bed, and don’t move them.”

With a small sound, Sherlock rolled backwards. John reached over, and tugged his pants the rest of the way off, squeezing his feet reassuringly as he moved aside. Irene swung a leg over Sherlock, and set her thighs on either side of him, her wet heat over his erection. She finally reached up to pull the chemise off her body unveiling the dusky pink of her upright nipples. Leaning on to hands and knees, she rocked her body over Sherlock, rubbing her wetness over his cock with each pass. Sherlock groaned, and fluttered his hands up to grab her hips.

“Hands down.” Irene warned dark and low, and he pressed them back to the bed. “John.” Irene gasped.

“I’m here.” John put a hand on her back.

“John, get behind me, touch my breasts.” Irene breathed.

John climbed up as directed, spreading his knees over Sherlock’s thighs and reached around Irene to
cup her breasts. John fancied he could hear the quickened breath of the chaperone behind, and let her shock, and he was sure arousal, push his own desire along. He pressed his aching cock straining at his pants against the swell of Irene’s arse, letting his thumbs stroke idly over her soft breasts. When Irene lifted and carefully held Sherlock penis to slide onto it, John zeroed in to catch her nipples between thumb and forefinger, and squeezed. Irene gasped, and paused as Sherlock reached her entrance. She threw her head back to John’s shoulder, and after a moment, sank down, piercing herself on Sherlock’s cock to the hilt. Sherlock made a helpless sound as Irene bottomed out. John closed his eyes, breathing through his nose, as he pressed against Irene. He concentrated on not spilling himself across her backside as he gently rolled her nipples. It just seemed bad form to orgasm in front of the witness given the circumstances.

They moved together as one creature surging forward, and back, and forward again. Every sound in the room seemed hyper clear from the heavy breathing of the old woman watching, to Irene’s gasps, to Sherlock’s groans to the wet slap of slick flesh between them. Irene tilted forward, and quickened the pace. Sherlock couldn’t move his pelvis up with two people on top of him. He lay pinned, groaning, hands fisted in the bedding. A drop of sweat rolled down Irene’s back and onto John. John reached down to grasp Sherlock’s leg, and Sherlock froze, jerking up as he exploded with a gasp. Irene collapsed over him, and John slid off to lie sideways on the bed, panting. Sherlock opened an eye to pierce the chaperone with a steely glare. She sat on the edge of her seat, eyes wide, mouth slack.

“You’ve witnessed the consummation of this marriage. Now get out.” He snarled.

The woman gathered her things, and all but fled the room, slamming the door on her way out. John burst into hysterical giggles, and the other two joined in.

Irene raised her head to kiss Sherlock, and he lifted a hand to gently cup the back of her head as his lips pressed over hers. Irene looked down at John who was nearly twitching beside them. “Oh, poor John.” Irene pouted her lips. “Whatever can we do for him?”

“I have a few ideas.” Sherlock drawled.

The two of them prowled down the bed like panthers to pounce on John, rolling him onto his back. As Sherlock pulled his pants off, and kissed down his thighs, John nearly wept with the relief of feeling his rigid cock spring free. Irene whispered against his ear “I think we should make you wait, and watch more often. The way you writhe is exquisite.” She nipped at his earlobe, and sat back on her heels to catch Sherlock’s eye. “Let’s do this together. I’ve been curious about fellatio forever. I’ve never done it, and you could probably write a treatise. Between us, we should do all right.”

“Between us we should do John.” Sherlock corrected her.

“Indeed, husband.” Irene laughed, enjoying trying out the word.

Together they bent, and licked clever tongues up each side of John’s raging erection. John’s eyes nearly rolled up inside his head, and he cried out nonsense.

“Really, love?” Sherlock rumbled against him. “Tell us more.”

Sherlock and Irene dragged their tongues up and down his cock while their hands played over him in tandem. Irene palmed his balls, and ran her nails lightly across his inner thighs, while Sherlock slid a hand over John’s chest and belly, rubbing his nipples, caressing his furred planes. John shook as sensation pulsed through him. It was too much, and not enough. Tears leaked from the sides of his eyes.
“Why don’t you finish him off?” Irene suggested. “I want to watch.” She sat near John’s head, trailing her nails lightly over his chest, as Sherlock bent to John, and gladly swallowed him down. In just a few hard sucks, John was tumbling, buffeted by the waves roaring over him. John waited for all to settle, but a noise remained in his ears. He realized the keening was his own, and he couldn’t stop it, or the shivers that ran through him. Sherlock curled up around him, warm and steady against one side, whilst Irene snuggled up by the other.

“Shhh, love.” Sherlock pressed his face to the side of John’s head as Irene petted soothingly down his side. Gradually John gentled. Someone reached down to pull up a blanket, and the three of them fell asleep entwined together.

It was late when John felt Irene kissing the side of his cheek, moving to drop a peck on Sherlock as well. “Kate is waiting for me. I have to go.” She whispered. “Good-bye sexy men.” With a final pat to John’s shoulder, she was gone. John rolled over, closer to Sherlock, and slipped gratefully back into blessed slumber.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

With the wedding over, life goes on at 221B.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to my readers both current and future for following my story all the way through. I am of course also grateful to the characters of John and Sherlock, and those who brought their present incarnation to life on the BBC.

I began this tale in the dark depths of one of the coldest, snowiest winters we have had to date. Following the twists and turns of these two delightful men has brought me through to the bright green doorstep of summer. Kisses to Brother John and Prince William Sherlock, and the fickle muse for staying with me through it all.

“Pass me a scone.”

“What sort?”

“Blueberry.”

“We’re out of blueberry.”

“We’re not. There’s some in the kitchen.”

“Well, walk to the kitchen, and get it then. All we’ve got here is lemon poppyseed, and cranberry.”

Sherlock sighed deeply. “Fine. I’ll take a cranberry.”

“I thought you might.” John smiled as he passed the basket across the bed.

Sherlock and John had been very conscientious in informing all and sundry that they would be touring the continent for the next month on holiday. They gave Carmina the time off with pay. Sherlock even wrote up a detailed itinerary that he sent to King Mycroft describing where they planned to be at which date. Then after such through preparations, the two of them had promptly fled to 221B Baker Street, locked the door, and not set foot outside for three days. Mrs. Hudson was the only one they let know they were in residence so that she might send food up periodically ensuring they wouldn’t starve.

John enjoyed unwrapping the wedding gifts that people had left for them at Temple of the Small Gods. The Hudsons had kindly piled them on the table in the sitting room after the wedding. John
almost cried at the quilt that Harry had given them.

“Oh, Harry.” John exclaimed, spreading it out over the floor.

“That’s quite lovely.” Sherlock remarked looking over John’s shoulder. “I like the interlocking circles.”

“This pattern, it’s called Wedding Ring.” John remembered watching his mother painstakingly piece the quilt together when he was younger. “Mum made it on commission for some toff bird. It took her forever to sew, but when it was finished, the woman said she didn’t like the colors and would only pay half-price for it. Mum was furious. She refused to sell it to her, and just kept it. She said it was too grand to sleep under though, and hung it on the wall in her bedroom.” John traced a fingertip over a circle. “I thought we lost it when they took the house. I can’t believe Harry saved it.”

“How fitting a title.” Sherlock kissed the back of John’s neck. “We can hang it on the wall in our bedroom. I don’t fancy that painting of the boats very much.”

Irene had given them a box filled with some interesting toys that had taken up the majority of their time over the last three days. The long silk ropes remained a favorite. John found he didn’t enjoy being tied up that much unless it was just his arms, and Sherlock gave him a blowjob as he writhed. Sherlock though went into a meditative trance when fully bound, and John spent some time happily perfecting his knots to his husband’s great delight.

It had been a taxing couple of weeks with the Arabonians in residence at the palace, and the two of them felt they deserved the time off in hiding. John had no idea what the old woman witnessing the bedding ritual had relayed to King Marco. Whatever she said seemed to do the trick though - the marriage was declared a success, and Prince William, and Princess Irene officially wed. Irene was sad to see her sisters go, but everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief when King Marco and his entourage returned to Arabonia. “Good riddance.” Sherlock snorted to John in private, not at all impressed with his father-in-law.

Sherlock and John had formally announced their marriage the day after the royal wedding, and the news went out in the next round of newspapers. Queen Norah tried to kick up a fuss about arranging another wedding dinner for the two of them, but Sherlock informed her coldly, “Over my dead body” and the matter was quietly dropped.

They did have plans to travel up the coast on a leisurely jaunt that included a visit to Irene’s country property, the Lorchmere estate, where she and Kate had left to spend most of August. They’d end with a stay at Rosewood Manor before John was due back in Delphium for his fall classes. Today though was a day of sloth. They were happily whiling away the afternoon with a nap across the ugly couch after a busy morning of shagging. Annoyingly, John was pulled from a very pleasant dream by a very unpleasant throat-clearing.

He blinked his eyes open to find King Mycroft not a few feet away, peering at him like a mad owl.

John would have leapt out of his skin if not for the weight of one sleeping genius sprawled half across him.

“MYCROFT. Great Gods, you nearly gave me a heart attack!” John cried struggling to sit up. He was somewhat relieved to note that he and Sherlock at least had their pants on. “How did you get in?”

“My apologies John. Mrs. Hudson let me in when I told her I was here on an urgent matter.”

Sherlock twitched awake at being rudely dumped onto the couch. He opened one eye to peer around John at his oldest brother. “Mycroft what in seven hells are you doing here? We’re meant to be in Brugge today.”
“Marriage has obviously dulled you. I know you hate Brugge this time of year. Clearly that was a lie.” Mycroft huffed. “I have a proposition for you.”

Sherlock groaned. “I already married for king and country, and I didn’t kill any of the Arabonians during their protracted visit . . . that I know of. What in frozen purgatory do you want now?”

“Sit up, brother dear, and hear me out. I think you’ll like this one.”

Sherlock grumbled, but pushed to sitting. Mycroft threw him a packet of papers.

“A month ago, the cattle of one Lord Whittlespit of Kentshire began developing an odd blue color. Then a fortnight ago, the colored cattle began disappearing. A few days ago, Lord Whittlespit, himself, disappeared. His family has no idea what happened to either him or the animals.”

“Interesting.” Sherlock intoned, flipping through the pages of information obviously collected by Mycroft’s minions. “Interesting, but hardly earth-shattering. Why is this important?”

“Lord Whittlespit’s unexplained absence is certainly important to his family, but more pressingly, he is important to the crown as his vote is needed in the Council of Lords for some delicate legislation I am negotiating in the fall.”

“But what’s this to me?” Sherlock asked turning a steely glare back to his brother. “I’m on holiday, it’s our honeymoon.”

“You plan to travel along the coast stopping by the Lorchmere estate, and ending up at Rosewood Manor. The Whittlespit property is directly on your route. You won’t have to go out of your way at all to investigate the matter. All expenses are paid,” Mycroft pulled out a cloth sack that he dropped onto the floor between them with a heavy clink, “and you may have use of my private carriage for the trip.”

“The navy one with brass trim?” Sherlock asked.

“The same.” Mycroft agreed.

When Sherlock cocked an eyebrow, and continued to stare at his brother, Mycroft sighed and uncrossed his legs. “Oh, all right. And I’ll ensure that Mummy doesn’t ask you about having grandchildren for at least two years. After that, I can’t make any guarantees.” Mycroft waved a hand in the air to punctuate his terms.

Sherlock turned to look at John. He tilted his head to the side in a much softer gesture. “John? It is our honeymoon after all.”

John could see he was trying to appear neutral, but excitement was bubbling up under Sherlock’s skin. “What, pass up a chance to solve a mystery? Not on your life.” John smiled at him. “I know how much your big brain needs something to do. Blue cows? Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Blue cows, and some blue goats actually.” Mycroft added in.

“All right, Mycroft.” Sherlock swung his gaze back to his brother. “I can’t guaranteed I’ll find your missing Lord, but I’ll find out what happened to him.”

“Fair enough.” Mycroft said. “If the man is merely misplaced, or passed due to natural causes, at least I’ll know the opposition hasn’t stooped to cut-throat tactics to block this legislation. You can send word via the post drop in Kentshire. I have an agent there. The carriage will arrive to collect you first thing tomorrow morning.”
“Where are you off to?” Sherlock asked, finally looking over Mycroft’s very casual shirt, trousers, and traveling cloak.

“I am on holiday myself – for a few days at least.” The corners of Mycroft’s mouth twitched slightly upright despite himself. “I’m off to a visit with Anthea and Loralee. They’re just sorting out their new home.”

“Have a good visit.” John smiled at him. “Tell them we said hello.”

“I will indeed.” Mycroft promised. “Have a . . . safe trip, and let me know what you find out.” With a nod, the king swept out the door leaving the two of them on the couch with a sack of money before them, and a sheaf of papers in Sherlock’s hands to prove that they hadn’t just dreamed his visit.

“I see we’re going to need to increase the wards on this place to keep Mycroft out.” Sherlock huffed.

“Oh, you love a new case, admit it.” John said nudging him in the ribs. “I was wondering how I was going to keep your attention through a quiet trip to the seaside.”

“John, you always have my attention.” Sherlock leered, wagging his eyebrows suggestively at him as he ran a finger up his bare thigh. He pulled John into the sweetest kiss that would have gone more interesting places had John not pushed him gently back.

“Hang on there, love. I’m hot, sticky, and starving. Bath, and then food.” John chuckled.

“If we must.” Sherlock pouted a bit.

“Come on. Mrs. Hudson said there’s a new curry shop opened up around the corner. I’ve been dying to try it out. Let’s go there for dinner.”

“I accept your offer, husband.” Sherlock nodded. He stretched as he stood, and dropped his shorts to the floor. “Did you know that you can tell a really good curry shop by the type of napkins they use . . .” He rambled on as he made his way into the bedroom.

John just grinned ear to ear, and enjoyed the view for a moment before continuing on to join his new husband at the bath.

FIN - END OF STORY

End Notes

If you liked reading this story, you may want to check out some of the amazing published authors who have inspired my writing. I highly recommend these books, and the others in their series:

- "Kushiel's Dart" by Jacqueline Carey
- "The Curse of Chalion" by Lois McMaster Bujold
- "Fool's Errand" (Tawny Man #1) by Robin Hobb
- "Troubled Waters" by Sharon Shinn
- "Circle of Magic" series by Tamora Pierce
- "Garden Spells" by Sarah Addison Allen
- "The Thief of Time" by Terry Pratchet
- "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" by J.K. Rowling
- "Od Magic" by Patricia McKillip
- "The Wheel of the Infinite" by Martha Wells

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