Things We Grew Back from Ashes and Mud

by TheBookshelfDweller

Summary

Ages from now, in a moment that is still numerous cases, several broken bones and countless memorable instants of breathless ecstasy away, local children will run through a garden overgrown with vegetation, flora running wild and untamed around skeletons of old beehives. But that is ages from now, in a moment that is still numerous blog posts, several broken tea cups and countless unusual love letters (read: intriguing corpses and breakfasts without bio-hazardous bits in them) away. So, let’s go back to now – there is a world being born, a world whose birth one wouldn’t want to miss.

[...]

It’s a new world, one that will be harder to destroy. Not because it is indestructible, nor because there won’t be challenges – oh, there will be (John wouldn’t have it any other way) – but because this time John knows, as does Sherlock, that, if handled with care, they allow each other to thrive.

They aren’t each other’s doom. They are each other’s greenhouse effect.

Notes

Ok, so here it is - Part 3 of the Greenhouse Effect Series :) Sorry for the wait.

I'll try to put up at least 2 chapters per week, hopefully more. It all depends on how much time I manage to steal from boring-life obligations.

Just a short note - the rating will go up to M at one point. However, keeping in mind that there may be people who don't like reading smut, but waited for the 3rd part of the series, I
wrote that particular chapter so that whoever wishes can skip it and continue reading without losing the thread of the story :) I will, ofc, leave a note when the rating goes up :) 

Enjoy!
Ages from now, in a moment when we began again

Ages from now, in a moment that is still numerous cases, several broken bones and countless memorable instants of breathless ecstasy away, local children will run through a garden overgrown with vegetation, flora running wild and untamed around skeletons of old beehives. They will play hide and seek in the forgotten garden, with the most daring ones trying to find their way into the old cottage in its middle (the one their parents will warn them not to enter). The children will laugh and shriek and run around, carefree and rampant in their enthralment with the microcosm nature has created for them on the very same grounds that once hosted a microcosm of different sorts. Older children will tell tales of two men who used to live in the cottage, London blokes – an eccentric with a collection of silly hats and a passion for bees, and a doctor with a set of old dog tags and a cane he never used for walking, that ended up as one of the legs on a scarecrow they’ve put up in the vegetable garden, during their third summer in the cottage. The children will recall how the one with silly hats and strange, empyrean eyes always knew if one of the kids was hiding something, how he threatened to tell their parents about it if they ever made him cross, but never did, always just winking at them with a smirk if he happened to pass them by in the village. The children will play and tell stories and buzz around until their grass-stained knees are tired and wobbly with fresh air and excitement, when they will go back to their warm homes for supper and a bath, leaving the garden to sleep for the night, the dried-up mud on their sneakers the only souvenir of the day’s exploits.

Running around, these little soldiers of mischief will climb trees and hide in shrubs, looking for clues of mysteries hidden in the soil, of some stories so much more interesting than their own (because they won’t know yet that their very lives will have the potential to become the greatest mysteries and the most fantastic adventures of all). They’ll go around reining like ultimate rulers in this little kingdom of natural chaos, where no place is off-limits to inquisitive minds and fearless hearts that are yet to learn how to do trig and chemistry, but appear to already be skilled in the art of stick-swordsmanship. No place, but one. In the deep recesses of the lush anarchy of greens, there will stand a single structure left untouched by any hand, in play or otherwise – a shrine of sorts. A small greenhouse, with several panels of glass missing – a toll paid to Master Time – will remain, like a piece of sacred ground, unchanged (bar the already-mentioned unavoidable alterations owed to the simply transient nature of all things material), as tribute to the pair that built it. With their initials carved into the two moss-covered paving stones in front of the its entrance, the greenhouse will be the only trace of the two men who survived ends of worlds and endured to see births of new ones, the only memento left behind, even when those children playing around it are old and grey, or when their grandchildren climb the same trees they’d once ransacked for ripe fruit in early autumn.

But what no one will know – not the children, nor anyone that will happen to come after them – is that before they inhabited this little planet in a calm corner of Sussex Downs, the eccentric and the limpless cane-carrier lived in a very different world. One that they built from remnants and ruins of previous worlds that they’ve lost or given up, for themselves and for each other (because, in the end, was there any other way to live? Any other reason to do so?). The children won’t know that the strange but winsome duo once ran, just like them, only through a different garden – one made of bricks and steel, with cables and wires hanging about instead of plants, and fire-escape ladders for climbing instead of trees. They won’t know the full story of two veterans of London’s battlefields, because London will seem light-years away and a lifetime ago (but it won’t be – it will be forever with them, preserved in the dust on the tea set they never use but cherish, and in the very fabric of two chairs, non-matching but somehow complimentary, that will be the first pieces of furniture ever to be delivered to the cottage).

Ages from now, in a moment that is still numerous discoveries, several broken promises and countless sincere apologies away, local children will run through a garden overgrown with
vegetation, a garden to which they will feel inexplicably drawn by some unseen force. They will make it their make-believe battlefield and the hours spent playing there will be the best of times. Why? Because hearts speak to hearts over the abyss of time and, while the children will not know it, their hearts will respond to the call of two other hearts, long gone, ones that could never refuse an adventure – ones who never knew any other way to be than beating slightly too fast with the thrill of the chase. Ages from now little soldiers of mischief will play where two other soldiers of mischief once lived, unaware of all the stories these two men have written across the parchment of each other’s lives, not with words or ink, but with silences and looks and actions that spoke louder than any combination of letters ever could.

But that is ages from now, in a moment that is still numerous blog posts, several broken tea cups and countless unusual love letters (read: intriguing corpses and breakfasts without bio-hazardous bits in them) away. So, let’s go back to now – there is a world being born, a world whose birth one wouldn’t want to miss.

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29th January, 2016

The kiss ends. The kiss ends, as everything always does, but it doesn’t mark an ending – it marks a beginning. (Or maybe, just maybe, it marks the admission of something that began years ago.) Either way, it leaves a silence in its wake, a silence that smells of wet soil and new life. But as it is usually the case with all infant things, this new life is as clumsy as a newborn foal. This new world, born to two men who somehow managed to take all the detrimental aspects of who they are separately, and use it as fertile ground in which a single bit of a ‘together’ can grow, doesn’t quite tick yet, so mistakes and wrong steps are bound to occur. And John Watson doesn’t waste time making the first one.

“Well, at least this time I know you’re doing this because you want to, and not because you’re high.” John says lightly, teasingly, meaning to break the tension. But as soon as the words are out, he wishes he kept quiet, stuck to the subtext. Subtext is safe where words are blunt and clumsy.

Sherlock’s face does a funny thing – not quite a flinch, but something similar, as if it is being punched by tiny, invisible fists, and John uses his best Sherlock-voice to mentally call himself an idiot.

“No, Sherlock, sorry. That’s not how I meant it. I just meant to say...I meant to say, it’s...nice...to know that it wasn’t just a one-time thing. A mistake. I didn’t want it to be a mistake, to you.”

“Once again, John, you prove that while you are usually above the average dullness of the masses, you have an amazing occasional tendency to be an idiot. I very rarely make mistakes, and choosing you, in any given context, never did, nor will it ever, qualify as one.” There is determination mixed with what a more ignorant person might mistake for detachment in Sherlock’s voice, but the cold wave of Sherlock’s voice is counterpoised by the conflagration in his eyes. It is an admission and a compliment, and so utterly, typically Sherlock-like, because he manages to sound both superior and expose himself in a way that offers more vulnerability than ever before. John doesn’t really know what to do with this Sherlock, this more human and less sociopathic-superman version that stands before him.

“I don’t really know how to do this.” John admits, because sometimes, just sometimes, saying things just as they are really is the best option.

“What, kissing? Oh, I think you did pretty well.” Sherlock’s eyes host a glint of amusement.
“Git. No, not kissing, that’s not what I meant– wait, sorry – ‘pretty well’?”

“Yes.”

“Just pretty well?”

“Do you really need me to wax poetic on your kissing skills?”

“First of all, I never thought I’d hear you say that combination of words, so this just became slightly surreal, and second of all – no, I don’t need you to wax poetic.”

“Don’t sulk, John, it’s not becoming on you.” Sherlock’s tone is a very clear indicator that he is doing his best not to smirk.

“I’m not sulking.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Do you always have to have the last word?”

“It just so happens that the other side always seems to run out of valid arguments before I do. So, yes.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Hardly.”

And just like that, they’re grinning at each other, still a bit awkwardly, but it’s them, slightly new, slightly more tender than usual, stumbling on new (foreign) ground, but stumbling together rather than apart. Something new is growing from the desolate, muddy planes of recent months and all the destruction that had occurred in that time, but it’s not flawless and it isn’t easy. Have you ever seen a young plant breaching the layer of dirt that covered the seed, pushing its way into the light for the first time? It isn’t easy, it isn’t elegant, but it is a wonder to behold. It’s the first test of resilience. But even when that test is passed, there are new ones waiting in the future.

“We should head back, you’re still supposed to be resting, you’re not out of the woods yet.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re at high risk for PAWS.”

“And you’re at high risk of violent death, but I don’t see that stopping your from going on cases with me.”

“Yeah, not really the same thing, you know.”

“Actually...”

“We’re going back, Sherlock.” John chastises softly. Sherlock pouts in way that would put a five-year-old who’s just lost at dodge-ball to shame.

“Fine. I hope my clothes stay wet enough for me to drip all over Mycroft’s ridiculous carpet” he
says, brushing a wet strand of hair out of his eyes, a wishful look colouring his face.

“Of course you do.” The fondness in John’s smile is unmistakable as they make their way out of the greenhouse. The temperature drop is somewhat of a shock as the warm humidity is replaced with sharp winter air.

“We better catch a cab, or we’ll catch our death like this” John pushes the words out between his slightly chattering teeth.

“No need” Sherlock replies.

“Sherlock, don’t be ridiculous...”

“No need for a cab, because transport has already been sent, apparently.”

John’s gaze follows Sherlock’s pointing finger and falls on the oh-so-(too)-familiar car that usually serves as an announcement of Mycroft’s presence (or at least involvement in whatever matter he deemed his business this time).

“Oh, lovely.” John says, and it’s only half-sarcastic. In one hand, John doesn’t really feel like playing Mycroft’s games, but in the other, they are soaking wet and shivering in the wintery air – not a very responsible thing to do, least of all by a doctor. He starts towards the car, but Sherlock’s arm blocks his way.

“John, since it is unlikely we will get much privacy to discuss any of this in the next couple of hours, I suggest we take this opportunity to settle some things.”

“Well, when you put it like a business contract, why not.” John teases, and then lets Sherlock continue.

“You said you don’t know how to do this. Just for sake of clarity, does ‘this’ refer to relationships in general, the fact that I am a man and thus not your typical preference, or the fact that we are two men living together in a rather co-dependent symbiosis, endangering our lives on a daily basis as way of having fun, and you fear whatever step we take next will endanger that symbiosis?”

“Urm...well, none of that and all of that really...”

“You’re being contrary again, John.”

John looks as if there are words choking him.

“I’m not very good at this – saying what I feel. That’s what I mean when I say I don’t know how to do this.”

“And you’re supposed to be the expert in that field, out of the two of us” Sherlock murmurs, and John barks out a laugh.

“Yeah...guess we’re properly screwed then. It’s...it’s just all a bit new, you know. I mean it’s you and you’re...well, so many things, and it’s me, and all that’s happened with us. We’ve been through a lot, Sherlock. We are complicated enough as it is, and this will certainly add new complications. This is not to say I am not willing to put up with them, just that this changes some things. And about you being a man – sure, not my usual thing, but I think I passed that bridge somewhere in my mind sometime after Mary left. It took some time, but in the end I realised that I’ve never been this deep in with anyone, Sherlock. I mean you fake-died and then came back and still, here we are. We’ve lived through more crap than most married couples, and still we somehow managed to fall back together.
So, if my lot is that the person I just can’t seem to escape – the one that I don’t want to escape – is a man, well then that’s what it is. In the end, it’s all just transport, right?”

Hearing his words repeated in this context, Sherlock admires the way context works. It manages to transform a dismissive remark into a voicing of acceptance which summarises perfectly what really matters. They’re Sherlock-and-John, and if they were Martian or had three heads, it wouldn’t change a thing. Still, Sherlock feels the need to reiterate some of his previous statements.

“I did say there wouldn’t be perfect conditions.”

“You did.”

“I asked if that could be a problem.”

“And I said no. I’m still saying no. There’s nothing perfect about anything we do, Sherlock. There never was, at least not in the regular sense. I was depressed war veteran when we met, and you were on the path of becoming an eccentric recluse constantly teetering at the edge of addiction. And then we met and decided to solve crimes together like comic-book heroes. And then you died and came back to life. Those are no perfect conditions – that’s just ridiculous. But it’s us. We’re ridiculous, only sometimes it’s not in the ha-ha sort of way. Either way, I don’t know how to do this, I don’t know how this will work. It will probably be ridiculous, too. But I am willing to try and see what happens.”

“In that case, I feel obliged to warn you that I, too, have a limited knowledge of how to proceed.”

“Sherlock Holmes, are you saying you don’t know?”

Sherlock’s mouth morphs into a pinched expression, as if someone just forced a pickle down his throat. John laughs again, a warm sound contrasting the cold, dormant landscape of the Botanical Gardens.

“Well, that settles it then. We’re both clueless.”

“I have never been clueless in my life” Sherlock says, indignantly, and John just shoots him a look which makes Sherlock want to act on impulse and kiss him. But there’s a car waiting for them, a car with eyes and ears, and while Sherlock is in no way embarrassed of any of this, he would rather if they could avoid Mycroft’s meddling for a bit longer.

“Shall we?” he asks, and the walk side-by-side down the swerving paths. Their hands brush, but neither reached to take hold of the other – that’s not who they are. Handcuffs, guns, code-words and brawls with criminals – that’s their hand-holding, their version of flowers and love-notes, their sweet-talk and dancing. They’re not perfect, they’re ridiculous.

Reaching the car, they fall silent, and as the door flings open to reveal Mycroft, Sherlock’s wish comes true- he is still wet enough to eat least leave a stain on the seat of Mycroft’s car, if not his carpet.

“John. Sherlock. If you wouldn’t mind getting in, I am rather anxious to get home. I’ve had a long trip.” Mycroft demands.

“You didn’t have to pick us up, brother mine. I didn’t know you yearned so to see me as soon as possible.” Sherlock snarls.

“I couldn’t resist.” Mycroft deadpans. “Please do try not to leave mud all over the floor.”
John and Sherlock smirk at each other and then proceed to in silence and for once it seems as if Mycroft is the one feeling most discomfort (John can almost feel Sherlock’s glee related to that fact). Cold water is still making their clothes stick to their skin, but the hot air circulating in the car makes the shivering a bit less violent. Sherlock and John sit in silence, soaked and slightly giddy, like two schoolboys being escorted home after an impromptu adventure, not regretting any of it in the least. Even though there are three people in the back of the car, there are only two in the world made of not knowing (but being willing to find out), dried mud, and ridiculous new possibilities. It’s a world they chose. But the trick to helping it endure is to keep choosing it, time and time again. It’s the trick to saving the(ir) world. It’s the key, but it’s also something else:

It’s a trick that neither of them knows yet, but that both of them have already used, unknowingly, and that one of them will soon have to become aware of. Become aware of, and implement, this time knowingly and with intent. And sometimes choices are ridiculous. Only, it’s not always in the ha-ha sort of way. Sometimes it’s not in the ha-ha sort of way at all. Sometimes it’s the exact opposite.
There’s a room where the light won’t find you

Gravel crackles beneath thick, black tires, whispering nonsensical secrets into the night that smells like impending snow. Milling like a shiny beetle, Mycroft’s car pulls up in front of the sand-coloured walls of his Victorian-style home. Warm glow falls from the windows, as if gently stroking the path in front, along with the now-non-functioning fountain. Frost slithers up the glass, like intricate embroidery that attempts to meliorate the shortness of days in wintertime.

John, Sherlock and Mycroft exit the car, their breaths clouding up the air around their faces as warm moisture that is so characteristically human betrays their warmth to the frigid air, which doesn’t wait long to start stealing it. Luckily, the front door is only a few steps away, and before the night manages to lift any more heat off them, the men make their way into the foyer.

“I suggest you two get changed into some dry clothes. I do believe this house has seen enough convalescence in the last few days. We wouldn’t want two pneumonia patients, now would we?” Mycroft instructs. “John, after you’re done, I’d like to have a word, please.”

John sees, out of the corner of his eyes, Sherlock roll his eyes and open his mouth to object, but a nudge of John’s hand keeps him quiet.

“Alright, give me a few minutes and I’ll be right down.”

With a nod, Mycroft retreats into his study while John and Sherlock ascend the stairs. Reaching the corridor, Sherlock turns left and John turns right, each towards his own room where their clothes are stored.

“I’ll see you in a bit, yeah?” John says.

“Yes. Hopefully Mycroft will keep his litany short tonight.” Sherlock replies. “I’d hate it if he bored you into a stupor.”

“I can handle him.” John’s smile is only a bit tight. “Are you feeling ok?”

“Yes. Don’t worry, the worst symptoms are over now. My legs still ache a bit, but I’m feeling better than a few days ago.”

“And the cravings?”

“Tolerable.”

“Sherlock...”

“John. I’m fine. It’s all fine. I’ve done this before, I know my limits.”

Sherlock can see the struggle on John’s face, but his doctor gives up in the end and sighs.
“Alright. Go and get changed, then. You’ve dripped all over Mycroft’s carpet, so mission accomplished there.”

“If Mycroft gets too obnoxious, try flinging a tart at him, or some biscuits...he gets easily distracted by food.” The twinkle in Sherlock’s eyes makes John feel as if there is a fizzy drink bubbling in his veins.

“I’ll keep that in mind” he laughs. Neither of them moves to leave. They seem rooted to the spot, as if their roots got tangled together in the invisible space beneath floorboards. If this were a whirlwind romance novel, one of them would push the other against the wall and kiss him senseless. If this were an epic romance saga, they would make their way into the first available room, with the door locking behind them to grant privacy. In a gothic novel a poltergeist would choose this moment to make the lights flicker and the windows shutter in the wind. In a world where the two men standing there aren’t them, there would be some sickly-sweet admissions of adoration. Maybe, just maybe, if it were the hallway connecting the kitchen and Sherlock’s room in 221B, there would be something irresistibly domestic about this.

But this isn’t any of those things, because they aren’t anyone else. They aren’t casual and easy and flirty – not if the ordinary meanings of those words are considered. They both have a knack for drama and overreaction, but not the pushing-against-walls kind. They’re Sherlock and John, so sickly-sweet admissions and tame domesticity fall on the wrong side of possible. They are only two inhabitants of this new world of theirs, that is still unexplored, still a bit volatile. It’s very much them – a synthesis of extremes. Extremes are where they function best, the two of them. It’s the in-between that they have trouble with. In-between such as this one, when they are standing at the edge, but aren’t allowed to jump just yet. Moderation – that’s the lesson they still have to learn.

“Well, you better get going or Mycroft will send a spy to check up on you.” Sherlock says and turns away with a smirk, stalking towards his room. John remains glued to the spot for another few seconds before turning around on his heal and marching into his room.

He dumps the wet clothes in the bathroom and pulls a dry outfit out of the bag that Mycroft’s minions delivered. His head is buzzing with what might just be a beginning of a fever, but is more likely a potent cocktail of adrenalin, oxytocine, dopamine, serotonin and endorphins altering his perception. Not even the impending meeting with Mycroft can dampen John’s high. It’s a feeling very much alike to that which leaves John breathless every time he chases after Sherlock through London, or catches a perp. A moment of clarity, when his hand doesn’t shake and he feels like his skin is finally the right size, in a place where everything around him makes sense.

A battlefield.

John Watson is thrumming with the adrenalin of battles – previous ones and those that are yet to come. Because he meant what he said – things will become even more complicated now. It’s them – this was never going to anything else then another battle. They were never cut out for mundane. It will be a struggle to figure out how to make this work. But they won’t be battling each other. Rather, each will be battling himself, his own shortcomings –that’s how they’ll fight for each other. John thinks it’s the strangest war he’s ever heard of, where the other side is an ally and your own forces are the enemy, and yet it makes perfect sense.

And right there, standing in his jumper (only half-pulled on), his trousers and only one sock, John realises that the reason why it was always going to be Sherlock for him is because with anyone else it would have been so horribly mundane. With anyone else he would have had to fight for his life, fight to keep himself from going crazy with boredom. With Sherlock, he gets to live his fight and that
makes all the difference.

Because John Watson may be a blogger, and a doctor, and a brother, and a friend, but more than all those things John Watson is a soldier. And soldiers belong in battle.

It’s twisted and just a bit dark and certainly unhealthy. John loves it. He loves it the way he aims his gun—steadily and precisely. He loves it the way he takes a shot—confidently and without hesitation. He loves it the way he used to rush across firing lines to get to the wounded—recklessly and instinctively. He loves it the way he imagines an addict loves a high—passionately and against better judgement.

In short—John loves it the way he loves Sherlock.

It’s as simple as that. It’s as complicated as anything ever was. It’s exactly what John wants, what he needs.

Taking a deep breath, John finishes dressing. He has a conversation to sit through, so he might as well get it over with. Navigating his way to Mycroft’s study, John knocks on the heavy door and enters when Mycroft’s voice sounds an even ‘Come in’.

Mycroft is standing in front of the fire, a tumbler of what appears to be scotch in his left hand, with his right hand resting lazily in his pocket. The orange glow of the fire dances across the glass in Mycroft’s hand, as if trying to reach the liquid and set it ablaze. Mycroft seems deep in thought, and were it not for the fact that he summoned John, John would wonder if the older Holmes is even aware of his presence. He wonders what is so mesmerising in the flames.

“John. Please, take a seat.” Mycroft finally tears his gaze away from the fire, taking his right hand out of his pocket and waving John over to the same high-backed chair that hosted him during their last conversation. Lowering himself into his own chair, Mycroft sets his drink aside, his eyes following the movement of his hand. A couple of moments pass before he finally directs his gaze at John, who’s waiting, somewhat impatiently, for his presence to be fully acknowledges and its necessity possibly explained.

“I am sure you are aware that the news of my brother’s...involvement with you has reached me.” Mycroft begins. At first the sentence sounds rather rhetorical, so John waits to hear the rest, but Mycroft seems to be waiting for some sort of response, so John gives a short nod.

With a sigh, Mycroft’s gaze falls from John’s face onto the fire again. A pitcher of water placed on the table next to the chairs casts strange patterns of light onto Mycroft’s face.

“You are a good man, Dr. Watson, but even good men make mistakes” he says, still not meeting John’s eye.

John can feel the buzz of the night turning into something less enjoyable and more akin to outrage. Still, not wanting to cause conflict not even 3 minutes into the conversation, he keeps his voice calm but terse.

“First of all, Mycroft, whatever goes on between Sherlock and me is absolutely none of your business. Secondly, if you are trying to imply that my choices regarding Sherlock are a mistake, let me stop you right there—”

“On the contrary, John. I do not believe your choices to be mistakes, for the most part because you haven’t really made many choices of which I could have any sort of opinion. That is precisely what I
Mycroft’s voice is silk-smooth and snow-cold, and matches John’s in force and intensity. There’s no trace of his usually semi-smirk. The older Holmes’ eyes are serious and sharp, and for the first time John is truly faced with Sherlock’s Older Brother. While he never found Mycroft-The-British-Government very threatening, John has no doubts this Mycroft wouldn’t hesitate to do anything he saw fit in order to ensure Sherlock’s well-being.

“What do you mean ‘haven’t really made many choices’?” John asks.

“While you decidedly did choose to be with Sherlock, it is still questionable whether you have, in fact, actually chosen Sherlock himself.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Up to now, John, certain major events in your life, which might have seemed to be your choice, were in reality decided for you by others. Take, for instance, Miss Mary Morstan.”

John’s bemusement quickly turns into anger again, and his voice resonates sharply. He can’t possibly see how Mary is any of Mycroft’s business.

“What about Mary?”

“You didn’t really choose to end it with her.”

If it weren’t for the circumstances, John would think it down-right hilarious that Mycroft is conducting what seems to be a crash-course in romantic relationships. The idea is so surreal that John wonders if he didn’t actually catch a fever and pass out.

“We came to an understanding. She didn’t want me to have to choose between my life with her and my life with Sherlock” he says.

“And you didn’t have to, did you? She – how convenient of her– took herself out of the equation, and spared you the choice.”

John’s left fist is tightened so hard by now that his short nails manage to dig into the flesh of his sweaty palm. Letting out a long breath through his nose, he purses his lips before spitting out measured words.

“Where are you heading with this, Mycroft?” he asks, but Mycroft continues as if John hasn’t spoken.

“So, you see, you didn’t really choose your life with Sherlock – Mary Morstan chose it for you. We will never know what you would have chosen, had the occasion arisen in which you would have been forced to decide between a possible long-term relationship – one that could have easily ended in marriage and children – and a co-dependency that, on occasion, verges on pathological, with a man whose way of life means a regular exposure to life-threatening situations.

And the same goes for these recent events involving the unfortunate drug-related case. As much as I admire the tenacity you’ve exhibited while looking for Sherlock during his absence, it was nothing more than your usual dynamics – when one of you is in peril, the other works as hard as possible to rescue him. So, of course, you managed to save Sherlock. You even beat me to it. I must admit I was rather impressed. Now, I’m not trying to belittle your role in my brother’s life, nor the impact you had. I am simply trying to point to the fact that throughout the most recent course of your relationship with Sherlock, you have been chosen or chosen for, over and over again, but are still yet to make a
Pink tongue darts in and out as John licks his lips, as if slicking them up to make sure his next words fall clearly and without obstacles into the space between him and Mycroft.

“Are you saying that if I break your brother’s heart you will end me?”

“If you must put it so crudely, yes.” Mycroft’s voice is calm and very unambiguous. John knows Mycroft means every word, but it isn’t the fact that he is being threatened that bothers John. He understands Mycroft, understands the urge to hurt people who hurt Sherlock – thing is, if anyone ever tried to harm Sherlock in any way, Mycroft would have to manage the improbable feat of beating John to them.

“Sherlock isn’t a child, Mycroft, nor is he a feeble creature prone to heartbreak, that needs his big brother to protect him from other people, and least of all from me.”

“With all due respect, John, while you may consider yourself an expert on my brother, let me remind you that I have known him for a very long time – all his life, as it happens. I flatter myself that I know a considerable amount of what he is or is not prone to. Sherlock wasn’t always the man you know now, and I have seen what happens when he sets out to self-destruct. You might not think him prone to heartbreak, but I assure you that he does have a heart, and it is as susceptible to breaking as any other. It is the fallacy of being human, but as it is unavoidable, I would appreciate if you kept it in mind.”

“You make him sound like a damaged heroine from a Victorian romance novel.”

A shift in Mycroft’s eyes suddenly brings something dangerous to his stare, his voice sharpening into razor-like syllables.

“I make him sound human, Dr. Watson. As much as my brother likes to consider himself a high-functioning sociopath, nothing could be further away from the truth. It is for that reason that I warn you – it isn’t enough to choose to be with him, John, you have to choose Sherlock, and all that that choice entails. There might come times when choosing Sherlock Holmes will seem like the stupidest thing you’ve ever done, but even in those moments you will have to stand behind your choice. You two are a dangerous combination – a man with severe trust issues and a man who, while not a sociopath or a psychopath, is highly skilled in manipulation and deception. He has done it once already, and it took you quite a long time to set the matter to rest. Sherlock is brilliant, but he is also fallible, and you may find yourself unable to forgive some of his failings. Not a second time around, anyway. So, choose carefully, good doctor. I recall you said during our first ever meeting that you weren’t frightened of me because I wasn’t a very frightening man. I wouldn’t want to have to do something that would cause you to revise that statement.”

John’s breathing is laboured with anger that smells like evaporating alcohol and wood-polishing fluid.

“I said once that you could be the making of my brother, or you could make him worse than ever. I still stand by that statement. It is a dangerous thing, putting two addicts together. Oh, yes, John, you are an addict as well. Danger, peril, life-threatening situations – it’s your high. It’s why you fell so easily into the life Sherlock leads. It’s why you didn’t shun him out of your life when he came back after leaving you out for two years. And that is why you could be his downfall. Because you didn’t choose him the way he chose you when he showed up at my doorstep a week and a half ago. You chose him the way an addict chooses to shoot up, but he chose you the way an addict chooses sobriety. Quite literally, actually. Yours was a choice that felt right, while his was the one that felt wrong but was right. So, when I say that a time may come when it will be crucial that you indeed
choose Sherlock, I mean that if you will have to go against your every urge, persist in doing everything against your every instinct, then you must. If choosing him will feel like giving up on him or giving him up, you must do it, even though you won’t want to, even though it will feel wrong. Addiction is a horrible thing, Dr. Watson. It doesn’t really give you much choice. Which is why you cannot afford to make the addict’s choice, when the time comes."

“Mycroft, what the hell are you talking about?” If storm clouds were ever stolen from the sky, one would find them stored in John Watson’s eyes in that moment.

“I am simply stating that a time may come to choose a side, Dr. Watson. Truly choose.”

Seeing that John is seething, Mycroft shifts his body a bit, his expression mellowing somewhat.

“John, I am in no way questioning you’re loyalty to my brother, nor any other...sentiment you seem to have for him...”

“Really? Because it feels like that’s exactly what you are doing.”

“I am simply urging you to consider the magnitude of your decision to become even more involved with my brother.”

“And you feel this is necessary? You think I need warning not to hurt him? I would never do that, and you know it.”

“Not intentionally, no. But it is hard to fight one’s nature, and so easy to give into it, especially when it seems like the right thing to do. And there lies the danger.”

“You underestimate him. He’s not as vulnerable as you make him out to be. And you certainly seem to overestimate my ability to hurt him. Not that I ever would.”

“And you underestimate the intensity with which Sherlock can feel. As I said before, I have known him his whole life. You still see him as someone invincible, even after all that’s happened. I can’t say that I blame you – he did come back from the dead, so to speak. Hardly very human of him. And even now, only days after being rescued from captivity and suffering through a long and draining withdrawal, he seems fine. Completely unruffled. But just because he appears to be a certain way doesn’t mean he truly is. Those who do their best to avoid pain are usually those who have felt it so strongly that they know, more than others, about its destructive power. And if it cannot be avoided, it can always be hidden.

As for overestimating your ability to hurt Sherlock...even machines have weak spots, John. Those bits that make them fallible, that break down first. So, you can imagine Sherlock, being human and not a machine, despite his adamant attempts to make himself seem like one, does too.”

Did you ever try slap yourself, or bite your finger very, very hard? Physically, it isn’t that hard, but something always stops you from using your full strength. But doing so to another is much easier. It is funny how humans are masters of protecting themselves from things that can break them. Hurt becomes anger and fear becomes rage – enemies domestic to enemies foreign, we charge at others in an attempt to battle the fear we feel within, hoping that it will somehow help. Hoping that by beating them, we can beat that part of ourselves that makes us afraid.

John feels anger, only John doesn’t really feel anger. He is angry at Mycroft, but truth is “anger” is just a name – a wrong name. Some things change, but others never do, and this is one of those that remain constant. John Watson is still using wrong words. Anger-which isn’t fills him to the brim, and he knows that he has to leave. Rationalisations kick in like safety-switches: he is angry with Mycroft
for insinuating that he would ever hurt Sherlock, he is angry with Mycroft for meddling in John’s private life and assuming he has some kind of insight into John’s psyche, he is angry with Mycroft for bringing up Mary and talking about things he has no idea about, he is angry with Mycroft for being an insufferable know-it-all who doesn’t know his place.

He is angry at Mycroft for being right.

And there it is, the anger-that-isn’t, a cracked veneer placed almost sloppily over something bigger, something raw. Something true.

“Are we done here?” John asks, clinging to his mask of anger. Mycroft radiates with the air of a man utterly convinced of being right. His eyes – so much colder than his brothers, so much more observant when it comes to the human heart – rake over John’s form before Mycroft speaks.

“Yes. I hope you get a good night’s rest. Oh, and John, I would appreciate it if this conversation remained private.”

“You do know Sherlock will probably work it out, right?”

“Perhaps, but I would still prefer if you didn’t help him in guessing the exact nature of our exchange.”

“And what am I to tell him when he asks?”

“Think of something. I’m sure you’ll manage.”

“Well, that’s helpful” John murmurs. “Good night, Mycroft.”

No creak of the door marks John’s exit. No moaning of floorboards follows him to the stairwell, where he climbs until he is at the top. In winter, when it snows, the sky does a strange thing. Even after nightfall, it remains light, its hue not morphing into dark blue, but rather remaining white. A dark white sky. Like matted canvas, or a white sheet thrown over a birdcage, it stretches over the land in its inexplicable antithesis of lightness and darkness.

John Watson is like the winter sky, both light and dark at the same time. There is, of course, the love for and the fierce protectiveness of those who manage to secure a place in his heart. He is the man who fixes Mrs. Hudson’s tap when it leaks and who listens patiently to his patients’ stories because he knows that sometimes people just need to know that someone is hearing them. Among Sherlock’s extravagance, he is the simple but steady firmness of an everyday man, calm and understanding, human.

But he is also the man who revels in the darkness, who has seen the ugly face of the world and fell in love with it. He is an adrenalin junkie whose hand shakes when he walks through the park, but remains perfectly still when he is aiming a gun or being held hostage by madmen. He is a healer who gets a bigger thrill from flesh being ripped apart by a bullet than it being sown together by needle and thread, one who went into a warzone when an operating room wouldn’t do, and who wields a gun as aptly as a stethoscope.

John Watson was never afraid of the dark. He never slept with a nightlight. The shadows were never containers of nightmares for him. He loved it, but was afraid of loving it. He loved it the way a child loves a forbidden storybook or a teenager loves a dirty magazine that sleeps hidden beneath his mattress – secretly, half in denial and half in attempts of justification.

Truth is, there is something dark about John Watson. Which is why the idea of risking everything makes his heart flutter with excitement instead of anguish, and why Mycroft is right – John fell for
Sherlock’s life style very, very easily. There is something dark about John Watson, and that’s alright, because humans are not just one thing, and darkness is an integral part of them. The darkness is alright, because John Watson is only human. But because he is human, he needs Sherlock to indestructible, just as Mycroft said.

They can’t both be human. One has to be more. Sherlock has to be more. Sherlock has to be Sherlock – the antithero who saved John, the ultimate fix for John’s addiction, indestructible, constant, invincible. Because, if they’re both human – well, then that’s a recipe for a disaster. If Sherlock is indestructible then John’s darkness is just another shade in the spectrum, the link which allows them to be who they are.

But if he isn’t, then John’s darkness might just be too much all together.

Have you ever seen an addict in search for a fix? They will go to incredible lengths to get it.

Standing at the top of the stairs, John allows himself, just for a moment, to look past the veneer of anger and at the truth behind it. What he sees is more frightening than any war, because what he sees is confirmation of Mycroft’s words. He is an addict, thriving on danger – one who would do anything not to lose his high. Give up anything. Or anyone. Even if it seems as if he were choosing them.

Standing at the top of the stairs, for the first time in his life, John Watson is afraid of the dark.

But there is a strip of light shining in the dark corridor – a literal one – so John moves towards it, almost on autopilot. He knows what to do. Mycroft said he would have to choose. He might as well start right away, with a choice that was never really a choice but the only viable option.

He chooses Sherlock.

It’s still partly an addict’s choice, but John doesn’t care. Determined that he will choose Sherlock as many times and in as many ways as it is necessary, he pushes the door to his room open.

Legs crossed into a lotus pose, Sherlock sits in the middle of the bed. His eyes flit to the door as John enters the room, the soft glow of the bedside lamp casting shadows across the pale man’s face. Softness of expression that adorned it only moments before disappears, a frown settling low between Sherlock’s eyebrows as he takes in John’s still-tense figure.

“What happened?” Sherlock asks, scooting over to the edge of the bed. “What did Mycroft want?”

“Nothing.”

“That was quite a lot of time you spent discussing nothing.”

A tired sigh escapes John’s lips.

“He just wanted to go over your care plan for once we’re back at the flat in Baker St. Which is supposed to be tomorrow.”

“Good. Finally.”

A guarded quality seeps into Sherlock’s posture as he stands up and approaches John, who is still having trouble meeting the other man’s eye.

“What’s wrong?” Sherlock echoes.
“Nothing’s wrong, Sherlock. Honestly.”

“You’re angry.” John wonders sometimes if the Holmes brothers even hear him while having a conversation with him, because it really doesn’t read like that from their blatant disregard for his responses. But he knew that it would be impossible to hide anything from Sherlock, so he grabs the opportunity to at least have him believe the anger sham. Before John can confirm or deny, Sherlock continues.

“You are angry, but I can’t tell why. It is possible that it has to do with me, but…”

“No. I’m not angry with you, Sherlock. Okay?”

Sherlock’s stare is intense, but the subtle shift of relief in it tells John that he isn’t the only one emotionally compromised here. Glad to finally have the feeling that he understands at least a bit of what’s going on, John pushes on.

“I am not angry with you. In fact, I am really glad that I found you here. I know we had this conversation earlier, but I just want to say this again – this is real, Sherlock. This. Us. This is what I want. This is what I choose. Just if I wasn’t clear earlier.”

John can still feel Sherlock’s brain buzzing, trying to piece together a conclusion from ridiculous clues made up of the way John’s sleeve shifts in the draught or the way the greys in his hair align with the blond parts, or something equally improbable.

“No, stop. Stop deducing. Just, for once, take my word for what it is, and nod if you understand.”

Sherlock nods, but it’s just a technicality, John knows. Deciding to abandon a technique he was never really good at, and which is obviously failing to fulfil its task, John does the one thing he always did best – he gives up on trying to word what he wants to relay, and lets actions speak instead.

A bullet that was their start, a tackle of a maniac that could have been his ending, danger night searches that were his care, a fall that was a dedication, a punch that was a ‘welcome back’, an escape-that-wasn’t that was a vow and two kisses which were a goodbye and a hello, in that order.

They were never good at speaking their minds (hearts), but they were always brilliant at acting them out.

With both of his hands travelling at same speed to the sides of Sherlock’s face, John kisses him in a way that is supposed to say ‘Here, I chose. Here, stop it now, let it just be this. This is what I choose.’. Those are insanely high expectations from a single kiss, but John hopes at least some of it found its way across the infinitesimal space between their lips.

Breaking apart, Sherlock’s eyes are no longer buzzing with attempts at deduction. Instead, they are the strangest mixture of clouded and blazing, like sunlight burning the bellies of cloud at sundown. John is pleased that he manages to stop the frenzied train of thought that would have lead, inevitably, to unwanted conclusions, but with Sherlock looking at him like that now, he isn’t quite sure where to go from there.

“I, urm...do you want to stay here tonight or...?” he stumbles clumsily over his words.

“Yes.” Sherlock’s answer is very simple, very direct – almost forceful.

“Ok then. Urm...I suppose you’re probably tired. You should-”
“No.”

“Sorry?”

“I am not tired.”

“Oh. Right.”

“And I don’t want to sleep.”

“Ok.” A beat passes in which Sherlock is standing so (maddeningly) close, staring at John with an unrelenting steadiness. There’s a message in that stare, and it is quite clear. It’s not even code any more...well, not a complicated one, anyway. But it’s them, so they must play it out till the end. John licks his lips, his breath coming out in warm puffs between their faces.

“So what do you want, then?” he asks, and he swears Sherlock almost smirks.

“I want you to do again what you did just now.” If John knew how to read music, maybe he would be able to write down the exact tone and depth of Sherlock’s voice in that moment, but he can’t, so he just lets it reverberate through the air and over his skin. The tone alone is teasing, taunting, even without the words’ meaning. But two can play that game, so John does an impression of an idiot, something Sherlock accused him of plenty of times, just to give Sherlock a demonstration of what it really looks like when he is trying to be obtuse.

“Which part exactly?” John asks, but the chatter is apparently taking too long for Sherlock’s liking, because his answer comes in form of another clash of lips.

“That part” he replies, drawing back. Slightly out of breath, he doesn’t move far out of John’s space, which is just as well, because it makes it that easier for John to close the distance once again after uttering a quick ‘Ok, then’.

Actions were always their preferred language, and as the stumble onto the bed, sliding and shifting clothes out of the way, it is the most eloquent and elaborate conversation they’ve ever had.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so the next one will be the M rated chapter and it should be up tomorrow :)
Sherlock thinks that there are deductions that should be made. Something is going on, with John, and the clues are right there for Sherlock to read, but John is too close and he’s making it all impossible. Like a text being held too close to the eyes, John’s invading Sherlock’s space, eliminating any possibility of a clear read. John’s lips are on his own, and John’s body is pressing closer, closer and closer yet, until Sherlock is in no way able to distinguish who’s stealing whose oxygen, until there is so little air between them that they seem to be breathing in each other.

This would usually be a problem, but right now, it really isn’t. None of what’s happening could in any way be categorised as a problem. It’s most definitely not a problem. It is, however, a lot of other things.

It’s a conflagration, blazing and rapid. It’s the coldest of waters, pulling him under, heavenly heavy around him. The feeling is a wondrous paradox of sensations that threatens to burn Sherlock to a crisp, while causing him to drown at the same time. Fire and water battle for dominance, as sweat trails his hot skin, stealing its heat as if trying to put out a fire that hasn’t even ignited yet. Pre-emptive strikes.

Opposite to expectations, when they manage to navigate onto the bed, Sherlock’s back hitting it like a heavy feather, graciously, but with a thud, and John intertwines his knees with Sherlock’s, steadily eradicating any remaining distance between them, skin to skin, Sherlock doesn’t become lost for words – ‘such a ridiculous notion, preposterous ignorance about factors influencing cognitive functioning’ – because, if anything, words are truly Sherlock’s forte. Oh no, Sherlock doesn’t lose his words – quite the opposite. He feels as if he is turning into words, into descriptions and exclamations, theorems and postulations. With every movement and every touch, he feels the unnecessary terms dissipate, until what is left falls into place – perfect syntax forged in flames and floods, out of fertile ground left in their wake.

When John’s lips move from Sherlock’s own, to the hollow juncture between his collar bones, Sherlock feels like a lexical entry, a dictionary definition of a word written in writhes of body and tremors of air.

“John...”

As gentle hands come to rest on Sherlock’s bare shoulders, John’s name becomes a refugee breath making its escape from Sherlock’s mouth before he can catch it, and Sherlock’s whole being becomes its definition. If one wanted to understand the meaning of ‘John’, understand his effect, if one was to look where to place and use ‘John’ within a sentence, they would find it all there, find John explained across Sherlock’s skin, in the disarray of his hair and the radius of his pupils.
Sherlock morphs himself into John’s explanation, his etymology and meaning, translation into various tongues, alphabets, and codes. Gooseflesh of Sherlock’s skin speaks of John in Braille’s letters, legible only to John’s fingertips as they move from joint to joint, from sinew to sinew, and John can close his eyes and still see, still know and read Sherlock, read all definitions himself, all he is to the brilliant man stretched out in front of him.

Warm fingers trail skin in order to underline examples of use of ‘John’ in various contexts, travelling left-to-right to read Old English and Glagolitic along Sherlock’s clavicle, right-to-left to decode Arabic and Hebrew hidden in the swirls of curls on the nape of Sherlock’s neck, and (finally) up-to-down, reading ancient Chinese symbols and Egyptian hieroglyphs on the parchment-scroll of Sherlock’s chest and stomach. The flexing of Sherlock’s fingers against the sheets that occurs as result of John’s hand slipping lower, lower and lower still, speaks of John in sign language, and when they move to John’s back, nails leaving marks in Linear B, it is only to compensate for any information that failed to be relayed through moans in Greek alphabet and sharp gasps scribbled in mid-air in Cyrillic.

There aren’t enough languages, not enough alphabets in all of human history that would suffice in capturing and defining John precisely, so Sherlock doesn’t limit himself to them. There are numerous ways of conveying messages and meaning, and Sherlock uses as many as his body will allow him to write John’s definition. Heartbeats in binary. Blush on pale skin below blue-green eyes – red, white, blue, green – international maritime signal flags.

John seems intent on imprinting even more of himself on Sherlock, amending gaps and incomplete information with his hands, his lips, his breath. He draws nonsense patterns along Sherlock’s sides – ‘code, it must be code, with a meaning, with ah-...’ – and on the back sides of his knees. It feels like calligraphy. Even now, they’re men speaking in code.

There is pressure that doesn’t feel cold, so it can’t be water, but that doesn’t feel light, either, so it cannot be fire. It is fire-hot and water-heavy, but Sherlock can’t remember the meaning of ‘fire’ or ‘water’, or ‘hot’ or ‘heavy’, not in any context outside the present, so they all come down to one word, the only important word, which seems to encompass them all, hold attributes of all of them.

John.

John is fire and water, and pressure and heat, and so much more, everything more, and Sherlock is the lexicon of all his meanings, cataloguing them, living them, feeling them. They make for a perfect pair – the definition of the word, and the actual entity it denotes, pressed skin-to-skin, merging until they are indelible, as is only right. Sherlock’s body shivers, shudders and then (finally, finally, fina-oh...) convulses, the word being screamed by erratic spasms, his muscles spelling out John’s name in Morse code.

Sherlock feels John shudder, as if he is cold despite the heat, and then they’re like continents that have just merged and enclosed a living, beating, burning heart of a planet beneath and between them, with the last shivers of a world being born still ripping through both of them. This place, this time, this – this state of being – it is the juncture point where the hot heart of the planet slithers into salty water, molten lava spilling into the ocean. Burning waters. As Sherlock’s bodysteadies, the only movement rattling him being the beat of his heart, he lies still and lets it fill him up, to the brim. For just a moment, it seems to shake out the words (not all words, John. John. John.), replacing them with a primal rhythm that preceded them, in that time before words came to be. It is the hot-cold lump of salt-crusted, ocean-chilled lava. It’s visceral. It’s tectonic.
Originally this chapter was supposed to contain both POVs, but I decided to break it up into two parts. John's POV should be up soon :)

John watches Sherlock’s face beneath him, watches lips part and hears gasps escape, like flocks of starlings fleeing to the sky in various formations, and admires how such unarticulated sounds can still sound eloquent. John doesn’t know, but he can guess what sort of whirlwind is ravaging Sherlock’s mind, words upon words wanting to be spoken, but each falling short of being able to express the fervour that is so evidently carved into Sherlock’s expression. It is a lovely sight to be seen. But what John sees in Sherlock’s parted lips and hooded eyes, in the tight muscles doing their best not to break the bones beneath them in half, are not words. After all, out of the two of them, Sherlock is the orator, the master of words. John sees what he’s always seen. He sees the one on sight which has the power (which always had the power) to induce contradicting feelings, to make him both angry and amused, thrilled and disappointed. He sees the man who is a lot of things, but who is always a source of awe for John.

John simply sees Sherlock. Sprawled beneath him, in the soft cage formed around Sherlock out of John’s forearms that rest next to the other man’s head, and the long tangle of legs that makes for the most intricate weaving pattern, John sees everything he’s always seen – brilliance, complexity, passion, just a sliver of other-worldliness, curiosity, invincible spark of life – all seemingly more concentrated than usual in this state of voluntary, elated disarray, blindingly bright and impossibly stunning. There’s no need for metaphors and rhapsodic mystifications, because none would ever live up to seeing Sherlock for exactly what he is. Sun-bright and as impossible as true loss of energy, he eludes and transcends John’s verbal skills.

Sherlock is the one who takes people apart to bits and constructs them back in deductions as eloquent as Greek epics, the one who can get a holistic impression from a single trace. Sherlock’s the analyst, the scientist, breaking apart molecules and data until he can break them down no more, in order to gain a better understanding of the whole. But not John.

John sees, feels, experiences Sherlock on a level no intellect can fully comprehend. It’s a level so visceral that it predates words and cognition altogether. Permeating and all-encompassing, Sherlock is like some abstract term that can only be experienced. Like explaining the colour green to a blind child, it is so incredibly difficult to describe the exact quality of warmth that zips across John’s skin as Sherlock’s hands come to rest on his shoulders, being used as levers to lift the rest of the man’s body up, up, up until lips meet lips, like broken seams being mended back into a faultless whole, and eyes that close to grant the sense of touch it’s moment in the spotlight. As they part, breath coming in and out heavily like that of men treading water, John opens his eyes and looks at the world at his fingertips. World at the tip of his lips.

So John simply looks at Sherlock.

Except, there is nothing simple about that. There is nothing simple about the feeling that shoots
through John, from the tips of his eyelashes, over the roots of his spinal nerves, down his back and out to the tips of his fingers and toes, seeping into his aorta, rushing to every bit of living tissue, the feeling he gets when he sees Sherlock’s half-closed eyes and half-open mouth posed elegantly in an expression of utter ecstasy. There is nothing simple about the shudders that shake him when Sherlock says his name like the most fascinating word in the English language (in any language), making it sound as if he is sacrificing the last of air in his lungs just to propel it into the commotion of air and breath and limbs that they make. There is nothing simple about the way he can feel Sherlock’s fingers drawing lines over his skin, and he feels like a new world being mapped out by a pedant cartographer. Every swipe of Sherlock’s hand, every slide of skin leaves new marks, new data, dots down new discoveries until John is the most detailed atlas in existence. It is right, and natural, and oh-god-yes, but it is in no way simple. But that’s alright, that’s how it should be. They were never made for simple.

John ducks his head to plant another kiss to Sherlock’s lips, sharp teeth gentle against the thin skin of them. It is such an amazing display of vulnerability – a kiss. A willing, welcome intrusion of someone else into the softest, most defenceless bits of us. It isn’t much more than moderate pressure, work of 34 facial muscles, slide of puckered skin drawn taught over nerve endings, but it is everything more. It is opening up and letting go, letting someone in. It is the best defence against perjury. Lies come so easily through words, but lying one’s way through a kiss is not as easy a feat. It is a special kind of intimacy, able of leaving one naked even when no clothes are shed. There is honesty to a kiss that borders on frightening. So, John lowers his head, planting a soft kiss that soon transforms into something more, evolves into a more complex being, millennia of evolution from single-cell organisms to vertebrates condensed in 22.1 seconds and a single sigh.

They kiss and there is nothing simple about the way John feels like a soldier being stripped of his uniform and a doctor being stripped of his white coat, of his armour, until he isn’t Captain John Watson or Doctor John Watson, until his identification isn’t written in letters graven onto round dog tags but stamped all across his skin, and he has no title to hide behind, no rank to help define him. No rules to confine him. No oaths to keep him hostage of expectations that go against his nature. No lies or half-truths or omissions designed to defend him. Right there, under Sherlock’s fingers, he is all he’s ever been, in the simplest of terms (which just happen to be the most complicated ones, too).

Under Sherlock’s fingers, he’s John. Just John. And being ‘just John’ is possibly the most precarious of all options, because being ‘just John’ means...what does it even mean? Captain John and Doctor John are relatively easy to comprehend, roles so well learned that they provide the safety of home. But John, just John, with no prefixes...John is a conundrum.

Because being ‘just John’ means being just...everything. Everything he owns, prides himself on.

Sherlock’s eyes open wide as John lets his left hand wonder lower like an alpinist descending down the long expanse of Sherlock’s ribs, and Sherlock’s irises fight a futile battle against the growing of his pupils, black whirlpools progressing in victory against the blue rings, all clouds-dissolving-in-clear-water and want and need and...

Everything John tries to keep at bay, attempts to control.

Sherlock’s eyes open wide, all clouds-dissolving-in-clear-water and want and need and...something.

Everything he denies.

Sherlock’s eyes open wide, all clouds-dissolving-in-clear-water and want and need and...and. And love.

There it is, plain as day, and just as bright, being projected like a reverse visual signal – light sending
an image out of Sherlock’s eyes instead of into them. As John’s alpinist hand travels lower, lower
and lower yet, Sherlock’s eyes never leave John’s face, except for those brief moments when their
contact is replaced by that of lips.

Sherlock looks at John. Simply looks at John, the way John simply looks at Sherlock, and it’s all but
simple, because it is in that moment that John feels truly naked. Because, looking at John, Sherlock
sees just John. Just everything.

everything-he-owns-pride-himself-on-everything-John-tries-to-keep-at-bay-attempts-to-control-
everything-he-denies

Everything he fears.

John Watson isn’t a man who scares easily. He is a war veteran who’s witnessed the vilest of human
tendencies. He is a doctor who’s seen his share of death and suffering. It disgusts him, at times,
saddens him at others, but it never really scares him. Out of all the things in the world, there is one
that frightens him much more than the muddy abysses of minds of psychopaths or the deep red pools
of life cooling off and away on floors of make-shift surgery tents in the middle of a dry, grating
desert vastness. It is one of the most primal fears, but flipped around.

Fear of the Dark.

Only, people usually fear the dark because dark is indecipherable, it evokes the fear of the unknown.
John Watson doesn’t fear the dark because he doesn’t know what awaits him there. The dark isn’t
unknown. He fears it because he knows exactly what awaits him there – knows it oh-so-well. His
own, personal Dark. The desire, the love of the thrill, the need, the addiction – each bit of dark matter
that stands antithetical to everything he is supposed to wish for. It is the Dark that cackles as futile
attempts at simple, pedestrian life. It is the Dark that taunts and teases because it knows that simple,
ordinary life – a safe life, a well-rounded, healthy life – would be death for John Watson. Death by
starvation of the soul.

Sherlock’s fingernails draw lines across John’s back, like tracking routes in a Hansel-and-Gretel style
of marking his way home on John’s skin. His way back to John. John’s way back to him. Home.
And right there, in that stare, in the way Sherlock doesn’t blink or look away once, John finds what
he needs.

Danger, adrenalin – the thrill of the chase. Danger of being seen for what he is. Danger of being true.
The danger of ‘just – ’. An addict’s fix. A nightlight that, rather than dissipating the Dark, allows
John to embrace it.

Thrill surges up like the tide, as he draws his teeth ever-so-lightly over the thin, breakable skin of
Sherlock’s wrist. Skin-white and vein-blue and blush-capillary-red paint his life into a melting, ever-
changing mural now, jumping off Sherlock’s body like neon signs on train stations, inviting him to
board the fast train to Oblivion.

coalescing in a single point in the night-shaded and skin-coloured dawn of their new world, Eros and
Thanatos doing their eternal Paso doble – a perfect Freudian example. But this time it is John’s own
life that he is saving and risking, all at the same time. Because this could just be the end of him, but
he doesn’t care because it’s the most alive he’s felt in a long, long time.

Sherlock writhes, all sinewy movements and short-lived gasps. Friction threatens to incinerate them,
and for a crazy moment John wonders if this is what the Earth feels like when two tectonic plates rub
against each other, leaving hot magma in their wake.
That visceral feeling that’s bright and non-verbal and ‘Sherlock’ doesn’t abate, and it feels like an overdose. John knows that if he were ever to be forced to go through a withdrawal, ever denied this, he wouldn’t make it. So, no – it **definitely** isn’t simple. Because ‘this’ isn’t just the physical, isn’t just the closer-close-closer until there is genuine threat of skin-burn. *This* is all of it. *This* is everything. Just everything.

Because, of all the scary, scary things John Watson has seen and done and lived to tell about, the one he fears the most is himself. The person he would become if he were forced back into a life without Sherlock. And the person he knows he is capable of becoming in order to prevent that from ever happening.

And it is frightening and delicious at the same time, this utter exposure, owning one’s true form. There is something dark about John Watson, but that’s alright, because there is something Dark about Sherlock Holmes too, and their Darks seem to be of the same variety, siblings hatched from the same marble-black egg. But this time, the Dark is ok, because this time, for the first time, John Watson comes to own it, instead of the other way around, and it is no longer great and vast and endless, but simply a part – a shadowy corner in a brightly lit auditorium.

Ink-black is still staining the sky outside, but in the dim room dawn comes, condensing in shiny droplets of sweat. It isn’t completely bright, this darkish sort of dawn, but as John looks at Sherlock, feels the arching of the Detective’s body that soon dissolves into limpness and breathing and heartbeat, the only thing dominating his vision is light. The light grows brighter and brighter. Lazy, sated hands never abandon their ministrations over John’s skin, until the air in front of John’s eyes bursting like a nova in the night-sky of John’s Dark when Sherlock’s hands mimic the path John’s hands made across his body.

So, no, *this* isn’t simple. Because *love* is never simple. Not for them, anyway.

But that’s alright. They were never made for simple. Simple would, surely, be the death of them.
I wake with good intentions

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the wait, life’s been hectic this week (and will continue to be so for the next three, so...) and I’ve only been managing to get writing done during the night. Well, hope this doesn't disappoint.

Enjoy!

Sleep seems to be a commodity available only in limited amounts and at the moment John Watson holds monopoly over it. Sherlock’s eyes are wide in the dark, retinas struggling to make out shapes in the poorly moonlit gloom. Acutely aware of the strange sensation caused by sharing a bed with another breathing, moving body, he catalogues the input, trying to distract his thought process by focusing on the way his senses are challenged to adapt to the new situation. Sheet slithers against skin, linen whispers engaging in a bit of kiss-and-tell. Sherlock blames the residue vestiges of detox for his insomnia, but his brain isn’t helping either.

Thoughts rotate in his head, re-playing this whole ordeal, which can easily be classified as a not-fully-voiced novaturient streak that’s been threading its way in their lives even before their lives became theirs, before they found each other and became themselves in their current form. Thirst coats Sherlock’s tongue, first like a fine layer of dust but progressing quickly into the insufferable aridity of desert planes. He lifts the sheet that covers him, watches for a moment the effect of cold air surprising the still-sweaty skin of John’s back before letting the white cover of wrinkled fabric reclaim its place over John’s sleeping form. Not blundering (because Sherlock Holmes never blunders) around, he starts looking for his garments. The floor likes like a deserted battlefield, dark slumps of discarded clothes resembling corpses abandoned after conflict. Managing to pick up a few of his own pieces, Sherlock covers himself up. The room is silver and black, all sharp angles of shadows and illusions of midnight light playing tricks over the intricate interior. Coldness of such light is completely incompatible with the warmth that swirls in the room like a languid cloud of smoke. The now-sleeping fire and something else...two bodies, each with their own heat, contributing to the temperature level, cause the space to be at odds with itself. Looking cold, when in fact it is near blazing. An unsustainable condition.

Sherlock’s gaze falls onto his feet, the only part of him touched by light from the window. Ghostly pale, they feel detached from him in a way, as if they might start moving and take him somewhere without him ordering them to do so. Where to, where to...?

Snapping out of his trance, Sherlock moves towards the door. Tentative steps betray no sound as Sherlock makes his way across the cocoon of warmth and sleep-breath that they’ve created for themselves. Metal-cold-dead the knob is a liquid nitrogen stamp branding his palm in comparison with the flesh-warm-living of John’s palm that’s been the sole sensation caressing the receptors on Sherlock’s palm only moments ago. Loss of heat, loss of contact, loss... Sherlock twists the knob the way a butcher twists necks of poultry and opens the door.He’s got time, he knows. Dawn is still just a faint outline of an idea the night is contemplating, an uncertain possibility in the relatively near
future. John will be asleep for hours, bar any nightmares. There won’t be any, Sherlock knows. Not tonight. He crosses the threshold of the room and closes the door. The lock clicks in soft reprimand. On the other side of the door, John doesn’t stir.

Echoes of his feet padding bare on the hardwood floor that peeks from under the very edges of the carpet trailing the corridor are quieter than they should be, given his weight and the size of the space. Almost as if it is another pair of feet trailing slightly behind in time, the sound comes out distorted yet hauntingly familiar. Sherlock knows it’s in his head and yet he can’t rid himself of the sound. It sounds like his feet, only smaller, lighter, pink and bare against the floor of the top floor of a medium-sized, two-story house he grew up in. Cursing his own mind, he tries not to draw parallels between his current progression and the way he used to sneak into Mycroft’s room when the branches of the birch outside his window flogged against the glass during storms. Seeking out big brother when the storm becomes too much to handle – Sherlock stopped doing that ages ago. Another relapse, then.

Wandering around the halls, he treads the well-known root to Mycroft’s room. His brother won’t be asleep, he knows. The man is even less dependent on sleep than Sherlock – a handy trait when one’s running quite a big chunk of the free world. He wonders if Mycroft will have guessed already the purpose of Sherlock’s little late-night visit. Surely, the older Holmes won’t miss out on the opportunity to quip up with some jab about Sherlock and John, but Sherlock’s ready to put up with it. The situation calls for sorting out of priorities.

He doesn’t knock. It’s not even an expression of spite, but simply one of habit. No matter what, he never had to knock. Besides, Mycroft doesn’t either when he barges into Sherlock’s life. Turnabout is fair play.

“46 seconds of waiting in front of my door before entering. Whatever is on your mind won’t make for an easy conversation, will it?” Mycroft’s hunched over the work desk in his bedroom, a small lamp bathing the corner in a waxy yellow.

Sherlock rolls his eyes at his brother’s showing off. And John calls him theatrical.

“It’s about the case.” Sherlock’s feet are barely in the room. Mycroft continues writing without looking up.

“No, it isn’t.”

Confusion (but no, not really true confusion – only it’s well-crafted impersonator) carves lines over Sherlock’s face.

“Of course it is. It is about the case. My case.”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

“Mycroft!” Sherlock’s voice booms too loud for the witching hour. Mycroft sighs a heavy sigh of a man long-suffering the same nuisance, before replying in a tone of an exasperated adult explaining something to a child who should really be in bed.

“It’s not about the case, Sherlock. Not the gist of it, anyway. It’s late. Let’s not waste time pretending we don’t both know what this is really about.”

Petulant silence comes as Sherlock’s only reply. (Only, again, petulance is a sham...Sherlock is the king of masquerades.)

“It’s what everything’s been about. For quite some time now.”
“And since you seem to know my own mind better than I do, please enlighten me. What is this about?” Sarcasm drips off Sherlock’s words like resin from a wounded tree trunk. Mycroft finally stops scribbling, raising his eyes to Sherlock’s. Blank like an unprinted page, his face holds no emotion as he replies, two (truest) words striking with the precision of a guided missile.

“John Watson.”

If it were anyone else, Sherlock’s almost imperceptible flinch would go unnoticed, but since it’s Mycroft, Sherlock knows every tell of his body might as well be a neon sign. Mycroft catches even the most miniscule of reactions. It’s the same conversation they’ve had already, only the roles seem to be reversed now. A negative of a déjà vu.

But opposite to Sherlock’s expectation, Mycroft doesn’t take it further. There’s no taunting, no unwanted comments. Instead, Mycroft’s eyes scan over Sherlock, followed by a short nod of head, as if Mycroft’s agreeing with some inner voice that remains inaudible to Sherlock. He turns back to his writing.

“I’m not letting you on the case of your own abduction, Sherlock.”

“Yes, you are.”

“You sound very certain of yourself.”

“You’ve been stuck for weeks now. No new leads, nothing to go on. Old trails have gone cold and your people have once again confirmed their status as incapable. You need me on this case, Mycroft. I’m the only one who can find Small and the rest of his band of thugs.”

There is victory in Sherlock voice. He knows he’s made his case. Moreover, he knows Mycroft knows. It’s the thrill of being irrefutably right. As way of ascending to Sherlock’s line of reasoning, Mycroft skips the actual act of agreeing and moves onto the practicalities.

“Naturally, you will want to take John with you when you located them.” It’s not a question. It was never a question.

“If by take you mean invite to come along, then yes.” Of course Sherlock will want John along. As stated – it was never a question. Just as Sherlock’s letting the buzz of getting Mycroft to agree to all this and of the idea of him and John doing what they do best, together, fill him like electrified fog, Mycroft speaks up again.

“Will you tell him about Mary?” Mycroft’s voice is quiet, calm and steady. It is the voice one uses to talk about the weather. Smooth like well-kept suede, it fools one into believing the deceiving innocuousness of the exchange. Sherlock, still rooted in front of the door, gnashes his teeth.

“I will have to, won’t I? Can’t really invite him to come along without telling him.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t invite him.”

“That’s not an option.”

“Why not?”

Is Mycroft an idiot? Of course he has to invite John. He has to, because John wouldn’t forgive him if he didn’t. Not a second time around.

“You know why.” The incredulity caused by Mycroft playing dumb – Mycroft. Playing dumb. –
shocks Sherlock into motion so he walks over and plops down on the edge of Mycroft’s bed.

“‘Trust issues’ – you’ve read his file. Trust issues combined with my last...escapade. Leaving John out of the loop this time is not an option. Not this time, and not ever again. I’m not an idiot. I rarely make mistakes, and even when I do, I never make the same one twice.”

“He may not want to come after you tell him. He may not even want to stay.”

“And that is a possibility of which I am fully aware, brother.”

“This could prove unwise, brother mine.”

“I don’t need lecturing, Mycroft. That’s not what I came here for.”

“Oh? And what is it, then, that you’ve come for? I don’t recall us being in habit of midnight chats. We’re hardly kids anymore, Sherlock, and unless I’ve missed something, you rarely seek out my company unless it is truly necessary.”

“Would you believe me if I said I’ve come for your delightful manner?”

“As much as I would if you claimed to have come in order for us to braid each other’s hair.”

Sherlock can’t help a smirk that snaps his lips into a bow across his cheeks. No matter how obnoxious, Mycroft is hardly a fool. In fact, he is the one person who makes Sherlock put in effort in order to keep up, because behind the unimpressive beige of his three-piece suits and the unreadable set of his features, Mycroft is a whole mechanism ticking meticulously in perfect order, numerous bits and pieces working together. Like different Mycroft’s all working to form the final product, a versatile, multifaceted design equipped to deal with any conundrum that arises.

Mycroft, whom Sherlock scowls at, mocks, avoids and spites. Mycroft, who spies on Sherlock, scolds him, meddles and insinuates, annoyingly omniscient and omnipresent. Mycroft, who lectures and preaches and bores Sherlock to death. Mycroft – the man who manipulates and arranges people like chest pieces, all while sporting a (seemingly) docile smile and the facade of the very definition of the term ‘exemplary’. The most dangerous man in England, if the occasion calls for it. The only one who’s never given up on Sherlock (well, besides John...but John wasn’t always there to not give up). The only man other than himself whom Sherlock trust enough with John Watson’s life.

“I came to tell you that since we’re leaving for Baker Street tomorrow, I will be able to start working on the case, so do send over the files.” Sherlock stands up to leave before Mycroft can drag him further into the conversation. He doesn’t see it, be he knows his brother has gone back to writing, ink being bullied onto paper without mercy. Mercy never was Mycroft’s forte. Just as he is about to make his grand escape, Sherlock is once again stopped by Mycroft’s voice.

“If that were really true, you could have waited till morning, easily. Ergo, whatever prompted you to get out of bed was important and troublesome enough to keep you awake. A few years ago, I would have believed you if you said it was the case. But not anymore. Which is why I have to urge you to think about what I said, Sherlock. You may be overestimating the extent to which John Watson is able and willing to go, regarding certain matters.”

Something snaps in Sherlock’s expression, causing his next words to come out in a barely-contained rage-rush.

“No, Mycroft. You are the one who is tragically underestimating John. You’ve been doing it right from the start.”
Facing Mycroft, he is aware of the too-rapid raise of his chest for a man standing still. Mycroft looks at him, an amused, ironic smile screwed tightly onto his face like an ugly door penchant.

“Well...I guess I’ll take your word for it. After all, you do know him more...intimately than I do.”

A twitch of muscle in Sherlock’s jaw is a traitorous break in his otherwise-expressionless poker-face, and Mycroft’s chuckle burns like salt being rubbed into open wounds.

“And to answer your unvoiced request, which is the actual reason you came – yes, in case something happens and both your lives are put in danger, I will stay true to my promise and make sure he’s safe. I held up my side of that particular bargain last time as well, didn’t I?”

Sherlock can only nod, because, damn it, he hates that he feels relief at the fact that despite everything, Mycroft still knows Sherlock and is willing to do as promised. With another nod, Mycroft dismisses him, but not before getting the last of his opinion wedged into the folds of Sherlock’s mind.

“Although, that aspect of my involvement might become a bigger problem than we first calculated. Goodnight, Sherlock.”

Sherlock stomps out of the room and back towards John’s, doing his best to ignore the way Mycroft’s words gnaw at him. It isn’t doubt – he does not doubt John – but the maddening fact that Mycroft is often better at reading people than Sherlock ever was. And John, no matter how special, is still human. But no-no-no, Sherlock knows John. Knows him in ways no one will ever be allowed to know him again. In ways no one else would even be able to start to fathom. Sherlock knows John. And Mycroft – Mycroft doesn’t know a thing. He doesn’t even know why he thought going to him was anything but a horrid idea.

Brown – wood- carpet – vast – corridor – too far – bedroom – John – Sherlock’s journey seems to take ages. He almost runs the last few meters to the door. The wood seems to be breathing in rhythm with John. Steady and soft, it lulls Sherlock out of panic a bit. Slipping back into the room, he presses the door closed. If he could, he would seal it up, make it air-tight so that nothing can enter. Silicone glue and cement. He’d make this room his tomb, if that’s what it took. The door would melt into the wall.

But he knows he can’t. Even if he managed to eliminate the door, the window would remain. Even if no one else was allowed in, light would find them. Ugly, bright light, exposing underbellies of thoughts and unappealing sides of intention. That’s the advantage of night – it is merciful in its blindness.

Sherlock crawls back under the covers, where John has since turned toward the door, so that he is facing Sherlock’s side of the bed. Facing Sherlock. It’s a strange sensation, sharing a bed. Sherlock is sure he could get used to it. He could get used to the way John’s breath tickles when Sherlock puts his face too close, and the way John’s hand lays lax and available for taking, right there, inches away from Sherlock’s own. Sherlock can be adaptable, if he wants to. And here, he certainly does.

As sleep finally sinks its teeth into Sherlock’s flesh, Mycroft’s damned words find their way from under the door, sneaking into Sherlock’s semi-somnolent mind, and he wonders for how much longer will John be facing him?

Hours later, dawn comes and finally, John stirs. Dawn comes and John stirs, and with him so does their world. It’s the first sign of tumult. It’s the first whisper of an earthquake.
This chapter gave me more trouble than I thought it would and turned out completely different than I intended...it's interesting when a story starts dictating itself to me, really...

Anyway, sorry for the long wait, real life is being a needy, whiney brat at the moment.

Enjoy!

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In the night, the pale moon perches like a betraying piece of silver against cold ink of the sky. John sits in a nest of white sheets in front of a tall window and watches as the silver sky-coin approaches, watches the Moon pass the glass barrier with nothing as much as halt in its progression, until it is large and luminous and right there in front of John, refusing to stay at bay, refusing to maintain the safe distance and the partition of glass between them. The room slowly loses its contours as the Moon floats in front of John, speckles of dust crumbling off it and onto the carpet and the sheet-nest that hosts John, bits of Earths faux-glowing, light-stealing satellite lodging themselves in the folds and valleys of white bed linens. John can feel the fingers of the Moon touching his skin in the most inappropriate ways, as if trying to read him, a breathing palimpsest of the obvious and the unsaid, of history and future. His somnolent mind registers the cold, mercury-coloured and bodiless caresses that feel new and old, familiar as of recent and foreign due to years of John staying out of its reach. Shadows draw borders, leaving John and the Moon floating suspended in a oblong patch of light that doesn’t quite seem to reach John at all, apart from the prying moonbeams that never stop their ministrations over John’s form, feeling him out. The touch isn’t as much pressure as it is a feeling so visceral that John wonders if he is even feeling it with his skin at all. It is disconcerting, this examination of reflected sunbeams turned grey with age of a dead day, because it doesn’t feel like just fingers prying with the softest of touches along the locked doors of John’s pores – it feels like eyes peeking through holes and cracks in the very fabric of his being, voyeuristic escapades of a celestial body playing out all over his skin, all over his shield. Simultaneously prickly like the rasp of fine sanding paper and smooth like the polished plastic spheres of Christmas ornaments, the sensation is like being stripped naked, to the bone – to the marrow. It is painful, this soft worshiping of light on skin. It is painful, but the pain is liberating, in a way akin to that of frozen feet being submerged into a hot bath, and the touch is certainly not meant to do harm - it is the ache of an infected wound being re-opened and cleaned, given a second chance at proper healing. Crisp smell of refrigerated air surrounds John’s solitary figure, the moon-fingers slipping the slightly acidic, fizzy taste of carbonated water into John’s mouth.

Déjà vu coats John like varnish or molten sugar, a sense that he’s been here before, in this place of second chances at new beginnings. He thinks he knows the Moon under another name, another face. Wondering if he could read it the way it reads him, John reaches out his hand, wanting to touch the moons featureless face, as if to unveil the one he thinks he knows is buried somewhere within. But just as his fingertips draw near, the Moon vanishes, leaving a dark space that is no longer a defined room. John can’t even see his own hands. Can’t feel his own skin. He has no bones and no breath to draw and expel. The Moon disappears and just like that, John simply ceases to be – in one moment he is several things at once, and in the next he simply isn’t.
Just as the limits between him and the nothingness around start to blur and blend, the Moon reappears, shocking John’s retinas into temporary blindness with its unaltering brilliance. Only, this time, no moonbeams roam John’s skin, no expeditions are taken into the depths of him. The Moon seems to know all it wants – know him. With one last touch, a single finger of metallic light lays a finger-kiss onto John’s face, drawing his lids over his lustre-shocked eyes. Darkness that envelopes him this time is the diametrical opposite of the previous one. Instead of dissolving, John feels every bit of himself as acutely as ever. He can feel blood pumping to the very edges of himself, to the tips of his fingers, bouncing back up him hands off the crescents of his fingernails. It feels like beginning of a Realisation, an embryo of Acceptance. More than anything, it feels like finally falling asleep.

In the night, as pale moon perches like a betraying piece of silver against cold ink of the sky, John Watson sleeps. He sleeps in a swaddle of pale sheets mixed with pale arms, all white and fragile and strong at the same time, fabric that can bind or hold down or hoist up if needed, but that could so easily tear if ripped at in just the right way. A net woven out of cotton and limbs holds him anchored to the mattress, possessive in the face of reality. John’s somnolent mind doesn’t register the cold-tipped caresses of warm hands that were kept above the duvet for too long and have lost their heat. Sherlock’s hands map out paths to various Nowheres over John’s skin, and John just sleeps.

When Sherlock steals away from the bed in order to pay a late-night visit to his brother, John doesn’t wake. He doesn’t even stir. He is paralysed by his brain, his mind schooling his body as he dreams of vanishing Moons and revealing touches that seem to hurt. He only manages to flip himself over to his other side. When Sherlock returns, fumbling his way into the safety of the unsustainable ecosystem that they’ve built inside the room, John still doesn’t wake. Instead, he dreams of re-appearing Moons and finger-kisses. And as long as the Moon glides its way over the dark denim sky, John doesn’t stir.

- It isn’t until dawn that a breath of air crawls up John’s spine, like tickling fingers of a naughty imp called Premonition. Sheets tangle around him like a Möbius strip, endlessly looping around in a possessive hug. Light strikes against his closed eyelids and explodes in an electric-pink-sulphur-yellow-twisting-melting ball of semi-consciousness coloured vividly by arrival of day. Burning its way into John’s waking mind, the morning brightness conjures up images the way developer extracts photographs from blank, light-scarred paper. Shifts in meanings and an inevitability long in making play out like memories of a three-act stage-play which John’s has both starred in and been an audience of. Languid and slightly surreal, the moment stretches like fudge, sweet and otherworldly, and John is too conscious to be asleep but no aware enough to be considered awake. He feels like some painting of Mark Chagall’s, distorted and oddly coloured in way that makes reality seem like a vision of a world beyond a kaleidoscopic spy hole. And it’s good...so good. It’s the spoils for victors of a long-fought war, a moment where instinct overrides reason and pleasure is untainted by worry. In the incoherence of the moment, John thinks he could spend the rest of his life in the process of waking up, trapped between sleep and consciousness.

Alas, the shifts that never cease to take place push the Sun higher up the marble arch of the pale winter sky, efficient in their attempt to extract the last vestiges of slumber from nooks and crannies of rooms and minds. Sleep is banished into the recesses of John’s organism as wakefulness barges in to claim him.

By the time John’s eyes finally open, the room breaths like a steady giant, still and awash in new light. Sheets tangle around John as morning seems to be sending microburst of unwanted shivers
through the air. Vastness dominates the space, somehow hollow despite the warm glow beyond the
windows. Turning around, John catches air in order to speak, but as he turns breath is aborted,
abandoned in favour of silence. The other side of the bed is empty. The morning light is all too
bright.

Silver hits skin-pale beige and a loud crack resonates with the darkness of a whole being irreparably
damaged. The delicate softness beneath starts to ooze out of the wound, still warm. Air blurs with a
cloud of warmth being stolen away by colder air from a warmer source. The silver hits a hard surface
with a dull ‘thunk’, gleaming in the light, cold in its perfectly polished impeccability.

Sherlock watches as Mycroft hits the perfectly smooth shell of his soft-boiled egg with a spoon and
spreads the runny contents on a piece of toast. Cutlery clinks against the shiny surface of a large oak
dining table, playing its annoying song like a cruel fiddler on the instrument of Sherlock’s nerves.
The rustle of Mycroft’s morning paper joins in with its stiff-soft undertones. It’s the usual breakfast
symphony that sounds more like a cacophony to Sherlock as he works his way through his plate. His
fork and knife barely touch the porcelain, minimising the probability of making a sound, as he strains
to hear any noises coming from beyond the dining room door. Trying his best to ignore the impatient
glances Mycroft casts his way between bites, Sherlock listens for the familiar footfalls that usually
mark John’s arrival.

Another six minutes go by before he hears the stairs creaking under John’s steady tread. The door
opens and some of the light pouring in through tall windows escapes into the dim corridor.

“Morning.” John greets, voice only slightly gravelly.

“Good morning, John.” Mycroft doesn’t lift his gaze from the paper, his hand bringing a cup of tea to
his lips in a perfectly measured fashion. Sherlock’s chest stutters imperceptibly before he calls out a
greeting as well.

“Good morning.” His eyes scan over John rapidly, apparently satisfying Sherlock’s thirst for
information. “Breakfast?” he asks. The table is a long, wood-brown stretch of land between him and
Mycroft, with a single chair posed half way between two ends. John isn’t all too thrilled by having to
sit as a buffer between two brothers if things escalate.

“Urm..yes, sure.” He moves to sit and helps himself to some beans and toast. A cup of tea is already
awaiting him, still steaming and to his taste. As he digs into his (much needed) breakfast, the only
sounds filling the air are those of cutlery fencing with each other over the plates, silver and posh as
the sport itself. John’s had his share of uncomfortable meals, but as he mauls the food, he can’t help
but rank this one among the top five. Torn between the unabashed giddiness of “the morning after”
and being completely at loss as to what constitutes as normal conversation over breakfast when it
comes to the Holmeses, John does his best to look enthusiastically engrossed in his meal. He is just
about to put the last bite of beans into his mouth when Mycroft suddenly feels the urge to address
him.

“John, I believe you will be happy to hear that arrangements have been made which will allow you
to be back at Baker Street no later than this afternoon.” Mycroft’s voice is the colour of his house –
beige and impossible to place anywhere in the emotional spectrum. But then he lifts his eyes to
John’s and, while his voice may be as bland as watered-down tea, Mycroft’s eyes are anything but. If
Sherlock’s gaze is penetrating, then Mycroft’s is down-right corrosive.

“I hope you will recall upon your time here with fondness.” The stress on the fifth word is minute,
but John knows code when he hears one. While the exchange that took place in Mycroft’s study the
yesterday evening is definitely not the most memorable event of the last 24 hours, John knows it’s
exactly the sort of thing the older Holmes wants him to recall. The ‘making-a-choice’ conversation.
Mycroft’s reminder of their conversation the evening before is a clear indicator that John’s recent
actions (of which, John has no doubts, Mycroft is inappropriately well aware) have not satisfied the
criteria of “choosing Sherlock”.

“I’m sure I will. Thank you, Mycroft.” John’s voice is as strong as his stare. It’s a battle of wills, but
a funny one, because they seem to be fighting for the same cause, only not side-by-side, but
somehow askew, not as proper allies, but as untrusting co-combatants ready to protect their own at
any given moment.

Sherlock watches the whole exchange with narrowed eyes, but remains silent (which, by itself,
should be an alarm bell, but John is too busy not backing down in the face of Mycroft’s tactical
games to notice). Light spills over the table, bouncing off polished fruit and casting oblong shadows
behind bowls and pitchers, breaking in its travel through different media – air, glass, liquid.

After a few more tense moments, Mycroft gives a nod and stands up.

“Well, if you will excuse me, there is some urgent business I must tend to –”

“Isn’t there always...” Sherlock chimes in, lazily and mockingly.

“Yes, Sherlock, there is.” Mycroft’s smile looks as if he is being pinched on the cheek by an ancient,
annoying aunt. “In fact, I am already running late. The car will be here to take you to your flat in half
an hour, unless you need more time to –”

“No, half an hour is plenty. We’ll be ready to go.” Sherlock’s voice skips around like a school girl
along a yard.

“Honestly, Sherlock, I don’t expect a ‘thank you’, but do you maybe think you may grant me the
civility of letting me finish a sentence?”

“What for? You are horribly predictable.”

Mycroft’s expression is so sour that John snorts out tea as he tries to hide his laughter. Sherlock all
but preens at this, all petulant impertinence and lax stubbornness. Sighing as if he is going to a
meeting with his executioner, Mycroft barely stops an eye-roll and leaves the room without another
word. Smug like a sated cat, Sherlock shifts his gaze from where the tails of Mycroft’s three-piece
suit disappeared with a frill, to John, who is looking at him steadily. Sherlock’s eyes look almost
feverish in the lemon-yellow light of the room. John is pretty sure Sherlock is having a full-blown
monologue on the inside, but it seems as if he’s forgotten to actually say it aloud. His eyes flit over
John like flam-licks, making John want to look for scorch marks. For a few moments, John considers
breaking the tension with a joke, but something tells him it would be like trying to break bullet-proof
glass with a bit of paint-ball ammunition, so he keeps quiet, waiting for Sherlock to speak.

Only, Sherlock doesn’t. Moments after his eyes land on John, something in his gaze shifts and it can
only be describe as “shutting off”. As if he has just switched channels, look at John one moment and
then not seeing him at all in the next. Usually, John would gasp in incredulity and indignation at this
sort of thing, but something about Sherlock demeanour feels off. He seems...over-tasked. John can’t
explain how or why he comes to that conclusion, but for once, his gut tells him Sherlock isn’t just
being a rude git. Not knowing what to do with that, John picks his plate and carries it over to a
trolley parked in the corner beside the door.
“Well, I guess we better start packing.” he says. He doesn’t really expect a reply, so it comes as even a bigger surprise when Sherlock apparently acknowledges John’s words and stalks towards him. There is no good-morning kiss and no fumbling verbal recollections of last night, but as they make their way back to John’s room, Sherlock’s hand hovers just inches away from the small of John’s back, not touching, but lingering, all the same.

The ride back to 221B is an odd mixture of old familiarity, new familiarity, and new awkwardness. Only, the awkwardness seems to be affecting only one half of the pair, as Sherlock seems completely unaware of it. Or of the world as such, really. John can almost feel the cogs turning behind the clock-face of his eyes. Sherlock is planning something and John decides there and then, fingers scraping nervously against the black leather of Mycroft’s posh car’s seat, that whatever plan it is, Sherlock’s not getting away with keeping him out of the loop. Not this time. Not ever again.

Sherlock doesn’t speak in the car. Nor when they step into the hallway. Nor when John grabs his wrist and forces him to stop before he manages to reach the stairs. He says nothing when John drops their luggage (which Sherlock’s left all for him to carry, naturally) and it hits the floor with a thud that sounds like syncope of breath and time. Sherlock stays non-verbal as John pushes him against the wall, only point of contact still being his grip on Sherlock’s writ, firm but gentle, never hurting. John moves into his space, obviously trying to raise a reaction out of the Detective, but Sherlock stays infuriatingly still. It’s a quiet stand-still, as John’s breath fans over Sherlock’s lips, but there is something missing in the scene. An absence robs the moment of any heat it might have usually carried. John doesn’t have Sherlock’s brilliant ability of deducing someone into a stupor within seconds of laying eyes on them, but he nonetheless notices something in Sherlock and that something makes him move away. Because the pulse beating beneath his grip is calm and steady. Because it doesn’t quicken. Because his reflection doesn’t drown in the black whirlpools of Sherlock’s dilating pupils. John steps away, suddenly feeling drenched in cold water, because even though Sherlock is standing with his back against the wall only a foot away from John’s rapidly breathing figure, it’s as if he isn’t even there.

John wants to ask and demand and shout and make Sherlock say something. He wants to pull at his skin until he finds the crack through which the man seems to have leaked away. But he knows trying to get anything out of Sherlock in this state would be as effective as interrogating a strand of seaweed. Confusion seems to be John Watson’s destiny, so with the last aborted question that never finds its voice, John picks up the abandoned luggage and moves up the stairs, all the way up to his room. When he comes back to the lounge, Sherlock’s already on the couch, supine, with hands posed for prayer that isn’t one. At least not to any deity but himself.

Sherlock doesn’t come to John’s bed that night and John doesn’t go to fetch him. It could be insomnia from the residual withdrawal symptoms keeping Sherlock up, but no matter how hard he tries to convince himself of it, John finds it utterly unconvincing. There is a stale taste of apprehension coating the root of his tongue. Regret is nowhere near the emotions currently residing on John Watson’s emotional repertoire, but who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes? John doesn’t think he could handle being regret. Not after everything. Not after letting Sherlock see. This was always a one-way journey, with no option of going in reverse. Not after letting himself see.

The sky outside is an empty sheet the colour of a surgeon’s blue scrubs, with no Moon anywhere in the vicinity. The incomplete scenery makes John remember his dream. He remembers the Moon that
wouldn’t stay away. He recalls wondering if it would take Sherlock’s form if he just managed to touch it, but somehow knowing all the while that it wouldn’t. It hits him them (expect that it’s not as much a hit as it is a put-upon sigh of some inner structure long denied the light of day, tucked uncomfortably away in some damp corner of John’s repression). It was never Sherlock. It was always John, all along. But not any John – John with Sherlock. John who has been not pushed but prompted, to face himself. John who no longer knows how to go back to being anything less than what he is, darkness and all.

Choices were made last night, but while John was aware that he was choosing Sherlock, actively and willingly, what he didn’t realise was that by choosing Sherlock, in full and unreservedly, he was also choosing something more important. He was choosing himself. In full. Unreservedly. He chose the same John Sherlock decided to choose a long time ago.

Only, it seems to John that Sherlock might just be regretting his choice, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is already half-done, so hopefully it will be up in the next few days :)

Drowning in thirst as morning kills night

Chapter Notes

So, this was supposed to be up on Wednesday, but life made sure I was unable to do it then and stuck away from home till midnight yesterday so I couldn't get it up before today.

Enjoy!

When John presses him against the wall just below the stairs, Sherlock has to do his best to keep himself under control. Leave it to Sherlock Holmes to try and control his vegetative nervous system, but somehow he manages to breathe deeply, keeping his heart from racing away, and thinking of the most mundane, boring thing he can think of (in this case it’s the way Mycroft tends to tie his shoelaces several times until the loops on each shoe are symmetrical) in order to block out John – his scent, his presence so close in Sherlock’s personal space, and yet, barely touching, a tender ring of skin and bone wrapped around his wrist. He manages, somehow, focusing hard and keeping his gaze distant, his breathing steady. It would be the easiest thing in the world to give John what he wants – Sherlock responsive and in good spirits and wanting and, and, and... It would be ridiculously simple, since it’s what Sherlock wants, too. And there lays the problem.

Every instinct Sherlock possesses, every urge for self-preservation, tells him to keep quiet and carry on. It would be so simple. So easy. Say nothing and enjoy the feast that would be John and he, shoulder-by-shoulder again, seemingly uncomplicated and finally restored to their full glory. And Sherlock wants it. He wants it the way all desperate things want – achingly, viscerally, from some deep, invisible core woven out of glass fibres of yearning, shiny and tempting but potentially sharp if cracked – possible shards of razor-sharp glass netting around his insides. A damning hypothetical. A perilous possibility. It’s torture of Tantalus, this poorly-lit hallway. Sherlock’s personal lake with a fruit tree, John’s arms like branches just out of reach, his breath like the undrinkable water of the lake of possibility-out-of-reach, pooling at Sherlock’s feet. A single option presents itself to Sherlock if he wishes to not repeat mistakes of the past – and Sherlock Holmes doesn’t repeat mistakes. So, he must stand thirsty in a lake and hungry under a branch of ripe sweetness and bare the temptation, because nothing can be touched before he tells John, not before John knows. John is completely off limits until all’s been brought into light. No loops to be left out of, no half-truths and lies by omission – it gives a whole new meaning to the phrase ‘brutal honesty’, Sherlock ponders, because this time he is the one suffering its brutality. It’s agony, each breath John takes or gives in this space of not-enough-but-too-much turning the unsaid words inside Sherlock into a corrosive solution that eats at him from within, but luckily for Sherlock, John backs away soon enough, letting some air flow between them like concrete, a wall coming up.

Taking the opportunity, Sherlock walks up, leaving John behind. He flops onto the sofa and closes his eyes, ready to run all possible options of the case in his head. But before he manages, he hears John walking up to the flat and the sound is such a constant beat that he cannot ignore it. He feels it up his spine, shaking the thoughts inside his skull. Step-step-step...John-John-John. It’s the lapping of rippled water against the shores of Sherlock’s thirst. It’s the squeaking of heavy-burdened branches of what-if-s above Sherlock’s wanting, hungry heart.

Before falling into the abyss of information, the rapids of the case, Sherlock’ Holmes deletes all of
The next day John wakes to a silent flat and a loud mind. Feeling not at all rested, he flexes his right arm so that his head lays in the palm of it, placing his left on his sternum. The mattress is lumpy but comfortably familiar under him. Morning light is smeared like egg yolk over the ceiling, yellow smudges on white, shockingly vivid. Like yellow blood-spatter – evidence of night’s violent demise.

John listens for sounds of life in the flat, reluctant to face the day just yet...or perhaps it’s not the day he finds hard to face. Perhaps it’s the look on Sherlock’s face in the harsh daylight, and the fear of it containing no softness of the night before. John doesn’t understand what could have caused such a change. Admittedly, Sherlock was never the poster boy for emotional stability and constancy, but John finds himself rather pissed off by the whole situation and it feels good, the anger, the irritation. It all feels better than the hopeless confusion, because John Watson knows anger. He can wear it like a second skin, comfortable at times in its durability and impenetrableness. And in the midst of all this, John finds it as comfortable as a set of well-worn pyjamas.

Because this is hard and John finds it difficult – all of this, every word, every complexity that demands lowering of shields. The hilarity of the situation isn’t lost on John, that he can have sex with the man – the ultimate lowering of shields – and find the whole ordeal surprisingly unthreatening to his emotional integrity, but cannot bring himself to talk about things that mattered without wrapping himself in security blankets of annoyance and anger in order to be able to spit them out. But here’s the thing – last night they were on equal ground, both exposed, bared down to the basics of themselves, undiluted essences and seemingly simple needs that were more, so much more that examining them beyond their apparent simplicity just wasn’t an option. Oh, it was frightening, in that delicious way all the best things are, in that way that John realised was the base line of his existence. It was them. And there’s the catch – it was them, together, equally likely to make idiots out of themselves (well, Sherlock would argue about those statistics), handing each other daggers with tips pressed to their chests and believing, trusting that the other one wouldn’t drive deep into the soft, yielding flesh of their mutual truths. They were each other’s contingencies regarding vulnerability, so, while it was one of the most intense things John’s ever done, it was not nearly as frightening as this. Because that was them, but this – this is just John. Alone, with his ridiculous emotions and humanness, about to flay himself open and expose the soft, never-healing bits to Sherlock – logical, rational Sherlock. Sherlock who hasn’t spoken a word to John in over 24 hours. Sherlock who seems so unfairly cool and collected and not at all torn. Sherlock, whom John has given all the tools needed for his destruction.

So, John puts on his armour of fury, because fury is safe. It is like a hard shell, a justification and a sword that can protect against the sharp blades of Sherlock’s dismissals. John ramps up a storm inside himself, safe in the eye of it, letting the tumult envelope him. Because this is hard and difficult and frightening and possibly painful and very much a battle and an armour is an appropriate choice of attire.

And, also, because John Watson is an idiot.

Of course he is. Sherlock’s told him so in as many words, often. Repeatedly. But John’s memory is a fickle thing, which is why he needs to be reminded of it and why he so easily forgot other things about last night, besides the surges of hormones and ecstasy. Like the way Sherlock said his name. Like the way Sherlock looked. Looked at John, and whatever it was that he found beyond the concept of John. John is an idiot who forgets things like acceptance. Like love. Plain, obvious love.

Only, he doesn’t. Not really.
Such things are hard to forget. But they aren’t hard to overshadow, especially when put against things such as doubt and confusion. So, it is perhaps not all that surprising that John should pay them a bit less heed than he ought to. Which doesn’t mean he isn’t an idiot. He is, only, he is an idiot with trust issues who just happens to be inseparable from a certain madman with a terrible record of being constant, or open or emotionally well-rounded. Sherlock isn’t a balm for John’s mental and emotional wounds – he’s a bloody bottle of peroxide. And yet, for some reason, they are a done deal.

They were majorly, royally messed up. Both of them. Barking mad. Like two Frankensteins that created their Creature which is half of each of them, their irreversible entanglement in each other.

But, as it just happens, their particular kinds of messed up seem to be rather compatible. Except when it’s not...which is, for example, the past 24 or so hours. John decides it won’t get to 48 hours – not if he has a say in any of it.

Not bothering to change out of his sleepwear, he trudges down the stairs to find Sherlock engrossed in what looks like a case file. The manila folder rests open, like wings of a dead bird pinned for dissection on Sherlock’s folded legs.

“Sherlock.” John’s voice is all determination and fierce decisiveness, partly genuine and partly a mask to hide the raw uncertainty that gaps open like a bone-deep cut just below the thin sheath of John’s temper.

John is all exposed flesh and Sherlock is peroxide and yet, in that moment, at the end of those 24 or so hours, Sherlock once again proves to be exactly the right thing, as he stops John from uttering another word by handing him the brown, coffee-stained case file. Sherlock hands John the file, and starts talking, and saves John - because this is hard and difficult and frightening and possibly painful and very much a battle, only John seems to be both the aggressor and the victim, so Sherlock helps him out of it by relieving him of having to say a word.

“What’s this?” John asks, thrown off balance by this unexpected interruption in what was supposed to be his grand speech on communication and honesty and what-not-s. “A case?”

“Yes.” Sherlock answers, “I’ve persuaded Mycroft to give it to me.”

Torn between an odd sense that it’s not just a case and the need to get on with his planed confrontation, John fiddles with the file. Sherlock just stands before him, all strange eyes and unnaturally still posture, with an indefinable sort of energy evaporating around him like fumes. After a few moments of tense silence, John decides to put off his little speech in favour of skimming through the file. As soon as he opens it, his eyebrows bunch up in confusion.

“Sherlock...” he starts, raising his gaze from the page. Sherlock just looks at him, uncharacteristically patient and silent.

“This is your case.” John waits for the eye-roll and the ‘Obvious’, but they never come.

“Mycroft is letting you work on your own case?”

“Yes. He is aware of the fact that I am the only one capable enough to locate Small and his drug-ring. In fact, that’s what I’ve spent the night doing and I think I narrowed it down enough to pinpoint a location.” Delivered in a litany that is just a tad short of Sherlock’s usual enthusiastic rambling, Sherlock’s words ring somewhat hollowly off the walls, bouncing to hit John in the chest. Suddenly, the alienation of the past day seems logical – a preparation of sorts. John lowers his head, ready to hear the words he so dreads – that Sherlock must go, but John must stay, some nonsense about protection and safety an - words he will protest fiercely.
“And you want to go after them, naturally?”

“Naturally. Don’t you?” John’s eyes snap back at Sherlock, his heart doing a fast gallop. Relief floods him like a surge of tepid water, because apparently, Sherlock’s vow of silence has been just the usual mid-case absent-mindedness. Suddenly, he is giddy with the promise of good old days with a new twist.

As a grin cracks on his lips, John asks, “When do we leave?”

Sherlock can hear John’s steps coming down the stairs and sees the way his shoulders are set as he enters the lounge. ‘Anger’, Sherlock deduces, ‘but something more, too’. He knows he’s in for a tiff if he lets John catch steam and that would be most inconvenient, so before John manages to speak, Sherlock pushes the case file in his hands.

He watches John process the information, and the grin that spreads across John’s face is both a sunrise and the apocalypse, Sherlock feels. So, when John asks ‘When do we leave?’, Sherlock knows he is running out of reasons to delay the inevitable.

The morning light plays tricks on their faces, mixing sharp shadows and soft planes of light. John looks like a made-up friend, a fantasy composed of both desires and fears. Sherlock wonders if he looks the same.

“Soon. Very soon. There’s only a few more things to work through.” He replies, his eyes skimming over John with some sort of wistful fondness.

“What sort of things?”

Sherlock’s eyes flit to the side for the briefest of moments.

“Bureaucracy.”

John’s eyebrows all but vanish beneath his hairline as his face morphs into the epitome of incredulity.

“Since when do you care about bureaucracy?”

“So, that’s all? Bureaucracy?”

Such delighted amusement graces John’s face that Sherlock fears the cracking of soft muscle beneath his ribs (impossible, metaphorical, grossly inaccurate phrasing) will be so loud it will resonate audibly between the wallpaper-covered surfaces of the flat, as he considers the (very likely) option of John’s good spirits seeping away with each new word Sherlock utters. John’s smile is wide and untainted, a grin of a boy being taken on an adventure, of a refugee being told he can finally return home. Warm and complex, John’s eyes are a mixture of child-like thrill and ages-old desire. He looks as alive as the headlights whirling over busy London streets at night and as familiar the reflection of ambient lighting off white ceramic plates at Angelo’s.

Happy. John looks happy. Sherlock wishes he could keep him that way. He almost snaps his next word in half in his throat as it constricts with impending destruction, almost kills them like carnivorous bacteria that threaten to devour the solid, fleshy joy that holds John in a soft, puppy-like hug. John is all colours, Aurora Borealis of 221B Baker Street. Polar fire lighting the skies with
colours that aren’t supposed to burn, but do, cold flames derived from the cool ends of the spectrum. Deep green and blue of Earth’s magnetic field that wavers like a flag in slow motion over its highest points, the one’s covered in steady, impressive glaciers that witnessed the childhood of the planet and encased its trinkets and toys over ages. John is the Northern ice caps and the light above them and the glory of frozen time and numerous layers of life witnessed and lived, and Sherlock...Sherlock feels like the slow, persistent force set out to destroy it, not because it wants to but because it must. Because it is inevitable – cause and effect. If John is a glacier, Sherlock is pretty sure he is global warming, thawing away the crystalline sculptures of John’s rapture, changing its aggregate state from solid elation to liquid disillusionment.

“Actually, there is one more thing.”

John has already moved to his desk, sorting a few papers out of the way so he can open the lid of his laptop, so he doesn’t catch Sherlock’s face.

“Let me guess – packing the experiments again? Sherlock, we’ve been over this, you can’t carry a portable fridge, no matter how time-sensitive your experiments are. You simply can’t carry them around. It’s difficult to get through airport security as it is, we really don’t need…”

Sherlock lets John ramble on for just a bit, grasping at any and all opportunity of delaying the conversation he is about to initiate. Finally, the tension that the current of dark, waterish emotion creates in him pushes air up, up, up and Sherlock is drowning from the inside, being pulled under by unsaid words like stones in his pockets. Another deep breath (a gasp for air, head still above surface) and then it’s time to give in to the water. Perhaps it will be merciful. Either way, it’s sink-or-swim time.

“No, John. It's not the packing.”

Something (everything) in Sherlock’s tone of voice makes John turn back from the desk to look at his...what are they? Partners, John would say. It seems to fit them best. Partners in crime. In solving crimes. Business partners, definitely, but since their business, their work is also very much their lifestyle, their life, well then, John supposes that makes them life partners. Whatever they are, John looks at Sherlock, waiting to hear what point on the agenda needs to be taken care of.

“What is it, Sherlock?”

“John, before we leave, I need to inform you about something. Once you have all data, you can make an informed decision about what to do next.” Sherlock seems transfixed by the flecks of mud trailing the floor around his feet, seeing as his stare appears to be permanently affixed to them. John hates the feeling that springs to life somewhere between his navel and diaphragm. He hates the suppressed knowledge that that feeling will probably prove a good indicator of whatever is to come.

“Sherlock, stop being bloody cryptic and tell me what’s this about.”

Heavy, heavy, like Atlas lifting his shoulder under the immense burden of the World, Sherlock lifts his gaze and John catches it before it can slip away again. Moderately bad, very bad and worst scenarios spin around inside his mind as he waits for Sherlock to speak. He expects an admission of another relapse or even a backing-out speech telling him that all this...whatever it is that they’re doing (love, that’s what they’re doing...not that they would call it that. God forbid they just come out with it for once. Nothing’s ever simple.). Expectations are strange creatures, very solid, very real and powerful. Which is why it always feels just a bit odd when they vanish like smoke rings in the face of the actual event which fails to meet them, confirm them so that they can take full, flesh-and-bone form of actuality instead of the undefined contours of probability. Because, for all his predictions and expectations, when reality hits in form of a six-word sentence, John never sees it coming.
“We need to talk about Mary.” Sherlock says.

Of course they have to talk about Mary. Because it’s them. Because they defy expectations, even each other’s. And because nothing is ever, ever simple.
I'm so, so sorry for the wait, I feel terrible for not updating sooner. I would give you excuses, but I doubt you're really interested in them, so let's skip those and move onto the new chapter, shall we? :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Bureaucracy” Sherlock says, and John has to tame the bubble of laughter that makes a run for it from his chest, up his throat.

He moves towards his desk, hand reaching out to open the lid of his laptop, when he feels the buzz of an incoming text in his pocket. He’s still holding conversation with Sherlock, teasing him about packing experiments and his body is turned away from the Consulting Detective as he slides the phone out of his pocket, rustling some papers away with his other hand. Elation fills him like a fizzy drink doing rounds through his veins so he doesn’t even pause talking while he reads the text. The letters are stark and black, the way they always are on his mobile screen, but the name attached always makes the specific arrangement of pixels seem just a tad menacing.

Time to choose, Dr. Watson. – MH

Staring at the text for a moment, brain buzzing to connect it to the current context, John wants to laugh out loud again. ‘Is this what he meant?’ If Mycroft meant this would be John’s choice – going with Sherlock as means of choosing Sherlock – than the whole tense fireplace conversation really wasn’t warranted. Of course John’s going with Sherlock. There was never any other option to begin with. How could Mycroft ever question that? John can’t help but shake his head at the man’s shortsightedness on the matter.

Sherlock is still talking to him, saying something along the lines of “No, John. It’s not the packing” and his tone, more than the words themselves, prompt John to turn back and face the other man again.

“What is it, Sherlock?” he asks, caution seeping like dish-soap into his fizzy blood, still creating foam, still a thrill, but a bit bitter and unwelcomed in his flurry of relief and joy. He listens to Sherlock’s fumbling words that stagger between them like new-born fawns on shaky legs, before snapping at him to get to the point. Sherlock lifts his gaze, hunched despite the lack of any visible weight, and John thinks that he looks small, somehow, like an old man. Like a wilting plant, deprived of sunshine and water.

“We need to talk about Mary.” Sherlock says, and John doesn’t know whether the sentence is completely absurd or just inevitability. He wonders if he should have expected it.
There is rhyme and reason to things, on paper at least – a recipe for a well-constructed timeline, if you wish, that dictates a fairly regular rotation of the good and the bad stuff, of catastrophes and prosperity. John wonders, in seconds following Sherlock’s words, why is it that that recipe never seems applicable to real life. He’s survived the fires and the floods – by all rules, he is entitled to some prosperity now. Demands it, silently, voicelessly, by the simple clenching of his fist.

But the world doesn’t care and John’s demands fall on deaf ears, like seeds onto barren soil, so he does the only thing that’s left.

He sits down and listens as Sherlock delves into the Story of Mary.

Sherlock lets his eyes sink to the floor one more time, as he draws a breath. Like an actor slating an audition, he fills his lungs like a bucket, bottom-up, soaking up air all the way to the edge of his trachea. Time seems to oscillate between too much and too little until it ceases to move all together and Sherlock knows it has run out. With his next breath, he lifts his eyes and delivers words, in litres, tons, pages of them, a syllable attached to each molecule of carbon dioxide that pushes its way violently against Sherlock’s vocal chords.

“Once it became apparent my disappearance would be inevitable, a plan was made that Mycroft will keep an eye on you while I’m gone.”

John doesn’t even have time to object to the face that he isn’t a bloody toddler that needs minding 24/7 because Sherlock seems to be vomiting words, like bile, foul and bitter in his throat.

“The initial plan was that he’d monitor you via street cams and CCTV streams he’d planted in all places relevant to my existence that you might decide to visit, over the course of the years. However, with his attention and resources becoming increasingly occupied by my mission, surveillance ceased to be the best option.”

Trepidation settles over John’s heart like a swan over an egg, his mind’s vicious little voice whispering daunting premonitions of what is to come. He hears the words before Sherlock says them, but refuses to believe them even once they’ve been voiced.

“It was decided that a level-up in precaution measures was in order. Mycro-”

“Hold on. Precaution measures?” John’s voice is low and deceivingly calm. Murderous. Light from the window paints a terrifying mask over his features, his eyes alight with some manic glow, the lines of his face drawn deep and crude. “Precaution against what exactly?”

Dust swirls in a ray of sunlight that cuts the space between them into two halves. The glow caresses wall, setting the green hues in it ablaze. Light, glass and green – a greenhouse, if only in name and slightly in form. Greenhouse effect, wreaking havoc, right there, in a space of a few square meters. Sherlock swallows, almost audibly, and continues, ignoring John’s interruption.

“Mycroft personally chose the agent for the task. She way trained, tailor-made to suit the parameters of your preference.”

“Answer me Sherlock. Why did Mycroft even feel a need to...why in hell did you think I needed a baby-sitter?”

“Because, if left to your own devices John, you would have been a danger to yourself.”
John flinches. Rage and disbelief seem to be his baseline condition at the moment.

“A suicide-watch? That’s what that was? That what she was?”

“In the beginning, yes.”

If breathing had a taste, John is pretty sure his would taste like gravel, ragged and rough.

“That’s ridiculous, Sherlock. I would’ve never had killed myself. You know that.”

“Maybe not with a gun. Or in any way that would explicitly indicate suicide. But there are various ways a man can kill himself, John.

You would have grown progressively restless and thus reckless, going out and looking for trouble, until one day you found exactly what you were looking for. Or you would have spent your days on autopilot, dying a slow death in the cage of routine and boredom.”

Deeply-rooted concern tinges Sherlock’s eyes, so when he looks at John, of all the things that pound against their glassy, surface, utter conviction of his own rightness on the matter is the most prominent. There’s something unapologetic about that look – a sense that despite being aware of making a mistake, Sherlock is still strongly convinced of the unmistaken nature of their cause. The John from three years ago would have pushed, persisted on his line of questioning, but this John, the John whose skin is ingrained with ashy mud of recent experiences knows better. This is not to say that this John isn’t livid about it, but since there is no way of ever proving either of the man right on the matter, he decides to leave the dwelling for another time.

“And later?” he asks after the silence becomes an anaerobic vacuum.

“What?”

“You said ‘in the beginning’. What about later on? What was Mary’s purpose then?”

“She also served as a distraction.”

“From what?”

“Any signs that my activities might have produced which could have had alarmed you to the fact that I was not, in fact, dead. Also, she couldn’t have simply disappeared. You were doing well. Things seemed...well-balanced.”

“That’s ridiculous. I can’t believe that you and your brother – two geniuses, by your own account – actually thought any of this was a good idea. What did you think was going to happen in the long run?”

“We hoped there wouldn’t be a long run. And if there happened to be, options were planed which would have ensured a seemingly natural progression of your relationship.” Sherlock answers, voice strained in a way completely new, but John is too angry to give the reason behind this a closer inspection.

Words fall on the carpet between them as if thrown by a hand of a sower, poisonous seeds catching root in the fertile soil of misguided actions, watered by their aftermath.

“So you’re saying...” John’s voice is barely above a whisper now. It’s harsher than any shout Sherlock’s ever heard. “You’re telling me that over a year of my life was a lie? Was she supposed to carry on with the shame for a few more months? Years? What!”
Sherlock’s lips remain immobile, voice apparently lost, lent to the wind that seems to be howling inside John’s mind. The time of day is unfitting to the general mood – it should be a stormy night, a frightening time when even the stars are afraid to watch so they blink their glowing eyes closed, leaving the world below to fend for itself. There should be rain and wind and slate and possibly a mid-level natural disaster – something to mark the complete collapse of John Watson’s world. Again.

“Whose idea was it?” John forces the words out, harsh blows of sound punching the air like fists.

“Mycroft’s.”

“Did you have a say in it?”

Sherlock’s eyes bleed, like an animal hit by a car and left to die on the side of the road.

“Sherlock! Did you know?”

“Not right away. I was unreachable at the moment when the decision to switch your security mode was made. I found out a month into it.”

“And you didn’t see anything wrong with it?”

“Mycroft estimated it was the best solution.”

“And since when do you listen to what Mycroft has to say?”

The look Sherlock gives him screams the answer louder than any words ever could. ‘Since it was you that was in the crosshairs’ it says, and John knows, despite his question, that below the surface, Mycroft is someone whose judgement Sherlock trusts almost implicitly.

The key to the greenhouse effect is accumulation. Heat accumulates below the dome of greenhouse gasses, an increasing amount of it arriving constantly only to remain trapped in a space with a finite capacity, and what was once a welcomed occurrence, the thing that made life a thrill – light, warmth, brightness of days – suddenly becomes its undoing, a threat of destruction born out of that which is (or was) essential for survival. Death born out of life – as it always happens to be.

The Earth doesn’t have a choice – the Sun doesn’t stop shining only because it is no longer in Earth’s best interest. The Sun is relentless, and so is the heat, and Earth just can’t seem to let it go, so the temperature rises and with it, so does the suffering. A relentless Sun and an unforgivable Earth.

None of these actions are product of malice – on the contrary, they are misplaced orphans of good intent. Still, there is always a point of no return, an instant when the maximum capacity is reached and an impossible choice is posed. The Earth can’t live without heat given off by the Sun. But, after a certain point, it can’t live with it, either.

“Why are you telling me this now?” John chokes out, eying the custard-coloured glow that tumbles through the windowpanes, innocently bright and unassuming of its potential lethality.

“Because I thought you deserved to know everything before you decided to accompany me.” A beat thuds like a blip of heartbeat, hollow and muffled by an unseen weight, before Sherlock continues. “Also, because it would have been a rather unfavourable situation if we stumbled upon Mary while on the case without you being in on the story.”

With a sharp movement, John’s eyes cut their way to Sherlock’s, razor-gray and just as sharp. A sharp man in a soft chair, soft light, soft day. Metal in sand. Soldier in a desert, withstanding the heat. His eyes demand further explanation, virulent and merciless in their insistence as Sherlock stocks on
more breath.

“After being...discharged from her previous task, Mary was assigned a new one. Incidentally, it was the same one that later became my case. She was the one in charge of tailing Small and his associates. Her last report came in a week ago. Her next one is 4 days overdue. The assumption is that she’s been captured.”

“By a drug ring?”

“Yes.”

A stern nod, a lick of lips, and then John is on his feet, moving towards the door.

“John..?” Sherlock’s voice inquires in a way that radiates uncertainty.

“I need...air. Time. Something. I don’t know. I just need to go.” John replies, determination pushing him forward like an insistent child.

The door slams shut with a sound of a match being struck and failing to catch flame, and for all the heat in the room, Sherlock feels unbearably cold.

Letting his legs carry him wherever they see fit in the mockingly bright London day, John attempts to march his thoughts into some sort of order. His feelings, on the other hand, he doesn’t even try to get hold of. Betrayal, anger, hurt, disbelief, confusion, and something that could be an infant version of shock run rampant around his insides, like unruly children on a sugar high.

The sun hides behind silverish clouds, its brightness suddenly muted and transformed into diffused light. Sounds of London make for a cacophonic backdrop, sounding like the colour gray and TV static. John walks like a planet dislodged from its orbit – aimlessly. After a while, he realises that if he continues to walk he will walk himself out of London, so he stops to take in his surroundings. Perhaps it is funny that what he finds is that he managed to wander into the same park that hosted his encounter with Mike, all those years ago. The park where it all started before it started in Bart's. Before in started in John's head. Before it started in his heart.

All of a sudden, all his frantic, angry energy seems to drain out of him, flowing down to his feet and out into the ground, feeding young saplings that are just starting to poke their heads out in the reluctant spring. Moving to a near-by bench, John looks around the park, thinking about that saying about standing in the same river twice and the impossibility of the act. He wonders whether he would have preferred to never have been in it in the first place, to never have met Mike, and, consequently, Sherlock. He tries to imagine what his life would have ended up resembling had things gone that way, and to his dismay, he realises he can’t imagine it. Not because his life revolves around Sherlock, but because Sherlock was right – there are more ways than one for a man to kill himself. And John is pretty sure he would have ended up doing exactly that had he not met Sherlock and had his life turned into the chaos it is today. Slow decay of an uprooted plant – John can easily see that.

Still, is his current situation any better?

Once again, John’s mind comes up with no answer, uselessly indecisive. The conversation runs on a loop in his head, like his personal mix-tape stuck on a single song of anxious turmoil. On, and on, and on again, he hears the words, his hyperactive mid taking turns in ignoring and ferociously analysing every aspect of the exchange. Finally, as he watches a young student run over the grass (earning a few dismayed looks of an elderly lady who keeps strictly to the drawn paths), his feet
squashing down the infant grass, John’s mind zeroes in on one specific portion of the conversation which managed to turn his life topsy-turvy. Again.

“What did you think was going to happen in the long run?”

“We hoped there wouldn’t be a long run. And if there happened to be, options were planed which would have ensured a seemingly natural progression of your relationship.”

Remembering the strain in Sherlock’s voice, it takes John a moment to realise the implication of his own words, mostly because he is so taken aback by Sherlock’s admission that he hoped for John’s relationship to fail. ‘The long run’ John realises, would have been the reality he was destined for had Sherlock not survived his little escapade into the criminal Hades. An aftershock hits just in time with his next thought, as it dawns on him that Sherlock actually planned how to keep John safe (from John himself, no less) even in case of his death.

And then there’s Mary. Sweet, kind, extraordinary Mary. Perfect Mary. A little too perfect, John realises. Perfectly tailored, lying Mary. Was he really just a job to her? And where is she now? Despite everything, John finds it hard not caring. It isn’t because he’s some sort of saint – it is because he needs answers that only Mary can give. Besides, to him, she wasn’t a job. And emotions tend to be horrible little buggers, not really knowing their place, which is a case here as well. If he were in a more philosophical state of mind, John would admire the ability of human beings to feel such contrary things at the same time. Impossibilities which make life difficult, but which make it life and not just mere survival.

The Sun is still hiding behind the clouds, giving only as much light as it absolutely must. John wonders if he can just stay sitting there until he grows roots and grounds himself to the spot. But there are decisions to be made – urgent ones, he recalls as the case that prompted this whole ordeal comes to mind. The case. Sherlock’s case that involves Sherlock leaving. And even though it shouldn’t be that simple, John feels something break, like a twig, inside him. Like a bough. Or a tree trunk. He feels a forest crumble to toothpick-sized chips inside his mind, leaving a single figure standing among the destruction. Sherlock – and the idea of losing him. Again.

In the impossible situation that encases him, John realises he isn’t supposed to choose the best solution. ‘Best’ would indicate a choice between several good options – there are none here. No, he is supposed to chose the least horrible one – a decision made on a very simple principle: which choice will break him the least. He must choose the option which entails the possibility of an outcome that would be the most unbearable.

Despite everything, he knows which option that is. It’s always been that one. He knows, because he was forced to think he was living that option.

Losing Sherlock.

Out of all horrible options, that one is absolutely unacceptable. Maybe Mycroft is right – maybe John is an addict. In that case, he is weaker than Sherlock, because John is in no way willing to give up his addiction. Even when his drug goes off and pulls off something like this. He forgave a lot. He can forgive some more, he supposes, in time. Not yet. One day. It is a battle between two logics – that this is just another minor thing compared to the One Big Thing, and that this is The One Thing Too Far. But forgiveness isn’t crucial here. John has come a long way – he can suspend resentment, anger, and hurt for the time that is needed to ensure Sherlock is safe. Once that is done, he knows there will be a showdown, of sorts. Mostly with Sherlock. Also, with himself.

The sky is a bright metallic colour, clouds aglow with the hidden star. No matter how hidden, the Sun still manages to plant its light on Earth. The Sun and the Earth are confided within their own
constancy and rigidity of ways. But Sherlock isn’t the Sun – he is a singularity, if anything. And John isn’t the Earth. They are neither relentless nor unforgiving. They aren’t celestial – they are human. And thank heavens for that. Human as they are, flawed and clumsy in their best attempts to stumble through life, they can afford to forgive. They are able to change.

John watches himself settle on a decision he knew he’d make all along. He doesn’t know what it means, what it says about him, that despite everything he still cannot fathom not going with Sherlock. Maybe it’s because, John realises, it isn’t true that any and all love or affection that took place in the last few years was fake. Mary wasn’t a facade love – she was just a facade for someone else’s love – love that was very much true and real and the source of such a misguided attempt at ensuring John’s safety. The whole scheme was very much emotion-driven. It just wasn’t Mary that loved him all that time.

It was Sherlock.

- 

John doesn’t see it coming. Mostly because there is no black car to tip him off. Also, because he really has better (or worse, depending on the point of view) things to think about. Either way, when he turns the sixth corner on his way back to Baker Street and almost topples over Mycroft, he doesn’t see it coming and it takes him a moment or two to gather his wits.

“Sorry, didn’t see you the- oh. Mycroft.”

John’s expression changes from apologetically distraught to a hard slate of barely-contained tumult with alarming speed. Like indecisive vapour suddenly condensing in its decision to become a storm cloud, John’s rampant thoughts gather in a burdening mass of threatening grey.

“He’s told you then.” Mycroft’s voice is calm, brimming with the unapologetic confidence of a man with vast experience with carrying out morally dubious schemes. “John-”

“Save it, Mycroft. I don’t want to hear it. Not again.” John pushes his way through, walking briskly and leaving Mycroft behind him, all beige elegance misplaced in everyday London of pedestrian worries and insignificant details which make life more than a simple string of catastrophes. John can handle Sherlock, temper his rage for Sherlock, but Mycroft is another story on that front.

“I see that you have reached a decision.” John hears Mycroft’s voice, the one he uses when he is absolutely certain of himself (which is always) and knows his words will hit bull’s-eye (which is, again, always). “I have to admit, I am surprised by it. Also, you seem to think that by making that decision you’ve also made a choice. The choice. If this is really the case, I am sorry to inform you that you’ve made the wrong one.” Mycroft’s voice rings, running after John like a teasing vagabond, tangling around his ankles until he stops walking. He doesn’t even want to know how Mycroft knows – probably by the way air swirls around his ears or something equally ridiculous and impossible.

‘Damn him’ John thinks, as two urges battle within him – one shouting at him to just tell Mycroft to sod off, and the other pushing him to ask questions, like a thirsty man drinking poison because it’s the only thing available at the moment.

“What do you mean?” The second urge wins and John curses himself for his weakness. “How can you possibly know which choice I made?”

‘I didn’t even know until moments ago’ he muses, but doesn’t say. The answer comes in a classical no-direct-connection-to-the-question Holmes fashion.
“They’ve taken her because they needed a fail-safe.” Mycroft averts his eyes to the ground, where the tip of his umbrella picks at the narrow, dirt-filled seam between two paving slabs like a beak of an unrelenting pigeon.

“Just in case that the idea of Sherlock potentially falling into their hands wasn’t enough of an incentive for you. They’ve taken Miss Morstan to make sure that once Sherlock found them, you would be right next to him.”

John angles his head in an attempt to shake off the questions which pound against the inside of his lips like prisoners against bars, but in the end the mutiny is too much and the words escape into the space between the opalescent sky and the dull walkway.

“But why would they want me?” John asks, pushing the grey beneath his feet away as he approaches Mycroft again.

“Because if they have you, they have Sherlock. Sherlock is a very hard man to capture, you see. It requires lots and lots of *legwork*. It requires stamina and energy, both of which can be better employed elsewhere because, you see, the way to capture Sherlock Holmes isn’t to chasing him to the point of exhaustion. Trust me, you’ll reach it much before he does. The way to get him is to make him walk into the trap himself. *You* were never their endgame. You are a means to an end. An end, which in itself was just another means to a greater end.”

“Which would be?”

“A bargain, of sorts, if you wish to call it that.”

“A bargain. Including Sherlock. From your honestly *alarming* level of interest in all matters related to Sherlock and me, I’d say you’d somehow be a part of this bargain, were it to happen.”

“What an astute deduction” Mycroft answers, lips pinched in a sour expression that reminds John of Sherlock’s face when he goes to make tea with milk that expired a week ago and ends up with bits of curdled dairy in his cup.

“You see, I knew Sherlock would insist on working his own case, just as I knew I would be forced to let him, since he is the only person even remotely likely to posses the abilities needed to locate the Aurora ring and its leaders. And, as I said, I knew Sherlock would invite you along and was considering telling you the truth about Mary. The recent events have taught him many things about the do-s and don’t-s of your relationship – he wasn’t going to risk losing you again by being dishonest. And my instruction to him not to tell you about Miss Morstan’s real identity was a sure way to solidify his intent to do the exact opposite. Which is, of course, why I suggested it in the first place.

I hoped your anger would be a sufficient agent in making you stay put. But I misjudged you...I have to admit, it is a novel experience.”

Mycroft’s tone shifts from a litany-dullness to slight interest, as if he is truly marvelling the novelty of being wrong. John’s having none of this, so he ploughs on, determined to get this conversation done as soon as possible.

“You told me to choose, Mycroft. Choose *Sherlock*. I am pretty sure that’s what I am doing here. Despite everything.”

Eyes the colour of the sky above drill into John’s, seeming dismayed – why, John can’t understand. He stopped trying to understand the workings of Mycroft Holmes’ mind ages ago. Luckily for him,
Mycroft was never the one to pass up an opportunity to prove himself right, so John gets a very detailed account of exactly why.

“And that’s where you’re mistaken, Dr. Watson. You’re not choosing Sherlock. You’re still choosing yourself. Choosing to follow Sherlock into danger because you can’t possibly conceive the idea of staying behind while he rushes head-long into trouble. Because it feels wrong to let him go alone, doesn’t it? Despite the fact that it would, in fact, be much more dangerous for him if you were to follow him. An addict’s choice, Dr. Watson. I’ve warned you.”

Rage blooms anew, and John’s body goes rigid.

“You actually expect me to let him rush head-long into this whole drug ring business all by himself? That’s your idea of me choosing him?” ‘And you are supposed to be a person of logic’ John scowls internally.

“My idea is that you do what is best for Sherlock and not what’s easiest for you.” With a slight shift of body, Mycroft manages to intrude into John’s space with minimal effort. “You’ve been given a perfect reason not to go, John. Use it.”

John licks away the curses that gather on his lips, and trades them for another question.

“And if I refuse to do that.”

“John, as I said – just because you don’t find me to be a frightening man, doesn’t mean I don’t have the means to prove you wrong.”

John stares at Mycroft. It is ironic, he realises, that he is in the company of the only person who cares about Sherlock as much as he does, and yet, they seem to fall on opposite sides this time. Enemies domestic – or maybe divided allies. The horrible thing is, John realises, that in face of the day’s events, this is the truly terrifying one.

John is terrified, because he suddenly realises the thing that made him angry with Sherlock is the thing he is being given now– only this time the consequences have the potential to be catastrophically worse. John was angry because he was kept in the dark, deceived and treated like an incompetent child. All his choices weren’t really his. All he wanted was to be able to choose.

John Watson should be careful what he wishes for, because he might just get it.

Because now, he is truly forced to choose – choose between himself and Sherlock.

Only, the choices seem both mutually inclusive and exclusive at the same time – impossibilities of humans. Choosing Sherlock means choosing himself and also not choosing himself – he can’t envision life without Sherlock anymore, so he must choose him. But he can’t choose him, because that choice means life without Sherlock, if only for a while (but possibly forever).

“Time to choose a side, Dr. Watson.”

Mycroft’s first warning echoes years after, and John is left on the pavement, just like he was left then in the damp, poorly lit space of a parking park.

Just John, concrete of the city and a choice, standing face to face. Time to choose.
Thanks for reading (and for the patience) :) New chapter definitely will be uploaded this week!
Mycroft Holmes is not a nice man. Polished, refined, influential, powerful – yes, but nice – no.

Mycroft knows that on most days, he doesn't really rank high as a good man. Sometimes he doesn't even rank as a proper human being. Most days it doesn’t really bother him, either, this ridiculous social construct of “good men”. The parameters defining the category are too vague, too pliable to bending and stretching. Too human. On most days, Mycroft Holmes has no interest in moulding himself into what average folk consider a good man, because on most days (all days) Mycroft has much more important tasks than winning congeniality contests, to which he must tend. He must choose wisely to which efforts he will devote time and energy.

However, as he turns his back to John Watson, walking away from the fruit of his labour that stands on the pavement in form of a very conflicted ex-army doctor, Mycroft feels, more than he is accustomed to feeling, the weight of his choice. For the first time in a long time, Mycroft is acutely aware of being not nice, because John Watson is possibly the only other person in the world who cares for Sherlock as much as Mycroft does. And Mycroft’s just bullied him into an impossible position, making him face a horrible choice. Horrible, but necessary, because feeling love and actually loving someone are not the same thing, Mycroft knows. Well, perhaps semantically they are synonymous, but experience taught Mycroft that sometimes dictionaries aren’t the most precise and truthful in telling of reality, because loving someone is an active process. It isn’t the simple letting go. It isn’t the passiveness of being washed over the feeling of love. It is an action and it's hard work, at times.

And it is always, above all else, a choice.

It isn’t romantic, this idea. It isn’t a rosy-tinted-glasses-compatible point of view. But if you ask Mycroft he’ll tell you that it is a far worthier (he’ll tell you even if you don’t ask) one. As opposed to the involuntary emotion that comes as side-effect of chemical processes in the brain, a choice is a conscious decision that entails consequences and responsibility. It is the process of assessing risks and disadvantages, of considering all the worst aspects of a person and still deciding to willingly risk everything, deeming them worthy of any possible devastation that may come as result.


He said once that Sherlock and he have more in common than meets the eye, but the truth is that there is one aspect in which they differ greatly. While both of them excel in their ability to institute mental faculties and logical thinking above emotion and impulses, there is an innate, intrinsic quality to Sherlock that makes him unlike Mycroft in a way that can be viewed either as a great advantage or a grievous, deadly impediment. Mycroft’s always been a polished man, a calculated man, a controlling man – but also controlled. His greatest asset (in his opinion) has always been self-control and ability to take a step back from the situation, running all viable responses to a stimulus in a fraction time that it takes for synapses to light up and choosing the most opportune one. Sherlock on the other hand...Sherlock’s always strived to imitate this, but never really reaching the same level. It wasn’t lack of mental acuity that rendered him unable to reach Mycroftian levels of detachment, but lack of moderation. Mycroft’s always been better at detecting those almost imperceptible differences between neighbouring shades of gray that populate the spectrum between black and white. Sherlock, while being able to note those differences in behaviours of others, was tragically unable to do the same in his own. Volatile, Sherlock always swung between completely ignoring of his feelings (thus the fake sociopath tag he created as a cover) and utter surrender to his inner currents that thrashed
him against sharp rocks. Volatile and so very, irreparably, dangerously, amazingly human. All red blood and pumping heart and thin skin too flimsy to keep it all in. Despite Mycroft’s repeated warnings, Sherlock’s never learnt how to find the golden middle. Like Icarus, he is always either too close to the Sun or too low down, sea foam on tips of waves nipping at his wings.

If Mycroft is a planet long-formed, stable and set it its ways, high-functioning with intricate workings of atmospheres, stratospheres and layers upon layers of crusts, cool and seemingly static, then Sherlock is a young planet in formation, with a molten, bleeding core still inadequately protected by layers of rock and a gravity much beyond that of Mycroft, which sends people hurtling towards Sherlock like space debris, and Sherlock absorbs the few he finds worthy – absorbs them so that they become an integral part of him. Only, instead of contributing to the formation of his hard crust, these people seem to make Sherlock softer and softer - vulnerable. Curiously enough, they are both his potential doom and (Mycroft sees this now) his greatest protection.

Which is why, in this particular case, it was Mycroft who made the mistake of misjudging John. Because John is, at his core, much like Sherlock and very unlike Mycroft, a creature of impulse rather than prolonged contemplation, when it comes to things dearest to him.

Mycroft understands this now, because he can see plainly that caring, while dangerous when felt towards a person as mortal as any human being, can be a shield when received – if it is shown in a proper way. Being cared for is risky business – it can kill you or it can save your life. Letting yourself be cared for is really just a shot in the dark – William Tell’s apple shot. Perhaps it is too harsh to say that there are wrong ways to care. But there certainly are wrong ways to show it, and Mycroft can’t afford that. Not when it comes to Sherlock.

Mycroft Holmes is not a nice man. Most days, he isn’t even a particularly decent one. Most days, he doesn’t really care that he isn’t. Popularity is a socially-dependent, varying construct and as such trivial. He’s a hard-crusted planet, all dry mud and layers of impenetrableness. Unlike Sherlock, he’s Daedalus, flying at perfect equidistance between two perils. And yet, every now and then, his wings threaten to give out and leave him plummeting, because there’s a kink in Mycroft’s perfect trajectory. A crooked feather. A crack in the layers around the molten core. Because if being cared for by someone is William Tell’s archery practice, then caring for someone is Russian roulette.

So, no – Mycroft Holmes is not a nice man. But niceness is the price of a gun with a single bullet, of choosing to pick it up round after round, day after day. Something’s got to give...something’s always got to give, and Mycroft knows one thing if he knows anything – if the choice is between his humanity and his brother, humanity will draw the shorter straw, every time.

Funny enough, it’s the biggest paradox of his life, that sacrificing his humanity should be the thing which makes him so irreparably, dangerously, amazingly human.

That’s Mycroft’s choice. One that he’s been making for over thirty-seven years.

John walks into the flat, walks hand-in-hand with his hard-won decision, and sees Sherlock where he stands by the window, framed by the last fingers of Sun clutching to the windows and the note stand that stands like a blackened skeleton in the dying glow.

Sherlock eyes skitter across the room and stop on John, searching for an answer to an unvoiced question. John notes Sherlock’s worried eyes and the defeated line of his shoulders. There’s the desperation, poorly hidden, and the resignation, carved deeply into lines of flesh, and John can’t. Resolution wavering, he can’t go through with his choice. But he can’t back out of it either. Most of
all, he can’t let Sherlock deduce it off him. Not like this. He needs...a distraction, a deception, muddying of waters, needs Sherlock otherwise occupied. Most of all, he needs time. He needs more time – more time to choose and more time with Sherlock, because it might be all he’s got if he lets Sherlock waltz off into danger all by himself and he wants it to last. (He needs eternity, but he’s keeping his expectations realistic.) The thought that whatever stretch of time he may manage to steal now may be the last he’ll ever have.

John knows he’s probably overreacting, knows that Mycroft would never let Sherlock just stumble into mortal peril without ensuring maximum security measures were in place (although even Mycroft is fallible that way and the threat to Sherlock’s life is a rather real one). The true danger lies in the fact that John knows his choice will irreversibly alter this thing they have, throw them off balance and out of their mutual orbits that circle each other. It will be perceived as revenge or betrayal, however deserved, and it will be just another whiplash on a bloody back of the past that is also the present, adding and adding to the wounds and scars and petty grudges and they will never be the same.

They will turn into apologies and guilt, fall into silence slowly and irrevocably, until they become strangers to each other, more so even than they were the day they first met. So, John isn’t just risking Sherlock’s life. He is risking more – even more than both of their lives separately. He is risking the life they have together – a life that is more than just two of their lives added together, a whole that is more than a sum of its parts.

It’s like bright light to eyes long kept in darkness, this sudden clarity that John experiences. Distilled, his thoughts are like 98% alcohol, burning John’s brain into sterility as if it were an open wound. The surge envelopes him like a cocoon, all emotion that accumulated in the past few hours (days, weeks, months...years) rising in an eddying chaos like the sediment off the bottom of the ocean being disturbed by a current. Anger, loyalty, resentment, worry, fear, love – an amalgam of mud and seashells, skeletons of creatures from twilight depths and strands of seaweed whirls inside John Watson and he has to move in order to ease the pain of so much commotion taking place in his still-standing body.

The whole process of contemplation doesn’t take more than a few seconds, although to John it feels like an eternity squeezed into the relativity of time of a freeze-frame. The flat smells like dirty dishes and clean linen and warm dust. The floorboards squeak as the wood expands in the slow-creeping warmth of oncoming spring. The light is fast fading, shadows infiltrating the space like Chinese circus acrobats. And John must move, although whether to prevent Sherlock from making deductions or to prevent himself from going mad, he can’t tell. Probably both. Probably both and several other reasons, too.

With the cooling air brushing against his skin like hands trying to pry him away from his destination, John moves towards Sherlock, crossing the room in five steps, until he is crowding the detective against the wall, just like that time when they came back to Baker Street (‘God, was that really just yesterday?’). Only this time there isn’t that damn absence of spirit in Sherlock’s eyes – eyes that somehow manage to be both alight and darkening at the same time. Roles reverse and this time John gets to read Sherlock. In Sherlock’s impossible eyes, John reads a flurry of things – guilt, resignation, but also careful hope, relief, desire...love – and it’s too much. Sight simply seems like a redundant sense at that moment, more an ache than a channel of gaining input, so John shuts his eyes as he pushes on to kiss Sherlock. And because it isn’t enough that Sherlock’s eyes are a canvas of some artist’s twisted catharsis that makes John seek voluntary blindness, when John’s mouth covers Sherlock’s, a sound so raw rips from Sherlock’s mouth that John wishes he was deaf as well. It is a moan and a sob and a shout and a whisper and a word in a language John forgot but understands all the same. It’s despair and a plea and a wish and a benediction. The rumble of it shakes through Sherlock like strong wind through empty rooms, howling its eerie aria.
And then there are hands sneaking under John’s clothes and foreign breath stealing into John’s mouth and the push of a body against John’s, all edges, hard planes and inexplicable strength, but also softness in places which are unreachable to human hands but felt nonetheless. They start fumbling towards Sherlock’s bedroom, legs twining together as neither shows any inclination to move away far enough to actually resemble two separate beings. Hands wander and touch, eliciting gasps and breathed-out curses. John keeps his eyes closed as much as the trip across the lounge and the hall allow him, avoiding looking into Sherlock’s eyes and focusing instead on the sound and smell and sensations of skin-to-skin touches. The little he sees when he opens his eyes in the gloom that has descended are colours – the pink of flushes skin and the angry, rebellious red of a mark he’s sucked onto Sherlock’s neck, the blue of Sherlock’s gown peaking through the door where it’s been abandoned in favour of naked skin.

When they finally collapse onto the bed, pressing together so hard that John is sure they’ll both be green and blue with bruises afterwards, John wonders if Sherlock didn’t see right through him. He hopes he didn’t, and his hopes are somewhat sustained by the unfocused quality of Sherlock’s clouded gaze that speaks of his current indisposition towards deductions. Twining their fingers together above Sherlock’s head, John tries to ignore how perfectly they move in time with each other, their rhythm somehow complementary to their rapid heartbeats.

It’s heartbreaking and delectable and delirious and oh, god, yes. Such exquisite pain that matches them so very well. John kisses Sherlock’s chapped lips in a way almost gluttonous, crashes over him like a wave while Sherlock burns beneath John like a pyre. As Sherlock writhes beneath him, sending shivers up and down John’s spine with each slide of his body against John’s, John can’t understand how something can feel so right and so wrong at the same time.

It’s all wrong because it’s avoidance and an excuse and cowardice. It’s buying of time. It’s cheating future out of arriving on time. It’s weakness of the human mind and the selfishness of the human heart, and John hates that he’s using it so, when it should be more, should be everything.

But it’s not everything it should be – it’s...something.

It’s all wrong but oh, it’s right, too. Right like gravity that holds together planets. It’s just chemistry and biology and physical processes, so it’s simple. Right? It’s a right wrong choice. It’s wrong and it’s right, too, because it’s love.

It’s not everything it should be – it’s...something (avoidance of conversation? Deception? Muddying the waters? Buying time?)

Looking at Sherlock face, his tightly shut eyes and lips parted to allow escape of air in moans and breaths like dying winds, John comes to terms with the fact that, deep down, this was never about reconsidering choices. It was about something else, about claiming time to do something else. The same something that makes this all wrong.

Between the slide of lips against the juncture of jaw and neck and the caress of hand on the juncture of leg and hip – tracing of invisible seams that bind parts into a linked whole - just as Sherlock’s wide eyes grow impossibly wider with pleasure, a realisation washes over John like a wave - it’s all wrong, because it’s not everything it should be (avoidance of conversation? Deception? Muddying the waters? Buying time?)...

...It’s wrong because it’s a goodbye. John is saying goodbye the only way he thinks he can manage – by not saying it at all.

It’s not everything – not yet. There’s one more thing it must become.
In the moments before his vision blurs with the overpowering burst of his nervous system going into overload, John gives in to the knowledge of what must happen next.

As the molten core somewhere in the inexistent place within him explodes to the very edges of him, all bright orange and red sparks behind his eye lids, John goes from feeling love to loving Sherlock.

It’s still wrong because it’s still a goodbye. Only now, it’s also right.


It is right, because it’s a choice.

It’s John Watson choosing to love Sherlock Holmes.

They burn and drown and as John’s mind finally gives up for those few seconds of blissful oblivion, they finally turn to ash. Petite mort seems more appropriate a term than ever, just then.

Afterwards, Sherlock fights hard to stay awake, but exhaustion gets the better of him and he drifts off. Conveniently for John, Sherlock sleeps like the dead, so when John extricates himself from the warm tangle of limbs (oh, and how that feels wrong, less like untangling and more like unravelling – disintegration of so much, of all they’ve achieved). Dragging himself up the stairs to his room, he dresses in a fresh outfit, pulls his overnight bag that’s always packed and ready for emergencies from under the bed and looks around, trying to decide what to take with him. With no time to pack properly and knowing that the longer he stays in the flat the more likely it is that his willpower will completely dissipate, John decides on three items that will be clue enough for Sherlock to be able to deduce what’s happened (because there will be no note, John knows – pen and paper and words might just break him if he even tried using them).

He can’t stay. He can’t Sherlock, can’t tell him the words he doesn’t mean anyway. Partly because Sherlock would probably read it right off his face or the slant of his hair over his left ear or something. He will read it and try to convince John that Mycroft is wrong, that the best possible thing John can do is come along. And John knows he will yield. Mostly, John is fleeing from this (John, Captain Watson – a man that didn’t flee from the line of fire) because he doesn’t trust himself enough to look into Sherlock’s face and stay strong enough to choose him in a way as selfless as the occasion demands.

He only plans to stay away long enough for Sherlock to leave, believing John has chosen not to go with him because he is still resentful over the whole Mary conundrum. After that, the flat will be empty anyway, empty and waiting for someone to come back, so there’s no need for John to pack heavy. Just enough to make the message clear (no matter how false it may be). Deciding to go to Mary’s old flat (he gave back his key, but still knows where she keeps the spare), knowing that it’s empty. He considers the probability that it wasn’t even her real flat, and is now unavailable, but decides to just take things in stride and cross bridges when he reaches them. Planning too far ahead seems absurd, since any plan John makes, the Universe seems rather intent on ignoring or making a complete spectacle out of. He scan feel time smoothing down his skin like sand, as it runs, runs, runs, and he knows he must move – move before it buries him alive. In the end, the choice of objects is simple. He takes with him aspects of his life – things he’s been for a while as well as things he’s become through association with Sherlock.

His gun (soldier), his medical bag (doctor), his laptop (blogger) and his tea mug (flatmate). There is one aspect of himself that he can’t take with him, one facet he finds to be the truest of all. There is no
object to represent it – there is just the knowledge of it, knowledge stored in two men. So, John takes four things and leaves one.

Making his way out of the kitchen he risks a last trip to Sherlock’s bedroom. Sherlock is but a shape tangled in sheets. Soldier, doctor, blogger, flatmate – important, but not essential. Gun, bag, laptop, mug – all palpable, transportable. All utterly useless, verging on banal and meaningless. Reaching for Sherlock and dropping what is more a whisper than a kiss to his forehead, John takes his four things and leaves the kiss to Sherlock.

Along with it, he leaves the fifth identity – the only one that seems to matter. The one he can’t take.


Kiss – Just John.

Three hours later, Sherlock Holmes awakes to an empty flat. He searches for John, but finds only empty spaces. Four at first, and then, additionally, five.

One - on the desk, where John’s laptop should be. Two – in the left-most cupboard (‘John is left-handed, practicality dictated the left-most cupboard’), where John’s tea mug should be. Three – beneath the sink in the kitchen, where John’s medical bag should be. Four – in top drawer of John’s nightstand, where John’s gun should be.

Five – in Sherlock’s bed, now just a cold nest of crusted sheets, where John should be.

(He doesn’t find the kiss – it falls off his forehead and gets absorbed by the criss-cross of fabric fibres in his bed clothes.)

Sherlock Holmes is a genius, by all accounts. The price of genius is the diminished ability of fooling oneself into comfortable (comforting) denial. So if chain of logic is followed, conclusion follows that Sherlock gets but mere moments of blessed doubt before certainty comes crashing down on him like a collapsed glass ceiling. He is stranded beneath shards of a collapsed sky, his own mistakes and the factuality of John’s absence. Of John’s choice.

Five hours later, Sherlock Holmes is on a plane headed for Switzerland, the British soil rapidly vanishing underneath him.

Six hours later, in an empty house, sitting on a dusty sofa, John Watson realises his mistake.
Exercises in sciamachy

The rain beats harshly against the plane as it ascends rapidly through the polluted air above England. The plane shakes like a kite that’s been abandoned and given to wind as a token of respect, the air currents playing with in that particularly cruel way seven-year-olds torture insects just to see how far they can get with it before they kill the poor creature. Layers of cloud seem impenetrable, like concrete or petrified cotton smeared with oil, dark and unattractive. It seems as if the plane is about the crash into the sky.

But it doesn’t. It cuts through the oily clouds like a bullet through dirty gauze, until the cockpit falls silent as rain is suddenly left below them and the sky becomes the ground. The only remaining traces of the storm that is currently bullying the Earth below them are fast-fleeing raindrops that slide off the wings and windows and the cacophony of thoughts in Sherlock’s head that sounds very much like sharp beating of rain against every surface available to touch. Deposited in Sherlock is the essence of the turmoil that is now just a distant memory below the plane’s belly, layers upon layers of dirty, grey weather festering like an infection in the wounds in the sky.

Lost in thought, Sherlock’s unseeing gaze is trained on his hands, the pointer finger of his right hand worrying the skin around the nail of his thumb. Such delicate, thin skin, that folds and wrinkles like cheap nylon with each sweep of fingertips. Sherlock remembers how even that part of him ached in the thick of detox, pain inflicted by an invisible tormentor from within his body. At times it was a sharp pain, like the one of a cigarette being extinguished on living flesh, while at others it turned into a duller, all-encompassing pain that seemed to weave itself all around, pulsing through him with each heartbeat, as if it was linked to his blood cells alongside oxygen. The former kind warranted screams and moans and writhing, but the latter was almost a constant condition, a baseline at which he was forced to exist. It was far more difficult to endure.

The pain he feels now feels very much like it. He can feel it in the cuticles around his nail, in his teeth, in burns its way down his trachea with each inhale, down, down, down, slithering along his body until it finally settles in the most distant recesses, nesting in his alveoli. His lungs are full of it. ‘Psychosomatic’ Sherlock chastises himself, and it’s such irony that he almost laughs. Almost. Had anyone told him that the man whom he cured of a psychosomatic limp would be the cause of his own psychosomatic pain, Sherlock would have laughed it off. But the laugh, even a cynical one, dies in his throat, loses wind somewhere between the heart and the mind and the incessant pain that isn’t, can’t be real.

And yet, it is.

It’s pitiful, Sherlock sneers at himself, that he is failing to prevent his mind from inflicting pain upon him. He wonders if all this would hurt less have John and he never progressed to more than just flatmates (but was that ever even the case? Weren’t they made ‘more than flatmates’ very early on, by the absence of a crutch and then a bullet through a villain’s shoulder and a shared inappropriateness? Sherlock doesn’t know if this knowledge makes him feel better or worse, really). Maybe it would have been easier waking up to an empty bed had he never been given reason to expect John to be in it. But even as he thinks this, Sherlock realises he is happy that he will never know the answers to the what-if-s. If he got to do the last few months again, he wouldn’t do much differently.

When he woke up to find the sheets all his and the other pillow already cold, he wondered if he’d find John in the lounge, trying to sort things out in his head. Sherlock hadn’t had a chance to properly gauge John’s state of mind when John came back from his walk. This was partly due to the
fact that his own state of mind was in somewhat of a disarray, partly because John moved so quickly that Sherlock was crowded against the wall before he could even take in all the details of John’s person. And then John was all over him, all around him, and John can be so horribly distracting like that. So horribly, wonderfully distracting. No, not can be – could be. Past tense. Even grammar is a mockery now, salt to a fresh, bleeding cut.

But once again, as soon as the moments needed for sleep to seep completely out of him, leaving him achingly aware and clear, Sherlock knew the flat was empty, bar for him. Even then, because hope is such a stubborn little pest, he considered several reasons for this state of things, each more improbable than the previous. One, John just went to the shops. Two, John went to the pub. Three, John went to Mrs Hudson’s for tea. Five, John got abducted by Mycroft. Six...he gave up on six, as the nagging truth fought its way to the forefront of his mind, cackling mockingly at his poor attempt at self-delusion. What was only a very strong hunch soon became confirmed fact as Sherlock got up to roam the flat, and found John’s laptop gone from the desk. He checked the kitchen, only to find John’s favourite mug gone, too. His medical bag and his gun were missing as well. How very strange it is that the absence of things could be heavier than their presence. It is illogical – if anything, removing four objects should make the space that much lighter for their added weights, but to Sherlock the empty spaces appeared seemed denser and more burdening than the heaviest of loads.

Returning to his room, Sherlock dressed and started preparing for his departure. It wasn’t really much in terms of preparation. No packing was required – Mycroft always took care of that – and no final arrangements and coordination were needed either. Things tend to be surprisingly simple when one travels alone. He phoned Mycroft, letting him know all was ready. After that nothing was left for Sherlock than to wait for the squeaking of tires on the pavement in front of 221B. He caressed the strings of his violin idly with his fingers, but the motion reminded him too much of another hand tracing similar patterns against his skin, not so long ago, so he chucked the instrument away, regretting the harsh action as soon as he the mournful twang of wood, and string, and the soul contained within the two, colliding with the worn fabric of John’s chair pierced the air like the wail of a beaten animal. For a moment, he considered writing some sort of note, a goodbye in case John came back around the flat to gather the rest of his things while Sherlock was away, until he realised that John’s already said his goodbyes. Sherlock just didn’t understand it as such at the moment.

John leaving was always a viable possibility, Sherlock knew that. He knew it when he resigned himself to telling John the truth about Mary. He knew it, but logical knowing doesn’t exclude illogical hoping, which, in the end, was Sherlock’s downfall. Looking back now, setting up an elaborate scheme to keep John safe from himself by having a person supposedly closest to him lie to him about her identity and effectively making their whole relationship a lie, wasn’t really the best way to go with a man who has trust issues. Sherlock gets that now, but as they say – hindsight is always 20/20.

But here’s the thing – love is a defect found in the losing side, not because it makes men blind, but because it makes them unapologetic. Love is the ultimate means-to-an-end scenario. It is the end that justifies any and all means. And Sherlock understands his mistake – he should have chosen his means more wisely. But he can’t find it in himself to regret keeping John safe. The irreparable consequences of his choice are a solid fact which makes him aware of the inappropriateness of his actions (to put it mildly), and he knows he owes John an apology for that, but he can’t force himself to be apologetic about his intent.

Not that it matters, anyway. Even if he gets back, John won’t be there to hear any apology Sherlock had to offer.

As the plane sails smoothly though the high-altitude air, Sherlock’s gaze returns to the window. The half-moon shines bright and cold, a razor cutting the sky’s soft skin.
When the plane lands on a small private airport in the vicinity of Bern, there is a dark car waiting for him on the taxiway. Listless deductions about the chauffeur (‘divorced, disillusioned former Catholic, father of two, local, smoker, bilingual since childhood, speaks two foreign languages, not one of Mycroft’s men – an outside liaison then’) float off the man and around Sherlock’s skull automatically, but there is no energy behind them. Like breathing or eating, deductive thinking appears to have become perfunctory.

(Sherlock is pining, he recognises this. He loathes himself for it.)

The sky is clear here, the night almost bright. It is the planet’s cocktail dress compared to the ragged cloth that is the English sky, most of the time. Utterly gorgeous, it seems to be mocking Sherlock with subtle jabs in form of starlight and calm lakes reflecting the world around them like sensual mirrors. As the car takes off, Sherlock averts his eyes from the window and stares at the soft leather of the upholstery. He tries tracking the car’s journey (‘going east, final destination near the Alps, Bernese and Urner’) in order to drown out other thoughts that intrude like the vilest of burglars, which doesn’t really prove a good technique, since he already knows where he’s headed. It isn’t until the car slows down to take a turn and Sherlock reads the name of the town on a plate (‘Meiringen’), that he realises he spent the whole journey focused on exactly the one thing that he was trying to ignore.

As he walks into his hotel room, a flash-back washes over Sherlock. There is something in the movements that have been almost rote for so long that brings out memories Sherlock doesn’t really care to revisit – the twisting of a doorknob that doesn’t lead home but into another in-between place that is only intended as an interim, the stepping across a threshold and into the darkness of a room that smells generic and beige (best case scenario) or down-right damp and mouldy and grey (worst, more frequent scenario), not bothering to turn on the light (if there is any). He’s done it countless times while away after his ‘fall’.

Sherlock doesn’t bother removing his clothes before spreading himself over the bed. The room is lovely, with a view. Five-star hotel near the main attraction of the area (some sort of waterfalls, Sherlock recalls) – Mycroft spared no expenses in order to make sure Sherlock was comfortable. Too bad he didn’t manage to achieve that goal, because Sherlock’s never been more ill at ease then at that very moment. But, he supposes, that’s not really Mycroft’s fault. At least not all of it.

The room is a far cry from the dingy squat-holes he’s sometimes had to put up with while chasing down Moriarty’s network, but no amount of plush duvets and velvety curtains can change the fact that being in this room feels very much like it did in all those other ones. With the added quality that this one feels just slightly (or not-so-slightly) worse.

Sherlock wishes for the bullet-riddled walls of an abandoned hotel outside Sarajevo. He longs for the wind that howled in the attic he stayed in while in Tibet. The damp, neon-lit basement in a village in the foot of the Ural seems rather charming now, really, because all of these places have one thing in common, one thing that was worth more than all Sherlock’s (however sparse at that moment) goods and chattels.

Back then, Sherlock had the knowledge (or so he thought) that when all is done, he will return back home and be welcome there. Admittedly, that didn’t go quite as expected, but Sherlock hadn’t been wrong. Once the emotions died down (or were more successfully repressed – depends on how you choose to look at it), things went back to some sort of equilibrium. There was never any real threat that Sherlock wouldn’t get to live his life (with John) again.
Which is precisely why this fancy, expensive, comfortable room is a dungeon build out of silk and marble and hardwood floors. Because Sherlock knows that once he leaves it he will return to a world much altered compared to the one he left. John won’t be there to welcome him back. John won’t even be there to be pissed off at him. John simply won’t be there. Because John made a choice (and Sherlock can’t find it in himself to resent him for it).

And there is nothing simple about that.

The pain that he’s been trying to deny any power over him seems to be carving out a space inside him, a hollow that should be unfeeling but somehow manages to ache harder than infected tissue. It is the very specific pain of knowing exactly what was once had and now is lost. It is longing and regret and disappointment and sorrow, all hugging each other tight like morbid lovers. It steals breath, traps it in the vacuum of the void in Sherlock’s chest (it is possible his lungs have been sacrificed to make space for the pain). Sherlock cowers away from the feeling, refusing to examine it more closely, but the sensation is relentless and assertive, demanding attention like a spoilt toddler. Loud and kicking, it is so much like a person that Sherlock can swear he hears it speaking to him.

The Pain smells like the familiar grease stains on the sofa and the foreign fabric softener of the hotel sheets. Its kicking inside Sherlock’s abused chest is an unnerving amalgam of John’s hands sneaking under Sherlock’s shirt and Sherlock’s startled kicking off of sheets after he woke up to find John gone. It seems to be kissing Sherlock from within, leaving tastes in his mouth – the bitter of burn toast on days when he tried making it before John got up in the morning, and the chalky residue of hunger long-ignored and barely-felt that he assumes he should be feeling sometime about now, considering he hasn’t eaten anything since before telling John about Mary, twelve hours ago (has it really only been twelve hours? Sherlock could swear a death and a funeral took place somewhere in that time).

The Pain’s whispers sound very much like the endearing nonsense John sometimes whispers between sweaty, slick slides of their bodies, in that altered state of mind when coherency is redundant. Its sing-along litany sounds very much like all the definitions of John Sherlock’s heard during their first time at Mycroft’s.

There is no one to silence it, no one to soothe its howls. The Pain’s thin, skeletal fingers reach out to hug Sherlock around the ribcage, digging pointy ends of digits into Sherlock’s sides until he is forced to double over on the too-sterile, too-impersonal bedcover. He remembers another set of arms encasing him like this, a warmer pair. The Pain giggles at this, and Sherlock feels it along the length of his spine, all cold ridges making his skin break out in gooseflesh. With each memory and each comparison, the Pain seems to be growing stronger, larger, and more inescapable. Feeding off anything available, like a parasite, it spoons Sherlock like a toxic bed-mate, wrapping itself around him as if to erase traces of another being ever doing the same.

It whispers sweet nonsense in Sherlock’s ear, but the sweetness is the sickish one of rotting matter in warm summer air.

It breaths down Sherlock’s neck, but its breath is acidic. It tries to lay kisses just below Sherlock’s hairline, on the spot where his pale neck runs into his thick riot of hair, but the action is nothing even reminiscent of osculation as much as it is scraping of teeth close to Sherlock’s blood.

The Pain is a poor lover, and as long as Sherlock keeps his eyes open he can resist its clumsy advances with some success, no matter how weak. But resistance is hard work and Sherlock wonders if the Pain would leave him alone if he fell asleep, so he lets his eyes fall shut. At first his hypothesis seems like a valid one, as he can slowly feel the sharp phalanges digging into the skin of his torso slowly turn soft, the breath at the nape of his neck turn warm and the harsh grating against
his skin slowly turn into presses of lips, pliant and slightly chapped, but so achingly familiar...The rotten-sweet nonsense filters out into a familiar murmur of sleepy banter...

Somewhere in his semi-somnolent state, Sherlock can feel himself relaxing, turning around on the bed. Sleep is like a soft veil with analgesic properties, covering him all over. Soft fingers and warm breath...half-there kisses and half-formed words...John.

Warmth and comfort envelope him, and Sherlock can't, for the life of him, remember, understand, why his eyes are still closed...why isn't he looking at John?

And that's all that takes. A single grain of consciousness. Prodding and questioning and just a drop of 'why?'. Sherlock never was very good at leaving things be.

The moment his brow creases in his sleepy confusion, reality comes crashing down and Pain's disguise falls off and it convulses around Sherlock in a manic hug. The soft John-flesh melts off its fingers, leaving bare bones that stab, its breath necrotises within an exhale, turning rancid, and the soft lips shrivel and disappear. The words turn into a high-pitched shriek and Pain screams in Sherlock's ear.

Its scream sounds very much like Sherlock's.

In the dark room, sleep is an abstract concept, as hard to grasp as String theory, and Sherlock knows without a doubt that the night is going to be just a long night terror of a solivagant man, endured with eyes open and no relief of waking up available. He lets cold sweat wash over him, eyes wide open and unnaturally light in the shadows. There won't be any rest for him tonight.

Just an extensive exercise in sciamachy.
Ignorance is bliss

Chapter Notes

Ok, if this confuses you a bit, it means it's working ;)

The sound is getting louder, the deep rumble of an invisible engine growling warning sounds through the shadowy space. Dust swirls in the air that is stuffy and warm in the way usually linked to a lot of machinery working constantly in a confined space, like laundry rooms in big hotels. Dark bluish shadows bathe the space in terror and ghoulish anticipation of unknowns that emerge with each new bend and turn. Strip of anaemic neon light cut through the corridors, doing little to illuminate the gloom.

John runs and runs, his loud breathing being distorted into a mutant sound by the metal walls that take it and mix it with echo. He runs, turning corner after corner, no longer trying to remember the way he came. The place – whatever it is – is a maze, convoluted and eerily disorientating. Feet hit the metal plating on the floor, playing a cacophonous march that would put a whole percussion orchestra to shame, and John feels as if his head is going to burst with all the sounds. Air seems to be growing both thicker and thinner at the same time, losing oxygen but gaining on density and crawling into John’s lungs like lazy tar. With no signposts in the endless net of corridors, he is orientating himself by the only sound in the space that he is sure isn’t coming from him – the deep rumbling of some invisible engine (or so he supposes). Somehow, John knows it is crucial he reaches the source of the rumbling. Something tells him that’s where he’ll find what he’s looking for.

Just as he turns another corner, trying to estimate whether he is running towards or away the sound, another sound reaches John’s confused, overwhelmed ears. Somewhere in the corridors he left behind, a distinct sound of water sloshing around between metal walls floods the space. Like a waterfall spilling into a system of tubes. John picks up his pace, running away from the sound and its source.

It should be thrilling, the chase, the danger. He wonders why it isn’t. Why it’s simply frightening.

The water draws closer and closer, its loud babbling growing unbearably deafening. The wave of raging, foaming liquid breaks around the corner seconds after John’s turned it and crashes into John’s current corridor. Luckily for John, this corridor differs from all the previous ones by a string of doors on its left wall. John bursts through the nearest door. Bolting the lock behind him, he turns around to inspect the room and is hit by heat that pounces like an angry serpent.

Following the cobalt darkness of the corridors, the room is blaringly orange, a strong glow from the centre of it radiating heat and light. The room is round, with the same metal walls as the corridors John’s left behind. The source of the orange glow seems to be a round hole in the middle, supposedly a furnace of some sort. John can register whips of flames that flagellate out of it like solar flares off the surface of the Sun. There is no trace of an engine or turbine that could be the source of the rumbling, but the sound reverberates through the space so strongly that John can feel it in his teeth.

Over the centre of the pit hangs an immobile figure, its hands outstretched to the sides, each handuffed and chained to one side of the room via long chains. Its feet dangle over the orange heart of
the room and its head is bowed so that John can’t make out its face. Despite this, John knows several things.

He knows this is what he’s been looking for.

He knows the figure is dead.

He knows it’s Sherlock.

Despite the fact that he is dead, Sherlock skin seems to be in an incessant cycle of transformation, as it turns red and burnt, all the way to charred and black, only to grow back pink and new, and then the process repeats. The process isn’t the same all over Sherlock’s body, but in varying stages in various spots, making Sherlock look like a living mosaic or a patch-work ragdoll.

He looks like he’s boiling.

John stands with suspended breath and stares at the body for a few seconds. The rumbling is the loudest here, in the round room, drowning out any other sound. Now that he has a chance to listen to it properly, to feel it in his bones, it reminds John not of an engine but of buildings collapsing in on themselves over and over again, like a skyscraper with an infinite number of floors crumbling into the void at the centre of itself. Yet, the room is so disconcertingly still, apart from the vibrations of the rumbling and the occasional lashing of fire-whips from the pit. The heat is oppressing, a merciless tyrant dominating the room. John can feel it pressing its greedy palms all over his body, drawing sweat like some sort of prize. He wants to turn away and run back into the blessedly cold corridors, but he can’t – partly because the corridors are probably still flooded, but more so because he seems to be rooted to the spot by the sight in front of him. The hot air that rises from the pit dances around Sherlock’s hanging body like a thin veil, distorting the image a bit. John decides he can’t see anything properly from where he is standing by the door, so he decides to move a bit closer.

Just as John moves to step towards the centre of the room, Sherlock’s head snaps up.

It’s a sudden movement, but, for some indecipherable reason, John knows Sherlock is still dead – even in face of fact-defying evidence. He knows it the way he knows Sherlock’s name or the fact that he loves him. Honestly, despite the abruptness of it, there is nothing scary about the movement.

Not until Sherlock’s eyes open.

Eyelids retreat quickly, revealing two eyes, unerringly familiar yet terrifyingly altered. Also, asymmetrical. And of all the things, this one frightens John.

Because in that moment he knows this is Sherlock, but isn’t Sherlock, as well.

He knows Sherlock, his Sherlock, is lost.

Sherlock’s left eye is red, while his right one is blue, but not the radiant, light blue that John’s gotten used to over the years (he not so much got used to it but fell for it, that first week they spent as flatmates, really). It is the listless blue of stale vein blood seen through layers of pale skin, several shades too deep to be right.

The non-matching eyes stare their dead stare at John and John can’t move. He is physically pinned by the gaze. The rumbling vibrates around him, blending with the thunderous beating of his jack-rabbit heart, the sound of which echoes around John’s skull the way his footsteps echoed in the corridors earlier. A cacophonous march. A Funeral March for a Fallen Soldier. John can’t discern whether it is playing for Sherlock or him.
Sherlock’s eyes that aren’t really Sherlock’s eyes manage to glower at John in a way both dead and fierce. There is something almost beastly in those eyes, wild, raw, and wounded. Accusing. If looks could talk, then this one would howl like a wounded animal in throes of death. John wishes Sherlock would blink, but wishes are as useful here as a glass of water in fighting the fire that bubbles below Sherlock.

Tremors shake John’s body as the rumbling continues to grow impossibly louder, forcing John to press his palms against his ears in order to muffle the sound. Only, he finds that the moment he does so, the sound becomes even louder. Momentarily disorientated, it takes him some time to realise that’s because the sound isn’t coming from somewhere in the room. It was never coming from anywhere in the complex, in fact.

It is coming from within John.

It is verging on violent now and John can feel his bones begin to crack, a narrow fissure cleaving apart his sternum. He can feel himself preparing to collapse in on himself, into the void. He looks down at his chest, as if he can see the cracks opening below his skin. Hopeless panic bursts from every fracture and John raises his head back up to look at Sherlock again. There is a ghost of a malicious grin on Sherlock’s dead-but-still-dying face.

John can feel the first vestiges of destruction, of infinite decay coming to claim him, and then...

...then...

...John snaps awake, his head jerking against the plane widow where he rested it before falling asleep. The engine on the wing on the other side of the window hums its deep working rumble. John doesn’t even bother to pretend that the fear he feels is just the residue of the nightmare. There’s no one there to sham but himself, and he knows that wouldn’t go over well, anyway.

The private plane commandeered by Mycroft a few hours earlier glides over the international sky like a sparrow on a mission. Abandoned by sleep on the cold, hard doorstep of reality, John lets the gravity of what’s happened in the past few hours settle in.

Nine hours earlier, Brixton

Darkness of his and Mary’s old flat feels like a soft drink gone stale, all fizzy bubbles gone, the sugar and artificial sweeteners already decaying into unpleasant goo. It feels wrong. All of it. The darkness and the flat that isn’t the Flat. John, here, away. John away from Sherlock. This choice which isn’t a choice at all, which is an act surrender to faith (or Mycroft...at times, it’s hard to distinguish between the two).

Despite the fact that Mycroft believes John’s finally made a choice equivalent to Sherlock’s, it doesn’t sit right with John. There is something missing. A visceral feeling of wrongness gnaws at John’s insides. It feels like emptiness. Like betraying, lying, deceiving. John wonders if Sherlock felt the same that day he chose to fake his death and leave John behind. He wonders how hard it must have been...and how much help Sherlock must have had.

A thought punches John in the gut, half relief, half dread. All of it sheer resolve.

Mycroft may know Sherlock and John and the way of functioning of all of human race, but he is wrong when it comes to this. All of this is wrong.
And if Mycroft is so brilliant, he must be able to come up with a different plan.

Three hours earlier, the Diogenes Club

“There has to be a way, Mycroft.” John voice is unyielding, not like metal, but like ages old carbon pressed by the weight of the world into a hard jewel.

“There is one.” Mycroft’s tone – too neutral, too reserved – and his eyes – failing to stay empty, their uncoordinated, mismatched signals tell John that whatever is about to be said doesn’t bode well for him.

John’s body bounces as turbulence tickles the plane. Now that he thinks about it, Mycroft’s solution was so logical. He should have thought of it himself, John ponders. He wonders why he didn’t.

He wonders if he knew all along, but pretended he didn’t.

John wonders a lot, because he can. Because it’s inane – wondering won’t change anything.

John wonders about by-gones and hypotheticals, because it’s all that’s left. The future, so very not hypothetical but actual, real and concrete, has already been mapped out.

So, John wonders about what could have been, just to pass the time.

It's not regret. It's just curiosity. It's determination.

It's a choice.

Two and a half hours earlier, The Diogenes Club

“Get me there.”

“John, you must consider...”

“No, Mycroft. I’m don’t considering. I’m done choosing. This is my choice.”

Two hours earlier, Heathrow airport, Private hangars

“Just one thing, Mycroft. Was this – me, doing this – a part of some mind game? Did you orchestrate this? Knew I’d react like this and counted on it?”

“No, John. Not this. Not this time.”

Mycroft’s face is serious. John would even go as far as to call it sad. He wonders if it’s genuine, if Mycroft’s telling the truth. It doesn’t really matter, in the end. It doesn’t change anything.

Mycroft doesn’t say anything else and John boards the plane.
The plane lands on a strip of dark grey among lush green and dull, wet brown. It taxies shortly and
then halts to a stop, softly, softly, as if it will wake the world if it does much else. John can feel the
flinch of his body resisting change of position as inertia works its magic and for a moment, he
wonders if it is some sort of subconscious resistance on a cellular level.

He can feel blisters on the backs of his heels forming despite the softness of his shoes. Sore, red stop
signs forming on skin. John ignores them and strides towards the black car on the side of the
taxiway. Looking out the tinted window, as the car moves swiftly and efficiently along the road,
John wishes his reflection would stop being distorted in a way that his skin is several shades to pale
and his face much to slender to be his own. He wishes he could stop seeing Sherlock staring back at
him.

(But he doesn’t, not really. All he wishes is Sherlock staring back at him. He doesn’t know whether it
would be too much or not enough. Probably both. Definitely unhelpful. Destructive.)

John exits the car just as the sky blanches and then blushes with the revived blood flow of the
oncoming day. The hotel is small but visibly high-end. Surprisingly, it doesn’t really conform to the
low-profile requirements of most cases John’s been privy to since knowing the Holmes brothers. A
strange but mesmerising amalgam of a relic and cutting-edge wonder of modern architecture, it
stands half carved out of the great slate of rock and half towering over a crack between two
mountains, overlooking a raging river a couple hundred meters below. Shimmering glass contrasts
the dull grey of rock, polished so hard that it gleams even in the still-sunless half-light of 7:12 am that
accompanies early-spring mornings in the shadow of the Alps.

Drowsy like the swirl of milk in a cup of Earl Grey, the world seems reluctant to wake, either
completely oblivious to or successfully ignoring the bundle of nervous energy and internal conflict
that is John Watson standing on a gravel path in the middle of the pellucid Alpine air that feels like a
gulp of cold water. In the motionless silence, a distant hum of water collapsing from a great height
whispers and murmurs the myths and legends of kobolds and the White Hunt, who still linger on in
the water spray-mist hovering over rocks that shatter cascades into beads of unstable shine.

John, robbed of the ability to appreciate the wild, unadulterated beauty that surrounds him, trudges
up towards the hotel’s entrance, feeling the exhausting alertness of a man kept awake too long by an
inescapable stimulus, like caffeine. Or adrenalin. His bones are lead and his eyelids must be coated
with sanding paper, if the feeling he gets with every blink is anything to go by, but his mind is
achingly awake, relentless in its spasmodic grip on John’s whole being. As he marches a defeatist’s
rhythm against the gravel, the shrinking distance rushes to reveal detail and intricacies of the edifice
ahead. But of all the carvings and almost-seamless transitions from ancient to newborn, rock to glass,
and wood to steel, what catches John’s wearily hyperactive eye is a shadowy blotch on the muted
pastels that will soon become loudly vivid with vulgar touches of sunlight. A human-shape blotch.
The figure stands on an observation deck over the canyon, downhill from where John’s making his
way up to the hotel.

Ignoring the pang of longing, John starts down the hill, eyes still on the mid-distant figure.

He knows this is what he’s been looking for.

He knows the figure is alive.
He *knows* it’s Sherlock.

...

He *knows* everything depends on how he plays his next move.
The early morning frost creaks under John’s steps, white traitor carrying voice of his approach. He is sure Sherlock is aware of the fact that he is not alone, but Sherlock being Sherlock, he doesn’t bother to acknowledge it. Stopping several steps behind Sherlock, he exploits Sherlock lack of socially appropriate behaviour and looks his fill. Sherlock fits in with the landscape as much as he does in London, although in ways distinctly different. In London, he is a specimen of an endemic species in its natural habitat, as much a part of the city as old operating theatres hidden in attics of churches and fish and chips shops with stacks of old newspaper stored for wrappings. There, he is a part of an ecosystem so complex that small changes in it appear invisible but are felt by those connected to the city so intrinsically that they equate the rush hours over its streets to the speed of blood pumping through their blood vessels. Whether the Sherlock is a man bespoke for the city or the other way around is only determinable by the differences in their age and rules of chronology.

Here, though, Sherlock is a wonder of a different nature. He isn’t an integral part of the place, but an addition, easily noticeable. But, despite his position as a visitor (or an intruder), there appears to be a mutual understanding between him and his surroundings, some sort of silent conversation conducted on levels inaudible to ears of others. He is (always has been) a creature of the wild sort of beauty, that which is tremendous in its absolute refusal of being conquered. Just like the mountains and the sharp, too-clean air that surround him, as well as the water that carves its way though stone of the Alps, Sherlock seems to be something deeply raw that only allows the illusion of being tempered down to everyday civility for the sake of those around him. The landscape treats him not as a rival but as an esteemed peer, a distant kin that somehow got trapped in bones and skin and the ridiculous confines of a human body, forced to forgo sharp peaks and snow caps, foaming waterfalls and vastness of the forget-me-not-blue sky.

In that moment, he is simply unbelievable (but there is nothing simple in that, not for John), but not in the mundane sense of the expression. He is literally unbelievable, a term beyond John’s grasp, an idea too incomprehensible, that he should exist, this eccentricity of the Universe. At times, times like this, John swears Sherlock is a fluke, Universe’s slip of finger, a beautiful miscalculation that resulted in a whole world being stored in 184 centimetres of fallible human tissue, held together only by its own gravity. It’s impossible, illogical, ridiculously sentimental and defiantly at least slightly unhealthy, but John wishes he could be an inhabitant of that world for just a little bit longer than he knows he has. Sherlock is his home world – has been, longer than John has been aware.

“I get nervous when you stand near edges of high places, you know”, John calls out, voice somehow too loud and foreign in the silence of the yet-to-be morning, forced levity cutting sharp wounds
across the distance that separates them.

Sherlock flinches, his coat flapping like wings of a startled bird that cannot fly, and spins around, eyes oscillating between being widened in shock and narrowed in inspection. Shock, confusion, and —ah, there it is — relief, almost guilty, surge over Sherlock’s face, and John know it is only due to the element of surprise that he has on his side that he is allowed this glimpse at Sherlock unguarded, reacting instinctively rather than calculating each twitch of muscle, each micro expression.

Just as John catches a glimpse of it all, Sherlock’s face grows guarded, as if he cannot decide if all this just a cruel prank or a twisted trap. His mouth smooths into a thin line, the small muscles of his face working to close it off, make it a mask of doubt and inquiry, but his eyes – his eye betray him. Perhaps it is only to John that they do so, who knows Sherlock so intimately, but between narrowed lids and lowered eyebrows, hope glitters like an uncontrollable electric current. John can tell Sherlock wishes he wasn’t feeling at, let alone showing it. And it feels a little bit like death, this reluctance of Sherlock’s to hope, to feel an emotion so dangerous, so glorious that it might just break him under the right (wrong) circumstances.

John steps closer, closer, until he is a one and a half step away from Sherlock. He reaches out towards Sherlock’s still form, catching the cuff of his coat sleeve, delicately, just a slide of fingers against dark fabric, using it to pull Sherlock a bit closer and a bit further away from the edge of the viewing deck. Sherlock is towering above him now, their height difference forcing John to look up in order to maintain eye contact across the half-a-step wide space filled with air that touches each of them but prevents them from touching each other. Just half a step, half a breath and it would be gone, this damned distance that dances like a mutual mistress between them. And John hopes it will be, soon, but there is something that needs to be said before it can be banished, if only for a few suspended inhales.

“I realised I made a mistake. I was...angry. Betrayed. I needed time to sort things out and I thought I did, but I realised I was wrong.” John delivers his speech on a single breath. “And then I left because I felt like that would help, but I was wrong again. Us ordinary idiots tend to get things wrong”, he offers with just the slightest indication of a smile. All the time, Sherlock’s expression remains unchanged, unreadable. John’s words linger between them like the smoke John so hates to smell on Sherlock, curling in dark spirals, apparently insubstantial, inadequate in mending whatever it is that has been broken. John is about to say something more (though what, he has no idea – he only had this little bit worked out and it has already taken him all the air in his lungs to deliver it), when Sherlock lounges forward and before John can realise that he’s chased the hate distance away with his words, Sherlock’s mouth reaches his, breath on breath, and for a fraction of moment it’s only their respective breaths kissing, mixing, carbon dioxide making love in the warm cloud of exhalation. And then – then Sherlock’s hands find sides of John’s face, gripping like a surgical frame (but endlessly gentler) to hold John in place, rooted to the frozen soil beneath him, right there, in front of Sherlock, so very close, almost occupying the same space, and John thinks (or, more precisely, he would think if he were anywhere near a condition allowing even a single coherent thought) that this is how a person should be kissed – thoroughly, hungrily, precisely and eagerly. Sherlock kisses him with the fervour of a desperate soul clinging to the edge above the river Styx, unwilling to drown, determined to hang on to life. It is a kiss that speaks of things lost and found, of hopes and futures surrendered and given up only to be resurrected and given back. Relieved lips slide and frenzied teeth nip and bite, and it’s so broken that it is healing (only because there is nothing else it could possibly be – anything else would lead to complete dissolution). John opens his mouth and it’s a voluntary slitting open of a wound, an invitation into the soft vulnerability with no means of defence. Sherlock doesn’t waste his time, stealing John’s air, erasing whatever divide there still is between him. He does it with the urgency of a long-shunned traveller returning home. It’s a flood so strong that it feels impossible to stop.
If it were a sound it would be a cry, that of a newborn taking its first breath and one of a nightingale pressing its chest to a thorn, bleeding beauty over the rose’s malicious finger. It would be a scream, and an angry shout, and manic laughter, and an exasperated groan. If it were a story it would be a myth and a cautionary tale, an epic legend and a cookie fortune significant only in personal context of everyday problems and quests.

But it’s none of those things (or maybe it’s all of them, blended together). It is just a kiss.

And yet, there is no way this is just a kiss – it must be something more, some primal energy surging up from the ground beneath them, misguided, missing a seed or a young strand of grass, and blooming through them instead. A moan tumbles out of a mouth, or maybe two, a sound of pained glory a flower feels with first opening of petals.

It feels a little bit like death, but only in that way in which death feels like the culmination of life.

But just like life, the kiss ends (too soon, too soon).

They don’t speak right away. For a while they let the sounds of their rapid breathing fill the air, warm moisture of all the unsaid words they fed each other, swallowed down and gave back blurring the air. It is such an intimate, dangerous thing to let another person just listen to you breathing. You can’t help it – you must breathe – and you are allowing them to witness, to focus on one of your greatest addictions. Just breathing, with no words, is so infinitely harder than talking. You can never breath as anyone but yourself. No acting, no faking – there are no lies in breaths, just raw reveal of things in the truest of lights. A breath is ultimate honesty.

“Are you staying?” Sherlock’s voice is quiet but clear, words strongly formed, which only serves to tell John how much Sherlock must be tormented by not knowing the answer.

“Of course I’m staying” John replies, a teasing glint in his eyes. (He cannot say ‘Of course I’m staying’ because he doesn’t want to lie, not even partially.)

The smile that cracks across Sherlock’s face borders on delirious and John thanks whatever cosmic authority wired the human brain to be partly incapacitated by such strong joy, because he is rather certain that the chemical disturbance of it is the only thing keeping Sherlock from catching onto what’s really going on.

People see what they want to see. Believe what they want to believe. For once, Sherlock sees but does not observe, and John can’t identify the emotion that stirs within him – it’s an impossible concoction of a wistful sort of relief, a dulled version of dread that comes with the anticipation of an inevitable event, the sort of joy that can only be elicited by Sherlock. ‘I guess that’s what people call love’ John muses and in that moment a knowledge settles, finally falls into place. It isn’t a sudden realisation as much as it is a hard-won final shift of a lever that sets a mechanism into motion. It isn’t really anything new – many have reached the same conclusion before him – but it’s there and right then it’s John’s, this (truest) truth that love isn’t really a feeling at all.

It is a fine balancing act, a study in tolerance between opposing emotions, an exercise in being contrary at one’s very core, thus allowing diametrically opposite concepts, feelings and thoughts to co-exist in narrow spaces and each other’s vicinity. Love isn’t a feeling, but many of them, in combinations – like codes, like words. It is a procession of faults and virtues and a lesson in dancing to sounds of both sets of footsteps. It’s the slow-slow-quick-quick of foxtrot, imperfect, full of wrong turns and damaged toes. Love isn’t a feeling, or a thing – it’s not even really a dance. It is what happens, stealthily, covertly, when breaths kiss and mind wrestle and lives refuse to untangle themselves from each other. If life is what happens while we are busy making other plans, then love is what happens while we're busy doing, thinking, feeling other things. And once it does, if one is
lucky, there is enough time to enjoy it just for what it is. But John knows he spent all of his luck and has no such privileges now, which is why all of this feels like a glorious sort of pain. He must move things along while he still has the strength to.

“Oh, by the way, Mycroft sends you this” he says, struggling to keep his tone nonchalant. He’s become quite an actor. He extends his hand, offering Sherlock a simple, black USB stick.

The previous evening

“Why would he believe the info to be true?” John asks, eyeing the black USB Mycroft’s offering him.

They are standing in Mycroft’s room at the Diogenes Club, with the fire cracking lazily in the fireplace despite the mild March temperatures. It casts dancing shadows onto Mycroft’s face, making it look like a venue of some tribal dance or rite-of-passage ritual.

“Because he is the one who gave it to me. I convinced him his data was wrong, that my sources were more reliable. You will tell him I was mistaken and that he should proceed as he originally suggested. And if Sherlock likes anything then he likes prov-”

“ – proving you wrong.” John finishes with a slight shake of head and a sigh which is half relief and half exasperation. Who would have guessed that Sherlock’s petty, immature feud would be the thing to save him.

“Precisely.” Mycroft agrees, “Sherlock can be brilliant, when he is not too busy being childish.”

At any other time, John would have taken a moment to smirk at the petulance of Mycroft’s tone, but not now. Not with each moment being so valuable. Not with each being a countdown.

“Are you sure this will work?” he inquires, eyes stuck on a little black USB Mycroft handed him. It looks so innocuous, just a bit of plastic and metal, no one would ever guess its importance. Lives contained within 4 gigabytes of memory. It doesn’t take much to store life, it would seem.

“No, I’m not.” Mycroft’s answer sounds as if the uncertainty pains him slightly. “But it’s the best option that’s available. John...” John lifts his gaze, meets Mycroft’s eyes with a hard expression that speaks of determination, of a soldier at peace with his duty.

“Even if it works, you are aware of the risks, are you not?” There is a hesitant note in Mycroft’s cadence, an oddity so rarely witnessed that John is almost knocked off balance by it. He only heard it once before, three years ago, in this same room – ‘John...tell him I’m sorry, will you?’. What followed after ended John’s life as he knew it for quite some time. John doesn’t particularly like that note. “I will try and get in touch with some contacts I have in Switzerland. Due to the country’s neutral status I cannot do much via the official channels...We cannot risk an international incident if word got out that the British Government was sending special units there. You will be utterly exposed and mostly unprotected.”

“I know.” John’s jaw is set, his stance all squares and sharp, unyielding angles.

“And you still persist in your hope that this will work?” If he didn’t know better, John would say Mycroft’s tone holds something edging dangerously close to admiration.

“Yes.”
“Despite the implications?” Admiration and something else....

“Yes.”

“Very well. The plane leaves in an hour.” ... something very similar to regret.

They make their way up to the hotel lobby, all marble and stainless steel. Sherlock asks for his room key while John signs in.

“Here you go, Mr Dupin” the receptionist says in impeccable French, as he hands Sherlock the keys.

“Thank you.” Sherlock replies and moves towards the lobby lounge area without further ado, stopping at the frame of the French windows that segregate the space into blocks. His back is turned to the reception desk and to a casual observer he would seem deeply engrossed in the view through large windows on the furthest wall. John watches him from the corner of his eye, so focused on Sherlock that he misses the other receptionist asking him a question. He snaps out of it, turning his head to meet the young woman’s eyes fully.

“Your name, sir?” she repeats in English, her accent barely noticeable. It takes John a second to remember the fake name Mycroft told him to use. He clears his throat and answers a bit too loudly.

“Victor Trevor.”

Sherlock’s eyes cut towards John, flashing with some unfamiliar light that John has hard time catching and identifying since he is still busy maintaining at least some level of civil communication with the woman in front of him.

“Here is your key, Mr. Trevor” she says and John is soon fully equipped to retreat to his room. He moves towards the lounge, passing Sherlock and settling on a small sofa. Sherlock takes a seat opposite him, a strange concoction of barely-contained excitement about the case and something else – something John suspects has to do with his fake name. But he can’t dwell on that now. He has a job to do. A plan to conduct.

“We should start right away – ” Sherlock’s words start to flow in that familiar rapid fashion John loves so much, but he can’t allow himself the indulgence today.

“Actually, could we just take it slow for 15 minutes? Have some tea?” he asks, using his best imploring voice. The expression of incredulous confusion on Sherlock’s face is simply priceless.

“Tea? You want to have tea? Now? With the case waiting?” Sherlock sounds as if he would really like it for John to say he was just pulling his leg. But the catch doesn’t come (it will, of it will, but Sherlock certainly won’t see it coming...not in time, anyway).

“Yes” John responds, “I would like to have tea with you. Please. For me, Sherlock.”

John doesn’t say anything else. Only lies have detail, and even though it isn’t an innocent request, it isn’t a lie that John would like to have tea with Sherlock. Just a few more stolen moments of fake normality (or whatever that term denotes in terms of John and Sherlock).

John doesn’t break eye contact and after a few more beats of befuddled staring, Sherlock just nods. John springs to his feet and moves towards the bar, ordering two cups of tea. He doesn’t move back to the sofa, but instead stays and waits for their tea to be made.
Sherlock observes him from where he is seated, the sun now slowly starting to filter through the wall of glass behind his back. For a few moments, John blocks the view of the tea with his body, fiddling with the cups a bit. Finally, he seems to have gotten both of them and he moves back to where Sherlock is, handing him a cup as he passes. They sit and sip their tea. It's utterly ridiculous.

‘Oh god, the Swiss can’t make tea for the life of them.’ Sherlock grimaces. The tea is bitter, as if over-brewed, the sharpness cutting through the layers of sugar. But he isn’t really bothered, he can’t force himself to be. John is here and that’s all that matters.

It’s simply everything.

Two keys are definitely redundant, Sherlock ponders as they climb to his room. ‘We won’t be needing two bedrooms’ he smirks. For some reason, Sherlock’s body feels heavy, his steps a bit uncoordinated. A yawn catches him unassuming and Sherlock stumbles as they enter the room.

Funny, he is never, ever, sleepy during cases. Must be the mountain air.

The bed looks warm and inviting, even though it is morning and not night. John takes Sherlock’s hand and leads him to it. For a moment Sherlock wonders if John is about to chase away Sherlock’s sleepiness with rather pleasant methods, but John just lies down on his side, so that he is facing Sherlock as the Detective does the same. He wonders what happens next.

John is just looking at him, but it isn’t in that happy, buzzing way he did only moments ago and on the viewing deck. As if something dark and sad and unwanted is leaking through cracks in John veneer now. Sherlock doesn’t like it. Moreover, he doesn’t like that he can’t identify it. Can’t think about it properly. Can’t think about anything properly in fact.

God, why is he so sleepy?!

John’s eyes are unblinking, bottomless blue dots drawing Sherlock in. He thinks he might drown in them. He wishes he could. Just fall asleep on the surface of John’s irises, afloat in John’s eyes, safe below the dome of his cornea. Sherlock wants to be the look in John’s eyes, tender and soft and oh-so-loving. Just not quite so...sad. Sad? Why sad? John should not be sad. He should be happy, like Sherlock is happy. Why...why sad? He is missing something, Sherlock knows it. Something hidden in the blue of John's eyes in that spot where Sherlock should be.

He's seen that look before...seen it...in John's eyes. In another bed. His bed. Their bed? Not so long ago. When he thought John has made up his mind. When he was wrong.

It was there then, this unidentifiable look. Sherlock didn't know what it was until later, until the moment decayed into 'too late'. He didn't recognise it for what it was then (what it is now, as well)...

...a goodbye.

As he yawns again, trying so very hard to fight off sleep, Sherlock’s eyes widen in hazy panic as he realises that it is a fight he will lose. Sherlock can feel his drugged brain putting all the pieces together.

John’s insistence that Sherlock drink his tea.

John blocking Sherlock’s view.
The slightly off taste of the tea.

‘**Of course...sleeping pills.**’ Sherlock wishes he could slap himself, but his limbs are so heavy. He can only stare at John in panic as sleep claims him slowly but ruthlessly. John needs Sherlock to sleep tonight. ‘**But why? Why would he need that? Why would he want me asleep. If I’m asleep then I can’t be with – oh. Oh, John. Oh, no.**’

Sherlock’s whole field of vision consists exclusively of John, who can’t hold his mask in place any more. His face is pure, raw pain. Strange how much it looks like love. Horrible love, stupid love, dangerous love – Sherlock can feel it on his skin, dull ache of invisible bruises made by John’s eyes mixed with the tormenting sweetness of John’s fingers kissing him like hands of a blind reading love letters in Braille. Sherlock’s brain is muddy, his eyes barely open. He slurs out his words.

“John...John, what did you do?”

The answer is so simple. So simple even Sherlock can understand it, even though his brain is shutting off at a rapid speed. Darkness steals the sight of John’s face from Sherlock as his eyes close, lids cemented together, but sound is still flowing in, rocking Sherlock to sleep. John’s answer is a horrible lullaby that ensures nightmares. **What did you do?**

“I chose.”

______________________________

One day the world will end. The end will start with fire. Next, there will be floods. In the end, all that will be left will be ashes and mud.

______________________________

Once he is sure Sherlock is out cold, John rises from the bed, lacing his trekking shoes.

John remembers watching a documentary about climate change. He recalls listening to the explanations of the greenhouse effect accompanied by poorly-coloured diagrams and animations of sunlight piercing the glass of a greenhouse and heat remaining trapped below it. He remembers thinking how stupid the human race was, knowing exactly what could very well be their undoing, possessing the knowledge on how to prevent that from happening and still doing nothing. Earth’s doom will be a shared product of its inhabitants and the star it so relentlessly circles. One can hardly blame the Sun for shining, although its heat plays a significant role in Earth’s demise.

John Watson can’t escape Sherlock Holmes any more than the Earth can escape the Sun. Even if he could, he knows he wouldn’t want to. Funny (but it isn’t, not really) how easy he was to judge people for doing nothing to stop climate change. In the end, isn’t he the same? There was such a simple way for him to save himself (only it was never simple). Humans are stupid, John decides as he stalks across the stark graphic of the remote Swiss countryside, and he is easily the stupidest of them all.

He casts one last look at the hotel, trying to identify the window of his room – the room in which Sherlock is currently sound asleep. It’s too bright to be sure, Sun reflecting off all windows with the intensity of a toothache, and John finds this slightly anticlimactic, but life isn’t a novel or a drama and such neat, cathartic moments simply don’t happen just because one wants them to. It doesn’t matter, not really. Maybe it's the human nature to always expect more than can be delivered, if only for the simple indulgence of being disappointed and thus allowed the semi-poetic/semi-pathetic instants of
melancholy that feels like more, that wears make up in order to fool people into thinking it is something great and profound and not simply a fancy word from feeling put out. How many moments of larger-than-life were Sherlock and he already granted, John thinks.

The dominoes and the coordinates, the case and the drugs, that cold Christmas Eve in the underpass and the warm nights in Mycroft’s house that followed, that first meeting in the greenhouse and then the second – it all seems like a part of a different life now, so distant, so detached from here and now. ‘Yes’, John acquiesces silently to no one in particular, ‘we’ve had a good run...so many of them’. Looking back he sees all the things that were lost – to fires, to floods, to themselves and to each other – and he swears he can trace their footsteps in the ashes and mud that now reside in the wake of turbulences, to this exact spot, this precise moment.

It is life after death, this path they drew together. The crash after the culmination of being unapologetically alive. John thinks it was worth it all. And so it this...so is this.

Love is what happens while we’re busy doing, thinking, feeling other things, and once it does, if one is lucky, there is enough time to enjoy it just for what it is. But if one isn’t so lucky, then love is the endgame, the name at the end of the road for all the steps that were taken.

Love isn’t a feeling...love is the very edge of the world.

And quite possibly, its end.

Chapter End Notes

I think there'll be another three or so chapters of this (hopefully before we're all retired)

:)
Of simple things

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be a single, long chapter, but seeing as life's kept me from finishing it in time, I decided to break it up :)

References to show cannon checked at http://arianedevere.livejournal.com/30648.html (great transcript)

Enjoy!

It’s all about the wavelength, really. Ultraviolet and visible light have shorter wavelengths than infrared heat, which is why light can pass the barrier of glass while heat remains mostly trapped beneath it. It’s simple physics. This is what Sherlock Holmes has done to John Watson – made him willing to give up his light and turn into heat, too slow to escape whatever confinement he enters in his radiant phase. And he will do it, willingly, because it’s in light’s nature to shine, not matter the consequences, and it is in John Watson’s nature to do things properly, be it war and only retreating from it after he’d given his everything – his years, his skills, his flesh, bone and blood – or love (sometimes the line between the two is a blurry, indistinguishable one), from which there is no retreat, not even after and if all is sacrificed. You can pay war’s release toll in blood and pain, but you can’t buy your freedom from love – it is a much more merciless master. It is indifferent to riches and contemptuous towards bargains and promises of favours.

John remembers the Dionaea muscipula by which he found Sherlock the first time they met in the greenhouse, and ponders how very fitting (ironic) it was that the warning was there right from the beginning, the Universe’s foreshadowing shout-out to those clever enough to listen for it. He was warned, John was, because love is very much like that Venus flytrap that loomed in the shadows behind Sherlock’s back the day when the air was heavy with the smell of soil and greenery and things unnamed. Beware of love – it’s a living thing, very much in possession of will and often cunning. It will lure you in, like that sly Venus flytrap, until it sure you’ve reached the point of no escape, when you are so deep in the soft, living, juicy inside of it that your feet are stuck and your head is swimming with disorientation. It won’t even have to snap shut around you to keep you in, swallow you whole. You will go willingly, taking bits of it with you, feeding off it as it feeds off you. Beware of loving – it is the shortest path to getting eaten alive. Love will be everything and you won’t even wish to escape it, allowing it to conduct unhindered its planned transmutation of you. For the sake of love, for the will of devotion, even light will turn into heat, invisible and temporary. Destructive. Dark.

If you asked John what the edge of the world looked like, he would tell you it looked like a cabin on a cliff, overlooking a waterfall. He would tell you it looked inadequately spectacular for its dramatic title. If you asked (but you wouldn’t, not John, not there – you’d let the man walking the ledge walk it in silence), John would tell you the edge of the world was the muzzle of his gun, all geometry of destruction in densely packed atoms of metal. He would tell you that the edge was not a single line in a single dimension, but several of them, some running parallel and some perpendicular, cutting and crossing, all sharing one point of contact. A point of converted light. A point of dark.

There is something dark about John Watson, but for the first time in his life, John finally understands
precisely why the dark is there. It’s just the right shade of dark for him to be able to do this. It’s the sort of dark that allowed him to become a soldier, because no man made of sheer light would ever do such a thing. It is the force that clamps a sturdy hand over the mouth of one’s nagging conscience in just the right moments to keep balance between a serial killer and a complete innocent. Dark is what it takes to love imperfect men and what it takes for imperfect men to love. Dark is what it takes for John Watson to love Sherlock Holmes in the only way that is proper.

People think love is composed of light and warmth and soft things that caress tips of ears and corners of lips in those neither-here-nor-there refugee moments of early mornings. But love is neither a duckling nor a puffy cloud of candy floss. It isn’t velvet or the tenderness of a pansy’s petal. Or, to be fair, it’s not only that. As already mentioned, love is the very edge of the world – and dark is its colour.

If you asked John Watson what the edge of the world looked like, he would tell you it looked like a cabin on a cliff, overlooking a waterfall, the muzzle of his gun, several dimensions, and the act of loving.

So, don’t ask John Watson about the edge of the world. You probably won’t like the answer. Better yet, don’t ask him anything, or if you do, forgive him any disappointment his answers might bring you. John Watson isn’t a perfect man. In fact, he is doing his very best not to become one, because he knows a thing or two about perfect men. Didn’t you hear?

All the perfect men are broken.

Dark is the colour the world will fall into once it ends. Only, dark isn’t a colour at all, just like love isn’t a feeling, not really. Just like love, the dark is something else completely.

Dark is protection against perfection.

Dark is what a choice feels like – the choice to die alive rather than live through death in the name of perfect men.

Didn’t you hear?

All the perfect men have broken hearts.

Just as the sun reaches zenith, a sign marking the area’s most famous attraction in four languages, English being at the very bottom, becomes just big enough for John to read. Walking towards it, he thinks of a painting, the retrieval of which he once witnessed some lifetimes and two or so worlds ago, that shared the name he now reads. Gifts of diamond cufflinks and forced thank you-s pull the corners of his mouth just a bit upwards into a rueful smirk as camera flashes blind him from the corners of his memory that host the before – before the thing that changed it all, before the faux-end that even as such ended something true.

The path is hard and frozen underneath his feet, the high altitude forbidding the ground from thawing even in midday Sun. It’s an ice age that grows from the ground up, into John, sliding glaciers through the soles of his feet and towards those infinitely warm, human bits of him. It’s alright – the cold is welcome. It will help, numb him, make him immune to pain. Or so he hopes.

The gun at the small of his back has the reassuring quality of an old friend’s hand pushing him gently on. John tries to shake apocalyptic thoughts – he was never one for dramatic end-of-the-world scenario’s, he always thought Sherlock would be the one for that, out of the two of them – because
he knows nothing is yet set in stone. Hell, even if it were, if anyone knows that things set in stone – in gravestones, no less – can still change, it’s John. Maybe all of this will play out in his favour. Maybe nothing will go wrong. Maybe he’ll manage to get all this done before Sherlock even wakes up and the worst thing he’ll have to deal with is Sherlock’s accusatory glare upon waking. It’s really not that impossible, given that John is a rather good shot, not prone to waves of self-doubt when it comes to his combat skills.

Still, if you ask John, that’s quite a lot of ‘maybe-s’.

But it doesn’t matter. Well, of course it matters, but the funny thing is that in the grand scheme it sort of doesn’t. No matter how things pan out, scales will be tipped and John is intent on making sure the only two possible outcomes are those that will tip them in favour of John’s side of the battle.

Outcome no. 1: All the maybe-s become reality and three lives are saved for the price of one.

Outcome no. 2: The maybes become an unfulfilled hypothetical and two lives are gained for the price of two. Still a fair bargain.

Outcome no. 3: John fails and – well, no point on finishing that sentence. Outcome no. 3 is completely out of question.

In a moment of sheer, insane hilarity, John thinks how surreal this whole thing is. Very James Bond. A sleek villain lair in a remote but exclusive retreat, a lonely figure under the crisp Sun going in for all-or-nothing. There’s even a pretty girl in the story, though in a Bond movie she would play a slightly different role. The only thing missing is a plot twist and the whole thing could be written down and sold as script. John would like that movie. In an even sillier moment it hits him that he may never see a Bond movie again. Or any movie, think of it. For some reason the thought is like a punch to the gut more than any he had. Maybe it’s because it’s such a ridiculously mundane thing, movie-watching. It’s not a larger-than-life, slightly-unbelievable concept like worlds and intricate processes than hold them together only to tear them apart. It’s so simple, so familiar, so exquisitely boring and that’s what makes it so painfully real.

So, maybe it’s the unbearable realness of possibly never getting to see a movie again that twists John’s guts, or maybe it’s the fact that as he thinks this, he passes the wooden sign he spotted from afar, the one with the name of the attraction written in several languages. He already knows what it says, but still, for some reason it feels like the point of no return. John’s step falters fractionally as he casts one more look at the name before striding decidedly past it.

It’s a name he knows, from before. The press had used part of it for some of Sherlock’s nicknames. It is the name that, in John’s head, will always mark the beginning of the end. How fitting it is then, that it is here that all of this is taking place.

John quickly turns into a steadily diminishing figure against the impressive scenery and the path once more becomes deserted, with just the wooden sign and the same name written over and over again in white lettering on green boards. The name of the edge of the world, tucked away in the middle of a small European country...

...The Reichenbach falls.

Jonathan Small’s cabin is a strange affair, all light pinewood and sleek steel and glass panelling. Like a futuristic ski-cabin, it perches on the edge over one of the smaller waterfalls, ensuring its value in
money at a price most people can’t even spell correctly. The Sun is beating unrelentingly at the polished surfaces of the cabin, making it impossible to look straight into parts of it and turning the windows into mirrors. It’s like something out of a magazine, one of those things you can never be sure are actually real and not just offspring of Photoshop. The patch of land in front of is a bare meadow, save for the uncannily green grass and a few rocks that seem to grow from the ground, that offers no cover and John knows he’s as visible as a candle in a calm night. Not that it matters, really, since he isn’t counting on the element of surprise. This isn’t something that can be done covertly. He will literally have to walk up to the front door and knock. What a very English way of dealing with things, perfectly civil even when dealing with rather barbaric matters. Really, it’s almost too easy. There really should be more fuss about it. One is not supposed to be able to just walk up to a drug lord’s holiday house and ring the door bell. Where’s the drama in that? James Bond would be horrified at such a no-nonsense approach. And just like with the movie-watching, the simple directness of it shears away any illusion that could make things just a bit easier by making them just an ounce unreal. There will be no black-ops style descent onto roofs or action movie sequences. John will walk up and ring or knock and that will be it. And it will be done willingly, no matter how real and true and scary. Thing is, only lies have detail, as Sherlock likes to say, and there’s nothing left but the truth now – John can’t, won’t lie to himself – so all of this, for the first time in a long time, is something rather simple.

By the time he finishes his musings on nature of terrifying things, John’s at the door. A security camera follows his movements with the rapt precision of a voyeur as he raises a clenched fist to knock. But before he gets the chance to beat the expensive wood with frayed knuckles, the door swings open.

“This is too easy”, John thinks as he turns to face Small, whom he can hear coming up behind his back. In one swift movement, John rounds on him, pulling out his gun before Small can get a chance to snatch it away. He scans the drug lord from the top of his head, where a flow of slick black hair trails down to the nape of his neck and ends in a small ponytail, to the tips of his pointy, Italian-leather shoes.

“You are a brave man, Captain Watson” says Small, standing still and quite unfazed in front of John as light streams luxuriously through the wall of glass behind John’s back, illuminating the modern, minimalistic interior of the cabin. White walls and sleek, sharp lines of blockish furniture leave no softness in the space. There is a certain brutality to all of it. The cabin isn’t a home – it’s a lair.

“I was once told that bravery is by far the kindest word for stupidity” John retorts. The gun in his hand is trained unwaveringly on Small, like a natural extension of John’s hand, all his darkness concentrated in the smoky alloy.

“Well, then perhaps I am lucky. You seem to possess a lot of...bravery. How much easier is it to outwit a brave man than a clever one do you think, Captain?” The smirk on Small’s face speaks
loudly of how clever he considers himself for managing to (not-so-subtly) squeeze in a quip about John’s intelligence.

“Probably as easier as it is for a brave man to press the trigger not caring about the consequences that it is for a clever one.”

“You would shoot an unarmed civilian? I’m disappointed to see the moral standards of the British Armed Forces slipping these days.”

“I’m pretty sure the British Armed Forces can live with your disappointment. After all, I don’t think they’d feel all that inclined to taking advice on moral from a drug lord. Besides, you are hardly an unarmed man, Mr. Small. I think that gun tucked away at your side and not really hidden by your jacket excludes you from that particular category.” It is only after he finishes his little speech that John realises how much he sounded like Sherlock just now. The realisation carries with it a strange emotion, a mix of pain and relieved serenity, because it means that even now, he has a bit of Sherlock with him. In him. There an imprint somewhere within those parts of John that are more invisible empty space that actual physical tissue, and in that imprint a piece of Sherlockian nature lied embedded, inextricably logged between thought and instinct.

(Only John doesn’t know that it isn’t a piece of Sherlock – it’s all him, all John, only truer and rawer and more sharply defined than before, a light centred by a lens or a prism until it’s a burning, white-hot beam. But don’t tell John any of this; let him have this little comfort. You don’t poke at the man walking the edge of the world with a stick. It’s just not a nice thing to do.)

“Perhaps. Yet, I am not the one holding you at gunpoint” replies Small. “Are you really going to shoot me like this? I had you pegged as a man of principle, Captain.”

The constant use of John’s military title doesn’t go amiss. John knows it’s a taunt as much as it is an appeal to his internal code of honour. John is aware of the fact that Small thinks he can play him into giving up, but what Small doesn’t know is that some principles run deeper than others. Doctor-soldier-John, all layers one on top of the other are now being stripped away until only the most basic remain.

‘Too easy, too easy, too easy’, John’s instincts scream, the internal chant causing him to try and scan the room from the corner of his eye, but there’s nothing. It’s just that simple. Too simple. Where is the plot twist? In a Bond movie, this is precisely when the plot twist would kick in.

Seconds turn into a minute, but nothing happens. John has no intention on lowering his gun, but since he also can’t bring himself to shoot a man who is just standing there, he is stuck in a draw. He wishes Small would do something, a too-quick movement, a wrong step – anything that would give any bit of leeway for a warranted shot. But not like this. There may be darkness in John Watson, but he is not a murderer. At least, not a cold-blooded one. He won’t shoot a man who poses no immediate threat to him or a third party. Only, he can’t stand here, waiting for a prompt, angry that Small has correctly calculated John’s mind-frame to an inch. This is not how things were supposed to go, but John can’t help feeling just slightly relieved as he flicks his gun towards the door.

“Very well, then. You win. I won’t shoot you, but you’re coming with me.”

Small’s laugh roars through the sparsely-furnished space, bouncing off bare walls.

“Why in heaven’s name would I do that?”

“Because while I have no immediate plans to shoot you, I do have a gun trained on you, while you, as you pointed out, do not have one on me.”
Something sly crawls into Small’s grin that makes John break out in cold sweat. He knows that face. It’s a face of a chess master about to announce mate.

“Oh, Captain Watson, you really should listen more carefully. I said I wasn’t the one holding you at gunpoint. I never said there wasn’t someone else doing precisely that.”

Small’s eyes never leave John’s as he raises his voice a bit and calls out to some invisible third party.

“You can come out now, say hi to our guest. I believe you no introductions are necessary. After all, the two of you know each other rather...intimately.”

John can sense movement behind his back, as a figure he knows so well steps out from behind the stairwell. He can’t see the person yet, but he doesn’t really have to. He has a pretty good idea who it is, an idea that is only further confirmed by the person’s voice.

“Hello, John.”

He knows that voice, heard it say mundane things over tea in the morning and other, not-so-mundane in ecstasy in the dead of night. That voice that once meant comfort now only means betrayal. John knew it couldn’t be that tidy, that simple. Because it isn’t. He knows what this is...

...It’s the plot twist.
Menace starts with M

Funny how much this is panning out to be like a proper Bond movie script, John thinks for the umpteenth time that day. Even the pretty girl gets her role, only it’s much better than it ever is in any of the actual movies. She’s not just a sidekick or a pretty face on miles-long legs strutting around seductively. Oh no, she’s so much more. She’s a reminder that in a world of men the best weapon is being underestimated. Centuries of damsels in distress working as perfect cover for the fact that amidst dramatic dialogues, blown-up egos and hero complexes, there’s a single unperceived threat in form of a 164 cm of lean curves and short mousy hair. Not a typical Bond-girl, admittedly, but all the better for it. Bond girls are fantasies projected onto silver screens, terrifyingly beautiful, but in the end just that – fantasies. Light and lenses and coloured film. But the pretty girl in this script is none of that – not a fantasy nor an apparition – and for that she is all the more terrifying. Real.

And unlike in the movies, for once, the pretty girl really has the best role – she is the plot twist.

John turns around to face her, the black abyss of a gun’s barrel fixed in his field of vision like a symptom of retinal damage.

“Hello, Mary.”

John’s voice is clipped, tight. He waits for shock or surprise to hit him like a bullet or a moving wall, but they never come. It was too simple, even then, her tidy exit out of his life. Yes, he knows she was only in it because of Mycroft’s directive, so it should be surprising that she hadn’t caused an upheaval while getting out, but if John Watson learned one thing, it’s that when things seem simple, that’s when one can know for sure they are about to get complicated in ways previously incomprehensible.

There are many theories about the name Mary. One of them is that it means “sea of bitterness”. John finds it ironically fitting, because that’s what she feels like right at that moment, like a bitter sea weeping at the shores of his and Sherlock’s tender, new world that never got the chance to fully become itself. Waves of vitriol wash upon the strand and John wonders if he should have seen it coming, the tide that appears when the Moon calls upon it. John speaks, the end of the world on his breath.

“So, not held captive, then.”

“No, not quite.”

Mary’s eyes are closed shutters, unreadable but not cold. Simply blank, like monitors of a computer that had all its programmes eaten up by a virus. It makes John feel as if he should know some sort of password that would bring all of this to a halt. But he doesn’t. There’s no password, no magic tricks that can reverse the tide.

“Good to know Mycroft gets it wrong every once in a while” John throws words at nobody in particular, his tone coloured heavily with faux-conversational levity, hoping that being snide will do a good enough job in conveying how very tired he is of thing tangling ever more tightly in a frustrating knot of betrayals and half-truths, back-stabbing and outright lies.

Isn’t there supposed to be some giant cosmic set of scales keeping track of how much misery was served to each individual on the last round of “life-going-down-the-drain”? If there is, it’s very much off-balance, John would say.
“Why don’t you take Captain Watson here down to see the sights?” Small’s voice is thick with malicious amusement. It drips like toxic resin, filling cracks in John’s spirit with dark, viscous pools of those lowest passions of men, the urges to hurt, to destroy, to cause pain.

“I think I just might.” Mary’s blank eyes never leave John’s as she speaks. With a sharp movement of her head indicating that John should go down the stairs, she moves behind him, wresting the gun out of his hand in the process.

John can’t tell how much time has passed since he left the hotel. It could be just a bit over an hour or it could be a whole epoch. Maybe the ice age is over and the glaciers have melted. That would explain the rushing noise of crushing water that swoops into John’s ears as he descends the stairs only to find himself standing in what seems like a concrete bunker or garage, carved into the mountain below the cabin and ending in a vast, rectangular opening on the far end. The opening leads onto a natural terrace, a small, roughly semi-circular patch of ground, all of protruding into the vertical fall of cliffs around it. From it, a spectacular close-up of the waterfall demands attention. The patch of rock and soil stands out among the geometrical, obviously human-made lines of the cabin, left unchanged in its wild irregularity. There is no protective rail cordoning off the unsafe edge of it, to which Mary brings John.

Small leans on the side of the bunker entrance, hands in pockets, a prefect image of a relaxed tycoon enjoying the fruits of his riches. The Sun is high now. There’s nothing soft in its glare, just sharp razors of light cutting air and brandishing their shine like swords of judgement.

“This place is stunning, isn’t it?” Small inquires in a chatty, breezy tone. “Very practical, too. The scenery makes it so easy to rid oneself of evidence.”

“Yes, I do see how that can prove to be an advantage. After all, it will make depoising of you so much easier if you choose to remain the blithering idiot you seem to be busy impersonation at the moment. Let John go, Mary. Now.”

All three heads turn to the source of the voice that rumbles, although not with the easy flow it usually fosters, bouncing off the concrete entombment of the bunker. Stepping out of the shadows and into the brightness of the terrace, Sherlock would look dramatic if only he didn’t look so utterly worn. He looks like some odd, elegant roadkill, all pale and sweaty, with too-big eyes and clammy skin.

“Well, if it isn’t the great Detective, himself. I must admit, Mr. Holmes, you look a bit better than last time I saw you...A bit, but not much...Is the mountain air not doing you any good?” Small taunts, obviously enjoying the newest development immensely.

Sherlock’s hands are shaking in a way John recognises as that of a man trying to fight severe somnolence with unwise amounts of caffeine. ‘That impossible man’ John wants to laugh; only nothing of this is even remotely funny. But it almost is, it’s almost hilarious, the fact that Sherlock somehow managed to circumvent the effects of John’s sleeping pills, just long enough to tank himself full of coffee or god-knows-what caffeinated beverage. John thinks that maybe he is suffering from adrenalin poisoning, because he can’t come up with a better explanation why his only current urge is to laugh very, very loudly and hug Sherlock for being the silly git he is, until his jittery, over-stimulated nerves calm down. (John suspects he might have just left all traces of self-preservation instincts somewhere back in London. Possibly at the airport check-in.)

The gun in Sherlock’s hands bobs up and down as the Detective tries to aim it, unsteadily, at Mary. All urge to laugh leaves John like dirty dishwater through a drain somewhere deep inside him as he takes in the scene of Mary and Sherlock pointing firearms at each other. He knows this is no draw. This is a mate under false prentence – no power play between equals, but the long-in-store tipping of scales. Because, John knows, the chances are very much skewed. Between Mary, a trained
government operative gone rouge, and Sherlock, with his twitchy hands, too-wide eyes, and rapid-firing nervous system, it is quite clear who will take the winnings. But it’s Sherlock – one never knows and things are never over before the end (and sometimes, not even then).

“Sherlock...” John breathes out Sherlock’s name, relief and desperation warring on his breath. This isn’t how things were supposed to go. This isn’t how they were supposed to go, at all. So why does John feel relieved then? A sickening feeling drenches his stomach in acid – the realisation that despite being ready to die, he is so very, very happy that he might just not have to... because Sherlock is here. Because *Sherlock is here*. Exactly where Small wanted him. Exactly where John and Mycroft have tried to keep him away from. And yet... and yet, John can’t help the mollified exhale that escapes him with the dawning of the idea that he might not end up as broken puppet at the bottom of an Alpine river.

John hates himself for it.

Small is still as relaxed as a jungle cat on a hot, lazy afternoon, standing only a few meter and a half or so from Sherlock. Like a single spectator in a private movie theatre, he seems engrossed in the action (or the current lack thereof) while at the same time being thoroughly convinced of his own imperviousness to the consequences that may come out of it.

“Since it seems like we are all here now, let’s not let things get boring. We all know how tedious that tends to be, don’t we, Sherlock? Puts a man at risk of falling victim to all sorts of... temptations. You know a thing or two about temptations, don’t you?”

A muscle in Sherlock’s jaw twitches, whether from the synthetic stimuli in his bloodstream or the memory of a dingy basement and a box of lethal liquid ecstasy, John can’t claim to know for sure. He can sense Small waiting for Sherlock to take the bait, bark out a snide retort, but Sherlock doesn’t seem to be in the mood for bickering. Which is, to be honest, rather worrying. Sherlock is always up for bickering. It’s his default mode half the time he’s awake and talking. So, Sherlock being silent is definitely not contributing to the growing sense of dread in John’s chest. Sherlock is only quiet when he is thinking so fast that his mouth can’t quite keep up with his mind. And if Sherlock is thinking as furiously as John thinks he is, then that can mean just one thing – Sherlock doesn’t have a plan. He doesn’t have a plan and he is trying to come up with one at the very moment. All faith in Sherlock aside, John has to admit it’s not the most reassuring of prospects.

The silence stretches out, and John thinks maniacally of something to say which would distract Small (or Mary, the only person quieter than Sherlock in the whole ordeal) enough for John to attempt some crazy, desperate move. He decides to just blurt out something ridiculous, aiming for incredulity or confusion, when he catches the slight motion of Sherlock’s head instructing him to keep quiet.

Sherlock flicks his eyes to Small, keeping his body still and positioned so he is facing Mary full-on.

“You have what you wanted. I’m here. You can go on and blackmail my brother. I’m sure he’ll be royally annoyed. You’ll probably force him to skip desert. Always puts him in a foul mood, that.” Sherlock is rambling and John knows it’s his ‘buying time’ ramble, but there’s a spark missing in it. Even the snide comments regarding Mycroft feel listless and automatic. “Let John go. You don’t need him here anymore.”

The laughter that erupts from Small following Sherlock’s words is an ugly, loud sound that carries through the clear air and bounces off sides of cliffs that surround them.

“Blackmail Mycroft? Oh, my dear Sherlock, do keep up. I have no need to blackmail Mycroft.”

Small’s grin takes on a sinister edge, and for a moment John is struck by the chilling thought that
maybe Mycroft sent them into a trap. But just as cold sweat breaks out on the small of his back, Small continues.

“You were slow. Too slow. I admit, blackmail was my initial plan, but that was ages ago. While you and you brother took your time finding me, I have secured an exit strategy that doesn’t require anything as messy as blackmail. No, too many loose ends there.

Once I’m gone from here, Mycroft will never find me. He will try, trust me. I will give him many more reasons for that than drugs. More motivation, shall we say. But he won’t find me. And even if by some miracle he does, he won’t be able to touch me.”

Sherlock seems thrown off by this, finally angling his body slightly towards Small and turning his head to get a better look (‘mistake’ Sherlock would tell himself), while keeping his gun on Mary.

“Oh, please do tell. I assure you I am dying to hear this majestic plan of yours.” Sherlock’s voice is surprisingly cold and cutting, considering the state his body’s in, but Small just laughs again.

“I know stalling when I see it, Sherlock. So, no. I’m not telling you my plan. But I’ll give you this – you are right about one thing. You are definitely dying. So is your dear Captain Watson. And quite soon, if I may add.” The smile melts off Small’s face alarmingly quickly as he utters his next words.

“Mary. Now.”

John doesn’t have time to react beyond spreading his eyes in shock as Mary, in one fluid motion, spins, shifting the aim of his gun from John to Sherlock. She is fast – very fast – and Sherlock doesn’t manage to turn quite all the way back from where he is turned towards Small.

Sun glints off the weapon in the pretty girl’s soft hands.

A shot rings out.

The water keeps falling. A body drops.

Mary’s gun radiates heat into the crisp Alpine air.

Three lives for the price of one.

The Worldmakers and the (Double) Plot Twist stand together as red blood eddies, pools, and then slips away, a small waterfall of its own, down the edge of the terrace.

“God, that man could never shut up.” Mary groans as she re-does the safety on her gun, her motions economic and sharp. “I guess we’re all in for some storytelling, aren’t we?”

John is still standing near the edge of the cliff, mouth hanging open in shock. Sherlock, on the other hand, seems to have already recovered from any surprise he might have suffered, and is standing
next to Small’s crumpled body, eyes never leaving Mary, with an air of deep thought surrounding him like a rainbow-halo that lingers over the junctures where waterfall meets river in a rush of foam and spray.

Mary casts a glance at John, then at Sherlock. There is nothing apologetic in that gaze, no softness John used to associate with Mary. His Mary. Was there even his Mary to start with? Or was there always just this person? John decides to add that to his long list of questions for the woman who is currently standing between him and Sherlock.

They’ve come full circle, somehow. John, Sherlock, and Mary.

“I guess we are.” Sherlock replies. John wishes Sherlock would look at him, but Sherlock nimbly avoids looking in John’s direction. To say it’s frustrating would be an unfair understatement.

“Shall we get on with it, then?” John growls out. Mary’s eyes snap to him. He still can’t read her and that doesn’t really do anything for his jumbled-up nerves.

“Yes.” Mary and Sherlock reply in unison.

Without further ado, Mary starts towards the bunker, making her way back to the cabin. Sherlock waits for her to pass, standing still in the bright sunlight, still not looking at John.

“John, if you would move away from that ledge, I would be much obliged.” Sherlock’s voice is steady, but John can see the tremors that shake his hands. He finally realises Sherlock’s reluctance to look his way.

“Yeah. Yeah, of course.”

John moves towards Sherlock and together they stalk back up the stairs and into the living room, where Mary is already seated on the big sofa.

It’s story-time.
There's a dead man on the ledge below, leaking blood into the void, down, down to the clear waters below, but somehow neither Mary nor Sherlock seem worried about that. John can't really find it in him to worry about anything anymore. There's only confusion and the slick film of so-much-death coating his skin, his mind, but there's something else there, too, a guilty feeling he can't keep down, burning like welcome acid up from his stomach. Relief, John realises, he feels such tremendous relief. He doesn't know if that makes him a bad man... he doesn't know what it makes him, but in that moment he just can't find an iota of energy to care. It's in that crash after the high, once the danger John so unwillingly can't help loving has been washed away by a spurt of blood and a rush of water, that the nauseating, sticky aftermath composed of betrayal and too much pondering floats into John's system like an emotional hangover.

There is background noise trying to steal away John's attention, which is currently focused fully and unmistakably (if somewhat unconstructively) inwards, a hungry bird of prey hunting over the fields of his mind and heart. It isn't until silence breaks into that noise like a clumsy burglar into a house full of people, that John realises it had been words, human voices, explanations force-fed to unwilling ears that he was tuning out. And now it has narrowed down to a single repetition of a few phonemes.

"John." Sherlock's repeating his name, his eyes and Mary's focused on John. John flinches as his surroundings sharpen out, his inner eye closing in favour of his actual ones, the presence of the moment hitting him like a gust of cold wind.

"Sorry" he mumbles, "I was thinking. Was there a question?"

"Yes. Is your phone getting any signal? We need to contact Mycroft." It's Mary that says the words and John observes, detached, what an odd feeling it is to be talking to her. It's like he's talking to the twin of the Mary he (thought he) knew, a person who looks like her in every way, but is unmistakably not her, at all. A familiar stranger. He checks his phone. No bars.

"Nothing." John can feel Sherlock looking at him. It's the look of a man who tried to do the right thing and got punished for it. John wants to tell him it's ok, that he's not angry with him. It's true, too. He isn't. Maybe he should be, but he can't think of a reason why...He'd resolved his anger over Sherlock's involvement in the whole Mary issue, and in the whole of this – this spy-movie-gone-awry – there's really little that could be counted as Sherlock's fault. Besides, John feels as if anger aimed towards Sherlock is a cliché by now, an over-used, recycled feeling.

And yet, he can't bring himself to look at Sherlock. He can't look at Sherlock because he wants to look at him and have that moment untainted – that instant of the world finally stilling and the realisation of 'oh, it's done. We can stop now. We can start again now' pouring in like liquid and
taking shape of the container it fills, a John-shaped container. There is a relishing to be claimed once all this is done, John knows, but it’s still away, a few steps out of reach. Because there are explanations to be given and plot holes to be filled, ghosts to be buried and memories to be rewritten. Because, right across from Sherlock and John, settled in a white leather armchair, there’s Mary, sitting right there, the past and the present colliding into a deformed creature that is neither then nor now.

So, no, John can’t look at Sherlock, because he is afraid that if he does the world will once again shift into something he doesn’t recognise. Perhaps, if he just keeps his eyes on Mary she won’t disappear this time only to crop back up as something new, something even more destructive. He’s not mad at Sherlock, but he’s not at peace either. Because a part of this doesn’t belong to Sherlock, at all. It belongs to John and John only – the right to know, the right to finally be in the loop regarding proceeding that are in fact his life.

“Well, it seems we have time for your story, then” he says, directing his words to Mary, like passing a ball in a game of catch, only the ball is not really a ball but a grenade or a bag full of shards of glass, dangerous and intended to hurt. Mary doesn’t even flinch and that cold, unrelenting air of being untouchable angers John more than anything. It’s unfair that he feels so tired or raw or betrayed or played or confused. It’s unfair that he feels so much and can’t help it, can’t stop it from showing, while Mary sits there, all cool composure and schooled features. People think love is the only feeling that can make a person feel foolish when unrequited, but that’s a sad misconception. Truth is, any feeling, when gone unreturned, has the same power. People are not fans of indifference. One usually likes most to be loved, but denied that, he will take any emotion – preferably a strong one, such as hate or rage or envy – as long as it means he is on equal grounds in his sentimentality. But indifference – indifference is the surest way to make a man the weaker party, the one compromised by the unruliness of his own heart. In the power-play of being human with other humans, indifference is the ultimate trump card. And Mary seems to be the one holding it.

Apparently ignorant of (or, more likely, ignoring) John’s inner struggles, she plunges into her story.

“While still in London, I was tasked with tailing Small and his pack of thugs. I did well until one night I got too close, too reckless and gave myself away.”


“John...” Sherlock sounds tired. Sherlock never sounds tired, John thinks. Which is why everything about this is wrong. Just a pile of wrong things, a scene out of an LSD-induced fairytale fantasy, all skewed and scary and horrifying and not nearly as fun as it’s supposed to be.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. I want to know where you screwed up.”

“I can’t say. It’s classified.” Mary seems almost spiteful. John can’t really believe her. There’s something off about her aloofness. Something unnatural. Forced. The sunlight spilling in from the outside is almost forceful, a bully made of photons, punching its way into the smallest spaces. And yet, the trio in the cottage is seated in the shade, just on the margins of luminescence. Not one of them makes a move to change that. The shades feel more comfortable, for some reason. It’s easier to hide darkness there.

“Either way, I knew I was spotted and that it was either get killed or acclimate from that point on. I was of no use to Mycroft dead, so I did what I was trained to do. I survived by convincing them I was on their side.”
John can’t help but snort. Incredulity wells up and beats Sherlock to asking the obvious question.

“They are an international drug ring, I’d think them quite a bit suspicious. What on Earth could you have said to convince them of being on their side?”

He expects more vague, off-hand remarks and pleas of “classified”. Which is why what happens next catches John completely by surprise. Not the surprise-birthday-party sort of surprise, either. More like ‘something turned up during your routine medical check up’ sort of surprise.

The cards fall, a perfect hand of indifference John fancied Mary has unexpectedly gone and lost as, for a moment, such pain flashes in Mary’s eyes that John gets a sudden, overwhelming urge to stick his fingers into his ears and avoid hearing the answer he asked for. But before his inert body can sculpt his thoughts into actions, Mary speaks.

“I gave them Sherlock.”

One day the world will end. The end will start with fire. Next, there will be floods. But the world can survive those. It can take the burn of the fires and hold its breath through the floods. The world can burn and it can drown, but it will not end in fire nor in water. Not really.

The world will end in the hands of men.

The world will be destroyed not by tectonic shifts, but by flickers of fingers. It will dissipate down the doomed paths of life-lines on palms and break over the harsh ridges of knuckles.

Which is quite alright, because just as it may end there, the world will also begin again in the hands of men. It is those hands that will take the leftover detritus of fires and floods and recognise in it the potential for new life, a new world sitting dormant in the bones of all the worlds that came (and died) before it.

It doesn’t take much to destroy a world. But it doesn’t take all that much to build a new one, either. It’s a rather simple recipe – a bit of ashes, a bit of mud, a pinch of faith, a teaspoon of hope, a dollop of effort, and for a finish grate some compromise. Mix it all in a pair of hands (or preferably two) and watch. Watch a new world grow.

“What do you mean, you gave them Sherlock?” John’s words are just a bit more than a growl, but before Mary can reply, Sherlock speaks up, finally joining into the conversation.

“Oh. Of course. I was wondering how they knew where to look.” The ridiculous man doesn’t even sound cross about the whole thing, just happy to finally have all the pieces of the puzzle. In any other setting, John would find it endearing. Now, he finds it infuriating.

“Sherlock...I want to hear it from her.” he cuts in, eyes slashing through the air under an angle. Turning back to Mary, John is determined to get to the bottom of this.

“What do you mean, you gave them Sherlock?” he asks again, slowly, almost menacingly.

“They knew he was onto them. Naturally, they wanted him...neutralised.”
“Naturally.” John’s voice gives off sarcasm the way sulphur gives off its rotten stench. Mary takes his comments in stride, letting them slide off her like droplets of water over a plastic cover stretched over a sofa to keep it from getting touched by anything. Her next words are directed at Sherlock.

“Mycroft had a whole network of people keeping an eye on you, just in case. I knew where you were hiding, and where you were likely to go.” For the briefest of moments, Mary’s eyes flutter towards the floor, evading anyone’s gaze. When she lifts them back up again, a change has occurred, a softening around the edges, like cotton wool drawn over roughness of stone. For the first time, apart from that brief flash of pain that came with admitting of her betrayal of Sherlock’s whereabouts, Mary looks at Sherlock and seems as human as any of the parties in the room. “I’m sorry, Sherlock. I really am.”

A flicker of understanding seems to pass between the Consulting Detective and Mary, a tacit act of forgiveness that, in John’s opinion, comes to easily, given the magnitude of the transgression. Sherlock should be angry, livid, and in all right refuse to hear another word. But, as it happens to be given to every human, there is nothing about what John thinks Sherlock should feel that has any bearing on Sherlock’s actual emotions, so John must settle for the next best thing. If he can’t cure the foolishness of his partner, he can at least take the task of feeling the proper things onto himself, an involuntary delegation of sentiment on Sherlock’s part. Sherlock may think this is ok, but John most certainly does not.

A stretch of uncomfortable silence draws on for half a minute (longer, John thinks, an age) before Mary speaks again.

“I continued to report to Mycroft, to ward off suspicion. Until Small decided to move camp. In London, at home, I knew I could pull this double-game because I was close to my sources, close to the base. But here, I was alone, cut off from any safety nets I had installed. I couldn’t tell Mycroft the truth because all my reports were monitored. So I did all I could – I left breadcrumbs. I told Small it was usual for an agent to skip a report or two if they got an unexpected chance to go off the grid in order to pursue a trail. He bought it, with some persuasion. Of course, I knew it would ring an alarm and that Mycroft would think I was taken hostage. At that stage, I practically was, only my captors didn’t quite know it yet.

I honestly didn’t know he would send you. Either of you. It was never my intention to have you here.”

There is sincerity in Mary’s voice, soft but strong, like the stem of a young sapling, seemingly fragile but stubbornly resisting any test posed to it.

“You lied to me. About everything. Why should I trust you now?”

“Because I’m not lying now.”

There are no further explanations offered, no heartfelt confessions of soul-tearing regret or pitiful pleas for forgiveness. Because, really, sometimes there is nothing left to say, once all the truth has been laid bare, like a virgin girl presented as sacrifice to an angry god. And it never feels as finished as it sounds, never quite final and always a bit lacking, as if there is a single word or phrase that might set it right if added, an amendment of sorts to fill the cavity of inadequacy that lies within each human interaction. But there’s no fillings available to assuage the rawness of an incomplete-feeling conversation, no words that could make it more satisfying, so silence settles over them like the faint spray of the waterfall outside, or ashes from a volcano striving to preserve them in time.

A chirp shatters the stale-mate that’s really a forfeit of the entire game. It comes from Sherlock’s coat pocket, a signal for an incoming text. Such an innocent sound, yet it grates against eardrums like the
shriek of nails down a blackboard. *Ping-pang*, it sings, *time to move on, things won’t get better than this*. Finality is a terrible thing when it feel fake, unfinished. It’s the longing of not getting to say goodbye to a dying friend, that irksome feeling that accompanies not getting to eat dessert.

“Guess I’ve got signal.” Sherlock says, slightly awkwardly. “I’ll just...go phone Mycroft, then.” He points to the door, standing up from the sofa. John can’t tell if the whole act is just a very practical coincidence or a masterful set-up prepared by Sherlock to give him some time alone with Mary. Either way, he writes a note on a mental post-it to scold Sherlock later for leaving him. Or possibly, thank him for it. Mary watches Sherlock go, before returning her gaze to John. Before John can say something, she beats him to it.

“I had been given a job. Besides, I was told it would help save your life.”

“Save my life? My life wasn’t in any immediate danger.”

“Well isn’t it?”

John knows she’s right – hell, he’s worked through this whole line of reasoning several days ago – but he doesn’t want to acquiesce.

“That still doesn’t make it a moral thing.”

“Are we really going to discuss moral here?” Mary scoffs, eyebrows floating towards her short hair like helium-filled balloons cut off their stings. “Very well, then. You once did shoot an unarmed civilian, John. Please, explain the morality of that to me.” Mary’s tone makes it clear that she isn’t in a mood for shamming. Seeing John’s slightly bewildered look, she continues.

“I work for Mycroft, remember? Of course we know about the cabby.”

“That was different.” John coughs out, once he’s found his voice again (it hid somewhere between his sense of that *no, it really isn’t all that different* and sheer surprise at being called out for an action he’d long thought no one knew about).

“How? How was it different?” Exasperation leaks off Mary’s words. “You shot a man. He had no weapon. He wasn’t even particularly strong.”

“He was a threat” John argues, all righteous rage and soldiers-don’t-cower defensiveness.

“What? Was he going to strangle someone with the string of his cabby tag?”

“Of course not, no.”

“Then why did you do it?” Mary pushes on, insistent, like a hound that has scented blood. Or a teacher who’d seen a spark in a student and is pushing him on and on, trying to light a fire. “Why did you shoot an unarmed man?”

“I did it to save Sherlock!”

“From what? There was no gun trained on him, no –”

“From himself!” John interrupts.

It isn’t until the words are out that he realises he walked right into Mary’s trap. Only it’s a paradox, this trap, because it doesn’t bring imprisonment. Rather, it brings liberation. Because, *oh...*, things make more sense now. There is great liberty in understanding your own confusion. John just hopes
he isn’t in for an ‘I told you so’. The ego is a sensitive animal, easily wounded.

The victorious smirk on Mary’s face would be right-down ridiculous if John’s dumbstruck face of being slapped by a realisation weren’t so comically exaggerated that it overshadows everything else.

“You used a bullet and he used his brother and me, but in the end you were both fighting armed enemies – the ones you knew existed within each of you. I don’t think you regret what you did. And I think Sherlock doesn’t, either” Mary says, her tone calm now, the hush after a storm. “I am sorry for any pain the deception has caused you, John. But do not expect me to apologise for doing my job. I’m not sorry. You are alive, that’s good enough for me. It may not get me a great many point on the moral scoreboard, but I think you’ll agree it’s a pretty shady scoreboard, that. Besides, ask a bullet if it regrets killing, see what response you’ll get. It was just doing its’ job, John. And so was I. I think we’re all glad at how it turned out, don’t you?”

It’s not sentiment, not in the way one would think. It’s a job-well-done sort of professional satisfaction, really, but there’s a pinch of that basic humanness to it, that simple gladness of one human being for helping to keep another human being from expiring. It’s benevolent, but not cordial, friendly in that generic way that is ingrained in most people’s basic settings.

Mary makes a move to get up, but there’s one more thing John needs to know before he can let her leave. Because, John knows, this is the last he will be seeing of Mary. Ghosts belong in the past, and her mere presence here is probably some sort of rule-breaking on some greater cosmic scale of time-sequences and good narratives. John knows he shouldn’t ask, that it will bring no good to him if he did, but the question is there, heavy, small, dark, and lovely in his chest, in the red-black hollow of his trachea, and he can’t resist. One more thing, just a few more words, teasing him with the promise of closure.

“Was any of it real?” The words are out before he can shape them properly, mould them into something a bit less raw, a single fraction further away from sounding like it matters.

“Does it matter now?”

*No, it doesn’t. It doesn’t matter, why would it? (Only it does. Of course it does. Maybe it shouldn’t, but it does, ridiculously and illogically.)*

“Of course it matters. You were the first person I allowed closer after what I thought was my best friend’s death. So, tell me – was any of it real?” John grates the words out, wrenching them away from the safe places they try to hide in, stealthily sliding behind the screen of self-protectiveness that urges them not to reveal themselves. Not to reveal too much of that soft underbelly. Mary considers them for a moment, as if trying them on for size.

“If you’re asking me whether I was on my way to falling in love with you, then the answer is no. It was a job John. And I am very good at my job. I know how to keep myself in check while doing it, because I am a professional.

But despite not being in love with you John, I do like you. You are a good man – a loyal, honest, brave man – and no matter what you think of me, I am neither ashamed nor sorry for taking the job. Because I like to think it that I helped keep you safe, and I see nothing wrong with that. We don’t live in a world where morality is a black-and-white affair. Maybe there is a place or a setting in which some lucky sods who can afford such thinking live, but it’s not here. I was the best solution for a very bad problem, desperate times and all...Which in no way means it was a good solution. Sometimes the best solution is a bad one, but a bad one that does least damage. Or at least does some damage that’s justifiable the context of possible benefits.
I was a bullet designed to save you from yourself. Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s enough to make me feel like a fool for feeling anything. I should have known better, I should have-“

“You should have done and acted precisely the way you did” Mary counters, her voice softening. “Don’t feel like a fool, John. There’s no reason for you to, because I wasn’t just a bullet. I was a bullet with your name engraved on it. I was assigned the job because I was deemed suitable. I was handpicked for it, a sniper shot if you will. You did everything right. The part of you that was a threat stood just in the right spot to get eliminated, and the rest of you liked me enough to give loving life a second chance.

That bullet you shot the cabby with, all those years ago – you might not have known it then, but it was a declaration...of loyalty or of something more, I don’t know, but I know that I, all of this – that was the answer, given years later.”

There is a smile in Mary’s eyes now, a kind thing that lights up her expression in a way John has no heart to interpret in anyway other than as sincere. Outside, a sudden rumble of a helicopter landing ruffles the air and the grass, vibrations snaking under their feet, slithering along polished wooden floorboards.

“I guess that’s my ride” Mary says, half-shouting now, trying to talk over the increasing amount of noise being generated by the craft on the other side of the door. She stands up, John following her example, and together they walk to the door. A man in protective overalls, with a body-bag slung over his shoulder passes them by, obviously on his way to collect Small’s body.

They find Sherlock waiting for them on the lawn in front of the house, a black helicopter by his side. ‘Mycroft works fast’, John thinks. Mary starts walking towards the helicopter, when John calls out to her.

“What’s going to happen with you now?”

Mary’s smile is blinding, a twin of the ones she used to give John. Under the clear, bright skies, she looks like a story bound in flesh. John thinks that, maybe, in the end he hadn’t gotten it all wrong. There are many things Mary turned out not to be, but there is one thing that John got right about her. For all the things she isn’t, Mary most definitely is extraordinary.

“Oh, I’m going to be punished” she retorts, her smile never faltering, as if she has just announced she was going on vacation.

“Punished?”

“Oh, yes. I might have remained loyal to Mycroft, but I have done so by trading in the most valuable commodity. The one no one is allowed to ever touch. His little brother. It won’t be an official punishment, but Mycroft is nothing if he isn’t the master of elegant subtlety. No worries, though. I might get him to go easy on me. After all, I have a plethora of information as leverage for bargaining. Don’t you worry about me.”

With that, Mary steps into the helicopter, a final nod to Sherlock being dispatched instead of a good-bye, stoic and calm. The whole crew is accounted for (the living and the dead), and the helicopter whirls into life. And then Mary’s off, suddenly and abruptly, the same way she’d entered John’s life again, a way that seems to be her signature.

Slow, measured steps bring a certain looming figure of the world’s only Consulting Detective over to
John. There’s a restraint to his movements, as he comes to stand next to the army doctor. John knows precisely what he wants to do – it’s something along the lines of desperate clutching more suited for a teenager than a grown man, but John couldn’t care less about that – but Sherlock seems to have a different thing in mind. Although John can think of a better way to employ lips and mouths at the moment, Sherlock seems set on talking.

“Mycroft would have never really let you die, you know.”

He’s not looking at John. Rather, he’s looking out into the distance, hands posed in pockets. Sherlock’s hands seem very much occupied by the business of not touching.

“Yes, he did say he would do whatever he could to keep me from harm, but that his hands are tied, Switzerland being neutral and all.”

“I’m not saying there wasn’t a risk. I am simply saying that you should have expected Mycroft would do all he could to keep you alive.”

“Why?” John asks. It’s not because he doubts Mycroft’s promise, but because he is pretty sure that, given the choice between John’s life and Sherlock’s, Mycroft would choose Sherlock. John knows this, because given the same choice, John would agree with Mycroft’s decision.

“Because he knows I would never forgive him if he did anything less” Sherlock replies, as if he’s commenting on the weather. In a way, that makes it all the more meaningful, really, because it seems as unquestioningly a fact as the weather itself, that Sherlock would hold John’s injury or death as the highest possible offence. It’s no grand declaration. It’s the simplicity of complicated things being woven into the very fabric of the state of affairs, made an integral part of the basic mechanics of life.

“But how could have he been sure I wouldn’t get killed?” John asks.

“He couldn’t have been. So, as you said, he played his best card to make it as unlikely an outcome as possible.”

“And what would that be if not his troop of minions?”

With this, Sherlock finally turns to face John, his reply arriving on a rush of air.

“Me.” After an intense moment in which he just stares at John, Sherlock continues. “Your code name – Victor Trevor. It wasn’t randomly chosen. It was a message form Mycroft, for me. A two-part message. A warning.”

“Who is Victor Trevor?”

“An old...friend. It’s ancient history, really.”

“Then why did Mycroft choose his name?”

“Because Victor was someone I...lost, partly because I didn’t listen to what Mycroft told me. Mostly because I didn’t know when to stop showing off. Also, because Victor was a liar.

So the message was: Listen to what Mycroft is telling me – that you were lying to me on Mycroft’s command and that by believing your words I was running a risk of losing you. He couldn’t be sure about Mary’s loyalty, not with communication between them severed, but he could count on me to have your back. He didn’t send you out here so you could get yourself killed, but he knew you would do anything you could to protect me. And I you.”
Seconds seep away as John just stands, mouth slightly agape, and stares at Sherlock, the details of all that’s been going on settling down like dust.

“You two really have the most screwed up relationship, don’t you?” he asks, finally recovering power of speech. Sherlock pretends to ponder on this for a moment or two, before cracking a grin.

“Yes, I suppose we do.”

John wants nothing more than to melt into that grin. There’s too much air between them, too much space, too much time spent apart. He wants to erase it all, and with it the memories of all things that tried to break them. But he won’t. He will use them as stepping stones, as monuments dedicated to casualties that will stand to remind them of where they’ve been and how far they’ve come.

But not here. Just a bit more, that’s how long they have to wait. Not here, but elsewhere, where the ground is right and the air isn’t too thin. The place where everything began, and then ended, and then began again.

“Sherlock” John says, calmly, almost quietly, “let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter (last one) will either be up by Thursday evening or, in case I don't manage to finish it, next week, since I'm going away for three days, Friday to Sunday, and will be without Internet service :)

What people forget about the greenhouse effect (or The things they grew back)

Chapter Notes

And there it is - the final chapter :) It's really just a short piece to tie up the story.

Thank you everyone who stayed with this series to the very end :) 

Enjoy!

The flight back to London smells like aeroplane plastic and generic air freshener, tastes like stale tea, and leaves the oily film of travel on skin. It’s too long. It’s bumpy, the air full of road-holes. But there’s Sherlock, in his seat, next to John, very much alive. And there’s John, right next to Sherlock, very much not gone.

The flight smells like plastic, tastes like stale tea, and leaves them grimy. Ask John and Sherlock what they think of it, and they’ll tell you it’s glorious. Looking at them, you wouldn’t know what they’ve just been through. You wouldn’t see the lightest of twitches each makes towards the other when they drift just a bit too far away from each other, an invisible tether tensing up and pulling them back, closer, closer. You wouldn’t know that they’ve just walked back from the edge – literal, metaphorical, or whatever other kind you wish – because that’s how it works. You look at people and don’t really see a thing. You never know what’s going on inside them, whether it’s just an ordinary day for them, or if right at that moment, just as you are looking at them, unconnected, irrelevant, there is a tectonic shift taking place, some major event breaking them apart or sewing them back up underneath that frail sheath of skin and kept-up appearance. So, you wouldn’t know, looking at Sherlock and John, of the yearning and the urgency that bites their skin like a puppy not yet aware of its own strength. You would pass oblivious past the intense feeling of being very, very lucky that makes every mundane little thing – the pattern on the seat upholstery, the random flight attendants nice-yet-slightly-crooked smile as she passes them their food, the blistering of clouds as the Sun sets past them – a spectacle.

When they land, Sherlock and John are greeted by an unexpected, yet not necessarily unwelcome, greeting party. The feelings both men hold towards the figure standing seemingly casually (though that is almost never really the case) are far from simple or straight-forward, but in any case, the both know there is a link there which cannot be denied.

Mycroft is leaning on his umbrella, suit-clad despite the warm, humid air that’s brimming with the static of an oncoming storm. Upon seeing his brother and his blogger descend the stairs off the plane, there is a subtle shift in Mycroft’s features that almost looks like a tic. Almost, but not quite. There are markers, Sherlock knows, which can be used to read emotion off human faces like script off parchment, but even if there weren’t, even if there was just the sheer feeling of it all, Sherlock would guess this one right. Because, really, it doesn’t take a genius to deduce the relief on Mycroft’s face. Because, really, it doesn’t take a genius to deduce the relief on Mycroft’s face.

Ages from now, in a world which will no longer contain Mycroft Holmes, an older Sherlock will think of his brother and, if this older Sherlock proves to be a fraction less proud (pig-headed, John would say) than the present one, he may admit to missing his brother. Probably, not, though.
Ages from then, in a world which will no longer contain either of the Holmes brothers, no one will know the depths of loyalty and betrayal, trust lost and long not retrieved, (but trust somehow re-built in spite of everything) that once ran between two siblings. But maybe – just maybe – two brothers will run through that over-grown garden with the empty houses for bees and glass castles for flowers, two boys laughing freely over a shared amusement the way only brothers can. They won’t know their laughter will echo that of another pair of boys. They won’t yet know the dangers of petty feuds and childhood resentments cultivated to adulthood. They won’t be aware of what a precious thing a brother is, both fragile and indestructible, at times. It will never have crossed their minds that there may come a day when they will drift apart, find themselves on opposite sides of a fence, so to speak. Because they will be brothers, at that age when a brother is as sure a thing as sunrise.

But that’s ages from now – a now that’s marked by Sherlock and John facing Mycroft’s solitary figure on a taxi way lit by colourful signal-lights. For an awkward moment, Mycroft’s throat works as if there’s chalk powder lining it, insulation to prevent speech from seeping out. But it’s Mycroft, so words find their way in the end.

“Glad to see you both safely retrieved.”

“Yes.” Sherlock replies, voice even and unreadable, because there is another voice running an inner monologue, battling between ‘Mycroft sent John into danger’ and ‘yes, but Mycroft did so to save me’. There is the ever-unresolved issue of brotherhood, their prickly cactus of a connection, and for one, Sherlock is content to let it rest for tonight. Because Mycroft is Mycroft, and Sherlock is Sherlock, which only means the complications will be here tomorrow. For now, it is enough that they are both aware of being happy (well, happy doesn’t really relay the complexity of the feeling) to see each other, an equally aware of the fact that neither would admit it out loud.

“Well. It’s good to be back.” John cuts in, catching the vibrations of all things unsaid (honestly, sometimes he wonders if Sherlock and Mycroft are quite aware that they almost reach telepathy from time to time). “But if you don’t mind, I myself am quite knackered.”

“Yes, of course” comes Mycroft’s reply, his voice cool and collected if a bit distant. “Please, the car is waiting. I am sure you are in somewhat of a hurry to finally get back to Baker Street.”

“Couldn’t be more right.” John says, sliding into the black vehicle, leaving Sherlock and Mycroft standing in the pre-storm air. Before Sherlock can speak, Mycroft reaches into his pocket and draws out a simple box. He offers Sherlock a cigarette. Sherlock takes it, and for a second the flicker of a lighter flam illuminates his face from below.

“You counted on this didn’t you?” Sherlock’s eyes aren’t on Mycroft but roaming along the airport, as if awaiting a passenger. He blows smoke out through his mouth. “You counted on John being stubborn enough to push against your advice and going after me.”

“I counted on John putting your well-being above all else. Nothing more. And nothing less. I am not half as Machiavellian a mind as you seem to think, brother”, Mycroft replies, playing with the cigarette box.

“No, you’re probably tenfold the Machiavellian mind I think you, Mycroft”, Sherlock retorts, bringing his gaze around to stare at his brother.

“I didn’t manipulate John into going after you. In fact, I was very adamant about him remaining here.”
“Were you, now?”

“I believe John can verify this fact.” Mycroft’s face is a blank cast waiting to be painted with shades of feeling.

“If you were so adamant, you could have stopped him from going.”

“I asked of him to choose. It would have quite defied the purpose of the exercise if I had met his choice by denying it.”

“In other words, you were never really counting on him to choose to stay.”

“No, Sherlock. I was never really counting on him not to choose you.”

This seems to come to Sherlock as a surprise – or better say, as a fact so obvious that he can help but wonder how he was not seeing it all this time.

“You sent him into danger”, he says, trying to stare Mycroft into obedience.

“I sent him to rescue you.” Mycroft replies, unruffled, “Besides, he would have gone either way. At least this way I could do something to help keep him safe. Keep both of you safe.”

By the time Mycroft finishes speaking, the glowing red-orange dot of Sherlock’s cigarette reaches the butt of the stick, burning a little too close to comfort. Sherlock drops it on the tarmac, along with his gaze, and stomps out the last of the fire. He moves to open the car door (which John has tactically closed behind himself), only to stop with his hand on the handle.

The sky is darkly illuminated in all shades of burdened as Sherlock looks back to his brother.

“Mycroft...thank you.”

A nod, a scratch of the umbrella tip along the coarse asphalt and then the car doors are slamming shut, tires screeching away, burning trails into the road.

The night smells like burnt rubber and cremated tobacco. Like gratitude and relief, and all the unsaid sentiment in-between.

An hour and several traffic jams later, John and Sherlock climb the stairs to 221B. The building sighs and moans, the foundations settling as balance of tenancy is restored. Quick ascent up the stairs and then there is the longed-for click of the door opening and then closing. The world is left on the other side of the partition.

“God, I can’t believe it’s only been a couple of days since we left here”, John says, allowing his lungs to fill with that well-loved, eloquent dust of 221B.

The door of the flat closes, softly-but-surely, and marks the tipping point.

“John.” Sherlock calls from behind John’s back, leaning against the closed door.

John turns to face his flatmate, and just like that, the excess of air dividing them finally becomes unbearable, and Sherlock moves to John (or John to Sherlock, there’s no definite verdict on who moved first), obliterating the hated distance. Before anything else can get in their way, hands latch onto bodies, and a tug-of-war sort of ordeal starts to unravel as caresses give way to pulling, closer,
closer.

Fabric whispers, betraying secrets of lovers to the walls that know them oh-so-well. It is different, this time, this third time. Different from the intense high of the first time (fires) and the frenzied search for band-aid oblivion and deceit of the second (floods) – the third time is something new, young and bright, but endlessly more mature, like a sapling growing from the burnt remains of an ancient oak, youth saturated with the wisdom of ancestry which roams its veins.

You’d call it love, but you’d be doing it injustice. Because it isn’t just love, glorious as it may be. It’s devotion and understanding, acceptance and a vow. More than anything, it’s creation in face of all the destruction.

(You’d call it love and you’d be right, because isn’t love – real love – just that? All of that? Complicated and difficult and hard work? Isn’t it glorious? You’d call it love. You’d be right.)

Fingers dance and it’s an intimate choreography to a tacit composition. Sherlock’s fingers work on the buttons of John’s shirt and John’s hands deal with Sherlock’s cuffs, skimming around each other like trained birds flying in formation.

Fingers write and it’s a pen-pal correspondence on skin, licks of tongue for the postmarks to stick. Scrapes of fingernails grate like talons of messenger-pigeons taking off and landing on concrete. Breaths are flaps of wings that carry words of yes and always and better this time around. They’re still standing on their feet, grappling at cloth (that’s slowly vanishing) and skin (that’s rapidly being uncovered).

And then everything stops. For a moment – just a moment, that’s all they can spare, all that lust and need allow, but a single moment is better than none – John and Sherlock just stand there, John’s hands splayed over Sherlock’s bare chest, skin-on-skin ignition points lighting up the world. Sherlock’s fingers still, stopping mid-movement on the band of John’s trousers, caught in fabric like fishing hooks in the deep blue, fishing for a miracle. (Catching one, too.) Eyes lock over the little distance they can stand to tolerate, hot, humid breaths coming out in puffs, like memories of the greenhouse and the warm air that surrounded them there. The world stands immobilised just long enough for the full realisation of all that could have been lost to come down crashing. But more than that, it allows the amazing against-all-odds nature of the current moment to rip through the surreal fabric of the last few days. Or years. A lifetime, it would seem.

“John...” Sherlock’s voice is soft, like black, rich soil; like tender hands sowing seeds. He leans his forehead against John’s, and for some reason it feels as intimate as sex, at that moment. It’s a plea and an exultation, a shout across rooftops saying “we made it!”.

“Oh, god...” John’s voice is pain and joy and little impossible things that refuse to be named, little children of cosmic plans and pure coincidence. It’s the voice of a man just saved from the gallows. His hands move over Sherlock’s chest, to roam frenziedly over his abdomen and back, up to the nape of his neck to pull Sherlock’s mouth to John’s, and just like that, the moment is over and the world tilts back into motion, just in time to witness this utter surrender.

Because that’s what it is – surrender. Even the victors have to give in to a force more powerful than them; to faith, or love, or whatever else you choose to believe in. They must surrender and know that, despite the temporary triumph, victory is fleeting. All they can do is choose to await the next pitfall either alone or with someone by their side.

For Sherlock and John, it was never really a question. Also, for Sherlock and John, doing what one must was never quite a clear concept. So, they refuse to surrender to anything. That is, they refuse to surrender to anything but one entity, and one entity alone - each other.
Breaking the kiss, John takes Sherlock’s hand, and together they make it to Sherlock’s (their) bedroom, their steps deliberate, their skin buzzing. Sherlock could swear the feeling in his chest is a pneumothorax, because that’s definitely what it feels like (though John wouldn’t tell him it isn’t, because John would recognise a pneumothorax) – too big for his ribcage, too vast for his being, this endless yearning. It feels like dying, a little bit. It feels like being truly alive in that way that comes along so rarely.

It’s precisely how love should feel.

Sherlock’s body’s bare, save his pants, as is John’s, as they fold together onto the bed, side by side, legs tangling in a wish to press their bodies as close together as possible. When John’s hand wanders between Sherlock’s legs to palm over the heat there, Sherlock’s lungs push air out so violently that Sherlock’s vocal chords are caught by surprise into producing a moan.

“John!”

Sherlock plunges his free hand (the one not currently in the service of teasing the band of John’s boxers) into his hair, pale fingers tangling black curls around them like flax on spindles, and his whole body arches towards John the way plants lean into sunlight. But John stops (damn him) and takes Sherlock’s hand out of the black mess of curls. And because this is John – and John is always a surprise – Sherlock isn’t surprised to find himself surprised (they’re a paradox. It’s not simple. But then again, they were never made for simple.) as John takes to kissing each of Sherlock’s fingertips.

The gesture is so reverent that Sherlock wonders how it is possible for someone to feel even more naked than being stripped bare. But he does – oh how he does – because this is more than nudity. This is being wanted and cherished. This is acknowledging the stupidity of ever allowing oneself to love – to entrust another frail, mortal being with one’s happiness, even if only with a fraction of it. Acknowledging it – and embracing it.

By the time John’s done with kissing his fingertips, Sherlock’s managed to tangle their legs so that when he rolls onto his back, he pulls John with him, successfully splaying him on top of Sherlock. Both men groan at the contact, as each shift and slide threatens to bring things to an end (and what a sweet threat that is).

Finally, the last of clothes are shed and as Sherlock and John start moving together, the silence is broken by the sound of rain starting to wash away the grime of the week. It rains hard, infinite little heartbeats pounding on glass and concrete and roof-tile, hard, hard, like fingers prying to catch at skin, and somewhere in London, there must be a fire burning, a flicker licking at air from a tip of a candlewick, a lighter hissing ignited gas at the round edge of a fag, and even if there isn’t it doesn’t really matter, because Sherlock could swear that all the fire and all the water and all of the world as such is really just a bad carbon copy of this, this world John and he are busy creating, this glorious ecosystem founded on devastations of the past.

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The greenhouse effect is a process by which thermal radiation from a planetary surface is absorbed by atmospheric greenhouse gases, and is re-radiated in all directions. Since part of this re-radiation is back towards the surface and the lower atmosphere, it results in an elevation of the average surface temperature above what it would be in the absence of the gases. When enhanced through human activity, it is the main cause of global warming, a steady and constant rise in Earth’s overall average temperature.

This increase in temperature is predicted to have adverse consequences on Earth’s climate, leading
to increasingly higher temperatures which may cause fires during summer, and melting of the ice caps, which will result in, among other things, an increase in the number of floods.

What people often forget is that the greenhouse effect is a natural phenomenon. Without it, the Earth would be a hostile, frigid place, its average temperature a harsh -18 degrees Celsius. It is only when people temper with it – pollute it, clog up the atmosphere, act recklessly – that it becomes a problem. But handle it with care, and the greenhouse effect makes Earth habitable. It’s what makes Earth home, allows life on it to thrive.

As dawn breaches the thin diaphragm of the horizon, John looks at Sherlock, amidst of scattered remnants of two lost worlds – the ashes, left over by the fire, and the mud, left over by the flood, make for a fertile soil – a basis for new life, constituted out of leftover traces of destruction. Fires and floods, a necessary antithesis allowing for new creations.

John looks at Sherlock the way he will look at him for many years more, and sees possibility (inevitability). John looks at Sherlock with the ages that are yet to come, ages from now when they will begin again and again with each sunrise and each nightfall, lurking somewhere in the whirls of fingerprints, in the shadows between lashes.

He doesn’t see the cottage and the overgrown garden and the path stones that they will lay down together. He doesn’t see their initials rooted to the earth long after they themselves have been put to sleep in it. He doesn’t see any of this yet, because these are early days and this John would find the idea of that life a horrifyingly boring prospect. But he will see it, eventually. He will.

Because right now there’s the promise of starting again, hard-won understanding of misguided gestures, fire-forged patience, and water-washed willingness to do better this time around. These are the things that allow life to thrive.

These are the things they grew back from ashes and mud.

It’s a new world, one that will be harder to destroy. Not because it is indestructible, nor because there won’t be challenges – oh, there will be (John wouldn’t have it any other way) – but because this time John knows, as does Sherlock, that, if handled with care, they allow each other to thrive.

They aren’t each other’s doom. They are each other’s greenhouse effect.

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