Drift Compatible

by J_Baillier

Summary

A washed out war hero struggling with his past. A prodigy who wants nothing to do with his family legacy. Both are looking for something—and someone—worth fighting for in a world where human civilisation is constantly under threat.

Notes
The title may have revealed to some readers which fictional universe I am borrowing, but I assure you that no knowledge of anything related to the wonderful and frightening world created by Travis Beacham and Guillermo del Toro is required to enjoy this. In fact, to ensure this, I recruited the help of two diligent betas who had no prior knowledge of that canon. So, if you are not familiar with the world of Pacific Rim, that's good. In fact, that's great! It means that you get to have a much more interesting journey of discovery during which I get to be the one to introduce you to all this cool stuff.

Author's notes will accompany many chapters for those curious about behind-the-scenes stuff – all fully skippable if you just want to enjoy the johnlocky ride.

All hail my mighty Valkyrian betas, plot hole-pluggers and canon sprinklage auditors 7PercentSolution, AnyaWen and 88thparallel(CanadaHolm). I bet all your pilot aptitude scores would be stellar.

TW: Homophobia (including internalised), bullying, parental neglect, neurodiversity and associated discussions on the definitions of normality, graphic depictions of drug addiction, death of family members in a traumatic manner, PTSD.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Sherlock perks up when he hears a key rattling in the lock. Witnessing an actual metal object filling that purpose instead of an electric fob or retinal scanner would feel wonderfully old-fashioned, if it hadn't been used four hours earlier to lock him into this holding cell.
It doesn't surprise him that The Internal Security Agency – built on the ruins of the old MI5 – would have to make do with such vintage tech. More money than the British government can really afford is still being poured into the so-called war effort, even though things have been quiet on that front for years. Most Earth denizens have moved on from the state of perpetual horror they had been stuck in until humanity began winning, but not all – some individuals have forged careers out of convincing others of their own importance, should humanity be thrown into full conflict again.

One such man is now flashing his high-ranking PPDC badge to the officer outside the door.

When he walks in, Sherlock squares his shoulders and lets his head loll back in relief.

"Finally," he complains, constructing a generous helping of disapproval into his tone. He may be the one in handcuffs, but he would never give his big brother the satisfaction of thinking he's lost control of the situation.

Mycroft will open his mouth any minute now, and Sherlock knows to expect a well-prepared lecture delivered in his brother's most refined tone of disapproval – one he had adopted after becoming Sherlock's guardian after the demise of their parents. Mycroft, even though still in his twenties then, had taken on the sudden pseudo-parental responsibility foisted upon him as though he'd been awarded the bloody papal throne.

Sherlock raps the table with his fingertips. He wishes Mycroft would just dispense his florid disapproval – get it over with, so that they could each go their merry ways and stop wasting time in this hellhole.

Yet, against all expectation, his brother says nothing. He simply reveals the paper-thin tablet computer he had been holding concealed behind his back, and places it in front of Sherlock on the scratched table. The chain the handcuffs have been attached to is just long enough for Sherlock to tilt the screen so that the glare from the ancient, chittering halogen lamps won't be reflected on it. The cheap light fixtures coat the room in a disgusting shade of yellow that look as though someone has spent years coating the walls with tobacco smoke residue – another sign that the Intelligence Services are suffering from a dire lack of funds.

Sherlock, certain that the voice control function of the tablet is probably locked to his brother's vocal signature, taps the rightward pointing symbol on the screen, and a news report begins playing. He instantly recognizes the apartment building on Montague Street he has called home for some years now – how many exactly is, admittedly, a little vague, since many of the events of those years have been spun into the glorious haze of 7-ace, orfentanil and whatever else he could afford to buy from London's multitudinous dealers.

The news camera soon zooms in on a large, gaping hole on the side of the building right in the middle, approximately where his rental flat had once been. Dust particles are thickening the air and blocking the view to the floors below, papers are floating down or being blown away in the wind, and alarms of several early model self-driving cars have been triggered by debris landing on them. A few dozen curious onlookers have arrived to gawk at the scene, and a fireman standing on a ladder is putting out the flames on remnants of what is probably Sherlock's sofa.

It hadn't been a very comfortable one, anyway. He'd found it in a skip and rejoiced in sharing this fact with Mycroft on his first visit after the prissy berk had already taken a seat. His brother had probably had his suit incinerated afterwards.

"At approximately a quarter past three p.m. today, an explosion destroyed three apartments at 13 Montague Street, and a pedestrian was injured when a flying brick from the facade hit them on the head," the reporter on site explains to the camera.
"I know," Sherlock points out disinterestedly. "I was there--- well, quite close by."

He stops the footage and shoves the tablet across the table, trying to broadcast disinterest. He takes up the indolent tapping of fingers on the wooden surface again because he knows his neurotic brother hates such irritants. If he manages to rile the man up well enough, he might huff an end to whatever dull tirade he has planned for tonight's edition of Sherlock's correctional education, and promptly arrange for his release. That's what Mycroft does: gets him out of trouble. It's his function, his purpose in Sherlock's life. His brother has never failed in this task before, and admittedly having to watch him strut about like a peacock with a military badge is a reasonable price to pay for Sherlock not having to deal with these things in court.

"Once the forensic team arrived, accompanied by the chief fire inspector, it was discovered that the oxidizing agent was an illegal sample of *kaiju* blood, and the heat source an antique Bunsen burner left on while the occupant of the flat had vacated the premises," Mycroft says, sounding as though he's reciting the news report verbatim. "At least you weren't passed out on the couch such as you were on the previous occasion when the fire brigade needed to attend to your idiocy. Had you been in the vicinity of the blood when the explosion happened, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Sherlock glares at him. "I hadn't *passed out*---"

"No, I suppose that is not entirely analogous to having overdosed on multiple illegal substances. A person with more grasp on the laws of cause and effect would have learned a lesson from being dragged out of a fire just before the chemical fumes from a so-called 'experiment' became lethal. We could argue the semantics of your narcotics use until kingdom come, but the fact would still remain---"

"---that I wasn't being vigilant enough," Sherlock sing-songs, in a mockery of his brother's voice. He then raises his wrists. "These are starting to chafe, so if you'd be so kind. I'm sure you have budgets to balance and politicians to soft-soap which you'd like to get back to."

They both know how this works. They've been here before. He pretends to be grateful, perhaps even a bit remorseful if he's in a charitable mood. Mycroft then pretends that having the upper hand doesn't please him in the slightest and gets him out.

It's been five hours since Sherlock's last hit, and the awareness of that is becoming more and more acute by the minute. There's a slow hum in his bones, an occasional tightening of his abdominal muscles, the desire to grit his teeth and a cold sweat approaching like a storm in the horizon. He needs to get out of here to fix it, to fix himself, and Mycroft is standing in the way.

"It hardly matters how *vigilant* you were. You were in possession of an illegal sample of *kaiju* blood. That alone would be grounds for imprisonment, let alone exploding half a street with it."

"It was hardly half a street." Sherlock tugs at the chain. It holds, of course, but it's useful to remind Mycroft what he should be getting on with.

"You've finally overstepped the mark. Before, you at least had the sense to limit your transgressions to something that was dangerous to only you, but this stunt has landed both of us in hot water. If you've been following the news---"

"You know I don't."

"*Had* you followed the news, you would have known that as of January 1st this year, possession of any part of *kaiju* anatomy, be that a genuine sample or a genetically engineered replica, is punishable by life imprisonment."
"Hasn't it always been?"

Before he'd acquired the sample, Sherlock had been bored. Aimless. His trust fund is nearly empty. He won't have any chance of finding a flat to let after this. There are no jobs available that he'd be interested in, especially after nearly all the research funding for universities has been leeched by the club of war mongerers Mycroft is a member of. While it is understandable that the sight of twelve-storey high things that could only be described as monsters – *kaiju* in Japanese – decimating coastal cities like houses of cards would make anyone rake money at the PPDC, there is no guarantee that the *kaiju* will ever come back. Meanwhile, human culture withers away into oblivion because there is no one to further its knowledge and understanding of the universe or fund and preserve its artistic endeavours. The only university faculties still open are utilitarian ones such as the medical and law schools. Sherlock had managed to finish his Cambridge degree in chemistry just before the second Breach happened, but even then, the universities were able to fund nothing of interest when it came to research.

There are plenty of jobs and training offered by the PPDC, of course, but even an insignificant criminal record will prevent entry into the science apprenticeship and research schemes, and Sherlock wouldn't want to be anywhere near any of it, anyway, since it only serves the war effort. The PPDC snatches up anyone with half a brain and some engineering aptitude, leaving only the mediocre to sit around hoping that the tattered remains of the civilian universities might eventually re-open more of their faculties.

Yes, Sherlock had known the risks of being in possession of the *kaiju* blood; curiosity has always been his driving force rather than any desire to be a law-abiding citizen. In all honesty, he had not cared about how dangerous the stuff was. He'd done it because he could; wanted to find out if he could manage to obtain some of it right here in London. It would have given him a rise to see his brother's face when he would have demonstrated that a terrorist group could have acquired a sample just as easily.

Mycroft can throw him in prison to teach him a lesson if he wants. It'll hardly be worse that what his life has been like for the past few years. Besides, judging by what he's heard, it might be almost as easy to get his hands on certain varieties of pharmacological relief inside prison walls than out on the streets. The government doesn't much care for prisoner rehabilitation these days. The Breach Wars have cost a lot of jobs even in countries where not a single *kaiju* bone litters the beaches, and lots of people have turned to crime to feed their families and to drugs for comfort. What else is there?

"As of January 1st, life imprisonment due to possession of *kaiju* material includes extradition to a PPDC prison facility in *China*. I can assure you that the Chinese prison services have not improved much since the 1800s when it comes to living standards and adhering to international ethical conventions."

"I thought the PPDC only ate caviar and drank champagne. I guess that doesn't extend to prisoners, then."

Mycroft's steely gaze softens a fraction, but *only* a fraction. "I can't help you out of this one, Sherlock. I wish I could. The eyes have been on us ever since---"

Sherlock tries to silence him with a glare. He doesn't like to talk about their parents – neither of them do except for when Mycroft uses them as a battering ram to get Sherlock to obey. His brother had already stood on his own two feet by the time they died, but the much younger Sherlock had been left with nothing except for a brother who wasted no time in banishing him to a hellish boarding school.

"It's our legacy, *Brother Mine*," Mycroft declares.
That's one of the man's favourite phrases, and one Sherlock had grown to hate. "I never asked for any of it. You can gladly help yourself to my share."

"The incident is all over the news, and unless I want my life's work to be for naught, we need to make a public gesture of loyalty towards the greater good. This is too big, Sherlock, and I have limited control over what happens next. I did all I could to prevent it, but they've de-classified your aptitude screening results."

When the words sink in, Sherlock's eyes go wide. He would already be out of his seat, fingers curled into the lapels of his brother's extortionately expensive coat if he wasn't chained to the damned table. "You promised!"

Mycroft reflexively takes a step back, then shifts on his feet, clearly embarrassed that he had visibly reacted to the outburst. "It's out of my hands. Those test results could be your way of turning your life around. As I've told you before, going down that road could be a good chance for you; surely it is much better than prison."

"Yet again, your solution is to send me away," Sherlock snarls from between clenched teeth. He needs to hold on to anger to prevent the shock from sinking in.

"You don't have anything here. Or anyone."

It stings more than Sherlock would like to admit that Mycroft doesn't mention himself as the sole exception.

This must be it, then – the anticlimactic ending to a complicated and deeply disappointing sibling relationship. The seeds of its downfall were planted years ago in death, which was neither of their faults, but they may well have both had a hand in the final shape and form of their alienation.

"You're delusional," Sherlock accuses, "There hasn't been a Breach in ten years, unless you count the ones created by one of your lot. You work for the Pan-Pacific Defence Corps as a foreign lackey with a massively inflated sense of your own usefulness. You are actually aware that not a single kaiju has ever set foot on British soil?"

"Are you truly so stupid as to believe what the media claims? You would not be throwing petulant spittle at me if you knew how close we have come to an attack right here at home. Because we did not have our defence program yet, we had to rely on the French to stop the threat of the Bete Etrange kaiju! You've not heard of that name – no one without a proper clearance should have. Why the hell do you think our base is located in the Azores? That is where a Breach opened two years ago; the fact was, thankfully, kept out of the press to stop mass hysteria. It did finally draw attention to how ill-prepared the Commonwealth was on this side of the Atlantic. It is high time that we had a large enough pool of British pilots available to serve on the front line of Europe instead of humanity only defending the Pacific Rim."

Sherlock takes in the tirade without offering a word in reply. Normally, he'd find some amusement in the fact that he has managed to rile his brother up so badly that he starts revealing highly classified information, but he's still reeling from the fact that he's no longer safe.

He knows what his aptitude test results mean – even when it's quiet on the war front, the PPDC would do everything in its power to reel him in. Now, they have the ammunition to effortlessly decimate his freedom. Were he anyone else than the brother of the Commonwealth Marshal of the Atlantic Sector of the PPDC, who has a high enough intelligence clearance to be able to bury aptitude test records in a nearly fool-proof manner, he would have been shipped out to the organisation's Azores base years ago. During and after the first Breach crisis, it didn't matter who you
were: doctors, lawyers, politicians – if your Drift compatibility was high enough, they wasted no time in shipping you off to be "kaiju" fodder. Now, it's voluntary – or so they claim.

Mycroft leans his palms on the table. He looks tired, much more tired than he usually ever lets on. Sherlock finds no sympathy within himself for a man willing to turn his back on his only living family member even if this is a PR disaster for him: black sheep sibling being branded as a terrorist. It doesn't matter that Sherlock had simply been trying to explore the chemical and biological properties of a substance that doesn't seem to obey anything encountered in Earth biology before.

Sherlock would still have thought that after everything, family would have meant more for Mycroft. That it would mean at least something. Had he truly done everything he could to conceal the test results?

"Who knows," Mycroft muses coldly, "Maybe this'll help you find some direction in your life. I would much rather attend the honourable funeral of a member of the Ground Crew or a soldier lost in battle, than to receive yet another phone call regarding an overdose, one that would have finally proven successful."

Sherlock lets the words flow through as though they were meaningless. Over the years, he has learned to push hurtful things away, lock them in a room in his head and lose the proverbial key. Just like Mycroft is about to do to him. Discarded. Deal with. Problem solved. Reputation rebuilt.

"By using considerable influence and some favours I really couldn't have afforded to invalidate, you will be spared a trial. Escorted by a Recruitment Liaison Officer, you will shortly be put on a flight from Brize Norton to Ponta Delgada. From there, the Azores Military Police will ensure that you make it to your sea transport to the Chard's Rift base."

The flexor muscle on Sherlock's right hand begins to twitch and he covers it with his other palm. The clock is ticking: the receptors in his central nervous system are already beginning to screech in alarm for having burned through his last dose. "You will ensure that my face will continue to adorn the news for some time, I assume. Can't waste an opportunity like this to show that you'll throw anyone under the bus to save your hide. That you'd do anything for your career."

Mycroft straightens his back, glances to the door. "Where did you even get it? The blood?"

Maybe Mycroft is getting sloppy in his moderately obese, middle-aged world-weariness; he should have started with extracting information. In his impatient desire to promptly deliver the harshest blow, he has let slip that he no longer has anything to reward snitching with.

Sherlock forces on a cold smile. He owes his brother nothing. "You know what they say: Harrods can get you anything."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes:
So begins our adventure. There are words and abbreviations in this chapter which may baffle you, but rest assured all will be explained sooner rather than later. Staging the story in the Pacific Rim universe means that it will be chock full of spoilers about the
two films; some details from tie-in (graphic and other) novels will also be used. Some *Pacific Rim* canon has been twisted, altered, and moulded into my liking, so if something differs from how it is in canon, you may assume the choice is deliberate. Those choices will be discussed in an Author's Notes subsection called "Firing the canon". These tidbits are all skippable if you want to hurry on forward to the next chapter; as already mentioned, I have worked very hard with several betas to make sure everything is understandable without any externally acquired knowledge of Rim canon whatsoever.

Header background is by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

**Firing the canon:**
Even though the name of the Pan-Pacific Defence Corps points to just one ocean, the organisation does serve all humanity in guarding ocean coastlines when the kaiju are on the move. Marshal is the highest rank in the PPDC. In canon, there is only one of them, but to expand on that, I created the regional Marshals – think something along the lines of "war general of Europe". In the context of this story, the Marshal can mostly be thought of as a stuffy bureaucrat who gives speeches and cuts ribbons and yells about budgets. Perfect for Mycroft (especially if there's cake at the ribbon-cutting). His most famous predecessor is Marshal Stacker Pentecost, featured in the first Pacific Rim film and wonderfully played by Idris Elba. Unlike Mycroft, Pentecost was a war hero.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
*Smashing Pumpkins: Bullet with Butterfly Wings*  
*Linkin Park: Numb*  
*Marilyn Manson: Man That You Fear*

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Addendum in May 2019: long after this story was published in its entirety I discovered that two other Sherlock fics had made use of the same Pacific Rim canon phrase as their title. They were published half a decade before this one, which is why I never found out about them. Since the title was not invented by either prior author, after careful pontification I chose not to change it, since this story was already widely known by the same. I mean no disrespect to either author who came before me.
I am blown away by the reception this story has received – by both the enthusiasm with which readers familiar with Pacific Rim have embraced the concept, and the open-mindedness of those unfamiliar with that strange world to allow me to introduce it to them. We are going to have so much fun together!

Now, it's time to meet John.

Standing at the edge of the main airfield, John shivers slightly in the crisp morning air. At such an early hour, he's alone, save for the fact that there is always someone manning the control tower, monitoring the skies and the seas surrounding the base. When no Breach exists, keeping watch is, of course, mostly a formality; there is the off chance that some terrorist group might try to target the PPDC by flying in a drone carrying explosives, but those zealots who believe that the kaiju are God's wrath and the PPDC should not oppose them have grown quieter and quieter, now that the kaiju have stayed away for so long. At least the drones make for good target practice for the base's cannons.

For the first few years after the kaiju arrived, it was believed that Breaches could only appear in the Pacific Ocean, so the first Shatterdomes were constructed along the Pacific Rim. Eventually, that theory was proven wrong, and after a close shave with a kaiju that threatened to decimate the French coast, subsections safeguarding other major oceans areas were founded, and a number of new Shatterdomes constructed. One of them is the Chard's Rift Shatterdome – the Atlantic Subsection's only PPDC base – which John has called home for nearly two decades. The official location of the base is on the island of Terceira, but in actuality, it is the equivalent of a floating warcraft carrier connected to the island only via a heavily guarded steel bridge. It's both a military base and a potential haven for civilians in case the worst happens and the PPDC fails to hold off a major kaiju offensive in its Atlantic protectorate.

As an organisation, the Pan-Pacific Defence Corps consists of the regional subsections, the Science Division and an Internal Investigations Unit. In John's opinion, all of these have become infested with hordes of bureaucratic brass that seems to multiply every year. Gone are the days when the Corps got to focus on what it had been created for – being humanity's last and best line of defence. This is the job of the most important part of the PPDC: the Jaeger Corps. They are the military arm of its regional subsections, consisting of the Rangers who pilot the Jaegers, their specialist support crew – also known as LOCCENT officers, and recruits hoping to embark on a Corps career.

John takes his coffee to the edge of a smaller helipad, kicks off his shoes and sits down, bare feet dangling from the edge over the water, his good shoulder leaning against the outer concrete wall of
the old main hangar. It used to house the base's Jaegers, but later on a better-protected dome was constructed below the waterline to house the war machines, its walls over ten metres thick.

The world once tried to build a different sort of wall to keep the *kaiju* at bay – some had begun to worry that the Jaegers deployed from Shatterdomes wouldn't be enough to keep the world safe. Many more thought that the wall project was doomed to fail, which is exactly what happened – the wall didn't keep the *kaiju* out for long at all. John remembers watching the news about the first one breaking through near Anchorage. Turns out that the Jaegers were needed more than ever, and in increasing numbers.

Four days after the wall had broken in Anchorage, a man in uniform appeared at the door to John's dorm room, and another the doorstep of Harry's flat. That was twenty years ago. John had just finished his second year of medical school and Harry had been drifting through menial jobs, mostly spending her meagre and irregular pay on partying.

For John, the pressing invitation to join the PPDC was a duty he took on gladly. For Harry, it was an adventure, a ticket out of London, an intervention to her downward spiral. They both packed their bags and joined the ranks of the Jaeger Corps.

It's Harry's birthday today – and his own, of course. In a military profession such as theirs, individuality is a frivolity, but birthdays have always been a big deal at all the Shatterdomes John has lived in. On Hawaii, everyone pitched in to buy food for the parties and here at Chard's Rift, birthdays were honed to an art form. They all competed on who could find the most surprising, expensive and difficult-to-obtain gift in for their co-pilot; there was little else to waste their per diems on. Now, he doesn't any have close enough friends at the base that anyone would remember to acknowledge the significance of today for him.

There are few things John regrets more than that bottle of Glenmorangie that had been his last birthday gift to Harry eighteen years ago. He had known, deep down, that the next day she wouldn't really be in her best battle shape. When it came to pretending to be immortal, untouchable by fate, forever destined to triumph despite the fact that the *kaiju* kept getting bigger and bigger, his sister had been the grand master of the Corps. Maybe it would have been only a matter of time before she'd start dabbling with the harder stuff that used to be quite easily available in the base. Maybe. Not that the drinking hadn't already got bad enough.

The day Harry died, the War Clock marking how many days had passed without a *kaiju* attack had read 249 days – the longest break to date. They had all been lulled into a false sense of security, thinking it would never reset to zero – that the *kaiju* had been the equivalent of a storm, strong enough to be given a name, but dissipating after bringing destruction, never to return again.

When the Breach alarm signalling an attack wailed to life that day, John had tried to stomp down on the bad feeling he'd had because he had never been a very superstitious person. A Drift connection allows a pilot to sense how their co-pilot is feeling, even what they're thinking if the neural bridge connection is strong, but it can't predict the future. John was always nervous and worried when deploying to face a *kaiju* but that day, as he hurried to put on his gear and make his way to the launch level, he had felt more doubt and fear than ever before. Or had he? Had that bad feeling been something he'd truly sensed from Harry that day, or just his imagination? Maybe it's just hindsight colouring his memories. Maybe it's his guilt trying to convince him he should have known, that he should have prevented what happened.

Harry is – was – his twin, but they weren't very similar in personality or temper. Still, their familial genetic makeup made them very Drift compatible. Neither of them had exceptional physical conditioning, a particularly high IQ, or anything else that would have made them stand out as
candidates for the Corps; sometimes, when in a bitter mood, John wonders whether their compatibility had mostly been based on being able to compensate for each other's faults. Nevertheless, their track record was exemplary. They were good at what they did.

John sips his coffee, gazing out to the edge of the horizon, where a yellow glow flirting with an orange corona is illuminating the grey waves of the Atlantic. He often comes out here to watch the sun rise and to get some air after waking up with a nightmare. There is little variance in those dreams that plague him and afterwards, he feels utterly dreadful as he's thrown back into consciousness. This morning, just as had happened on so many mornings, he had woken up drenched in cold sweat, hyperventilating, his heart threatening to pound itself out through his ribcage. The dreamscape is the only place he can still talk to Harry, but there's a price to pay: the dreams never treat him with mercy, never come to an end before forcing him to relive the moment when Harry's consciousness was ripped out of their Drift, out of existence. Gone forever.

In that moment, John not only saw but felt death, and it wasn't a light at the end of a tunnel or a nice meadow somewhere – let alone mellow harp sounds on a fucking cloud. It was a void, a gaping wound, and no words that John could offer the useless Corps psychiatrist he was required to see afterwards could even begin to describe the feeling of losing half of himself in an instant. He had stopped attending the counselling after that one mandatory session.

During the following months, he withdrew from the company of his fellow Rangers. Eventually, he learned to slap on a forced, waxen smile that lasted only as long as he was in the presence of others. It was hard to mourn in private in a place where privacy was seen as a luxury one could do without – an indulgence only available for the civilians they were protecting. Eventually, they all saw through his stiff upper lip. They smelled it on him that Harry's death was end of his active Jaeger career even before they tried to find him a new co-pilot. John knew it too, but it still hurt to think he'd never pilot again. Who would he be without it? Without Harry, without Drifting, he felt crushingly alone. That feeling has diluted through the years that followed, but never disappeared.

The closest relationships in the Corps exist between co-pilots, many of which turn into romantic engagements. Drifting with Harry made it somewhat unlikely for him to find a partner in the eyes of others, and it was a convenient excuse not to even try. "Stop moping, Bro, you can't possibly be lonely with someone else in your head all the time," Harry had joked, when John had lamented that he'd be single forever. Harry knew, of course, the reason why being paired with her was the greatest relief of John's life – it meant that he could keep certain things close to his chest, wouldn't be called out, wouldn't be ostracised and isolated, perhaps even quietly pressured to resign. She had carried his secrets just as he had carried many hidden truths about her.

Being a Ranger meant that he would never take the risk of acting on what he wanted. When he had Harry, that choice had seemed bearable. Now, he has just given up on a lot of things. Resigned to his fate.

Even after Harry's funeral and the failed attempts to reintroduce him to active service, John had stayed in the PPDC – where else was he going to go? They'd sent him back to London to finish medical school; during the craziest war years the Corps had been so singularly focused on recruiting every possible pilot and staffing the ground crew directly connected to running the Jaeger program that everything else needed to run such a massive organisation was done with a skeleton crew. It was only after the first longer break from the attacks that they seemed to realise that they had to feed, clothe and attend to the medical needs of a nearly insane number of employees and officers, and many of the doctors they had recruited were now pilots instead of physicians. John found a role for himself somewhere between the Rangers and the Medical Unit, but since the latter functioned under the secretive Science Division, he would forever be the outsider without proper security clearance.
The sun has now crept high enough to colour the mist surrounding the small volcanoes on Terceira bright orange, and the skies above a mix of pink and blue. The stunning sight never gets old, and it doesn't fail to lift his spirits. The coffee has warmed his fingers. All in all, he feels a little less hag-ridden.

It'll be harder than usual today to find that boundless patience and empathetic physician's smile he needs to do his work. At least birthdays are about celebrating every aspect of a person's life and not just for remembering their death. The Corps honours the latter, too, by putting the image, name and rank of the honourable deceased up on the holographic wall in the command centre foyer. John's various duties take him through that area numerous times a day, and he hates those holographic images which are made to look as though the person depicted in them is delighted enough to flash a smile to each person walking in the door.

What would the dead have to smile about?

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
'Jaeger' is German for hunter. These formidable war machines will be explained in detail in later chapters.

Some readers may be racking their brains trying to recall where they have heard the words 'Ranger Watson' before; I daresay it was probably in sincewhenyoucallme-john's recent AU "The Bluest of Blue". I would have preferred not to sound repetitive, but the term 'Ranger' is very much core Pacific Rim canon. Surely there can never be enough Ranger Watson booty in this fandom.... *grin*

Firing the canon:
So, what are the kaiju and where did they come from? Well, these things just suddenly waded out of the ocean depths and started pummelling coastal cities. Somehow, they never show up for interviews in morning shows, so their origins and purpose are mostly unknown, and they are (possibly) extradimensional. Due to the shock and awe they inspire in humans, some think they are God's punishment on mankind, and some think they are Gods. In fact, there is even a somewhat organised religious movement that worships them (this is what John was talking about when deliberating the possibility of a drone strike). By the time this story starts, millions of lives have been lost to kaiju attacks, and cities have been reduced to rubble, but at least they have brought mankind together. A bit. Sort of. You know how we like our petty conflicts and trade wars; some fuckton-weighing scary monster isn't going to change that. At the start of the story, it's been quiet for a while; new kaijus haven't appeared for years. In the past, they've always come back even after longer lulls, so there are no guarantees of a lasting peace and quiet.

Kaiju bits possess many strange and unique properties – including some very dangerous ones – and trading them in the black market is canonically big business. Their brains in particular have turned out to be quite a risky thing to possess (the second Pacific Rim film is a very demonstrative cautionary tale about it), so I have assumed that possession of any kaiju parts would become highly regulated. Imprisonment in China isn't canon,
nor is the British legislation about possession being categorised as treason.

Canonically, there are nine Shatterdomes: Panama City, Los Angeles, Sydney, Nagasaki, Tokyo, Vladivostok, Anchorage, Lima and Hong Kong (for the purposes of this story, I dropped Nagasaki off the list but kept the others). By definition, these massive PPDC military bases housing the Jaegers are all located within the Pacific Rim and their placement is based on military tactics and geography, not politics. To bring Europe in as a major player, I added an Atlantic base and other bases to cover all the major sea areas of the World, and the Acores seemed like a geographically convenient location. They are a stunningly beautiful chain of nine volcanic islands off the coast of Portugal and an autonomous region of the country. Terceira is one of the larger ones. John's explanation of the PPDC structure may seem complex; I kept tripping up on it because I hadn't actually sat down and created the whole thing until pretty late into the editing process. I have now, which was a lot of fun. So, feast your eyes on the command structure of the PPDC:
* in J. Baillier's "Drift Compatible"

** in J. Baillier's "Drift Compatible"
Larger versions are available [here](http://example.com). And yep, John is that sole holder of a "specialist ranger" denomination. Nobody quite knew where to put him after Harry died, and he doesn't know where he belongs, either.

I named Chard's Rift after Colonel John Rouse Merriott Chard, who successfully commanded a small British garrison of 139 soldiers against an assault of up to 4000 Zulu warriors.

Those familiar with the first Pacific Rim film may see some echoes of the backstory of brothers Raleigh and Yancy Becket in John and Harry's history. You're not wrong; at least John didn't quit the Corps to go help build that very useless wall.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**

- [Blanco White: Colder Heavens](http://example.com)
- [The XX: Missing](http://example.com)
- [Placebo: Sleeping With Ghosts](http://example.com)
Sherlock pushes aside the narrow, articulated plastic door of the plane toilet, somehow manages to stagger the one step required to get him across the aisle to his seat in the last row, and collapses into it. Closing his eyes, he tries to will his churning guts to calm down. The worn T-shirt underneath the generic grey hoodie he had been given to wear is soaked with sweat, his teeth are aching from bringing up bile, and every muscle burns as though he'd run a marathon.

Desperate for a distraction, he tries to focus on the ambient sounds, but the noise of the plane combined with the inane chatter of his fellow passengers soon starts grinding his nerves raw like a pebble between millstones. Every soundbite that vibrates his eardrum feels like nail on a blackboard, and his skin feels too tight. With shaky fingers, he picks at a sliver of skin that has separated from a cuticle, eventually drawing blood. The sting of the exposed flesh is a welcome lance of clarity for his overstimulated brain.

There are only eleven passengers besides him in this old McDonnell-Douglas that must have once been a commercial passenger carrier. Now, it's been stripped down to the bare necessities and doesn't appear to have been cleaned for at least a decade. A broken window shield on the opposite side of the plane is bathing the cabin in torturously bright morning sunlight. At least the toilet still works.

As Sherlock shifts to find a marginally more comfortable sitting position, the goosebumped skin on his shins brushes against the frayed fabric covering the seat next to his, which brings forth an uncontrollable shudder. He pinches his eyes shut and forces himself to focus on the conversation he can hear from the seats in front of him, aware that it's probably a futile hope that it would take his mind off of what every cell in his body is screaming for.

"Do you think you can see the Jaegers from the boat that'll take us to the base?" the excited voice of a young woman asks.

"They're not in the main level of the Shatterdome anymore. Sheesh, don't you people know anything?" huffs a snooty, overconfident male tenor voice from the front. "They realized too late that they were sitting ducks in the dome before deployment, so they built undersea vaults to every base after the Tokyo incident."

"That drone strike was the first time anything had ever reached the airspace above a Shatterdome. Kaiju never headed for any of the bases, and all of them were well away from Breaches."

"Still, it should have been obvious," the young man insists.

"You do realise that most of you will be lucky to even get a glimpse of a Jaeger arse plate before they weed you out from the pilot program and put you in the loser ground crew? Only ten percent of recruits get to become pilots." This is a steroid-deepened, male voice somewhere in the middle. He sounds at least a few years older than the other conversants.
"Oh, we know," Little Miss Excited replies coldly. "That applies to you, too."

"For some reason," Mister Testosterone replies, "I'm not worried."

A seat squeaks; someone must be turning to look back down the aisle. "So, what's with the dope fiend back there?"

"No idea. Maybe they've sent one of the engineers to rehab and it didn't take. I heard that the PPDC crackdown on stims somehow never reached the science division."

*Good to know.* Not that crystal meth, some newer stimulant, or whatever pilots and Ground Crew may have been once using to combat battle fatigue – to power their endless work binges and to ease their night watches – would be Sherlock's first choice, but beggars can't be choosers. A lot of the best stuff available in London is probably too highly priced for PPDC personnel.

"Can't be a recruit, that's for sure," the young woman announces, and that seems to conclude the discussion regarding Sherlock.

He's tempted to get back to the loo to splash his face with cold water – that sensory assault had momentarily silenced his overworked senses twice before, but the effect is so short-lived that it's not worth the trouble.

He drags his lids open and raises himself a little from his seat to survey what he can see of his company. He hadn't paid much attention to them when boarding; he had felt too dreadfully ill. Now, he could perhaps manage to memorise some details.

They are all younger than him. Naive idiots, most likely all desperately trying to manoeuvre the army route towards what they hope will be a celebrated career as a Jaeger pilot. Were they eligible for the other pathway into the program – having exceptional aptitude test scores – they would have been rounded up and turned into *kaiju* fodder at a much earlier age.

Sherlock has read that, apart from twins, nearly all of the most successful pilot matches have been made between brawn and brains, so to speak – one neurologically and intellectually exceptional candidate, and one who could bring outstanding physical conditioning and battle fortitude to the mix. Aptitude scores dictate which candidates are given a chance to try to survive basic Jaeger Corps training, but they cannot predict whether there is another prospective pilot in the Corps who would be compatible enough with that person for Drifting. Sometimes, Rangers with unimpressive aptitude scores turn out to be exceptional pilots when paired with the right partner; many twin co-pilots have proven this rule.

Compatibility scores between prospective co-pilots can only be measured at a relatively late stage in training – after the point of no return of *implantation*. Sherlock will never agree to that, so they'll have to put him in the Ground Crew. It's all irrelevant since he has never wanted any of this. The Pan-Pacific Defence Corps and, by extension, its Jaeger program – the neural-interfaced battle exoskeletons that are nothing but glorified oversized toy robots his brother likes playing around with – have already taken everything from him.

Well, *nearly* everything. And now they've come for the last piece.

-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-

– PPDC Atlantic Subdivision Chard's Rift Base, Terceira, The Azores –
– The Fourth of May 2041 –
Ranger Tom Wallis hurries across the main hangar to catch up with John who's heading for dinner. "Watson, wait up!"

John doesn't slow down his steps. "Mess will be closed in ten, and I'd like to get my hands on at least some warm scraps instead of raiding the storage."

"Right," Wallis says distractedly as he adopts a synchronous stride beside John. "Portugal's playing Scotland tonight, you coming to mess to watch later?"

John has never been that big a footie fan, but watching the games together are some of the only social occasions he feels comfortable taking part in at the base these days. Not that he's in the mood this week.

"The new batch has arrived, then?" he asks to circumvent the invitation; he's not all that interested in the new recruits.

He receives a nod as a reply as he holds the door open for his fellow officer. Wallis is a Fightmaster, which means that he's in charge of training recruits and co-ordinating the selection process for the different Jaeger Corps training branches in the later stages of the hopefuls' cadet periods. Each Fightmaster is paired with an assisting Ranger for their work; Wallis has long been working with Xie Gao, a veteran Ranger from Guangzhou who had been sent from the Global Command Shatterdome in Hong Kong to oversee the building of the training program for the Atlantic subdivision. Gao had stayed after meeting his now-spouse, a British Ranger named Jocelyn Marsh, but now he has been reassigned to oversee the training program at the Hawaii Shatterdome, ending his collaboration with Tom. John wonders who will take on Gao's role for this batch of recruits.

After Harry died, the Corps had tried to re-pair John with Jocelyn. They'd both tried their best, and out of all possibilities Jocelyn just might have been the best one, but it was too much, too soon, and he couldn't find it in himself to trust Jocelyn enough. A successful neural handshake requires sharing things with another person John would never be comfortable sharing with anyone except for Harry. John had been relieved when the Corps had matched Jocelyn with another pilot, and she's still one of Chard's Rifts active duty Rangers.

Once in the mess hall, John and Tom scrape the bottom of the lasagna pans, run themselves mugs of robust coffee from a large percolator tank, and grab seats by the window overlooking one of the main plasma cannons on the side of the barracks' external wall. The Atlantic stretches beyond that protective shell, endless and grey and restless.

"I need a favour," Wallis says, pointing his fork at his Ranger colleague. "If you've got time to spare."

John clears his throat and gives Wallis a side glance. They all know he can't be that busy after they shut down the Guardian program he had helped initiate – the design project of an advanced medical diagnostics system in the Jaegers. The project was nixed after it was decided that, while under attack, it would be wasteful of time and resources to initiate more detailed diagnostics of the pilots' injuries than the Jaeger systems were already capable of. Pilots were to focus on one thing and one thing only – inflicting as much damage as they could until they either expired or won, before ejecting themselves out of the Jaeger. Medical help would come later.

Sometimes John feels that they're still building that damned wall, only this time they're using Ranger corpses as bricks. "Shoot," he says.

"Could you have a look at one of the recruits? The boat captain says he was feeding the fishes all the
way from the Port of Ponta Delgada. It's not just seasickness, judging by what the rest of the group
had to say about his behaviour on the flight in. I think he needs a doctor. He's in a single room
instead of the dorm; if he does turn out to just have a stomach bug, he needs to be isolated if we don't
want to have half the base puking and shitting their guts out."

"Just take him to Med Bay," John suggests. He hopes this isn't some charity mission to make him
feel useful after his Guardian project got cancelled.

John is not fond of the Med Bay staff. As a subunit of the Science Division and thus managed from
the main headquarters in Hong Kong rather than falling under the jurisdiction of the Atlantic
Subdivision, they seem to function in their own little autonomous bubble. Base Medical Units –
usually referred to as Med Bays – employ outstanding specialists in their respective fields, but they
seem to have taken the PPDC war imperative to heart: maximise performance at all costs. John
doubts that they'll give a toss about some poor bugger who's not even a full cadet yet, even if they
have arrived at Chard's Rift in bad shape. They'll do what's needed and what's medically sound, but
that's it. Empathy would be a tall order.

"I would, but the recruit absolutely refuses to go there," Wallis explains before shoving a forkful of
wilted salad into his mouth.

"Why the hell not? This is the Corps; why would he think he's got a choice?" John dabs his mouth
with a napkin and cards a hand through his hair.

"Technically, according to the rules, treatment for non-battle related injuries and acute illness require
consent before cadets start their training since they don't effectively gain their legal cadet status
before that. It's one of bits in the legislation that the Marshal has refused to push to change, since he
thinks keeping the current idiotic version cuts costs."

"Is the recruit on the aptitude track or the distinguished service track?"

"Aptitude. And there's one thing that you'll be curious to hear."

"Yeah?"

"The family name's Holmes."

"So? It's not that rare a surname; could be a coincidence."

"The Marshal's listed as his emergency contact."

"So, his parents would be the Holmeses?"

"The very same."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes:
They're about to meet, then. But why does everyone seem to know who Sherlock's
parents were? Stay tuned for first impressions (very soon) and family drama (later).

Firing the canon:
To explain the routes which John, Harry and Sherlock would have taken into the Corps, I had to devise a selection process. Everything regarding it is thus non-canon. I ended up with the concept of there being two routes in: either a distinguished military career combined with good enough aptitude test results OR aptitude results so exceptional that a person would be plucked into the Jaeger program quite young and without prior military experience. When humanity realised that the kaiju would keep coming, and new pilots were likely going to be needed in hordes, aptitude tests were administered to a big part of the under-thirties population in the nations taking part in the war effort. Later on, all schoolchildren were given the tests at the age of 14. Combining a genetic workup, a psychological profile, extensive tests on visuospatial skills and IQ, they are used to predict who is capable of Drifting and who is not. Drifting will be explained in detail later. Twins often Drift well, even if their individual aptitude scores aren't that high. John and Harry sort of took the military route but their early training was sped up due to the crisis being at its worst back then. Their aptitude scores were promising, and their twin connection was a predictor for a potential Drift match.

As illustrated in the chart I provided for chapter 2, the personnel of the Chard’s Rift Jaeger Corps can be divided into four groups. 1) the brass, consisting of Base Commander Hammond (and technically also the Marshal, but he doesn’t really participate in the day-to-day running of the base), 2) Rangers in active pilot duty, 3) Rangers in charge of training new Rangers and 4) the lonely Ranger (LOL) who does neither, and is employed as a retired-pilot-slash-non-MedBay-army-doctor. This is, of course, our John.

Wallis, Gao and Marsh are OCs, as are the hopefuls Sherlock was stuck on that flight with. My reason for not marching forth more Pacific Rim (or Sherlock) characters is that I find it somewhat tiresome and reductive in many crossover stories that the main purpose seems to just be to let a bunch of characters from two universes meet. This needed to first and foremost be about John and Sherlock.

Writing soundtrack for this chapter:
Placebo: Come Undone
Skunk Anansie: This Is Not A Game
The Reluctant Patient

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The isolation dorm is lit only by the dim emergency lights embedded in the baseboards. The single-person room used to be given to visiting high brass before the cadets' accommodation was moved onto this level; since Terceira's fancy resort hotels are only a short drive away, nobody of command ilk ever really used it. John considers it a smart move by Wallis to put the poorly recruit here – his symptoms would have caused alarm in the other recruits. Besides, knowing how the military route recruits in particular tend to act in the beginning, this one would have been singled out and ostracised as the weakling of the batch quite quickly. Maybe that's already happened. They had all come in on the same transport, after all.

"Pretty sure I left the lights on," Wallis comments dryly, and flicks the switch for the ceiling LED panel just as John closes the door behind them.

Wallis walks to the corner where the dorm room's single bunk bed is located. "It'd be much easier to help you out at Med Bay," he points out with the tone of a man who is tired of repeating himself. He's blocking John's view to the figure huddled on the narrow bed.

No reply comes to the Fightmaster's words.

"Did you hear a word I said?" Wallis demands.

John shoves himself between him and the bulkhead into which the bunk has been bolted to see his prospective patient better.

The mound of bristly woollen blanket shifts a bit. "Nothing wrong with my hearing," replies a slightly hoarse baritone from underneath.

Recruit Holmes – the term quite a generous expression for the sordid sight that greets John when Wallis grabs the edge of the blanket and pulls it away – has curled up onto his side, facing the wall. All John can see of his head before he drags himself to a sitting position is a matted, blackish mop of curls. The Corps have always been a bit more relaxed than the Royal Armed Forces when it comes to grooming rules, but there's no way he'll get to keep such an unruly hairstyle.

Holmes yawns, blinks blearily and then surveys the intruders. Even though it's hazy from a virus, drug withdrawal or whatever – John hasn't made a definitive diagnosis yet – his gaze feels as though it pierces right through to the back of his head.

"Not going to Med Bay. I know what they do up there, or down there, or wherever you have set up your equivalent of Frankenstein's lab. Over my dead body." The tone leaves no room for argument.

John presents an alarmed frown at Wallis, who replies with a shrug and an eye roll. Usually new recruits can't wait to be sent to the medical wing for their implants. Is the program truly forced to scrape the bottom of the barrel so hard that they're even dragging in the stark raving lunatics, now?

Holmes fixes his gaze on John. "You're a doctor." A statement, not a question.

"Yeah," John says. How could the recruit tell? It feels like an admission, which is odd – after all,
that's why John had been requested here.

"I've already said that I won't agree to being taken to Med Bay."

John steps closer to the bed, lowering his palms in what he hopes is a disarming manner. "Alright, alright! I don't work for them," John explains.

Holmes rubs the edge of his nose, sniffing and blinking his watering eyes furiously as though the light is hurting him, then nods. "You can stay, then – but get rid of him." He cocks his head towards Wallis.

"You don't fucking tell a Fightmaster to leave!" Wallis explodes.

John steps in front of him to keep the man from getting closer to the bed. "If this is what I think it is, he's not all that much himself right now. You should stand down, Tom." He can only make a suggestion since they're the same rank.

Not that his fellow soldiers actually treat John as equal to those still in active duty within the Corps. If a Breach opened right below their arses right now, all the other Rangers would be running to the underdome to climb into Jaeger Conn-Pods or assigning and adopting base defence assignments to cadets and Ground Crew. John, on the other hand, would be instructed to get into one of the shelters to huddle up and hope for the best with the civilian Ground Crew. He's a Ranger only by title.

'You would miss it,' Harry often tells him in his head, as she really had, one evening when they had talked about what they'd do after retirement. A bit like fighter pilots and ballerinas, Jaeger pilots were usually taken off active service when they reached 35. Otherwise, the cancer risk and the neural strain might take them into an early grave. 'You would miss Intercept, and you'd be so fucking bored after retirement,' she had told him.

Maybe Harry hadn't assumed she'd survive to retirement age. She would have been so fucking bored, too.

John's lips tighten into a determined line. It's no use conversing with ghosts when there's a near-skeleton right here. The young man on the bunk bed is close to rail-thin, his skin tinted with a sickly pallor made worse by the yellow lighting in the room that makes all surfaces look dirty and old. In a base where most things are constructed from metal, even the ugly plastic furniture adorning the living quarters feels like a luxury.

Wallis huffs angrily. "He's all yours," he tells John, and marches out. The recruit recovers the blanket from the floor and pulls it up to his chin, closing his eyes.

After the door clangs shut after Wallis, John grabs a plastic chair and drags it next to the bunk.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" John asks, hand hovering above a blanket-covered hip. He withdraws it after a moment, deciding to give the man the control over the situation he seems desperate to hold onto. Why else would he talk back to an officer?

"You're the physician," comes a snarky reply. "Not much you can do about this."

"Oh, I think there might be plenty, even if this is what I suspect. Fluids, paracetamol – assuming your liver hasn't called it quits – something to help you sleep---"

This gets him some attention. Holmes shifts under the blanket, drags himself up into a sitting position, blanket still tightly around his shoulders. He yawns twice, then rubs his face with the tips of his fingers. "I thought there was a ban on all CNS-acting substances in the Corps."
"Not banned for medical use, but naturally you can only get those through Med Bay."

Disappointment and irritation waste no time in appearing on the younger man's face. "You're useless, then."

"I can get you Ventrin."

"Which is what?" The question sounds as though it downright disgusts Holmes to admit he doesn't know something.

"Melatonin combined with oxytocin and GABA. Works pretty well for jetlag, at least."

"Is that your diagnosis?" Holmes' tone is mocking.

It isn't. On their walk from the mess hall, Wallis had given John a brief summary of what he knew about the recruit: graduate chemist; a criminal record which, apart from the latest entry, consisted solely of misdemeanours and other minor things such as possession of regulated substances. That should have clued Wallis in to why the recruit is in such a bad shape, but then again, it's not often prospective cadets arrive in the throes of rampant drug withdrawal. Addiction isn't a contraindication for PPDC recruitment – after all, the wizards up at med bay can nowadays reverse the associated receptor upregulation, especially if it has to do with opiates, the most common stimulants, or benzodiazepines. Alcohol dependence is more difficult to tweak, and some people opt out of treatment. Active substance abuse will get a Ranger benched from piloting but if there was one thing Harry enjoyed more than her booze, it was taking the Intercept out for a spin. That's what kept her from spiralling completely out of control.

"Some homeopathic mixture of hormones is unlikely to do much good," Holmes announces. "You can leave, if that's all you can offer."

John sighs. "At the very least, I need to monitor you."

"Not necessary. I've done this before. On my own."

Something about that statement makes John terribly sad.

Holmes drags his knees up and hugs his arms around them, letting his jaw rest on top. He closes his eyes, which allows John to look at him without feeling intrusive. The man's right earlobe is split and scarred, and an old scar also divides his right eyebrow into two sections. A visit to Med Bay could easily fix those, but John doesn't mention this out loud. Holmes looks like he hasn't slept in days. He has been sniffing nearly constantly after John and Wallis had walked in – clearly a runny nose, and his eyes keep watering even though he's clearly not crying – and what little John can see of his knees and arms are in goose bumps. He's constantly shifting his position as though he's finding it hard to find a comfortable one.

Holmes yawns again, and John decides he's seen enough to make a diagnosis. This is text-book, really, for opiate withdrawal.

Suddenly, Holmes' eyes fly open, and John sees sweat beading up on his forehead. The slightly green tint his face gains in the next few seconds tells John all he needs to know to predict the near future. He strides to the utility closet, lifts a mop aside, and brings the bucket it had stood in to the bed.

Soon, Holmes is retching up and spitting out tiny amounts of bile into it.

"Better like this, than out the other end, eh?" John offers and passes him a tissue to wipe his mouth.
"Not so sure about that," Holmes replies with a hoarse voice and yawns again.

John gets him a glass of water – tepid, not cold – of which he takes a few sips. When he gives John back the glass with shaking hands, John makes use of the opportunity to grab his wrist and turn it to reveal the lunar landscape of scars in the crook of his elbow and down his forearm. The damage isn't bad enough that John would suspect he's been shooting up S-desomorphine, but ruling that out still leaves a pharmacopoeia-sized selection of possible poisons.

When John had been finishing his medical training in Manchester, S-deso had been all the rage. Based on the devastating regular desomorphine – also known by the street name Krokodil – the drug's S-isomere was claimed to solve much of the tissue damage problems, even though a big part of them had been due to home-cooked desomorphine not being very pure and not because it contained both stereoisomers. Eventually, someone worked out how to manufacture the S-version on the streets, and things got bad again. John has seen images of the users in medical journals. Not as bad as it had been with Krokodil, but bad enough.

"I wouldn't be stupid enough to go for S-Deso," Holmes tells him as though he'd read John's mind. "Besides, nobody does morphine derivatives anymore, not after they released the virus that killed off all the opium poppy-pollinating bee species."

It had been one of the worst ecological disasters in human history, the aftermath of which is still being repaired by trying to genetically engineer new bee species that would be resistant to the mutated virus. The world had come close to a cataclysmic famine when all the bees – instead of just the Apis cerana himalaya – began dying out. Some believe that the kaiju had come to punish mankind for such crimes against the Earth.

"Care to tell me what you have used, then?" John asks, expecting Holmes to clam up.

Instead, the recruit looks thoughtful, as though going through a list in his head. "Orfentanil, mostly. 7-ace and fepram when I had to act presentable. Bezitramide, if running low on funds, 7-Hydro if there's nothing else on the market."

"Jesus. Bit of a career there."

"I get bored." Holmes is shivering, and when John had inspected his arm he had noticed how cold the man's extremity had been.

John goes to the climate control console to bring up the temperature in the room. Dorms that aren't used are kept cool to save money. It can't be helping that Holmes' shirts look to be soaked with sweat. "I'll get you some fresh clothes from Requisitions."

"I thought you were a doctor, not an errand boy."

"And I thought you were a recruit, but every minute you're sounding more like some random arsehole who walked onto the wrong plane."

Something flashes in the younger man's eyes that John can't quite place. If feeling insulted weren't the more likely option, John would have suspected it had been amusement.

Holmes leans closer to read John's name tag, making him realise he hadn't introduced himself. "Watson, John; Ranger," he pointedly reads out loud. Something about the name seems to have sparked his interest: his eyes narrow and he studies John's expression with a disconcerting intensity before a sneeze breaks his concentration. "I was under the impression that the medical staff aren't part of the Jaeger Corps," Holmes finally dismisses as though disappointed. "May I have more water?"
John delivers it, then recovers his seat by the bunk. "Did they do the standard health workup before
they shipped you out here?" John asks, referring to the medical exam package administered to every
recruit at their local PPDC liaison office before granting them a place on the transport out to Chard's
Rift.

"My brother made sure it slipped their minds."

John is not surprised that this would have worked. In the early days of the Corps, bending the rules
was more standard practice than an exception, and the PPDC is still famous for being more flexible
in both its morals and in practices than most military organisations would be. Some might call it
having a bit of common sense instead of being a stickler to rules, but it has its downsides. Some
things that wouldn't fly in the outside world can easily go unpunished in the PPDC. Such as
discrimination, hazing, and ignoring safety rules.

John grabs the medical field kit he'd brought with him and left just inside the door and takes out a
few items. He keeps it in his room and has, through the years, kept making improvements in the
contents. For the state-of-the-art handheld lab unit which he places on a nearby table, he's had to
write some very long and very tedious requisitions addendums but eventually, it had been delivered.
Arguing that he sometimes went out with Ground Crew to practice field first aid had done the trick.
It's a good example of the unspoken agreement between him and the Corps – he won't cause trouble,
and they mostly let him be and do his thing. Sometimes he wonders why they haven't just enforced
an honourable discharge on him – does his service record truly matter that much, or do they really
fear that he'd go to the press and wail about how a battle veteran has been treated? Perhaps. The
PPDC can hardly afford more bad PR in Europe right now.

Holmes flinches when John grabs his hand. "Sorry."

"It's--- fine. Over-sensitised," Holmes explains timidly.

John nods. Opiate addiction and withdrawal, especially with the new designer stuff available through
the dark web that still survives against all efforts of the UN and individual governments to shut it
down, can wreck the central nervous system's processing of pain signals. John's harmless touch had
been interpreted by the sensitised pathways as pain.

A surprisingly amicable silence envelops them as John rips open a sample kit package arranges the
contents next to the analyser. He takes a firmer hold of the trembling hand that is again being
presented to him and prepares to take a blood sample from his patient. It's a good thing that only the
prick of a finger is needed for this – getting a bigger sample from the crook of the man's arm might
have been a challenge, considering the scarring there. It takes him three tries to even get a capillary
sample; the fingertips in Holmes' left hand are callused. The recruit scratches his neck and John
notices a peculiar blotch of darkened skin underneath his chin on the left side.

"You should have tried the right hand. I play the violin, hence the left-hand calluses and the
pigmentation on my neck which you're currently staring at."

John averts his eyes. "Sorry," he says needlessly.

"Perhaps it might be more accurate to say I played the violin. I don't suppose instruments are allowed
here?"

"Officers above cadet rank are allowed some personal possessions like a guitar. I don't remember
anyone ever having a violin, though," John muses as he inserts the sample vial into the machine and
watches the analysis progress bar on the monitor starting to rise.
"My brother has probably used mine for kindling by now," Holmes says bitterly.

John can't help being curious. Wallis had rightfully made a big deal out of the recruit's surname; not only is this recruit related to the Holmeses who had been instrumental in buying humanity enough time to somehow scramble to save its collective arse, he's also a sibling to the current Atlantic Marshal. "Your brother, he's the---"

"Yes, he is, and that's the extent of my willingness to discuss him."

The bar on the monitor fills up, and John is treated to a screen full of results. "Your liver and kidney enzymes are mildly elevated. The kidney issue could just be dehydration, and I think the liver parameters will likely return to normal with abstinence."

"Splendid," Holmes replies disinterestedly.

"Everything else looks pretty normal," John points out. Holmes' haemoglobin level is a little on the low side and his transferrine receptors elevated, pointing to iron deficiency. That can easily be remedied. He grabs a pencil and pad from his kit and jots down Venfer – the name of a fast-acting intravenous iron store-replenishing drug.

Next, he digs out an old wrist model of a blood pressure meter. "You don't have an implant, so we have to do this the old-fashioned way."

While commercial medical implants are nowadays common outside the PPDC for the treatment and remote monitoring of various illnesses, not everyone has them. There are the tinfoilhat brigade who think the Government is trying to control them, then the groups worrying about side effects, and then the healthy people who just don't see the need. Not even the Corps doles standard medical implants out to its ground personnel, since Med Bay has exceptional diagnostic facilities that get them quickly to the bottom of nearly any problem.

The sorts of implants Rangers have, however, are a whole different thing to the commercially available models. Even big civilian biohack companies are light years away from what the Corps have achieved with their implant tech. It's all classified, of course, to prevent sabotage – one of the main reasons why the Science Division is kept so isolated from the other parts of the PPDC.

"I prefer the old-fashioned way." Holmes presents a thin, pale wrist that sports a collection of mostly old, inconspicuous puncture scars. There are a couple of fresher ones as well in the small veins on the inside of the wrist with scabs that looked like they've been picked on.

The BP meter gives a whiny beep and John reads the result. "95/70. Usually opiate withdrawal raises the blood pressure; you must have been putting yourself through the wringer for some time since it's this low. Better not get up too quickly from lying down." The device also analyses the acoustics of the pulse wave, giving a rough estimate of the function of the left heart ventricle and the heart rhythm as well as measuring the pulse rate. Holmes is having some extra-systolic beats, otherwise his rhythm is normal. Cardiac indexes are exemplary. It seems that stimulant use hasn't wrecked his heart just yet.

A thought occurs to John: once, this young man must have been fit and healthy, possibly even happy. What has happened between then and now?

Without asking for permission – this is the Corps, after all, and as a Ranger he's a high-ranking officer – John fishes out a two-litre bag of PlasmaBalancePlus and an IV tubing and needle kit.

"You should let me do that bit," Holmes suggests. "I know where the non-scarred veins are. Besides,
don't you have one of those portable imaging kits? The hospitals in London never have any trouble with me since they've got those miniature-sized hyper-concentrated cone ultrasound things."

John gives him a look. "Med Bay has those."

Sherlock rolls his eyes.

"Lie down, head turned towards the wall." John doesn't add please, even though they had stressed the importance of politeness in medical school. It's clear that Holmes is good at trying to distract and divert other people's intentions, which John can't afford to fall for.

He gets the cannula in on one try, and a flush with a pre-filled syringe of saline confirms that there is now a functioning IV in Holmes' left external jugular. It's the recommended spot in the PPDC battlefield medical manual if the bigger peripheral veins have constricted due to haemorrhagic shock.

Holmes doesn't sit up again. He closes his eyes, then brings his fingertips up to where the base of the cannula has already sealed itself into his skin with a collagen-based, antimicrobial tissue glue. "It twinges when I turn my head."

"With your veins, it was either that or an intraosseal, and we avoid those whenever we can, especially in pilots who have already developed osteoporosis."

"Lucky me," Holmes replies, but the bite required for proper sarcasm is missing. He's shivering, and suddenly he yelps and presses a palm on his stomach where the shirts have ridden up to reveal a sliver of pale, sweaty skin.

John can see the muscles underneath tensing and crawling as they cramp.

"Fuck," Holmes pants, "I hate this part."

He curls into a foetal position on the bunk. John spreads the blanket on top of him but it soon gets kicked off.

"Can't you get me something?" Holmes mutters, "Even just a non-opiate painkiller, some of those whatever things the Chinese invented last year... I'm sure the Corps' have cupboards full of all the latest stuff."

"Yes, we do, but you can probably guess what I'm going to say regarding how to get to them."

"Not going anywhere near that place," is groused from underneath the blanket.

"I've just got paracetamol, but I'll need to lower the dose due to your liver not having much fun," John offers, and receives no reply. He sighs and drags his chair against a wall so that he can lean the back of his head against it.

Since the recruit won't go to Med Bay and his condition will likely only get worse, it looks like they both have a long night ahead of them.

Chapter End Notes
Author's notes:
Apis cerana is a real bee species; the himalaya variant is my invention. I have no idea if there is a particular bee species that favours opium poppies. Probably not. We need to look after the bees!

There's lots of yummy pharmacology in this chapter, some of it real and some tweaked and twisted by me for evil fictional purposes:

– Ventrin = A fictional drug invented by yours truly, combining GABA (a neurotransmitter that reduces excitability in the mammalian central nervous system), melatonin (a hormone that regulates sleep cycles) and oxytocin (a hormone one of the many functions of which is to alleviate fear and anxiety; it also has antidepressant-like effects). I devised the name based on the fact that the ventrolateral preoptic nucleus (VLPO or VLPN) of the hypothalamus is one area of the brain that is particularly involved in the switch between wakefulness and sleep.

– desomorphine aka Krokodil = A fast-acting, strong synthetic opioid developed by the pharmaceutical company Roche. Its misusers can suffer horrid damage to their veins, skin and subcutaneous tissues due to the impurities present in street-manufactured batches. It is relatively easy to manufacture from codeine, which in Russia was available over the counter until the government cracked down on codeine availability in 2012. It has been estimated that around 100 000 people still use the drug in the country. The S-isomere is my invention; its introduction probably wouldn't solve the impurity problem, which means that Sherlock wouldn't be stupid enough to go for it.

– fepram = amfepramone, trade name Tenuate; a stimulant drug chemically quite close to amphetamine. I have no idea if someone actually uses this abbreviated form; it and all other short forms of previously unheard-of street drug names in this story were devised by me, including orfentanil.

– 7-hydro = 7-hydroxymitragynine; one of the active compounds in the plant Mitragyna speciosa, also known as Kratom.

– Venfer = an invented name for an intravenous iron supplement (these do exist already)

– bezitramide = An opioid developed in the 1960s by Janssen Pharmaceuticals. It was pulled from the market in the Netherlands after several fatal overdoses in 2004. Its trade name is Burgodin.

– orfentanil = Orthofluorofentanyl, a real-life derivative of fentanyl. It appeared in the illicit market in 2016 and has been sold online as a designer drug. I imagined that by the time this story happens, something like it could well have side lined heroin, fentanyl, buprenorphine and other current main substances as the biggest opioid street drug in the UK.

– PlasmaBalancePlus = In the future, they shall have invented a perfectly physiologically balanced super-IV-fluid, and this is its brand name.

There's some more medical slang present related to anaemia etc; if anyone wants a more detailed explanation, all you need to do is ask in the comments section, and your friendly author-anaesthetist-incorrigiblejohnlocker will be happy to bore for (whatever) Britain (is called in 2041) about all of that.

Firing the canon:
The Jaegers are massive exoskeletal war machines operated by two pilots whose brains have been synced through a so-called neural handshake. The early versions of the Jaeger control systems were too much for one person's central nervous system to bear, leading to nosebleeds and seizures and other kinds of nasty things. The later versions of the control system require one pilot to control the left hemisphere, the other to control the right, and a sync that is achieved through the sharing of memories, emotions and
thoughts. The term for operating in such a sync is Drifting. Not everyone can do this, and compatibility between two potential pilots varies immensely. Drifting requires intense trust and can create a bond between pilots as deep as between lovers or siblings.

This much is canon.

As for how it works on a more detailed (technical) level, I had to and wanted to go off and beyond Pacific Rim canon, especially since medical H&C is the bread and butter of my works... In this story, the neural interface relies on highly sophisticated implants in the pilots' spines and brainstems. There are two generations of interface systems (to explain the differences seen in the helmets et cetera between the two films), which will be explained in detail later in the story. There aren't that many Jaegers since they are expensive to build, and they all get more or less cool names a bit like major warships have always done. John and Harry's Jaeger, The Diablo Intercept, mentioned for the first time in this chapter, is a canon one. I imagined the (obviously non-canon) Jaegers at Chard's Rift to have been named by stuffy British bureaucrats (ie me trying to emulate them).

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
Linkin Park: Breaking A Habit
Foo Fighters: Let It Die
John is startled awake by nearly falling off his chair. He must have dozed off, tablet computer in hand. He vaguely remembers deciding to check on the results of the football match sometime after midnight – Portugal had won 2-1.

On the bunk in the corner, Holmes is sleeping restlessly. Insomnia is often a feature of withdrawal, but after what must have been an uncomfortable flight and an even more uncomfortable boat ride in the choppy seas from Ponta Delgada in his current state, the young man must be so utterly spent that sleep had reached him even through the other symptoms. Had he an implant, John could have monitored him remotely from his own room, setting up an alert profile on his console for different vital signs, but the rule with his new patient certainly seems to be that everything needs to be done very old school.

John doesn't mind. Most of his patients nowadays are nothing but brief outpatient visits and corridor consults. Med Bay handles all substantial ailments, and John finds that he sometimes misses his rotations at London's A&E departments where he'd been on another sort of a frontline saving lives.

What he's doing right now is a favour to Wallis, and there are no parameters within which he should operate. It is up to him and him only to decide what to do with Holmes, and the man had been partly right in his dismissals of John's assistance – there is little he can do besides provide company, basic care such as fluids and mild painkillers, and to arrange additional care if the situation calls for it. He doubts that respiratory depression, a brain bleed or seizures are likely, but anything is possible, judging by what he has now learned about the veritable collection of substances the recruit has been using.

He has been oddly tempted to address Holmes by his first name, though he knows it would not be appropriate to establish a first-name basis. It still feels quite natural in this situation where he sees the man at his worst state. At least among Rangers, being friendly and informal has always been the rule, anyway. As a physician, when treating fellow pilots and other staff who have become friends, he has often struggled with finding a balance between caring and professional, between a doctor and a soldier. He knows he should have insisted on being called by his proper rank, but everything about Holmes sticks out like a sore thumb in this place. The burning question is, of course, why on Earth he would have wound up among a batch of hopefuls in this state, especially since he really doesn't appear very enthusiastic about being here. Wallis won't have any empathy to spare for Sherlock, but John certainly does. Regardless of what choices have led to this, no one deserves to go through such an ordeal at what is making him writhe in pain and discomfort even in sleep.

John quietly makes himself a cup of tea – a former occupant of the room had left some basic supplies in the cabinets above the small hob. He finds a thermos and fills it with the rest of the hot water, drops in a teabag. Maybe he could convince his patient to have some later.

Perhaps it's the clink of John's mug against the sink or simply his deteriorating condition, but an hour later Sherlock flings himself up to a sitting position – groaning in agony as his still cramping abdominal muscles complain of the strain, and throws up, only barely managing to fumble around for the bucket next to the bed before his meagre stomach contents are brought up.
"How long is it since you last took anything?" John asks, crinkling his nose as he recovers the bucket and rinses it out in the shower.

"Something like fifty-five hours. I don't know what the time is. Lost count."

With opiate withdrawal, the peak of the symptoms usually happens at around seventy-two hours.

"Oxycodone's quick in, quick out. Usually worst at around sixty," Sherlock comments and swallows, leaning his temple against the wall next to the bunk.

"Good to know," John says, keeping his tone neutral. He goes through a routine of blood pressure, pulse, pupils, temperature, peripheral vascular filling, other measures of dehydration. The results aren't better, nor are they worse.

"What are you still doing here?" Sherlock asks after wiping his mouth on the back of his palm after the next bout of retching. John gives him a tissue which he shoves under the pillow. "Save for something kept under lock and key at Med Bay, there's nothing you can do."

John is tempted to protest that he hardly thinks that exchanging the IV fluid for a fresh bag, making sure there's a glass of water available, administering a lowered dose of intravenous paracetamol due to the liver results, helping the young man into the fresh clothes he'd fetched last night, and making sure bodily fluids are deposited in either the bucket or the loo where they belong is hardly nothing. There's something odd about the persistence with which Holmes – Sherlock, he corrects – is trying to get him to leave. Embarrassment? Suspicion about his motives? Or would he dismiss any and all PPDC staff, further confirming John's suspicions that he really doesn't want to be here?

He clearly isn't done with the protestations: "I'm not likely to drop dead from this, which is what your status exam just now should have told you."

"Not likely, no, but looking at you I can tell you aren't exactly going through this from a very healthy starting point. Try to get some sleep; I've got some clean clothes for you when you start feeling better."

"Nothing about this bloody place is going to spell better." Sherlock drops his head back on the pillow.

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Even though he'd initially dismissed it as useless, Sherlock does accept a tablet of Ventrin at five in the morning. John hopes that it won't come back up as soon as it hits his stomach. Thirty minutes later, a restless sleep claims the recruit, and John finally sneaks out of the room to catch up on some sleep himself after getting a Ground Crew Field Medic on standby duty to watch over Sherlock in his stead. There are no battle exercises today – John had checked the schedule – so a standby medic would not be needed for anything. One is still on rota every day.

John sets his alarm one in the afternoon, four hours after he'd retreated from the isolation room. Nothing he has on his schedule today is time-sensitive; he had simply jotted down some stuff on today's slot that he's been meaning to get done sometime this month. No one is keeping watch when or even if he does these things. That fact doesn't exactly make him feel like a valuable member of the Corps.

He could easily turf Sherlock Holmes entirely onto the Ground Crew Medics, who he outranks and whose duties his deployment orders state he partly oversees. But, he won't do that, because he is
forced to admit that he really doesn't have anything else worthwhile to do. And, the man is such a
mystery that he quite likes the idea of sticking around. Nothing much happens to him nowadays, and
this will be a short distraction, a break in his routines before Holmes disappears into the grinding
machinery of the Cadet Training, assuming he doesn't quit long before that. Why wouldn't he quit, if
he doesn't want to be here? Why is he here?

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At lunch, John gets the answer to his question. Or, at least a sanitised and possibly heavily edited
version of it. Since he's late to the meal, his only company is his tablet, so he browses the news from
the media at home while scarfing down a passable bowl of chicken soup.

'Brother of Atlantic Subsection Marshal to join the PPDC', announces a headline in The Daily
Inquirer, and a sidebar raises the question whether an official inquiry into 'misplaced' aptitude test
results from decades ago could be connected to a recent explosion in downtown London. The
connection seems flimsy at best, and since the cause of the explosion is not known, John really can't
see what those two things could possibly have to do with one another. The tabloids are probably
grasping at straws as usual. He checks The Times, finding only a small feature on page fifteen about
the son of the famed Holmes couple leaving England for a prospective career in the PPDC. John
wonders who had provided the press with such info. Certainly, the Holmes family is famous, but he
can't remember ever seeing Sherlock's name in the press before. It has always been all about Marshal
Mycroft Holmes, who seems to quite enjoy basking in the limelight.

John decides against asking Sherlock about this. His reasons for being here are his business, and it's
not John's job to evaluate whether those reasons should earn him the status of a cadet or whether he
should be put on a boat home once the withdrawal abates.

He goes to relieve the Field Medic from his watch duty.

"He's been asking for you," the man tells him. "Testing me by asking for some other stuff, too,
which shouldn't surprise anybody. I opened your kit to check that you haven't got any opiates which
he could have got into while I went to the loo."

"Sensible," John replies tensely. He doesn't like people going through his stuff and poking their nose
into his things, even though it's not an attitude someone in a military organisation should adopt.
There is no privacy here.

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Few words are exchanged between John and his patient during the next twelve hours. Sherlock's
prediction of things being at their worst at around sixty hours after his last fix turns out to be spot-on.

The nausea is mostly gone, but the muscle cramps, the uncontrollable shivering due to fever, and the
restlessness Sherlock discloses as feeling like cockroaches are crawling up his arms seem to break his
resolve to act crankily stoic in John's presence. His eyes watering and his nose running are typical
symptoms, but at certain points John suspects the lacrimation might be more due to honest tears of
misery rather than an autonomic nervous system out of whack. He knows that the depletion of
neurotransmitters that normally allow a person to feel joy and hope and other positive things can
sometimes feel as bad or even worse than the more concrete physical symptoms.

He mostly lets Sherlock be, limits his examinations to the bare minimum, since his patient seems to
have completely withdrawn into himself. He doesn't offer reassurance that this will pass, that the worst is soon over, because he suspects he'd have his head bitten off for such platitudes.

Watching what the younger man is going through makes John feel as though it's quite understandable why many users would relapse at this stage.

He swaps an empty IV bag for one with added glucose and continues his quiet vigil beside the shivering form of Sherlock, who has once again burrowed underneath a blanket.

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It doesn't last forever, of course. When Sherlock's blood pressure begins climbing to a healthier level, his fever goes down, and he manages to keep water and half a sports drink down for several hours, John removes the IV. PPDC medical service regulations list substance use as an indication for removing an IV as soon as possible to prevent such patients having an easy route into the circulatory system.

Sherlock still regularly rubs his cramping limbs and his mood is down in the dumps, but by midnight of his second day at Chard’s Rift, John is convinced that he can give the man some of the solitude he had been demanding before the worst of the withdrawal hit.

During the most hellish phase, he had not asked John to leave. In fact, at one point, he had turned on the bunk, teeth chattering hard and hand shaking violently as he readjusted his blanket and called out John's first name. When he'd gone to stand by the bunk, Sherlock had simply said: "Just checking," and turned to face the wall.

Back in his own room, John shoves some medical journals to the floor off his bunk as he collapses onto it. He reaches down to his ankles and unlaces his boots, then kicks them off. Sleep comes easily.

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Just like every year so far, the days surrounding Harry's birthday mean an extra helping of nightmares. Sleep may have claimed John effortlessly, but he keeps waking up, sometimes with a shout, and so drenched in cold sweat than he gets up earlier than usual to take a shower. Under the spray, he thinks that however Holmes is feeling that morning, it can't be that much worse than him right now. He hates how the dreams so easily trigger the same physical reactions he'd experienced when it had all really happened, and those reactions continue through to wakefulness.

As much as he would love to do so, he can't go back to bed, because he has classes to teach. The science officers of Med Bay are happy to turf this duty to him since they prefer to stick to their research and patient work, instead of instructing cadets and Rangers and Ground Crew on how to perform CPR and use the automatic wound and haemorrhage control kits. Since he's busy teaching, John sends one of the field medics to check on Holmes. The medic comes back saying that he's still weak, unsteady on his feet and in a thoroughly bad mood, but had requested bottled water. John can't blame him – the desalination does what it's supposed to, but the stuff that comes out the taps at Chard’s Rift has a strong aftertaste of iodine, probably from the copious amount of seaweed that keeps getting stuck in the system’s intake valves.

"Get him some breakfast, and check at noon if he was able to keep it down."
Cadets aren't allowed in basic training unless healthy, and it'll be awhile until that description can be applied to Holmes. He isn't really anyone's responsibility until then – Wallis won't be interested in playing nursemaid; that's why he'd wanted to assign Holmes' care to John in the first place. The Med Bay only treats patients who have actually signed up for their care voluntarily or ordered there by their superiors, and until Holmes – Sherlock – shows up for his first basic training session, he won't officially be a cadet subject to such discipline.

He's nobody's responsibility and nobody's business until then, and something tells John that Holmes just might prefer to keep it that way. Maybe he should to be on the look-out for any signs of malingering.

After lunch and his third class of the day – this one a lecture on the biological effects of radiation to an uninterested audience of Rangers – John goes to Records. While he could have asked the man himself, John wants to see if he can work out a more thorough explanation of why Holmes has ended up on their doorstep looking something the cat dragged in.

He could have asked, could have demanded answers, but something about Sherlock's stubbornness and insistence to be treated the way he chooses intrigues John and makes him want to respect that wish.

"How's the special butterfly, then?" Angela Moreton, one of last year's new Rangers, asks John as they queue for coffee in the Education Section's kitchen area.

"I was planning on checking on him after this." John raises his coffee cup.

"Maybe Big Bro got him in, thought that this would be the world's shittiest detox," Moreton suggests and toasts her coffee at John before meandering her way out of the kitchen.

John isn't surprised that news of the recruit's condition has spread. Nothing stays hidden in these closed confines, and when it comes to battle readiness, nobody is allowed secrets.

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After stopping by at mess hall for lunch, John finds Holmes sitting by the desk in the isolation room. On the table before him he has the detachable, staff-issue wall console that doubles as a comms tablet with which all rooms are equipped.

"Oh. It's you," he comments when John lets himself in and drops his gaze back to the computer.

John notices a lunch pack on the bunk which hasn't been opened. Sandwiches, fruit, watery orange juice.

"Useless," Holmes curses and shoves the tablet forward.

"Depends on what you want to do with that."

"The only websites accessible are blatant government and PPDC propaganda, brain-rotting entertainment, and shops willing to deliver to this hellhole."

"There's the BBC," John suggests, "even after privatisation they are making quite nice documentaries."
"As I said, government---"

"Alright, alright, I get it, you're not a fan of authority. Which begs the question: what are you doing here?"

John's survey of Holmes' records had provided few surprises. Yes, he's the son of the Holmeses. Yes, his brother is the Marshal. His aptitude results are flabbergasting – John remembers hearing of only one person whose results had come close to Sherlock's, and that had been the legendary Mako Mori who'd been a part of the team who had managed to close the first Breach.

The health records he had found were unremarkable and mostly non-existent up until the age of eighteen, making John wonder if Holmes had even been in Britain during most of that time. Since his eighteenth birthday, there have been seven overdoses, two brief involuntary psychiatric holds turned into voluntary addiction treatment schemes from which Holmes had quickly called it quits. A few broken bones, some other A&E visits because of minor accidents – the nature of some of them sounding quite peculiar. John had seen similar things in patients who had been unable to pay their gambling or drug debts.

Holmes' educational records are scarce before the age of twelve, and non-existent after that. Home schooled? Boarding school abroad after his parents died? His NNHS health records are empty, even though The New National Health Service had integrated all the records from its prior electric systems, so it should all be there. Yet, it's as though someone had simply clicked 'delete' and purged everything.

The criminal record had been of some interest. Nothing major – not until a somewhat surprising domestic terrorism arrest, after which he had suddenly popped up at Chard's Rift.

"Unlike you, I was press-ganged. No real alternative." Holmes replies. "Indemnity for eternal servitude. At least if the Corps gets its way."

John plugs in the electric kettle and rummages around the utility closet. He finds one more teabag; cheap, generic English breakfast. It'll have to do. He can go without after just having had coffee.

"Being here really isn't what you want, is it?" John asks.

Holmes gives him an odd, joyless smile. "What gave that away?"

"What's the plan, then? Sass up the trainers, get thrown in the brig, hope to get sent home?"

"I'm here to avoid the brig. I was hoping the Corps might adopt the same strategy of benign neglect as my parents and my brother."

"This isn't a spa hotel – you can't just idle your time. If you flunk the training, they send you packing."

"Which in my case would mean extradition." Holmes leans back on his chair. "I'll sign up for the Ground Crew, then."

"You can't sign up for it. People get recruited there through a separate civilian route, or end up in the non-civilian part of it after not making it to the Jaeger Corps."

Holmes accepts the mug of tea. "So, to earn a spot in the Ground Crew, my only option is to fail cadet training?"

John shrugs and takes a seat opposite. "I guess so. Not hard to achieve since Ground Crew is where
most recruits end up anyway. How are you feeling?" He doesn't voice what he'd just thought – that
with an attitude and physical condition like Holmes', it shouldn't be any problem to fail the trials.

"Like I just quit drugs."

Nobody can keep up being such an annoying dick all the time, can they?

"What happens next?" Holmes then asks.

"We get you back on your feet, then you join the recruit group being trained by Wallis."

"I assume we are talking about the occupants of the ship of fools I came in on."

"Chen says we've got some strong candidates in there." Stronger than you, at least.

"Let's see..." Holmes looks up theatrically. "One of the females thinks she's God's gift to the Corps,
which is just as delusional as what she thinks of her sister whom she idolises but who has obviously
been kicked out of the PPDC at some point in the past. There are two very average males, one of
whom has a severe height complex he tries to offset by wearing hidden platforms. The older Irish
candidate is suffering from an STD in its acute stages, causing urinary symptoms. One of those who
has likely been designated as a 'strong candidate' is a bully who has abused steroids for years and
who smuggled some of them onto the base in the most uninventive and uncomfortable manner in
existence. I'd sweep his bunk and get rid of him. Would you like me to continue?"

"How do you know all of this?"

"I had to sit and listen to them for nearly seven hours on the plane and the boat. Clearly not
humanity's finest."

John raises his brows. How can someone whose life has obviously gone a bit, well, not good, have
such a superiority complex? And, how could he know all that just from listening to people? Surely
the cadets hadn't been casually spilling such secrets on the plane?

"Can you explain the training stages?" Holmes asks.

"Basic training lasts for three months, of which you'll probably miss a week more."

"I think not," Holmes says indignantly. "I'll need four days at the most to feel sufficiently human."

John feels like he's getting whiplashed. How is Holmes suddenly keen on training after making it
clear he doesn't want to be here? Is it because John had been trying to deny him something, to
suggest that he might not make the cut?

He's clearly got problems with authority.

"Since I seem to have become somehow in charge here of your status in limbo, you'll attend training
if and when I say it flies," John says, crossing his arms.

Holmes leans away from his chair to grab the lunch bag, dangling it in front of his eyes and looking
suspicous. He then drops it on the table. "A sudden need to demand I respect your authority after
one and a half days of being rather lenient about protocol. Curious. You were addressed as a Ranger
by that idiot who manhandled me out of the plane yesterday, but you clearly do not wear the insignia
with much pride. Rank a touchy subject since you were benched?"

John grits his teeth. It's public knowledge which Rangers are in active duty and which ones are not,
but he wouldn't have expected Holmes to know this – unless he's somehow deduced it like he had all that stuff about his fellow recruits.

John remembers something he'd heard one of the cadets Sherlock has just demolished say over lunch; *who'd want to Drift with that junkie?* The drug addiction may not be Holmes' biggest problem when it comes to dealing with other people. Yet, his petulance is not that of a teenager. He reminds John more of a cornered animal, still stronger than its captors but at risk of losing the battle eventually because of being outnumbered.

"I served for some time as a pilot, then the Corps put me through the rest of my medical studies. The Breach was quiet then, so I was more useful this way."

Holmes looks deeply sceptical of this explanation for reasons John can't quite work out. "If you dislike formality these days, then what should I call you – *sir*?"

"Well, not *that*," John protests. Even though it would be appropriate. "John, for the time being."

"You've not addressed me as *cadet*, either."

"That's because you're not one yet. You're a *recruit*."

"Which means I'm a civilian for the time being, so you could just as well call me Sherlock."

"Ready to actually tell me how you feel?"

"Could use more paracetamol," Sherlock replies, rubbing his arms vigorously.

"Not yet. And I think we should keep the dose low, considering your liver results. Maybe you should try to get some fresh air. When you feel well enough to leave the room, you can go up a floor and take two lefts to Requisitions. They'll sort you out with some more clothes, a pair of boots, that sort of thing."

Sherlock's eyes flit quickly to the ratty pair of sneakers shoved under the bunk and then back to John. "You were explaining about basic training," he says hastily.

Finally, something has clearly made a chink in the armour. Are bad shoes somehow a sensitive subject? Is Sherlock used to a much better wardrobe than what he came in with?

A detail from his records John had quickly skimmed through comes to mind. Something about a trust fund based on an inheritance being frozen.

He almost scoffs. Who the hell even has a trust fund these days, except for upper-class twits? Sherlock's big brother certainly fits that description, but hadn't the Holmeses been quite normal, middle-class people? Maybe they'd left some money behind they hadn't much advertised existing. Maybe that money came from some big life insurance policy. Who knows?

John is startled when someone starts snapping fingers in front of his nose.

"Right, so, basic training," John stammers, "They work you about ten to fourteen hours a day. Mixed martial arts, boxing, swimming, free diving, climbing technique, basic physical conditioning. Then there are theory lectures which you can skip if you want to self-study. Not many do – too keen to impress the teachers. There are two small and three big theory exams. The first small one, which is about Corps and PPDC protocol and safety, you have to take a week after starting training. There's a Fightmaster and an assisting Ranger who are in charge of everything."
"Wallis is the Fightmaster?"

"Yeah."

John remembers Sherlock's description: 'the idiot who manhandled me out of the plane'. The description hardly does Tom Wallis justice; Sherlock had been nearly passed out on the plane, so that Ranger had walked in and hauled him out in a fireman's carry, according to some who'd been there to see the new recruits arrive.

"Aren't you going to ask who the assisting Ranger is?"

Sherlock raises a droll brow signalling that it should be obvious.

John catches on. "It's not me," he corrects. "Michael Chen's the assisting Ranger for your batch. I don't conduct basic training, never have."

"I assumed that since you're here---"

Is Sherlock disappointed? Perhaps he should be. There's no chance that Wallis and Chen would be treating him as patiently as John. Anyone who runs off their mouth to Chen will be looking at a hundred push-ups out in the rain.

If Sherlock – Recruit Holmes, John corrects to himself – wants to stay, then he needs to learn the rules and the importance of obedience.

Am I really thinking of him as just 'Sherlock', now? What happened to 'Holmes' and 'cadet' and 'recruit'? This is the bloody Corps, after all! John knows he's doing a disservice to the man by indulging in informality. Some Rangers not assigned to training duty call recruits 'new meat' and don't bother to even learn names until the ones who will be accepted to the Jaeger program have been picked.

John stands up to leave. "Pick up the training manuals when you go to Requisitions. You can't do the physical stuff yet, but you can read when you feel a bit better."

Sherlock starts stabbing his finger at the console again. "Aye, sir," he says without the slightest bit of actual respect or courtesy, and without even looking up at John.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes:
Inventing future medicine is fun! I'm sure they will come up with fancy, automatic wound closing kits, haemorrhage control packs with fibrin patches and other such fancy stuff and be able to remotely and wirelessly monitor the vital functions of field operatives. We already routinely use ultrasound to locate blood vessels for cannulation and to perform nerve blocks and for doing bedside diagnostics. I'm hoping that in the next ten years, someone invents that handheld thing in space sci-fi TV series that beeps and then tells you what's wrong with the patient after you've waved it around in front of them for a bit.
Politicians seem to love nothing better than bureaucratic reshuffles and overhauls and reorganisation, hence me adding in the concept of a New National Health Service. I doubt it would be an improvement, most likely they'd have just stacked more layers of admin on top of the old one.

**Firing the canon:**
Cadet, trainee, candidate and recruit are terms I have used for hopefuls arriving at a Shatterdome trying to get into the Jaeger Corps. The training scheme for Jaeger pilots is not explained in all that much detail in the films, so I got to improvise. At the end of basic training, each cadet will be told whether they've made it to the actual pilot training and thus the Jaeger Corps, or if they'll be assigned to the Ground Crew. Only those who make it past that cut will receive the necessary implants for Jaeger piloting to be possible. Those implants are bloody expensive, which means that they definitely won't install them into just any cartilage-for-brains fresh off the boat.

The older Jaeger models were powered by much less safe energy sources than the current ones, so who knows what side effects piloting them for a long time could have had for Rangers (hence the early retirement age). Osteoporosis was probably the least of such worries.

Mako Mori was one of the most famous Jaeger pilots. Her story is told in the first Pacific Rim movie. Michael Chen is an OC.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**

*Placebo: Narcoleptic*
Apart from short visits to monitor his recovery, John doesn't see much of Sherlock during the next two days. The man seems to be in a chronically sour, non-talkative mood, and the atmosphere during John's visits to the isolation room is strained, making him disinclined to stay for long. He suspects that Sherlock is finding it difficult to adapt to these surroundings which can feel rather bleak and prison-like unless one is very fond of military aesthetics. Sherlock doesn't seem at all curious to explore the base, even if his energy level seems to have risen to what would permit getting to know his new home.

As much as John tries to remind himself to use the proper vocabulary, they invariably keep slipping back to using first names. All the people John normally orders around are Ground Crew Medics, and they don't tend to act as formal about it as Jaeger Corps officers do. John has no trouble leading and giving orders when he needs to, but what would he even order Sherlock—_Recruit Holmes_—to do? Take a shower? Finish his breakfast? Seems a bit theatrical. Besides, politeness and respect seem to be met with less resistance when it comes to Holmes, even if he does not return them.

One thing has become clear – while Sherlock may not enjoy being here, the PPDC is the best option available to him. That's what John had been able to put together from the media, Sherlock's economical explanations about the events preceding his arrival, and his personnel records. All of John's further attempts to discuss his reasons for the drug use or his state of mind are promptly shot down by a murderous glare.

To be on the safe side, John tells Wallis to give the man at least a couple days more to rest and recuperate. Medically speaking, there is little need now for anything else than ample nutrition and rest, and Sherlock should be capable of seeing to that himself.

Once John clears him for training, his fate will rest in the hands of other Rangers. It'll effectively be the end of their acquaintance. Sherlock will leave the isolation room for the cadets' group dorms, and John hopes that having a few more days to brood will milden his temper before he has to face the people who have already decided that he's the weakest link, judging by the other recruits' mess hall talk. It's would not do Sherlock any favours in terms of their opinion to be seen mollycoddled by a doctor. It's best for all concerned that John tapers down his assistance as soon as he can.

The strange thing is that he finds himself oddly reluctant to do so. He'd enjoyed being a proper doctor for a change and it had felt good talking to someone not marinated in the internal politics of the PPDC for years and years—someone from the outside world. Being reminded of there being a whole world out there that didn't function according to the often nonsensical and arbitrary rules of this place had made John feel slightly less claustrophobic. It's a shame, really, if Holmes becomes just another bolt lost in the massive war machinery—if he turns into yet another cookie-cutter Ranger. John has seen some very stubborn people turn obedient and loyal if they wanted it enough what they came to Chard's Rift for—which is to become Jaeger pilots—but somehow, how doubts Holmes could change that easily. Then again, it would also be a shame if he fails cadet training so badly that he gets sent somewhere worse.

Either way, he's not John's problem anymore. It must be the season of Harry's birthday that's making him so mirthful about the departure of someone from his life who had barely even had time to make a
proper impression on it.

There is a definite upside to his duties with Holmes coming to an end: he can finally use a long-overdue full day of shore leave on a lazy shopping trip to Ponta Delgada, the capital of Azores on a larger island. He has long been planning to get some better-quality office supplies than what the Corps have on offer, buying some new underwear, and stocking up on socks; his service boots seem to rub asunder any fabric in just a few days. He should get a new pair, but ever since he'd lost Harry he's had a problem giving up old things. He'd rather keep them even if he doesn't use them or they start breaking down.

It would have been nice to have company for the daytrip, but John didn't want to bother the others to find out if anyone was free on the same day. Rangers in active duty often spend much of their free time with their co-pilots; getting along well is what enables the bond forged through Drifting in the first place, and the intimacy created through the sharing of emotions and memories understandably creates a bubble that leaves other people outside of it. A Ranger who's lost a co-pilot is not unlike a widow, even if they had not been romantically involved.

It is outstandingly rare for one pilot to survive when the other one dies. Since it's impossible to pilot a Jaeger alone for any length of time, the survivor is forced to abandon ship which leaves them at the mercy of the elements and the kaiju. The one he and Harry had been fighting had already become weak enough that the one strike John had been able to deliver after Harry's death had finished it off. Had it survived, maybe it would have finished John off as well. It must have been just dumb luck that had helped him survive the six hours he had to wait for rescue in a broken rescue pod at the mercy of two-metre waves, pounding rain and darkness.

He hadn't been afraid the night, because he was numb with shock after the worst had already happened. Harry, pinned to the floor of the Conn-Pod like a butterfly with the metal bar that had pierced her head, had sunk below the waves in the carcass of Diablo Intercept, their Jaeger.

Even now, eighteen years later as he sits in a cafe near the Ponta Delgada marina, his hand holding a cappuccino begins shaking from the weight of the memory. Other recollections of significant events in his life time has softened and altered, but that night remains sharp and bright and difficult to shove aside, no matter what he's doing when something reminds him of it.

It's good that it's all over for him, that he'll never have to fear going through anything like that again. It's good that it's over, even if he'll have to spend the rest of his life feeling diminished.

Mute.

Stagnant.

Less.

They don't talk about him behind his back so much anymore; at least he doubts it. He has proven his usefulness as a doctor, gets along with everyone, and he has stopped demanding the same respect as the active duty pilots. He exists somewhere in-between. A proper Ranger no more, but not entirely banished to being the equivalent of a civil employee, either. He's not part of the Science Division and he's definitely not brass. He's carved himself a niche. It'll be enough. It's better than to reach for the past and risk getting crushed by it.

Sherlock—Recruit Holmes—has kept slipping into his thoughts as he'd walked the streets of the shopping district looking for the items on his mental list. They both have a past that doesn't seem worth dwelling on, and a future that they wouldn't have chosen themselves. It seems that John doesn't know where he belongs any more than Holmes does.
Not wanting to wander the streets for hours waiting for the free, late-night PPDC transport back to Chard's Rift, John hires a boat taxi to take him back to the base. Not a cheap choice, but he has very few things to use his wages on, anyway. The weather is warm and sunny, so he decides to sit on the deck as the boat pulls out of Ponta Delgada.

The calm seas allow for speed, and soon the Bay of Mosteiros at the western edge of the main island of Sao Miguel starts getting smaller and smaller on the horizon as Terceira begins taking shape. The light of the setting sun is draping the volcanic island chain in hues of red and yellow — a sight that never gets old for John. It must be windy high up since the sky is sprinkled with ripped-looking streaks of thin cloud. *Cirrocumulus*, he recalls them being called; Jaeger Pilot training used to include some meteorology and climatology.

He has heard that some of the non-civilian Ground Crew are planning a diving excursion out to Princess Alice Bank, an offshore site famous for its rich wildlife including whales, dolphins, whale sharks and rays. John decides to at least seriously consider joining in; he has some shore leave scheduled precisely at that time and he knows the site is within his diving skills.

The boat ride seems to have blown some cobwebs from his head, since he feels downright cheery upon arrival at the small pontoon attached to the side of the bridge to mainland. He registers at the guard booth, submits to a retinal scan to make sure he is who he claims to be, then starts the walk from the bridge across the runways which separate the barracks from the helipads.

He vaguely remembers some press conference airing tonight regarding some reorganisation being done in the European and Australasian divisions of the PPDC. He decides he doesn't care enough to join the evening crowd at mess hall to watch it. He decides to pick up his mail and then retreat to his room. But, just as he's about to disappear into the shadow of the main barracks tower, a shadow against the glittering sunlight reflected on the waves catches his attention.

A lone, thin figure of a man is sitting on a diving platform with his legs dangling in the water the reaches up to his knees.

Sherlock.

John leaves his shopping bags on a box of life vests near the barracks’ main entrance and makes his way to the edge of the water. The warmth of the sun that is now lingering where the ocean meets horizon caresses his bare shins; he had worn shorts today instead of a uniform. His deck shoes have chafed a little; they get very little use so have not been properly broken in; he's probably got handsome blisters on his heels.

Sherlock is kicking his legs back and forth underwater, looking thoughtful as he gazes out to sea.

"Hi," John says and wants to kick himself, because 'hi' is something civilians would say, not servicemen; Rangers would just acknowledge each other by calling out a surname.

Sherlock is wearing a slightly oversized, light grey jumpsuit that does no favours to his pale complexion; since he hasn't joined cadet training officially yet, he hasn't been issued the proper sets of uniforms. The legs of the jumpsuit are rolled up to mid-thigh, presumably to avoid getting them wet. He has clearly showered, washed his hair and even attempted to tame the unruly mop a little.
John doesn't remember knowing anyone with curls like that; they look ridiculously soft. John thinks it a shame that they will have to be cut short when the man becomes a cadet proper—unless he makes a claim for their religious significance. John once met a Hasidic Jew Ranger from the Anchorage Shatterdome who was allowed to keep his traditional peyes.

"John," Sherlock acknowledges without reverting his gaze from the horizon. He must have glanced in John's direction at some point—how else would he have known who was approaching? "The sunset here is nicer than in London—in the city there's always some building in the way," he adds, sounding defeated.

"I guess."

"I was waiting for you."

Johnny's brows hitch up. "Me? Why?"

It wouldn't have been much of a trick to find out that he had headed out of the base; anyone could have told the recruit that, since the shore leave transport lists are in the main corridor. But, Sherlock would have had no way of knowing when he'd be back.

Has he been sitting out here all afternoon, waiting?

"I wanted advice. Or, more accurately; information," Sherlock explains, leaning back against the arms he has outstretched.

John finds his choice of words odd. The man has been provided with all the necessary training manuals and base induction guides—John had seen them in the isolation room the last time he'd been there. What advice would he need for John in particular, especially since he had been so resistant to discussing his health before?

Wallis would probably be happy that John is the one being bothered instead of him, even if this is about something that would fall more under the jurisdiction of a Fightmaster. Besides, John doesn't find bothered. Not at all. Instead of heading to his room, he is happy to find an excuse to talk to someone.

And, if he's honest, he had been hoping for a chance to talk to Sherlock again, even if there is a strange, nagging feeling of doing something wrong every time they talk about something that isn't strictly connected to him being—having been?—his patient. This, right now, feels like something John shouldn't really be doing. It feels... risky. Then again, why should he feel suspicious? What's wrong with Sherlock asking advice from the one person he has exchanged more than just insults with in this place?

He expects the man to explain further, but instead all John gets is an expectant silence.

I'll bite, he decides. Instead of pointing out that Sherlock should take his enquiries to his soon-to-be-Fightmaster, he kicks off his shoes and sits down, dropping his legs down into the water. After an initial smarting, the coolness feels like heaven on his blisters; in addition to bigger ones on his heels the shoes have chafed the tops of his big toes, too.

"Go on," he prompts when Sherlock seems to become preoccupied with watching both their feet moving underneath the surface.

"What is it like, Drifting? I have never spoken with someone who has personal experience. A Ranger gave a talk at my school once, but that was just PR."
Clearly, he expects John's answer to be more honest than that the average pilot's would have been. John briefly worries if he has let on that not everything connected to Drifting in his head is good and nice and positive. That, while it may have been one of the most amazing experiences in his life, it had also ruined what remains of it.

"I assume you know the basics, then?"

Sherlock scoffs half-heartedly. "Everyone knows the basics. The implants enable the sharing of thoughts, memories, and emotions between Rangers, which is then used to establish the so-called neural handshake—meaning the synchronisation of cerebral function for piloting."

John nods. "It's... intense. Hard to describe. Takes getting used to, that level of honesty and sharing yourself with someone. You can't hide anything because you never know what memories will end up going through your head during the neural sync. The stuff you decide to try not to think, of course it's the shit that's going to pop right into your head when you least want it to." It's odd, talking about this, and John can't quite put a finger on why he feels reticent to delve deeper into it.

It isn't my life anymore.

"No secrets when Drifting," Sherlock suggests.

"No. The LOCCENT officer in charge of the sync has no way of knowing what you'd seen or shown the other person, but your co-pilot will know and see everything, and you just have to trust that person not to share that stuff with anyone."

"LOCCENT officers? They're responsible for the neural handshake, then?"

"Yeah. LOCCENT is short of Local Control Centre. Neural Bridge Operator is the official term."

"Is it possible to pull out of the Drift if there's something you don't want the other person to see?"

"Yeah. If you react so strongly that you sort of block the other person—some people instinctively know how to do that, it can't really be taught—the sync will fail. Then, there's also the white rabbit."

"The white rabbit?"

"We call it 'chasing the white rabbit' when a memory so intense comes along that you become completely caught up in it; initiating a bilateral sync will fail because the other person can't get through; think of trying to shake someone's hands when all they're doing is hugging their arms around themselves tightly. The pilot gets lost in a memory, relives it while the other one is either left wondering why they can't connect, or they experience it, too, but no sync is achieved. Witnessing something that's got such a hold on your co-pilot can be kind of traumatising, but usually one pilot chasing the rabbit just throws their co-pilot completely out of the connection."

"So, in order for a neural handshake to be established, not only must you relive what might include your worst memories, but you must also share them with someone else without having any say as to what they see?"

"That's the worst-case scenario, yeah, being reminded of the worst stuff."

"Did it ever happen to you, sharing something that upsetting with a co-pilot or vice versa?"

John's lips tighten into a line. "Not really. It was serendipity, really, that mine and Harry's worst memories were shared to start with. She was my twin."
Sherlock nods.

The sun has set, and they can now make out the brightest stars. There's still light in the horizon, but the sea is already nightly black. Something leaps up from the waves and lands with a faint splash close by; probably trevallies hunting for smaller fish.

"Does it... hurt?" Sherlock asks.

"Does what hurt? The physical stuff connected to Drifting? Or do you mean the implantation?"

"Mnh."

John has a hunch Sherlock might want to learn about both. "They kept me sedated for the first day after the surgery. Wasn't too bad, afterwards. Drifting does hurt in the sense that you experience the damage taken by the Jaeger as though it's you being pummelled by the kaiju. Your nervous system is being tricked into believing it's actual sensory feedback. They made the first system versions without that, but---"

"---if you can't feel what you're gripping, you end up using too much or too little force. Children born without the ability to feel pain constantly injure themselves. Sensory information protects us," Sherlock muses. "I can see why they needed to add that physical feedback loop. How bad does it get?"

"Feels real enough to me," John scoffs. "At least they don't simulate the intensity of nutshots to match the real thing."

Sherlock blinks."'Nutshots'?"

Surely the term can't just be army slang. "Well, you know when you get hit in the---"

"Why would a kaiju target that area of the Jaeger?"

"We don't really know why the kaiju do anything that they do. I don't think they think that carefully. They just react. Like... animals."

"They're not animals. Possibly they would require a new branch in biological taxonomy. They don't have reproductive organs; it's as though they have been... replicated, even though each one is unique. Manufactured, somehow."

John has attended a few lectures on the subject. Kaiju have been established to be living beings, not machines, and some aspects of their physiology are similar to that of regular Earth creatures. They have the equivalent of a circulation system, but instead of oxygen, whatever passes for their cells is powered by hydrogen-based reactions. They can extract the element out of water, allowing them to travel astounding distances below the surface. Much is now understood about their biology, but where they came from or what beef they have with humanity, remains a mystery.

Nobody knows why they've come, except to cause destruction.

"We're getting side-tracked," Sherlock announces. "I understand why a certain degree of discomfort is sensible to build into the physical experience of drifting, but I'm more interested in the cerebral cost. I have overheard people here discussing Drifting and making it sound pleasant."

That statement must mean that Sherlock has begun spending at least some time outside of the dorms.

"Like I said, intense. You have to like the person you Drift with—why would you want to trust them
otherwise? Lots of pilots end up if not dating or more deeply involved with their co-pilots, then at least being very good friends. Sometimes there are lovers' spats, of course, which are a drag if you're trying to Drift."

"I read about one pilot stabbing another when they found out—through Drifting—that one had cheated on the other during shore leave."

John is surprised that Sherlock could have learned about such a thing from the media; the Corps has been very meticulous about censoring anything that would suggest Drifting having adverse effects. Painting a pretty picture is a recruitment strategy and an attempt to undo the damage done to public trust of the Jaeger system by what is now known as the drone incident. An up-and-comer private sector subcontractor to the Corps had become overconfident about the cybersafety of their drone program—designed to replace at least some of the manpower required by the Jaegers with remote control—but the system had been hacked and corrupted, resulting in yet another near apocalypse. After that, humanity found itself, once again, very much in favour of human pilots for the Jaegers, and with as much independence from central control as possible. The newest Jaegers have been designed with this neural independence in mind, but good enough pilots have been hard to come by because the compatibility and aptitude demands of this new generation of Jaegers are so immense. That's why the flagship of the Atlantic subdivision has yet to see daylight—the Corps has already spent years trying to find a suitable pilot team, and that search is still continuing with no end in sight.

"Would you do it again?" Sherlock asks.

"It's kind of pointless to think about it. I'm retired."

"You're still a Ranger."

"Honorary title."

"Not really."

John's forehead crinkles in annoyance. What the hell kind of a point is Sherlock trying to make? "I should see you tomorrow for a final check-up."

"I'm fine."

"You have neither the rank or the training to decide that."

"I should know, when it's my physical state we're discussing. I can give you proof right now," Sherlock announces ominously.

John opens his mouth, but before he can formulate a protest Sherlock stands up, crouches down slightly, then springs into a leap that lands him in the black water after a perfect, high-arching dive.

John scrambles to his feet and curses. Sherlock must still be weak from the devastation of the detox, and now he pulls this bloody stunt. The water isn't warm at all, it's already dark, and if he passes out from exhaustion he'll drift away from the diving platform—the currents around the base can be treacherous. John scans the black depths with his gaze, but it's hard to even make out individual waves. The sea is relatively calm, but that doesn't mean squat when it comes to the current.

Seconds pass, and perhaps they're already approaching a minute. John curses again, huffs and raises his eyes to the heavens in frustration before spinning around on his heels.

The airfield is empty, but he still yells "Man overboard!" on principle. Then, he steps to the edge of the diving platform, grits his teeth and jumps in feet first.
The water isn't cold enough to be a shock to the system, but the absence of sunlight still means that a shuddery chill radiates straight down to his bones. He sweeps his hands blindly in arcs as he kicks himself to the surface, hoping that he is heading towards the spot where he'd seen Sherlock disappear below the waves. He surfaces with a gasp, blowing stinging seawater out of his nose. Kicking frantically and using his hands as paddles for turning a full circle on the spot, he laments the fact that he hasn't done much swimming during the last few years. Save from an occasional jog up and down stairs and across the main decks, a few hikes a year on Terceira, and a few trips a year to the gym, he's let it all go. Let himself, if he's honest. The set of muscles that used to be visible on his torso have turned into much softer contours.

He used to be a Ranger, for fuck's sake. He's completely lost the plot of physical conditioning compared to the rest of the Rangers, all of whom can probably bench-press nearly as much as Olympic athletes.

His anger at himself manages to keep at bay the realisation that he's alone on the waves only for a moment. Soon, panic starts setting in, and the voice he yells Sherlock's name with sounds slightly hysterical in his own ears.

Suddenly, there's a faint splash from somewhere close. A few strokes turn John back towards the lights of the base, and he nearly collides with Sherlock who's bobbing on the surface between him and the diving platform. The man's curls are plastered against his head and his eyes are barely visible in the light of the rising Moon reflected off the waves.

They've already drifted a lot from where they'd jumped in. It'll be a heavy swim back.

"Race you to back to the platform?" Sherlock asks nonchalantly.

"You---- you--- bloody fucking utter COCK!" John yells. He thinks he ought to sound angrier disbelief ends up being the dominant tone.

"I told you I'm fine," Sherlock replies deadpan.

"We're about to catch hypothermia if we stay here," John complains.

There's movement on the diving platform, now—a searchlight is being pointed at them. Perhaps someone heard John's shouting, after all.

"We're fine," he yells as loudly as he can, then raises his hands into what looks like a ballet pose, attempting to form the letter O. It's a signal originally used by scuba divers and later on also adopted by the Corps, and it means that someone in the water is alright.

The searchlight is swung around in the standard reply of a circle.

"You're crazy. Absolutely fucking batshit insane," John tells Sherlock, and splashes a bit of water at him, mostly to wipe off that smug smile.

Then, laughter which John had not been expecting bubbles up, and it won't stop.

Even in the dim light, he can see Sherlock's lips curl up into a wide grin. He bends his neck back to look at the black sky and lets a giggle burst out. It's a little reserved, slightly held but, but sounds genuine.

John gasps with laughter until he manages to get himself under control. "You're fetching the bloody tea after this, that's for sure."
Sherlock begins an exemplary breaststroke towards the platform, and John begins following him. He's not sure if what he's doing is a proper stroke of any kind; swimming had never been his forte in active duty. Thank fuck for the floating rescue pod when he'd had to abandon ship during his last Jaeger mission; the stormy sea could have easily exhausted and finished him off that night.

Ten minutes later, John rolls onto the diving platform. Sherlock is already standing on the pier, having climbed out of the waves well ahead of him. Just as John had thought, they'd had to fight against a heavy current and his lungs are heaving like bellows. *I have to start exercising more.*

Two guards standing at the edge of the pier and the rescue diver alerted to the site as per base protocol are still frowning at this impromptu night dip. The Head Guard offers John a hand to help him climb to his feet after his breathing calms down a little. John assures them that they're both fine, that it had just been a stupid dare. The men, both of whom John has enjoyed more than a few drinks with in his former life, nod and leave the matter at that.

Squeezing water out of his shirt, John turns to ask Sherlock if he has a towel in his room, but there's no one there.

A glance towards the main entrance shows Sherlock striding in without looking back.

John shakes his head, still grinning. He's quite certain he hasn't done anything to upset the man and judging by what John has already experienced of his bad manners, a retreat without even saying goodnight probably doesn't mean anything.

What happened tonight should have marked a goodbye—a somewhat permanent one—but to John, it doesn't feel like one at all.

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Author's Notes:**

Using an implanted device to manipulate brain activity isn't entirely sci-fi: it is already being used to control symptoms of (for instance) Parkinson's disease and severe OCD. It was fun trying to imagine what could be modulated in the future—perhaps it would be possible to up- or downregulate of opiate receptors in the central nervous system. Could that somehow reset at least some components of opiate addiction? Surgical means of affecting brain function to alleviate (neuro)psychiatric symptoms is understandably a very controversial, sensitive and ethically complex subject, especially since it was the subject of maybe the most misguided Nobel prize in the history of medicine (awarded to Egas Moniz and Walter Hess in 1949 for inventing the leucotomy procedure, also known as lobotomy).

**Firing the canon:**

The basic principles of Drifting as explained here (except for all stuff pertaining to implants) are canon, chasing the rabbit included. The pilots do experience physical sensations when piloting, but it's unclear how intensely the hits that the Jaeger takes are fed into the pilots' sensory systems.

What was referred to as 'the drone incident' is basically the plot of the second Pacific
Rim film. Its details—beyond those explained in this chapter—have little relevance to this story. Trust me: they go pretty wildly bonkers, which is why I shoved them pretty much aside apart from some fun minor details. We'll get to those later. The solution that the PPDC had to the problems highlighted by the crisis were devised by me; after seeing the second film they seemed rather obvious.

As for the motivation and the physiology of the kaiju, the general ideas are canon but more specific details mine (such as the hydrogen thing). They are foot soldiers and harbingers rather than an independent species. As of what exactly, is still left a bit vague by the films.

Sherlock being an absolute, utter cock sometimes is naturally canon.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**

- Of Monster And Men: Black Water
- Röyksopp: Running To The Sea
- Porcupine Tree: The Start of Something Beautiful
The next day, John has an idea, and he commands himself not to analyse it too carefully lest he start second-guessing what he's about to do. He should just go with the flow, indulge in a bit of spontaneity just like he had last night.

He wants to get out of the base. Yesterday in Ponta Delgada had helped, but it had also underlined how claustrophobic Chard's Rift can get. His shore leave lasts until ten in the evening tonight, and he's free to leave the base as many times as he wants, as long as he gets back in time. Perhaps no one would even care if he stayed out even later; he doesn't have to participate in roll calls. Besides, the base can track him if they need to, thanks to the implants. What he's planning for today wouldn't raise any eyebrows—he has ventured out to the hiking trails of Terceira before, but what is particular about today is that he wants company and has a very specific someone in mind.

There's a very pleasant, if slightly strenuous hiking trail that starts close to where the base bridge connects to the island. If Sherlock wants to prove that he shouldn't be held back from training any longer, then John is going to let him do exactly as he had suggested—demonstrate his capabilities.

John knows this isn't the only reason he's considering bringing the recruit along; once Sherlock joins the training regime, he won't have much free time. Shore leave isn't awarded to recruits until they've gone through months of basic training.

It's likely that this could be the last opportunity to spend time with the man, and the thought is more jarring than John would like to admit. He doesn't want to examine why, because there's a chance that might lead to some unpleasant realisations about his age, the way he's stuck here with his glory days long gone, and the fact that he feels like he's doing something forbidden.

He shouldn't feel like that. Corps officers are allowed friendships—they're downright encouraged. Rangers should get along, look out for each other. It isn't just doctorly concern that makes him feel protective of and intrigued by the younger man.

He clears his throat and calls the Guard office to request permission for recruit Holmes to leave the base; permission can usually be granted for training purposes as long as a recruit is accompanied by an officer. He's not doing anything he shouldn't but making the phone call brings on a lingering sense of unease.

Get over it. He's putting too much stock in things his idle brain keeps cooking up. He needs a new project; he's getting stir-crazy and bored. Maybe that's why he's trying to make Sherlock into one, even though he's effectively over the detox and no longer in need to John's attention. Once he joins the basic training, he'll be off John's hands. He'll be Wallis' and Chen's responsibility, and John can get back to—existing, like he has for too many years. He's good at it, getting on with things with raising minimal fuss about himself.

Sherlock's rebellious streak feels contagious. It'll be good if they don't see each other that much after today. All today will be is a shore leave day indulgence.

John changes into a T-shirt, his old windbreaker, the hiking boots that mostly gather dust in his uniform locker, and a pair of camo trousers. Then, he makes his way two floors down to the cadet dorm level and goes to knock on the door to the isolation room.
John uses the pass card function on his wrist console to unlock it and finds the room empty; even Sherlock's clothes are gone.

*Maybe they kicked him out. Maybe he's made some daring escape by swimming to Terceira. Maybe that's what last night's stunt was about.*

He leaves the room but he's only barely made it to the corridor, when he collides with a member of the cleaning crew who's dragging around a hoover.

"Where's the recruit who was staying here?" John asks, after apologising for spooking the young man.

"They sent him to take over bunk 221 in dorm B."

B is one of the larger dorms on this level; twelve bunks and its own shower room. "Thanks," John tells him and makes his way down the corridor and down a level of stairs.

John is relieved; he feels as though he had thought he'd lost something important, only to find it right there where he left it. He knows he's putting way too much stock into this and that he should be heading out alone today, but he just can't resist the temptation. Why would anyone even care or pay any attention to what he does with his time? It's not often that he finds himself tempted by anything in this place. Here, luxuries are few and far between, but the Spartan lifestyle at least serves a higher purpose. Civilian life is too easy. Too predictable. Too safe.

Then again, Chard's Rift has been easy and predictable and safe for a long time as well and will remain so as long as the War Clock ticks on instead of petrifying everyone by resetting at zero. It marks how many days have passed since a Breach last exhaled a *kaiju*. Nobody in the Corps can really afford to relax; they aren't here because they want *safe* and *predictable*. Nearly everyone in the PPDC has signed up voluntarily. Only those who are exceptionally suitable may be brought in against their will during a time when a Breach is open – Article 67 of the Commonwealth Joint Defence Charter allows this.

John strides into dorm B. Since all the other recruits are in training at this hour, John isn't surprised that Sherlock is the only person in the large room.

His head snaps up the minute John comes into view. "Oh," he says when recognition dawns.

John can't decide if it's a good 'oh', a mildly bad 'oh', an indifferent 'oh' or something else. Why should he care? Why *does* he care?

"That obnoxious Fightmaster dragged me out of the single room this morning and told me to get set up here," Sherlock informs him.

"You don't get your own room unless you're a Ranger or a senior member of the Ground Crew."

"I can't be in a dorm, it won't work."

"What do you mean, 'it won't work'?"

"At Cambridge they eventually realised that, if they wanted to minimize disruptions, they should not put me in with the rabble."

"Because you don't like them?"
"Because they refuse to attempt to like me."

*I wonder why.* "Might not be that bad. Twelve people, surely they can't all hate your guts yet."

The look Sherlock gives him is one artfully mixing scepticism and amusement.

John leans on the doorframe, watches Sherlock shoving a set of training manuals into the narrow shelf between his bunk and his locker.

"I was wondering if you'd like to head out to see a bit of Terceira," John finally says when the silence starts getting awkward. "I was planning on hiking a route. If you do well, I might sign you off on being fit for training."

"Last night---"

"Last night you pulled a stupid, dangerous stunt that only proves you're a solid swimmer. That says nothing about your state of mind right now regarding the temptation to use, or your basic stamina."

"So, you want to drag me up a volcano to see if I give up and try to score? They've done an annoyingly good job with the illicit substances crackdown; there's nothing available here."

John knows this is not exactly true, but nowadays banned stuff only exchanges hands between people who trust each other. Nobody knows the recruit well enough to take the risk of selling anything to him. Besides, he has no funds with which to pay.

"Does that mean you want to use?" John asks, crossing his arms.

"Don't be an idiot, John. I'll always want to use; it's just the depth of that desire that varies."

Even though the effect is diluted by being also called an idiot, Sherlock calling him 'John' instead of 'Watson', or 'Ranger' feels—

Harry always called him John, of course. Some of the Rangers do, at least after enough many drinks. But, it's not the same. Somehow, it's not the same at all. It reminds John of when he wasn't yet a part of PPDC. When he was just... himself. Sherlock makes it sound like there's no name he'd rather be slipping over his lips. It isn't his intention—of that John is certain. It's just his own brain adding things, but right now, it's—

*Pathetic.* He's drawn to Sherlock's energy, stubbornness, relative youth. He's drawn to how he still thinks he has all the options in the world, even though he really doesn't. Sherlock is like a breath of fresh air after standing in the dark of a dungeon for a long time.

*Stop being so fucking dramatic,* John tells himself. "Do you want to come with me?" *Say yes say yes say yes—*

If Sherlock says no, what of it? Maybe he should be allowed the luxury of declining something before Wallis makes damned sure he starts understanding that the word 'no' won't be part of his vocabulary anymore. At least not during basic training. Would Sherlock agree to coming with him just because John is a superior officer? No, John is certain that he wouldn't. Why would the potential 'no' be such a blow?

Sherlock shoves the standard-issue gear bag he's been given from Requisitions under his bed. "If I join basic training tomorrow, it might be good preparation," he reasons.

John expects him to tell him he'll be a minute so that John might step out, but then he realises that he
is slipping back into old rules—civilian rules. No one in the Corps ever hesitates to change clothes in front of others. Unisex dorms have been the norm for years, and that includes unisex showers. Someone might even point out that they're both men.

But, Sherlock has no way of knowing that for John, that's the core of the problem here. When he pulls his sweater over his head, John turns to face the doorway, pretending to be interested in who's walking past.

"Throw those out, will you?" Sherlock calls out to him.

John turns back towards the bunks. Sherlock's hand is extended, holding the worn trainers he'd worn the day he'd arrived. A pair of brand new combat boots sits on the table in the middle of the dorm; hiking boots would be better, but this will be a good opportunity to break a pair in which Sherlock will be required to wear during most of basic training. For the sessions at the dojo, he'll be barefoot, of course, but for anything happening outdoors, it's always boots.

John receives the trainers and goes to drop them in the large bin in the corridor. He then returns to the dorm.

Sherlock is stretching his indecently long neck, tendons taut on the opposite side to which he is tipping his head while pressing down above his ear with his fingertips. He hasn't put a shirt on, and his lithe, pale torso makes John think that he desperately needs more sun. His gaze lingers, wanders down the expanse of milky white skin on Sherlock's chest. There are surprisingly well-defined abs. A sprinkling of moles near his left clavicle. A bump in his right clavicle; perhaps an old, dislocated but well-healed fracture. His combat trousers are riding low—impractically low, since they reveal a set of delicate hipbones jutting out just a bit too much.

He needs food as well as fresh air, John decides. Maybe he has lived on the streets. Then again, John remembers who his brother is. Surely the Marshal wouldn't sit idly by while his brother wondered the streets of London, high as a kite, without a home to go to? Then again, not all siblings or parents care.

He's beautiful, John has to admit to himself. Even like this, far from fit and healthy, still rail-thin and still in recovery, that's what Sherlock is, and John finds himself helpless before such a sight.

As helpless as he has always been, knowing that he can never, ever let himself show such appreciation for another man. Not here. Not ever.

Sherlock grabs a standard issue black T-shirt and slips it on, then adds a black sweatshirt adorned with Corps insignia. John has never both loved and hated pieces of clothing more.

"Will this be enough? You've got a jacket on," Sherlock points out.

"It's enough," John says. "I don't think it'll rain."

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"So, what's your family like?" John asks as they scramble up a broken set of stone steps. They had briefly touched on the subject when Sherlock had first arrived, but his explanation then may have been strongly coloured by his disdain of having just been brought in and his physical state. 'Non-existent' is what he'd said and left it at that.
"There's just Mycroft, and I'm not wasting my breath on him."

John sighs and slows his steps so that an already breathless Sherlock can catch up to him. "Just making conversation."

Once they'll be clear of farmlands, the scenery will open up; the highest parts of the circular Mistérios Negros hiking trail will take them up to six hundred and seventy metres from sea level. He had told Sherlock that, while the route wasn't even six kilometres long, it would still take at least two hours for even someone in peak physical condition to negotiate. Sherlock might have once been fit, but those days are gone, ruined by the drugs. John can hardly judge him; he hasn't kept up much more than a very bare-bones exercise regime after being relieved of active pilot duty.

"My parents have been dead for decades, and my brother is as good as," Sherlock adds, his tone now tentative.

John's lips tighten as he surveys a set of trail signs. "What's he done that's so bad?"

"He's the reason I'm here."

"I thought you were here because you committed a crime and they unsealed your records and discovered what the program's been missing out on," John suggests.

Sherlock gives him a murderous glare. "You're only looking at the endpoint of a very long record of him putting his career before everything else."

"Namely, before you?" John asks, trying to keep scepticism out of his voice. He lets Sherlock pass him on the narrow trail and watches him press his palms on his knees for extra leverage in a particularly steep bit that should take them to a longer and better maintained stretch of the route that runs parallel to old irrigation channels.

Sherlock stops at a junction in the trail to catch his breath and to knead out a cramp threatening to break out on his calf. He's still probably prone to them due to detoxing. John takes off his backpack and passes him a bottle of water.

"Thanks."

"You didn't think to bring water, did you?" John asks. It's a probably a rhetorical question.

They take in the view. Out here, in the middle of the lush green volcanic landscape and surrounded by an open ocean teeming with life, it's easy to forget that many parts of the world have succumbed into chaos when there weren't enough funds to rebuild after the *kaiju* had decimated large parts of the coastal cities. Most of Sydney's northern suburbs are still off limits due to the radiation levels being high; before the Jaegers were built, tactical nuclear weapons had been the only option when the creatures began getting so big that other weapons no longer did much to stop them. Chemical and biological weapons were tried, and some experiments were more successful than others, but the *kaiju* were quick to evolve into resistant forms. On one disastrous occasion, some sort of substance one of them had secreted reacted with whatever chemical weapon the Hawaii Shatterdome had deployed, and an unprecedented ecological disaster had only narrowly been avoided. After that, a public outcry lead to the PPDC abandoning all other efforts besides the Jaegers. They are the only thing proven consistently successful, assuming humanity will keep building bigger and better ones.

Which is terribly expensive, of course.

The Jaegers' impact on global economy has ensured that the rift between the poor and the rich has widened; slums have grown around the areas where *kaiju* touched land and destroyed everything.
John has seen news report footage from Manila where people are constructing shelters by using parts of *kaiju* skeletons. In Pacific Coastal Asia, criminal organisations are thriving on the sales of illegal *kaiju* parts. It's much more profitable than the drug trade, and that's probably where Sherlock's sample of blood had come from.

Besides being funded by governments, private citizens and non-profits, the PPDC raises some funds by producing merchandise. Especially now that years have passed since the last attacks, for children the *kaiju* are becoming more lore than reality, much like dinosaurs had once been. There's an animated series about them and the Jaegers which John has seen glimpses of on a Portuguese TV channel. It presents the Jaegers as robots instead of taking into account that when they are destroyed, there are human pilots inside who very likely lose their lives. Other merchandise does heavily feature the Rangers, and plenty of visits to TV shows, arms fairs and charity events are undertaken by Corps officers every year. All that serves as a reminder that Jaegers are only as effective as their very fragile human pilots.

"Let's continue up," Sherlock prompts, having caught his breath and swallowed a few more mouthfuls of lukewarm water.

"I didn't mean to pry if you don't want to talk," John says as he starts following Sherlock along a nearly overgrown path. So much for *better maintained*.

"Why would you even ask about my family? I'm sure all the salient details are in the records you must have access to, *Ranger*." Sherlock's tone is an attempt at venomous but comes out mostly just resigned.

*He looks so young and out of place.* "Well, I like to think it's not the same as hearing it from the horse's mouth."

They continue their hike in silence for a few minutes. John decides he should relish the luxury of being away from the base more often. In theory, there's nothing to stop him from doing this more often but going at it alone requires more mental effort than he's comfortable with. When he's by himself, he's never *alone*—Harry's there, as though a part of her still lives in John, just as she had shared John's awareness when they'd been connected through the neural handshake.

He's haunted by a ghost inside his head – one whose last moments he had experienced as though they had been his own.

He never wants to go through that again.

"Idle weed," Sherlock says as though it's a reply to a question John isn't aware he had asked out loud.

"What?"

"Mycroft's nickname for me, at least during the past five years. The first time he used it was when we were driven home from our parents' funeral—empty caskets, of course; their bodies were never found since it would have entailed sifting through Vancouver bay. *An unkempt garden will grow nothing but idle weed,*' he said to me, then: *'unlike the benign neglect of recent years, you need a firm hand. I don't have time to raise a child, so that firm hand shall be someone renowned for their skills.' He shipped me off to The Haig Academy for Boys in South Korea, where, I quote their motto: *'every child is a building block for a nation's future'*. You couldn't get closer to my brother's wet dream than that philosophy. He thinks we should all serve the PPDC one way or the other."

"That boarding school's a pretty posh one, isn't it? Our head psych analyst went there, I think."
"By your standards, yes, but whatever you mean by posh certainly doesn't mean that it offered a very comfortable environment."

"What's that supposed to mean, 'by my standards'?"

Sherlock stops, then scans him from his boots to his hairline with his gaze before continuing walking. "Lower class background. Obvious. You were one of those kids who lived playing with Action Men and dreamt that one day they'd get out in the world and be war heroes and strong enough to beat the crap out of their abusive parents."

"Oi!"

"Balance of probability. The look on your face tells me I'm right."

"The look on my face also tells you that you're an arsehole."

"I would have preferred that over the Shakespearean insults my brother favours."

"Such as idle weed? I liked Richard III. Read it for my GCSEs."

"Did the army pay for you to go to medical school?"

"Only a part of it," John defends himself. "I was 22, in my fourth year of studies when San Francisco happened. They tested everyone at Uni, and my scores were high enough to be drafted. I served a couple of years with Harry, then— After we lost her, they paid for the rest of my studies."

"Why didn't you seek a spot in the Science Division? You could have left the Jaeger Corps and applied as a civilian?"

"They wanted me to teach battlefield medicine, first aid, that sort of thing." John has a hard time keeping the bitterness out of his voice. "It made sense, so I stayed." It's a somewhat skewed and simplified explanation. He doesn't quite like to admit that he'd felt so paralysed by years after Harry's death that such a change of course was beyond his abilities. "Not that they were intending for anyone to really use that stuff. Maybe it would have just looked bad if they shoved me out of the Jaeger Corps after Hawaii."

"That's where your sister was killed?"

"Yeah." He hopes that Sherlock won't ask for further details.

"Did you... enjoy any of it?" Sherlock asked tentatively. "Before she died?"

John tries, in his head, to separate the intrusive memory of Harry's last moment from everything that happened before it. He does remember the camaraderie, the beautiful sunsets, the downtime scuba diving out in the Hawaii base, and the shore leave where the bar crawls never seemed to end.

He remembers Harry laughing without making a sound. That shared, unadulterated joy blooming in his head. On a good day, John is thankful they'd had that. On a bad day, it feels like there are two people still screaming inside his head.

Of course, he also remembers Diablo Intercept. Their jaeger. His jaeger, for a mind-shattering seven minutes. It's still the record for the longest anyone has withstood the crushing cerebral strain of solo-piloting.

"I did. I really did," he answers, wondering what Sherlock will deduce from his delay in replying.
"I'm not surprised, soldier boy. You must be wondering why we're not all lining up to have our brainstems and spines hacked and poked into and wired into ten tons of kaiju fodder."

John laughs. "No, I get it. Before the Breach opened, I remember people complaining that even the Internet service providers knew too much about them, and we saw the risks of the Drift systems being hacked during the drone crisis." He could voice more doubts, even explain some personal regrets on what it has cost him to share not just his life but also his brain with a sibling. But, he refrains. It's obvious that Sherlock is well-versed in all the criticism directed at the PPDC.

"You favour your right hand even though you're a leftie," Sherlock announces.

"War injury," John replies, trying to infuse pride into his tone but he's not certain he has managed to keep the sadness from seeping in. "I've got a piece of kaiju carapace stuck right here," he adds, running his fingertips along a scar just below his left collarbone.

"Couldn't they have removed it? And fixed whatever nerve or tendon damage you've obviously got? They can do that now, can't they, through the spinal implants?"

"They offered, and I said no."

Sherlock stops to lean on an old milepost, raising the water bottle John had given him to his forehead, probably both to cool off and to shield his eyes from the sun. "Why on earth would you do that for?"

John squints towards the sun, then sweeps his gaze along the coastline far below as though looking for something that isn't there. "Some pain is... useful. Worth remembering."

Irritation washes over Sherlock's features, bright and sudden. "The hell it is," he snaps and sets off at a faster pace towards the top of the dormant volcano at the centre of the national park they're in.

"Sherlock, wait up." John scrambles after him, slipping a little on a patch of wet moss.

Sherlock is striding forward, looking angry and determined. He doesn't look at John when he catches up with his brisk pace.

"So, your parents—you really are that Holmes."

"I have no desire to ride on the backs of their discoveries. Whatever they did and the way they chose to live was their choice, not mine."

"And your brother is the Commonwealth Marshal of the sector." John knows he's repeating things, but at least mentioning Mycroft Holmes is what had got Sherlock into talking before, even if he'd insisted the topic would have the opposite effect.

"One of the greatest tragedies in military history, yes."

"I think he's quite well-liked. At least he's kept the budgets from being cut."

An eyeroll. "How long have you been here?"

"Here, as in the Azores, or here, as in the Corps? I just told you I enlisted soon after San Francisco."

"You've not been to Britain since then?"

"No. Harry's funeral service was in Hawaii; we didn't have any close relatives either of us would have wanted to have there. Where would I have gone? This is my family, right here."
"Which is why you keep biting your tongue every time I say something critical towards the Corps which you're itching to agree with. Why do you think you need to defend everything they do?"

John grabs Sherlock's arm to stop him. "Look, I can't just forget that they gave me a roof over my head, an education and a career, and there have been some good times."

"Only some? Don't bite the finger that feeds you. Truly, exemplary ethics from a doctor. I'm sure that's what they all said at Nuremberg."

"Jesus Christ! If the Corps hadn't existed, have you any idea where we'd be? You can say goodbye to the whole fucking human race is where."

"Yes, you saved us, and now the whole planet bows at your feet. Did you know that half of South Korea is starving while the government vomits money into constructing their first Mark Eight Jaeger? And what about the way in which all the nice little laws about medical ethics, human experimentation, tampering with DNA and all that lark just flew out the window the moment someone saw an opportunity to build better weapons?"

As John lets go of him, his fingertips brush briefly over the scars in the crook of Sherlock's arm. "Clearly you're so bloody good at looking after your own humanity that you have the moral high ground to lecture everyone else!"

"You sound exactly like my brother."

"Well, maybe you should have listened to him, then, instead of wasting your life!"

"At least it was still mine to waste," Sherlock replies quietly. The fight is gone from him as quickly as his temper had risen.

John reminds himself how badly and how recently Sherlock's life has been upended. Unlike John, who's here by choice, Sherlock is here because he had no choice left.

Sherlock is breathing heavily, but something in John tells him it's not just from the exertion anymore. He has turned to face the sea, fingers curling around a rusted metal wire that's supposed to act as a safety railing.

John stands behind him, hands hanging limp and useless at his sides. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

Sherlock swallows. "I'm scared, John. I had a choice, once, and I should have taken it, but I let myself get trapped like this."

John places his palms on the younger man's shoulders, because he suddenly looks as though a stronger breeze could knock him over. He's terribly thin, still, and the restless energy and drive John has seen in him seems awfully brittle, prone to disappearing so quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Do you think I had some plan for the next ten years, tens months, or even ten days? My inheritance would have lasted three more months, at the most. The thing with the explosion at my flat—I didn't do it deliberately, but if I'd known what was going to happen, I would have stayed in the flat and I wouldn't have stopped it." He turns to face John, pleading with his eyes for him to understand, to read between the lines.

John's fingers slip from the bony shoulders and he takes an involuntary step back.

He should have guessed. He should have seen it in the slump of Sherlock's shoulders, the petulant anger and the defensive sarcasm: Sherlock doesn't care what happens to him. He probably hasn't
cared for a long time.

*And that isn't a very good thing for a cadet,* John thinks and then gets angry at himself. Isn't this exactly what Sherlock has just been ranting about—that a person's life and happiness are worth nothing in the Corps?

He doesn't quite know what to say, or if an attempt at consolation would be welcome, so he decides to divert the topic to satisfy his own curiosity. "Why *kaiju* blood? You must've known how dangerous that is, and not just because it's illegal."

"An opportunity to procure some arose. I was curious, and it was a way to pass the time on the road to nowhere. Better than crap telly and only marginally more expensive." Sherlock tightens the lace of his right boot and jogs a few steps to catch up with John.

John shakes his head with a disbelieving smile.

"The media companies charge per TV programme nowadays in the UK; only the military and PPDC get some of the channels free," Sherlock gripes. "It's all drivel, anyway."

He opens an old gate to let them pass through a field, and John closes it after them.

John might be relieved over the change to a lighter subject, but Sherlock's very personal admission a few minutes prior lingers in his thoughts. He can't just shove it aside. "I joined voluntarily – they postponed my admission because of my university studies, but when they needed me and Harry, they came for us. I went through what you're going through right now, at least some of it, when I joined; it's such a big life change that everyone goes through at least a little bit of a crisis. Like you said, shit childhood, wanted to get away as far as I could and the Corps was definitely further away than med school in Manchester. I realised quickly after arriving that I wanted to make the cut for the Corps. So much, in fact, that I was scared that my life wouldn't have amounted to anything if I failed; truth be told, I wasn't sure I could have afforded to continue studying. There weren't a lot of part-time jobs available, the banks were limiting student loans and I couldn't rely on my parents since they were dead. But, Harry was there with me during basic training, and after. We got by because we had each other's backs. I couldn't have gotten through the Drift training without her."

"I don't have anyone, and I won't listen to some saccharine lecture about the Corps being a family."

John spreads his arms in what he hopes is a welcome manner. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Sherlock gives him a sceptical look. "You."

"Yes, silly old me."

"What am I to do with you, then?"

"Find out if there's anything here in your new life that you might not hate."

Chapter End Notes

**Author's notes:**
London is brilliant, but sometimes it feels like a breath of fresh air to take our boys somewhere else. That's one of the alluring things about writing AUs. Views of Terceira.

The Haig Academy for Boys was invented for this story. It's named after Douglas Haig, aka 1st Earl Haig, a controversial British Field Marshal, whose strategy of attrition in WW1 (summarised mockingly by some as 'kill more Germans') lead to massive numbers of British casualties.

**Firing the canon:**
The Mark of a Jaeger denominates its generation, in other words how new and fancy it is. The latest range is called Mark 8—-invented by yours truly for this story—of which only a few of exist (one is British-designed, and you will meet it/him/her/whatever later). I envisioned that the problem with the Mark 8 would be that it requires an unrivalled level of Drift compatibility from its pilots to achieve the greatest possible independence from the central control of the Jaegers. The aim of this is to prevent someone attempting to hack into Jaeger systems from wreaking havoc. Some of the first Marks utilised analogue computer technology and old school energy forms such as nuclear; the modern ones are more about hybrid technology and more efficient energy distribution. (Think moving from diesel tractors to the Prius.) One of the Mark 1 Jaegers, the Russian-built Cherno Alpha, is just adorable in its Soviet aesthetic (alright, I'm done fangirling).

*Article 67 of the Commonwealth Joint Defence Charter* is non-canon poppycock invented by me. I bet it's just the sort of thing Drift!croft likes typing up during his lunch breaks.

*Dojo* is Japanese and means a space for immersive training or meditation; it's what martial arts schools are often referred to as being. Covering large parts of its floors is usually a tatami mat where throws and other moves can be comfortable practiced. In Pacific Rim canon, what the word dojo describes is actually called the Kwoon Combat Room; I preferred a more generic term. I have spent quite a bit of time at various dojos myself, having practiced martial arts for years (I used to be able to do quite an impressive mawashigeri) but nowadays I'm very out of practice. It's actually pretty surprising that I haven't used more of such stuff in my fic. And, before you ask: nope, not a black belt (of any grade—in many martial arts there are several types of black belts). We shall visit the Chard's Rift dojo very soon.

The bit about kaiju remains lying around where people live comes from canon; the first minutes of the first film include footage of a kaiju skeleton in a coastal suburb. Canonically, shanty towns built around kaiju remains are referred to as *bone slums.*

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
- [Blanco White: Outsider](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Outsider)
- [Florence+The Machine: Big God](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BigGod)
It's been eight days since Sherlock's batch of recruits had arrived. While he is far from fit and healthy, John sees no reason to delay his joining of basic training. He'd discussed the situation last night with the two Rangers in charge of the group's training, hoping that they'd go easy on Sherlock until it's fair to start demanding the same things from him than everyone else. After all, he'll be competing with the other recruits, many of whom are in prime physical condition due to being career soldiers. Still, there's only so much Wallis and Chen can look past, lest the other cadets start complaining of favouritism.

Truth be told: as optimistic as John tries to be, it's hard to believe Sherlock could hold his own among the other cadets. Even if there's a huge difference between the man who had hiked with John on Terceira, and the wreck shuddering under a blanket when he'd first arrived, he'll have to have an ace up his sleeve to keep up with his fellow recruits.

Mornings for cadets are for martial arts and weapons training. The Japanese Shatterdomes had been the first to dub their hand-to-hand combat training spaces dojos, and the term had been adopted by some other bases as well, Chard's Rift included. The reason for this is that the first Ranger in charge of the fitness program in Hawaii had been a legendary Japanese Ranger who had once been a world-renowned karateka. Since the traditions and practices he had initiated had served as the foundation for what is done at Chard's Rift, it's understandable that the associated vocabulary got imported. John had met that legendary Fightmaster—Ichiro Akamine—once during his basic training before the man had retired from the PPDC to go back to his native Okinawa. During John's active pilot service career, battle training had part of his daily routine five days a week, but now he hasn't been to the Rift dojo in more than a decade.

Without examining his motives more carefully, he had suggested to Sherlock that he might escort him there on his first morning, but the offer had been promptly turned down. "I can't show up with a minder," he had pointed out, and John had wanted to bite his tongue for not realising such an obvious thing. "They already think I'm weak and being let off easily, having missed over a week of the proceedings."

Still, there is nothing stopping John from observing the training today; after all, he has a perfectly legitimate reason to do so in wanting to make sure Sherlock truly is up to the task. The other cadets will likely just assume that John's presence is part of some standard assessment for all of them.

Being a convalescent and losing practice matches in combat training are not punishable offences or grounds for dismissal. If Sherlock wants to end up in the Ground Crew, all he needs to do is try his best and keep his head down. His recent curiosity about Drifting that troubles John more than his physical condition; is he suddenly tempted to prove his worth, to land a spot in the Corps which he'll then decline by refusing the implants just to spite the PPDC? Or, had his questions just been idle talk and his plan to fail—but not badly enough to be sent home?

Nobody wants to fail, and John wonders if Sherlock is just stubborn enough to push himself too far or in a direction he doesn't really want. Either way, this dilemma is all the more reason for John to continue to keep an eye on him, at least for the duration of this morning. Every day he has told himself that it's going to be the last thing he does for the recruit, and every time he has been tempted to not leave well enough alone. He needs to step back, because Sherlock is right—any suspicion of
favouritism would ruin all his chances of getting along with his fellow cadets.

John unlocks the eastern doors of the *dojo* with his wrist console. When he lets himself into the large, high-ceilinged area, most of the new recruits are already present, as are Fightmasters Wallis and Chen. A grey tatami, fixed in place with frames of dark red wood, covers most of the floor and there is a stand of three rows of seats off to the side. No locker rooms—the trainees and Rangers change into their training clothes and back into uniforms in their dorm rooms.

Most of the recruits are grouped together close to the stand. John has seen all their photos on the intranet of the base and seen and heard them at the mess hall, so he already knows a few names. Some are stretching, and a cadet whom John recognises as being called Lee, is holding a punching bag in place for another—a young woman called Kitchener—who is pounding it with gusto. John remembers hearing Wallis mention that physically, the tall man and the blonde, brawny woman are among the strongest candidates, but that their attitude leaves a lot to be desired. According to the Fightmaster, who has seen all sorts of recruits over the years, these two seem to fancy themselves in a league of their own.

"Morning, John," Wallis greets, lifting the front page of a handwritten list clipped to a pad.

"Morning."

John grabs a seat next to Chen on a chair dragged close to the stand, and exchanges a nod with the second Fightmaster. They don't ask what brings him here; John had mentioned to Chen he might stop by to see how Holmes was getting on.

The air smells of dust and sweat, bringing back memories of John's own basic training. After doing quite a lot of boxing in college he had usually held his own in practice matches but had found it hard to devise strategies against those of his fellow candidates with extensive experience in martial arts. Those adversaries' effective kicking and grappling techniques which had posed a particular challenge, but John had still enjoyed diversifying his own skills. The first years after being selected to be a pilot involve an intense advanced battle training, a program the purpose of which is not only to build physical strength but also to develop the co-operative skills between co-pilots team and to hone their ability to anticipate each other's moves. Battling the *kaiju*—just like battling other enemies assumed to be sentient—is not just about strategy; a lot of it depends on reacting fast and appropriately to the adversary's moves, on having outstanding dexterity, and on possessing the ability to improvise. There is a consensus within the Corps that martial arts are an excellent way to cultivate such things in Jaeger pilots. Practice matches are a frequent part of both basic and advanced training, and probably rougher than in most civilian martial arts academies.

Harry had been a passable judoka, and it had been a lot of fun sparring with her. As long as John kept out of her grasp and used quick in-and-out attacks, he could hold his own. "*Come at me, bro, or are you getting tired already?*" had been Harry's favourite taunt. John can easily imagine it echoing in this hall even though most of their time sparring together had been spent at the *dojo* of the Hawaii base instead of this one.

"We've divided them into as diverse pairs as we can to see how much strategic thinking they have," Chen tells John in a low voice. "And how much resilience."

*At least Sherlock's got plenty of that,* John thinks.

Wallis gathers the scattered, chatty group of cadets while John talks to Chen some more about what he knows about the recruits' skill levels. Sherlock is a big question mark since his arrival interview with the Fightmasters has been postponed until this afternoon. Since he has missed the first crucial induction days designed to ease the new recruits into the ways of the Corps, he will have to go
through today just like he had gone through detox—cold turkey.

Wallis has let the recruits plan their own warm-ups today. He calls out that the first match is due according to the schedule posted earlier; the recruits take seats around the main tatami area to watch.

John realises that even though the five-hour morning session has now started, Sherlock isn't here. Only a part of him is surprised; he had worried that the young man's nerves would get the better of him, or that the reality of this day arriving would lead him to decide to call it quits. John still hasn't completely rejected the notion that their midnight dip could have been an attempt to gauge the swimming conditions as part of a plan to make a daring escape from the base.

Sweeping his gaze around the *dojo* once more, John establishes that Sherlock truly doesn't appear to be present.

Or, is he?

"Lee and Holmes," Wallis calls out.

The only part of the hall invisible to John is a corner hidden partly away by bundles of ropes attached to the ceiling which have been pulled aside and tied to a wall with string.

From there, now emerges a figure in white.

"Shame you're a human doc and not a vet, Ranger Watson sir," the cadet called Lee hollers at John while theatrically cracking his taped knuckles.

"And why is that?" John asks in a tone he hopes will discourage further conversation.

"Because this'll be like kicking a puppy," comes the young man's gleeful reply as he sizes up his adversary.

"Watch that mouth," John warns.

Standing barefoot at the opposite edge of the tatami, having taken a short, sharp bow before stepping onto it, is Sherlock. He's dressed in a snow white, crisp and new martial arts *gi*. All the other candidates' Corps-issued *dojo* combat gear is already dusty and stained with sweat and blood after long days of training, making the pristine fabric of Sherlock's jacket look as though it's shining a cold, white light. His knuckles are bare, despite John practically commanding him to make use of the heavy-duty plaster tape he'd dropped on Sherlock's bed last night. "The trainees are told not to pull punches, and Wallis says this batch of recruits doesn't fuck around when it comes to sparring," he had said, to which Sherlock's reply had been an eye roll.

Lee has taken up a position at the edge of the tatami closest to John and the other Rangers. He is if not twice Sherlock's size, then at least close. John wonders if this pairing is a deliberate attempt by Wallis to teach Sherlock a lesson. He is suddenly very worried that the still recovering recruit will have broken much more than just the skin on his knuckles by the time this session is over. Although he has told John several times that he has always been skinny, he's clearly underweight for his height. A cadet like Lee could do a lot of damage.

"Are you sure about this?" John asks Chen under his breath. They stand up and walk up where Wallis has taken up position right at the end of the tatami to see better. "Couldn't you have picked someone closer to his size?"

Chen gives him a disinterested glance. "You heard Tom. The *kaiju* don't play fair, either."
"Unarmed, freestyle, five minutes or until yield," Wallis announces. "Head is free game, balls are not. Play nice."

Lee snorts, cracks his neck sideways into both directions and lowers his stance. He is wearing similar garb to Sherlock, but his gi is already adorned with faded bloodstains and yellowed where it has chafed against sweaty skin. He doesn't take a bow—not a habit outside martial arts.

Sherlock hesitates as though he had been about to honour such a tradition, but then contents to a brief touch of his palms to the sides of his thighs before dropping into a slightly lower stance.

They are looking at each other, focussing hard. Sherlock's expression is challenging to interpret—not neutral but determined, not angry but composed. In contrast, Lee looks practically gleeful at the chance to try to deliver a bit of whoopass. He probably thinks he's been handed a gift of a weak opponent he will have no trouble defeating.

*At least Sherlock doesn't look intimidated, John thinks. Then again, he's clearly got a good game face.*

"When you're ready," Wallis says.

They begin circling each other. Wallis' lightweight boxing shoes squeak a little on the tatami as he turns on the balls of his feet. Sherlock's barefoot steps movements are silent.

Lee charges him, attempting a right hook, but Sherlock dodges down, touching his fingers of his right hand briefly on the tatami before springing into action and giving Lee a sharp shove between his shoulder blades—his momentum has hurtled him past his opponent.

John chuckles nervously; something tells him that particular move, in its lack of grace, had been a calculated attempt from Sherlock to annoy his adversary and to lull him into a false sense of security.

Lee wastes no time in attacking again, going for two rapid jabs with the same fist. His front leg work is good, but he doesn't seem to quite know what to do with his back leg. John is no expert, but to him it looks like Lee hasn't been very interested in honing his technique in his prior training, opting to compensate for it by sheer force.

Lee finally manages a diversion, leading Sherlock to lean right, which gives the more heavily built recruit the opportunity for an overhand first, then a low punch to Sherlock's solar plexus.

Sherlock staggers back with a gasp, face turning red momentarily as his breath is caught and the pain blooms.

Lee gives him a wide berth for a moment, but the fight is far from over.

Next, Sherlock takes the initiative. After a few running steps he spins half a circle on his supporting leg, then attempts to deliver a back kick to reply in kind to Lee's hit to his diaphragm. He misses, but only barely—Lee isn't that fast, but Sherlock had begun his attack from too great a distance, and his opponent had predicted at least partly what he was going for.

Before Sherlock reorients himself, Lee is charging him, leaning forward as he tries to knock them both down for a bit of grappling, but Sherlock leaps back, then springs forward, and with a leap upwards that propels him around in mid-air, he delivers a quick, sharp snap of a back kick straight to Lee's jaw.

Lee staggers backwards, then regains his footing and takes a bloody spit on the floor just outside the tatami. He no longer looks like he's having fun—now, he's livid, as though that single hit that has
managed to get through is a personal affront. During the next thirty seconds, it becomes apparent that both the man’s imagination and patience seem to have run out because his next offensive is a classic knee to the stomach.

John wonders if he’d be prone to ignoring Wallis' directive about avoiding the groin, was he even a little bit more enraged.

Sherlock sees the kick coming from a mile away, springing back just a few inches and performing an elegant block with an open palm with the wrist bent slightly. This redirects the forces sideways and makes Lee lose his balance. Sherlock crouches low, coiled like a snake, then explodes into action, pivoting on his supporting foot, then launching himself into a pirouette in the air during which he first knocks out Lee's feet from under him with his lower foot, then lands a brutal, snapping roundhouse kick to the side of his head before he has even toppled down. To John, his every movement is calculated, graceful, poised and perfect.

Sherlock lands in a crouch just as Lee crumples to the ground next to him, sending the dust and magnesium gripping powder that has gathered on the tatami flying up in a thin cloud.

"Fucking amazing," John mutters without any self-awareness of having said it out loud. Chen gives him a curious look, making him clears his throat to hide the sudden realisation and embarrassment of the word slipping out.

Lee staggers back to his feet, cursing. John notices that he limps a little.

Again, the larger cadet charges. Sherlock lets him approach while standing in place, his stance regal and high though he has placed his feet far apart—he's practically standing on the balls of his feet. When Lee rampages towards him—fists in motion before even within hitting distance—Sherlock sidesteps slightly, then reaches down to gather momentum from placing his knuckles briefly on the tatami and launches into action. He takes a low jump, spreads his legs, and brings them together in a devastating scissor kick that ends with his legs clamped around Lee's midsection, immobilising his arms. They're falling; Lee looks like a set of flailing limbs as he has now completely lost his balance. Sherlock pulls his leg from under Lee a fraction of a second before the larger man hits the floor hard. He lands head first, followed by a heavy thud when his back collides with the tatami.

Sherlock has landed in a low crouch beside him and wastes no time in planting a palm behind him and using that arm as an anatomic vaulting pole to fling his legs across Lee's neck and chest where he's lying on the ground. Before Lee can grab onto him, Sherlock takes hold of his wrist and bends the arm against his own thigh.

Lee grunts, curses, his face flush and sweat trickling down his temple. He curses and grimaces some more, then yelps as Sherlock wraps his fingers around one of Lee's and twists it in the wrong direction.

"Yield?" Wallis demands. "Not worth a finger, Lee."

"Fuck you, Holmes!" Lee's curse comes out garbled and distorted by pain. His palm hovers over the tatami, them slams down twice.

Sherlock lets go, retreats and then gracefully climbs to his feet, patting dust off the front of his gi and readjusting the lapels to overlap more. Unlike Lee, he hasn't worn a T-shirt underneath.

John shifts in his seat towards Wallis, who looks openly surprised and a little alarmed. During the fight, John had glanced at Chen, whose jaw had dropped so thoroughly that John wonders if he might have needed help hoisting it back up.
Lee, still lying on the tatami, slams his head against it, closing his eyes and muttering something that's likely to be profane.


Sherlock bows towards the middle of the tatami before stepping outside of it. The floor outside the tatami must be cold, but it doesn't seem to bother him.

Now that he's getting closer, John can see better what the cost of what he's just done is. His fringe droops in sweaty locks, there are wet patches in his armpits, and he looks completely exhausted. The fight must have taken every bit of energy he had, even though he'd made it all look so easy. His chest is still heaving, the blueish shadows under his eyes seem even darker than before, and he's shaking a little. John's first instinct is to get him some water and to get him to his dorm, but it isn't his call to make. Not anymore.

"Where the \textit{fuck} did that come from?" Wallis demands. He's not an easy man to impress, having been a European champion in judo in his twenties. When the \textit{kaiju} arrived, he wasted no time in enlisting in the army, even leaving a fiancée behind to do so.

Sherlock seeks John out with his eyes—why?—then lets his gaze rove from Wallis to Chen. He clasps his hands together behind his back and snaps his spine straight and John thinks he spots a suppressed grimace of pain. Lee hadn't gotten in more than that one punch, but it had been a good enough hit to break a rib.

"I have a third Dan black belt in Taekwondo," Sherlock answers with the tone one would use when asked about something utterly insignificant and unsurprising.

Lee is still lying on the tatami, probably just for dramatic effect, but John feels compelled to go check on the cadet. A cursory exam reveals what can't be worse than a mild concussion. The cadet will be sore in the morning, but John is certain that he'll be fine. Sherlock had clearly exercised some control over how much force he had applied—it's obvious that his technique is exceptional, and he could probably have done much more damage. His had been an adaptive, well-thought-out strategy with a precision strike to end the assault. Lee's plan of just going at it with muscles blazing had never even stood a chance. After John helps the slightly dazed Lee to his feet, a fellow recruit hurries over to help him limp to the spectator area.

Wallis sends Sherlock to join the group of recruits standing on the opposite side of the tatami, but he retreats far away from them, practically to the corner where he'd emerged from.

Two more matches are staged. For John, they hold little interest. But, even though he can no longer even see Sherlock who's hidden from the other recruits behind a column, he isn't going to leave, because he wants to hear Wallis' decisions regarding the battle training cohorts. It's the name for the skill level groups into which all cadets will be divided according to their fighting skills and fitness level. Group C is where the weaker recruits end up: unless they have exceptional aptitude scores of they fight tooth and nail to show what they can do during the rest of basic training and improve significantly in all areas, they're likelier to end up in Ground Crew than the Corps. Group B is where most recruits with distinguished military careers get assigned to. It's tough, but not exceptionally so, and it does not predict in any way how likely a candidate is to end up in the Jaeger Corps. Group A means having the same training regime as active service pilots. For someone with exceptional physical conditioning, surviving Group A until the end of basic training means an almost guaranteed spot in the Corps, assuming the candidates perform at least reasonably well in other areas assessed.

After the third match of the day, Wallis takes a seat in the stand next to Chen. John stands up, stretched his arms above his head and walks around the \textit{dojo} to give them some peace and quiet and
make their decisions. He can see them poring over the list of candidates which Wallis has on his clipboard.

John circles the large column at the western end of the hall, and Sherlock comes into view. He has retreated to the edge of stretching area and is now rolling his head around on his shoulders while sitting in a side split. Having seen the kicks he'd performed during the fight, John isn't surprised that he's spry enough for such a thing.

Chen leaves the *dojo*: it's lunchtime. Wallis stands up, and instantly the cadets scramble to their feet. They must know that the cohort decisions will be made today and that those decisions will have a huge impact on their likelihood of ever piloting a Jaeger.

John retreats to stand by the door. Sherlock hasn't turned to face the Fightmaster, hasn't even stood up. All John can now see of him is his head of blackish ringlets which, after all the exertion look a bit flat.

Wallisis now reading the results. "—Holmes, group A. Jackson, group B. Lee, group B—"

The rest of the names float in and out of John's ears without registering. The other candidates are whispering among themselves, some of them hooting or cursing after hearing their own designation. After the last name has been called out, Wallis calls for a lunch break.

After all the others—Sherlock included, with an austere expression John doesn't know how to interpret—have trailed out of the hall, John walks up to the Fightmaster.

"You can't put him in A," he protests. "Well, you *can*, but---" he'd get hurt. He'd fail, because there's *no way he could keep up with active duty pilots.*

"I can, and I will. You know we assess them not against the pilots but by how hard they try to keep up and improve. He isn't here because he wants to be. We need to test if there's any resolve that can be coaxed out of the guy."

*He'll end up in the Ground Crew*is John's knee-jerk reaction. He has seen even professional athletes crumple under the stress of group A and not get accepted into the Corps proper. But... wouldn't that be exactly what Sherlock wants? Or does he? "He's only just gotten clean."

"If he can do what he did to Lee now, imagine what he can do when he's been clean for months," Wallis reasons.

"Even B would be tough enough for anyone who's just joined without an active service history."

They walk out of the *dojo* and head towards the nearby mess hall. All the cadets have already lined up for their food; Rangers are allowed to go straight to the front of the queue.

"You know how much the applicant numbers have dropped," Wallis says angrily. "We can't afford to waste any time on people whose potential doesn't turn into results. I could make soldiers out of most of this bunch—" he nods towards the line stretching beyond the mess hall doors, "—but I'm not sure I'm seeing a Ravager pilot in there," he says sceptically, referring to the base's newest Jaeger still devoid of even a single pilot team. Every Ravager needs at least two teams because pilots need time off, too.

John knows how much the applicant numbers have dropped. He also knows that candidates can get burnt out when pressed too hard. Especially the ones who have never wanted anything else in their lives than to pilot a Jaeger, failure can be devastating. This is yet another reason why the other cadets are obviously shunning Sherlock—they don't understand why he should be given a chance if he
doesn't even want to be here.

John's scepticism must have shown on his face because Wallis scoffs. "What's the worst that could happen if we place him in A? We push him, he cracks, and he goes home or crawls back under whatever rock he came from."

John thinks about what he had learned at school about the human world wars of the 1900s. Entire generations of young men got killed, injured and traumatized on the battlefields. The war machinery of the PPDC isn't eating up as nearly as many, but it still means plucking up some of the most physically and mentally talented, brilliant people to serve the defence effort instead of pursuing some civilian careers which might benefit humanity in a different manner.

While picking up a tray, John steals a glance at Sherlock. Thanks to his height, he's easy to pick up from the crowd. Where would he or John be, if the *kaiju* had never come? Where would Sherlock be if his parents weren't who they are? Would those tracks marks on the crooks of his elbows be there, and would he be stuck at Chard's Rift—in a place he chose only because the other option was much worse?

At least a placement in group A will mean a sure-fire way into the Ground Crew. No implants. No Drifting.


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**Chapter End Notes**

**Author's notes:**

Finally, the word Ravager gets mentioned. Keep that one in mind.

Why Taekwondo, you may ask? Well, Sherlock spent a great chunk of his youth in South Korea and Taekwondo is a Korean martial art. It emphasizes kicks, for which those long, lithe limbs would be perfect. The word gi (referring to the training outfits) is Japanese; since I have been using Japanese terms such as dojo and *kaiju* in the context of the PPDC it felt apt to stick to them instead of introducing Korean terms, and all the cadets would have the same Corps-issued outfits. Most of the recruits probably aren’t representatives of any specific martial up but especially the military types would have had quite a lot of hand-to-hand combat training.

**Firing the canon:**

In Pacific Rim canon, it is actually through hand-to-hand combat that Drift compatibility between pilots is assessed and pilot teams are created based on practice fights. For the purposes of this story, that seemed a bit flimflam, so I made the whole process a bit more structured and scientific and complicated. It should be said in the canon Corps' defence that, back in the day when they were quickly scraping the PPDC together, they didn't have the time or the infrastructure for anything but a bit of flimflam. Here are the [candidate trials from the first film](#).

A reminder may be pertinent that since Chard's Rift as a location is non-canonical, so are its Jaegers (although one of them is technically a recommissioned canon one; more on this later). Diablo Intercept, which John & Harry used to pilot, wasn't canonically
housed on Hawaii but in Lima, Peru.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
The fight scene in this chapter simply would not exist without the Tool song *Schism*. Just listen from 00:42 onwards and imagine them circling each other.

*There was a time that the pieces fit, but I watched them fall away*
*Mildewed and smoldering, strangled by our coveting*
*I've done the math enough to know the dangers of our second guessing*
*Doomed to crumble unless we grow, and strengthen our communication*
This story has the awesomest readership. And the fiercest and most dedicated betas. I am lucky.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John walks—no, storms—into the Rangers' lounge. It's a place to swap war stories, decompress and get peer support, complain about useless trainees, compare notes on the latest Drift system upgrades, and the newest pieces of armour. Even though he's perfectly qualified to be there, John has avoided the place for years. While the other Rangers know a bit about his service history and are duty-bound to accept the notion that he still holds the same rank, it feels like a very potent unwritten rule that this is a space for those in active pilot duty.

Today, John's anger helps him ignore the things that usual make him apprehensive about entering, and to march up to Tom Wallis who's sitting on the window sill, pen and pad in hand. John's hair is dripping water onto his shoulders and his fingers still feel frozen from being out in the rain, but he hardly cares if he gets water onto the worn and ugly old wall-to-wall carpet.

"We're the bloody Corps, not a Siberian penal colony!" John barks, taking a position so close to the other Ranger that the man should feel at least a little cornered. They're not friends, just... colleagues, and John knows that the man may well lose respect for him for this, but there are more important things in life than whether Tom Wallis still thinks he's worth his wall plaque in the Launch Level corridor.

The room has gone quiet. Out of Chard's Rift's thirty-four, four Rangers are present; each Shatterdome's Rangers number about thirty to forty of which about half are in different stages of advanced training. Every Jaeger requires several pilot teams to ensure that they all get enough rest outside of manning the three watch shifts into which each day has been divided.

One of the Rangers present is Chen, who John knows better than he does Wallis and respects, but he doubts the man will back him up on this.

John shifts on his feet, jaw tight and shoulders squared. He knows this isn't his fight, but it's too late to back out. This isn't his business, but damn it if he's going to stand idly while a recruit gets hazed and punished for the shape he'd arrived in instead of anyone acknowledging how hard he's trying. Were this just squabbling amongst the cadets, John would leave it to the Fightmasters, but he's begun to doubt that Wallis is not being entirely impartial when it comes to giving all the candidates an equal opportunity to prove themselves.

By putting Sherlock in group A, Wallis had rigged the game against him.

The Fightmaster regards John tiredly. "Let me guess," he says calmly and drops his foot from the low window sill to the floor. He stands up to his full height, and he's significantly taller than John.

"This about Holmes by any chance?"
"Damn right it is about him. I thought it was the kaijus' job to fuck Rangers up, not Fightmasters'."

"You know as well as I do that I'm operating well within guidelines. No lasting damage done."

He's speaking of himself in first person instead of hiding behind a joint decision made by him and Chen but then again, he's the one ultimately in charge. He isn't afraid of John, and why would he be? An unwritten rule is being broken here—those who aren't involved in training cadets shouldn't run their mouths off about how it should be done.

"This is the third bloody time this week he's been sent to the dorm from the airfield," John points out. What he's referring to is that three times in the past five days he or someone else has come across Sherlock on the main airfield, trying and failing to get through whatever exercise torture Wallis, Chen or the Fightmaster in charge of the cadets assigned to group A have devised as his punishment to get him to toe the line.

"He should have finished his assignments. Being sent back to the dorm is a reward." Wallis doesn't hide his disapproval.

"Being sent there before he gets hypothermia or drowns, you mean," John snaps back.

"He can blame himself for every punishment. He's been sent out there, because that's where he needs to be. No point in opening his mouth if there's nobody there to listen."

"Push-ups when he's got three broken fingers. Really?" For two hours. In a bone-chilling wind and heavy rain. Wearing nothing but combat trousers and a T-shirt. Sherlock will be lucky if he can lift his arms tomorrow; his pectorals will have turned to lactic acid. John has no idea how he had managed even an hour; the shivering had been violent when John had commanded him to climb to his feet and head for a hot shower in the dorms.

"I wasn't aware he had broken them," Wallis says.

John studies his expression—he doesn't appear to be lying. He crinkles his nose, adjusts his stance. This conversation is not over. Doesn't he at least have a physician's duty to address potential safety hazards in training?

"He never complains," Chen pipes in.

"Because he wouldn't, would he? Because that sorry lot of idiots you've made him bunk with will eat him alive the minute he does," John replies. "We're supposed to be the height of humanity, yet we're nothing better than a flock of hyenas, and you're condoning that shit, even adding to it."

"He'll never see the inside of a Jaeger unless he learns the meaning of 'Yes, sir', and the fine art of shutting the fuck up."

_He doesn't want to see the inside of a Jaeger. All he wants is to be spared prison._

To be able to pilot, Sherlock needs to be able to rely on one of his fellow Rangers, to function in what is effectively a cerebrally intimate relationship. From John's perspective, all Wallis and his partners-in-crime are achieving is wrecking any chance of the man wanting to trust any part—or member— of the Corps. "You're not giving him any reason to respect the chain of command. You need to appeal to his intellect instead of trying to break him," John argues. "You're just pissing him off and making him more hell-bent to prove you wrong."

"Is that what they did when you were in basic training, _appeal to your intellect_?" Chen asks, but he isn't putting much edge into the sarcasm. He's a good man; John has never found reason to disrespect
him. It's Wallis he has always considered a bit of a rogue, if mostly a trustworthy one. A hell of a Ranger at the wheel of a Jaeger, that's for sure.

Wallis snorts. The fact that he seems more amused than affronted by John's outburst signals that he isn't about to heed the advice given. "You're some sort of a Holmes whisperer, then?" he asks, and pockets his pencil and pad.

"John, this isn't your fight. It's his," Chen adds.

According to what John had heard the week before, Sherlock had been ordered to Med Bay from the dojo when the three other cadets assigned to group A had been allowed to practically beat the crap out of him under the pretence of match training. They're not supposed to pull punches, but they are most certainly not allowed to use unnecessary force, either. Apparently, Sherlock had spat out a tooth and a worrying amount of blood before refusing to leave and demanding Chen for yet another sparring partner. He doubts Sherlock had obeyed the order to seek medical help; most likely he'd patched himself up at the dorm, his deep dislike of all things Med Bay considered.

Why is he trying to prove himself so hard? Trying to spite the Corps as his motive would not surprise John, but this sounds like overkill. Is Sherlock still as self-destructive as ever, or is he just being a garden-variety idiot trying to prove some obscure point?

At least no one has yet asked John the question which had most made him hesitate to initiate this confrontation—

—until Wallis jumps right to it. "What do you care, anyway?" he asks brusquely, crossing his arms. Before, his tone had been disappointed but willing to justify his decisions to John. Now, he seems to have lost patience.

John knows he has overstepped his bounds by coming here, of all places, to challenge a Fightmaster about their methods. Training decisions lie with the Fightmaster, and in that context, John hadn't really even had the authority to send Sherlock back inside from the downpour today. His medical arguments are flimsy, at best: Wallis is well aware of the rules, and technically, he hasn't broken them. If a cadet conceals an injury, it's on them and not Wallis. No lasting damage inflicted.

"You seem to think he deserves some sort of special treatment," Chen points out. "We know he's neurodiverse, John, if that's what you're so worried about. He has turned down every opportunity we've offered to be assessed by the Med Bay neuro unit for potential adjustments in his training. So, we can't treat him differently. He has not objected to any of the disciplinary orders given."

Because he knows that more severe subordination than a bit of talking back will land him in prison, John thinks and huffs in frustration.

"We're grateful for your help with him, John, but we can't let him off the hook for stuff that other recruits get punished for. It'll make your life easier if you let this go. He needs to learn his place and a bit of team spirit."

Chen's lip quirks up, stretching a scar on his cheek. "I get wanting to root for the underdog. We're all curious to see how he manages."

"He doesn't get along with the other cadets and at this point, the only ones who could have any real impact on how thoroughly he alienates them are the supervising Rangers."

"You want us to just ask him to be nice?" Chen laughs. "He's smart enough to work that one out himself. Believe me: all he ever does is piss them off."
"If he needs special protection, he hardly belongs here," interjects Maria Groenewald, a Dutch Ranger sitting on a worn sofa in the corner. An exceptionally good pilot, she'd come close to becoming half of the first team piloting The Ravager, the base's newest and fanciest Jaeger. Those dreams were crushed when her prospective co-pilot had been in a car accident last year on shore leave, and the brain damage had decimated his chances of ever Drifting again. In the simulation lab they had gotten very close to the level of neural sync that the Ravager is estimated to require. The loss of half of that team had been a sobering reminder that the Jaeger program is only as strong as its Rangers. Now, Maria pilots another Chard's Rift Jaeger, The Churchill, with a forty-something neurodiverse German-Israeli guy who collects virtual versions of medieval Bibles.

"We're supposed to help them perform as best as they can," John says, fighting hard to instil a more diplomatic tone into his voice. "Breaking them down and allowing a dog-eat-dog mindset is the opposite of cultivating their strengths."

"Thank fuck you're not the one training them," Maria tells John. "There's no room in the Corps for special butterflies." Maria flings her boots off the coffee table and stumps out of the office. She has never hidden her opinion that even though many neurodiverse Rangers are among the greatest pilots the Corps has, they shouldn't get any concessions regarding living conditions or training arrangements. John feels sorry for her co-pilot.

Anyone will break if pushed hard enough. John admires Sherlock's obvious resilience and stubbornness, but after spending time with him he's seen behind the tough facade and knows that, if pushed too far, whatever potential and promise he may have as a pilot will go down the drain if he loses hope, fails and quits. Can the Corps really afford to lose such potential?

It's not John's business. It's not his fight. He doesn't even want to examine that carefully why he cares this much but he does, and there's no point in backing down now—with three pairs of Ranger eyes on him.

"Look, John—I haven't forgotten the state he was in when he first came in, which is probably why you're worried. He's come a long way from that, but there's a line we have to draw," Wallis tells him. "We're still a military organisation, and he'll need to learn what command structure means. You'd do well to revise some of that. Don't go soft in retirement, Ranger Watson."

John's fingers clench into fists. Most of the Rangers in the room—hell, most currently active Rangers full stop—have never taken on a *kaiju*. It's easy to puff up their chests like this in peacetime and pretend they are the holders of some holy truth on how to select and train the best pilots. Twenty years ago, the Corps was created in haste when humanity scraped together its resources and its best military professionals. Now, the PPDC has succumbed to being more preoccupied with rules and protocol and petty squabbles and medals and ceremonies and pretending that their training regime is an epitome of excellence.

If they were as perfect as they think, the newest and greatest of the Jaegers would not be gathering dust without a pilot team.

Yet, John's righteous anger is beginning to drain. Wallis has trained plenty of excellent Rangers, he *has* seen action, and John's anger is, in part, fuelled by the fear that the Fightmaster may be right about Sherlock. Especially as a pilot, he can't go on being a loner. No amount of help or leniency can guarantee that he'll get through the training program. The problem is that, before Sherlock had interacted with the other cadets at all, he'd been branded the odd one out thanks to the state he'd arrived in. The move to a shared cadet dorm had done nothing to improve his relationship with his fellow recruits, because they are all trying to build the strongest possible alliances in order to make it through training, and to trample down those they see as unfit. The Corps careers of those who can't
cut it will die natural deaths at the end of basic training—they will be sent home or assigned to the
Ground Crew if they haven't quit.

Does he want Sherlock to do well simply because he wants him to stay? And, does John want him to
stay because he doesn't really have any more people he enjoys spending time with than Sherlock
does?

Last week, John had spotted him at lunch nearly falling asleep from exhaustion. After staring cross-
eyed at his plate for fifteen minutes Sherlock had nodded off and dipped forward a bit—only to be
hit on the back of his head with a meal tray carried past by a fellow recruit. He'd jerked back to
awareness but by the time he'd realised what had happened, there was no way to tell who'd been
responsible. John had seen it all, and he could have singled out the one responsible, but he knows
how the power play here works: be seen as a superior officer's favourite and things will only get
worse.

Besides, he'd been more worried about the fact that Sherlock still seemed in danger of face-planting
onto his plate of what vaguely resembled meatloaf. He didn't even notice John making his way to his
table—at which he was the only one sitting.

Most others had already left mess hall; only a few Rangers sat in a corner table. "Cadet Holmes,"
John called out in a low voice.

Sherlock had shifted in his chair, then began climbing to his feet.

"No need to get up," John had hastily added.

"Sir," Sherlock acknowledged. Whenever they'd passed each other in the corridors, a smile had crept
onto both their features if no one else was around. Now, Sherlock looked utterly spent and he didn't
even raise his chin to look at John.

"Care to explain why you're nearly falling asleep at lunch?" John asked, clasping his hands behind
his back, his tone matter-of-fact.

The two Rangers in the corner table glanced at John, before shifting their attention back to their
conversation.

"Can't sleep," came the muttered reply.

"What was that again?"

Sherlock cleared his throat and raised his oddly coloured eyes, dim with lack of sleep, to look at
John. "I can't sleep in the group dorm. The nightly ambient noises are too much. Sir."

John couldn't decide if the ease with which he had suddenly and obediently begun to pepper his
speech with the word 'sir' was more alarming than the state he looked to be in. "There are earplugs
on sale at the shop. Sort yourself out, Cadet."

That being said, he'd begun striding back to his table to collect his tray, but Sherlock's voice made
him stop. John couldn't make out the quiet words, so he pivoted on his heel and went back to the
man. "Come again?"

"I've not been given commissary rights yet, and even if I had, there's no money on my account."

Commissary rights—being allowed to visit the base shop—were at the training officers' discretion.
Usually, they were awarded automatically at the start of cadet training. This was either an innocent
oversight, or a punishment."

"Right," John said. "Well, can't be helped, then," he said dismissively, but instead of returning to his table, he dug out a pencil and a pad from his pocket, jotted down his account number, his signature, and the words 'tell them you're picking them up for me'. The commissary staff could always compare his signature to the ones he has already jotted down in their sales book if they got suspicious or give him a call to verify.

Sherlock read the note with a frown. He read it again, and finally nodded to John. After a wary glance at the Rangers in the corner table, he mouthed "thank you".

John knows he shouldn't have done such a thing that day—just like he shouldn't have come here to today to challenge someone else's work.

Wallis clearing his throat yanks John's thoughts back to the present "Was there anything else, Watson? Day's wasting."

Tension crackles between them since neither is stepping down, but John isn't worried—Wallis would never risk severe disciplinary action trying to establish domination by physical force, and while John also has a temper, he has learned to keep it in check. The only target he allows for it is himself.

Chen rises from the armchair he'd commandeered a few minutes earlier. "I'll tell him tonight to splint the fingers, and that he can sit out tomorrow morning's grappling class but not the kata. He can use the free time to study; the other students say he doesn't ever seem to be reading any of the exam materials. It's his loss if he flunks theory, but that wouldn't look good in our training records." He walks out the door and closes it behind him.

John realises that he would have wanted to be the one to tell Sherlock that.

Wallis clears his throat. "I appreciate the idealism, Watson. Now, stay the fuck out of business that's not yours." He walks out, leaving John bristling in his wake.

Once, he would have been their equal. Once, he was a bloody hero, but he never got to enjoy that since losing Harry. When piloted by two individuals, the control over the Jaeger is squared rather than doubled, due to the number of neural connections available growing massively when two brains are connected. When one pilot's input is lost, the burden of controlling a Jaeger by just one person means a four-fold neural strain. Usually, this leads to the pilot left behind quickly becoming overwhelmed and the Jaeger consequently becoming unresponsive. In the rare event that a pilot manages to push on, there is an increasing risk of permanent brain damage with every passing minute. How much damage is done and how quickly it occurs, has been nearly impossible to measure—the kaiju are quick to take advantage of the crippled Jaeger's vulnerability, taking it and the remaining pilot down before lasting neurological damage becomes reality.

John knows of only two other pilots who have survived when their co-pilots have perished; understandably the Corps doesn't like advertising the fact that a Ranger has been lost one way or the other, but he has managed to put together enough rumours, facts, and vague allusions to find out that one of them had committed suicide after being left with bad enough cognitive deficits never to pilot again. The other accidental solo pilot had eventually been sent to a civilian psychiatric institution. The information regarding how long they'd been able to solo pilot is classified, but John has understood from the looks and the whispers and corridor talk after Harry's death that no one had ever even come close to how long he had managed to keep Intercept going.

There had been nothing in John's aptitude test results or his training records to indicate he would be capable of such a feat, but he had still managed a staggering seven minutes of solo piloting
and survived with his wits intact. He had still spent two weeks at Med Bay afterwards, suffering from symptoms similar to a concussion combined with a severe migraine, and he had difficulties even writing his name during the first few days, and months passed before he could trust his memory and his ability to concentrate well enough to return to any sort of duty. The medical officers had assured him at six months that he was fully recovered by all parameters monitored—extensive neuropsychological and other evaluations had been repeated weekly—but there was no denying that he was a changed man, most of all by the gaping hole ripped into his life by Harry's death. Maybe the other Rangers were wary of him because he had quit playing a hero's role.

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Sherlock sinks his spoon into the mixture of overcooked pasta and gelatinous gloop described on the mess hall list as "cheese and bean sauce". He can't possibly eat this—even seeing its consistency is nearly making him retch. Thankfully, the bread container had been full, so he can fill his stomach with the cheap, white, springy loaf they serve every day. Clearly his jibe about caviar in the Corps only applies to the people high-up like Mycroft.

In the end, it hasn't been very difficult adapting to the mindless routines of cadet training. After Haig, this is easy. Here, he gets to sleep until half seven in the morning instead of being woken up at five a.m. for cleaning duty and getting his head dunked in the toilet. A part of him finds the predictability of his cadet days reassuring; having too much freedom hasn't resulted in any sort of a sensible plan on what to do with his life. He feels as trapped as ever, but at least adhering to the training timetable gives him time out of mind when he doesn't have to make decisions about how to whittle away his days. That's what London had been: existing. Wasting time.

This afternoon, there's four hours of physical conditioning left, after which there is an exam on Jaeger weapons systems. He won't need to revise; it'll be child's play. The rest of the cadets are naturally spending their precious lunchtime with their noses buried in the technical manuals. Idiots. They could have learned all this years ago like Sherlock had done.

He's sitting alone at a corner table. He always sits alone.

He could just grin and bear it, keep his head down, get through basic training with minimal fuss and accept his future as part of the Ground Crew. Yet, a part of him rebels again the idea that he doesn't deserve what these witless morons have convinced themselves is their birth right. None of them seem likely to have aptitude test results even close to matching his—if they did, they wouldn't have gone the army route. Most candidates with high enough scores to be recruited through the aptitude track have already been plucked up by the Corps years ago. The rest are left with just the option of elbowing themselves in through army service. That being considered, who are the real leftovers in this scenario?

Mycroft thinks he should have signed off his life to the PPDC years ago. Yet, he also believes Sherlock will never amount to anything. He doesn't know what their parents would have thought of his chances of carving a place for himself in the world—he never rated very high on their scale of importance. As much as Sherlock prides himself in how little he cares about the opinions of others, those overwhelmingly negative opinions have been inflicted on him all his life. How many times does one have to be told they're a hopeless case before they start believing it and acting accordingly?

Weirdo. Retard. Delinquent. An unruly child whose academic aptitude matters little when he cannot adhere to basic discipline. Idle weed. Freak. He has had many pet names in his life.

He always tries to go to mess hall as late as he can to avoid the others. Last night, when he had
returned to the dorm after dinner, he had found his bunk missing its mattress. He'd spent a miserable night on the bare, hard bed and today he'll have to endure the mortification of going to Requisitions to beg for a new mattress unless his old one mysteriously reappears during the day. It's a repeat of an old pattern: instead of just letting him be, of making him a social pariah, his very existence somehow grates on the nerves of his peers so much that it requires an outlet. This is the same as it had been at Haig: if he kept his head down, kept quiet and made no fuss about himself they singled him out as weak; if he fought back with the lashes of his tongue, they just hated him more. At least the taekwondo had helped in his teens when the physical side of the bullying at Haig began to escalate. Granted, he hadn't been at his best when he'd first met his fellow candidates, but it has never mattered whether he makes an effort to be civil or not—something about him repels the non-neurodiverse.

Not once has he had anyone on his side. The teachers at Haig weren't any help at all and telling them about the bullying merely encouraged the idiots to turn up the heat. Often, the staff just punished Sherlock instead of the others, and it was hell sitting in class with his hide caned raw. He was punished for being disagreeable, they told him. He was ordered to be more sociable, to curb his tongue, to be more active about seeking out company, to participate in team sports and other group activities. The more they tried to box him in, the more he resisted because no one ever explained what the crime was that had necessitated his imprisonment in such a place as Haig. He'd wept from relief when he'd walked out of the gates after graduation, clutching his diploma like a safety blanket; holding it in his hand meant that no one could drag him back there.

Mycroft hadn't come to pick him up that day. While other families took their children out to celebrate, his brother just sent a car to pick him up, a plane ticket waiting in the back seat. Sherlock was eighteen, theoretically free to do what he wanted after graduation, but with his finances under Mycroft's control any options he may have thought he had were a pipe dream.

At least he knew that university in England wouldn't be the same as a boarding school. The only alternative to continued education that Mycroft would have accepted was the PPDC and there was no way in hell Sherlock would have agreed to it.

Cambridge had, indeed, been marginally better than Haig. He had learned his lesson: do not engage. Don't talk to people. Don't let them in. When approached, offence is the best defence. He was meticulous about shutting down any attempts by his fellow students to befriend him, to seduce him, to benefit from his skills and knowledge. He'd thought he had become skilled at keeping everyone out.

He had no one. And, he was certain that would never change.

Then, John Watson had walked into his dorm room. Correction: not John. It's Ranger Watson, he tells himself, but it feels like a joke. Something about their interactions has never fit the framework of any sort of command structure. Somehow, the man had made him reveal his soft underbelly, probably because he'd been so sick that his defences were down. Now, he can't get Ranger John Watson out of his thoughts. He wants to know everything about the man, to solve the mystery of him, but is there a harder task? John emits an aura of sorrow, acutely visible like a gaping wound, and hides in plain sight from his fellow Rangers by pretending to be insignificant and harmless. John clearly cannot be cajoled or pushed or cornered to share the contents of his head—he'll simply withdraw, retreat, perhaps even lash out. At least very least, he'll hide behind rank and Code of Conduct. He's a conundrum of curiosity and aloofness, of duty and honesty, and somehow, Sherlock has inspired in him an undeserved loyalty. Why?

News travel fast in a place like this, and nothing stays hidden. The fact that John had stormed into the Rangers' lounge yesterday to defend him and demand that he be treated differently is certainly on
everyone's lips today. Everyone seems surprised at John's ballsiness—all, except for Sherlock. How can they ignore who John is? How can they forget the Ranger he once was? The Ranger he still must be, if he just allowed himself that option. The John Watson who had sat vigil by his bunk is not what Sherlock would have expected if he'd been told years ago he was going to meet the Ranger once world-famous for solo-piloting a Jaeger longer than anyone. John is clearly hiding his assets underneath the demeanour of a world-weary, utterly boring Corps doctor. He doesn't carry himself with the reserved confidence of a physician—instead, his demeanour is the bitter subordination of someone who has been side-lined. Don't the idiots in this base realise that the feat John had performed when his sister had died completely rules out that he could be anything less than remarkable—that no heroic or brave act done by him should be surprising in any way?

This raises a pertinent question: why would John pay any attention to someone like him? What has John seen in him that makes him want to come to his defence? Sherlock is no longer his responsibility, and it's hardly a merit to associate oneself with a candidate who seems destined to fail from the start.

There is another question that makes him even more uneasy: why is he so preoccupied in kind?

He often finds himself meditating on the strangest details such as John's hands—remembers being calmed by the man's patient ministrations when he had felt miserable, shivering and nauseous. Could it possibly be that he has fallen prey to something as pedestrian as Florence Nightingale syndrome?

He thinks about John's voice, giving form to things that do not sound like the standard platitudes of a physician on duty.

Sherlock doesn't want a friend. He doesn't want a mentor. He's not interested at all in anyone acting like they are a big brother looking out for him. He doesn't need a doctor, nor does he need an advocate who goes around yelling at people on his behalf and making him sound like some pathetic creature needing leniency to get through basic training.

But, the thought that there's—someone… It's hard to even wrap his head around the idea, let alone pick apart why it feels so important. So cataclysmic.

Is John a friend? An ally? If Sherlock is honest with himself, he doesn't want to place John in any of the usual categories people use to explain what others are to them. Sherlock has never been good at deciphering people's motives, reading their emotions in their expression and actions or deducing how they feel about him. He just cannot place John in the matrix of people's usual expectations and patterns. A part of him thinks there is something there—a frighteningly and fascinatingly complex reason why John seems to be thinking about him, too, judging by the need to protect him.

Two days ago, when his resolve and capacity for self-denial had been at their lowest in weeks, he had thought about kissing John Watson. He hasn't ever wanted to kiss anyone. He doesn't want to want to kiss anyone. God, this is getting out of hand. He's lonely, he's stuck here, John is the only good thing about this place, and it's logical that his limbic system would latch onto whatever pedestrian source of comfort presented itself. For the duration of his teen years and his adulthood, he has managed to avoid attachment, because it had never given him anything but pain. Love in all of its incarnations is something he has dismissed as a thing he'll never have because of the way he is. He had been a burden even to his family. They would say they loved him, but it sounded like the sort of duty that one listed alongside paying taxes and being a good citizen. Clearly, love must be a false construct, a line drawn in wet sand easily wiped out of existence. A mirage. A distraction.

He needs to work harder on convincing himself that this preoccupation with John Watson is nothing but him succumbing to depression, trying to grasp at straws, putting too much stock on the one nice thing that has happened to him since he'd sat in that interrogation room and got sent to this prison-by-
He draws a deep breath and a rib a fellow cadet had cracked with an admirably sharp kick to
complains, making him hiss under his breath.

He doesn't mind pain. It's an old friend. The loneliness, too, is a devil he knows as well.

It's just that John—

Idiot, he tells himself. Stop wasting your time on this. Clearly, he's clinging to pointless things when
he should he looking forward. He's not here of his own volition, so any motivation is going to be
flimsy at best, and he certainly shouldn't hang it onto an individual who has nothing to do with his
training. He has no reason to spend time with John Watson anymore. He has no reason to even talk
to the man, save for an occasional formal salute as they pass each other in the hallways.

But, as much as he tries to order himself to be sensible, it still feels like an even sharper kick to the
ribs—the thought that John is here, but infinitely beyond his reach.

Author's notes:
In many AU stories, Sherlock is the Messiah prodigy with exceptional gifts, but John is
just... John, meaning that his special ability is simply being able to deal with Sherlock. It
was important to me that he was exceptional, too, most of all through his resilience, his
will to survive and his ability to bounce back and return to at least some sort of duty. He
is, of course, also a catalyst for equilibrium and a sturdy foundation for Sherlock's
volatile, unrefined brilliance.

We are now learning more about the Jaegers of Chard's Rift—rest assured, you will get
to see them through John's eyes soon. The Ravager is the one to keep an eye on, as you
may have guessed. At this point the Atlantic subdivision of the PPDC has been a
laughing stock for some time because they just haven't been able to man that particular
fancypants one—haven't found pilots clever and Drift compatible enough. Maybe they
never will, and Mycroft could use the Ravager as a particularly colossal garden gnome?

Kata, also known as forms, could be described as shadow boxing. They are series of
martial arts battle moves that teach fluency and concentration. Here is the second kata
from the shotokan style of karate, also used in some other karate styles, including the
one yours truly used to train.

I am deliberately using the term (non-)neurodiverse instead of neuro(a)typical, since I
imagined the lingo considered politically correct may have changed by 2041.

Firing the canon:
In the early parts of the first Pacific Rim film, Ranger Raleigh Becket loses his brother
Yancy in battle and is forced to solo pilot their Jaeger, Gipsy Danger, as he struggles to
defeat a kaiju. As mentioned before, the tale of the Becket brothers has been an
inspiration for what happened to John and Harry.
Writing soundtrack for this chapter:

Banks: Waiting Game
Kyla La Grange: Cut Your Teeth

I have received some fun asks about this series on tumblr, plus there are some picture posts readers might enjoy having a look at:

— John the way I imagine him in this very chapter and eighteen years earlier
— a moodboard
— Scenery from the Terceira hike
— some imagery of Chard's Rift
— more visuals of Chard's Rift
— views of sunrise over the Atlantic and the Azores
— London in 2041, some stuff from South Korea which will become pertinent later and some coastal Azores views
— John&Harry from 18 years ago plus a Mycroft
— Q: If John’s gone through the implantation process, is it really as bad as Sherlock seems to think?
— Q: Why hasn't John just quit the PPDC?
It's customary for all the base staff to attend the cadets' graduation ceremony. Even John, who has mostly opted out of such pomp and circumstance in recent years, does enjoy seeing fresh faces finding out whether they can continue chasing their dream of becoming Jaeger pilots or if they're going to be put in the Ground Crew. While the latter is vital to the running of the PPDC, for most it would mark a failure. Three years ago, a BBC documentary crew had done a reality show on cadet training, culminating in this occasion. Only one or two out of each batch of recruits gets selected for the chance to become a Jaeger pilot and often it's quite obvious from the start who the strong candidates are but of course everyone starts out hoping they might be the one. Twenty years ago, when John and Harry had been recruited, their basic training and the whole selection process had been expedited since the kaiju crisis was at its worst and the PPDC still taking its baby steps.

Thirty rows of collapsible chairs have been arranged in the large hangar below sea level known as the Underdome. It seems proper that the silent, hulking forms of the base's three Jaegers are watching over the proceedings from their docking alcoves.

The Jaegers are battle armour gone big; another word for them would be an exoskeleton. They are so massive that the two pilots operating each of them do so from a Conn-Pod that fits inside the front of the Jaeger equivalent of a skull, and the highest ones stand as tall as eight- to fifteen-storey buildings.

Greenwich Victory is Chard's Rift's Jaeger patriarch. Mostly silver in shade but with green lights and dark green seam embellishments, It's showing more than a bit of wear and tear in its dinged-in plating; not even regular sprucings-up with fresh coats of paint can hide its age. It's the only one of the three Jaegers of the Atlantic Strike Team that has seen action; formerly known as Echo Saber, it was relocated from the Tokyo Shatterdome to be the first Atlantic Jaeger.

John has arrived early; one of the cleaning crews are still hanging by their harnesses from dynamic climbing ropes, scrubbing the pristine-looking breastplate of Churchill, the smallest of the three Jaegers. It had been designed as a swift forerunner of the team to complement the Victory. To make it faster than most Jaegers, each of its muscle strands comes with two hydraulic units instead of just one. It is silvery blue with navy blue breast- and shoulder plates, and just like other Jaegers, it needs two heavy-duty combat helicopters to carry it any significant distance even though it's not as tall as most of its kind. Thankfully, kaiju are not very fast, either, in making their way from a rift to any coastal area needing protection, so the slow method of transporting Jaegers by air is feasible. The Corps naturally prefers to engage the kaiju as far from inhabited areas as possible, but the Jaegers don't really fight well submerged.

The last member of the Atlantic Strike Team is the Reichenbach Ravager. Named after the German-born engineer who designed it, it is the first Jaeger built in the Commonwealth after the now rather aged Australian ones. It's taller than most Jaegers, built to withstand extreme weather conditions, and with its hybrid power cores, it should be able to function for an entire week without having to be recharged. Theoretically, the Ravager should have enough physical and firepower to take on a level 7 kaiju; one has not been seen yet but that day is expected to arrive since they have progressively grown in size and destructive power through the years.

After the lessons learned in the drone crisis, another hacking incident a year after that, and the fact
that some kaiju seem to have EMP-like effects on electrical systems, the Ravager is designed to be able to function even if communications to Mission Control are completely cut. This is what makes it such a demanding Jaeger to pilot: the level of independence required from the pilot demands an exceptionally high compatibility and the ensuing exceptional level of neural sync when Drifting. Not just any pilot team can reach such a state. In fact, no team in Chard's Rift has succeeded so far, and there have been talks to do worldwide try-outs, which would naturally be a bit of an embarrassment to the Atlantic subsection. It might even lead to the Ravager being moved elsewhere. The Jaeger had been a triumph when it was finished but slowly, it is becoming the fodder of much humour and a thorn on the side of politicians, who are now accused of building a 'toy so fancy no one knows how to play with it', as one comedian had phrased it. Phrases like 'white elephant' are bandied about, even if the colour reference is wrong. Unlike its companions who sport shades of lighter metal, the Ravager is nearly all black, thanks to the novel alloys used in its armour plating. The lighting along its torso and circling the windows of the Conn-Pod housing the pilots is a brighter red, as other highlight parts used in the design. Three decorative blood-red stripes adorn its right breastplate, looking as though something with big claws had slashed it.

The formidable sight of such a war machine should give a kaiju at least some pause—not that anyone knows whether they even experience emotions such as fear. They are sentient, that much is known, and hostile, of course, but their origins and their purpose remain shrouded mostly in mystery, at least if one believes the official reports. Maybe the science division knows more but isn't saying anything in order to ward off mass panic. Lord knows there are already enough conspiracy theorists among the general public cooking up madcap theories and spreading them on the internet.

John doesn't understand the impulse to speculate on such outlandish stuff; as is, the kaiju are already the very epitome of unlikely, incredible and insane. They shouldn't exist. Yet, one day one simply came through the Breach and reshaped what everyone thought they know about the world. It had certainly reshaped John's plans about the future, and that's why they're all here, now. He doesn't miss the kaiju—who the hell would?—but he misses the sense of purpose fighting them had given him. He misses the perfect equilibrium of relying on someone and someone relying on him. He would have done anything for Harry, and Harry the same for him. Even back when they were still kids, he'd looked after his sister, and once they became adults and joined the Corps, she returned that favour over and over again. Drifting with her he'd felt safe, important and content. Not happy, since a close relationship with a sibling wasn't exactly the same as falling in love and spending his life with someone he had chosen. Not happy, but what he had was enough. The reassuring presence of Harry, who kept his secrets safe, must have been better and easier than what waited beyond the walls of the Hawaii Shatterdome. He knew his place and his role, and no one can have everything, can they?

Except that some Rangers do—those who end up together with their co-pilots. Properly together, as lovers and spouses.

Then again, those people are all heterosexual. "Fucking straight people," is what Harry often cursed to John when drunk and it was just the two of them present, "can't live with 'em, can't live without them since they set the fucking rules." It was only a half-joke, the sting of which she must have felt as acutely as John. Somehow, Harry was always more honest about who she was, and better at forcing others to accept it, even in the Corps.

Before he takes his seat in the Rangers' row, John scans the group of cadets already seated up front. Sherlock's unruly curls are easy to spot—John knows from corridor talk that quite a few punitive sets of pull-ups have been assigned due to his obstinacy in obeying the part of the dress code that regulates hairstyles. The edge of John's mouth creeps up; the sudden surge of giddy joy he feels over witnessing such a blatant act of rebellion is a novel feeling for him. He has toed the line for so long, and what has it earned him? Not respect, that's for sure. And here is Sherlock, seemingly fearlessly taking on things that represent everything that has bothered him about the PPDC for years. Even if
they are small things, it gives John some strange hope, even if he knows that the fearless-ness he sees is an act—after all, Sherlock had admitted to him being rather apprehensive about his future.

Sherlock is keeping his face strictly forward, towards the speaker box; John wishes he could see his expression. Does he have a confident estimate on what’s going to happen today? Has he relented to being the expected prodigy of the Corps, or has he been assured that, due to disobedience and a self-sabotaged abysmal basic training performance, he'll be given a menial job in the Ground Crew? The Science Division isn’t an option, chemistry degree or no chemistry degree; this isn't the route in, and no one with a criminal record would have any chance of being recruited to it anyway—not after that drone debacle where a kaiju-corrupted scientist had managed to nearly open a new set of Breaches. John has wondered whether the man’s issues could have been prevented, or if the regulations instilled afterwards are merely the politicians wanting to look as though they are doing something to prevent a repeat. Instead of listening to scientists and trying to make the best possible decisions based on data, they are trying to ensure their own re-election. This makes them always late in taking action.

The Holmeses are a good example of just that. John had read their biography, written posthumously by one of the Hong Kong Shatterdome's science officers. Before the kaiju arrived, Andrew and Marjorie Holmes had been a pair of geologists who noticed strange shifts in the newer laser surveys of the geomorphology of the Pacific—things that hadn't been visible in the satellite pictures and other surveys taken in the 1990s. The biography described, in great and embarrassing detail, their struggles to be taken seriously; they travelled from conference to conference for years but politics and the reluctance of the scientific community not to accept anything that didn't fit their established worldview lead to them being ridiculed and marginalised.

It all changed, when San Francisco happened. Incidentally, the Holmeses were there during that first kaiju attack—Andrew Holmes had finally been allowed to do a presentation of their findings at a geology conference. After half of San Francisco Bay was decimated by the kaiju later dubbed Trespasser, sceptics became believers in what had been seen as a madcap theory. Nobody was an expert in the Breach of the kaiju, but since the Holmeses had been the first to try to raise the alarms, they were the best the world had. However, educating world leaders about the scientific evidence for a threat and a major city having already experienced kaiju devastation didn’t quickly translate into a successful defence. By the time the world had shaken off its shock and arranged a UN-led summit on how to respond to the attack, Manila, Cabo and Sydney had fallen victim to three more kaiju. The Trespasser had been a level 1—still vulnerable to smaller tactical missiles—but the third had been a level 2, and when nothing else had topped it, a small nuclear strike had been used. A major topic of that foundering summit of the Pan-Pacific Defence Corps consequently was the fact established by the events in Sydney that nuclear weapons and heavier tactical missiles are not a viable option in densely populated areas.

Something else had to be done.

Cue the Jaeger programme. It was founded in that very first summit after Dr Jasper Schoenfeld and Dr Caitlin Lightcap presented their preliminary designs of the first Jaegers in a pitch that became legendary once footage from it hit the news. The Holmeses—instant staunch advocates of the Jaeger program—were part of the first PPDC High Council, and they oversaw the construction of the Hawaii Shatterdome. It felt deeply unfair that they would perish in a later kaiju attack in Vancouver—the first one to hit Canada; they happened to be there for a PPDC summit. There's a memorial built for them in Vancouver harbour.

How would it look now, if Holmes the younger was relegated to a marginal role in Ground Crew? Of course, there was the elder son sitting on the throne of the Atlantic Marshall, but wouldn't it seem like a waste if the Corps fails to make the best use of Sherlock with his exemplary aptitude scores?
Then again, the whole argument might be entirely academic. Sherlock had refused to go anywhere near Med Bay even for run-of-the-mill medical care, so it seems highly unlikely he'd agree to implantation.

John remains lost in thought until the ceremony starts, nearly failing to notice his fellow Rangers taking seats next to him. Wallis isn't one of them since he and Chen are sitting with the cadets. Their training duties will end today; others will provide the cadets with further training wherever each of them end up.

The Atlantic Marshal usually attends these things to deliver a dry, pointless speech, but this time his flight had been delayed by a volcanic eruption in Iceland. Back in the day, as long as they didn't bother air traffic or threaten lives or cattle, nobody paid much attention to volcanic or seismic activity, but nowadays such stuff is as closely watched as EastEnders even by most civilians. John isn't sure if that soap is still on. It probably is. TV broadcasts at the base are dodgy and mostly consist of Portuguese channels, and since many Internet sites are being blocked by the Corps John hasn't really kept up with entertainment. He does watch the Portuguese news if he's in the mess hall at the right time—the display unit automatically translates the meteorologist's words and the weather symbols and geological event maps that end every broadcast are pretty much self-explanatory.

John suspects it would have felt odd to see the Marshal on the podium today, knowing who his little brother is. It's probably for the best that Sherlock doesn't have that stressor present at his graduation. Although Sherlock has not volunteered many details on why this is so, it's obvious that there's no love lost between the brothers.

Soon enough, it's time for the cadet assignment announcements. One by one, the candidates—in their easily recognisable, tight-fitting cerulean blue jumpers and greyish blue trousers with large PPDC patches on their right biceps—receive their designations and walk to sit in the areas assigned for those groups. The names are called out in alphabetical order.

"Farrar, ground crew."

"Greenfeld, ground crew."

Cadet Lee is assigned to the Jaeger Corps, and John isn't surprised. He'd heard Wallis saying that Lee's combat skills had improved greatly during basic training, his test scores were high enough, and there wasn't that much to complain in his aptitude results. Perfectly adequate, a well-rounded candidate, but not spectacular. Still has a smart mouth, but most Rangers will probably think that sort of thing will fit right into the Corps. Besides, if the kaiju come back and it turns out that Lee is all talk, then reality will shake him into his senses. It certainly had peeled off any ideas off John that returning from any mission was ever guaranteed, or that he was indestructible.

Harry had never lost her machismo. "Your sister's got bigger balls than you, Watson," a fellow Ranger had once joked, to which Harry, a glass of Azorean hooch in hand, had replied: "And you can give them a good lick if you haven't got anything better to do than to let that fucking mouth run off on its own". It had been Christmas, and they'd spent most of their shore leave at a bar in Funchal. It had been a good day. A good Christmas. Their last, together.

The microphone rattles and Wallis taps it against his palm. He then continues reading out the names; the next two candidates are assigned to ground crew. From a recruitment batch this small, it seems unlikely that a second prospective pilot will emerge.

"Holmes," Wallis calls out, and John's heart flips an extra beat.

Wallis waits to allow Sherlock enough time to rise to his feet before making the announcement:
"Jaeger Corps."

John nearly stands up in amazement. Or, should he be surprised? If Sherlock’s aptitude scores were high enough to be dragged here in the midst of opioid withdrawal, then is this truly so surprising?

Sherlock appears equally surprised, judging by how he has frozen on the spot. He should join the rest of the Jaeger Corps in the seating area John is in, but he doesn't even flinch away from the cadet section.

Even from a distance, John can make out Wallis giving him a glance instead of the paralysed cadet. Why?

Finally, Sherlock seems to return to himself, pivots on his heel, marches down the aisle—past where Cadet Lee is already looking smug sitting with the rest of the Rangers—and then straight out of the Underdome towards the elevator corridor.

John can barely sit still for the rest of the ceremony. Once the last trumpet blast of the Corps March he has always considered a bit pretentious has sounded out and the crowd begins dispersing, he seeks Wallis out.

"How the hell did he survive group A?" John protests. "Nobody in the state he arrived in would make it through that. No way." Even athletes might struggle to jump straight into the fitness regime of active duty pilots.

"I shouldn't tell you this, but I had nothing to do with the group A designation. The order came from some higher-up."

John's brows shoot up. No wonder Sherlock hadn't been given any more chances than a single practice match to show what he's made of—the decision had been made before he'd even begun basic training!

"Higher-up? Who?"

The only one who comes to mind is the Marshal. Why would he interfere? Is he trying to help his brother by keeping him off pilot duty, or trying to teach him some sort of a lesson by putting him through the wringer? Either way, that plan had obviously failed.

Wallis glances around as though trying to make sure no one is listening in. "Very high up. That's all I can say."

"Well, what about accepting him into the Corps? Did that order came from somewhere up in the brass, too?" John demands.

Wallis shakes his head. "My guess is that since he would have been pushed hard even in group B, someone wanted to ensure he fails by putting him in A. But, the thing is, he didn't fail. Of course, he couldn't keep up with all the demands of the active service regime, but we couldn't not notice how bloody hard he pushed himself. The panel looked at his performance in the context of his physical state upon arrival; he surpassed expectations in all categories except for teamwork skills and adhering to the Corps code of conduct. He excelled in fighting techniques and stamina, and we could hardly overlook his aptitude test results."

"The aptitude scores aren't everything."

"Not just the aptitude scores. As well as defying all expectations with the physical conditioning, he scored full marks from all the theory exams. No other cadet impressed us like he did, none of them
got even close to what he showed us."

Full marks without studying? That's what John had been told by the trainers, hadn't he? That Sherlock never picked up any of the study materials? And, he'd heard the other cadets gossiping.

*The idiot just couldn't help showing off, could he? Now he's gone and sealed his fate, assuming he wanted to end up in the Ground Crew to get off easy!*

"It's just that—" John starts arguing before he has even worked out what to say. "Accepting him into the Corps—"

He snaps his mouth shut when he suddenly realises that he doesn't have any right to speak for a cadet. He doesn't know what the cadet wants or doesn't want. It's not his fight, and if this is what Sherlock has decided he wants, after all, then John has no right to piss on his achievements.

"Sounds like you don't think making him a Ranger is a good idea," Wallis points out. "Look, John—if you know something I don't, if you think he's a liability or a downright risk, then speak now or forever be silent," he jokes, though John knows that beneath the lightness of his tone the Fightmaster is serious. They've had attempted infiltrators from terrorist groups before, and one of them even got as far as Drift training. Naturally, her cover was blown the minute she went through a neural handshake with another cadet, since keeping secrets isn't possible when Drifting.

"If you say he deserves this, then that has to be right," John says firmly. "He must have worked hard. I guess I just worried about his motivation, just like you and Chen did," he excuses himself.

"He's not your project anymore, John," Wallis reminds him amicably.

John glances at the Ravager where it stands on the opposite side of the Underdome. Without lights in the Conn-Pod signalling that Rangers are there, it looks like a lifeless statue. Dead. Useless.

John reminds himself that none of this is his problem—not Sherlock, not ensuring that the best people get recruited to pilot the Jaegers. This isn't his world anymore.

"I know." John shifts his focus from the Jaeger to Wallis' expression, trying to discern how strange the man might find his interest in Sherlock. Maybe it's just nice to have been able to talk to someone who doesn't live and breathe the Corps; eighteen years away from what used to be known as The United Kingdom is a long time.

Wallis nods, then leaves John standing in the now mostly empty seating area. He should go to his room, catch up on journals, maybe clean up the long row of dirty coffee mugs on the sink. There's plenty he could be getting on with. Oh, and it's delivery day at the base store. *That'll cheer me up*, he decides as he walks to the lifts and squeezes into a crowded one to get back to the main levels.

The walk to the base story is short and mostly devoid of people since a lot of the staff have done to dinner or stuck around in the Underdome having a look at the Jaegers—it's not often anyone but the crew assigned there gets to gawk at the reason they're all here for. For the cadets, the graduation ceremony is their first proper chance to see what waits at the end of Drift training or what they will miss out on, having been assigned to the Ground Crew.

After getting his goods, John tries to motivate himself to go back to his room, but he just can't shake the image of Sherlock practically taking a runner from the ceremony. He curses, shoves his meagre purchases into the pockets of his ink-blue parade uniform, before walking first through the main hangar and then across the upper scenic deck from where he can see most of the airfields and all the lower decks. He has a hunch that Sherlock might have wanted some fresh air to think.
At the starboard edge of the scenic deck, he hesitates, trying again to coax himself to leave well enough alone because he has found what he's looking for; there's a lonely figure sitting on top of one of the massive plasma cannons, looking out to sea.

Not your business.

He huffs. What is his business, nowadays? Running an unofficial health clinic for birth control and sprains? Trying to read all the books in the Shatterdome library? Continuing to devise pointless projects that get shot down by the brass so that it would be easier to trick himself into thinking he's a valuable member of the Corps?

What exactly is his purpose? They let him stay, all those years ago. For what? To be Harry's living tombstone?

He scrambles over the safety railing of the scenic deck and makes his way to the cannons. The late afternoon sun is warm, compensating perfectly for the salty chill in the breeze. He takes up a standing position next to Sherlock, who must have heard his footsteps but doesn't turn to see who has arrived. The younger man has taken off his jumper and pulled his tightly fitting, white dress shirt out of his trousers, and the two top buttons are now undone. A brisk sea breeze is shifting his curls around, whipping them into a mess John is suddenly tempted to run his hands through, or at least tuck a few loose ringlets back behind an ear.

John’s fingers reach out but then conscious thought kicks in and he stops himself. He clasps his hands behind his back.

"Should I say congratulations, or that I'm sorry?"

Sherlock doesn't turn to look at him. "I wish I knew."

"I thought you had made a decision, considering your exam scores and how hard you've worked. Even Wallis is impressed."

"I couldn't bring myself to fail them deliberately. I don't know why. Maybe I’m allergic to the concept of cheating."

Maybe you didn't want to cheat yourself out of the chance of a lifetime.

John sits down next to him, leaning a palm on the sun-warmed deck. "Maybe a part of you does know—the part that didn't want to end up in the Ground Crew like all the average candidates."

"You don't get it," Sherlock says, and digs out a cigarette and lighter out of his pocket.

Cadets aren't allowed to smoke, and Sherlock himself had told John he had no money on his commissary account. Even if he must now be permitted to use it, cadets don't get per diem. The only chance might be that his brother has arranged a wire transfer. "Where'd you get those?"

"Wallis."

"Wallis gave you—?" John closes his eyes briefly when the realisation hits. "Of course, he didn't." He chuckles.

"It feels like I'm betraying my principles if I go through with this. I swore, ever since I was twelve, that this was the last thing I'd ever do."

"Did you swear that because you honestly didn't want any of this, not even a tiny bit—or because
you were a kid who was really angry at the PPDC?"

Sherlock replies with a noncommittal hum, wraps his lips around the now lit cigarette and draws in a long inhalation.

"Maybe it's not betraying yourself or giving in. Maybe it's lemonade."

Sherlock turns to face him, looking disbelieving. "Lemonade?"

"When life gives you lemons?"

"Ah."

"Maybe you could show whoever you've been trying to spite that you can take this thing and make it yours. Own it, instead of running from it."

"Maybe. Still not convinced at all that it's worth getting my brain stem and spine poked into."

"I let them, and I'm still here. Good as new," John jokes.

Sherlock's eyes lock onto John's bad shoulder. He must be thinking of the scar underneath John's jacket and shirt, the shrapnel still inside the muscle. "Did you have the old-style implant surgery?"

"Yeah. Wasn't too bad. I was on my feet in two days." Very shaky feet, but still. John doesn't offer more details; they're not going to help Sherlock's decision-making because that's all in the past. An open craniotomy is no longer necessary, only a series of injections into a vein containing the nanobots and the building materials they need for the implants.

"I have a graduation present for you," John says, wanting to change the subject.

Sherlock says nothing but his expression does shift to expectant.

John digs out a KitKat from his pocket.

Sherlock scoffs, staring at the offering for a moment before shifting his cigarette to his left hand so that he can accept the gift with his right. "Why would I care for a chocolate bar?"

"When was the last time you had one?" John knows that Sherlock hasn't been to the commissary, cadets aren't allowed to raid the staff kitchens where the ice cream and the army-issue wine gums are kept, and the mess hall doesn't serve dessert.

"I don't remember."

"When was the last time you had someone in your life who might give you a KitKat?"

Sherlock's sea-glass eyes, reflecting a bit of sunlight, study John's expression. Usually, he'd feel uncomfortable under so much attention, but coming from Sherlock, he practically drinks it in.

When Sherlock looks at him, he no longer feels like a has-been. No longer rudderless. When Sherlock looks at him, he feels like... a Ranger.

_Why?_

"This isn't your real family—or mine—but it's _a_ family," John points out. "By all intents and purposes, you belong here. Why fight it? Just out of principle? What if you miss out on a lot if you stick to something you decided at the mature age of twelve?"
"You sound like you're recruiting for a cult."

"If wanting to stand between the human race and the apocalypse is a cult, then give me a robe and a candle and some chants and I'll get right to it."

Sherlock chuckles. "Finally, someone manages to make the Jaeger Corps sound tempting. I did always find some of the Ranger groupies in Korea and London downright religious in their worship. Your collectable card used to be a very popular one."

"My what?" John gapes.

Sherlock shrugs. "All Jaeger pilots get collectable cards; even in the age of 3D virtual reality gaming, people want to pay for useless pieces of cardboard. They're sold all over South Korea and Japan, and there are some European collectors as well. They list stuff like kills, Jaegers piloted and, of course, superpowers."

"You're shitting me."

"Alas, no. 'Single pilot control expert' is what yours said. One of the Prefects at school had it. I stole it, along with some other favourites of his."

John doesn't ask if Harry has a trading card, too. It would be just another pointless memorial, one made out of glossy cardboard.

What he should ask is why Sherlock had seen a need to pilfer the cards. Had it been just a prank, or revenge for something? Or, had he wanted them for himself? In the end, he refrains because Sherlock seems bitter about his past and reticent to discuss it save for these sudden bursts of reminiscing. Prying questions would probably only lead to that line of inquiry promptly being shut down, and he doesn't want to rock the boat at this point. It still feels as though they're circling each other, sizing one another up, and whatever's between is still new and fragile.

He shakes his head. "Collectable cards. Jeez."

"You really should get out more, John. It would give you a wider perspective."

"Do you still have them?"

"They're probably somewhere in the flat I used to rent; I assume Mycroft has had it emptied and everything taken to storage or a dump. People sell them online. Yours used to go for at least a few hundred pounds since they haven't made a re-issue in sixteen years."

John can't help a giggle, which he then stifles; "Sorry about your flat and your stuff."

"They're just things. Hardly a reason to stay."

"What would be a reason to stay somewhere?"

"That remains to be seen."

Chapter End Notes
Author's notes:
After AnyaWen—my trusted friend, beta and fellow Coven member—read this chapter, she had one very pressing matter on her mind. "Jessica," she said; "you need to confirm to me right now that this Ranger Watson trading card exists". I laughed and told her no. Two hours later, that no had turned into a yes.

So, here's what Sherlock, age 13, hid under his pillow:
Next, 7PercentSolution saw that and had further demands. More photoshoppery will follow.

When devising the story of the Holmes parents I thought a lot about the lives and deaths of a ground-breaking volcanologist couple, Maurice and Katia Kraft, who perished in an eruption of Japan's Mount Unzen when a pyroclastic flow was triggered.

Open craniotomy is when the bony skull is sawed open in order to operate on what's inside. Cranium=skull, -otomy=to cut into.

**Firing the canon:**
A strike group means the set of Jaegers assigned to a single Shatterdome. Echo Saber is the only canonical Jaeger mentioned in this chapter. This [bit from the first film](#) contains some nice views of Jaegers, the War Clock and the interior of the Hong Kong Shatterdome.

Some kaiju actually *are* pretty fast, at least when it comes to swimming.'

The moment of birth of the PPDC and Dr Jasper Schoenfeld and Dr Caitlin Lightcap as the key players are canon, as are the attacks on Sydney, San Francisco, Manila and Cabo.

Kaiju and Jaeger-themed toys and apparel are a canon thing. Examples can be found in the [opening montage of the first film](#).

In canon, only The Pacific Ocean gets Breaches. For the purposes of this story, I have assumed that there is nothing special about that particular ocean that dictates that Breaches couldn't happen in other sea areas. Shatterdome locations have been selected based on the typical routes of the kaiju from Breaches towards habitation; the idea is to intercept them before they arrive in an area where fighting them could lead to significant
collateral civilian damage. Canonically, a Breach is a sort of an interdimensional portal that opens at the bottom of the ocean to let kaiju through. I have deliberately not been explaining much about the precise nature of Breaches, the kaiju or their motivations since that discussion is a bit of a tangent to our romantic plot. If anyone wants to know more, head to the Pacific Rim Wiki, which will explain all of it to you much more eloquently than I ever could.

Writing soundtrack for this chapter:
The Killers: A Matter of Time
Smashing Pumpkins: Disarm
Awake

Chapter Notes

It's been three days after the graduation ceremony, and John often finds his thoughts returning to Sherlock, who he hasn't seen since their conversation on the cannon deck.

After receiving their assignments, new Jaeger Corps members—tradition dictates that the term Ranger should only be used after one actually has piloted a Jaeger for the first time—have five training-free days to move their things to their new single rooms and to recover from the implantation. For some, this is much-needed reflection time as to what exactly they are about to sign up for, and they can freely resign during this period and receive honourable discharge papers. It is very rare to see a cadet who decides not to go through with Drift training—most who quit the Corps do so early into basic training, and no one really gets picked into the Jaeger Corps against their will.

John wonders if Sherlock would be such a candidate if he had a genuine choice to go back to his old life—a life that no longer exists. If Sherlock returns to Britain, he'll be extradited to the PPDC authorities, tried publicly for illicit possession of kaiju blood and a domestic act of terrorism, and sent to prison. Still, their conversation up on the cannon deck seemed to point to Sherlock having made a choice of some kind during basic training to choose the Jaeger Corps, if only he was allowed in.

That means he must be at least considering implantation. Quite a one-eighty from a man who had been adamant not to set even half a foot inside Med Bay which to him seemed to represent the dark side of the PPDC. John understands why he'd be so resentful— it's obvious that, without his parents' and his brother's roles in the organisation, his childhood would have been very different. Still, aren't the kaiju even more to blame? Sherlock also seems to carry some additional, deep-seated fears specifically towards the medical side of Drifting and John can't blame him—he and Harry had spent a sleepless night before their implantation, the notion of the Science Division probably knowing what they're doing as their only consolation. Who the hell would feel completely trustful and confident before brain surgery? Still, the way it's done nowadays will leave only a small scar in the back and no scar at all on one's head, and there haven't been any failed implantations in eight years—at least that's the official story.

It seems that a part of Sherlock does want to join the Corps, but another part of him might still want to refuse the implantation if the anxiety built. John doesn't want to overestimate his own effect, but maybe their talks may have at least alleviated some fears as to how much the process changes a person. Then again, Sherlock has only known him like this, so how can he judge whether there has been a change or not?

What has changed him the most? Joining the Corps, what happened with Harry or the long, lonely years after? John really isn't sure.

At lunch, John idly eavesdrops on the travel stories of a group of LOCCENT officers who have just returned from furlough; they won't be able to get time off once Drift training for new Corps cadets begins. It is advisable for cadets to sort the implantation out as soon as possible after graduation to allow for some R&R time before pilot training begins. John suddenly realises that it may have already been done to Sherlock— it would explain why he hasn't caught a single glimpse of the man in the past few days; he might be holed up in his room, recovering.
Maybe I should go visit.

Reminding himself that the younger man is not his business and that he should just focus on his own work has become an empty mantra which reminds John of the empty prayers he’d recited at every Sanctification Mass and daily Vigilia as a child. He never remembers feeling like those endless prayers had come from his heart; either he’d been too young to understand their significance, or he had doubted their truth. When he’d told Sherlock that the Corps had been a family to him, John had not told him that its rules and regulations had felt perversely consoling when he'd first joined. He had always toed the line, done what was expected of him, kept up a facade while Harry had been the brave one; she had done the insane thing of come out to their parents, and unsurprisingly, they threw her out. Their whole community refused to acknowledge her existence after that. John had felt that continuing to live at home after her banishment so that he could finish his GCSEs was a betrayal of her, but she never treated him as though he'd done something wrong by staying. They had secretly kept in touch and reconnected properly after John had begun university. In a way, John had been betraying his parents ever since he realised at a much earlier age that he couldn't believe in the same God as them. The way they and all their fellow believers treated Harry was the last nail in the coffin, not a grand revelation about the malignancy of their doctrine. John couldn't believe in any sort of God at all because no version of him, according to his parents and other fervent followers of the same beliefs, was willing to accept people like him and Harry. That's what he'd had to listen to all through his childhood: the lectures and fear-mongering about who was unworthy.

"Any man who looks at his fellow brother like a man looks at his wife should have their eyes plucked out," Dad has once said after fellow congregation members had been talking of the London Pride March over tea and crumpets after Mass. "It’s in the Bible, John Hamish." John's heart had been in his throat: why had Dad directed his words at him, when it had been Harry who had left the house weeks earlier after being told she was as good as dead to her family?

John likes to think he has left all that behind, that he has chosen what he believes in and what he doesn't, but it is still a disconcerting mixture of shame and excitement when he thinks of other men. He feels that conflict when he wonders what Sherlock would look like in battle uniform or when recalling what he had looked like sitting on the cannon deck, hair whipped in all directions by the salty wind. What might he look like in the dim light of the emergency floor lighting in John's room, pale skin glistening from sweat as they pressed their bodies together?

These thoughts feel less threatening—and more tempting to dwell on—now that they aren't seeing each other practically at all. But, how will John feel when they eventually do cross paths again? Chard's Rift is large, but not big enough to live as though Sherlock wasn't here. John has never acted on such impulses and never will; they're a distraction he shouldn't welcome.

When the PPDC was scraped together in the panic over the first kaiju attacks, the best military minds were assembled to lead the war effort. Many of them came from totalitarian countries where sexual diversity—or the rights of any minorities in some cases—wasn't respected or even legal. Since success on the battlefront trumped everything else in importance, the attitudes these individuals planted the seed of in the Corps are not seen as a high priority to remedy, not even when it's quiet. Even many of the staff from the Western world had never held very liberal values to start with, and they found a safe haven for their intolerance in the Corps. The rest of the world doesn't seem to care if the PPDC is allowed to harbour a toxic inner culture as long as it does its job. Some media have tried to dig around when it comes to racism and other forms of bigotry inside it, but no one from the Corps would ever talk to them. It would be the equivalent of treason.

All human lives have been affected by the kaiju, some more than others. Before they came, the world's conflicts and problems did not hit everyone equally. It had been those worse-off who suffered the worst from the droughts, the famines, the oil wars, the clean water wars, the cyber
terrorist attacks decimating weaker electricity networks and nuclear power plants. The planet had been drowning in selfishness, in capitalistic greed, in political stagnancy and the internet-borne superstition and baseless opinions which were sidelining sensible media and science. The kaiju at least shook sense into some of that idiocy. But, in the place of the global churn of the economy being the centre of everyone's attention, rose a war machine and people are still being crushed under its wheels even though the world is enjoying a Breach-free period. The PPDC is supposed to be the height of humanity, but perhaps the attitudes inside it simply reflect the facts of human fallibility and pettiness.

Despite all this, Harry had somehow carved a niche for herself where she could be somewhat honest about who she was. Lots of fellow Rangers must have known she was occasionally getting it on with a Norwegian girl from the Ground Crew. Harry was the tough one of the Watsons and looked the part; hair cropped short, bigger biceps than John. She was one of the guys, so why should it raise any brows that she was chasing the ladies just as they were? She could laugh and swap war stories from the front lines of the war just as well as from the human battlegrounds of bars and clubs—she blended in. Male Rangers sometimes teased her, chastising her for dipping a finger in the same jar of honey, for trying to steal their girls. Sometimes there was a malicious undercurrent in their humour, but Harry didn't care.

John never pretended to be a part of all that machismo because he feared that any make-believe show of aggressive heterosexuality would have been called out as fake. He hoped that the others would think that he was just very career-oriented, or that he was some doe-eyed, old-fashioned romantic who wanted to find a special girl and wait until marriage before jumping in the sack. He was an active duty Ranger so no one ever questioned his manhood or his abilities; in the Corps, he was safe as long as he buried the bit of himself that would have set him apart from the other men.

Sometimes, on a good day, he looks at his fellow Rangers and wonders if maybe he's being too sceptical about their tolerance. Maybe they wouldn't care in this day and age. But, after decades of hiding from his mother and father out of respect for their faith and because he couldn't face their disappointment, and from hiding from his fellow soldiers for fear that he'd lose their support, he can't even imagine coming clean about his sexual orientation. The other Rangers already look at him crooked: he's the broken one, the one who didn't go down honourably with his co-pilot, the one who dug himself out of the rubble and now wanders around pretending to be useful. But, as long as they focus on those things, he's safe. He has survived forty years without a relationship lasting longer than the time it takes to get off in the back rooms and men's rooms of bars and restaurants. In London he could have had relationships, but he had been so young then, and so dead frightened still of their parents finding out that not even the opportunity offered by a big city to disappear into its crowds had allowed him to pluck up the courage to go for anything else than having a few hasty fucks in the gents'.

He has missed his chance.

Maybe he never even had one.

He's forty. It's fine.

He can admire Sherlock from afar and have enough self-restraint to leave it at that. Polite, professional admiration should be the extent of his involvement with the younger man because clearly, he's a flame and John is the moth who can't help himself. Who the hell even knows about Sherlock—what he likes, what he wants, what experience he has of relationships, if any? Maybe he's straight, though a part of John doubts it. He doesn't trust his senses when it comes to picking other gay men out of the crowd; a wrong estimate could prove dangerous. Maybe Sherlock just thinks he's above all that.
John isn't that old, but he feels old. He's longing after someone ten years his junior who is unlikely to really be attracted to him. Is he so deprived of companionship that he'll go overboard like this even with someone he has only just struck a tentative friendship with? Are they friends, or something less? Is he a mentor? Or a necessary evil, someone easier to tolerate than the Fightmasters or the other cadets? Seeing someone at their lowest yet treating them with respect and kindness can certainly being two people close. Is Sherlock struggling to define the parameters of their acquaintance like he is, or is John flattering himself by thinking the man would spare any further thought to a has-been Ranger now that basic training is over and his withdrawal long gone?

*Get over it. Get over him,* John commands himself.

He manages this feat for fifteen minutes while sorting some laundry, answering some intranet messages and getting annoyed trying to use the new shore leave request app.

After trying for twenty minutes to install it, he decides to head to mess for coffee. He has just put on his uniform jacket when there's a knock on the door.

Expecting nothing and no one of any significance, John opens it without thinking—and comes face to face with Sherlock. Well, nearly face to face, since the man is nervously looking down the corridor, inhaling sharply as though preparing for something.

His head snaps towards John and his stare is slightly bewildered—as though he hadn't expected John to appear in the doorway of his own damned room.

"Hi," Sherlock says, and it sounds like a private joke.

John can't help but notice that the last weeks of basic training have done the man a lot of good. Instead of looking thin and scrawny, he now fills his uniform a bit better. Still slim, still compact and sinewy like a whippet, though. He has the faintest tan, which is being nicely complemented by the colour that rises on his cheeks under John's scrutiny. It's just the slightest tint of red, but to John its origins, the *reason* for that faint blush is suddenly the most fascinating mystery in the universe.

John leans against the doorframe, drawing himself in, imagining himself taller, less self-destructive, more composed, but it's like trying to stop a landslide with just a pair of hands, trying not to feel stripped and raw and wonderful under Sherlock's intense gaze. The temptation to stop guarding himself so carefully is intense; couldn't he just react without second-guessing everything he says or does in case he lets slip something risky?


"Not yet."

John's eyes wander to Sherlock's head, which is pointless since one cannot see if someone has been implanted. "When, then?"

There are just two days left before the end of the Corps' rookie leave. Sherlock is cutting it very close with implantation—unless he's not going through with it. Maybe he's here to tell John as much.

Sherlock checks his wrist console—the latest model, of course, since he can't have had it for more than just a few days. "In thirty minutes."

"Oh. Well, good luck, then." *Why do you have to keep on barging into my life?*

"How does luck factor into it? Is that comment supposed to be reassuring? Would a physician
believe that some cosmic coincidence determines whether I come out the other end as a vegetable or a Ranger?" Sherlock rattles off in a sceptical tone. "Would you send someone into a hospital for surgery and tell them that if they're lucky, they'll get well?"

"You know what I mean. I could also have said 'break a leg'.'"

"It's hard to tell which proverbs are to be taken literally." Sherlock peers over John's shoulder into his room, as though hoping to be invited there.

_Not a good idea._

"I was hoping," Sherlock says. Then, he snaps his mouth shut.

"Yes?"

"Seeing as you may have had a hand in my decision-making." Still not a proper question.

"Yes?" John's brows hitch up.

"Perhaps if there was an impartial physician observing."

"You do know that you aren't speaking in complete sentences?" John crosses his arms.

"Can you not deduce the rest?" Sherlock snaps. "You're not an idiot, though you sell yourself short most of the time."

"If you want a favour, don't insult people." John is not insulted, and he doubts whether he actually could be insulted by Sherlock. He would most certainly rather be insulted by him than never to see him again.

_Favour is not how I would have categorised this._

"Then, what? You show up here thirty minutes before your showtime at Med Bay, have a hard time spitting out what it is you want, and then demand telepathy."

John's tone isn't angry, mostly amused, but he sees Sherlock's expression shift to something colder and more calculating. Dismissive. Disappointed?

"I didn't come here to be laughed at."

"I'm still waiting to learn exactly why you are here."

A pained, pleading expression. "Must you make this so hard for me?"

_Back at you. Ever since you set foot at the base._

"Will you come with me?" Sherlock blurts out.

John wants to kick himself for not seeing this coming.

Sherlock must still have doubts. There's no one on his side here, not really, except for John, who has if not talked him into it, then at least made himself complicit in what Sherlock had decided to go against long-standing convictions that he shouldn't. He doesn't have anyone else here, and judging by what John has learned about his life, he doesn't seem to have a whole lot of people outside of the PPDC he cares about or who might care about him.
Sherlock is looking at the ground and not at him.

John's shoulders sag a little. He now remembers their conversation during the hike on Terceira: *'Im scared, John.' How could he have forgotten that?*

"Give me a minute to find my ID card," John tells him and starts rummaging around his laundry pile.

Sherlock waits by the door, hands shoved demurely into his trouser pockets, lips almost shifting into a relieved smile he seems to be trying to keep in check.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Four hours later, John is watching him sleep. In slumber, Sherlock loses the constantly shifting lines etched on his face that create the relentless parade of his sharp expressions. In their stead is now a peace that makes him look very young.

The sight makes John want to reach out and run a fingertip along a sharp cheekbone, up a temple, down the ridge of his nose.

Yet, he won't. Not ever. This is a vigil for a friend. A watch over a fellow soldier.

Sherlock has made his choice to go through this, and John feels partly responsible for that decision.

*He could be good at this. He could be great if paired with the right person.*

Meanwhile, John will perform his own duties, go to the mess hall to watch the weather report, drink tea and waste away his life in this coffin of a base. Sometimes he wishes that someone up in the brass would pay attention to his existence and devise him a job description. It's been eighteen fucking years, and it is feeling more like charity by the minute. Sometimes he wishes that he hadn't managed those seven minutes that had cemented his place as some sort of a Corps legend. He doesn't want to resign, and they don't want to kick him out because it would look bad. He doesn't want to resign, because there is nowhere for him to go. He attempts to shovel away the thought with a sigh.

A pang of worry had hit him as he watched Sherlock's eyes flutter close in the reclining procedure chair when the first dose of a general anaesthetic was administered. He had wanted to reach out, to touch some part of Sherlock, but it had felt like the wrong thing to do. After all, He had asked for John's presence, not his loneliness or his desire. After he fell asleep, John was escorted out of the procedure room, since he doesn't have the security clearance needed to be privy to the details of the process.

The implantation itself had gone perfectly. First, the so-called Pons system had been introduced through an IV injection of nanobots. The second phase of the procedure had been to install the signal transducer for the spinal clamp. This still required a small incision between the posterior parts of two upper thoracic ribs to insert the tiny biocell energy core and its spare. No bleeding worth mentioning. The system had been fired up for the first time, everything had looked to be in order, but then—

John is shaken out of his thoughts, when one of the Med Bay's neurologists strides to Sherlock's bedside, eyes glued to the tablet computer she's holding. "Very little osseal distortion in the spinal signal and the new generation of binaural dampeners should reduce noise much better when communicating within the Drift. All the neurodiverse subjects we've implanted or re-implanted during the last three years have been particularly pleased with that. No further pathological
waveforms on the EEG."

John nods. He is being told these details as though he'll need such data regarding Sherlock in the future—as though it is somehow relevant to him. He should entertain no illusions about that. His official involvement in Sherlock's training has ended. This is a courtesy call.

The neurologist leaves after giving the monitor above Sherlock's head a once-over. There are no wires running from him into the machine—his vital signs and many other things going on in his body can now be remotely monitored through the implant; in fact, it’s an important part of the testing process. The Science Division and the LOCCENT Officers handling the Drifting are not allowed to use the monitoring outside active duty and medical care unless there's an emergency or they are requested to do so by a Ranger's supervisors or the Ranger himself. These rules are the only bit of privacy a pilot gets.

John leans back in his chair, crosses his fingers and extends his limbs outwards palm-side first. He stretches his finger joints by letting them bend in the wrong direction.

Suddenly, Sherlock sits up with a jolt, blinking and shaking his head as though trying to clear it.

John remembers what it was like, waking up after the installation of the spinal clamp interface and the older version of the Pons system that's still in his brainstem. Nowadays, since the procedure is so much less invasive, most cadets walk out of the procedure room after the sedative wears off and re-join training the next day.

Not all, though, because sometimes there are complications.

"What am I still doing here?" Sherlock asks angrily after surveying the scenery.

John sits up straight and leans forward. Of course, he'd catch on immediately that something's not right. But, before he gets to offer an explanation, Sherlock flings away the thin white blanket and slides his legs down onto the floor. John scrambles to catch him when they don't carry his weight as well as he had expected. Gently, John shoves him back into a sitting position on the trolley.

"You had a grand mal seizure, so they decided on keeping you in for observation. It's not uncommon after implantation, but they can't really predict who's susceptible to it. It settled easily and shouldn't happen again. Neurodiverse cadets are known to have a higher risk of postoperative EEG changes."

Sherlock gives him a death glare, and John deduces it's because he'd used the n-word. Although it is still much kinder than the old terms, advocacy groups are still pushing to eradicate such vocabulary altogether, stating that it's discrimination saying that a brain is not normal because there are anatomic and neurophysiological differences, if those differences have largely been caused by genetic and developmental factors rather than an illness.

This is the first time they have discussed the fact that John knows that this is what Sherlock is. John knows, because he's read his records, and now he feels a bit embarrassed that he hasn't come clean about doing so, even though Sherlock has probably suspected as much.

John thinks that talking about neurodiversity is at least better than saying autistic or neurotypical or developmentally deficient. There is certainly nothing deficient about the performance of high-functioning neurodiverse individuals as Jaeger pilots as long as they are paired with just the right individual. John knows that Maria Groenewald's harsh attitudes have caused chafing between her and her co-pilot since those things can't be kept secret when Drifting. There have been plenty of neurodiverse Rangers in the Jaeger Corps. Sherlock will be the third in the history of the Atlantic subsection.
In Hawaii, John had once spoken to a neurodiverse Ranger after their first Drift with a non-neurodiverse co-pilot. The guy had said that experiencing his partner's memories and emotions had been mind-blowing, but the non-neurodiverse world he had glimpsed did not feel better, or easier – just different. "I wouldn't trade," he had said. "Maybe Drifting will give me the best of both worlds."

Sherlock is frowning. "I can't remember what I did this morning. I can't remember coming here."

This seems to alarm him.

"It's common to lose at least a few hours," John reassures him. "The implant accesses pathways that regulate memory, both those involved with long-term potentiation and the formation of short-term recollections. How do you feel, otherwise?"

"Not that different." Sherlock sounds a little surprised, and decidedly not happy.

John wonders what he had been expecting. "You shouldn't feel much different. The implants can reprogram your cells to repair neural damage, but it's not brainwashing. You can't be controlled through them. That would be the opposite of what the program is for: you're supposed to lend your skills and intellect to the Jaeger and nothing is allowed to interfere with that. Did they assign you to a LOCCENT officer already?"

"Yes. They offered a meet-and-greet which I didn't attend."

John huffs. "You're going to be trusting a whole lot to that person. You should at least try to establish some rapport before you start training proper."

"Won't I be trusting more to the co-pilot?"

John nods. "Sure."

While idling away his time waiting for Sherlock to wake up, John had brought up and read through the list of non-paired pilots on a tablet he'd borrowed from a nurse. Until two pilots have been actually connected through a neural handshake, there's no way to know what their true compatibility is, but there are computer models available to make predictions based on aptitude test data and data from their basic training.

There are very few unpaired right-hemisphere dominant pilots at Chard's Rift. As a matter of fact, there are only two of them: Lee and a last-year recruit with the surname Halden. If a suitable match isn't found locally, someone from another Shatterdome might be sent here, or Sherlock reassigned to some other location. John doesn't want to think about the possibility. Maybe it could work with this Halden guy, and Sherlock might stay.

Does John really want that? To know that Sherlock is within reach, but sharing things with someone he will never share with John?

The reality of this option hits hard. John tells himself he shouldn't get attached to anyone who could be plucked out of this life at any moment if a Breach opens.

He shouldn't get attached, period.

A glance at Sherlock, who is studying his face expectantly, he realises he already is.

Fuck.

It's agonising, spending time with someone and constantly forcing himself to rehearse a goodbye. Sherlock will be paired with someone who will become more important to him than John. If it's a
really good match, he won't ever be lonely again; not in the way that John has been for eighteen years.

Sherlock is touching his fingertips to his scalp, as though expecting to find something there. He then slithers his hand to the small of his back and then upwards; there's probably a bandage there. He glances at John and drops his hand. "John?" he asks, as though baffled by the reticent silence.

John shakes his head. He's so tired of everything. He's particularly tired of trying to convince himself that his motives for enjoying Sherlock's company could ever be professional and platonic.

"What's wrong?" Sherlock asks.

John curses his perceptiveness. "This is a big moment for you. I hope things work out alright."

He has done what Sherlock has asked of him. He needs to do the right thing to spare himself from further pain and to allow Sherlock to focus on his future. For the first time since they've met, the crushing sense of being at the end of the road triumphs over his persistent fascination with Sherlock.

He stands up, gives Sherlock a tight smile, and walks away.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
One thing I put a lot of thought into in collaboration with a beta was the background of John's issues with his own sexuality and his profound fears of coming out of the closet. I imagine that by 2041, outside the PPDC the world has changed for the better in these matters, but it was important for creating plotty conflict that the Defence Corps would still be a bastion of quite terrible prejudice. Add to that a fundamentalist religious upbringing, and it's no wonder John hesitates so much to even acknowledge his feelings for Sherlock. The terminology related to the church services John mentions attending sound deliberately weird because the religious movement his family belongs to is fictional and will be discussed more in a later chapter. Perhaps a part of John welcomed a life in such an environment as the PPDC because he felt it might act as a deterrent for him to act on the orientation he had not come to terms with yet. He should have remembered what Ian Malcolm says in Jurassic Park: life will find a way.

Seizures can be caused by lots of different things from whole-body metabolic disturbances to local brain pathology. During a seizure, there is abnormal electrical activity happening in the brain which can cause various more or less visible symptoms depending on how widespread that malfunction is. A local disturbance can cause limited symptoms or an absence seizure; a more widespread wave of abnormal EEG activity can cause a grand mal seizure (aka a generalised tonic-clonic seizure), which is what people usually assume a seizure looks like.

Firing the canon:
As I mentioned in a prior note, canonically there are no implants, and there is little specific information regarding how exactly the spinal clamp works. This was a good thing since it allowed me to tweak stuff to my heart's desire. According to canon, the
Pons system was designed by Dr Caitlin Lightcap, and the name explains why I chose to place the brain implant in the brainstem: pons, also known as the brain bridge, is a part of the brainstem. Functionally, placing an implant there that largely deals with the motor cortex and pain and other sensory pathways doesn't make that much sense, but it felt reasonable sticking to canon.

LOCCENT as an abbreviation comes from the words Local Control Centre. LOCCENT officers initiate, adjust and monitor the neural bridge interface so that pilots can Drift, and they also keep an eye on the pilots' vitals as well as data on the Jaeger's condition.

In the films, Drift compatibility is an intangible, mystical thing sensed somehow by compatible Rangers during a practice martial arts match. That was way, way too simple for my purposes.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**

- Blanco White: El Buho
- Halestorm: Break In

**Beta comment of the day:**

From AnyaWen, regarding what John does at the end of the chapter: "Dork."
Sherlock slams his head against the pillow and swallows down the name he's just stopped himself from calling out after watching its owner striding out of the room.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid, STUPID!*

*Naive.*

*Careless.*

He's been *had*. Betrayed. *Tricked*. He shouldn't have let hope and loneliness and sentiment cloud his judgment like this. It's one of his weak spots—he knows it, Mycroft knows it, and it seems that John Watson, *Ranger fucking Watson*, had smelled his desperation and promptly shoved his proverbial fingers into it—used it, used *him* so that the Corps could get what it wants.

'Ranger', they will now call him. All traces of curious anticipation regarding this development have evaporated, leaving only the realisation that he has again been shoved into a slot defined by others—one he only barely fits. He shouldn't have expected anything different: if ever anyone attempts to get close to him, they never want to stay after seeing what he's really like. He fails their expectations, so they just want to use his intellect and leave the rest of him out to rot. Why would it be any different here? Why would John Watson of the PPDC see anything different than others do when looking at him?

When Sherlock had first arrived in the very distracting worst throes of withdrawal, he hadn't immediately recognised who the doctor sent to check on him had been. Only after reading John's ID sporting the title *Ranger John Watson* had the memory connected to the crumpled card he had concealed inside his lumpy pillow for a year until the older boys—whose greatest joy at Haig had been tormenting him—had ransacked his belongings and found what he'd stolen. They broke his arm to teach him a lesson but let him keep the card. Its owner told him he no longer wanted anything to do with it, his attitude had signalled that the item was now assumed tainted in some way. Something else is tainted, now, too: Sherlock hates how the last few days have permanently altered his image of Ranger Watson, even if that image had just been the rosy daydream of a child.

He bites his lip and forces a vile, bitter smile on his lips.

*John ought to be commended for his acting skills.*

The man had pretended to struggle to be professional and to detach himself, even created the illusion that he hadn't been attempting to strike up the friendship which seemed to practically construct itself nevertheless. Or, perhaps friendship is not the right word. *Something* had been brewing between them, and now Sherlock is left to wonder which part of it had been smoke and mirrors. It seems downright cruel of John to sever their acquaintance just as Sherlock had made the mortifying and revealing decision to ask for his support. Couldn't John have cut ties at graduation if that was the plan all along, once he was satisfied that Sherlock had been safely delivered into the waiting arms of the Jaeger Corps?

It *is* the sensible decision, of course, not to pursue this strange thing between them. Why did
Sherlock’s treacherous, greedy heart have to start hoping for more as they got to know each other? John became his fly in the ointment, a relentless distraction, the source of his escapist daydreams. The man kept interfering, kept showing Sherlock the sort of kindness that made him stumble in his steps—kindness that had startled him because it seemed so out of place here. It had felt genuine since it was so undeserved: Sherlock had hardly done anything that would have made John feel as though such behaviour was warranted, let alone deserved. Sherlock wants to kick himself for not being able to focus on showing his brother that he wasn’t weak like Mycroft thought, that he could do this—if only to spite the man who’d thrown him to the wolves. But no; he had stupidly allowed himself to be seduced by the notion that perhaps he wasn’t as condemned to loneliness as he had always believed.

That photo of John in the collectable card had looked like the epitome of a Ranger. Well-defined biceps, a winning smile, sandy blond hair mussed up and left just a bit longer than the dress code probably allowed. An approachable champion for humanity. His dark green battle armour with winged Corps logos painted on his shoulder guards had nicely complimented his blue eyes. Sherlock cannot even remember being more fascinated, more spellbound by any image. The notion of that Ranger being a part of it had been the only thing about the Corps he had not hated after their parents died, and he had wondered many times what this person flattened into a 2D cardboard image might be like in real life. He had not in a million years dreamt of meeting John Watson in the flesh, and especially not as such a changed man—a deceptive shadow of the past. Now, his nearly possessed fascination can’t be anything but his brain needing something interesting to latch on to in this bleak place of duty and routine and sleep-deprivation and physical agony. He has suffered worse in the bowels in London than he has out here; this is bearable and should not require constant daydreaming to get through. But, at night when trying to distance himself from the cartilage-brained chatter of the other candidates sleeping in the same six-person dorm, he has kept sinking into thoughts about John. Those thoughts are of the kind he has hoped he could avoid because they lead to nothing but heartbreak and preoccupation with things that are not as worthy of his time as are more intellectual pastimes. Such imagery belongs to the realm of the romantic and naive.

I should be grateful, really, that one of us is doing the sensible thing and ending this.

Before John, the presence of another human being has never made him feel as though he’s much more than the disparaging words of his peers and Mycroft. John had made him feel as though he’s worth something even at his lowest. That he’s welcome. That he’s... wanted, in whatever way John Watson would or could want his company. John had been his doctor, his friend, and his self-appointed protector, storming the Rangers’ lounge like a knight in shining armour. The thought still makes Sherlock nearly shiver with a mixture of delight and overwhelming uncertainty.

Had they become friends? Sherlock can’t tell, because he’s never had one. Nannies who hadn’t quit instantly because of their contracts don’t count, do they? His cousin Valerie was one of them, and she had stayed with them for two years; she was a quiet girl who loved their Surrey house and was comfortable enough in her own skin that she could withstand the loneliness there; with Sherlock’s parents gone, and the house a long way from the closest neighbours who were all pensioners, she had little in the way of adult company. He remembers the day just before their parents’ funeral when Mycroft told her she was no longer needed. It felt like adding insult to injury that not only had their parents died, now more people kept leaving Sherlock’s life. He had hidden in the garden and cried, even though he never did so because he had learned it to be useless at a very early age. All it ever got him was a prompt to be brave from his parents or Mycroft; those words always insinuated that, in his sorrow and longing, he was anything but the courageous and strong person they expected him to be.

"There's no room for sentiment in duty," Mycroft had told him at the funeral. "We should be glad their deaths have meaning. It's tangible proof, what happened to them in Vancouver, that all of us are in constant peril. Mummy and Father were there because they wanted to help prevent more humans losing their lives."
"Why couldn't someone else do all that and die instead?" Sherlock had asked him.

"One day you'll understand," Mycroft had said curtly and told him to stop swinging his legs and to sit up straight in their pew. His tone had signalled that Sherlock should sort out his infantile emotions quietly so that others could get on with more important things. "Besides, many other people did die in Vancouver, brother mine," Mycroft had finally added.

As though that fact made Sherlock's sorrow petty, somehow.

He didn't care about any other of those people. Thinking about them just made him sadder because it meant that somewhere out there, there were others who felt exactly as he did, who sat in funerals and tried to adjust to a life without the people most willing to put up with them.

They left Musgrave Hall the next day, never to return. Sherlock doesn't know what had happened to his books, his toys or the family heirloom violin—the Haig did not allow students to bring in instruments. He never asked his brother about those things, because he knew what the answer would have been: "Stop clinging to things so much, it's unhealthy." At Cambridge, he had finally been able to buy himself a new violin—a cheap one from a pawn shop. That's probably gone now, too. He'll lose the calluses on his fingers if he can't play, but the small pigmented spot that every violinist has on their neck will probably stay and be a permanent reminder of yet another thing he has been deprived of.

All he has ever had are things, so is it any wonder he has clung to them? He doesn't have anyone. He's probably not equipped to have anyone. Interacting with others has always been a disaster, yet he finds himself sometimes starved of it. He's at the bottom of a well of humanity, shouting up at a sliver of blue sky, and no face ever appears high above to listen, no rope is ever lowered to pull him out. At least with the drugs, he had felt as though he was able to keep himself company.

Is it any wonder that after so many years of choking loneliness, he would grab the attention given by someone like a lifeline? He knows he's overreacting, getting so upset that John hadn't stayed to sit needlessly by his hospital bed today, that his warm expression had suddenly closed off and he had left with words that were kind but sounded harsh. It hurts, even though the mess is Sherlock's own fault—his punishment for mistaking John's kindness and responsibility for friendship and his loyal duty to the PPDC for actual enjoyment of Sherlock's company.

When he'd first arrived, he had been careful, suspicious, smart, even in the sordid state he had been in. But then, John had messed with his expectations, slithered close with the bashful smile of someone who Sherlock believed would have nothing to lose by giving him the benefit of the doubt. It wouldn't take much for a place to beat a Chinese PPDC holding cell, but to find Chard's Rift bearable would require an incentive to commit to his duties here. He shouldn't have let John become that incentive. There have been moments when John has been the only bright thing in the dark of this base, moments when he had actually gotten Sherlock to believe that there might be something in this life worth hanging on to. Something seemed to spark between them that Sherlock hasn't ever experienced before—things unsaid, things read between the lines, silences that spoke more than words, casual touches that felt like more. Had he really imagined it all?

After procrastinating both the implantation and talking to John for two days, he had swallowed his pride and asked John to come with him to Med Bay. He never does things like that, never admits to wanting or needing something, to being nervous or out of his depth. Yet, the way John had behaved towards him had made him feel as though this time he could. That it wouldn't be used as ammunition. That it wouldn't be shooting himself in the proverbial foot. That it was alright, sometimes, to admit liking having someone else around. In hindsight, what John has just done is part of his pattern. Just when Sherlock feels as though they are enjoying each other's company and that
the future could be something more than just a different sort of hell to London, John pulls away, jerks himself out of Sherlock's reach. Every time when he'd felt like they had taken a step closer to each other, John had retreated. Why agree to come with him today, if he was going to just fling some hesitant platitudes in Sherlock's direction before walking away with the air of a defeated man? He still can't entirely believe everything John had done for him had been an act, and that doubt grates more than the betrayal. Out of all the people in this damned base, Sherlock would have expected that the only one with nothing to lose, the only one from which he could expect at least some honesty, would be the person who has enjoyed the perks of being an active Ranger but also experienced the downsides. John has seen the worst of this life yet decided to stay. Apparently, he is still loyal enough to act as a recruiter.

Resignation has set in. Sherlock knows he should be angry, vengeful even, but instead of wanting to burn this place to the ground, he wants to withdraw into himself and disappear.

He sits up on the trolley, gaze fixed on an ambient temperature monitor on the wall. A nurse comes by to check the dermoplastic stitching in his back and to cover the wound with a fresh adhesive bandage. His reflexes are tested, pupillary dilation checked. When asked about headache, nausea and vertigo, he denies having any such symptoms. In truth, he is feeling a mild case of all of them, but he wants to get away from the clinic to find a quiet spot in which to curl into a ball. At least accepting the implantation and becoming a Ranger means that he has been assigned his own room, instead of that ghastly, noisy dorm. He'll have a day and a half of solitary quiet to sort his head out before Drift training begins.

After changing out of the white Med Bay gown and into his dress uniform, he straps his wrist console back on. The nurse had told him to wait for one of the doctors to give him the all-clear for discharge. Just as he starts getting restless, jiggling his fingers against his thigh, the neurologist assigned to his case walks up to him and extends her hand holding a tablet so that he can sign his discharge papers with a fingerprint.

"If everything is working correctly in the first training session and if you don't start experiencing any alarming symptoms, there's no need for a check-up after," she says, flashes a cold smile, and leaves Sherlock alone in the post-surgical observation area.

Alarming symptoms such as what? Going insane? Losing consciousness and lapsing into a coma? My brain herniating through my eye sockets?

He has seen the leaked footage of the early Pons system test runs before they realised a single pilot was never going to be able to take the neural strain alone. John is a living testament to that. Just a few minutes of solo piloting and a Ranger was left a wreck who seems still convinced he will never again helm a Jaeger.

Won't, or can't? Even if John could re-join active Jaeger pilot duty, would he want to?

Sherlock slides off the trolley to his feet, swallowing as he remembers the first time he'd tried getting up. Instantly, John had grabbed hold of him, steadied him, held onto him perhaps a moment longer than was actually necessary after helping him back onto the trolley.

Wishful thinking.

Sherlock had wanted to reach out, to return that embrace, even just for a moment. Just long enough for it to mean something for the two of them but not to anyone else.

He lets go of the trolley railing. No vertigo. He starts walking and soon makes his way out of Med Bay through its white plexiglass sliding doors.
All in all, he thinks he feels better than anyone who has just had their central nervous system poked into has any right to feel. He got through basic training. The implantation procedure has gone in an acceptable manner. He very likely has some sort of a military career ahead of him instead of a death sentence.

Yet, he can't lie to himself: he still feels empty. And, that emptiness is frighteningly similar to how he has felt for as long as he can remember.

Ranger or junkie, free or enlisted, he's still himself—in both the good and the bad.

Chapter End Notes

Firing the canon:
The Vancouver attack is not canon, though it's certainly close enough to the Pacific Coast and Anchorage that the kaiju might well head in its direction.

Writing soundtrack for this chapter:
GnuS Cello: Numb
Blanco White: Lie Alone
Kate Bush: Under the Ivy
Of Monsters and Men: Hunger

Beta comment of the day:
From AnyaWen: "Sherlock's turn to be a big dumb dork."
Duty Calls

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John has left his door open for walk-ins; he doesn't officially advertise the times he's available for a bit of medical advice, but everyone tends to know it's Wednesday to Friday afternoons. Some things people just aren't comfortable bringing to Med Bay's attention, so he's an unofficial alternative. After graduation, he obtained prescribing rights in the Azores so that he could stock up some stuff he often needs without having to battle with official bureaucracy and to prescribe things such as erection dysfunction drugs or birth control. John has suspected that his superiors and Med Bay know what he's doing but don't care. Med Bay probably thinks that it's better to have a half-illicit family planning clinic than having to deal with the occasional STI or pregnant Rangers instead of focusing all their efforts on Drift science. Starting a family is very much possible, but it will relieve at least one Ranger parent at a time from active duty. Even in peacetime. Commonwealth Rangers have been protesting the rule, especially since it's the polar opposite of the National Armed Forces' approach. To John, the rules concerning pregnancy and childbirth are yet another example of the Corps' old-fashioned ideals; in contrast, the British National Forces have gone through a lot of modernisation after monarchy ended.

The air conditioning on the office floor has been acting up, and there's a chilly draught that is making John long for hot tea. He's just about to swipe the lock function of his screen to leave for mess hall when someone calls out an inquisitive hello from the doorway.

John quickly recognises his visitor as Louise-Josephine Marais—or, as everyone calls her, LJ. She's one of the Rangers in charge of the Neural Handshake Induction Programme—colloquially known as Drift training. A waif-like fifty-something woman with an astoundingly thick, long, blonde ponytail she had worn in Princess Leia buns for the Corps Christmas party last year, she is easily underestimated and overlooked by those who don't know her—but only for a moment before she establishes her authority with a few well-spoken words. The feats of her active pilot career are second to almost none. John likes her. Respects her. She has one of the oldest working implant sets in the Corps and hasn't wanted to swap for a newer one.

"Hello, John," she greets with the quickly-pulled-on, rehearsed smile of someone who guards very carefully what they reveal of themselves. Her English retains a strong French accent which makes his name sound like Jon on her lips.

"Hey, LJ. Anything I can do for you?"

"I wanted a word about one of our new Rangers."

*Let me guess. They want birth control and they're too shy to ask themselves?* It wouldn't be the first time they had asked LJ to mediate such matters—she exhibits a very maternal attitude to her trainees, women in particular who tend to find her very easily approachable.

"It's Holmes."

John drops the pencil he's holding, and it rolls off the table.

In hindsight, he should have guessed that out of all the rookies, of course Sherlock would be the one to continue stirring up trouble. It's just that he's been trying not to dwell on the man, and during the
past few days he's finally been succeeding. They haven't seen each other in two weeks.

He hopes that it's just advice that LJ wants, or an outlet for ranting a bit. *Anything* but being dragged properly back into Sherlock's orbit.

"How's it going with him?" *Act nonchalant. Neutral. Professional. Do not start caring about this conversation.*

"Not great."

This may not sound like a very strong statement, but coming from her in particular, John realises it's a huge admission of defeat.

"He didn't let Wallis and Chen off easily, either. Have you talked to them?"

"Of course. It was Wallis who referred me to you."

"Wallis' solution of a hundred extra push-ups a day isn't your style for punishing the stubborn, so what have you been trying with him?" LJ is cleverer than that, and John has never heard her admit defeat with a cadet before.

She pulls the chair opposite John away from the table and takes a seat. "He's not being insubordinate so no need for punishment. He tries hard, but he's finding everything very difficult. The problem is two-fold, I think."

John crosses his fingers, leans his elbows on the table and his chin on top. His instinct is to shut down the conversation as quickly as possible, but he also wants to support a colleague. *Of all the cadets, why does this have to be about Holmes?*

"You are aware that nowadays we use a very cushioned, automatically filtered neural handshake with the new recruits, but it still requires going straight into bilateral Drifting?"

John nods. The new Rangers are paired up and a strictly controlled neural bridge established so that they can acclimatize to Drifting and to practice communication before being given battle simulations to practice with. The system automatically censors any memories that cause a strong reaction in either party, making it a cushioned but realistic approach to piloting. Most candidates nowadays have a very short adjustment period to Drifting, having played virtual reality games all through their normative years. It's a bit like throwing them into the water but with safety floaties on.

"He can shield. Well. *Astoundingly* well," LJ emphasizes. "One could say that he keeps throwing the other cadets out of his head. We've yet to achieve a passable hemisphere sync with him. He's nearly two weeks behind the other cadets since he has not completed a single training module."

"Can't you pair him with an experienced Ranger, then, at least for the duration of training?" It hardly matters who Sherlock Drifts with before the Corps starts to test him with prospective co-pilots. That won't happen until he has completed Drift training. Pairing a rookie up with a Ranger for the first few days is what's often done with cadets who are having significant trouble with acclimatizing to the Drift interface.

"After the first few tries with other cadets, he refused any further attempts and made it very clear that any of the Fightmasters he has encountered during his basic training would be out of the question, as are the rest of his cadet training group. I would have offered to pair up with him even though I usually can't since I must supervise, but my implants won't work with the newest simulation software version."
"Can't you use the old system to ease him in more gradually?"

"We offered, and we do have a more gradual training sequence we usually use on the neurodiverse recruits, but he refused it. Absolutely refused any sort of what he called 'special needs concessions'.”

"I still think the old system would be better.” It had been the system through which John had himself been trained twenty years ago: it's a much more gradual and better-guided introduction into Drifting but compared to the new system, it required a lot more staff resources and time.

John can't imagine what it would have been like to be thrown right into full-on bilateral Drifting with someone else—even if that someone was Harry. It hardly would have helped that any memory or exercise evoking too strong a physical response from either candidate would be shut down or filtered automatically; to John it would have felt like too great a risk to take when it came to preservation of privacy.

"It hardly matters which system we use, if he's ready to call it quits. He did not show up for training today."

"So, you think the crash course style of the current training system is the biggest issue? You did say that you think there are two problems with him."

"There are trust issues. He has made no friends among his graduating class. He hides it well, but I think he's very nervous to do any of this. Being very distrustful of the other cadets isn't helping, and he does not hide the fact that he distrusts anything and everything Corps-related. I am having a hard time believing that Wallis' reports from his basic training regarding his motivation actually describe the same person."

"You're the expert. All I know about neural handshake training is having gone through it once," John evades, leaning back against his chair. "What do you think I could do about any of that?"

"You know Holmes better than I do. Wallis says—"

John is not interested in Wallis' opinions of Sherlock. "There's no love lost between him and Tom, that's for sure. I'm not some Holmes whisperer, LJ. I was asked to make sure he got through a crash detox alright, and he did. I wasn't his Fightmaster. I don't know him."

"The fact that he asked you to accompany him to the implantation doesn't fit that statement,” LJ says plainly, studying John’s expression.

He curses inwardly. *Nothing stays a secret in this damned place.* John wonders if and what Sherlock has told others about the events of that day, then reminds him that he does *not care.*

"I'm the only one who doesn't hate his guts, nothing else. I was available, and Sherlock wanted my medical opinion of the procedure. That's all there is to it," he says pointedly. Then, he wants to bite his tongue as he realises he had used the man’s first name.

LJ's gaze sharpens to meet the challenge of his defensiveness. "Holmes asked you to go with him to Med Bay. Ergo, he *trusts* you."

"LJ—"

"Why are you so reluctant? I haven't even told you what I'm going to ask of you."

John points at his screen. He can't get mixed up in whatever it is LJ wants him to do, but the only excuse he has is his practically non-existent job.
So, he needs to lie. "I'm bloody snowed under with paperwork as is, and I'm fucking tired of being treated as everyone's errand boy. I'm not in active duty anymore, but that doesn't mean that I haven't got shit to do." His words come off way angrier than what LJ deserves but John knows she won't take it personally. Being able to separate her opinions on work issues from her opinions on people is one of her finest qualities.

"I'm not on active duty anymore, haven't been in eighteen years," John explains. "I'm not involved in cadet training."

"You are a Ranger, are you not?" LJ glances pointedly at his nametag.

The base has plenty of dedicated Rangers for training—LJ and her colleagues must be at their wits' end with Sherlock is they're coming to him with this. They also must be very, very desperate to make use of the potential they see in the cadet. They wouldn't go through all this trouble for just any recent recruit. It makes John uneasy how determined the Corps is to practically force someone through the training who is likely still torn about whether they even want to do it or not.

It's obvious that they're trying to push Sherlock through a regime that isn't a good fit for him. A square peg for a round hole, and that peg is going to fight like a wild animal when cornered.

John sighs. "Let's hear it, then."

LJ clears her throat, then launches into a pitch that sounds rehearsed but probably isn't, since she must have delivered similar ones dozens of times through the years to back candidates her excellent instincts have singled out as exceptionally promising. "We're trying to find the pilot who could be our secret weapon once we get them in the Ravager Conn-Pod. Holmes has the best aptitude scores of any recruit for years, John, and he impressed the hell out of everyone in basic, but it'll all be for nought if he can't deal with Drifting. Whatever you've got on is important, but not more important than this. You've seen the kaiju, John, just as I have. How many times have I come to you, asking for help like this? How many times has anyone? I'm not asking for me and you know it. I'm asking for the Corps."

No, they really don't come to John with these sorts of requests because he's not a Fightmaster, but he has already used that argument.

John lets his head loll back in defeat. He hates it that people can still get him to do things just by appealing to his sense of Jaeger Corps loyalty. Or, maybe he just doesn't have it in him to rebel against anything anymore.

"What would you need me to do?"

"We'll use the old system and you'll be the hands-on trainer. Walk him and talk him through it so that he gets through the adjustment period. I'll send you the old training manuals, but I doubt you'd need them—I have a hunch you need to improvise with him, anyway, and you remember how it all works, don't you?"

John nods. "Did enough upkeep sims in the old system that it'll be like riding a bike." It's not the technical side of things about which John worries. He hasn't Drifted in years, and even if this'll be a limited approximation of it, he hopes that having to focus on Sherlock will keep the memories at bay. Thankfully, he has only positive recollections of the sim lab.

"We'll only need you until he gets the hang of it. Then, we can start looking for a suitable co-pilot; we'll just have to give him plenty of time to get to know the prospective ones before Drift-testing him with them."
"Good luck with that, trying to get him to befriend someone." Who the hell will ever be good enough in Sherlock's opinion? The man seems to think everyone is an idiot—except, perhaps, for John.

Being friends with a co-pilot isn't required, of course, but distrust, anger or fear between two pilots will not lead to a solid enough neural handshake to pilot any Jaeger, let alone the Ravager. No one has managed that yet.

LJ is only asking for help in getting Sherlock to establish a neural handshake. Once he gets the hang of it, John is off the hook. She is not asking him to participate in the matchmaking process to find Sherlock a co-pilot, which is good, because John is certain he'd find that... unpleasant. LJ probably doesn't realise that it just might turn out to be an even harder part of the process than Drift training.

*Who would he accept, if he can't or won't even practice with anyone?*

She’s eyeing him carefully. "Will you do it?"

"We'd only use the unilateral bridging in the old system?"

"If you insist."

The unilateral bridging was built into the old neural handshake training system at the demand of the Fightmasters—they didn't want new recruits to see everything that was in their heads before everyone was certain they had embraced the core values of the Corps and the importance of discretion. Most importantly it might affect their attitudes towards their trainers to be privy to all their secrets—there's no risk of instructors' embarrassing or upsetting memories becoming Friday night gossip among the rookies. When bridged unilaterally the trainer sees and experiences the equivalent of a normal neural handshake from the recruit, but the data that flows in the opposite direction—from the trainer to the trainee—is carefully regulated.

"I'm not doing a full bilateral neural handshake with him," John tells LJ. "I'll help him get used to establishing a neural bridge and interacting with the environment in the Drift, but I'm not exposing him to what happened to Harry."

*Or anything else that's inside my head.*

"Very sensible," LJ admits. "You will be in charge, so you set the parameters. But, before we get ahead of ourselves: there's something you'll need to do first."

"Hm?"

"First you must convince Holmes to try again. Everyone else who has tried to talk to him has failed. After the things he said to me today, I could have had him court-martialled." LJ grins to signal she is about to do no such thing.

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Before going to the dorm level of the newly recruited Rangers, John heads up to the Simulation lab to talk to the LOCCENT officer LJ has assigned to Sherlock. Her name is Colleen Dunne and she's been around for a long time, but John still needs to make sure she's up to date on the plan. His *other*motive for heading up to the LOCCENT offices floor is that he needs to distract himself to calm his nerves.
It doesn't matter whether he thinks he can do this or not—declining would raise a lot of eyebrows. It would draw attention to the fact that he's got some sinister reason for declining to help.

Still, if he's honest with himself, his topmost gut feeling when thinking about this mission forced on him is relief. Relief that it isn't over yet, that he has a safe reason to talk to Sherlock again. During the first days after Med Bay, he kept wondering what Sherlock had made of his hasty departure; whether he's angry or confused or nothing at all. It would be best if he wasn't that affected. A stronger reaction would likely just be John's wishful thinking.

Colleen has little to show John in terms of past simulation records. Her assessment echoes LJ's; even without any Drift training, Sherlock has formidable talent in blocking out any attempts of a neural handshake.

"He does it as though it's a reflex," Colleen explains. "I think that the first two other cadets he was paired with were not a good match, and that made him even less receptive to trying again. Self-preservation instinct is what I'd call it."

She then describes Sherlock's escalating failures and his declining mood in the training sessions. it matches the picture LJ had painted: withdrawn, defeated, probably depressed.

John shares with Colleen the plan to use the old training scheme, and it turns out that LJ has already been by to relay the contents of her conversation with John to the LOCCENT officer.

"I haven't used the old system for a few years, have to check the manuals in case someone has patched up some of the still remaining hiccups," Colleen says. "I also haven't had a neurodiverse trainee for a long time; they've usually been assigned to Halvorsen but he's got more trainees and Rangers on his plate than he can handle as is since he took on Coyne's who is on sick leave."

Something tells John that Sherlock's problems are more complex than just having a Bridge Operator who doesn't have that much experience with neurodiversity. The ways his drug use had changed his neural pathways have been fixed by now—the implants sort that out very quickly, essentially resetting his autonomic nervous system and the population numbers and functions of his opiate receptors into a pre-narcotics stage, so his addiction shouldn't pose any technical problems. But, the reasons why he'd turned to such a lifestyle in the first place are still there, and they might be connected to what drives this clearly deep-seated lack of trust towards other people. It'll definitely be a formidable block to a career path that is built on a foundation of opening oneself up completely to another human being.

As he takes the elevator down to the Ranger dorms, John tries not to let that notion make him feel as though this is a fool's errand.

All he can do is try since everyone else has failed. Maybe it's because they have demanded trust instead of trying to earn it. This is a military organisation, after all—obedience and trust are demanded based on rank, instead of being earned, even if the most successful trainer-trainee relationships are naturally built on mutual trust and respect. The trainee needs to believe that their instructors have their best interests at heart.

The question is, does Sherlock believe that of him?

John can relate to having trust issues. After all, he had found it impossible to open himself up anyone else after Harry; a lack of trust had buried his pilot career.

He finds a door to which a piece of painter's tape has been attached and Sherlock's surname scribbled onto with a marker pen. Only after an official pilot designation will this become a permanent home
with an engraved sign. Everything in a freshly minted Ranger's life is temporary and probationary; they have received an official co-pilot assignment and taken a Jaeger out for a spin.

Before making contact, John takes a moment to have a final think on what he's about to do.

Does he have any options besides going through with this? Not really.

Does he want to do this? The neural handshake part, not really. The part where he gets to spend more time with Sherlock and he doesn't even have to feel guilty about it because it's official business? God yes.

He knocks on the door.

"Go away"! yells a familiar and very resentful baritone from the other side.

John knocks again, louder, with a smirk.

"I said GO---" the protest dies when John quickly flashes his wrist console against the magnetic lock and steps in.

Sherlock's head snaps up from where he's sitting on the narrow, messy bunk in the corner. He's wearing only a T-shirt and his uniform trousers. His hair looks unruly, and his red-rimmed eyes are framed with dark shadows underneath.

There's a softcover book open on the bunk next to him. As he walks in, John recognises it as an old Jaeger blueprint catalogue from the archives.

If Sherlock has lost hope and is probably considering quitting, why would he be interested in reading such a thing? There's plenty of escapist fiction available at the base library.

Sherlock's gaze clicks onto him, his eyes narrowing to steely slits. He huffs but his attempt at righteous indignation falls flat like a cake deflating when the oven door is opened. He looks exhausted.

"Of course they'd send you." Sherlock presses his fingertips on the eyelids he closes briefly, then looks away from John towards the en suite, presumably just because he feels awkward.

John feels rather awkward, too. Angry, then. The sight of Sherlock right now floods him with an urgent need to do something, to fix it, to erase the misery the man is emanating. But, the level of bristle going on right now probably means that expressions of empathy would not go down well. "I'm sorry I haven't been by earlier."

Sherlock tilts his head, shifts his tired and dismissive gaze back to John. "I'm sure you've been a busy little bee with all the other hopeless cases the Corps shoves into your open arms."

It's not difficult for John to see past the venom. It seems that Sherlock is back at square one, rebelling against everything and everyone when he can't see a way out his predicament. Still, when he had first arrived there was more fire in his protestations. Now, bitterness and defeat have prevailed.

"Get the rest of your uniform on. You should be in training." John crosses his arms where he stands by the small desk next to the door.

"I quit training. They would have kicked me out, anyway. Doesn't a doctor hear all the gossip in this hellhole?"
"They're not kicking you out. In fact, they're bending over backwards to work out how to get you through it."

"And that's why you're here? To help me bend over for them, in exchange for what? What's in it for you, Ranger Watson?" The blazing anger is back, which is a good thing, but John hadn't expected such rage towards himself.

Maybe he's just been bottling it all up. John can't let it faze himself. Bring it on. I can take it.

Unless this fury is about something else than just making him a placeholder for the entire universe.

"They've already offered you the option of trying the other training plan, and there's also ways in which you can practice on your own without having to Drift with someone you'd have to deal with during downtime. There's Sarah—"

Sherlock's eyes go wide. "Out of all people, I'd expect you to agree she's an abomination."

"She donated her brain to us."

Sarah Sawyer had been the first pilot who had died fighting the kaiju in a two-pilot Jaeger. She had donated her body and her brain to the Corps; there had been a legal battle with her family afterwards about whether her consciousness was intended as part of the deal in the way that the Corps began using her, but eventually the family relented—after receiving a sizable sum of money to alleviate their concerns. John had reacted a bit like Sherlock just has when he'd first met Sarah who is essentially just a floating brain kept alive in a tank in the Sim lab. She is used by trainees to drift with, and her remains had been chosen for this because, in life, she'd been extraordinary compatible with just about any pilot. She is completely trustworthy outside of Drifting—without a mouth, she can't blabber about what she learns of the trainees, and her short-term memory has been tweaked to expire after each training session.

Perhaps she enjoys interacting with the trainees. At least they keep her company. John knows that LJ Drifts with her sometimes—they'd been friends when she'd been alive. It must be so strange. John can't imagine doing so with Harry, so he had never wanted to practice with Sarah.

"I think the worst that she was expecting was to be cut up and shoved under a microscope, not trapped in a bloody jar for all eternity!" Sherlock complains, sounding properly scandalised for her.

"I admit it's a little gruesome, but she doesn't complain. She hasn't asked us to euthanize her even though she could."

"Who knows what the Science Division is feeding into her through the tubing. Could be drugging her up, keeping her nicely sedated. It's not like the average idiot trainee could tell the difference."

"Alright, alright. Sarah's ruled out, then," John placates. They're getting side tracked, and Sherlock spouting his theories about the evilness of the admittedly secretive and unscrupulous Science Division will lead nowhere.

"Why did you decline when LJ offered to give you the old starter training program?"

Sherlock cards a hand through his hair. "I detest the idea that I need special arrangements, and I find the details of the old system disturbing."

"In what way? You're paired up with a Ranger, and we tend to understand how important it is that what happens in the Sim lab, stays in the Sim lab. Every one of us has had lots of practice with Drifting, so it won't be like the-blind-leading-the-blind which is, frankly, what I think the new system
"The old system still uses the relay gel," Sherlock mutters.

"Hm?"

"The old system uses the relay gel and the closed helmets," Sherlock forces out through clenched teeth, and John catches a whiff of embarrassment in his tone.

"Right, yeah, they do." John isn't quite getting why this is so important.

"I find the idea disturbing, alright? I hated putting my face in the water or getting it in my ears during swimming lessons as a child."

His tone tells John that this hadn't just been the mild discomfort of most children. He remembers one neurodiverse trainee from years back who had quit after never quite getting used to her sense of touch being manipulated through the neural bridge. She had also hated the neural gel with a passion. The substance used to be necessary to modulate signal transduction to the pilot's sensory organs. It increased conduction velocity in the auditory, olfactory and optic nerve and it also dampened or removed the neural noise caused by what the pilot was actually seeing inside the Conn-Pod; this was vital because they should be seeing and hearing what the Jaeger was experiencing, instead of what their own corporeal bodies were registering. Now, such a detail is no longer needed. The new implants and the later versions of the Pons system don't even require closed helmets.

"It's body temperature, it doesn't really smell or feel like anything, and it's just two seconds before it drains away," John says. It's definitely not his favourite part of the old system, but he has never found it so off-putting that he would have complained.

Sherlock looks like the very personification of disdainful suspicion.

John wonders if he's latching onto such a detail in an attempt to draw attention from what really bothers him. He decides to try another approach. "It doesn't matter if you don't get along with the other cadets. The only person you need to trust and manage to be around is your future co-pilot."

"You are the only one here I can manage being around. Correction: that I managed to be around."

The past tense seems somehow significant, but John has no idea why. "If you gave some of the guys a chance—"

"Very few pilot cadets Drift with their future co-pilots during the introductory phase since the final compatibility estimates can only be done in a full neural handshake."

"Some of the guys specialising in Drift training have years of experience teaching it, and they're good at what they do. LJ's a good example. Have you talked to her about what you find difficult?"

"No. Just no. I have talked to enough specialists in my life." Sherlock makes it sound like a curse word.

"You're being inordinately stubborn."

"No, I'm trying to preserve my dignity. I don't want any of those idiots in my head—cadet or Ranger—when all they'd do is rummage around for ammunition to use against me. They hate me, John, and the feeling is mutual."

He doubts arguing that LJ certainly doesn't seem to hate her most promising trainee when Sherlock's
thinking is this black-and-white. "What happens in the Drift stays in the Drift. Didn't they teach you this?"

Sherlock gives John his best worst glare. "Has no doctor ever in the history of the profession broken a confidence, swapped war stories over dinner, revealed a juicy tale to a spouse?"

"Of course, they have, but---"

Sherlock sighs. "Every argument you could possibly make has already been made by someone else. There's been a veritable parade of people here during the past three days, trying to blackmail, order, sweet-talk and intimidate me into complying."

"So, what next, then? You know you can't barricade yourself in here for all eternity."

"I should have told Mycroft to stuff this stupid enforced plea bargain up his arse and accept that I'm going to end up rotting away in China."

"You don't want that. Nobody wants that, because they know what you could probably do once you got through training."

"To what end? To become a puppet on a string?"

John walks to stand next to the bunk. "You still don't get it, do you? You're the puppeteer. The Corps can't function without its Rangers—if some robot or drone system was the best possible pilot, the Science Division wouldn't be using Rangers anymore. I've never seen the Corps work so hard to keep a candidate. Wallis assigned you to the Corps, even though he must have had his doubts even after seeing your training results. He has never had any difficulties in sending people home if they haven't toed the line, and you've been pissing on that line ever since you arrived, and they still won't throw in the towel."

"It's understandable that they don't want their precious, expensive implants to go to waste. They can have them back for all I care."

Implant removal has quite high complication rates and it's not routinely done even if a Ranger quits. Not even retired pilots usually go for it, simply opting for the implants to remain functional or for them to be rendered useless through a process involving a very precisely applied magnetic resonance field.

"Besides, aptitude scores aren't everything," Sherlock adds. It doesn't sound like his heart is in the argument. It's as though he's talking just to waste time, not caring if he wins.

"I know," John says. "Mine weren't that stellar, but me and Harry were unusually compatible. Well, twins tend to be like that. If either of us had had your scores——"

Sherlock looks up at him. "You think it would have changed anything? You think she'd still be alive?"

That pierces through and stings deep, even though John tries to hide it. "Maybe, maybe not."

They remain silent for a moment. Sherlock, shoulders slumped, fingers the strap of a combat boot he had left on the bed. John shifts his feet.

"I know you never saw this as a very attractive prospect before, and I really don't have to remind you what's at stake, but you did get this far. Is there any way, any compromise which you'd be willing to go for to try again?"
Sherlock pins him in place with a glare. "Why are you here? Why did they get you of all people to spout all this nonsense at me? And don't bullshit me, I'm not falling for it again."

John's instincts had been right, then—there's something going on here on top of the main issue. Something involving the two of them. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Did you have to go so overboard with it?"

"With what?"

Sherlock grunts in disgust, probably for having to explain this further. "Acting as though you cared for anything else than the Corps. You walked out once, when you thought that your work was done. Now, things are not working out so here you are again, trying to sweet-talk me into doing the Corps' bidding. It's all for the greater good, I'm sure. I'm sure they'll pin another medal on you for helping the needy."

"Sherlock—"

"Don't 'Sherlock' me. Why won't you call me 'Holmes', or 'cadet', or 'trainee' like you should? Why would I ever be just 'Sherlock' to you unless you're using it to abuse my trust?"

"When I first met you, I had a hunch you might hate all the formality," John stammers.

"Did they not order you back onto my case, since I'm not Drifting?"

Technically, that is what happened, but admitting to it is not a good idea. "That's not why—"

"You defended me to Wallis. I heard Chen talking about it; he was quite impressed, if a little confused. I was off your hands at that point, no need to care about yet another piece of cannon fodder for the system. Why, John? Why would you play games like that?"

John spreads his arms in defeat and confusion. "What games?!

"I thought you liked me!" Sherlock exclaims, then looks horrified at his own admission.

"I thought you liked me, wanted to spend time with me. It's utterly pathetic that I fell for it."

No, you got it right. You always get everything right when it comes to me. "Sherlock, I'm sorry, I— it wasn't an act. Ever, I did want to spend time with you. Do want to, I mean. You're so different from everyone else here."

"For someone lecturing me about trust, you seem to have some trouble with it yourself. Every time I shared something, every time I thought that maybe I could trust you, you wouldn't meet me half way, or you disappeared."

"I'm... sorry." What else could he say?

"I don't understand people. That's not going to change, ever. I have thirty years of evidence that says it's never a good idea. By extension, I don't understand you, and I shouldn't trust you." Sherlock grits his teeth as though something about the statement is disturbing him in its contradiction.

Finally, the words register in John's head. Instead of speaking in past tense—

*He still trusts me?*
"I've never trusted anyone but Harry. Not with... some things. This life, as a Ranger, gives you comrades and sometimes it gives you a spouse but mostly, it just gives you co-workers. Not friends," John tries to explain.

"Then I understand even less what you're playing at."

"Maybe that's what I thought we could be, but I'm not used to it, either, and especially not here at Chard. Having friends, I mean," he adds utterly needlessly. Very eloquent, John.

"I don't have 'friends',' Sherlock snarls, loading a full clip of disapproval into the word.

"Maybe I felt like we both could have given it a try," John offers.

Sherlock is studying the floor. "I wanted you to not be one of those blindly obedient idiots who just want to use me."

"Believe me, I'm not. Eighteen years is a long time to be side-lined. I know what it's like to belong here on paper, but not really feel like you do."

Sherlock shrugs stiffly.

"Will you still trust me, then?" John asks. "With the training? If there's no one else you'd be willing to work with, is there a chance you might have a go with me?"

"I don't have a choice, not really. It's either you or these idiots who want to see my head on a spike. Or eating rats in a cell."

It's obvious that John's words haven't been enough. He has a hunch that Sherlock is expecting something more from him, some compromising gesture that would even out the playing field.

He'll just have to deliver. This skirts a dangerous level of honesty, but a part of John wants to stoke the fire. "I was never in this to hurt you. I was never in this, until I was—do you understand?" he asks, trying to let enough conviction into his voice for it to sound convincing, but not so much that it would make Sherlock ask further questions.

Sherlock shakes his head, gets up and retreats to the sink to run himself a glass of water—probably to get something less upsetting to do than to continue being scrutinised and pressed for an answer.

"I'm not here just for the Corps. You don't want to go to prison, and I think it would be a huge waste if you did."

I want you to stay. Not just for you, but for me as well.

Sherlock leans his palms on the sink, regarding John through his reflecting in the mirror above it with an expression that's hard to interpret. "You asked me if I trust you. I don't trust anyone, but there is one person here I might be willing to give a chance to earn such a privilege. Whether that's happening against my better judgment, remains to be seen."

John smiles. "I will see you at ten in the Sim lab tomorrow, then."

"Is that an order?"

Reflected in the mirror, Sherlock's eyes seem to have changed colour from the greyish blue they are in daylight to magnesium grey flecked with moss green, and John can't get enough of them. He can't get enough of any bit of Sherlock he's allowed.
"Do you want it to be?"

"Technically, we are the same rank, now," Sherlock points out, and his reflection disappears from the mirror as he turns to face John. "If we're doing this, then we're doing it as equals, even if I acknowledge that fact that you're the instructor."

"I would never dream of getting the upper hand on you."

"Good, because I wouldn't let you," Sherlock announces.

John laughs.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
I must urge all wanting a good laugh to have a look at the veritable meta-spinoff things coming to life in the comments section. Thanks to sartorius, the cast of characters of that behind-the-scenes mayhem (complete with some photoshopped illustrations) includes John's libido, Grawp Good-Smasher who brings in a much-needed kaiju perspective on all this endless pining, Ranger Regret, and (last but not least) the great Cthulhu himself. This is how it starts, and this is how it continues. I take no responsibility for anyone's mental health when reading such material. If this isn't reader engagement taken to a whole new level then I don't know what is. *continues scrubbing tea snorted out of her nose from the kitchen floor*

I want to thank all my readers—the commenters, the kudos-pounders, the lurkers, the tumbelerers (is that a word?) and all the other cheerleaders of our Ranger boys. You are all greatly appreciated. We're halfway through now, but all the best stuff just might still be ahead of us! We're now so close to all the Drifting that it's practically calling us like a nameless tentacled void.

Firing the canon:
I will postpone more detailed commentary on the neural gel for a later chapter. It's canon, but featured only in the first film. Blocking, in the way it is explained here, is not really canon but Drifting does require allowing the other person into one's head.

Sarah is canon, believe it or not. She's introduced in the second Pacific Rim movie. The surname Sawyer is, of course, my addition.

The fact of there being two generations of training systems and the details regarding them all come from my head. The brainstem implants can be fired up and connected to LOCCENT control without establishing a neural handshake that would allow Drifting; this sort of a limited connection can be used in the early stages of training to help a cadet acclimatize to having his senses manipulated. The next step in the older training scheme is unilateral Drifting, which John already explained to us in the previous chapter. In a unilateral Drift, he will be safely locked in behind a sort of a cerebral firewall, while Sherlock is the one who needs to allow access to everything: his memories, his
emotions, his very being. As RosiePaw put it in her brilliant comment: John is about to meet Sherlock's limbic system. A unilateral Drift is enough for training purposes—to introduce a new Ranger to how it feels for a neural handshake to be established—but it wouldn't allow controlling a Jaeger.

LJ Marais is an OC. The movies do not offer any commentary regarding birth control or medical care in the Corps so that's all me.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
Florence+The Machine: *Hardest of Hearts*
Florence+The Machine: *Make Up Your Mind*
Florence+The Machine: *Heavy In Your Arms*
Arcade Fire: *Ready To Start*
John spits the toothpaste out into the sink and rinses his mouth, then scrutinises himself in the mirror. He'd taken his time shaving, even unwrapped a fresh blade for the task; he's happy with the results. Do the dark shadows underneath his eyes look lighter today? It's entirely possible since he had slept well, even nightmare-free, for the first time in months.

He grabs a comb with the intention of parting his hair slightly to the right of the midline and combing it down neatly just as he has been doing for at least a decade when something stalls his hand. He places the comb on the edge of the sink and instead merely runs his fingers quickly through the blond strands in the front, letting his hair finds its slight natural swoop to the right. A quick flick of a wetted comb seals the deal.

He grins at his visage in the mirror. This is what he used to look like, save for the fact that his sandy blonde is beginning to develop greyish highlights. Having to wear a helmet and not having time to groom when deployed to fight meant that his signature hairstyle in his active service days had been an unruly one.

After hanging his towel from a hook on the wall, he waves a hand in front of the optical light control panel to plunge the bathroom into darkness. He then returns to the main area of his dorm room.

During his piloting career, he used to get up half-past six in the morning, since Harry always showed up a quarter to, banging both fists on his door and hollering through it something along the lines of: "Wake up bro! It is a be-autiful morning in the Breach, with sunny skies and at least a moderate chance of kaiju!" When John opened the door, she'd shove through a hand holding a steaming plastic mug of coffee for him before walking in. By the time they'd walked to mess hall that coffee—brewed by Harry in her room from much better beans than the Corps would ever serve to its staff—would have been drunk. "Needs to be strong enough to wake the dead," Harry always said when John made his habitual complaint about the coffee being too strong. It was their ritual, their safety blanket, a tiny island of predictability in a life where every day could have been their last.

Eighteen years have passed, but those memories have still given John a gut-punch when they slip into his head like this—but not today. Today, he is somehow able to accept them, grab on to the fondness and the love they remind him of, but not be overwhelmed by the loss. It's there, a hum in the background, an invisible hand that's got a hold of him, but today it feels like a reassuring weight on the shoulder instead of fingers coiling around his neck to choke him.

John grabs the new black boots he had picked up from Requisitions last night and gives a critical once-over to the inky blue service uniform hanging from the handle of his wardrobe door. He hasn't worn it in eighteen years, but last night he'd established that it still fits. He has worn his parade uniform regularly and the more casual Ranger clothes daily, but the service uniform is just for active duty Rangers and Rangers in training. Some of his colleagues might frown that he's wearing it today, but since his implants are about to be fired up again with the purpose of training someone, why wouldn't he? In his current job, he has limited himself to a combination of Ground crew uniform pieces and informal Ranger wear, because the eclectic combinations of dress shirts and uniform trousers have felt like a good fit for a job that is a mix-and-match of several different PPDC service divisions but does not properly belong in any of them.
Today, he's not an eclectic collection of parts sewn together. Today, and as long as he's needed, he'll be a Ranger again.

John hums to himself as he makes his way to mess hall, letting whatever ancient rock song had settled in as an earworm pace his steps. For once, he uses his privilege of walking past the cadets queuing for their breakfasts to joins the Ranger line. After filling a mug to the brim with coffee, he reaches out for a cranberry and oat muffin just as Maria Groenewald is trying to fish the very same treat out of the basket.

"Go ahead," John prompts, and she grabs the pastry.

Before turning back towards the rest of the breakfast offerings, she gives John a once-over with a surprised frown. "Looking good today, Watson. What's the occasion?"

John flashes a winning grin. "It's veterans' day at the Sim lab," he quips, grabs an apple and tosses it in the air, catching it with his other hand just so that it's easy to slip into his trouser pocket.

Maria gives him an appreciative nod, and they continue down the serving line.

John wonders how long it'll take before the whole Corps knows about what they will initiate today. LJ is not a gossip, and John would like to postpone becoming the talk of the base as long as he can. However, the cadets will find out as soon as they check their own Sim lab bookings; they'll see his, Colleen's and Sherlock's names listed together for Training Room Five on the rota, and after lunch, most of the base will be privy to this new development. John finds himself worrying surprisingly little about his reputation; after all, he can simply say he is under orders. What does give him pause is the realisation that Sherlock will have to endure quite a lot of scrutiny from his peers, since this will be seen as special provision, perhaps even mollycoddling. It's probably the reason why Sherlock had declined any tailoring of his training plan in the first place. Now, he no longer has a choice if he's to stay in the Corps.

John is still not entirely sure about the nature and intensity of his motivation, but he also doesn't feel that he has the right to question either. It should be enough, that Sherlock not only endured the trials of basic training but excelled at it when he could have just settled for a performance good enough to spend his life mopping the floors in the Ground Crew.

No, John realises, he doesn't belong on the sidelines. And neither do I.

The first thing John does when he arrives in the Sim lab is to chase out all the curious onlookers from the control booth of Training Room Five. Rangers, especially ones in training themselves, are encouraged to observe other Rangers' Sim sessions for educational purposes, but John is certain that an audience would only make Sherlock clam up, especially one containing people John knows he's had conflicts with such as rookie Ranger Lee.

Once John shuts the door after them, Colleen turns in her chair to address him. "Lee's the last one we tried to get him to practice with since we have so few recruits right now. It usually works best to pair
two who are in the same stage of training."

John chuckles. "Yeah, no, that's not going to work. No love between the two of them; Lee's been looking at him down his nose from day one, and Sherlock beat his sorry arse up at the dojo."

Colleen smiles and turns back to continue her systems check. "Takes twice as long to go through the automated test runs with the old system."

"Any updates I should know about? I last Drifted about eighteen years ago," he admits, slightly embarrassed. Colleen probably knows this already; he'd had an automated request from her to allow access to his Neural Handshake records and Pons settings data last night. He had been expecting one; having John's old info at her disposal will enable Colleen to focus on finding the right parameters for Sherlock instead of having to run fine-tuning calibrations for both Rangers under her watchful eye.

A ten-year veteran of the LOCCENT section, Colleen had worked for CIA before she was recruited into the PPDC. In the early days of the Corps, the CIA was a particularly important ally since the prototype of the Pons system was based on the US Army's DARPA jet fighter neural systems.

"It'll be pretty much the way you remember it," she replies.

John checks his watch; it's two minutes past ten in the morning. _Fashionably late, then._

There are two helmets on a long side table in the control booth, the metallic paint on both of them faded and worn. John grabs a microfiber cloth and the bottle of window cleaner Colleen has placed next to them and gives the visors a good wipe. One can never know if the previous users have bothered to do so or not, and these helmets probably haven't been worn by anyone for a while.

"They were serviced yesterday, and the relay gel replaced."

John had emailed Colleen late last night after reading through the old training manuals. They're going for a pretty standard approach, first simply firing up the brainstem implants and establishing a connection to the Pons interface so that Sherlock can get used to the sensory input arriving into his brain being manipulated. No neural handshake between the two of them is required for this. Step two would be a unilateral Drift, established through a neural handshake in which John will stay behind a cerebral firewall, but Sherlock will get the full experience of his memories being used to sync him with the system. It'll be the moment of truth since Sherlock needs to allow him access to _everything_: his memories, his emotions, his very _being_. A unilateral Drift is enough for training purposes—to introduce a new Ranger to how it feels for a neural handshake to be established—but it wouldn't allow controlling a Jaeger. A unilateral Drift is as far as John will need to go—as far as he's willing to go—and once Sherlock can tolerate that, a bilateral Drift with prospective co-pilots shouldn't be a problem for him. It's less upsetting to experience someone else's memories and emotions than it is to be reminded of the most intense examples of one's own—and to share them with another human being.

John does not underestimate the difficulty of doing so—after all, he would have never agreed to even try with anyone except Harry. When the recruiter had stood on his doorway at the university dorm, they had assured him that there was nearly a zero chance of him being paired with anyone else than his twin. That had sealed the deal for John.

Now, he's asking someone else for that trust. The weight of the realisation is heavy, but at least he knows that he fully appreciates the gravity of such a request.

He rechecks his watch. Ten minutes past ten.
Just as he starts wondering if should go see what's delaying Sherlock, the door to the Sim room attached to the control booth opens. John hurries through the connecting door.

Sherlock carefully closes the door behind him, his gaze sweeping the edges of the door as though to make sure no trespassers can enter to interrupt their session.

"Colleen will lock it from her side," John promises.

Should he offer his hand for shaking? That feels awfully formal. Besides, the moment has gone, and Sherlock is inspecting the room. Colleen waves a hand behind the plexiglass window separating the control booth from the training area, and Sherlock gives her a nod.

"Looks the same as the new ones," Sherlock soon announces and finally turns to face John.

"Yeah, well, the biggest difference is what generation of software we use. The old system isn't compatible with the new headsets, but there are oxygen ports in all Training Rooms for the helmets, and the Pons connection is all wireless so we can use any of the Training Rooms for this."

Sherlock looks utterly disinterested as he sticks his hands into his service uniform pockets and keeps eyeing John as though he expects him to do something alarming at any moment. Should he say something more, explain his plan, give some sort of a pep talk?

Colleen appears at the door. "You boys ready?"

"I don't know. Are we?" John asks with what he hopes is a reassuring smile.

"Do your worst," Sherlock says in a resigned tone and receives a helmet from Colleen.

John grabs the other one from her, and she returns to her booth, closing the connecting door between them. It's the moment of truth, then.

The room is well insulated from ambient sound, and there are no windows. This is important particularly when battle simulations are run; ambient noise can break concentration and destroy immersion. There's no need to employ the spinal clamps when simulating; the Pons system can simply trick the Rangers into thinking they are controlling a Jaeger when in reality they have not left the safe confines of a Training Room.

John puts on his helmet and presses the button in the neck seal to activate it but keeps the visor up so that they can still have a few words before beginning. The proper version of the helmet would connect to the rest of a set of battle armour, but these training versions have been equipped with an automatically extending and adjusting rubber neck seal similar to ones used in drysuit diving. "See, I can breathe fine until the gel's applied. It's nothing worse than a motorcycle helmet right now. Or, if you've worked in a lab with similar safety gear—"

"I studied chemistry, not microbiology." Sherlock is holding his helmet between his palms as though he can't quite decide what to do with it.

"Right. Go on, then. Put it on."

Slowly, watching it intently as though it is a snake ready to spring into action and bite him in the nose, Sherlock inspects his helmet one more time and then lowers it onto his head. The visor fogs a little before John plugs both of them to the life support systems through a spiral hose connected to the oxygen port, but it soon clears as the oxygen mixed with room air begins circulating inside with a hiss.
"You can put a bit of aromatherapy oil inside the helmet if you don’t like the plastic smell; we used to do that all the time. Pine, eucalyptus, seashore scents—" when having the flu, three drops of menthol oil had always made all the difference.

"No doubt all artificial esters and not natural aromas. I'll pass." Sherlock's voice is muted by the helmet.

"Ready?" John asks. "I'll go first. You'll hear a warning signal; there's enough time to take a deep breath after that. You don't really even need to do that, like I said, the neural gelling only takes about two seconds." He glances towards the control room; LJ has slipped in and taken a seat next to Colleen.

Sherlock gives them a sideways glance, and John is relieved that he doesn’t seem to be too bothered by the doubled audience.

"Don't worry; I'm not staying; just came in to wish you all good luck," the Fightmaster's voice soon comes through the loudspeaker in the Training Room wall; she's leaning into Colleen's microphone. She stands up, gives a nod a John, and slips out the control booth door.

"Luck has nothing to do with this," John hears Sherlock mutter.

Colleen's voice comes through the loudspeaker next, addressing Sherlock: "Once it's drained out, the gel starts working in about a minute. When you're both been doused, I can start the Sim. Between the start and the gel beginning to take effect you will be able to hear, see and smell less and less, until all sensory conduction has been cut off. Then, I can start the system. If I do it before, there will be a very disorientating sensory reverb effect. In the new system which you've had some experience with, the shift to the initiation of the neural handshake is instant; now, it will be gradual. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Sherlock snaps.

John can't tell if he's impatient or just very nervous. "We won't be bridging just yet. The system will only take over your senses, first, and we can play around a bit with that. Only when you're comfortable, we'll do a one-directional handshake. I'll see what you are experiencing, and the communications will work as they would in a full Drift, but you won't have to worry about dodging anything upsetting that's coming from my side. Alright?"

"Not really," Sherlock mutters, before relenting, "Just get on with it."

"Hit me, Colleen," John says. There's a quiet beep, and then the yellow, opaque gel flows in and fills the helmet, then instantly starts draining away. There's just enough time until it starts taking effect for John to see that Sherlock has closed his eyes and is holding his breath.

"Eyes open," Colleen's already fading voice register's in John's ears. The outside world disappears briefly, fading into whiteness until the Pons system begins replacing his senses with processed data relayed through his implants. His vision returns, and the room looks just as it did before, even though the sight is no longer being relayed into his visual cortex directly from his optic nerve. Instead, what he thinks he sees is data from that nerve being processed and regulated by the implant and then fed to the conscious parts of his sensory system.

Instantly, he turns to look at Sherlock. He has raised his hands to the neck of the helmet as though tempted to shove it out of his head; most of the gel has already drained out, and John can see him blinking frantically, eyes wide and pupils blown.
"Nearly done", John promises. "It's all fine."

"I won't alter anything until you say so, John," Colleen assures them.

John barely even registers her words since his focus is solely on Sherlock. He's still breathing heavily, bordering on hyperventilating.

Sherlock has barely managed to suffer through the torture of the gelatinous, disgusting substance slithering into his nose, eyes and ears when the reassuring return of his senses is replaced with an impending sense of disappearing off the face of the Earth. The ambient sounds begin to mute, his vision shift into what can only be described as pure white light. A faint jolt of electricity, akin to a shiver, goes down his spine and tingles in his limbs. It's like being trapped in a box the edges of which are at an infinite distance. White. Silent—no, not even silent but utterly devoid of the very essence of sound. Everything is empty and sterile like a void; he can't feel the clothes on him, can't even feel himself breathing— It's the most terrifying thing he has ever experienced. He can't see or feel himself moving, but apparently, something is still triggering his proprioception because he feels slightly nauseous and dizzy.

Finally, as though a veil has been lifted, reality begins to creep in.

But, there's something wrong with it.

Colours are off—sharper than he remembers them being in the Training Room with its military-befitting muted tones. When he turns his head, the nearly imperceptible lag that always happens with human eyes just isn't there. The scrape of his shoe against the linoleum floor is too sharp, especially since there is no ambient noise at all. The ever-present sounds of the bulkheads groaning as the sea tests their strength is absent, and so is the hum from air conditioning. It's disconcerting. It's as though only a few channels of a recording are allowed to play or if someone has suddenly dropped off nine-tenths of an orchestra while playing a symphony.

He can't even smell anything.

"Sherlock?"

John sounds like himself, but remastered, like an old recording that has been scrubbed of dust and re-edited.

"Everything alright?" Colleen asks. She sounds as though her voice is coming from inside Sherlock's head, and her soprano has a slight microphone-like muted distortion as though coming from a bug planted inside his cranium.

John steps in front of him. "Hi," he says with a smile. "We're in the system, now. Not Drifting, yet, but connected to it."

"This isn't how it felt before, with the newer training system," Sherlock argues. He sounds distracted and stupid, and the pitch of his voice has risen from anxiety. It must be true, what John is saying, and admittedly this is much less disturbing than being thrown into a hurricane of images and feelings and memories, some of them his own, some of his training partner's, but his instincts are still telling him to escape.
His attempts with the newer training system had felt as treacherous as trying to step into a wildly spinning carousel. Every time, he had been completely overwhelmed, and his fight-or-flight reflex had kicked in. The Ranger in charge—the French one now sitting in the control booth—had told him that he had kept somehow shielding, meaning that he was somehow throwing him and his partner out of the system. No proper neural handshake was ever established, not even once. Every neural bridge the system tried to build between him and someone else collapsed into the waters of his resistance and the maelstrom of his consciousness. He had blacked out during the last attempt and woken up to the sound of that bastard Lee laughing at him. That's when he had walked out and sworn never to return to the Sim Lab.

Several people had tried to talk him round, and he had told all of them to piss off because it was all pointless.

But then John had come to talk to him, somehow reawakened a persistent glimmer of hope that he could do this, that he might stick around—not just because he's obliged to but because he wants to.

Maybe it's true. The jury's still out.

"I know. This is what it will feel like when everything is in order. It's a crash landing, starting one's Drift training with the new system, but I bet you can do it with no problem once you get your bearings in here."

Sherlock isn't so sure about that. He raises his hand, not even knowing why. He feels like testing whether everything still works normally. He sees his hand, and it looks and feels like his hand, but it isn't. Something about it is—off.

"Your senses are working normally, but instead of the signals travelling straight into their cortical processing centres, they're being processed by the Pons system as relayed by the implants, and the scrubbed and altered data is being relayed back through them," Colleen explains inside his head. "We can remove distractions and only show you what the Jaeger sees and hears. This is how we can get you to control only the equivalent of half of it; we just let through the signals from one hemisphere, but making you feel like you're are using the right one normally as well."

"And Jo—the co-pilot will provide the input from the opposite hemisphere?" Sherlock cringes inwardly when he realises what an uncharacteristically stupid, stupid question he has posed. It must be a symptom that he's distracted, alarmed and uncomfortable; no wonder his thinking is degenerating into the realm of the unintelligent.

"Yes," Colleen confirms cheerily. "I'll show you the control console view. You won't need to know what each bit does for some time, but it'll give you an idea of how we can alter your perception."

Suddenly, Sherlock's visual field zooms out and gains an intricate frame of readings: proximity warning, different gauges which must be related to the Jaeger; his heart rate and remaining blood volume, various other medical-sounding details, a compass...

Suddenly, it all flashes out, and his vision returns to normal, leaving in its wake an even worse sense of vertigo.

"There are several different views you can select from, all customisable. Usually, the co-pilots build themselves a visual rig together."

Sherlock nods mutely. He feels like he's not entirely keeping up. Colleen's voice inside his skull feels like a tiny insect is burrowing itself into his brain.
"Tell me what's going on," John prompts. "You're being very quiet."

Sherlock frowns. "Are we still talking normally? I see your mouth moving."

John chuckles a little. "Yeah, we are. I'm saying things, and you're hearing them, in the sense that the system is taking the signals travelling along your auditory nerve, processing them and sending them to your auditory cortex. Can you mute me for a moment, Colleen?"

"You got it."

Suddenly, John's mouth is still moving—it looks as though he's singing something—but Sherlock can't hear a thing. John then glances towards the control room, and then, as though Sherlock had only imagined going temporarily deaf, John's voice is back: "—am rubbish at singing, anyway, so you'd be happy to have been spared of that, I promise."

"You can alter anything I see or hear or feel?" Sherlock asks, alarmed.

"Yeah," John admits. "That's what enables battle sims: we don't even need a mock-up Jaeger Conn-Pod, we can just trick you into thinking you're in one, taking on a kaiju."

Sherlock knows this, of course he knows this, he doesn't need things to be repeated or explained as though one would talk to a child, but he definitely wants to keep John talking.

"Let's test the way the implant can influence your somatosensory neurons," John says, referring to the part of the nervous system that responds to changes at the surface or inside the body. Its receptors process information regarding temperature, pain, touch, and proprioceptive information from outside the central nervous system. The spinal clamp is required to turn the commands issued by the brain into physical Jaeger actions, but activating it isn't necessary for sims. The brainstem implant can trick the brain into thinking it's moving and sensing touch, pressure, pain and other such things.

"Ready, Colleen?" John asks.

"Just a second," she replies, gesturing furiously on the special holographic interface connected to the computer, presumably to isolate the right brain nuclei metadata to manipulate their neural pathways.

Sherlock wants to protest, wants to say that he already feels exhausted and overwhelmed and would very much like to be returned to his own head and his own body right now thank you very much, but Colleen's fingers soon stop dancing on her keyboard and the 3D interface, and she nods. "Ready."

Sherlock's gaze narrows as he keeps his eyes locked onto the back wall of the control room, trying to work out how to phrase his request to cut this session short right now. He squeezes his eyes shut when an unexplained shudder goes through him, bringing on another bout of vertigo. The quiet of the room when no one is talking feels like being underwater, and he has to struggle hard against a sense of claustrophobia.

"I'm touching your arm," John says after a moment.

Sherlock's eyes fly open, his gaze soon focusing on his right hand. He startles violently when he sees John's fingers curled around his wrist. He feels nothing. Not John's hand, not his own hand, nothing! Logic is galloping away from him, making way for panic to slither in its tendrils.

He bites his lip—nothing; stomps his foot on his other foot—still nothing! He can't feel the pain, even though it has to be there!

It's too quiet. It's too quiet in his head; he can't function if it's too quiet! They once made him wear
headphones at school when they thought it would help him, but the other children laughed, and it was the opposite of what he needed, he needed the noise, the white noise of the rest of the planet around him---

He can't breathe. He tastes metallic blood, it's too quiet, and he can't feel anything, and there's no oxygen----

John's voice is distant but alarmed: "Colleen, stop!"

Suddenly, Sherlock can feel his left big toe smarting and his lip aching a little. Never before has he welcomed pain like this. Sensation is how he grounds himself in reality. To lose that threatens him, terrifies him. To try to re-establish control, Sherlock tries to think rationally, logically, with detachment. What occurs to him is that this system could make millions if it were turned into a commercial virtual reality gaming system. The current commercial models can make you see and hear things but altering the sense of touch is a long way away, still.

"You alright?" John asks.

Sherlock flicks a dismissive hand. "Of course. Stop fussing." He wants to get through this as fast as he can, so best just grin and bear it. He is borderline coping now that he no longer feels as though he's been suddenly thrown into a sensory deprivation tank.

He can't even say which is more disturbing; the glaringly artificial reality he sees when he opens his eyes and looks around the room or being deprived of a component of that manufactured reality. When human-like robots were the latest fad in the 2010s, researchers had found that they should deliberately be made to look a bit unrealistic so that people wouldn't be disturbed by them. Who knew that the same could apply to anything created as a series of ones and zeros?

Not that the human code is that much more complicated. *G.A.T.C. The genome. Four codones.* Sherlock knows the letter combinations for all the human essential amino acids, which is what he starts reciting in his head to calm himself down. He lays a palm on the worn wood of the small side table next to him. It looks as artificial as everything else, though the wood feels entirely normal, organic underneath his fingertip when he runs it across the surface.

When he hears his name being called, he lifts his gaze to meet with John's. Those blue eyes are almost sparkling with excitement and anticipation.

Suddenly, something flickers through Sherlock's visual field, as fast as a blink, which it probably was, but he hadn't felt the butterfly-soft touch of lashes against his lower eyelid. Why would they turn off only that part of his sense of touch? What would be the point?

"Let's take a step further," Colleen suggests, and John looks eager.

Sherlock feels powerless and vexed, but the faster they get through whatever it is that was planned for this session, the quicker he gets back to his room and gets to bury his head underneath a pillow. His head feels like a beehive, ready to burst. Usually, he prefers florid cerebral stimulation to avoid getting bored and succumbing to certain destructive habits, but this barrage of information is entirely out of his control and feels threatening, especially since it can be turned off at the click of a button.

_They're in your head._

He squeezes his eyes shut, tries to put the thought back where it belongs, but it won't disappear. Instead, it looms in the distance, mocks him and frightens him.

*Look at what you let them do to you.*
Suddenly, there's a flash of colour at the left edge of his visual field. He turns his head and is startled to see a swarm of butterflies flying past between him and John. They're a mix of blue and white Asian and European varieties; he could probably name most of them if they weren't fluttering past so quickly.

He shifts on his feet to look at John, bewildered. He knows that the system must have manufactured this, but they look so real; he could even feel the faintest breeze on his cheek when two of the insects had fluttered past.

John offers his hand, and Sherlock takes it hesitantly. John tugs at it so that he's extending his arm right in front of him, palm up. To be able to feel John's warm fingers—or even just a computer approximation of them—on his skin makes him want to gasp with relief; it's precisely what he needs to ground himself right now.

"Amazing, isn't it? They used a sim with birds when I did my beginner training," John tells him, letting go of his hand. "Keep your hand up."

Soon two large, pearlescent blue butterflies are perched on Sherlock's fingertips.

"Some people are phobic of birds, so we swapped them for these," Colleen tells them.

The rest of the butterflies have perched on the upper edge of the control room window. Now, one of them hurtles into flight, and lands on his palm. He starts turning his hand gently, and the insects obediently crawl along it. The sensory illusion is perfect—a faint tickle and a familiar sense of stickiness from its legs. How is it that a computer-produced experience feels more realistic right now than the imitations of reality the system is feeding into his head?

Sherlock brings his hand closer so that he can see the butterflies better. At such a close distance, he can see that they're not real, after all. They're not perfect, because they're too perfect. Too symmetrical, too identical, too predictable in their movements. Life is difficult to imitate because it's not neatly organised or geometrically perfect. Computer generated images lack those imperfections that Sherlock has always been good at spotting.

The slow closing and opening of the wings of the insects on his hand turns into a quicker flutter, and they take to flight. Watching them leaving fills Sherlock with a growing sense of unease, and he can't pinpoint why.

"I'll give you another kaleidoscope," Colleen says.

Sherlock turns to expect them from the same direction, but this time it's a smaller group fluttering down from the ceiling right above them. They are again mostly blues and whites, but the tail of the group is orange.

His heart begins to beat quicker.

It starts to rain.

He looks up, expecting to see his visual field distort and a soft pitter-patter to begin as the drops hit on the plexiglass of his helmet, but they fall soundlessly right through him. He waves his hand in front of him, through the cloud of butterflies now in a trajectory between him and John. The raindrops are ghosts, not wetting his hand or causing any other sort of sensory experience, either.

He waves his hand through the thick flutter of hundreds of butterflies; the blue and white ones split into two groups as his fingers approach them, but his hand slips through the orange ones as though they weren't really there. He tries to snatch one of the orange ones, but again, his hand passes right
through as though they were nothing but vapour.

He can't feel the raindrops, even though he can see them falling.

*What is this?*

Why is he expecting to hear the thunder any minute now? He can't even hear the rain! He pulls up his sleeves to expose more skin to the falling drops, but nothing changes.

"Sherlock?" Colleen asks. "What are you doing?"

John's voice: "Sherlock? You look a little green around the gills. Everything alright?"

His breathing has picked up, and he hadn't even noticed.

There's a memory— he tries not to—

*No.*

"Leave me alone," he pleads, threat and alarm mixing with confusion.

John waves towards Colleen. "Stop the sim."

Sherlock tries to focus on listening to their conversation, but until he gets out of this, until they stop this, whatever this is, he can't trust his ears, he can't trust his eyes; they can do anything they want to trick him—

He flinches violently when he feels a hand on his shoulder. It's not real; they could just be tricking him into believing it's there—

"Get out of *my head!*" he hears someone yelling, and only realises afterwards it must have been him.

There's a flash of white, something tugs at his curls; he hears a hiss as though someone had left a gas valve open. The air feels a bit stuffier, now. He reaches up to rub his eyes, then remembers that he can't, since the helmet is there—and manages to poke himself on his closed eyelid when his fingers do collide with his face, after all.

"Open your eyes," John prompts gently. "You're alright. We took you out of the sim. Helmet's off. Get your eyes open—you'll feel better."

It takes Sherlock a moment to heed the advice. The fear of finding himself back in that too-perfect approximation of the room makes his heart feel as though it's clenching in his chest.

He cracks his lids open, curls his fingers into the fabric of his trousers, relishing the fact that it all feels normal again. The room looks...normal, except for the light from the overhead LED panels being a little flickery. He presses the back of his hand on his lower lip, and it comes away with a tiny speck of blood. It proves he'd bitten down hard enough that it should have hurt.

John is pouring two glasses of water, gesturing to a chair. Sherlock moves to it like a sleepwalker, takes the drink John shoves into his palm.

He can still smell the rain.

-o-0-0-0-o-0-0-0-o-0-0-o-
After Sherlock has downed his water and excused himself to go to the toilet, John goes to the control booth to talk to Colleen.

She says it's quite normal for the first session to be short; some trainees take longer to accept that they'll have to adjust their definition of 'real' when it comes to the Pons system. They'll feel pain not directly caused by their own nervous systems alerting of tissue damage; they will not see or hear things they expect to experience. There had been a warning in the old training manuals that neurodiverse individuals with sensory processing issues might need an extended adjustment period.

Colleen leans back in her chair, crossing her fingers behind her neck. "I don't think he did too badly. Then again, I have so little experience with neurodiverse pilots that I can't really tell if this would have been a normal first session for someone like him, especially after the bad experiences he had with the new training system."

"You don't think there was anything—off about how he was with the butterfly sim?" John asks with a frown. "At first, I thought he was just playing around, but something about it is bothering me."

Colleen leans back over the keyboard and brings up the monitoring data stream. "There were 54% more localised spike-and-wave bursts in the areas around his visual cortex at that time, but since research hasn't established what would be considered a normal amount when re-initiating a simulation, I can't really say whether that's significant or not. They weren't followed by delta bursts, which is what Med Bay reports they sometimes see in recent implantees who need more signal dampening, and his implantation records didn't list anything like that."

"He had a grand mal the first time before waking up, but that's hardly rare. You've seen more first sessions than me, of course, so you're the expert in gauging what's normal and what's not."

Colleen frowns. "I'm not sure. I've seen trainees do some weird shit during the first session, but eventually, nearly everyone adjusts. LJ says that for some of the neurodiverse Rangers, the selective sensory output actually helps them concentrate. We can change the amount of ambient noise we filter out, fine-tune their perception of touch, even help with synaesthesia by isolating different varieties of sensory pathway data from one another as they are travelling between nuclei."

John realises that it's been more than a few minutes since Sherlock had left the Training Room.

He goes to the hallway with the intent of knocking on the door of the single toilet, but the door is ajar and the lights off.

John hurries back to Colleen's booth, plants his palms of the outside of its doorframe and leans in. "He's gone; I need to go see if he's alright."

"I know you may have been hoping we'd get to the unidirectional Drift today, but I think he did well, considering our prior failures with him. It's a start."

"I guess," John replies hastily and hurries out of the Sim unit.

It seems likely that Sherlock would have wanted some peace and quiet and thus gone to his room instead of outside or somewhere where he might run into others.

When John reaches the trainee Rangers' quarters, he finds Sherlock's room door ajar. He wastes no time in entering and finds Sherlock sitting on the bunk facing the wall, palms clamped on his ears, eyes pinched shut and feet gathered underneath him. He's leaning his forehead against the cold bulkhead and gives no indication that he has even noticed someone coming in.
Since he's not sure how much Sherlock can hear through his palms, so John gives the side of the bunk a gentle kick, startling its occupant. Sherlock drops his hands, blinks open his eyes, but it seems to take a while for him to focus them on John.

"You alright?" John asks.

Sherlock presses the heels of his palm on his forehead as though he's got a headache. "Is it off?"

"What's off?"

"The system. I want all of you out."

"We took you out of the sim. There's nothing that the implant should be doing right now."

"They're still here, and the door is all wrong."

"Hey, you're worrying me a little here," John tells him with a nervous smile and sits down on the bunk next to Sherlock, prying his hand off his face.

Pupil reactions to light seem normal, and Sherlock's eyes follow the finger he moves back and forth in front of his face as John would expect him to. He also seems to be able to hear him normally.

Sherlock mutters something, then draws a breath before staring at the wall for a moment. John peers at it, seeing nothing worth getting fascinated over. Truth be told: he is completely out of his depth if this has something to do with the Pons system. Its details are still on a very highly classified need-to-know basis. No one has ever thought he should know much about it since he's not part of the Science Division.

At least Colleen hadn't been able to isolate anything incontrovertibly worrying. John tries to console himself with the idea that this could all just be the result of Sherlock being particularly challenged by this adjustment period.

Sherlock pushes himself off the bunk, rises to shaky feet. He sways a little as he makes his way to the desk, feverishly rummages around for a pencil and paper, not appearing to care if he sends other things flying out of the drawer to the floor.

He presents the pad and pencil to John. "Draw the door!"

John's brows hitch up. "What? Why?"

"Draw the damned door!" The anger flares and then abates as quickly as it had come. Sherlock slumps down on the bed, drops his head on the pillow like a rag doll and closes his eyes.

"Alright, alright." John quickly sketches what he sees. He's no artist but manages a passable rendition of the grey, nondescript door that connects the dorm room to the corridor. He then taps Sherlock's arm with the pad.

Sherlock opens his eyes blearily and squints at it. "That's what should be right, but clearly it's wrong!" he complains.

John grabs his wrist and pulls him back into a sitting position. "You need to try to explain; I can't read your mind."

"Ha. That's exactly what you're all trying to do." Sherlock runs a shaky hand through his hair and opens his mouth to say something, but suddenly he stops to stare at something, eyes unseeing and
connected into a distance somewhere beyond the wall. His hands flops onto his knee, the fingers giving a slight jerk before stilling.

John leans in closer, waves a hand in front of his eyes, calls out his name. Nothing.

The staring into infinity continues for a moment more until suddenly it looks as though life flows back into Sherlock as he seems to blink himself back into consciousness. "—still in my head, messing with things," he comments. "I couldn't feel the rain. Why couldn't I feel the rain?" He then says something else, but it comes out garbled. He seems to realise it himself and fixes his gaze on John as though expecting him to explain, but then his expression goes blank again, and the light disappears from his eyes. Suddenly, he goes completely listless, and John barely manages to catch his head before it cracks against the wall next to the bunk. John lowers it on his lap, then fumbles to use the emergency alarm function on his wrist console.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
We've finally reached the part in the story where I get to slam on the table a full flush of neuroscifi. While a lot of the vocabulary is real (a "spike-and-wave burst" is a good example), the theories here ain't, so don't got putting any of it in exam essays *grin*. Bursts of widespread spike-and-wave EEG forms which last at least two seconds are a feature of so-called absence seizures.

Links to all the most glorious Drift Compatible meta, as posted on Tumblr and here in the comments section, have now been assembled by yours truly into a single post.

Firing the canon:
The fact of the Pons system being based on the US Army's DARPA jet fighter neural systems comes from canon. As for the details of what it feels like to use it and the way the newer and older training systems work, that's all J. Baillier. In the films, either it can be assumed that all the Rangers have already gone through something similar, or (in the case of the second film), no such training seems to be even needed to pilot a Jaeger (which I found highly implausible).

The closed helmet system with neural relay gel is a feature of the first Pacific Rim film. In the second movie, those features have been replaced by a more open headset design. I assumed the explanation for this being that technology has advanced, hence my decision to state that the gel is required only for the old simulation system, not for the current actual Jaeger interface. Long have I wondered where the gel comes from and where it drains into; it sort of reminds me of the bacta in Star Wars. The gel can be seen in action in this scene from the first film where the Becket brothers are preparing to go kick some kaiju arse.

Writing soundtrack for this chapter:
The Killers: For Reasons Unknown (definitely the soundtrack for John's upbeat morning mood)
The Killers: Deadlines And Commitments
Hurts: Silver Lining
Velasco & Dikicyan: Prothean Beacon
"Can I see him?" John asks before he has even sprung onto his feet from the sofa in Med Bay's waiting area.

Eva Tagore, a neurologist and the base's current Supervising Neural Analyst, gives him a reserved smile that would look more at home on the features of an experienced intelligence operative than a physician. She then gestures downwards with her palm to tell John to sit back down.

"We gave him a sedative which he's still sleeping off; he got quite agitated and exhausted with our questioning. He's fine, no need to worry."

She takes a seat next to John. They're the only ones in the area, so there's no need to move the conversation elsewhere to preserve Sherlock's privacy.

"What's wrong with him? Did you find the cause?" John splays his fingers nervously on his knees.

"Yes, we did. And the news may surprise you—it certainly surprised us. You made a reasonable assumption that this had something to do with him adjusting to the implants, but it was the other way around: the implants are trying to adjust to him."

"What do you mean?"

Doctor Tagore opens the paper-thin aluminoplast tablet she had brought with her and shows John a set of what he recognises as functional 3D PET-MRI images with different neurotransmitter-sensitive areas colour-coded and superimposed onto retinotopic mapping. "He has more connections between certain nuclei of his limbic system and the visual cortex than 99.8% of individuals, which may well explain why his processing of spatial domains and directional derivatives is so exceptionally sensitive, as demonstrated in his aptitude test results and our functional scans. What we haven't ever seen in our Ranger population before him, is the way his Ammon's horn—a part of his hippocampus—lights up like a Christmas tree when the implant interacts with his prestriate cortex. In his aptitude tests, he exhibited, among other things, exceptionally good visuospatial skills along with quite astounding visual memory; he was interviewed on the subject and stated that he has used a technique called a memory palace for most of his life to organise such things in his head. Individuals with a highly developed secondary visual cortex tend to prefer such techniques since they can use so-called illusory contours and binocular disparity to store information effectively."

John thinks he has understood at least some of that explanation and racks his brain for the contents of the extra courses he had been allowed to take on neuroanatomy and neurophysiology at the Corps Science Academy in Singapore after finishing medical school. They didn't cover how the implants or the rest of the Pons system works in any detail since that's classified; what Tagore is telling him now could already be skirting the edge of what he's allowed to know.

"Why the hippocampus? What happened to him in the simulation? He was saying something about the rain, but we didn't add that to the sim. I talked to Colleen, and she swears there was nothing like that in there," John explains.

"As I said, his memory is quite extraordinary. The hippocampus—well-connected to the limbic
system that partakes in regulating our emotions—enables him to store very vivid visual memories. The simulation seemed to trigger a memory he has, the details of which he adamantly refused to discuss with us. What that memory did, together with the unprecedented connectivity between certain areas of his brain, was to create a feedback loop with the implant, leading to a wave-like cortical activation which caused the absence seizures you witnessed."

"I'm not sure I followed all of that."

"He can imagine visual things so well that it activates the implant into thinking they are things he is really seeing. This causes a processing error in the implant because it is not receiving the matching input it expects from his optic nerve. To rephrase: when he imagines things instead of seeing them, it's his visual cortex that's activating first—and doing so in a manner that it would employ to respond to an actual visual experience—when that should be the final destination of the signals. The implant couldn't process that so as a consequence, the signals began to circulate in a loop, not unlike those seen in the heart with certain arrhythmias when the problem exacerbates itself. That short-circuit, as a layperson might describe it, continued even after he was disconnected from the training system. Eventually, that loop began to evoke electric potentials in surrounding internuclear neurons, which triggered the absence seizures."

"I thought he was hallucinating. Asked me to draw the door; it's like he saw something there he couldn't accept as being real." John had already told this to the Med Bay staff upon their arrival, of course, but he still can't quite grasp what that Sherlock had been responding to with that odd detail in his behaviour.

"He says that the contents of his memory palace were merging with reality. This can be explained by the detrimental feedback loop—the things he was imagining, the implant was interpreting as reality, and feeding it back to his visual cortex as sensory data."

"Can you fix it?" _Please fix him_ is what John had nearly said, but that phrasing wouldn't have been accurate, would it? Judging by the explanation he has just been given, there had been nothing wrong with Sherlock; it had been just the implant acting weird since it wasn't customised well enough for him.

"Yes—already done. All we had to do was to increase the filtering of the implant's input into the Lateral geniculate nucleus which regulates the transport of memory data between different areas of the brain. We also adjusted the trigger levels of the processing centres of sensory-evoked potentials because that also affects how much data flows back from the visual cortex. Admittedly a lack of fine-tuning in visual data processing has been a theoretical weakness of the implants' default settings for some time but fixing it has not been a priority since we'd not yet seen an individual to whom it would have posed such a significant issue."

John breathes a sigh of relief. His worst fear had been that the implant was somehow faulty, or that Sherlock had been utterly incompatible with it. "You didn't pick up that anything was wrong in the scans you did right after the implantation?"

"Those scans were done while he was still anaesthetised so deeply that he was burst-suppressed; we didn't see a need to repeat them while awake because he reported no symptoms."

_of course, he wouldn't have said anything because he probably just wanted to get the hell out of here._

"You didn't check again even when he had a grand mal?"

"Continuous EEG is monitored during the process, including during and after that seizure, and
"You just told me you have never seen a brain like his, so what would those expected parameters be, hm?" John's tone is biting.

Doctor Tagore glances at her wrist console. To John, the gesture makes her appear uninterested and wanting to leave. "Increasing the filtering of signals may also fix another issue which came up when we interviewed him after he came to from the fourth absence seizure: he had been able to easily distinguish between reality and a visual sensory rendition of his surroundings created by the system. No wonder he found the simulation quite disturbing. His particular brand of neurodiversity features hyposensitivity to sensory stimulus; that's what enables him to pick out details from the world which others miss. It also means that he found the highly filtered sensory environment of the simulation very disturbing. We have adjusted that so that more of the surrounding world is let through when he's connected to the system, and especially when Drifting. This is probably one of the reasons why his aptitude scores are so high—unlike most pilots, who need lots of data filtered out so that they can concentrate on piloting, he can process outstanding amounts of data at once – he can take it all, no matter how much information is fed by the Pons system into his cerebral cortex."

John realises that this might be the reason why Sherlock's array of street drugs had included both stimulants and depressants. He needs constant stimulation to concentrate, but sometimes he may have just wanted to stop needing that barrage of stimulation, to wind down.

"He should have said something if he was finding it difficult."

Doctor Tagore studies John for a moment. "I'm not sure if this is at all appropriate for me to disclose, but what he admitted to us was that he didn't want to disappoint you. That he feared you wouldn't continue helping him if he failed today."

"Christ. He still should have told me!"

"I talked to Ranger Marais not two days ago about him; she was concerned for his mental state, said that he seemed as though he'd given up, that he was depressed. This did not seem the case today. It is obvious that he found it very difficult, what you did today in training, but he clearly wants to continue."

"Shouldn't we give him a few days of rest first?"

"There is no sign of abnormal EEG activity, no inappropriate activation of the relevant pathways we imaged after we made the adjustments, the absence seizures were brief, and they had a clear cause. When weighing the need to recover with the fact that his unease and apprehension may grow the more time passes between this session and the next, I would suggest you continue soon. Perhaps tomorrow?"

John grits his teeth. Of course. That's always their priority—squeeze the juice out of everyone, as quickly and effectively as possible.

For all intents and purposes, he's in charge of Sherlock's training, now. So, this is his call, and they are sure as hell going to take a break of at least two days, assuming Sherlock does want to continue. After the events of today, John wouldn't be surprised if he'd had a change of heart.

Doctor Tagore's expression sobered. "We can release him in a few hours, once the sedatives have worn off; without them, he would have probably walked out the minute we stopped the seizures. He was asking for you, demanding that you be brought in; he wouldn't let us make the recalibrations when he was awake. You know the protocol—all adjustments and calibrations to implants are off
limits for observers without the requisite security clearance."

John says nothing, just wrinkles his nose and sniffs in barely-concealed annoyance.

"I assure you he's quite alright, Ranger." She stands up, adjusting the hem of her crisp white uniform tunic. "You can come sit with him, now, if you wish."

John is on his feet in an instant to follow her through a set of sliding doors, down a corridor and into the Recovery&Observation area. There's one other patient parked at the opposite end of the spacious area, so a dividing screen has been set to isolate Sherlock's trolley from the rest of the open space.

It doesn't matter that he's just been assured that Sherlock is okay; John needs to see for himself. When he catches his first glimpse of tangible evidence to support those claims, relief and protectiveness surge in like a tidal wave. Before, his libido had admittedly tried to get the best of him occasionally when in Sherlock's company; right now, all that has been cast aside to make room for a fierceness he hasn't felt since Harry's death.

He begins striding towards the bed. *If they've hurt him—*

Entwined with the imperative to protect is a strange sense of belonging—of being in the right place at the right time, even though John hasn't been able to do much to help except to call for it at the dorm.

A few feet from the bed now, John sees Sherlock's chest expand in a deeper inhalation, then descend. The sleepy calmness somehow emanating from the bed is allowing John to breathe easier, too. He feels guilty that he'd let himself be escorted out of the Casualty Room after Sherlock was brought in. He should have insisted on staying, even if they'd have just called the guards. He should have made it clear that they would be held responsible if something went wrong.

He forces himself to slow down his steps, to open his clenched fists, to tell his galloping heart to settle. He tries to tell himself that Sherlock is a grown man who chose to go through this process on his own, that he doesn't need John to keep him safe. After all, it's in the Corps' best interest to do everything they can to keep him healthy and functional. But, would Sherlock even have moved forward with any of this if they hadn't talked about it if he hadn't met someone like John who had gone through it and survived?

Has he really examined his own motives for encouraging Sherlock to try for the Jaeger Corps?

"Let him rest," Doctor Tagore prompts him; "he's had an eventful day." She then bids a pleasant afternoon with what John finds a rather soulless smile. John is glad to see her disappear somewhere into the bowels of the unit.

*Eventful fucking day.* John grabs a chair from the nurses' station and drags it next to the bed.

He has never seen Sherlock like this, looking so wholly peaceful. Even after the implantation, when he had been sleeping off the anaesthesia, he had slept fitfully as though having nightmares. Now, lying on his side facing John, under a thin white blanket, his frown lines are smoothed away by sleep, his hair a messy halo of curls around him, and he no longer looks pale or nauseated or frightened like he had at the dorm. All in all, he looks so serene that John finds himself yet again drinking in that calmness to soothe his nerves.

Sherlock shifts and tucks his hand underneath his pillow when John pulls the blanket up to his shoulders; the Med Bay is always well-ventilated and thus chilly, and the medics have removed the jacket of Sherlock's service uniform. John's hand halts after he's let go of the fabric then hovers above his shoulder until Sherlock's breathing resettles back into a deep, slow pattern of sleep.
It's odd, this effect Sherlock has on him. This morning, the thought of what they were about to embark on had wiped away eighteen years of pain that has been dragging John down into the depths and away from others. He suddenly had a sense of purpose no one could take away, because they had come to him, asking for help. They'd come to him because no one else is as good at dealing with Sherlock. Maybe it's because he has never felt like he has the upper hand—just as Sherlock had insisted things should be when he agreed to all this.

It isn't just that he might need me. Maybe I need him.

The thought that all this could have suddenly come to an end if this seizure issue had turned out to be a career- or even life-ending complication is too terrible for John to consider. Should he have realised earlier that something was wrong? Had he been too preoccupied with what they were doing, with his sense of importance, to pick up on Sherlock's distress? Or, is Sherlock just that good at hiding it?

Without thinking, John lets his hand caress the curls in a sweep from his forehead to the back of his head. Even when so obviously in dire need of brushing, they feel just as soft and lovely under John's hand as he had imagined, and he's tempted to thread his fingers deeper. He refrains but does allow himself to feel the texture of the brunette locks between his fingertips. He retreats his hand when he realises that if Sherlock were to wake up, he would probably not understand why John is doing such a thing. Why he'd want to do such a thing. Hell, John doesn't like admitting the reasons even to himself.

What he feels is not innocent bewilderment over the fact that he feels very drawn to Sherlock, but guilt over wanting to be with him in ways he must never seek, and steely determination to not slip now. Not after twenty years of being able to keep himself in check and not risk the life he's built.

A thought: What the hell do I do if they partner him up with someone else?

How could he watch that happen and go back to being whatever the hell he's been for the last decades? Why couldn't they be the same age, so that he could have met Sherlock in London all those years ago when he had been just a medical student? There, it would have been so much safer to explore this. There, John would have been anonymous, away from the influence of his parents' phobias. They could have had some nice years together before John would have been dragged off to the war. Sherlock would probably have been subjected to the same unless he got his act together and managed to avoid his aptitude records being unsealed. Maybe he would have waited for John. Perhaps, after Harry had died, John would have had a place and a person to go back to. He could have walked away from the PPDC. Maybe he could have been happy. Maybe they would have been happy.

John knows he shouldn't let himself do these things, but he slides his palm underneath the blanket to take Sherlock's hand, runs his fingertips along the long fingers he finds there. Calluses befitting a violinist. Perhaps an old fracture in the pinky?

When Sherlock yawns and turns to his back, his hand is pulled out of John's gentle hold, and it doesn't seem as though he has noticed that it had been trapped there. John retracts his hand and doesn't reach out for physical contact again, increasingly worried that it might not be welcome.

Sherlock yawns again, courtesy of the sedatives, then cracks open an eyelid. He mutters something that seems to contain a J and an N, and John's heart flips through an extrasystole as it tries to decide whether to rejoice from Sherlock being awake or worry that he's still not right in the head.


Sherlock blinks a few times, and it takes a moment before his eyes find John's.
"Deja vu, eh? Can you talk?" In hindsight, something about the joke feels off and insensitive.

Sherlock seems to regain the gift of speech quickly. "Neuroscientists used to think that what we call deja vu is a glitch of a brainwave, a feeling based on no factual information that something had happened before."

To John, this sounds reassuringly clever, even if he has slightly minced some of the words. "Well, I think we've definitely been here before. You alright?"

"You've done nothing but ask me that for the past 24 hours."

"Well, I care."

"Are you sure you don't mean that you're just obligated to ask?"

John feels slightly insulted. It's such a fine line to negotiate, concealing certain things yet trying to reveal enough of his feelings so that Sherlock would trust him. "No, it's—I was worried." You have no idea how desperately worried. A bit not good, that.

"Well, if it consoles you, I feel fine. In fact, I feel considerably better than I did during the simulation."

"So you should. They're pretty confident they fixed the problem."

"I want to see my medical reports."

"I'm sure they'll explain everything to you and then usually send you an electronic summary of every visit."

"I want to see my full records, not some redacted and dumbed down version."

"Those are classified. Even I can't access them, because they belong to the Science Division and not the Corps."

Sherlock bristles.

"There was a filtering issue; stuff you were thinking were being mistaken as actual sensory data by the implant."

Sherlock hums in acknowledgement, then stretches his hands above his head with a grimace.

"According to the analyst, you could tell that what you saw and heard wasn't the real thing?" John asks.

"The signs were glaringly obvious. You mean you can't tell?"

"I haven't met anyone who can. They said it might have to do with neurodiversity; people with associated exceptional sensory perception sometimes have a tough time adjusting to the projected reality in the sims and when Drifting. It shouldn't be a problem; they turned down the signal filtering instead of filtering out as much as they could, which they initially assumed you'd prefer."

Sherlock looks appalled. "You mean that they originally pressed a button to make me less observant?"

"No, they just adjusted things so that you wouldn't be overwhelmed, because they didn't know you needed more of the real world to seep through than what we gave you in the sim. You know that
they can make the implants alter your sensory processing even when you're not on duty?"

"I'm not surprised; after all, there are commercial stimulator and dampener implants available outside the PPDC. Many of the neurodiversity advocacy organisations are very much against them. To them, such devices are an insinuation that what we are is... wrong. Defective."

"In the Corps, you're the opposite of that. You're special, in ways that the other cadets are envious of—"

Sherlock fixes a stern glare on him. "Being special—" Sherlock makes sarcastic air quotes, "—has never been enjoyable, but it doesn't mean I'd want who I am to be tampered with. The Corps tolerates my specialness when it has to because it can use parts of it. Out there, at home, at school, what I am has never been a strength."

John thinks he's being a tad bit dramatic. The things that make him an exceptional pilot candidate must have helped him with studies and other things.

"My variety of so-called genius is a lonely place, John." Sherlock purses his lips and looks away.

John clears his throat in an attempt to alleviate the sudden tension. "I remember when those behavioural implants came on the market. There were some pretty heated arguments in the medical establishment as well. Lots of psychiatrists and neurologists were against them, but lots of parent groups pro."

Something hard settles in Sherlock's eyes. "I'm not surprised. Parents tend to react badly when their offspring don't conform or fulfil their expectations. The rhetoric about implants was very similar to those decades-ago arguments on whether parents should be allowed to abort a foetus based on things such as Down's syndrome. If someone doesn't accept the notion that something is an illness, it's logical that they would reject the idea of a cure. It's fortuitous that neurodiversity is too genetically complex to be screened for before birth. I probably wouldn't be here if it were." Sherlock isn't even trying to conceal the bitterness in his tone.

John wants to ask about his parents, but everything that Sherlock is broadcasting right now points to it being a very sensitive subject. The message in Sherlock's explanation had been clear: his parents don't seem to have been tolerant of his brand of special.

"If there were a 'cure'—a pill to take or a blob of metal my parents could have stuck in my skull for to make me like the rest of you, they would have jumped at the chance. First, I was a wrench in their well-oiled career wheel, then someone whose existence was an inconvenience both because I was so young when they found their calling—" another sarcastic air quote, "—and because I was never going to be like Mycroft who joined in on their holy crusade. Not that Mycroft cares all that much about humanity. What he cares about is ensuring that he gets to boss around at least the coastal half of Europe for the rest of his days."

John remains quiet. He recognises the profound sadness in Sherlock because he carries a variant of it himself when it comes to childhood and family. John knows what it's like to live with a stinging awareness that what one is would never be accepted.

Maybe it's an after-effect of the sedative that Sherlock doesn't seem to be done talking. "No, they wouldn't have hesitated to fix me. Maybe, when I was younger, when I was at Haig, I would have made the same choice but if there were a solution now—something I could do to make myself entirely similar to non-neurovariant people—I would say no. I have never not been me. I can't imagine what it would be like. That's a part of why this..." Sherlock looks around the Med Bay "...was not something I was looking forward to experiencing."
"I would never want you to be—well, not you, either," John stammers in an attempt to echo his sentiment. "I can't separate those parts of you from the rest of your personality. You shouldn't have to try to do that." John knows what it's like to isolate bits of himself and shove them away. That's what he's done as long as he can remember. Sherlock is the first person who has ever made him doubt his compulsive need to do so.

The attitudes towards diversity in the PPDC have always been wrought with double standards. Certain ethnic minorities are still entirely absent from the Corps even though Jaeger pilots are officially supposed to represent the best of humanity in all its diverse forms. Much of the PPDC staff come from old-school military backgrounds and are proudly continuing the best traditions of their prior organisations in insisting that sexual and gender minorities are a threat to the very core of effective military discipline.

The Corps has always been keen to recruit high-functioning neurodiverse individuals to exploit whatever particular cognitive talents they have, but to John, it seems that they have never made any serious effort to accommodate their specific needs when it comes to training, living conditions, food or social structure in the Shatterdomes. There had been a suicide two years ago when a young, neurodiverse male Corps recruit cracked under the harsh training regime in Hong Kong. It had led to protests from advocacy groups which were reported on the global news, but the PPDC's PR faction certainly earned their wages that week with their placating rhetoric and behind-the-scenes silencing of the issue.

Sherlock closes his eyes for a moment.

"Do you want to sleep some more?" John asks, patting his knee through the blanket.

Sherlock's lids open, then narrow into slits of sea-green and blue. "No. I want to get out of here."

"They'll release you in a few hours. Hungry?"

"Not really. I just want to get back to my room."

"I'm sure someone will come by soon with your discharge documents."

While they wait, Sherlock does fall asleep again.

John watches him, deep in thought. While he's both happy and surprised at the contents of their conversation, they haven't touched on perhaps the most pressing issue: will Sherlock be willing to continue the training?

Doctor Tagore reappears half an hour later. John tells her that she can give whatever instructions she has for Sherlock to him, and he'll make sure that their patient complies. He wants to let Sherlock get as much rest as he can before the walk back to his dorm room.

When the Doctor is about to leave, John decides to ask again about what's troubling him, since Sherlock's quiet snoring must mean that he won't hear this discussion: "Are you sure it's safe to continue training with him? We'll take a few days' break, but—"

The neuroscientist pins her tablet against her waist like a shield with her hands. "As I explained, before we brought him here to Recovery, there were no discernible anomalies at all in his brain function. He should be absolutely fine. Time to stop mollycoddling your trainee, Ranger."

John glares at her receding back as she walks away.

The certainty in her statement is reassuring in a medical sense, but its contents are not accurate.
Sherlock won't be 'fine'—not like she had meant. The implant acting up must have been his worst fears coming true. What happened today will make it harder than ever for him to trust the Corps. John just hopes that he isn’t being tarred with the same brush.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
There are definitely some controversial topics skirted in this chapter; it's both fun and very, very frightening to try to guess what sorts of modulations of human brain function we might be able to do in the future. Some deaf parents greatly hesitate to allow their hearing-impaired children to receive cochlear implants, fearing that they will drift away from deaf culture—which is their parents' culture. Autism advocacy groups have resisted labelling autism as a disease or a fault to be fixed, preferring instead to raise awareness of the diversity of human brain function and the way in which society is designed only with neurotypicals in mind. "Fixing" something invariably insinuates that there is a wrong/right, healthy/unhealthy, bad/good -type dichotomy in place, and that dichotomy can be outstandingly harmful.

Firing the canon:
This chapter is an unholy matrimony of real neuroscientific terminology, futuristic sci-fi conjecture and make-believe medicine. None of it is Pacific Rim canon. Two things made me want to write this story. One: the potential to play with such delicious neuro-nonsense and two: [spoiler redacted].

Writing soundtrack for this chapter:
30 Seconds to Mars: Hurricane
Ursine Vulpine ft. Annaca: Wicked Game
Djawadi, Ahn, Glennie-Smith&Randall: Mako
John walks into the *dojo*. Could this be a place Sherlock might come to work himself into a sweat when he's frustrated or trying to think? It's the third place in which he has looked for Sherlock tonight; he wasn't in his dorm room or the Mess hall.

After the disastrous first simulation session six days ago, John had kept his word of allowing them both some time off. A second hike on Terceira for the next day had been agreed upon, and as far as John could tell they had both revelled in an opportunity to spend more time together in a way that was uncomplicated by duty and Sherlock's anxiety over the training. John hadn't pushed him into talking about any of it, allowing him some time out of mind. He was certain the events of the past few days were circling in Sherlock's brain whether he dragged them into a conversation or not.

When they were crossing the bridge back to the base, Sherlock stopped and told him simply, "*Yes*".

"Yes to what?" John had asked, halting his steps by a guard tower. Rain clouds were finally receding; they'd showered down a few times during the hike, and the wind was brisk and briny—a welcome change to the blistering heat that had scorched the Azores for days, now.

"Yes to the question you have been thinking about all day; whether I am willing to try again. If I weren't, I'd be on a plane right now. You must have come to the same conclusion yourself, but you still want to hear it out loud from me," Sherlock had rattled his deduction off.

"Well, good," John had said, the words grossly inadequate to convey his relief. "Will you promise to tell me if you feel like anything's wrong or off—anything at all?" he said as they continued walking.

The words of Doctor Tagore had stuck with him about Sherlock not wanting to let him down. "I can't help you unless I know what's going on."

Sherlock let out an exasperated sigh. "I'll tell you everything you need to know."

It wasn't the answer John was hoping for, but it would have to be enough.

Before they parted ways for the night, Sherlock suggested that they return to the sim lab the very next day, despite John's protestations that they could easily allow time for some more rest and recuperation.

"You shouldn't worry if the others are further along in their training. We shouldn't rush it; the Corps is obviously willing to give you as much time as you need, so we should take advantage of that," he had told Sherlock.

"I don't want to waste more time. If the implant is now functioning as it should be, waiting won't make things any easier."

"If that's what you want."

"Weeks ago, I would have protested that none of this has anything to do with what I want, but now— it's more complicated. Some things here are exactly as I expected, and those downsides haven't changed, but there have been some... surprises." Sherlock's tone at the end had been very
pointed, and John had tried hard not to read too much into it.

After they parted ways at the barracks' main entrance, John went to his dorm to message Colleen before dinner. She readily agreed to continue working in the morning, though John knew she'd been hoping for another day off. Maybe she had a soft spot for their underdog prodigy trainee, too. At least she seemed to easily shrug off Sherlock's general unfriendliness towards everyone else than John.

The next morning, Sherlock made good of his word of alerting John when he became too uncomfortable. These moments turned out to be much fewer and further between than John could have hoped for; Med Bay seemed to have done their job correctly this time around.

After two hours of breezing through the interface sims that had led to disaster the last time, John asked Sherlock to describe the difference between how he was experiencing things now, and how it had been before the implant was reprogrammed.

"I'm not constantly trying to find evidence of reality versus virtual construction; I see them both now, sort of superimposed on one another; it's akin to being aware that one is seeing a landscape through a window. It's not distracting anymore."

It didn't sound like John's experiences of his surroundings in a sim, probably because he has never been able to tell the difference between reality recreated by the Pons system and the real deal.

They made it through the first stages of the old training sequence in three days instead of the five days usually allocated for it. So, it was the logical next step yesterday morning to try the first unilateral Drift. It would mean establishing a proper neural handshake through syncing Sherlock's memories through the interface with John. Effectively, it would mean revealing the contents of Sherlock's head to John like a book being flipped open; not only would the memories be shared, but also the emotions associated with them by the time they happened, and what they evoked now, would be experienced by John.

It hadn't gone well. It hadn't gone anywhere, really, and John had gotten a taste of what Colleen had described eloquently as shielding; in reality, it felt as though he'd been kicked hard in the head and given a migraine as a chaser.

They had tried eight times yesterday to initiate a neural bridge, and every time the result had been the same. Thankfully, that had not discouraged Sherlock, and Colleen telling him how many cadets required several tries to get through it seemed to help. Once, John had thought he had caught the tiniest glimpse of what the Rangers called the Fade—a dizzying flow of intermingling memories, their colours and sounds distorted into a swirl of images and emotions. He thought he had spotted a small human form and a smaller, moving one, but at that point, Sherlock had thrown him out of his head again, grunted in frustration and torn his helmet off, followed by storming out of the simulation lab altogether.

They had taken up a habit of eating together at around seven in the evening; yesterday Sherlock hadn't shown up. It had made John realise how important those meals had become. After years of eating mostly alone, it's a relief not to have to dodge the looks from others wondering if he prefers his own company or if others simply don't enjoy it. He's quite certain Sherlock finds having dinner company an equally positive thing, judging by the eagerness with which he always confirmed John's suggestion of "At seven?".

He had been tempted to message Sherlock later yesterday evening but refrained; if he wanted a bit of space after the intense sessions they'd had in the morning, then that's what he deserved to have.
This morning, Sherlock had arrived at the sim lab in time but looked as though he hadn't gotten much sleep. He was hardly enthusiastic to get to the day's work but didn't seem discouraged, either.

John's relief had been premature. Sherlock's temper flared up right at the start when Colleen had to take some time to reboot a part of the system. Then, after days of having no visible issues with it that John could tell, he'd nearly had what really looked like a panic attack with the neural gel. They'd argued when John had asked Colleen to take them through some of the early exercises again, just to help Sherlock regain his confidence. Sherlock had been hell-bent on pushing through, but John had a feeling that such a mindset would not be fertile ground for a neural handshake.

He was right. Five attempts at entering the Fade later, Sherlock marched out, muttering a string of curses in his wake. John has noticed that he never seems to resort to profanities unless he is very, very upset or furious. This afternoon, he seemed to be both. John gave him four hours to calm down, then left his office to talk to the man. He's quite certain the reason why he hadn't found Sherlock in his dorm room is that he wanted to avoid the conversation he must have known John would eventually show up to initiate.

John isn't surprised that he's struggling. Not after what had happened with the implant. He had tried to get Sherlock to talk to him about it, but such inquiries had been brushed aside with a cold 'what's done is done, they're hardly going to remove it, are they, so best get on with it'. While the statement is true, not addressing the incident and Sherlock just trying to plough through while gritting his teeth is not getting them forward.

The door locks behind John, and when he comes out of the short entryway corridor to the dojo proper, he finds what he's looking for.

Sherlock is standing barefoot in the middle of the tatami, the toes of his supporting foot pointing outwards in a forty-five degree and his other leg stretched skyward, the fingers of the corresponding hand perched on his big toe to stretch it. The cuff of his gi trousers has slid down his shin, revealing a thin, delicate ankle. His eyes are closed, and when John walks closer, he notices he has earbuds in—no wonder he hasn't heard his approach. They're wireless, likely streaming in music from his tablet through the local area network. In the quiet of the large, echoing space, John thinks he can make out violins. Sherlock must have the music on terribly loud.

They're the only ones present. Cold blue moonlight is shining through the windows, and patterns of it, reflected off the sea surface, are rippling on the ceiling; only a few overhead lights have been turned on.

Sherlock lets his leg descend, then drops into a planking position, shifting his balance so that he can plant one palm on the tatami right underneath the middle of his ribcage. He then lifts his other palm off the floor and stretches it outwards from his body parallel to the floor. His midriff is already shaking with the strain of keeping his back straight, and there are locks of sweaty hair plastered against his temples.

John clears his throat, hoping it will get through the sound of the music. Startled, Sherlock loses his balance and collapses on his stomach. He scrambles to his feet with a bounce, tearing the earbuds out with a disapproving frown. "Thanks for that," he snaps.

"You shouldn't let people—or things—sneak up on you like that," John points out, crossing his hands as he stops to lean against a column. "You can get your tablet's music system connected directly to your implant, by the way. Sound quality's much better when streamed straight into your auditory cortex."

"Maybe I prefer the old-fashioned way," Sherlock retorts while raising a fistled hand into a blocking
position and locking it between his opposite arm, kept straight, and his shoulder to stretch it.

"I know why you stormed out," John tells him. He tries to avoid sounding superior or all-knowing or told-you-so, just lenient.

Sherlock gives him a glance carefully constructed to come off as nonchalant, then looks at a wall. "Is that right." Not a question. A dismissal.

"You want to get through this phase, but you're torn by what you need to do. There are things you don't want me to see. Probably things that embarrass you even if they're not your fault."

"How would you know that they're not?"

"Because I struggled with that, too, two decades ago. I did think that certain things about me were my fault; that if I just worked harder and made some hard decisions and stuck to them, all that stuff would change. That's what makes you afraid, but that's not what makes you worried and frustrated and angry."

Sherlock makes a noise that is half a grunt, half a scoff, as though he doesn't quite know what to think. "Stop projecting on me."

"You worry that you won't get past it and that will ruin it for the both of us. A lot is riding on your shoulders since it's kind of obvious they're hoping they've found a promising new pilot—hey, maybe even a Ravager pilot. I'm not saying you should worry about me, but nobody wants to become known as the biggest disappointment in Corps history."

"That's not helping! If you've come here just to knock me down---"

John steps onto the tatami. Sherlock glares at his feet—he still has his shoes on—so he retreats a few steps, unlaces his boots and returns to the edge of the thick mat. "I was talking about me. Being a big disappointment to the Corps, that is. Or, at least the way I felt like I was one. That I am one. That they kept me on as a warning example."

Sherlock's brows drop into a sharp frown. "That's ridiculous. You had a record-breaking run as a pilot."

"And I couldn't save Harry. That's why I think I'm the biggest disappointment in the Corps. That's what it means, to me. You don't want to disappoint me, but you also don't want to disappoint you."

"You don't have anything to worry about, now. You'll still be a Ranger if I fail. You'll go back to whatever it is you have been doing for eighteen years."

'Whatever it is you've been doing'—sadly, it's quite an apt description of John's work.

Sherlock straightens his knees and reaches down to place his palms on the tatami.

It's warm, so John takes off the jacket of his service uniform and puts it on the wooden frame separating the area from the bare floor. He has a black T-shirt underneath. "That's what you're not getting and what's blocking you from getting forward. It's not enough for you to try harder to do your part, if you're not letting me help. If you're not letting me in. And I don't mean just when we're doing a sim, it's between sessions as well. You pick what you let me see, and you get spooked every time you think you tell me something I won't understand. It stresses you out so much that by the time we try to initiate a neural handshake, as much as you want to do it, your subconscious or whatever has already pulled up the drawbridge."
"That applies to you, too. It's easy for you to say I'm not veing open when we haven't really Drifted properly. You did it for years so how would you remember what it was like at first? Or, maybe you were just inordinately trustful."

*You have no idea.*

"What we've been doing is just a stupid training exercise. It's not the real thing. It's no indication whether I can actually manage a handshake," Sherlock dismisses. "Maybe we should just go for the real thing—a bilateral Drift—and then call the whole thing off if it doesn't work. Which it won't."

"That would be mad, trying something that's way harder after failing at something easier. You don't really think you'd somehow be ready for the real thing?" John picks up a disposable water bottle Sherlock has emptied, walks to the starboard edge of the tatami, and throws it into a wastepaper basket by a sink. On his way back, he picks up two full ones from a receptacle and throws the other to Sherlock.

"Are we?" Sherlock counters. "I'd be an idiot not to notice that you're not keen on the idea of ever doing a bilateral with me; Colleen said as much, that you'd insisted that your role ends by the time I can handle a unilateral." He pads to a high basket in the corner of the tatami and picks up a *shinai*—a wooden staff used in weapons training and associated sparring matches instead of a proper kendo sword. He spins it around in one hand, then makes swings in perfect circles on both sides of his torso, ending with a middle grip with the *shinai* held close to his waist. "If we were both in the Fade, I could focus on you. You'd show me how to do it."

"It's not an imitation game," John walks to the basket and picks up a *shinai* as well. Though they haven't made any verbal agreement to spar, they simultaneously step to the middle of the tatami and take a starting position with the weapon held in front of them on their upturned palms. This gesture is a sign of respect and trust; evidence that one is not about to mislead an opponent.

John has been thinking about re-joining some of the Rangers' physical conditioning training for years but just hasn't got around to it. It’s yet another sign of his ambivalence, his self-imposed status in limbo. He hasn't sparred in years, while Sherlock has had plenty of practice recently with the other cadets. Judging by his opponent's taekwondo prowess, John knows he'll probably have his arse handed to him in a few minutes, but maybe this could break the logjam of tension that has been mounting between them during the past two days.

Sherlock takes a stance of holding the *shinai* in the hand farthest from John, behind his forearm. John assumes a more classic opening position with the weapon poised in his front hand like a sword.

He takes a step closer, toes first like a hunting predator.

Sherlock waits, stance low, muscles tense, eyes locked on John's. "You've done a bilateral, countless of times. I'm tired of messing about on the outside. *Kill or cure.*"

"You can't force a Drift, if what happened with the implant is still scaring you," John points out.

"I'm not scared," Sherlock snarls. "They did their worst already. There's no turning back, now."

It sounds as though the implant problem has evoked a thirst for revenge in Sherlock—a need to show them all that they can't make him fail. This is, of course, a good thing, but ignoring his worries is not going to work to get through something that requires him to drop his guard. Sherlock is trying to do this alone when the only way forward is teamwork.

"To receive something when Drifting, to accept the connection—" John explains, then takes a quick
swing forward—an easy parry in a sweeping arc for Sherlock, "—you have to give something first." He makes an underhand move, and Sherlock retreats to get out of its way. "The neural handshake is a dialogue. Both parties have to let the other one in. You have to let me help you."

"Easy for you to say when you're safely cordoned off while I have to bare all my bloody soul."

Sherlock shakes his head to banish a curl out of his visual field. Then, he strikes forward, his shinai stopping an inch short of John's head. "You're not concentrating. One point."

"We're counting them, are we?" John asks mischievously, then swings his shinai in a large circular sweep from behind his head, hitting Sherlock's hasty block with a loud thwack that reverberates down both their arms. "One point to one point."

They both retreat to begin another round of attacks. Sherlock has barely regained his stance, when he's already on the move, forcing John to walk backwards as he counters a somewhat predictable series of strikes from alternating sides. Before he's pushed off the tatami, he brings the attack to a halt by planting his back leg firmly close to the wooden edge and performing a mighty swing upwards that nearly sends the shinai clattering out of Sherlock's hands. "You're too focused on yourself. You're not following what I'm doing. You're not listening. You never heed my advice—you ignore me, go in all guns blazing and get knocked down and out when your defences get the better of you. Two points against two."

"That was at least two points for me and one for you!" Sherlock protests.

"You wouldn't have gotten a hit in. Too slow," John teases. He's getting warmed up and having fun. They return to the middle of the tatami.

"How are you focusing on something else than yourself, then?" Sherlock demands, eyes narrowed.

"I do what I'm doing right now: paying attention to you, talking to you, responding to your moves. You don't say or hear anything when you're just trying to strike someone down. You're not cooperating; you're just locking yourself away from what's going on."

"This is a fight, not ballroom dancing."

"Ballroom dancing is a bit like fighting, I think. You have to anticipate what your partner will do and take that into account when you're trying to take control and bring the scenario into the conclusion you want. You can't just make the moves you want to do—the other person might stomp on your foot, or you lose your rhythm and momentum. And, ballroom dancing is exactly like Drifting in that respect."

"You're wrong. When dancing, someone has to lead," Sherlock points out, "What you're insisting is the opposite; that Drifting is a democracy."

John attacks, trying to keep his strikes as unpredictable as he can, forcing Sherlock to react instead of trying to hijack the role of the offender from him. Now Sherlock is the one who ends up having to scramble to come up with an effective defensive strategy, and soon he's at risk of being driven off the tatami, which would cause him to lose this round.

"Follow me," John tells him sharply, followed by a grunt as Sherlock finally manages a strong enough counter-strike to shift them away from the edge and to make John work hard to continue his offensive.

"Trust me," John adds, then grunts as he tries to drive his shinai through a block he had anticipated
Sherlock would employ. John finds him strangely easy to read right now; maybe his anger is still making him predictable and careless.

Back in the day, before aptitude tests and a more structured training program, this is where Drift compatibility was assessed: on the tatami. LJ had spoken of it to John, once: "They told us: if it feels like dancing, if it feels like you are reading the other person's mind and that is making the differences in your skill levels disappear, then you know. You just know."

To John all that sounds like a somewhat unreliable method of picking pilots. How would a Ranger know when that was happening, and if the connection was strong enough?

John slips a finger between his neck and the T-shirt to cool off; he's getting rather sweaty.

They end up shifting sides without making a verbal agreement to do so; somehow, John just felt that it was something they were both wanting to do.

"I've always been—" Sherlock muses while attempting a lightning-quick sweep across John's throat, which he manages barely to evade by ducking down, "—alone. Alone protects me," he adds proudly.

Their *shinai* are locked against each other, and they're pressed arm against arm, struggling to shove the other person backwards. "Not in a Jaeger it doesn't," John replies, grimacing as he strains to oppose Sherlock. "Who the fuck taught you that nonsense?"

Sherlock risks losing his footing by yielding a little and then using the momentum forward he can now get to shove John backwards successfully. "Mycroft."

"This the same guy who abandoned you?" John asks, bouncing a bit on the balls of his feet before making a mock-lunge that startles his opponent. He chuckles. "Fooled you."

"Never. I was just humouring you. And don't you start about Mycroft," Sherlock snarls through clenched teeth.

John would never say so out loud, but he finds the sight of a Sherlock all fire and brimstone, enraged like a wasp rather endearing.

John swings his *shinai* in a few lazy arcs, then replicates Sherlock's horizontal greeting presentation before they reform their opening stances. "What he did to you just taught you that everyone is out to get you, and no one is there for you. I'm not like that. Let me in."

Sherlock doesn't reply. He huffs furiously as he barges into an attack that is clearly not very well planned. All John needs to do is to sidestep, and Sherlock's misguided strike sends him tumbling, elbows first, into the tatami. When he leaps back to his feet, John grimaces at the sight of the abraded skin on his forearms. That has got to smart.

"No one has ever been there for me," Sherlock confirms. "No one has ever wanted to be. And now you're asking me just to show you *everything*."

He brings the *shinai* towards John's midriff in an arc, forcing his opponent to take a rolling tumble on the tatami to get away.

Thankfully, John's muscle memory works, and he manages to land on his feet and to return to a standing position if not gracefully, then at least purposefully. "Your bull in a china shop act is just you hitting your head against a wall instead of asking the person right next to you where the door is. It's not just you doing this. I will do my absolute best to get you through this. But, you have to accept
that help.

"I don't know how. Some pointless speech from you isn't going to change that. The rules of engagement are clear and unfair: you get into my head, but I don't get into yours."

"Admitting that you want to get into someone's head, that you're willing to be worthy of their trust is an important step."

Sherlock gives him an eye roll. "But not the next step, is it?" He attempts a potentially crippling, low sweep which John evades by jumping high.

John then takes advance of a brief window of distraction and disappointment at the failed surprise move which he spots, stepping closer and sweeping Sherlock's feet out from underneath him with a loud, painful snap to the back of his shin that makes him cry out. John hurtles himself closer, sticks the shinai underneath Sherlock's knee before his legs hit the ground, locks his foot in his armpit and lifts the shinai so that—unless Sherlock yields—a painful, increasing pressure will be exerted on his now smarting shins. "You need to let your co-pilot see your faults, and your problems—trying to be perfect won't work because you're not that, nobody is. They'll compensate for what you lack, and you will do the same. And then you can win."

"My faults and my problems? Stuff I don't—" Sherlock gasps when John lifts his leg with the shinai so high that his hips hitch off the floor, "—want to see myself. Why would I want to show my failings to—anyone—else?" The last words come out as half-aborted grunts as the pain increases.

John tightens his grip and leans forward; his weapon is now squeezed painfully between Sherlock's thigh and his calf.

Sherlock screams, both in pain and frustration and slams his palm on the tatami twice. John drops him, pulls out the shinai and steps back, giving a bow. "Now, will you start listening to me?"

The look he gets when Sherlock starts scrambling to his feet is not exactly submissive, but at least it isn't angry. "This isn't over. Or, are you tired, old man?"

John whirls around and regains his preparatory stand. "Oi! he calls out. "I'm only ten years your senior."

"Ah. My suspicions confirmed."

John curses when he realises that nugget of information is probably what Sherlock had deliberately been fishing for with his barb.

"So, if we did a bilateral Drift, my job would be to fix your character flaws?" Sherlock teases as they circle each other, reacting with slight movements to every change in one another's postures. "You're too doctorly. Too bland. You're grown attached at the hip to safety and routine. You're willing to accept less than. Less than what you used to be, less than what you could be. It's deplorable."

"If you'd seen what I've seen, you'd appreciate peacetime, too."

"You hold back and retreat, too, and I can't work out why. You were adamant that we'd never do a bilateral, even though that's always part of the training before co-pilot team selection. What are you afraid of?"

They both lunge forward simultaneously, shinais meeting with a crack. This leads to a fast series of swings and blocks. They're getting into a much better rhythm, now, with much more precise reciprocation.
John is enjoying anticipating what Sherlock is trying to do next. He offers an opening—springs a trap—which Sherlock then circumvents and gives John the same opportunity. This isn't brawling any more; it's human chess. No wonder hand-to-hand combat is seen as an ideal form of co-operation training in the Corps even if it has lost its meaning as a way to form co-pilot teams.

What they're doing right now feels like a dance and not a fight; something has changed. Instead of lashing out, Sherlock is now focusing on him, reaching out with his moves, asking for answers, seeking confirmation. The focus is on John now, and it feels as dangerous as it feels seductive.

Finally, Sherlock is doing precisely what he should be doing when Drifting: focusing on his partner. He's going to form one half of a consciousness—half of one virtually recreated brain—with another person. He needs to let himself make that connection.

Sherlock's comments about him holding back and retreating have stung a bit, forcing John to remind himself that he's safe—that this isn't about him. He'll help Sherlock get to a stage where he can be trial-paired with others, that's it. He will walk away with his dignity and his life and his secrets intact.

The only problem is that... he's not sure he wants to. That decision is easy to make when he's not with Sherlock, but when they're together—

John pivots on his foot, his bad shoulder groaning from the exertion of sweeping his weapon around in a wide arc. He stops half an inch before it would have collided with Sherlock's back on a spot where it could have burst a kidney. "I lost count of our points, but I win this one."

He starts walking towards the basket to put away his weapon, but suddenly there's a flurry of movement on his right, a sharp pain on his nose and unless he wants it to break, he's forced to fall backwards. Before he even realises, he's on the ground with Sherlock straddling his hips and his shinai poised threateningly just underneath John's chin. "Ten points," Sherlock announces. "One for the takedown, nine for the look on your face right now."


He expects Sherlock to rise, but instead, he pins John between his thighs even tighter and leans over his torso. His eyes narrow as he's studying John's expression.

Both their chests are heaving. The playfulness has disappeared, and Sherlock's sudden proximity, combined with the intensity of his focus on John soon becomes downright intoxicating. So enticing, in fact, that John can feel his body reacting to it in a way Sherlock will soon notice unless he gets up right now.

"You let your guard down because you think you have the upper hand," Sherlock announces, and his smug grin makes it sound very much like a pot-kettle thing. "You want me to risk everything, to reveal everything, but you're afraid to do so yourself. You lecture me about trust, yet I know you insisted on using the old safeguards that keep the contents of your head safely locked away. Whether you don't even trust me enough even to share some embarrassing but harmless childhood memories, or there is something very particular you don't want me to see----" he leans forward, gaze fixed on John.

"Sherlock," John starts, and it's both a suggestion and a warning; he can't let on how badly he needs to extricate himself from both this conversation and from underneath the lean, beautiful, warm, inviting body pinning him in place.

Sherlock is now looking at him as though he's a particularly fascinating petri dish or whatever it is he likes experimenting with when there's no kaijublood available.
Good, yes, think about the kaiju. Nobody gets a hard-on for them, well, except maybe some of the nutjob cultists, but still---

"John?" The tone he's being addressed with has lost its edge. It's tentative, now—confused, even.

John realises Sherlock can't have missed how hard he is trying to distract himself by averting his gaze and nervously tapping the tatami with his fingertips. He cracks a smile he hopes looks genuine and innocent. "Alright, you've had your fun, and you're the winner. Get off me."

"What does the winner get?"

"Ice cream. The secret weapon of the Corps. Rangers have keys to the small side kitchens," John replies, and now he's so tempted to squirm that it's nearly impossible to resist. He wants to move his hips, to make Sherlock shift backwards just to bit to find a bit of friction against that delectable arse—

Sherlock leans forward, lets the shinai drop to the side and splays a warm palm on John's chest. John tries to tip him sideways, but Sherlock only drops both his palms to the tatami on both sides of John's head. "Trust and openness, you say. What are you hiding from me, right now?"

Damn, damn, fucking hell. Lean back and find out, you bloody brat playing with fire. Fuck. "I think I sprained something," John offers, his words quick and a bit messy.

God, he needs to get laid. He should go to Ponta Delgada, maybe even splurge on a flight to Lisbon. It's safer there, plenty of back-alley bars. It's been ages—that's why he's reacting like a ruddy teenager. Christ.

Sherlock still looks suspicious. Then, he does one of the frowns John loves, where his forehead crinkles so deep that his laugh lines at the edges of his eyes are repurposed and engaged. "What flavour?" he asks.

John blinks. "What?" He feels like his head is swimming a little. He hasn't been this close to Sherlock since he'd passed out practically in John's lap and that time, he'd been too worried to be turned on. He's never been this close to Sherlock, ever. The alarms going off in his head are being drowned out by the need pulsing in his veins that's filling out his cock even more.

"Ice cream." Sherlock snaps his fingers in front of his face. "Do keep up."

"Vanilla," John tells him, voice strained. God, he's hard—thank fuck Sherlock's leaning forward has brought him to sit on where John's stomach meets his ribcage. Evidence of John's arousal is still tucked painfully tight against the inside of his thigh, pinned there by his pants. He could pull Sherlock down by his shoulders right now, to press their lips together. He could end this sparring session with a new beginning—or an apocalypse. Is it there, the spark, the connection he keeps imagining seeing and feeling and sensing and hearing and practically tasting?

What would Sherlock taste like? John would kill to get to run his tongue across every inch of the skin that doesn't have any right to be that pale and that soft, yet firm—Stop it.

"Can't breathe," John says, and he's only half-lying. The reason is only partly that his ribcage is being crushed under Sherlock's weight; mostly it's because he has never been this tempted and this adamant not to give in, never been this tormented by what he wants and can't risk trying to have, never been this close to getting what he didn't even know what he wanted through all these empty, pointless, lonely years.

He's so done for. He thought he could live alone, make do with a lonely toss-off once a week, to
hang on to a hope of finding a purpose as a side-lined has-been.

What he has straddling him right now is life itself, offering itself freely but not without risk, looking at him like he's still worthy of things he wants.

John is shaken out of his thought when Sherlock drops off him to kneel on the tatami, then climbs to his feet, probably confounded by his sudden silence.

John quickly scrambles to a standing position, crawls on all fours to grab his uniform jacket, draping it on the arm held in front of his midriff as he rises to his feet. "Let's go see about that ice-cream."

Chapter End Notes

**Author's notes:**
The only martial arts weapons I have any experience of are shorter staffs called bo, wooden knives and nunchaku. The most important thing that I learned when spinning the latter is how much they bloody hurt when they hit your head when you miss a hand transfer. Here is martial arts legend Bruce Lee playing ping-pong with them (because he's Bruce Lee duh).

A shinai is a bamboo sword/staff used mostly in kendo. The staffs used in the first Pacific Rim film's martial arts scenes were not named, so I have chosen this term as an approximation. This scene is heavily influenced by a dojo scene in the first film.

**Firing the canon:**
Ice cream being available at a kitchen area for Rangers is canon, as defined by the second film. The term *Fade* to describe a virtual river of memories that is used to perform a neural handshake leading to a neural sync is not canon; I borrowed it from Dragon Age.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
Foo Fighters: *The Pretender*
Queens of The Stone Age: *Go with The Flow*
Florence+The Machine: *Big God*
The next morning, Sherlock tries to keep his mind off John and firmly focused on what he needs to achieve today. The problem is that anything and everything related to this place and Drifting connects to the man, especially Drifting which should be his primary preoccupation right now. He wouldn't have gotten this far without John, and he's well aware how brittle that makes his motivation. He'd nearly lost it once already; he was certain that Ranger Marais was going to kick him out of training when he kept failing to establish a neural handshake with the other cadets.

He sits down on his bunk, crunching his damp curls against a towel. His new room is Spartan in its refurbishments but still a significant improvement to the dorm he'd had to share with several other cadets. He can't decide if it had been better or worse than being at Haig.

What had made LJ Marais engage John in his training instead of just telling the brass that he was a lost cause? Is it because others have noticed the same thing he has: that even if one of them actively tries to avoid the other, something keeps pulling them back together?

He shouldn't engage in such fatalistic, downright superstitious thinking. A much more important question lies in why either of them would ever feel the need to withdraw from their connection. Why did John walk out on him at Med Bay? Why does he push and pull, ebb and flow, like a bloody tide? What could Sherlock possibly represent to him that makes him behave like he's a dog playing with a venomous snake; fascinated but wary of getting hurt?

Before, Sherlock had wanted to Drift to get that part of his training over with, to get to the next stage. Now, he also wants to do it because his curiosity about John is driving him mad.

Last night hadn't helped. Their practice match yesterday had ended quite strangely: John had suddenly become rather serious and uncomfortable. The moment when he'd sat on John's chest, trying to make light of the situation had clearly thrown his opponent completely off kilter. Had Sherlock getting the upper hand, both in their conversation and the fight, been what had changed his tune at the end of their match? Is John simply a control freak or a sore loser?

No. It's something else. Sherlock refuses to accept the possibility that seems most obvious, even blatant: that what John is battling is a physical attraction to him. That very notion could merely be Sherlock's own wants and needs creating preposterous ideas in his head, and if he reacts to that possibility and ends up being wrong about it, then it will truly be the end to their acquaintance. Sherlock has learned already from looks and corridor talk that discrimination and prejudice are rife in the Ranger Corps, no matter what the manner in which someone deviates from the norm. That norm is, of course, a neurotypical blatantly heterosexual male or nearly androgynous woman with muscles to spare and bravado worthy of a rhino. The LOCCENT and science units allow for much more variation, but that doesn't help since the Ranger Corps is what both he and John must deal with first and foremost. Is John wary of an association with him, because he doesn't fit that narrow, tedious mould of a classic Ranger? John must have, once, before he went soft and inconspicuous.

Sadly, it's possible that John is trying to be his friend, but Sherlock's attraction to him keeps bleeding out into their interactions like a toxic spill, ruining their time together for John.
Sherlock drops the towel on his messy bunk, slams a fist into his pillow. Why must he be so terribly bad at interpreting others, and his poker face so weak? He needs to get a grip, especially if he's to Drift with John today. Thankfully, the neurophysiology of daydreams should be different from memories, so the possibility of getting a brainful of Sherlock's fantasies is slim. But, perhaps it still exists. Can't be helped. It's either John, or some random idiot, and at least John will probably keep what he sees to himself. If that completely alienates him from Sherlock, then that would have probably happened, anyway, at some point. He always ruins these things. He's never really had a friend. It's not surprising that the first one he finds, he scares away by plunging head-first into the relationship with his largely unused libido flaring up like a beacon in the night.

At least John forgives of whatever it is he doesn't like about Sherlock. The tension brought on by their sparring had thankfully abated as they headed to the self-serve kitchen in the Ranger dorm level for some dessert—truth be told, Sherlock hadn't even had dinner, so the creamy, sugary treat had tasted even better than his victory at the dojo. He had made one more half-hearted attempt to convince John to hop over the unilateral Drifting and go for the real goal, but John had firmly shut him down. He seemed concerned that even unilateral would continue to be a challenge.

Letting John in isn't the problem—letting anyone in is. Even if he manages it with John, what about when they try to pair him up with someone else? This is Drifting with training wheels on, with someone who seems outstandingly attuned to his issues. He won't have that luxury forever. His razor-thin optimism is easily pushed aside by the notion that their limited sessions with John will be for nought in the long run.

There's still an hour to kill before he's due at the sim lab. The churn at the bottom of his stomach and the anxiety that is making him fidget and pick at his cuticles ensures that no breakfast would agree to slide down his throat.

John has mentioned that he doesn't want anyone else to have to experience the night when his sister had died. Sherlock also has memories he doesn't want to re-experience, let alone share with anyone else. What makes it worse is that memories ones eliciting the most potent emotional response usually produce the highest level of cerebral sync. His memories are the reason he had been drawn to psychoactive substances in the first place; he had been hoping they'd help him... not remember and not care. Not remember. Now, he doesn't even have those at his disposal to ward off the waking nightmares trying to burst out of his brain.

All he has is John.

He stands up, drapes the damp towel on the backrest of the chair, and grabs his dress uniform jacket. *Into battle.*

-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-

Precisely at nine o'clock, Sherlock walks into the simulation lab and grabs his helmet from a side table.

John's eyes are kind, inquisitive, curious. Worried.

*Pitying?*

Sherlock grits his teeth. He's not a charity case or a twilight project for a has-been. He's going to
succeed or fail today, not stay lingering in between. He can no longer abide not knowing whether this will work or not.

*Kill or cure.*

He glances at John briefly before putting the helmet on, refusing to make proper eye contact. He needs to hold on to the anger he had summoned during his walk from the elevator to the lab, the one borne out of frustration. He needs to get through this, then somehow become independent of John when it comes to being able to Drift. It's the only way forward if John won't trust him enough to go bilateral. It's the only way to avoid a life in prison or mopping the floors. He wants a life that offers at least some level of freedom and intellectual stimulation.

*That's assuming piloting is either of those things.* If it's so great, so earth-shatteringly wonderful that the entire planet worships those who can do it, then why had John given up trying to get re-assigned?

"You two are being quiet today," Colleen points out through the speakers. "Everything alright?"

That's usually John's line, and Sherlock is thoroughly fed up with being fussed over. "Fine."

"I hope it helped, what we talked about yesterday," John says, making Sherlock wonder if he has shared any bits of their conversation with Colleen.

"We'll find out soon enough," Sherlock dismisses. The gist of what John had been telling him was that instead of concentrating on himself, of withdrawing into his head, he should be actively reaching out to his partner.

He takes a deep breath. "I'm fine," he says and is satisfied at how calm and amicable he manages to sound. "I did think about the stuff you said."

He's done little else than think. He'd prefer to get to the doing, now. *Want to see everything I have? On your head, be it.*

Initiating the system connection still isn't easy—the gel is still disgusting and terrifying and makes him disoriented and slightly nauseous. At least the current Jaeger interfaces no longer require it, or even a helmet.

They warm up with some basic hand-eye-brain –coordination exercises; Sherlock needs to get used to the feedback from everything that would normally be governed by the right side of his brain being an illusion. It no longer feels like it is; he can accommodate to it now. John's vast experience shows; even though Sherlock is a quick study, John's always faster and more precise.

"You'll get there. You're already way better than I was when I started piloting," John promises him.

Without a proper bilateral drift, they are still communicating by the implants conveying their voices to each other's heads through the system. When they're Drifting, they are effectively two parts of one mind, so they'll talk to each other in their heads; artificial telepathy.

Sherlock's scientific curiosity definitely wants to experience that.

"It's time," John says. "Colleen, we all set?"

"Sure," she replies. "Take a deep breath, boys. Initiating unilateral neural handshake."

Sherlock closes his eyes, then flinches when he feels a hand on his arm. During the bridging, it's not advisable to talk, so John seems to be trying to help him by initiating another sort of contact.
Sherlock shakes off the limb; it feels distracting, and it would disappear soon, anyway; in order to sync their motor cortices, the Pons system needs to override their own neuronal signal transduction.

His visual field goes dark, and he can no longer focus on his surroundings. He can hear distorted voices—one of them sounds like his own. There are flashes of cold, bluish light, images floating past as though projected on a screen. The Fade. He's caught glimpses of it before, but he's never been able to stay in it, to submerge himself in those undercurrents of his psyche, because panic has made him reflexively reject the whole this.

He lets himself think about John instead of trying to pick apart what he is or isn't sensing. He tries to focus on a memory of the two of them on Terceira, splashing water on each other's faces from a stream in the tropical heat of a mountainside forest.

At first, he thinks he has sunk so deep into that recollection that he had imagined John's voice calling out to him. Then, he realises that it doesn't feel like a voice, and focusing on it makes it clearer each time he hears it. Maybe it's not a voice but a... thought, one that's not his own. It feels like the moment of just falling asleep when the border between reality and his imagination blur together; it's a hallucination he is somehow aware of being false information, but it's still real, it's—

Can you hear me?

Sherlock is startled when he suddenly hears John in his head as though he was talking straight into his ear. Sherlock says his name, but he isn't sure if he's talking or just thinking about it. Now that he has let go of one memory, he is being distracted by the Fade again; images are flickering back and forth, flowing through him like a stream of consciousness. They're not overwhelming, nor can he really make out any details. Is this the worst it gets? When he was trying to do this with the other cadets and the newer training system, he remembers feeling instantly overwhelmed—as though he was in the blast zone of a cerebral explosion. Compared to that, this is... gentle. Like a breeze compared to a hurricane.

He calls out for John again.

Don't try to talk. Concentrate. Just... think about me, and I'll hear you, John tells him in his head.

Sherlock lets out a frustrated huff at the vagueness of such instructions. Then, he tries again.

John?

There you are!

The images have stopped; Sherlock is enveloped in darkness. He tries to look down, but he can't even make out his own limbs in the velvety emptiness. Brain in a jar.

John?

His voice shakes a little. He feels like he's about to tumble down into a void.

Just talking like this requires just a slight connection. What we want to communicate is being intercepted from our Broca and Wernicke areas, and it doesn't require as full a neural sync as other things; being able to do something co-ordinated together, and to share a visual field requires a fuller neural handshake. Do you want to stay like this for a while?

Sherlock wants to say yes—they haven't even gotten this far on their previous tries—but he'd prefer to have some visual information to orient himself. The fact that this is only a low level of sync explains why the Fade had felt no more intense than watching a bad TV connection.
"Yes, I can" Her voice sounds and feels like normal mouth-to-ear conversation instead of the voice just floating inside his head like John's currently is. "Sync is at twenty-one per cent. We need to aim for at least seventy to do any of the proper Drift training modules; I'd need to take you back to the Fade to increase it. Is this enough for today, or do you want to push on?"

Is this alright? John asks.

Sherlock isn't sure. If this were the extent of it, then the answer would be yes. If this is just a weak sync, and he'd never even gotten close to anything that would be enough for piloting, what sort of an onslaught of his nightmares is in for once returned to the Fade? John looking on them like a voyeur is not an enticing thought. On the other hand, delaying probably won't make it easier.

Yes, is there any point to staying at this level than establishing that we can communicate?

Not really. If there's anything you're nervous or worried about, now's the time to say it. Colleen can block herself out if you want to just talk to me.

Sherlock says nothing, hoping that John will make some deductions about his silence.

Give us a minute, please, Colleen.

"I'll give you three. I'm going to go get a coffee. It's just the two of you in three, two, one."

I'd prefer her to be shut out entirely when we go deeper, but that's not possible, is it? Sherlock asks.

Not really, but she doesn't see or hear the Fade. That's only for us. Just don't get upset if we don't get there today. You're already done well this morning, but you're so damned impatient—

They won't wait forever for us to achieve a proper Drift. The time is ticking. John. Or, in the case of the War Clock, it isn't ticking.

Just... remember what I told you about chasing the rabbit. Sooner or later, some memory is going to appear which will upset you, distract you, make you want to chase it or to block it out, or to somehow hide it from you. You need to fight that impulse, and you need to do it by reaching out to me.

How?

Just like this. Focus on me. Don't try to block out the images and don't start observing what happens.

Don't start watching the memories. Just let them float past.

You'll see all that I see? And I can't influence what comes through?

The system can't pick what memories the bridging brings out. The cortical syncing wave hits your memory banks, and then the impulse flowing through your limbic system determines which ones come through; the system tries to select ones with sturdy emotional anchors, whether they be pleasant or not. You can't consciously pick a memory, but it is your brain that determines what the Pons system pulls out.

They should have come up with something less emotionally volatile.

That would have been nice, yes, but there are upsides.

Like what?
Some of those things that come forth are nice—things you want to remember. And, the bad stuff doesn't feel half as bad when somebody knows about it, shares it. Helped me understand Harry a lot better.

Does John want to understand him? He's certainly curious about John.

Still, this is John's duty. His assignment. Who knows what he'll think of Sherlock, afterwards? He'll go back to running that rickety shadow clinic of his and making himself useful by inventing half-arsed projects to improve the medical services—and the Corps will let him because they don't know what else to do with him. That is, at least, what the other Rangers are saying about John behind his back.

He's wasted in his current role. They should let him train people if not pilot again. He's good at both. Disarming. Trustworthy?

Sherlock realises that John is probably waiting for him to say— no, think something at him.

What if even the good memories just remind him of what he's lost?

I'm ready, he tells John firmly.

Alright, Colleen?

There's no reply from the LOCCENT officer.

Instead, there's a river. A river Sherlock is suddenly dropped into, but instead of water it's filled with images, and he's sinking into it, desperately trying to grab onto something, anything—

Don't fight it. Don't grab on to anything. Don't chase the—

He tries to hold on to John's voice, tries to keep himself afloat by following a sense of his invisible presence, but he feels like a piece of wood drifting further on storm waves, eventually disappearing into the maelstrom. He needs to fight; the compulsion is overwhelming. He'll drown if he doesn't. There's no end in sight, no starting point and no end, and who knows what sort of a waterfall awaits at the end of the current?

Sherlock! Don't chase the—

John's voice is distant now, a faint echo like the whisper of the ocean in a seashell.

Sherlock knows he needs to find landmarks so that he can find the centre of the current. He tries to focus on other sounds he can make out, tries to ignore John for a moment.

The current slows; it feels like being washed ashore, but he can't feel sand between his fingers.

There's a wind in the trees.

Footsteps on wood.

His own breathing.

The sense of familiarity floods through him, and he feels as though he has finally managed to grab hold of a tree root and flung himself on to dry land.
But, he isn't safe here. How he knows that he is not sure at all. He scrambles to his feet.

He's in a building of some sort, but everything is shrouded in mist that moves aside when he takes a tentative step forward, closing in behind him again.

He looks down at his hands, belonging to a man. Yet, he doesn't feel like a man anymore.

He looks around. Even dimmed and distorted like a badly focused photograph, he can now recognise where he is: a wooden walkway between the buildings of The Haig Academy For Boys. It's the one leading from the classroom annexe to the main entrance.

In front of him, at an intersection, stands a boy thirteen years of age. Messy curls, scuff marks on his shoes which were always supposed to be polished until they shined. The scuff marks aren't his fault—he'd been pushed down the stairs.

It should feel stranger, watching his younger self. Is this some side-effect of the sync? Is he seeing himself through John's eyes or his own? Is John here, or is he alone in his own recollection?

Shadows shift, and in front of the boy now stands one of the Prefects, a diplomat's son with a definite sadistic streak. "Your brother's here. You can see him in the visiting garden."

Not even parents were allowed into the academy proper, presumably because some of them might frown at what the stern discipline, high moral values and peer feedback used as a tool for behavioural excellence actually meant.

Mycroft would have thrived at Haig. He would have been perfect for the scheming, the favouritism, the competitiveness and the cruel manner in which those who could not adjust and blend in and carve their path subtly are shown their place.

"And straighten your tie!" the Prefect barks at the boy's retreating back, and Sherlock sees him—himself—tightening the piece of fabric so tight and straight that it presses a red welt on his thin neck. "You need clothes in a smaller size," he calls out.

Missing home and hating every bit of Haig had decimated Sherlock's appetite. But, of course, they'd made it clear that they had their ways of forcing him to eat. So, he swallowed down as little as with which he could get away.

Some nights he had thought of his tie, and what could be done with it if he managed to hang it from a rafter.

Students were only allowed in the visiting garden when a family member came to see them. It was big, like a park, presumably to offer so much to see that parents wouldn't have the time or energy left to poke around the rest of the place.

Mycroft was—sitting on a bench under a flowering Yoshino cherry tree. Unappreciative of beauty and frowning of frivolity, Sherlock's big brother is ignoring the lovely surroundings in lieu of typing up something on his tablet computer.

Mycroft kept making promises to come see him: a month earlier, then two weeks after that, then the next week, but he never showed up until this day. He had not called, had not sent a message about visiting today. It made Sherlock feel like he had hesitated, that he had wanted to leave himself a way out, but that is not his brother. He never hesitates or backs down. What he decides, happens.

Five days earlier, the sense of abandonment had gotten the best of Sherlock, and he had cried in class. The consequences of such a display of weakness were the cause of the slight limp he still had
and which his younger self is trying to conceal as he makes his way to Mycroft.

"There you are. I was about to find the Headmaster to ask what was keeping you."

The Prefect boy, Allard, had probably deliberately delayed conveying the message so that Sherlock's visiting time would be cut short.

The boy approaches the bench. A cherry blossom lands on his shoulder, and Mycroft wastes no time in brushing it off. He scrutinises Sherlock carefully from top to toe.

"You look well."

"If you say so." He was happy to see Mycroft—happy to see anyone who could get him out of here, and he can see that relief reflected on the boy's features. He was still angry, but that anger was diluted by the fact that Mycroft had finally kept his promise.

"I brought you some treats; gave them to that Prefect boy so that they can be shared among your dorm."

Sherlock sighs. He won't be seeing a single morsel, that's for sure. Not that he'd want to. His stomach turns at the thought of eating anything in front of the others. His appetite has always been the weather wane of his moods.

"You've lost weight. I'll see to it that there's an allowance for better fitting clothes."

The boy replies nothing.

"Your Housemaster says that your grades are good, but you have trouble getting along with the other children."

"They don't want to get along with me."

"It's all down to the right attitude and a genuine effort, Sherlock, neither of which you possess in abundance."

"When can we go?"

There was only a fortnight left of the term. Mycroft must have come to take him home. After all, the Haig was supposed to be a temporary arrangement—"just for a few months", which had now stretched to a year. "It'll be good for you to travel a bit", Mycroft had told him at Heathrow Airport. One of his assistants was to escort Sherlock to South Korea. "When this current stage of our project is done, we can see about a suitable school in England." He had never specified a timeline, but months had been the word he kept using.

"Go where?" Mycroft asks now, as if that conversation about the transience of this arrangement had never even happened.

"Home," Sherlock says.

The older Sherlock, standing now behind the bench and studying the increasing distress on the face of his younger self, knows what's coming. He doesn't want to witness it, but there's nowhere to go. Beyond the nearest bushes, there is nothing but mist, and he's oddly scared that he'll walk off the edge of something if he wanders there.

"I'm glad to hear you are doing well with your grades. I'm sure any university will be happy to have
"you, once you graduate from here."

"I don't want to be here next year!" The boy's eyes have gone wide with shock.

*Oh, the folly and naivete of youth.* He should have realised this was Mycroft' plan all along, but he wouldn't have wanted to believe it.

"Keep your voice down, no use in making a scene. We'll talk about this later. The Dean says you have taken to martial arts, even competed. That should serve well to curb some of your more destructive traits. Now how does—"

"The term ends in just two weeks," Sherlock interrupts him. "When do we go home? I want to see Redbeard."

Mycroft folds the aluminoplast screen of his tablet in two and slides it into the breast pocket of his coat. He clears his throat, schools his features into a sombre expression. "Sherlock, there's something I need to tell you."

The older Sherlock averts his eyes from his brother because whatever weakness or sympathy he might try to find there isn't going to soften the blow, even after all these years.

It's no good being clever as a child if it just makes you quicker to realise how much the pain is about to drown you.

"Uncle Rudy and Aunt Mary are old, and it's not fair for an energetic dog like Redbeard to receive inadequate exercise."

"That's why I need to go home," his younger self argues. "I can take him out. I always take him out for his walks."

Redbeard was *his* dog, his only friend, given to him as a puppy when Mycroft had been sent to boarding school. An Irish setter with beautiful chocolate-brown eyes and mild entropion which excluded him from being used for breeding and made him look a bit goofy, he had taken to Sherlock the moment he had been brought into their home in Surrey.

A home which Mycroft had sold before even a month had passed from the deaths of Mummy and Father. He had only told Sherlock about the sale three months later in a letter.

When Sherlock had left for Haig, Redbeard had gone to live with his aunt and uncle, and he was supposed to be waiting there for Sherlock to come home.

Mycroft's words. All lies.

"Sherlock. It was kinder for Redbeard to be put down."

A strangled noise escapes the lips of his younger self, and he tries to set off running, but Mycroft grips his wrist like a vice.

The screams—not even words, just a guttural agony straight from the bottom of his soul, hidden away for months so that the other boys wouldn't find it and make it worse.

This is the scene Mycroft was trying to avoid, but it's his own fucking fault.

His older self—right now they are two in one, the one and the same, because how could two beings who have experienced the same moment and felt the same precise amount and quality of pain be
completely separate—can't keep tears at bay anymore.

"Sherlock," Mycroft says sternly, the pitch of his voice higher than usual which is a tell that he's surprised and doesn't quite know how to handle what's going on.

How could he be surprised?

Surprised at what?

That a child would embarrass him by making a scene over being robbed of the last good thing in his life?

"Surely you don't need that animal anymore. It may have been a reasonable suggestion from your therapist to increase stability when Mummy and Father began travelling more, but you are a young man now, not a child. Mummy indulged your weakness, but now we can rely on this wonderful school to build you a bit of character."

Redbeard was the only one who stayed with him. His only friend. The only thing that was his.

Tears are streaming down his younger self's cheeks, and Sherlock wants to go slap Mycroft over the disappointment and dismay on his features borne from not knowing if he should give in to what he probably considered a sentimental and base impulse to comfort a crying child.

But, he cannot move, because he's caught in the moment; it's agonising to be so viscerally reminded of what it feels like to have lost everything.

Mycroft is now gripping the boy's shoulder and giving it a stern shake. "You need to listen to me. We must keep the big picture in mind. You are so lucky to be here, protected and cared for. We're at war; there are children dying, cities burning—"

The boy has stopped struggling and has raised his chin to look into Mycroft's eyes. "Then let them burn!"

Mycroft leans back and sighs, letting go of the boy's wrist. "We can talk more later. Right now, you're too emotional to consider the facts—"

"I hate you."

"You don't mean that." Dismissive. Never understanding. Never listening. Never caring. Well, he does care about every other human being on the planet. Just not his own flesh and blood. It's all for the greater good, always. 'A bit of pain for victory' had been Father's favourite saying. Mycroft has probably had the phrase embroidered on his pillowcases.

"I hate you. And I hate Mummy and Father!" The boy shouts.

Mycroft's hands fall from his shoulders. "You don't really mean that."

"I don't ever want to see you again, and I'm glad they're dead!"

The pebbles of the gravel path groan under the leather shoes of the boy as he retreats, turns, sets into a run and disappears into the mist.

Sherlock stand suspended behind the bench, expecting something else to happen; expecting a different ending, expecting—he doesn't even know. Time seems to slow, the visage of his brother still sitting on the bench collapse into itself like a dying star.
Sherlock is alone, and he doesn't know where to go from here.

It takes a while to pick up the faint sound of someone calling out his name.

Someone who sounds like John.

Reality begins seeping in: has John seen this? Has he felt it, all of it?

Sherlock tries to reach out when he hears his name again. Not with his hands, but with—somehow—

"Finally," someone says, and suddenly he is ripped out of the mist into something that's too bright, too loud, and there's a tension around his temples that feels like it's about to crush his skull. His skin is too tight and so are his clothes, and every hair on his body is sticking up, bending under pressure. He tries to speak, but his vocal cords feel wrapped in gauze, and it's though he's being strangled. Nausea hits like a tidal wave, and he claws at his head with his fingertips, trying to rid of himself of whatever is causing this. Sound blends into heat, heat into light and everything into a whirling, overwhelming storm—

Then, reality surges over him impacts with his consciousness like a blow to the head. He spends a dizzying moment trying to convince himself that the chairs, control room window, John, and everything else he can now see is real and not just the system fucking with his head. His knees give out from under him, and black dots are dancing in his visual field. He thinks John is talking to him, but it sounds like they're both underwater.

He lets John drag him to a chair, shove his head between his knees. He's shaking so hard that even his teeth are clattering together, but he's not cold.

John's arm snakes around his shoulders. Squeezes. Pats his arm. He's warm, and Sherlock lets his head loll against the broad shoulder hovering close by. He doesn't want to close his eyes; he knows that the fear that he'll be thrown back into his nightmares is pointless, but it's still there.

"You're alright," John promises him. "We're alright. You did really well."

How was that doing well? He had lost control, and he doesn't ever want to go through anything like that again.

"Is it always that bad?" he asks, and he must still be disoriented since he's startled by hearing his own voice instead of an artificially manufactured approximation of it in his head.

"No, unless you chase the rabbit. That's what you did. I couldn't bring you back since you were too far gone in an instant—we had to take both of us out of the system. Not a pleasant experience, I know."

No wonder Sherlock feels like someone has pulled his plug.

"Shall we call it a day?" Colleen suggests. She has come out of the control room to check on them.

John rises to his feet, pulls Sherlock up with him. He doesn't let go of the grip he has on Sherlock's shoulder.

He mustn't let go. I don't know what will happen if he does.

John walks him to his dorm room, but he registers little of the way there; he remains sunken deep in thought-controlled thought, his own thought, no intruders, no one wrenching away memories he doesn't want to relinquish—and safe.
At the door, John lets go of his arm, and the sudden lack of contact is like a shock to the system. An absence. Being without something he didn't know he wanted or needed. Having someone else in his head should have felt disturbing, invasive, unsettling. But, had it been anyone else—

He misses John. He already misses John, even when he's right here. He wasn't alone, during those short moments when they had established at least some level of sync.

His mistake had been simple: he should have stayed close to John. With John.

John, who has now somehow gotten him to sit on his bunk and is raising his chin with a finger and peering into his eyes, perhaps doing some doctorly thing or other.

"Stay with me," Sherlock says without thinking. As the words register in his own mind, his head snaps up, and he retreats from John's fingers now trailing along his jawline. Is there anything he could say to erase what he has just revealed? And, is it worse than what John had seen in the Fade? "I—"

"Of course I will," John cuts in, and that's the end of the conversation.

Sherlock drops down to lie on his side on his bunk, eyes drifting shut, knees hugged to his chest, not caring that he still has his shoes on.

The thin mattress dips when John takes a seat at the foot of the bed. Two faint thuds mark him kicking off his boots. "The first time I chased the rabbit, I cried. Bawled like a fucking baby. Happens to everyone, and sometimes it's worse when it's a sibling; if the memories syncing together are very similar, it's like re-experiencing your crappiest moments, amplified."

Sherlock hums a non-committal reply, lets himself lean a little against John with his eyes closed. It doesn’t feel awkward at all to do so; somehow, the wringer he's just been through creates a bubble of need in which the usual meanings and complicated consequences of things cease to be.

John's palm is placed just above his knee; a thumb strokes the outside of his thigh. "We'll make a Ranger out of you yet."

He doesn't feel like a Ranger. He feels like a dishrag squeezed dry and abandoned on the bottom of the sink.

The next time he becomes aware of his surroundings, he's still in his room, lying on his bunk, a blanket spread over him. Alone.

Without.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
I can't start writing a story until I begin seeing the visual of at least one scene in my head. The flashback scene in South Korea was probably the most important thing that popped into my mind about this fic. It effectively cemented the idea that I was going to write this.
Firing the canon:
Mako Mori, one of the main characters of the first film, chases her own white rabbit in a wonderfully dramatic scene in the first film.

Writing soundtrack for this chapter:
Williams, Ma & Perlman: Sayuri's Theme
Djawadi, Ahn, Glennie-Smith & Randall: Mako
Linkin Park: The Requiem
Enigma: The Gate
The next day, only a skeleton crew mans the defences of the base; everyone else gets the day off their usual duties.

It's Memorial Day.

It always starts with a better breakfast than usual, served in the old main dome where the Jaegers used to be housed. After the Underdome was constructed, it was divided into workshops and other technical spaces, but the main floor of it is still the largest open indoor space in the Shatterdome. There, once a year, everyone eats together in honour those who have given everything for humanity. It reminds John of old Norse legends of warriors dining in Valhalla, though this meal is being shared by those still living.

At the event, holographic images of the dead are projected on the walls of the old dome and pointless speeches given by current brass. The latter are ignored by everyone; most residing at Chard’s Rift nowadays haven't known any of the deceased or even seen battle, and those who have don't want to hear the empty words. Sometimes Memorial Day even marks a visit from the Marshal but only if there are medals to dole out. The flood of them has thinned into a trickle now that the kaiju have stayed away for so long.

John had attended these breakfasts for four years after Harry's death, thinking that it would be odd if he was absent—that it would somehow mean disrespecting his sister. Gradually, he began to think that people weren't really happy to see him at such occasions; for most staff this day is just a nice holiday, and John began to suspect that his presence put a damper on their otherwise festive spirit. So, for the past decade, he has mostly stayed in his room, pretended to be catching up on work, and tried not to think about Harry’s image being projected onto the concrete wall of the old dome with hundreds of eyes glancing at it without even recognising her.

He hadn't set his alarm clock last night, thinking that he’d probably wake up at the usual hour, anyway.

He doesn't. He sleeps through breakfast and some more. Towards the end of his slumber, a nightmare creeps in. Perhaps it's brought on by yesterday's events—experiencing the loss and grief and anger Sherlock had felt all those years ago when he had lost everything. The nightmare could also just be the result of John's subconscious being aware of what day it is, or even just a coincidence brought on by a messed-up sleep schedule.

It hardly matters. What does matter is that this nightmare is worse than his usual ones.

When he dreams about Harry these days, he mostly sees a jumble of images—a melange of happy occasions and tougher spots. Time has done its trick, diluting sorrow into something just about manageable. But, sometimes it still hits full-force, as though it's a gaping wound with the stitches ripping themselves open as though there was a rat trying to claw itself out of a sinking ship.

In John's dream this morning, nothing is dimmed or diluted or toned down. The details are sharp and bright: Harry's scream when the left side of the Conn-Pod caved in and a metal bar that snapped like
a twig swung loose from the ceiling and pierced through the chestplate of her armour. The frenzied shouts from Mission Command when they saw her vitals—or lack thereof—and realised what had happened. John screaming his lungs out in panic and the pain that hadn't even been his own before it was transferred straight into his nervous system by the last currents traveling in Harry's synapses. Finally, the paralysing void of silence in his head after he felt the last spark of life and light drain out of his sister.

The next seven minutes after that were—and are—a blur. He was nothing but a barely-conscious, deranged puppeteer trying to keep a broken marionette in play.

Images and sounds come and go, piercing his consciousness and ripping through his dreamscape: the sound of the *kaiju*'s incomprehensibly massive corpse hitting the water. The pain on his knees as he crawled over twisted metal into the Rescue Capsule from the ruins of the Conn-Pod as the Intercept began to tilt down. Groaning metal, flickering lights as the Intercept went through the Jaeger equivalent of death, collapsing into the waves, raining bits and pieces of itself down to the ocean floor like confetti.

The Rescue Capsule spent an agonising minute submerged, momentarily held down by the turbulent flow of water created by the sinking Jaeger's wake before it breached the surface. In his dream, John again sees the black, endless ocean, and the faint starlight shining through the surface of the churning sea, blocked out of view from one side by the Jaeger, and from another the dying *kaiju* that was being swallowed by the inky darkness of the ocean depths.

When he wakes up with a jolt, twisted in sweat-drenched sheets and shivering with cold and shock, the images still won't stop coming. He remembers the lights of the helicopters sweeping the seas and the sight of a search & rescue specialist being winched down into the waves. John's own fingers were too shaky and numb from the cold to assist in his own rescue; he couldn't even clip himself into the winch rope. Just as they were about to lift him out he had protested, even tried to launch himself back into the sea, in disbelief that there was nothing he could do for his sister anymore.

Six hours later, when he could hold a phone to his ear, he had called their parents. He remembers yelling into the phone, yelling at the beeps that signalled that the line had been disconnected by the recipient. Even in death, even as a fucking war heroine, Harry was worth nothing to their parents: *I don't have a daughter*. They refused to come to Honolulu for the funeral. Although it was all over the news, all over the world, they may not have known about her death before John had called them; they had never owned a television nor did they use the internet. The rules of their sect said that such things were the devil's invention.

The tears squeeze from underneath John's convulsed lids when he recalls the simple, black casket wrapped in a PPDC flag being dropped into the sea filled with her belongings instead of her body, which was never found. For months, John kept scanning the recovery divers' footage back and forth, refusing to accept that nature had stepped in and made most likely made her remains a part of the ocean's cycle of eating and being eaten. He both feared seeing what had become of her and feared never finding any trace of her. Finding her would mean that it was all over. He knew that, of course he fucking knew that, but it would have been different to see it, to see her; unseeing, grey, glassed-over eyes, seaweed in her hair.

He dreamt about it night after night in more and more absurd versions. Maybe that was how his brain chose to process it.

Harry, a mermaid. *'All the other girls had a crush on Prince Eric. I was totally all in for Ariel,'* she once joked to John and then dissolved into that throaty laugh of hers, its coarseness refined by years of whiskey. *'Always did like the redheads.'*
It was easy to get her officially declared dead—after all, it had happened like on reality television, her heart rate and blood pressure plummeting in real time on the monitors at the base. Heart going into asystole, oxygen saturation zero—it was all there, conveyed by the implants to an audience of technicians safely huddled inside a metal dome kilometres and kilometres away. The funeral had been before all the requisite official paperwork was even done; as though the Corps was in a hurry to get it over with. John had hoped, in vain, that their parents would show up for the memorial service. After years of experience of what they are like, he still hoped. ‘She’s at peace’, the priest said. In hindsight, John thinks he should have insisted on a civil memorial service instead of a religious one. There's nothing peaceful about dying in combat.

Before, this world had been John’s home. After the funeral, all it was to him was violence and darkness and loss. As usual, the anti-PPDC activists rejoiced over the death of a pilot, even though Harry had given their lives to protect them as well. Fucking religious zealots, like their parents.

Harry was gone, and Diablo Intercept was in its own watery grave. John remained, but that was all he did. He didn't live. He existed.

He curls into a tiny form on his bunk, the pain of the memories still gripping him like a vice. When his bladder starts to complain he stumbles to the sink, throws up, then ends up sitting on the floor. He needs to protect Sherlock from this. This is what he'd see, if they ever Drifted together. Pinching his eyes shut, John thanks his lucky stars that they'll never be co-pilots. His fascination with the man is a folly, a frivolity, the product of an idle, lonely mind. It's dangerous for both of them.

He should be thankful for his nightmare of the reminder.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

A man needs to eat eventually. John ventures out of his room late in the afternoon, and is just about to round a corner to the hallway leading to the new recruits’ dorms when he hears voices from the direction he's heading. Something in their tone makes him slow his steps and remain hidden behind the corner to listen in.

"Kindly unhand me, Lee, unless you want a repeat of what happened at the dojo."

Sherlock.

"Fuck that, because we just found out that you've wrapped this whole bloody base around your finger. Turns out that our sim training hours were cut because one of the LOCCENT officers needs to babysit you and Watson in the old lab. And, the rest of us can't even try for the Ravager because they've earmarked it for you and whoever ends up being your co-pilot even though you haven't even done a goddamned bilateral yet!" Lee booms. His drawl is easy to recognise, and he doesn't seem to care whether anyone hears this exchange.

Another voice, a female one John recognises as Emily Kitchener, one of the cadets who was assigned to the Ground Crew. "So, it's all down to you instead of the brass, and you've made it clear you'd never accept any of us because somehow, you—some faggot junkie—are better than us. Everyone knows there are limited spots for new people in the Corps, and the place that should have been mine, they gave to you."
"Did you deduce all that by yourself?" Sherlock asks snidely. "I'd refrain from talking out loud if I were you; clearly, the two of you lower the IQ of the entire PPDC."

"Who'd you blow to get in, eh?" Lee asks.

"Well, it certainly wasn't you," Sherlock replies in a superior and mocking tone.

John hears some shuffling and a thud.

"You're not worth shit, Holmes. I slice you open, and they'll have replaced you before next week, never mind the aptitude scores that have the Science Division nerds licking your arse. They're not worth fuck, either, not in battle, and they should have realised you somehow tricked your way in. That babysitter of yours, Watson, isn't going to be around forever," Lee snarls.

"Maybe that's our answer to who he's fucking," Kitchener points out triumphantly.

Sherlock doesn't reply, unless one counts a grunt and more sounds pointing to a scuffle, and John's neck prickles with nervous sweat.

He wants to step in, to protect Sherlock, but he knows that defending Sherlock, associating himself with him right now makes him highly suspect a character. Of course, no one would believe the words of two irate cadets already established as volatile over a veteran Ranger's, but the two of them spouting this nonsense somewhere else and those words they'd spoken of Sherlock, of the two of them, being repeated at a disciplinary hearing would be John's worst nightmare. Even if he denies it all, even if he manages to sound credible doing so... He has tried his utmost best never to give anyone reason to believe what is being insinuated, but he fears that, sitting at a hearing where he has to listen to such things being said out loud, he will somehow reveal himself.

He grits his teeth, fear over Sherlock warring with the need for self-preservation. Finally, he finds a moment where shame over being so tempted to flee to protect himself is greater than the need to protect what he has kept hidden.

He needs to interfere. If it goes well, then maybe this is all the justice he'll ever get for having silently put up with the discrimination in the PPDC for decades. Besides, Sherlock is worth a thousand of these bigoted idiots. It doesn't matter if he's made mistakes, it doesn't matter if he made them repeatedly; no one can deny how hard he has been trying, how hard he has worked to overcome his difficulties and how great a hell he has endured, kicking a hard drug habit and rising like a bloody phoenix into the ranks of the Corps. He has more raw talent than the wastes of breath who are taunting him right now, combined.

What Sherlock doesn't have, what he's never had, is someone to stand by him when he struggles—unless John steps up to the plate right now.

"Watson's got no power over anything. He's not really a Ranger anymore, they just keep him around because—" Kitchener snarls, but the words die in her throat when John shifts out of the shadows, turns the corner, snaps his spine straight and clears his throat loudly. He tries not to be affected by the site of Sherlock being pinned against the wall, face-first, by Lee, Kitchener holding the blade of a butterfly knife against his throat.

"Cadets Lee and Kitchener. I recommend you step down this instant, and do not even consider finishing that sentence."

"It's your minder," Kitchener spits into Sherlock's ear with a low voice. She holds her ground.

John steps closer. "Stand down, NOW!"
Kitchener steps off, letting the hand holding the knife drop theatrically, menacingly slowly.

Lee shoves Sherlock away, and he barely gets a leg in front of him in time to avoid toppling to the floor. John expects him to flee, but instead he stops a few feet from his fellow cadets, rolling his shoulders a bit—Lee had been bending them backwards in what had looked like a very painful manner.

"Did you honestly think threatening someone would ever have given either of you the Ravager?" Sherlock asks Kitchener in a venomous tone. "Have fun being court martialled."

Lee is glaring at him. "Everyone knows who your brother is, and that's the only real reason why you're still here."

"Yes, they do know who he is. They are usually also aware of his influence on the punishments doled out by the disciplinary board."

Lee blanches.

"Kitchener: to your room, to which you are confined until a disciplinary hearing is arranged," John commands. "Same goes for you, Lee, unless you'd prefer the brig."

The two cadets look at each other as though wondering whether John has the authority to order them around.

"I will call Hammond if need be, which you really don't want me to do," John warns them, eyes blazing. He's referring to the Base Commander; protocol dictates to insubordination be brought to his attention immediately.

Lee turns on his heels and begins walking off.

Kitchener isn't quite done. "The Corps is going down the fucking drain!" she yells at John over her shoulder. "Wouldn't want to stay here with the likes of him, anyway," she curses, and spits on the ground right in front of Sherlock. Then, she starts after Lee. When she's about to pass John, he snatches her wrist, wrenches away the knife, flicks it closed and shoves it in his own uniform pocket.

John is tempted to call the Disciplinary Officers in right away to detain her, but he's got a more pressing matter in mind. He will call Hammond, once he gets back to his room.

"You alright?" he asks Sherlock, who has just touched his finger to where the blade had been pressing in. There is a very shallow abrasion there, a drop of blood gathered at the edge. John digs out a handkerchief from his pocket and presses it there. "It's just a scratch; you'll be fine with a plaster."

"Yes," Sherlock says, sounding distracted. He's looking towards where Kitchener and Lee had disappeared. "I had a hunch that things might escalate."

"How so?"

"Classic overcompensation from Lee. Not enough balls to go for this alone, he channelled Kitchener's ambitions and disappointment to revenge. He tried to cop a feel in the shower," Sherlock adds with a sarcastic sigh.

"From her?" John is confused at the sudden turn in the conversation.

"No, me. He also made a rather lewd proposition as to how I could get into his favour. All this
happened two days after I moved into the joint dorm. I made it quite clear that I wasn't interested, which did not go down well."

"So, he's gay?"

"I wouldn't know. While some men do use such acts and suggestions as power play, he seems a very poignant cliché of an individual trying desperately to build as heterosexual a public profile as possible. It is uncertain whether his huge collection of tall tales about his conquests of females is as much overcompensation as what happened in the shower room. Most likely, yes."

John swallows. He doesn't like the idea of Sherlock turning his keen deductive eye on the orientations of others. "The Corps has never been very kind to sexual minorities. Amnesty International has been on their—our—case on that for years, but the PPDC’s PR division has done a good job putting a damper on the subject in the media."

Sherlock leans against the wall, crosses his arms. "Military organisations were rarely tolerant in the past, and Corps has isolated itself so effectively that I'm not surprised it's still the Dark Ages in here. Embracing diversity wouldn't sit well with the classic macho male image Rangers seem to be so fond of."

"My sister was gay," John says and instantly regrets it. Why the hell would he draw attention to himself like that?

Sherlock's forehead wrinkles into a thoughtful V. "Did they give her a hard time in the Corps?"

"No, they—well, they didn't like it, but she wouldn't take shit from anyone. She gave as good as she got. They let her be."

"I'll wager a guess that she rarely exhibited traditional feminine traits?"

"You mean that she wasn't girly? Hell, no, definitely not." Having to wear a uniform had not been a big concession to Harry. She had explained to John that, while she did not like the idea of enforcing stereotypes, her hairstyle and style of clothing gave others an idea what to expect, and she found them comfortable and very her. "She wouldn't wear a skirt to school no matter what Mum tried to bribe her with."

"Skirt? Sounds rather archaic."

"Well, our family belonged to The Movement."

The Movement for The Restoration of Christ Above All Saints is one of the more fundamental European sects which had separated from what used to be known as the Roman Catholic Church. The separation had happened following certain events in world politics around 1990; a majority of cardinals had refused to boot such sects out of what used to be the Roman Catholic Church even though they had mostly abandoned the entire New Testament. The whole church eventually split in half, the more tolerant and modern side renaming itself as the Catholic Church of The Light and Resurrection, the rest splintering into small, disorganised sects. John's father used to pray that 'the Earth would swallow those blasphemers', referring to the more liberal side of Catholicism. John's parents had been among the first members of The Movement in what used to be the United Kingdom. Time Magazine had described the strictness of The Movement's ethos to be at least as extreme as that of some doomsday cults.

"Ah," Sherlock says with obvious restraint regarding his honest opinion of the religious group. "While it's much nicer out there for sexual identity minorities, now," Sherlock says, "a religious
upbringing can still be every bit as hellish as the Corps, I'd imagine."

That polite, reserved phrase at the end gives John pause. Is Sherlock trying to be politically correct, signalling that he empathises with the emotional consequences of such discrimination, or is he trying to signal something? John really can't tell, and he would never risk revealing too much of himself by inquiring further. Whatever might be the politically correct terminology these days, he is still caught in the undertow of his upbringing and cannot feel anything but fear of the sexual currents he is trying to control. Harry had not even tried, and that head led to her being proverbially dead to their parents; John couldn’t not try to adapt after seeing such a thing happen to his twin.

He offers a non-committal grunt as a reply.

Sherlock shifts his feet, looks at the streak of blood on John's handkerchief, now on his palm since the scratch has stopped bleeding. He gives it back to John.

The silence soon becomes awkward. "I'm going to make sure those two get a disciplinary hearing as soon as possible. She'll be out of here before you know it," John promises.

"Removing a piece of rotten fruit from a diseased tree won't fix the growth, John."

"I know. But we can't let it slide."

"No, of course not."

John is reluctant to walk away, because he finds Sherlock oddly unaffected by the whole ordeal. Is he so used to blocking these things out, to being a subject of such ire, that this is but a drop in the ocean?

He doesn't ask. This will be dealt with through the proper channels, which will change very little. There may be—no, more likely will be—individuals on the Judiciary Panel who will secretly agree with the vile statements made by the two cadets. John hopes that they won't repeat their more derogatory statements in the hearing. If they did, John would expect to see barely concealed, schadenfreude expressions on the panellists. It would take more than one judiciary hearing, or a few heated words spoken in a corridor to change the Corps. John has listened in and been a part of such panels for ten years. He knows how much prejudice festers in these waters.

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After demanding an unholy amount of reassurances from Sherlock that he's alright, John continues on to where he'd been going, but finds that he has no appetite, and that he can't concentrate on work at all. He wonders what Sherlock had thought of his reaction; he was probably broadcasting loud and clear the fact that, out of the two of them, he's the one more affected by what had happened. He has some lessons to learn from Sherlock on how not to care about what other people think, even if part of the man's nonchalance is an emotional armour in which he wraps himself.

Yesterday, John had gotten a glimpse of the reasons why Sherlock finds it hard to trust anyone. They both have that problem, but for different reasons. Experiencing Sherlock's reaction to the events that day at his boarding school through both his younger self and who he is now had left John feeling drained and miserable. At least with Harry nearly all of the bad memories shared in the Fade were things they had both experienced. *The devil you know.*
Still, that fathomless sorrow and desperation he'd felt second-hand yesterday hadn't put him off Drifting with Sherlock—not in the least. Everyone has baggage, and he would much rather face Sherlock's every day than stare down his own until his dying day.

Anger mixes with self-loathing—John's old friend—and a frustration and powerlessness that have not felt this acute in years. Seeing Sherlock, if only just accidentally and briefly, on a day like today when his resolve to keep things professional is at its strongest, crumbles his defences. All it takes in one look from the man and John loses his conviction. Suddenly, his only priority is not to let Sherlock out of his sight. Ever. Whether that's protectiveness, fondness or something more, hardly matters, but he can't help trying to pick apart his motives. The last few days, training with Sherlock, have been the best John's had in years. He feels younger, he feels useful; he feels wanted. He'd be lying to himself if he claimed that looking forward to seeing Sherlock every day is just because it's his mind John wants to spend time with. He's clever, interesting, sharp-witted, funny when he doesn't even mean to be, but he's also everything John now thinks about when he shoves his hand between his legs. It feels so much more intense, so wrong in all the good ways that he now thinks about a person he knows, a person he spends time with, when he's turned on.

It's a breach of trust. Technically, they are now the same rank, but effectively they are still miles apart. The things John thinks about can't be appropriate. Yet, they threaten to take over when they're apart, and always hover at the periphery when they're together.

*You've fucked me up, Sherlock Holmes, without even touching me.*

As much as it kills John to think that they may not have much time left together, it will feel like a relief when Sherlock's image begins fading into a memory after he's shipped off somewhere or when their paths no longer have any reason to cross at Chard's Rift. At most, they'll exchange pleasantries over terrible Christmas drinks at Mess hall while Sherlock's co-pilot—effectively his *life partner*—hovers close by. Maybe they'll all be friends.

He has to try to enjoy their remaining time tomorrow, even if every minute of it has a bitter tinge. He has already taken a huge risk defending Sherlock; he can't afford another slip-up. Maybe his admiration will shift to someone else. That would be for the best—most of the objects of his always one-sided affection have evoked a desire in him that's but a scraped match compared to the wildfire brought on by Sherlock.

It is what it is, and it'll never be more.

Chapter End Notes

**Firing the canon:**
No Catholic or other sects are mentioned in canon, and the sect John's parents are a part of has nothing to do with the real Roman Catholic Church. Memorial Day is also solely my headcanon.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
Hurts: *Unspoken*
Hurts: *Illuminated*
Garbage: *You Look So Fine*
GnuS Cello: In The End
Me spending some holiday time on the bottom of the Mediterranean sea has delayed the last two updates, so let's play a bit of catch-up in the form of a surprise chapter just one day after the preceding one! This is a very, very important one, my dear readers.

That night, sleep steers clear of John.

Never before has the sense of being carried along by a current, of no longer being in control of his life been stronger. When he was young and still living at home, the powerlessness he felt over the strict rules of their home life had felt like a prison, but like most sentences, it would end. Not, he fears he'll remain suspended between reckless temptation and stagnating safety until something breaks the tension or Sherlock disappears from his life.

The latter is more likely. Inevitable, even. Maybe the cure for his obsession isn't denial— perhaps it's allowing the ghost of Sherlock in his head to get a word in. To open the door to it, just the tiniest bit. Just this once. To stumble through the guilt and the self-hatred afterwards, and be done with it. To surrender, just this one.

For the first time in eighteen years, the ghost in his machinery isn't Harry. And, for the first time, that apparition wants things it can't have.

This will be the first and the last and the only time he does this. Just this once, the two of us, then it needs to stop. Just this once, and it won't even feel as real as a simulation. It was never real.

He steers his thoughts back to their second hike on Terceira. Sherlock had taken off his shirt at a rest stop, complaining that the sweat pouring down his back was prying loose the bandage still covering his spinal implant scar. After a bit of contortionism as he attempted to rip off the loose bandage, he'd given up and turned to offer his back to John. The sudden invitation had been startling and impossible to resist, so John had lain a palm on his warm, glistening back, feeling the muscles ripple underneath as they adjusted to the contact between them. John had swept his thumb across the slit-like scar, almost completely healed and no longer in need of covering.

"You can leave the bandage off," he'd said, voice slightly hoarse to his own ears. His hand had lingered on Sherlock's shoulder blade, and he had hoped and prayed and feared that he'd have enough courage to do more.

To press his lips on the curves of Sherlock's spine, to wrap an arm around his waist and to pull him close. He'd done none of those things, simply stepped back, allowing his fingertips nothing but air which to grasp. It was safe. Just like it's safe right now to go further, in the confines of his mind.

So, he lets himself imagine doing all those things he had wanted to do that day—and more. To pin those strong thighs underneath his own, to nip his teeth on the tendons of that long neck, to slip a hand between the firm buttocks, to trap Sherlock's cock in his grip, to flick the tip of his thumb down the sensitive ridge of the frenulum. He'd start with stroking down with the same firmness he enjoys.
He's already far gone, painfully hard and gasping as he grips himself. He won't last long tonight. That much is obvious from the very first tentative tug he gives himself, pinching his eyes closed as he sets into a familiar rhythm, using his other hand to shove down his pants and trousers so that he can hook curve his fingers around his balls to give them just enough of a gentle squeeze to intensify what's he's doing to his cock.

*How would Sherlock like this? What does he like to do to himself?* The questions that only half-register in the haze of John's arousal are all academic, of course. He'll never know more than what he imagines, based on limited data. That's what Sherlock would say. *Impossible to analyse without all the necessary information.*

It won't ever be Sherlock who runs a warm hand down John's stomach, fingertips twirling in the hairs below his bellybutton before diving down to envelop his cock. It won't be Sherlock who presses up against him, the friction between their groins causing them to moan in frustration and anticipation. It won't be Sherlock who kisses him so hard he'll be left with a bruised lip. It won't be Sherlock whose vertebrae he'll count with his tongue, whose buttocks he'll perch on his palm to settle them into a rhythm that'll bring both of them to the finish. It won't be Sherlock on his lap, arms around his neck, his collarbone just there against John's cheek. His hands won't ever stroke those curls while watching his cock slide between the lips he can't help staring at when something else, something completely innocent, is being passed over them.

They won't ever fall off a bunk while playfully wrestling over which position to adopt. They won't ever stop to look at each other to find their own affection and lust mirrored in each other's eyes. He won't ever push into the tight warmth of Sherlock, won't pin him between his own body and a bed. Sherlock won't ever be entirely his to keep safe.

Even if John tries to remind himself that this is a goodbye—albeit a somewhat premature one—it doesn't make his arousal flag or slow things down. He comes in his fist with a pillow-muffled shout, holding his grip unnecessarily tight afterwards to remind him of the control he needs over his brain and his cock. Finally, he lets his hand lax, his other palm on his bare chest. He never bothers taking every piece of clothing off for this; for long, tossing off is has felt like a chore that ought to be dealt with military precision and not made a fuss about.

With Sherlock, he'd make a fuss. He'd cause such an uproar that Sherlock would probably laugh at him. Maybe, he'd secretly enjoy it, the attention to detail and the slowness with which John would want to make love to him. That's what it would be like, at first, before they found a familiarity within that would allow for something less exploratory, less tentative. They'd fuck, yes, most certainly, but that would come after because it's always less personal. Giving and taking. That's the world John knows, and it's not one he wants to most share with Sherlock, because it's not about sharing. It's not about togetherness, and it's most certainly not about understanding someone as profoundly as he longs to understand that infuriating, beautiful man who keeps interfering with his life and his peace of mind. Who makes him play with fire up to the point of blowing desperately into cooling embers.

It would be easier if Sherlock were just a bit of wanking material, a nice-looking bloke in the sea of physically fit men that are the Corps. But, John finds himself daydreaming about other things, too, things that aren't sex. They're everyday things: waking up together, coffee outside on the helipad, holding hands sitting behind a corner so that no one would see.

Drifting together. *Piloting* together.

He's losing his mind over this, so it's good it's about to end. None of that's part of his life, anymore. Whatever residual interest he might have in piloting cannot possibly be because he'd want to
experience any of it again. If you're in the Corps, you care about the Jaegers—of course, you do. They're a means to an end, but they're also terrifying.

He had his time. He survived. That's more than anyone could ask for.

The haze of the orgasm has faded, but John takes his time lying on the bed, imagining sinking through the mattress down into the depths below. He expects the usual sense of solitude he feels after coming to set in, but it doesn't. Instead, he feels…odd.

Like he's being watched. It feels like the moment before realising you had turned your head because the person in the direction had been looking at you.

A frantic, paranoid glance around confirms that John's dorm room is still as empty as it had been before he lost interest in anything but the feel of his lotion–slicked hand on his cock. There are no security cameras in these rooms, he can't hear footsteps outside in the corridor, and the sliver of light visible underneath the door is intact; there's nobody there. He's alone, but…something still bothers him, creates a lingering sense of unease like a shadow at the edge of his visual field. But, this shadow is somehow in his thoughts.

He rises from his bunk, zips up. The feeling doesn't disappear. It's like a nudge at the back of his consciousness, the equivalent of the feeling at the back of his skull when someone is staring at him.

It's also familiar, somehow. A…presence he's felt before.

He had experienced something similar years ago when Harry was still alive, but this can't be it. It has to be his imagination playing tricks on him; he hadn't had a good night's sleep last night, and Memorial day always messes him up a little even though he doesn't like to admit it. Feelings float to the surface which he usually is able to keep at bay, making him feel like an exposed nerve. Maybe his implant gets a bit sozzled by the hormonal surge of climaxing, too, and he just hasn't noticed. His implants are hardly new; perhaps he should have someone from Med Bay have a look and maybe a fine-tuning. Besides, usually, he heads quickly to the shower to clean himself up instead of lounging around like this. Today, he had wanted to take a moment when he was already feeling emotional.

Could it be that he'd been so relaxed that he'd nearly dozed off? Maybe he'd dreamt the whole thing and just doesn't realise it. No; the anxiety is still there over how conflicted thinking about Sherlock feels.

The presence is waiting. It's a question mark. A suspended animation inside his head. As though it's waiting for his response to something.

There's only one way to find out what's going on. John closes his eyes, tries to empty his head, calm his heart rate down and to breathe deeply.

It's there. It's not an image, not a dream, not a memory. It's not ominous, not benevolent, it just is. Trying to make sense of it feels akin to trying to find meaningful forms in a wisp of smoke or telling apart a rock from an animal in the dark. John can't be entirely sure about what he's sensing.

Suddenly, it changes, and everything seems to still the way that nature appears to be holding its breath a moment before it begins to rain. John tries to focus harder, attempts to trace the connection back to its source. He's reminded of the vibrations on a spider's web, of signals echoing back and forth in the synapses of his central nervous system.

Suddenly, something reverberates back to him.

A word. A summons.
It's a whisper that's not a whisper at all—it has appeared inside his head without travelling through his ears. John knows that voice, he knows that presence, and the fact of it makes his blood curdle in his veins for the horror of what his unfortunate eavesdropper may just have experienced through their connection.

Sherlock.

He's Ghost Drifting with Sherlock.

John sits up, his feet dropping against the floor, eyes wide open in shock.

It's not possible. It can't happen just based on a unilateral Drift. How—? How long—? What had he seen or felt or heard-----?

Not possible.

Not possible. They haven't even— It's been just one-sided— He hasn't been in John's head, not really, the connection between them in the sims is very limited!

It's real.

John stands up, panicking. He has never needed his insufficient blocking training because there had never been a reason to need it. He had been rubbish at it, and now, years later, he's highly sceptical if he can do it to any extent. He never could with Harry. They knew everything about each other, the good and the bad.

Sherlock cannot know him. Not like this.

He pinches his eyes closed, for dramatic effect if for nothing else, and images a wall. Better yet, the Pacific Coastal wall. So high that the top is hidden in clouds. Higher than any kaiju could ever breach. Impenetrable. Divisive. Perfect. Unbreakable. Safe.

He thinks about Sherlock's own words from a few days back.

Get out of MY HEAD! John screams, and he isn't sure if he had managed to form anything but spoken words.

He feels the equivalent of an aftershock of waking up from a nightmare: a moment of disorientation and residual fear.

But, he's alone in his head again.

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The next morning, the very second the office hours of the Atlantic Jaeger Corps Command open, John marches in. He's a man with a mission.

He walks right past what might be a queue forming to the Chief Secretary of Command's desk. "I need to see Hammond."
"He'll be attending a meeting shortly."

"That's fine because I sure as hell won't take long." He pivots on his foot before the young man gets a chance to protest someone barging unannounced into the Base Commander's office.

John has always liked Prentis Hammond. A former active Ranger, he doesn't sit in an ivory tower but is a very hands-on superior officer Only two years ahead of John in being recruited, they had shared more than a few whiskies together back in the day. While not bosom buddies, they are good enough acquaintances that they've retained a first-name basis. He's a good man, and John hopes that their shared memories will help in getting his request granted without too many questions asked.

He knocks and receives a hurried "Come in" in reply.

Hammond is sitting behind his desk but already standing up, shoving a wad of papers into a folder. "Morning, John. Nice of you to pop by before the meeting."

"Yeah, I heard you've got one, so I'll be brief. Take me off the training duty of a cadet. Right now. Please," he adds.

Recognition dawns on Hammond's face after a brief confusion. "Ah. So it is you they asked to help. I thought I'd read wrong when I saw your name, that's why it didn't stick. You were never a Fightmaster, were you?"

"No."

"Eames, is it? The cadet?"

"Holmes."

"Oh, yes. Right. That's the promising one, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you getting along? The reports say that he's back on track, to say the least."

"I think my implant's doing something wonky, and I'd hate for his training to suffer because of that. And no, we don't get along well." Belt and braces. Make sure there's nothing they can argue. We get along too well, not just 'well', and that's the problem.

Now, Hammond looks at him strangely. "That's not what the talk of the town is."

John's heart leaps into his throat. Are people talking about him? Has Sherlock been saying things—?

Fuck. He'd walked in here today to save his bloody career, but it seems that the ship has sailed.

"I thought you'd be pleased," Hammond says, studying his expression. "I know it's a big step, coming back, but—"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Hammond checks the vintage table clock that adorns the side table below the window. "The meeting. You did read the memo and the invite? I assumed that's why you're here."

"I haven't seen anything like that." John had been too riled up to care about checking his messages. Usually, he does it every morning before heading for breakfast.
"The Ravager Assignment meeting," Hammond explains. "As per my request, yesterday Ranger Dunne delivered the preliminary compatibility results gleaned from your unilateral Drifting sessions with the cadet. They're off the charts, John, and it was just unilateral! I think we'll have to devise a whole new scale once the two of you do a full-on neural handshake," Hammond jokes admiringly. "It's obvious we've found the Ravager co-pilot team; all we need is an answer from you since a return to active duty requires consent from all parties. Holmes has been invited to the meeting, too, to hear the news, and of course, we will hear his thoughts as well, but with these results, I doubt he'd say no."

What?!

John feels faint.

Return to active duty.

The Ravager.

Co-pilot.

Sherlock.

No.

"No, absolutely not. No way. No." John shakes his head.

"John, I know what happened with Harry. I know how hard it was for you; can't even imagine what it was like to, well, you know, lose someone like that. This has to be what you need to move forward. To turn a new leaf in your career. Since you only piloted for two years, the retirement age can be renegotiated. This is what we need so that the Corps can move forward, too. We've never seen compatibility results like this—granted that they're not the same tests they used when Becket and Mori began active duty, so they're not really comparable, but John, this is—"

"I won't do it. Can't. No."

Hammond circles his desk, offers a hand for shaking. "The Corps needs you, John. Now, more than ever. Without you, we can't use Holmes—at least not as well—and without Holmes, there is no gateway for you back to being a pilot. Without Holmes and you, most likely there is no Ravager. The recruit numbers are dropping, and we haven't seen compatibility scores like yours in almost two decades. It’s time we stopped being the laughingstock of the Corps."

It just slips out: "That's what the Corps does. Uses people. Never mind the personal cost. I can't do it. I won't." John crosses his arms, refusing to take the congratulatory hand he's offered. He likes Hammond, but right now, he hates the man because he's part of the system that wants to take only certain bits of him, wring them dry, and then discard the rest as unworthy.

He has been completely blindsided by what he has just heard, but it won't change his mind. This game has become too dangerous. The only way in which he can retain a place in the PPDC is that he remains right where he is, quietly working in the margins. The has-been. The Washout. Nobody pays him any attention, but at least they will tolerate him. That would all stop if he went through with this charade and everything was suddenly out in the open—his secrets splayed bare for Sherlock and the world to see.

Sherlock has already seen…something.

The Intercom hisses to signal that Hammond's secretary has activated it. "Cadet Holmes is here, Sir.
You wanted to escort him into the meeting?"

"I wanted to congratulate him," Hammond says, eyeing John tiredly. "We have to continue this conversation at the meeting, then."

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm not doing it."

Hammond gives John a look that says this is far from the last word on the subject.

John walks out, slams the door after him. As though drawn there by an invisible thread, his eyes then settle on Sherlock, sitting on a chair next to the secretary's desk. He looks impeccable: handsome and completely unattainable, dressed in a crisp parade uniform. Hammond’s aide is gone, probably to set up the meeting.

Sherlock springs to his feet. "John—last night—"

"Shut up. Shut the fuck up, Sherlock, and forget it. Forget everything. My implant's acting up. Whatever you think you saw or felt or heard, it didn't happen."

Sherlock's eyes go wide at the anger in his tone. He physically recoils and drops back into his chair when the backs of his knees hit the edge of the seat.

"John, I—" he starts, looking so lost and confused that a part of John breaks and it's nearly impossible to resist stepping closer and taking him in his arms.

No. This needs to be a clean break. Nothing ever happened, and nothing ever will. This was John's home first, his scraped-together existence. He was here first, and he can't throw it all away just because he can't stop thinking about Sherlock bloody Holmes.

"Forget it, Sherlock. Forget everything. Good luck with your training," he adds for good measure, aware of how harsh and mean it sounds. "I hope they find a co-pilot for you."

He marches out of the office, ignoring the hasty footsteps that start following him, ignores his name being called with increasing urgency.

Eventually, he reaches the lift lobby. Alone.

Alone is just what he wants, he tells himself.

It isn't. It never was.

Chapter End Notes

Firing the canon:
Ghost Drifting is very much canon. It is also the reason I wanted to write this fic.
*laughs*

Cue much enthusiastic yelling about telepathic pornos at my betas. And don't worry, John may be huffing and puffing, but the boys are not done working together.
According to the Pacific Rim wiki, Ghost Drifting is a known anomaly after Drifting—an "unanticipated consequence" of the neural handshake. It simply means that pilots have found that their connection stays somewhat active, though muted, after they've been disconnected from the system. But, it doesn't happen between all pilot teams, and I imagined the intensity varying from what John has described as being mildly aware of Harry's presence sometimes, to what's going on here (you ain't seen nothing yet!).

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
Enigma: *T.N.T. For the Brain*
Tori Amos: *The Pool*
Queens of The Stone Age: *Go with The Flow*
Eight hours.

That's how long John gets to live in a Sherlockless existence.

He should be glad that he'd finally decided to cut all ties, but all he feels is a gnawing finality and residual fear that the chain of dominoes that is the public image he has constructed of himself has begun to topple over because he's been too careless, reacted too late. He's certainly too panicked, still, to face the fact that it's also his greatest fear that his harsh words could really have been effective in banishing Sherlock permanently from his radar.

_Don't think about him. All it would be is hindsight, an afterthought. A pipe dream. A flimsy fantasy._

He scrubs at a brown ring of coffee residue in a mug even harder. He hadn't been able to sleep last night, downright paranoid about what his dreams would contain and if someone would be trespassing on them.

_Don't think about Sh——_

There's a loud knock on the door.

John glances at his watch. Staff don't usually seek him out for their medical needs after office hours, and he isn't in the mood for a walk-in. It would be easiest to pretend he isn't in, but the person on the other side of the door has probably heard the water from the tap hitting the sink. "Come back tomorrow!" he shouts at the door and puts the mug on the small drying rack on the edge of the sink.

There is a second, insistent knock.

"I'm off duty!" John shouts. "Go to Med Bay!"

"John?"

Sherlock's voice.

_Oh no. NO. Fucking hell no._

"Go away!" John shouts, slamming his palms on the sink and shaking his head. Not very eloquent, but he can't afford to be ambiguous.


The next knock is more of a bang. Most likely with fists.

"Goddamnit," John mutters, drops down to lie on his bed and flips over to face the wall opposite the door. Even Sherlock will eventually give it a rest if he refuses to open the door. He'll get the message. It's not like he's going to sit outside the door all nig——

"I am prepared to sit here _until next week_ if I need to!" booms a baritone through the door.
"I'll call Base Security," John replies over his shoulder. "See if you like it in the brig!"

There's a huff. "This is ridiculous!"

John doesn't reply. After a moment of quiet, he hears the sound of several pairs of footsteps somewhere further down the corridor. After they've passed, silence falls, and John breathes a sigh of relief. Maybe Sherlock had decided to not make a fool of himself in front of some passing staff.

John crosses his fingers and tucks his hands under the pillow, staring at the depressingly grey ceiling. A nap won't happen, not after what has just transpired. He knows he and Sherlock can't inhabit the same Shatterdome without running into each other, but as long as Sherlock gives up on trying to get the last word, it'll be fine. He has to believe it'll be fine. They'll pass each other in the corridor sometimes, exchange a glance. That's all. If he is lucky, Sherlock might even get transferred if they can't find him a co-pilot at Chard's Rift, or if he decides to call it quits.

*What if they won't ever find one for him? Will he lose his chance because I took it away from him?*

No. He can't be the Corps' last chance for the Ravager. He just can't. He's not a star pilot; he just happened to survive all those years ago. He's a delusional relic, and he's let Sherlock fan the flames of some compulsion to relive his glory days.

John knows that he talks to Sherlock right now—if he lets him in—his resolve might crumble. He has to do this as cold turkey as Sherlock had kicked his drug habit.

He pulls the pillow from underneath his head, drops it on his face and grunts in frustration. It is at that moment when the peace and quiet become short-lived: there's a quiet shuffling noise from behind the door which sounds as though someone has slid along the wall to sit on the floor. John twists his torso and bends his neck back so that he can see the line of light streaming through the narrow gap between the door and the floor. Something has shadowed most of it.

"On October fifth at approximately nineteen hundred hours—" Sherlock starts reciting loudly from behind the door as though reading from a file, "—activity was recorded in the North Pacific Breach, and *kaiju* number sixty-four, code name *Shi Unmei*, was spotted heading in the direction of the Hawaii Shatterdome protectorate."

John sits up, plants his boots on the floor, groans in annoyance and rises to his feet.

"At seven minutes past eight in the evening, Diablo Intercept engaged the *kaiju* twenty miles northeast of O'ahu. Before dying of a wound inflicted by the dual-speed plasma scatter cannon of the Intercept, the *kaiju* breached the Intercept Conn-Pod, mortally injuring the left hemisphere pilot, Harriet Elizabeth Watson. Remains not recover—"

John slams open the door, knocking Sherlock over. He scrambles to his feet and opens his mouth to continue—he *is* reading from his tablet.

John gets there first. "Not a single fucking WORD MORE! "John warns him.

Sherlock takes a step closer, and John curses the fact that the man is much taller than him. "The right hemisphere pilot, John Hamish Watson, survived after managing to solo pilot the Intercept for a record-breaking seven minutes. Medically discharged from active pilot duty within the Jaeger Corps six months after the incident, he retained his service rank, shifting to a position of Specialist Ranger to utilise his medical training for the development of battlefield medicine for the needs of the Atlantic Subsection."

"You fucker. I don't know how you hacked your way into my file——" John grabs his collar and
gives him a good shake.

"You'd be surprised how much of this is available online to any one of your fans, John," Sherlock croaks, and John lets go of him. "This isn't your service file; it's a profile from an online site run by volunteer enthusiasts about the Jaeger Corps. This is you, John. Not someone who hides in their room pretending to be harmless and succumbing to pointlessness in the process."

Sherlock readjusts his collar which has been pulled crooked by John's grip and redoes the button that has come loose. "I've known nearly all of this for nearly twenty years, John."

"What?"

"I know everything that's publically available about all notable Rangers, including you. I didn't study much for the theoretical exams of the basic training because I knew I would pass with flying colours. They don't put classified stuff in the exams, because not all candidates survive the selection process. But, I can list every Jaeger ever built by mark, condensator temperature, by weaponry, by the number of engines per exomuscle strand just to name a few properties. Would you like to know what the first full titanium core one was? What about the weak spot of the Cherno Alpha cooling system? The rate of brain tumours among the Pons system version 1.2 users?"

John feels like someone has dropped him into an alternate universe. "You can't possibly care about that stuff; you didn't want to join! How the hell—?"

"The geology of the Breach, the Jaeger program and the PPDC were my parents' life's work, and it is also my brother's career. No, scratch that, it is, and was their life. I desperately wanted to make it mine, hoping that it might reconnect me into theirs if I learned enough, if I studied everything and made them proud. It didn't work, of course. Gradually, I began to hate it all—begun to want to hate it. It got a lot easier to do so after Mycroft sent me to Haig, but in hindsight, maybe there was still a small part of me who, like a lot of people, looked at the Corps and think that's where they wanted to be. Still, most of my motivation was based on not wanting to be shut out of my own family. It sounded so—disturbing, really, when you described the PPDC as such a thing for you."

"Why were you reading about Harry?" It had hurt, more than John wants to admit, to hear Sherlock recount the whole thing as though he was reading a weather report.

"Because I want you to know that I'm doing everything I can to prepare to experience it second-hand and that I already know and appreciate what you went through that day."

"Don't tell me you're doing this to help me or pay me back for something. I don't need a therapist, or someone to join a pity party. I know where I am and where I need to be. You can't just march in and tell me different. I've had years to consider my options."

Sherlock blinks, looking disappointed and incredulous. "No, you haven't, because before I came along, you had much fewer of them! I'm doing this for both of us. John—you're not like the others in here. They couldn't Drift with me, nor I with them. It can't be anyone but you. It can't be anyone but you."

"It's not that simple. And it's not just about Harry."

"Then what is it? Obviously, you have some issues that are clouding your judgement, and I'm just trying to understand—"

John's anger rises. "Why would they tell you about the Ravager assignment even after I declined?"

"At the meeting you didn't attend, they suggested testing me with some other unpaired Rangers, and
I told them no. I told them that it's my condition for piloting that I won't Drift with anyone but you. It was quite serendipitous since that was what they were planning, anyway, before you refused. Looks like I had some leverage; they couldn't quite conceal how keen they are to see me in the Conn-Pod of the Ravager. Maybe they also thought that I could convince you to say yes."

John is frozen on the spot, reeling, paralysed. Suddenly, he's the one who has no choice. If they told a cadet, the decision must be made. An order will be given. Will he have to consent or be court-martialed for disobeying?

No. You can't command someone to Drift. The bridge can't be formed if one pilot resists. That's the very reason John is in this mess: because Sherlock couldn't go through with it when he was being forced through a training scheme unsuited to his needs.

"You'll be the first Chard's Rift Ranger pulled out of retirement," Sherlock points out. "Wouldn't it be a nice new first to add to your service record?"

John feels nauseous. How can Sherlock be so cheery about this, to make it sound so straightforward and uncomplicated and seductive? He seems to be pretending that yesterday hadn't even happened. But, if John so much as considered this, it would probably happen again. And again. And if they Drifted, Sherlock would know everything about him. Harry knowing certain stuff was a bearable necessity, but Sherlock is a whole other can of worms. They're already Ghost Drifting, even after just a one-sided connection through the simulator. The reason why they are so compatible is the very thing that will be John's doom: the Ravager requires a higher level of neural sync than any prior Jaeger, making it more independent of Shatterdome support and thus more resistant to being hacked. 'The deeper the bond, the better you fight' is what was repeated like a mantra during John's basic training, and he's certain that's still being parroted to recruits. To John, those words haven't meant anything as long as it hasn't been him who's had to bare his soul to someone new.

Sherlock pokes him in his good shoulder with a forefinger. "You're not saying anything. Why aren't you saying anything?"

"I can't do this," John manages. "Not with you."

Sherlock's face falls. "So there's something specific about me that's wrong?"

"I can't do this with anyone, least of all you. Don't take it personally."

"How else am I supposed to take it that you obviously can't—and won't—trust me?"

They're standing in the hallway, still too close.

"I don't trust myself." John hopes that Sherlock won't try to go too deep in his analysis of all the possible meanings of this.

Harry had kept his secret. He has no guarantee that Sherlock will.

No more playing with fire.

"Is this about the dreams?" Sherlock asks bluntly.

This sends John's thoughts scattering into the wind. His head snaps up, eyes locking onto Sherlock's piercing sea-glass gaze. "What?" John asks, even though he really shouldn't.

His intense scrutiny seems to crack the younger man's facade a little finally, and he breaks their contact, looking at his shoes next. "Well, perhaps the word 'dream' doesn't quite—" he trails out.
Suddenly, the confidence seems to completely drain from Sherlock, and he looks past John into the
dorm room, the door of which is wide open. "I know they must come from you."

John's brain begins a mad scramble for the non-existent airtight collection of excuses he wishes he
had spent years building to prepare for the chance that this moment might arrive. "Sherlock, when
you've got so little experience of a neural handshake, the connection can get distorted, and you might
mistake—"

"I know about Ghost Drifting. The details and incidence rate are highly classified, but there are
plenty of rumours out there; it's become part of the popular mythology for Jaeger watchers.
Telepathy. Drifting when not connected to the network at all. Co-pilots sharing dreams and emotions
and vague impressions of vivid mental images. It happens."

"How the hell do you know all that?" John crosses his arms. He can still salvage this. Delay.
Distract.

"I heard my brother discussing it on the phone once when he was visiting Haig. Usually, he's very
meticulous about keeping classified things hidden from me, but even he has his slip-ups. When I
heard the term, I discovered that it's one of the best-guarded secrets in the Corps." Sherlock clasps his
hands behind his back, draws a deep breath. "The first few times I didn't put much stock in it – even
doubted that it was—"

The first FEW TIMES?

"—what I thought it was. Then again, why would I be having those sorts of dreams or thoughts
about myself? Whatever would be the point?"

"People don't Ghost Drift unless they've done a proper, bilateral Drift, and it won't happen to most
pilots even after that," John argues.

"That is what I thought, too. Until the third time, which was yesterday. That's when I realised neither
of us was asleep. I am quite certain you eventually became as aware of my presence as I was of
yours."

How much of it did you feel? John wants to ask but is too embarrassed.

Was it good for you, too? is an additional question suggested by the part of him that has apparently
abandoned all common sense and decency and self-protective instinct.

He shakes his head, as though the physical act could banish whatever stupid, pointless nucleus in his
head has caused him to fuck things up this gloriously. "Please," John says, practically hearing his
self-respect being torn to shreds, "Don't tell them."

"Tell them what? That you're having some sorts of erotic—"

"Shut UP!" John clamps a hand on Sherlock's mouth, shoves him into his room and closes the door
behind them.

"It's not a crime," Sherlock comments when John removes his hands and steps back. "This is the
2040s, for heaven's sake. They dismantled the sexual and gender equality organisations in the UK
years ago because they were no longer needed, and even the churches have stopped discriminating
against people based on their sexuality. Why the hell do you look so shocked right now?"

"Do you think any of that matters here?!" John hisses, furious and he doesn't even know who he's
angrier at—Sherlock, himself or the PPDC.
Sherlock rolls his eyes. "I wasn't surprised to discover that one of the archaic military traditions the PPDC have decided to hold onto is blatant homophobia. Or, maybe this level of it is just your thing, thinking it's some tragic secret that's worth sacrificing a new lease on life and a new chance at a career."

"I didn't do it deliberately. I would never want to make you uncomfortable." Why hadn't it occurred to John sooner that Sherlock's mind being suddenly invaded by his imaginary wanking catalogue may have felt quite disconcerting? "Why did you reach out to me? You scared the hell out of me, announcing yourself like that. The timing, Jesus fucking Christ."

Gradually, the haze of the shock over beingouted like this, of being dragged into light in such a brutal manner begins to fade, and John realises something else he should have addressed sooner. "You're not bothered by what happened?"

Suddenly, Sherlock blushes. Will the wonders never cease?

"I—I find myself—I don't exactly—"

"You don't what? You came to me with this; now finish the game you started.

John realises that when he'd Drifted with Sherlock in the simulation—Drifted to Sherlock, since it had been unilateral—there was nothing in the memories he had seen that had been even vaguely sexual. Surely nothing can't be the sum total of his experiences? No, John decides. Can't be. Maybe he's just had really dull sex all his life, nothing about which to form important memories. No, that doesn't seem likely. How could intimacy be something that wouldn't impact such a fiercely private person as him who has trouble allowing other people close? Could Sherlock be so good at shielding, even without any training, that he could regulate what he allows John to see? No, that's not it. He wouldn't have let John witness the scene from his boarding school if that were the case. And, they haven't Drifted all that many times yet—it's possible that it's just a coincidence that no pieces of Sherlock's romantic history have floated past in the Fade. Also, if Sherlock had been blocking things from him, the compatibility score of their neural handshake level would have been much lower. In a unidirectional Drift, the most people tend to achieve is a preliminary compatibility score in the low sixties.

They had reached eighty-two per cent.

Sherlock's consciousness had practically surrounded his, even when closed away by the artificial firewalls—enveloped and protected him like a mental armour. John had felt safe, even in a scenario where he had not had to put any trust of his own on the line at all.

Sherlock is silent, that fascinating tint of red still on his cheeks.

Did you like watching me? He didn't probably see anything, but he must have felt quite a lot. "You felt me. I won't pretend the things I thought didn't happen, but they're just thoughts," John says. "Plenty of people indulge in that sort of thing, even if they wouldn't anything like it in real life."

He sounds like his Dad, now. The Breach happened because we have turned away from God. As long as we don't act on the filth in our souls, we can be saved."

"'People'," Sherlock spits out as though it were profanity. "I'm not interested in 'people'. This base is full of them, and they're all idiots. What I want to know is what you would, or would not do, in the real life about which you somehow feel competent to lecture me."

Apart from the now-abated blush, Sherlock hasn't revealed his hand. John has a sense that his sudden
cockiness just might be a disguise for anxiety.

John leans his palms on the back of his chair and regards Sherlock tiredly. "It doesn't have to mean anything, and if it offends you, then I am sorry you had to experience it."

Sherlock now looks indignant. "I am not offended by it, not in the least," he says pointedly.

"Harry was the only one who knew about me," John says. "I wanted to keep it that way."

Sherlock snorts. "So, when everyone thought you were some tragic hero, PTSD'd out of your mind permanently by the death of your sister and incapable of Drifting again because of that, this is what you were really hiding and why you won't Drift with me again, why you'd throw away the chance we've got, a chance I could only ever have with you? Because you're gay?"

John should wipe that incredulous, slightly amused smile off his face with a right hook. He should tell Sherlock to get out of his sight, to stop ripping open old wounds and trying to feed him the absurd notion that he has made a mountain out of a molehill. Because that's what he really seems to think.

John does none of those things. Instead, he bursts into laughing even though this is something about which he'd never laugh.

Soon, once recovered from his surprise, Sherlock joins in and soon, they are practically giggling in unison.

It doesn't make it alright. It doesn't change the fact that John is convinced he would have to say goodbye to a lot of Corps traditionalists speaking a single word to him ever again. No more casual showers in the presence of others, no more skinny-dipping with the guys on shore leave. People will look at him differently when they know.

But, had he ever really wanted to do those things or had it just been something to pass the time, an attempt to make him feel like he belonged? Something to slam on the toes of loneliness when they thrust a foot in the door? Was he doing all that to prove he could rise beyond what he saw as the worst in himself?

How can Sherlock stand there and laugh, as though John hasn't just revealed anything worse than having had the chicken pox as a child? What the hell kind of a world does Sherlock live in? It sure as hell isn't the PPDC.

Since Harry died, John has never felt less lonely than during the time he has known Sherlock. Now, he realises that the loneliest he has felt has been when he had tried the hardest to blend in.

This could be their secret. Nobody sees what Drifting pilots see, only their physical reactions. Maybe he is making a mountain out of a molehill. If Sherlock isn't shocked or put off—

"I've always had bigger reasons to hate myself and my life, so I guess I didn't pay much attention to that part of me," Sherlock says bluntly.

It takes a moment for John to grasp what he's insinuating. "You mean you're—That you're—"

"Do keep up," Sherlock says. "Of course I am. You're good at hiding, but not so good that someone who's like you wouldn't pick up on it. I've never actively told anyone, either, because it was never an issue. I pushed all that away: relationships, sex, other people. Other students at Cambridge mostly assumed that I was gay and I let them. As I told you, it's not like it was in the nineties or the 2000s—it's hard even to believe how much progress has happened in thirty to forty years after a couple of
thousand problematic ones. The prime minister is a re-elected lesbian, and even the right-wing groups voted for her—unless there's a new one already; I don't really keep up with any of that. Strange how war puts things into perspective as long as someone like my brother keeps making sure everyone remembers it's just around the corner; it does bring forth a certain willingness for people to put aside their marginal differences. I have to say I'm surprised that the Corps has managed to isolate itself so thoroughly from the rest of the world when it comes to tolerance. What sort of an idiot would tether themselves to the only place in which they're not welcome?” he muses, looking genuinely perplexed as he studies John's expression.

It's a good question; John had wanted to do his duty and with Harry, it had been alright. She kept his secret.

There's a possibility being dangled before him right now he wouldn't even have even dreamed about. But, there have to be a million things still that ought to make him consider this carefully, to tally the plusses and minuses. There must be a rule somewhere about an instructor and a trainee being involved.

*There must be,* John thinks, until he remembers that the rule was lifted for Jaeger pilots because a significant number of them were Ghost Drifting into each other's dreamscapes, and that led to...well, those dreams being turned into reality. As long as there wasn't a messy breakup, it only seemed to strengthen the neural handshake. And, surprisingly few couples had separated. Experiencing the world through the other person's eyes tended to promote empathy and help resolve problems. John remembers only one incident where a female pilot had experienced, second-hand, a male pilot's memory of sexually assaulting an ex-girlfriend. The guy had been court-martialled and kicked out.

John isn't surprised that everything related to Drift technology and especially Ghost Drifting has been kept classified. Hysteria over thought policing would be rife.

Sherlock no longer looks smug. Now, he draws a deep breath, carefully seeks eye contact. "John, I—When I felt you, I found myself—"

John cuts him off with a look. He has just gotten a lot to process, and something about the sudden shyness that has taken over Sherlock, the unknown the brink of which he feels as though he's standing gets too much. Sherlock has an uncanny ability to challenge everything John knows about himself and what he wants, to uproot his whole life, to shift his perception in a nearly violent manner and right now, it's too much. He shouldn't get carried away by the positive before considering the negative.

Whatever it is Sherlock is finding hard to say, John just can't hear right now. "I need to think," he interrupts, his head feeling like a beehive full of new information and possibilities to analyse. "I'll see you tomorrow at training."

"But—John?" Sherlock sounds both hopeful and dreadfully worried.

"It's fine. It's all fine. We'll talk tomorrow." He opens the door, and Sherlock hesitantly trails out, lingering in the hallway.

John feels guilty for closing the door on him, but a man can't just snap his fingers and change his whole way of thinking just because someone tells them that the fears they've constructed a life on are pointless. It doesn't work like that. Sherlock may come from a different world, one where John's worries are now unfounded, but would he be able to shift his whole identity in a second? It had taken weeks to draw him out of his funk and get him to see sense and stop acting like a stroppy teenager and months of hardship to acclimatise to life at the base. He's expecting too much from John, too soon.
He owes it to himself to think things through before rushing into the new life he's being offered on a silver platter.

Chapter End Notes

**Author's notes:**
I have no idea what I have done right in a previous life to earn such a wonderful group of readers as this story has found. The list of meta which I am curating on tumblr has been updated.

Isn't it nice that in 2041 sexual and gender equality has pretty much been reached in Britain? Not that they would have been the first to have an LGBTQA+ prime minister; Iceland got there first in real life with Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir.

**Firing the canon:**
I probably haven't mentioned before that the position of a Base Commander, and Chard's Rift's current one, Hammond, are not canon. In the films, while there seem to be several Shatterdomes, the whole organisation seems to be either lead by a single Marshal, or the details of a more detailed command structure are simply not explained.

John isn't the first Ranger pulled out of retirement; early into the first film, we learn that Raleigh Becket has left the PPDC to work in construction of the pointless coastal anti-kaiju wall. After that wall is breached, he is brought back into the Corps, and finds a new co-pilot despite assuming that he'd never Drift again after losing his brother in battle.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
Foo Fighters: *The Pretender*
Hurts: *Only You*
The Killers: *Flesh And Bone* (I may have described this at one point as my choice for this Sherlock's Not-As-Massive-As-John's-But-Still-Most-Adequate-Dick Walk Song)
John stays in his room, pacing the short length of the floor there until the walls start feeling as though they’re closing in on him.

He knows he should have let Sherlock finish what he was trying to say. He can’t reject a part of what’s going on to come to terms with the rest, because it’s all connected: him, Sherlock, how they feel about each other, their duties, their fears, their regrets and their pasts.

It’s just that John is terribly afraid of making the wrong move. He no longer fears that Sherlock would share his secrets with all of Chard’s Rift; now, he worries that he might wreck what is still brittle. If he’s lucky, Sherlock had been about to say that he feels the same, that he wants to explore this... thing, this entity between them, but John knows he should keep in mind that his own desires may be clouding his judgment as to intensely Sherlock might reciprocate his feelings. He hadn’t seemed upset about suddenly being privy to John’s fantasies, but that doesn’t equal wanting the real thing. If Sherlock doesn’t, then they’re in dangerous waters. The man’s precarious position in the Corps if he fails to be paired with a co-pilot may make him feel compelled to roll with this, maybe even to pretend to return John’s affection to ensure that he doesn’t get kicked out—that he gets the career he has maybe begun to want. How well does he know Sherlock? What would he be willing to do? How far would he go? How long would he pretend?

If they did a bilateral Drift, John would find out, but he shouldn’t go that far, shouldn’t expose Sherlock to Harry's death if he isn’t confident that they are on the right page.

*I should have let him speak.*

What’s done is done; Sherlock can’t forget, can't *un-feel* what he had experienced. It would be embarrassing if they became co-pilots and things would remain unrequited from John's point of view.

Would Sherlock be able just to let it be? Aware that John finds him desirable, but not allowing it to mean more? Would John be willing to live like that?

Even the thought of returning to active duty has John torn in two. Why would anyone sane—anyone who has gone through the trauma that he has—be prepared to put himself in peril again? He escaped death once and might not be so lucky a second time. What happened to Harry could happen to him or Sherlock, leaving the other behind to grieve. Is there truly no one else who could operate the Ravager? After all, there are plenty of unassigned Rangers in the PPDC. Couldn't they just tone down the functions of the Ravager a bit to enable someone else to pilot it? They probably could, but it would still be bad PR. It had swallowed up more money to build than any prior Jaeger; toned down, it probably wouldn't seem worth the extra cost.

John grunts in frustration and shoves a chair against the table. He needs to get out of this stuffy room that offers no answers.

He goes to lift at the back of the dorm section, unlocks it with his wrist console. Once in the lift, he uses the retinal scanner to get to the Underdome. There’s a small side deck mostly used by the smokers of the Ground Crew that connects to the lowest level of the Underdome. Its walls are
plexiglass, shielded from the elements but offering a view of the sea from just a metre above the waves. It’s designed to deal with the little service ships that are needed to get divers to the right place to make repairs to the parts under water.

At this hour, it's empty. John goes to sit on the narrow bench placed there and watches the beacon of a lighthouse sweep the dark sea in the distance. It's cloudy, so the darkness outside is thick and inky.

He closes his eyes and concentrates on listening. The bulkheads groan, and water echoes down against the walls of the dome. The sound reminds John of a cave in Malta; only accessible from underwater, it opens into a dome-like structure where divers can resurface and listen to waves hitting the rocks outside. There, hidden away from the world, he had felt very at peace, just like he has felt safe in the half-existence he has carved out for himself within the Corps.

He can't live in a cave all his life.

He has known, deep down, that one day he'll have to choose between malignant stagnation and the unknown. He is being handed a chance for a new life; isn't it normal to be frightened? Especially since part of the deal is something he has never had: an opportunity for happiness with another man.

There are monsters out there. Somewhere, at the bottom of the ocean, a Breach might open at any time and unleash them. If John says no to returning to duty to protect himself, would he be able to live with himself if he sends Sherlock out there to battle them with someone else?

Since the beginning of their acquaintance, he has felt a fierce need to protect Sherlock. At first, he might have wanted to believe it's because he sees himself as Sherlock's mentor. Now, he's ready to admit that his motives are not that noble. He cannot deny the sexual chemistry that is at work between them. In many ways, he feels like it's Sherlock who is the wiser one, the one who could teach him so many things. He already has; the conversation they'd had this evening had opened John's eyes in many ways.

He wants to protect Sherlock because he cannot abide the thought of a world without him. Nor does he want to accept a world in which Sherlock belongs to someone else. The idea of Sherlock finding another co-pilot, forming a connection with them that could deepen into something more, is …just unacceptable. John wants it to be him with whom Sherlock partners up. He can't remember ever wanting anything more.

If he allows himself to accept how much he desires Sherlock, there's no coming back from that. Point of no return. He needs to know Sherlock will meet him half-way.

He has sat like this, looking out to sea, countless times during the last eighteen years, trying to find consolation in the vastness of the ocean, in the fact that it doesn't care who he is or that he even exists. Through the years, the loneliness has gathered like storm clouds, thickened like smoke and how close it has come to smothering him, he is only beginning to realise. He's standing at a crossroads, and his options are clear, but both roads opening before him contain risks with which he’d rather not have to deal.

All his life, John has evaded what he desires. Today, it pounded his door with its fists and refused to leave until it was acknowledged. A smile ghosts on John's lips and he shakes his head with amused disbelief as he recalls Sherlock’s behaviour earlier in the evening.

He closes his eyes, leans the back of his head against the concrete wall behind the bench, and tries to empty his head.

Soon, something stirs in him. A flicker of awareness, a nudge, a spark.
A warmth travels down his spine, and he can no longer feel the chill that's always present on this small deck that's always beaten by the cold waves of the Atlantic.

Something touches his mind, careful and inquisitive. He feels a sigh that's not his; an exhalation, the release of tension. Someone is with him, but not really present—not sharing this physical space.

John doesn't push it away, and it tentatively breaches the radio silence left by Harry. He doesn't try to call out inside his head to whoever is trying to make contact—he merely lets himself feel.

His breathing picks up its pace, deepens. The veins in his neck and his hands distend and blood pools in his groin, throbbing with warmth. Soon, it's hard to resist pressing his palm momentarily against his crotch to try to take control of the pressure mounting. He's not entirely hard—not yet—but there's all-encompassing, overwhelming arousal that is washing over him, as though his mind is much further gone than his body. He curls his hands into fists where they now rest by his side on the bench but lets his legs fall open. His trousers aren't that tight, but just the pressure of the fabric on his penis makes him want to increase the friction, to thrust against something.

Suddenly, there's a strangled gasp—a tight exhalation that isn't his own. Then, the warm pressure in his groin blooms into a faint but unmistakable sensation of his muscles convulsing, an exquisite pressure being released; relief and arousal are mixing into ecstasy. His eyes squeeze shut, a breath suspended in his throat and his heart thrumming in his ears. Physically, it's a pale ghost of a climax, but it fills his mind so intensely that it briefly cuts his connection to reality, and it cannot be anything but an orgasm. Once it ebbs and his muscles relax, his hand instinctively goes to touch the front of his trousers, expecting dampness, but there's nothing there. He feels a quiver of thighs in the aftermath, yet his own are still.

The conclusion is that he hasn't come, he's still outstandingly hard, yet feels oddly satisfied and spent; his head is swimming in a post-orgasmic haze, and he wouldn't say no to a nap, preferably pressed up next to a warm body.

He knows what's happened, and how. He knows what he's being shown. This is what he hadn't let Sherlock tell him with words.

This is the answer, his missing piece. Any residual doubt would be misguided concerning what Sherlock wants with him. And, this isn't just a projection of lust. It's acceptance, and love, and hope. It's real, not a fabrication—while Drifting, one cannot lie, obfuscate or mislead. Sherlock is giving him an answer in more than words because words can deceive. This cannot be fabricated. If there were even an ounce of shame, of embarrassment or guilt over trying to convince John of something that wasn't genuine, he would have felt it.

He has the answer he needs, and with a certainty that could only be given by the absolute trust and openness required by what has just happened. The first time they had Ghost Drifted with both of them aware of the other, John had merely been projecting so loud that Sherlock had felt him by accident—by not actively blocking him out. Sherlock certainly knows how to block. Now, he had made a conscious effort to let John in.

This shouldn't be possible. Many compatible co-pilots who have Drifted for years don't Ghost Drift at all. This shouldn't be possible, just the like their compatibility score based on just a unilateral shouldn't be possible.

John wants to signal that he has received the message, loud and clear. That he wants it, all of it, and accepts and welcomes that he is wanted back.

But, he's never really tried to communicate anything very precise this way. His and Harry's Ghost
Drifting was merely the occasional blink-and-you'll-miss-it vague impression of a feeling, nothing concrete.

Sherlock?

There's a quiet that's hard to interpret, laden with expectation and apprehension and a sudden shyness.

Then, a signal. A beacon in the dark of John's consciousness. A reply:

We're the same.

John, we're the same.

The words come through loud and clear, as though spoken in a quiet room directly into John's ear.

What will this feel like once he and Sherlock have done a full-on Drift together? If they can communicate this clearly now, what would it be like to be wholly synced without any barriers between them?

It is suddenly so clear that John cannot live the rest of his life without finding out.

This is the answer he needs. He closes his eyes, tries to summon an image of Sherlock, to concentrate on the presence that now feels like gentle waves lapping at the edge of his consciousness.

Firing range. Now.

Sherlock's answer is not words but a delight that tingles like electricity down John's every nerve.

-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-

The Corps has never needed a proper, old-fashioned firing range for its training needs, but one still exists at every Shatterdome. The people who constructed the PPDC—veteran soldiers from all branches of the military—had enjoyed loading a few clips into targets to relax, to hone their aim. Sometimes Rangers check out some of the longer-range weapons, go up to the main gun decks, and shoot down the drones that tourists often fly in from resort areas, hoping to catch a glimpse of a Jaeger. This is military airspace, so it's entirely legal to take them down. John has never felt the need to participate. He doesn't have a taste for destruction as a sport.

Every bit of battle training needed for Jaegers can be done in the simulation labs, but there is something about holding a gun and pressing a physical trigger that just cannot be replicated by virtual reality. Maybe that is why John had picked this place. He wants to see and hear and touch the truth instead of just believing a description or an intangible approximation of it.

He turns on some of the lights in the middle of the large hall, goes to the gun cabinets and uses his wrist console to unlock one. He picks a Glock 17 Generation 8 semi-automatic; it's the current service weapon of the Royal Armed Forces. He wishes he could lock the door from the inside once Sherlock arrives; he wouldn't want anyone intruding on the conversation they're about to have—a conversation that will have cataclysmic effects on his future. But, the locking system is part of the centralised electronic control system, and the firing range is available for any Ranger to use at all
The target image he picks is a silhouette of a man. No one had bothered to commercially produce a *kaiju* version since all a handgun would do against one was probably to tickle it a bit.

Harry had handled most of the weaponry on the Intercept, but John was always the better marksman with a hand-held weapon. He puts on earmuffs and starts firing. He hits a nine and two-eights and only misses one with his first clip.

Before he has a chance to load another set, the edge of his visual field picks up the door opening, and his lip quirks up. The range doesn't see all that much use anymore, especially not at midnight on a weekday. Besides, he can *feel* who has just walked in.

Sherlock makes his way to his booth, watches him raise the weapon. John refrains from firing after he realises Sherlock's ears aren't protected, so he lowers the gun and removes his own earmuffs. He places the Glock on a shelf on the wall of the booth.

What does one say to a person who has completely changed one's life?

"Was I clear enough?" Sherlock asks, crossing his arms and leaning against the splintered wooden wall.

John turns to face him and lets himself luxuriate in the sight. "Was that how it felt for you when I—"

"I can't know for sure, but yes, I was attempting to replicate that experience. I don't do this, John—relationships, love, what have you—until I *did*. Do you understand?" he says.

The statement seems to be modelled after something John remembers telling him: *'I was never in this until I was—do you understand?'*

"I do, but——"

"Why would you hold back? What do you have to lose, if we put aside your worries about how the Corps would treat you—us—if we get involved?"

"You, if you later on concluded that this isn't what you want. Or, if the worst happens and either of us gets hurt in battle."

Sherlock lets his arms descend from his chest and steps closer. "You can't get rid of me. I'm here. You don't *want* to get rid of me. Whenever we talked about me being paired with someone else you were so dismissive and looked so—pained. I couldn't help wondering why. You already know what my feelings are regarding being paired with anyone but you. I don't want to define us any more than you want others to do so, because I don't care about labels nor do I care about what they think. All I know is that it's you, John. You showed me the way. My conductor of light."

"I need to protect you," John argues feebly. "You don't know what it's really like in the Corps, or in the Conn-Pod."

"You can't do that by running away," Sherlock says and shifts closer. "I'm not here because of the Ravager. I'm here because of *you*." Their faces are inches apart.

It's not a conscious decision on John's part to go for a kiss, nor is it one to wrap his arms around Sherlock and to pull him into an embrace. It's not a conscious decision to let his eyes fall closed, to allow Sherlock's presence to flow into him, through him, and surround him. John doesn't care what part of this feeling comes from the physical world, what part of it is just in their heads, or what is his
own heart imagining more than reality can offer. The only thing that matters is that he knows it's real, not forced or wrong or make-believe. Whatever chance either of them ever had to lie or conceal or deceive no longer exists.

After parting his lip slightly to allow the tip of his tongue to tease John's lower lip, Sherlock trails kisses down the side of his neck with the slightest bit of teeth before pulling back.

"You can and are allowed to protect me, but not because you mistake me for some blushing virgin or because I'm younger than you, or because you used to be my superior or whatever rubbish excuses you have had filling your head and keeping you from seeing the obvious," Sherlock says, voice thick and breathless.

"You've been with someone before, then——" John's sentence is cut short when Sherlock insistently presses his lips against his again, tipping his head slightly back so that John can take the lead and trap him between himself and the wall.

John slides his palms down Sherlock's sides, grips his buttocks.

"None of it mattered. I deleted it all," Sherlock breathes out, eyes pinched shut as their groins are pressed together.

"Deleted it? From where?"

Sherlock taps his temple. "Mind Palace, John. I can choose what I put in there and what I keep. Apparently, I still have not managed to banish everything worth forgetting."

John loosens his grip. Does Sherlock really want to forget the sad things connected to his family? Life would be easier, but it would also be untethered. Given a choice, John would not delete Harry. Not even if he is forced to relive her death over and over again until the day he dies. The thought is even easier now that he doesn't have to face those memories alone.

"Stop brooding," Sherlock commands and presses up against John again. There's no doubt whether he's wholly interested in the proceedings right now, and John is finally convinced that just wanting the Ravager would only have given Sherlock an intellectual hard-on and not the concrete one currently pressing up again his thigh. He backs Sherlock up against the safety railing separating them from the firing lines and grabs the parallel metal bar, pinning Sherlock in place. He slithers a hand into the dark curls shifting against his cheek, brings his fingers together to take a gentle hold, and brings their mouths together. Sherlock's hands seem to find what they were looking for when it's John's turn to feels a firm grip on strong fingers on his arse; Sherlock then slides one arm to grip around John's neck, spreads his legs slightly and squeezes John's hip between his thighs. He's now practically sitting on the railing, trusting John to keep him from falling backwards off it.

"Jesus God," John pants into his neck; he's getting critically hard, and it's plain as day that Sherlock is in a similar state.

"Don't bring your silly religion into this," Sherlock groans, and tilts his head to capture John's lips again.

The feel of Sherlock's tongue against his own makes John lose his train of thought completely.

"Don't ever think I don't want to be here," Sherlock tells him, eyes pinched closed as John sucks his earlobe. "Don't think you haven't completely changed the game for me."

"It's not a game," John warns him half-seriously and tugs him down so that they both have their feet planted on the floor again. Sherlock's grip around his neck loosens; standing in front of each other
makes their height difference bigger than it had been a few seconds ago, but it hardly matters; John 
now has the opportunity to get rid of Sherlock's belt and to start undoing his trousers. "It's not just a 
fucking game, Sherlock, if we continue."

"It never was. It's a matter of life and death, ever since the beginning." Sherlock starts to reciprocate 
the effort that's being made by pulling John's shirt out of his trousers and sliding his hands 
underneath his uniform dress shirt and the vest underneath. John gasps when he finds a nipple that 
has become almost painfully sensitive with arousal.

"Careful," John yelps and Sherlock lets go with a triumphant half-smile. He's worrying his slightly 
swollen lip, saliva glistening on it, and John ignores what he'd been doing and stands on tiptoes to 
suck that lip between his own teeth.

Sherlock lets out a gasp, then buries his face in John's neck. "Don't ever think I didn't start wanting 
this the moment you did."

John suddenly leans back, surprised. "And when was that, exactly?"

"The hike on Terceira." He snorts. "You thought you were being subtle with the way you kept 
looking at me?"

John is surprised, amazed, confused and endeared all at the same time. He picks up Sherlock's hand 
and kisses a knuckle. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I wasn't sure what your intentions were. All evidence pointed to you having made a very stern 
decision to see but not touch, ever, when it came to anyone. I am not good at deciphering the 
intentions and desires of others, so it was best to err on the side of caution. You could have reported 
me, claimed that I had behaved in some manner that the Corps code of conduct has banned—I'm 
sure there's a suitable article in those books you could have thrown at me. You didn't seem like the 
sort of man to do so, but I'm not suicidal enough to risk going to prison just because you looked at 
me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're looking at me right now. Often, that look shifted to something sadder, probably because 
I was reminding you of everything you have tried to hide."

"You're annoyingly observant, and you drive me crazy," John complains with a grin and opens his 
zipper, then tugs his trousers down to his thighs. Sherlock shifts his hips slightly so that John has 
more space to slither a hand inside the elastic band of his boxers, and both their breathing picks up 
when he closes his fingers around Sherlock's shaft.

John worries that there's too much friction since he hadn't spat in his hand and the pants are pressing 
his hand tightly against Sherlock's cock; he smears the tip of his thumb across the tip and finds a drop 
of moisture there; it probably won't be enough. He presses himself as close to Sherlock as he can so 
that he can shove his hand down to the base, then grabs a tighter hold and starts a slow stroke. 
Sherlock is uncircumcised liked him.

Suddenly, there's a faint beep and a metallic clang at the door.

John reflexively pulls out his hand; Sherlock grabs hold of his elbow and shoves him to the side, off 
to a corner where they can't be seen from the door.

There are footsteps; then someone turns off all the lights. They wait for several agonising minutes 
after whoever had looked in has left before speaking. "Probably Base Security on their rounds," John
whispers. The fright over the intruder has made his arousal flag, and Sherlock seems to be now fixing his uniform back into shape, though it's hard to tell in the dark.

"I drive you crazy?!” Sherlock comments, reacting to what John had said earlier. "You were the one who kept dipping a toe in, then retreating. Talk about mixed messages."

"I was trying not to convey any kind of a message," John points out and shoves his own shirt back into his trousers.

"I hated the way you kept me at bay. I had no idea what you wanted. After basic training ended, I thought that was it—that the one after the graduation ceremony would be our last conversation—and I could have lived with that, but I didn't want to—be without you. You helped me through the worst, and I should have focused on what was going to come next in training, but I kept thinking about you when they tried to pair me up with all those idiots."

John reaches out to pat Sherlock's hip, then perch his palm on his hipbone. It's intoxicating and wonderful to be allowed these casual touches, let alone more. "You were all I thought about. Especially when I tried not to. I have to be honest: I'm pretty fucking worried what'll happen once this gets out. You said I'm obvious in the way I look at you; if that's true, then we'll never be able to keep this a secret. Not for long, at least."

Sherlock's hand covers his, fingers slithering between his own.

"Then, we don't. We'll have the publicity over the Ravager on our side; we'll have the fact that everyone knows who we are. The PPDC is dependent on good press for their funding and the justification to keep them in charge. If there's any risk that we'd raise a global shitstorm with discrimination accusations, they'll do what they have to so that it keeps quiet. Once we have the Ravager, we'll have leverage, John."

"And there's a nice bonus of having all that leverage which can be used for getting back at your brother?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Maybe."

"The PR Division knows what they're doing, and they could bury whatever attempt we make the force the Corps into accepting us."

"When are you going to get it that this isn't going to be a big deal to anyone outside of the PPDC? You really need to look into how the rest of the world has really gotten over this whole queerphobia thing; if the PPDC did so much as frown at us in public, or if they tried to silence us and word got out about it, they'd be crucified by human rights organisations for being utterly medieval. No, this isn't about anyone else, not even Mycroft. And he's known about my sexual orientation since I hit puberty. He won't cause a fuss; far from it. This is about me getting what I want." Sherlock's piercing gaze roams the fathoms of John's eyes. "For the first time in a long while, I have such a thing in my life. Two things, even. The Ravager, and you in it."

"We'd be the first public same-sex couple in the Corps."

"You were the first Atlantic pilot to survive when their co-pilot died. You were the first to solo pilot for more than a few minutes. You're the first retired Atlantic Ranger still in the Corps. You are the first in many things, John—isn't it high time you were first in something that changes not just some statistic in the Corps' war journals, but something much more important?"

"I don't want to make this political. I don't want publicity.” It would be nothing short of his worst
nightmare.

"Aren't you tired of hiding in the dark?"

"Right now, I'm kind of liking it in the dark," John replies and presses his other palm to the front of Sherlock's trousers to give him a gentle squeeze. Not because he wants to pick up where they left off, but because he can. Because he's allowed. Sherlock's reactions reverberate at the edge of John's mind, and he can't believe how sensitive the man is to everything he does. Even the aftereffects of the smallest touches wash over their shared consciousness like a tidal wave, and he can sense how they break Sherlock's thought patterns and his concentration.

He remembers what Sherlock had said about inexperience. He realises he needs to know what that had or hadn't meant. "Sherlock…You have done this, haven't you, been with someone?"

"Yes. I have had sex." The tone carries no fondness.

"Have you been with someone you loved?"

"No. I haven't even been with someone I even liked. But, needs must."

Something tells John those needs may not even have been sexual, considering the state in which Sherlock had arrived.

John's own prior encounters have been too quick, too anonymous, too unemotional, too sudden. He hasn't been with someone he loves, either. The recklessness of youth, long bouts of abstinence brought on by self-loathing and the need to be touched by someone—anyone—had ensured that he had never had trouble performing. He hadn't usually even known their names in the back rooms of London clubs and certain bars in Funchal. There had once been a fellow medical student in a broom closet in the hospital, after which John had sworn off getting it on with someone he worked with because fearing that they'd out him to people he knew was too anxiety-inducing. He has orgasmed at the hands of other men, given and taken, but every one of those encounters has left him less satisfied than he is right now, even though not that much has even happened yet.

"I do recognise the precariousness of our situation before we are officially assigned to pilot, which is why we'll be careful until then," Sherlock announces, straightening his and John's shirt fronts. "After that, as the Corps rules say—only in much more boring words—we can do whatever the hell we want. And I know what I want," Sherlock adds, grabs John's collar, and pulls him in for some more kissing.

It takes a few minutes of that before John summons enough willpower to break away and return the gun to its locker.

As they make their way back towards the dorms, keeping a chaste distance as they walk side by side, John remembers what Sherlock had told him about what life is like outside of the PPDC for sexually diverse people.

Maybe he needs to recalibrate his thinking.

What if the thing he has most wanted to hide has, through Sherlock, become the thing that is going to pull him out of the darkness Harry had left behind, and give him a new start? It also means letting go of the notion that he shouldn't Drift with anyone else out of respect for the dead, but maybe there's another need for recalibration right there. He has believed that memories of Harry are the thing that has kept him from succumbing to the more crushing debts of loneliness, but what if it's the opposite, and they have been a wall he has hid behind, wasting years of life clinging to a ghost?
The Ravager is what will give him Sherlock, truly and completely. Returning to active duty is what guarantees they won't be separated.

But…can he face combat again? Letting someone into his memories will be hard, but it just might be necessary. Just as he wants Sherlock to understand that he had been the wronged party in his childhood and the way his life has gone; that he had been just a kid when he'd lost everything and reacting to that, and the way he'd been uprooted and abandoned is perfectly understandable. So much is wrong in the way Sherlock sees himself, and John wants to help change all of it, just like Sherlock is helping him recalibrate his perspective. He's still afraid to step out, to embrace who and what he is. But, even if they have to do what Sherlock had said about using publicity to protect their position, his worst fear—being outed—will already have happened at that point. After the official pilot assignment, they can't separate him and Sherlock; their compatibility is the hope of the Corps if they ever want to use the Ravager. The fact that the Jaeger had been earmarked for Sherlock even before a co-pilot had been found is unprecedented and says everything that John needs to know about how much leverage they have.

There's too much traffic in the corridors for a proper goodbye, so Sherlock merely nods before rounding a corner and disappearing from sight.

John expects to feel that he's alone with his thoughts again, but he's not. Somehow, as he navigates the last bits of the way to his room, he feels as though there is a tall, curly-haired figure still matching his steps right beside him.

Chapter End Notes

**Author's notes:**
John has a new ghost instead of Harry, and this one's nicer. And alive. And there's pornos.

**Firing the canon:**
Oh nevermind.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
Massive Attack: **Teardrop**
Ursine Vulpine Ft. Annaca: **Wicked Game**
Enigma: **Endless Quest**
Enigma: **Between Mind And Heart**
That night, sleep refuses to come, and John wouldn't have welcomed it, anyway: he has too much on his mind. A single emotion would be impossible to define or pluck out from the maelstrom in his head: he feels as though all of them are flowing through him at once, as though he's in a vortex he doesn't even want to escape. He relishes the feeling after years of paralysing greyness.

*Maybe I'm adrift in Hurricane Sherlock,* he thinks and stifles a near hysterical giggle in the dark.

He's having a hard time believing he'd kissed a man last night. And that he was kissed back, with a promise of more. Even harder to fathom is that once they got back to their rooms, it was clear that both were sufficiently frustrated to go instantly for a furious wank, which was then shared through Ghost Drifting. To John it felt like orgasming twice in two minutes; *is this how it feels like for women who come in succession?* Sherlock's disbelieving amusement afterwards, radiating through their connection, just may have been John's second favourite part; it helped him to convince himself that it was alright to feel apprehensive and strange about this because Sherlock was in a similar state.

He should probably be alarmed by the fact that even if they parted ways, this side-effect of their compatibility might continue for the rest of their lives unless either or both made a conscious effort to shield. The only emotion that floods him at the thought is *relief.* It's as though he has dodged a bullet of having to spend the rest of his life shrouded in mourning and loneliness.

Why hadn't he followed Sherlock to his room, or invited him to his own last night? Sherlock had seemed as keen as him to move the proceedings to bed; had he gotten a bit shy to continue after they were interrupted, or had he sensed a hesitation in John instead?

After decades of not taking any chances that someone in the PPDC would pick up on his secret, it's hard to get over that fear even when his head had been swimming with arousal. Something in John still can't quite pluck up the courage to easily rise to that risk level. He knows he may be overreacting, but he's quite sure Sherlock would point it out to him if he were. Instead, he seems to be respecting how difficult this is for John. He had also raised the point that, before they have the Ravager, their position isn't very secure. Once their names are all over the media as the pilot team that has *finally* been found capable of bringing this expensive Jaeger to life, they will have some protection. Before that, John might not be able to put his fears aside to enjoy properly being with Sherlock within the walls of Chard's Rift.

There is also the fact that of all his prior encounters, most had been quick trysts that have developed from first meeting to sex in less than ten minutes. Anonymous, Deniable. Inconsequential. That's not what he wants with Sherlock. Certainly, he'd be willing and enthusiastic to make love right the fuck *now,* but he'll have only one chance to experience what it would be like to take the time to explore each other, their connection and all the thousand physical ways in which they could build up trust and intimacy before letting things culminate.

Last night, they had nearly jumped over all that, which would have been a shame. Maybe having to wait for the Ravager assignment could even be a good thing; it might help them do this *properly.* A bit of courtship, a slow build instead of a flash-bang grenade. John has never had that, and he's only beginning to realise how much he wants it—finally to enjoy all the things he has avoided for fear of being caught. Fear has always pushed him into opting for quick, anonymous encounters instead. *I
am not afraid of this now. He's surprised at how much this decision serves to calm him down. Of course, he'll have to find out how glacial or swift a pace Sherlock would like. John stalling things when Sherlock just may be all systems go please now would be unfair, of course. And vice versa. The joy of this relationship is that they will both know what the other is feeling.

John glances at his alarm clock, the glowing numbers telling him it's just gone past two in the morning. Aware that he isn't half as good at it as Sherlock seems to be, he reaches out, tries to imagine giving his partner a bit of a cerebral nudge. If he uses his imagination, he thinks he can feel something there; not an awareness but a familiar, dim presence. It's not responding to John, but not pushing him away, either.

Is this how it feels when Sherlock is asleep? There is now so much to explore within the invisible tether that connects them.

John smiles to himself and crosses his fingers under his pillow. Sometime before four in the morning, he finally drifts off to sleep, and there are no nightmares, no dreams at all.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o
out. The neural syncs had never reached above twenty per cent. That's not even enough to lift the pinky finger of a Jaeger. He hadn't even waded deep enough in the Fade to risk chasing the rabbit. It seems that something in him had locked and barricaded the door. Now, he needs to give Sherlock the key.

When the digital clock hits eight in the morning, John calls Hammond and tells him that he has reconsidered returning to active service. The Base Commander expresses open relief; apparently, the Marshal has been threatening to replace him unless he finds a pilot team for the Ravager by the end of the year.

The public announcement will be made once they have Drifted in the sim lab and taken the Ravager out at least once. But, even before the world finding out, all eyes at Chard's Rift will be on them.

John also needs to remember that, despite the events of last night and Sherlock's training successes of late, there is a chance that he will be the one who can't let anyone in. Neither of them can retreat now, but the added pressure from the brass that is going to start even before the official Ravager designation is hardly going to help. Their joy of last night may well have been premature, but they can't turn away from a chance that could change both their lives for the better.

Sitting by his desk with a mug of instant coffee, John allows himself to daydream about donning his armour, walking into a Conn-Pod, feeling the vibrations of the hydraulics echoing in his bones, seeing the waves splashing far below against the hulls of the Jaeger's lower extremities. He allows himself to hope that it might be his life again to be lifted up into the clouds in the most formidable war machine ever built by mankind by wires attached to helicopters. That he might, once again, be dropped straight into danger.

He has missed it. The thrill of the chase, the blood pumping through his veins. Just him and Sherlock, standing tall for all humanity.

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At nine thirty, there's still an hour to go before their scheduled sim lab session, but John can no longer sit still. It would probably be a sensible thing to talk to Sherlock to find out if his partner—lover? Is the word premature?—has worries and doubts he could help with. Judging by what John had heard from LJ, Colleen and Sherlock himself, he may well be feeling sceptical about his abilities to return to the more modern simulation setup with the instantly engaging full neural handshake. It won't be a soft landing but a crash one, straight into another pilot's psyche.

It's hardly surprising that someone with trust issues might find that approach difficult. John doubts he could have gone through it, either, had the newer system been in place when he was being trained twenty years ago. He would likely have thrown everyone out, Harry included.

When John rounds the last corner leading to the dorm this year's Corps recruits had been assigned to, he bumps into Sherlock. They both stare at each other, dazed, before John starts laughing.

Eventually, Sherlock's lips stretch into a cheek-splitting grin, but his amusement is altogether more restrained.

"I wanted to—" John starts. He hadn't reached out to Sherlock, suspecting that he may have wanted some peace and quiet to prepare for their encounter after the exhilarating and bewildering night yesterday.

"—talk to you," Sherlock completes his statement. He looks sombre, the delight having waned from
his face as quickly as it had appeared.

"Let's walk," John says when he hears voices from the end of the corridor.

They fall into a synchronous step towards the LOCCENT training wing, dodging the occasional cadet hurrying to training, or Ground Crew member carrying gear.

Sherlock speaks up first. "I know they tried to find you a new co-pilot after Harriet. Hammond said so at the meeting. He also said that it failed. I want to say that—" he swallows, "—I don't know enough to be able to help you, but I want you to know that you have nothing to fear in terms of me ever sharing any of what I am about to learn with anyone. I would never do that."

"I wasn't worried about that," John says, and it's almost the entire truth. Even after everything that has happened between them the fact still stands that they haven't known each other for long. How well can one know someone else without having Drifted with them? "At least not anymore." He feels guilty for having had such doubts until yesterday, for being so afraid of being called out, for his secrets being dragged to light even though he's known from day one how carefully Sherlock guards his own privacy.

_He knows about me, and he's still here. He knows, and he feels the same._

Sherlock grabs his arm and shoves him to an alcove. There's no one in the vicinity, but John still leans around the corner to make sure they're not being heard.

Sherlock leans his forehead against John's, and they both reflexively close their eyes. "There is no alternative, no option, no other possibility, no other choice for me but you. Tell me, please tell me you feel the same; I need to know even if you don't, so I can start picking up the pieces of myself after having already given everything to this. I will go to prison rather than Drift with anyone but you."

Shame washes over John for ever letting his doubts cloud the truth that's right in front of him: Sherlock trusts him, utterly and completely. _Wants_ him. _Chose_ him.

"I would never consider this with anyone but you. I never thought I'd meet someone like you," he whispers, and they both open their eyes and retreat, but only inches. He wishes desperately that he could kiss away Sherlock's downright fearful frown lines, but right now that doesn't seem like the right approach. Instead, he places his left palm on Sherlock's shoulders, then trails his right up to his cheek before shifting an errant curl on Sherlock's right temple with the backs of two fingers. "There's no guarantee that it will work today, but I don't doubt for a second that you're the only one it could ever work with, apart from Harry." She was his flesh and blood, but it's not an exaggeration that Sherlock will have his heart and soul if he wants them.

The silence, pregnant with anticipation, lets them regroup. John lets his hands drop, and the warmth from Sherlock's skin seems to linger on his fingertips. If briefly distracts him with the desire he'd felt last night.

_Not here. Not now._

"What did you want to say?" Sherlock asks, tongue flicking across his dry lips.

John suddenly feels a connection between them, rippling with echoes of Sherlock's shifting expression. Sherlock must have been holding back before, shielding himself before John could reassure him they were both ready to jump in with both feet. "Nothing we haven't already covered. Did you just block me?" He raises an apologetic palm, "It's fine if you did."
"Maybe. When I'm distracted, it seems to happen automatically like some sort of a cerebral safety mechanism. When I want you to feel me, I have to let you. I don't know how it works, exactly."

"I think I've been sensing you on occasion," John tells him. "This morning, when I woke up. And last night, of course."

"I was thinking about you most of this morning," Sherlock says shyly. "I was waiting for you to wake up, I guess, and I knew when you did. I wasn't sure whether you'd approve of me intruding like that."

They start walking again, and their hands brush up against one another when they round a corner. John wishes he could take that hand, to hold it in public just like the other Ranger couples do. Maybe one day, he can. "I worry about what you'll see. I worry that you'll feel how it felt when Harry died. No amount of reading will prepare you for it."

"I can't say I'm looking forward to the experience, but it does not sway my decision to do this in the slightest. As I told you before, I have read everything I got my hands on regarding what happened to her, but I am harbouring no illusions on whether any written account of it can do any justice to what it was like. It will still be worse for you since it's your memory, not a borrowed one. At least I have a veritable collection of unpleasant memories to share, too, some of which you have already encountered. We just may end up being if not even, then at least closely matched."

John lets their shoulder bump together as they walk into the elevator. It feels so backward, Sherlock trying to support and console him since he's the experienced one. He almost feels indignant but then realises that this is one more thing he has missed and to which he has to acclimatise again—not being an island. Having someone who looks out for him, who understands him.

"We can't do this any other way than with absolute trust," John says with newfound determination. "You show me yours, and I'll show you mine."

Once they arrive in the sim lab, it becomes evident that someone has leaked news of their first training session with the current Pons system interface. John delights in pulling down the roller curtain that cuts off the view from the corridor to the control room and asks Colleen to turn off all the speaker and communications systems except for the one creating a closed loop of the three of them.

John knows that when they start training with the Ravager, a large audience will be inevitable and the eyes of the whole world will be upon them. Just before leaving his quarters, John had put in an order to Acquisitions for the first active-duty Ranger uniform he has had for fourteen years. Next to Sherlock, nobody will probably even notice him; the man looks unabashedly gorgeous even in the simplistic cadet uniform. They need to be prepared for all that circus, but right now, John's priorities lie elsewhere than worrying about having to preen for the media. Today, they need privacy more than ever.

They are both quiet as Colleen helps them set up the Conn-Pod headsets which will now replace the helmets; unlike the old system, the Pons 6.0 works without neural relay gel. Only a thin-ish electronic band containing a capacitor and a transcranial signal transducer are needed to interface. It must be a relief for Sherlock—his unease over the gel never seemed to wane.

"Ready when you are," Colleen says calmly. She has been quiet today, too; aware of the importance of the day. She has, of course, gone through similar sessions many times a year, but now there's a
chance she might get a permanent Jaeger assignment as well, and the challenge she faces is formidable. Her pilot team consists of possibly the best shielder in the Corps, and a rusty veteran with trust issues and some residual version of PTSD.

"John?" Sherlock calls out, his long fingers carding through his curls as he adjusts his headband.

"Yeah?"

"I came to a realisation last night."

"Hm?"

"What I'm worried about is not so much you seeing things from my past as I am averse to experiencing those things again. People say that time makes memories seem less intense, that they grow easier over time—some things, for me, never have. Perhaps it's the curse of eidetic memory. I have tried to forget many things, and it almost never works. I could only shove some things away for a few minutes at a time in ways that were not a viable long-term solution. I turned to other options."

*The drugs,* John realises.

"If this doesn't work, if it's my fault that it doesn't—" an edge of panic creeps into Sherlock's words.

John glances towards the control booth—Colleen has stepped out. He takes Sherlock's hand and kisses his knuckles. A part of him doesn't even care if Colleen walks in now and sees this. He trusts her—he *hasto* do so. Mere months before, he would never have felt like this, would never have taken such a risk but today is do or die, and he needs to remind Sherlock why this *could* work.

"You used because you wanted to forget," John says quietly and leads Sherlock to sit on a bench by the door.

"I've never told that to anyone. Mycroft thought I started using just to spite him. Everyone else thought I did it because I was defective and bored and stupid and incapable of analysing the consequences of my actions. I just wanted to wipe the slate clean. I wanted to not...be me. Not have my life."

"When things were bad, at first, after Harry died, I would have been tempted to do the same. I didn't start drinking but the only reason was that I couldn't escape the thought that the drinking was what made Harry careless the day that she— It's not her fault, it's not anybody's fault and we fought like hell, but that's just the sort of what-if you get stuck in. The memories are all I have left of her. If I want them, I have to take them all, the good and the bad. You're not just a sum of your good experiences; in many ways, it's the bad stuff that makes us who we are. I'm sorry that you will probably be forced to feel what I felt when she died, to see it happen; for me, it's almost a relief to get to relive it in the neural handshake instead of as a nightmare, because I've got you with me. And you won't be alone, either, with your memories. Never again."

"John," Sherlock breathes out and turns his head away quickly. John is confident he'd seen a bit of moisture glistening at the edge of his eye.

He claps a hand on Sherlock's shoulder. "We've been alone for a long time, the both of us. No more."

Sherlock glances towards the control booth, then turns to face John, expression tense. He blinks, shifts his shoulders. "Colleen's back."

They rise to their feet.
John gives his partner a nod. "We're ready," he announces to all three of them.

"You got it," Colleen replies. "Thirty seconds to neural bridging."

Sherlock's eyes narrow, mouth tightening into a determined line.

John squares his shoulders, draws a deep breath—

—and nearly staggers backwards when the flood of images explodes in his mind. It's akin to being on a lightning-speed escalator, eardrums humming and rattling with a cacophony of a thousand voices. Everything is whiteness and electric blue light; lines are distorted, distances skewed.

Slowly, the barrage of information begins to organise itself into scenes.

*John, standing on the main flight deck of the Hawaii Shatterdome twenty-one years ago after flying in from London, seeing the Oahu shoreline for the first time.*

*A small boy with black curls running into a cottage garden buzzing with bees to catch up with a big brother who is carrying a book and a packet of crisps.*

*Harry and John, hooting an exhilarated battle cry during their first test run in the Diablo Intercept.*

*The crack of a bone. Laughter. Cold water; being held down. Gasping for air, the water blooming red in the murky depths; blackish-brown curls floating, vision clouding with black dots.*

*A woman with raven curls, a bouquet of white flowers placed on her chest, a cross in a gold chain around her neck. Mycroft's hand reaching in to straighten the PPDC flag spread on top of the closed coffin next to hers.*

*The sharp, bright pain of a needle prick; a liquid orgasm of warmth; lust without sex, a world without end. Quicksand darkness. Heartrate picking up, bright light somewhere above. Voices demanding to open eyes.*

*John's green bicycle, a ribbon wrapped around it that had been torn from one of Mum's old dresses. Canned peaches instead of a birthday cake they couldn't afford and which would have been against the rules; still the best birthday ever.*

*Soft words spoken in French; then a woman's voice: 'This is Valerie, she will stay with you here at home; she is your second cousin. Isn't that fun, Sherlock? We'll be back before you know it.' A tight band around chest. Unshed tears bringing forth a pressing headache. A voice that sounds like the Marshal's: 'It's no use crying, it won't bring them back sooner. One day you'll understand how important their work is.' Nothing else is important. Children are not important.*

*A man's voice in the Congregation Hall: 'When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child. But, when I became a man, I put away the things of a child.' A book on the lap of a teenage boy with sandy blond hair: The Douay-Rheims Bible. His father leaning in to whisper: 'The true word, John my boy, the true word. Do not turn away from it like Harriet.'*

*The scent of formaldehyde. 'The Freak's already cut up his frog! You going to kiss it, Holmes, hope it turns into a prince?'

*A sickening sound of Father striking Harry so hard she falls and hits her temple on the edge of the mirror. 'You are no child of God, nor are you a child of mine.'*

*The sound of a chain rattling against a wooden surface. The Marshal's voice: 'You don't have
John breathes as calmly as he can to ground himself, lets the images and words float through. He can feel Sherlock's presence as though from behind a veil; he must be struggling under the tidal onslaught of the Fade.

The Conn-Pod shudders so hard that John's head bangs against the back of the rig. Blinding pain, but not his own. Screaming. Scraping, groaning metal, breaking plexiglass. Light flickering, the kaiju bellowing so loudly that John's helmet visor cracks. He wants to bend over from the agony, still not his own. Turn head to look at Harry, fingers shaking terribly as he fumbles for the optical override switch to see what's going on inside the Conn-Pod instead of the front Jaeger cameras. A puppet with a crushed skull which looks like Harry, not real, can't be real. Steel bar through the chest. Hysterical laughter, a scream, he doesn't even know who's screaming. Harry's presence pulsing dimmer and dimmer in his mind; then, a sudden silence: has his implant stopped working? Have they lost connection to the base? Roaring, bellowing, the sound of storm waves. Lash out in blind panic and fury; target target target Harry always does this part load cannon— The control sphere held in his palm is spinning wildly as John tries to find the plasma cannon launch directive. Emptiness. Missing. Gone. No. Harry. No! Crushing weight in his head, synapses screaming out as they overload. One more step. One more step. Vision blinking in and out. Kaiju sinking into the waves. Can't leave Harry. Words through the emergency radio, not the interface: 'John! You have to evacuate, right now!' The words are raspy, etched with urgency and shock. Metal groaning, electrical circuits misfiring with sizzling cracks. Crawl. Falling. Water. Darkness.

With the determination of a drowning man, John scrambles for purchase in his own mind, fumbles blindly and dodges the rest of the memory, yelling Sherlock's name.

Slowly, the memory fades but doesn't disappear—now, it's like a television left on loud in another room instead of a tsunami threatening to drown him.

Sherlock's voice.

Breathe. I'm here.

John has no idea how much time passes while he tries to regain control. He's hyperventilating, fighting the onslaught of the agonising grief that feels as though it's an animal trying to claw itself out of his chest. All he can find to reach out for is the familiar presence he can sense only dimly. He reaches out for him, and gradually, he begins to sense shock, awe and sorrow that isn't his own—they're emanating from Sherlock.

I'm here, Sherlock tells him again.

Finally, John feels like he can get some air, but before he has time to reorganise his head into a reply, they're whisked off again by the intensifying Fade into yet another memory.

A meadow. A sky shrouded in grey clouds. A kaleidoscope of orange butterflies fluttering into flight from a field, the round marks on their wings like a thousand eyes. A butterfly net begins whipping through the air above the tall reeds at the edge of the field—too low, too low, follow the orange. Wincing as wet leaves of grass whip against bare shins; the sensation is itchy. A young woman is calling Sherlock's name. Don't like her, want Mummy. Hide from Valerie. Chase the butterflies, but they're gone. Rain. Heavy, cold drops on arms, shivering. The scent of the rain is sharp, metallic. Climb in through foyer window, see Valerie, hand clasped on mouth in front of the sitting room television. 'Casualties' is a nice word for dead people. Something about Vancouver on the news—
Mummy and Daddy are there. Dead orange butterfly in the net. Valerie running to answer the ringing phone. Big houses falling down on the telly. 'Sherlock, come here'—Valerie's voice breaking, something is wrong, wrong, wrong. Mummy and Daddy are in Vancouver—

John feels it—a tether between them stretching and threatening to snap. He calls out for Sherlock in his head.

Don't chase the rabbit! It happened, but there's nothing you can do, now. It's over. I'm here.

He can feel a choking sorrow moving in like a fog to shroud them both. He calls out for Sherlock twice, three times, four times, trying to break through the disbelief, anger and shock emanating from Sherlock that is threatening to push them out of the Fade.

John tries one more time, feeling a vein on his forehead practically bulging as he tries to concentrate harder than he ever has.

_Sherlock!_

Suddenly, the Fade dissipates, and John finds himself in the memory, standing in front of the television. He watches helplessly as a twelve-year-old Sherlock screams not even words as a young woman tries to keep him from running off, tears streaming down her face, too.

John glances around and sees the Sherlock he knows standing by the kitchen door, paralysed, tears meandering down his cheeks.

_I didn't understand then, not really. I didn't know that after this moment, I had no one._

John reaches down to the floor to pick up the butterfly net that has been dropped there from the child's grasp. He picks up the beautiful peacock butterfly with his fingertips, takes Sherlock's hand and turns it palm-up, dropping the insect down on it.

Suddenly, it springs to life and makes its way out through the nearest window.

Sherlock watches it go. Once in the open air, it fades out from view, just as Valerie is now disappearing into the white fog that's moving in.

How—? He asks, bewildered. How did you do that? He is still frowning towards the sky visible through the window.

_You told me about your—Mind Palace, was it?_ John asks.

_We're in it, now._ Sherlock confirms. _In a part of which I try to keep out._

If that's how and where you keep your memories, then you can decide where you put them and how everything works and looks like, John suggests.

_Yes._ Sherlock replies; his expression betrays that he doesn't understand at all what John is trying to tell him.

_This isn't my memory, so I'm not bound to what I know is real about it and what's not. That means I can change it._ John explains.

He takes Sherlock's hand, laces their fingers tightly. Maybe the real him, in the sim lab, is doing this to the real Sherlock, too.

_You had no one – until now, he says._
The house disappears, and slowly, the simulation room comes into view. John glances at their joined hands, lets go of his grip, then slowly curls the fingers of his right hand into a fist.

Sherlock flinches, and his eyes go wide. He's staring at John in disbelief.

John—*I can feel that!*

Of course, you can. John replies with a triumphant grin.

Sherlock must have been so sceptical about their chances of succeeding that now he can't believe what's going on, even though it should be plain as day. *Obvious,* as Sherlock likes to say.

They're connected.

United, as two halves of one brain.

What one senses, the other does, too. John can feel *two* heartbeats, two sets of lungs moving air in and out.

He has missed this.

"Both hemispheres calibrated. Neural sync at 97.66 per cent," Colleen's voice echoes in his mind. "Bloody hell," she adds, "I've never even *heard* of anyone going above ninety-one."

Sherlock is still staring at John incredulously.

What does that *mean?*

It means that we did it. We're Drifting.

Chapter End Notes

**Author's notes:**

*takes a deep breath* FINALLY.

We also finally got an explanation for the rain and the orange butterflies from their first attempt at Drifting.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**

Velasco&Dikicyan: **Prothean Beacon**

Enigma: **The Gate**

Enigma: **Push the Limits**
After helping Colleen formulate a suitably triumphant training report to the brass, John and Sherlock enjoy a celebratory dinner of calderada—a Portuguese fish stew—in the mess hall. Afterwards, they stop by the commissary to buy an overpriced beer for John and a Pepsi NextGen for Sherlock, which they crack open in the sun on one of the cannon decks.

They sit quietly for a while. In John's mood, the thrill of their achievement is giving way to a tinge of concern as the gravity of it sinks in. He assumes Sherlock looks so deep in thought, severe frown lines forming on his forehead, because he is also meditating on the effects of this morning on their futures.

Up here, sitting behind the protective walls concealing the cannons, they are hidden from the sight of anyone walking the outer decks. John shifts closer to his partner, places a palm on his shoulder, and strokes his fingertips along the nape of Sherlock's necks where his curls are softest.

"Only married couples get double rooms," Sherlock suddenly points out, squinting in the sun.

John laughs. "Is that what you were thinking so hard about?"

"They wouldn't have announced us as co-pilots until we've Drifted properly in the Ravager. But, once that announcement is made publicly, they can't touch us. I know we'll have the rest of our lives to ease into being together and allowing others to see it, but I can't help wondering what kinds of idiotic rules and prejudice and red tape we're going to face. It clearly means a lot to you to feel safe about this; you've lived in the thick of all that for years, and evidently, it's been difficult enough that you chose to be alone instead of challenging that idiocy. I can't accept a life like that. I won't accept it, because I'm used to a better standard of equality when it comes to my orientation. I've always had to fight to be allowed to be who I am in other ways, and I won't settle for less here than what I had in London." It sounds like a warning.

"And I wouldn't ask you to," John assures him, frowning.

"I don't want stolen kisses in the dark. I want the same as everyone else. But I can wait. You didn't seem worried about Colleen finding out about us today, but I won't risk exposure until our position is secure."

Gay or not gay, only active duty Rangers with a co-pilot are exempt from fraternisation rules. Sherlock shifts slightly away from John when they hear footsteps echoing past on the deck below.

John is surprised how little Sherlock's words worry him. Perhaps, within him, desire has truly begun to hold its own against old fears. He is a seasoned veteran of secrecy, but Sherlock seems to be exceptionally good at leading him off into a tailspin of recklessness. That thought annoys him. Is it reckless, after all, or just a reasonable demand that they should be allowed the same as Rangers who simply happen to be straight?

As long as I have you, I can do this. They are not teenagers who have made some stupid vow to wait until marriage, and there is no doubt about their intentions. But, they must ensure that there won't be any hitches, any problems, or even a crooked look in their direction before the Ravager.
announcement is made. Before that, their position truly is as precarious as that of any unpaired or retired Ranger; they could be sent away since they are not bound to a Jaeger, and the Corps is notorious for shifting its personnel around. One day, John had simply been told to pack his things and prepare to leave Hawaii for the Azores. Back then, he didn't even know where such a place was.

John tries to imagine walking the halls of Chard's Rift when everyone knows they've been paired and the Ravager is theirs. Will they be jealous? Seasoned Rangers may well be envious of a semi-retired veteran who has managed to scoop the prize. Will this unleash some chatter behind their backs? Might John be accused of seducing Sherlock in order to get the best posting in the Corps? Will their orientation become an easy target to take them down a peg? In the face of that kind of reaction, how will they deal with being seen as a couple? What would change in their everyday lives? Probably less than John thinks. Will they really able to relax, once they have their official assignment? These questions remind John of how the walls in this place are solid metal, which means that they echo—having sex in a dorm room instantly alerts anyone walking down the corridor to what's going on. They need to have time to think about this—their self-imposed limbo just might be a useful hiatus when it comes to taking the physical things further. Everything is so new, so precious to him, so delicate, and he wants to experience the whole meandering path from the first touch to the consummation of their relationship without rushing into anything. He chuckles when he remembers that he had once made an abstinence-until-marriage promise before the whole congregation when he was fifteen. His mother had beamed in the front row as he vowed not to defile a woman before holy matrimony. That one he had known, even at the young age of fifteen, he would have no trouble keeping.

As for a man...

"I don't like waiting, but I acknowledge this must be... difficult for you," Sherlock offers.

"I like just spending time with you," John explains. "I'm not in a hurry here. Don't get me wrong—if it weren't so bloody risky and complicated, I'd invite you over to mine right the fuck now—"

His profanity makes Sherlock whip his head around to look at him. He's blinking as though trying to process what he's heard.

"That's in case you were wondering why we haven't, you know—" John clears his throat and looks Sherlock straight in the eye. There is another thing that ought to be said out loud: "The only part of taking things slowly that feels wrong is that if there's a new Breach, we might not get a long enough life to be able to take the time to enjoy each other properly." He expects apprehension to cloud over Sherlock's features since this is the first time they've discussed the worst-case scenario of what being co-pilots will entail.

John is painfully aware that if he's really unlucky, what happened with Harry could repeat itself. Losing Sherlock would be to lose half of himself, again. But, if the price of avoiding that risk would be to turn away from this, he wouldn't consider that option even for a second.

He runs a hand through his hair. "I didn't mean to get so gloomy."

In his partner's eyes, he finds determination and reassurance. "John—" Sherlock starts.

John loves to hear his name on those lips. He's amused at the politeness with which Sherlock treats him when there are others around. He even sometimes uses John's surname. Endearments and pet names would only lead to a reprimand from brass regarding the proper manner in which one should address their fellow officers. Once again, it annoys him that nobody would bother complaining about straight couples using such language. It is just so terribly hard for him to imagine what life would be like if they stopped hiding.
"However long we get, it will have been worth it," Sherlock says quietly. "I don't believe in fate or karma or what-have-you but being sent here was a watershed. If I'd continued living like I did in London and lived to see ninety, it would have been much greater a waste than dying tomorrow in battle, with you. We may be on the side of angels, but I doubt that many Rangers are motivated by some noble ideal of protecting humanity. It's a part of the deal, but who we're really here for is us. We're here because we need to be. Because anything else would be...less. I thought that the only way to survive here was to be some naive idiot living for queen and country. You proved me wrong."

John leans his forehead onto Sherlock's shoulder blade and breathes in the scent of him for a moment before climbing onto his feet. "It seems that we both owe something to the other when it comes to changing our ideas of what our lives could be and what they were."

Sherlock nods, gazing out across the ocean on the horizon. "You leave first; I think I'll sit here for a moment more."

John gives his shoulder a squeeze. Sherlock looks up, his eyes full of promise, his gaze laden with what John thinks love must look like.

It's hard to leave for the dorms alone; John feels like the invisible tether between them gets thinner whenever they are not together. Once in his room, he sighs at the mess: cleaning up hasn't been the topmost thing on his mind lately. Sherlock's quarters are always shipshape, probably reflecting the precision with which he governs the contents of his head.

John sits down on his haunches to reach underneath his bunk to fetch a sock from the floor, but when he begins rising back to his feet, his mind is flooded with an image that feels like the tsunami equivalent of a brainwave.

It's the two of them, naked; John is sitting on his bunk between Sherlock's legs, back against his chest. Sherlock's right hand has curled around his cock, left hand gently cradling his balls. He's nipping kisses down John's neck towards his collarbone, his exhalation tickling John's skin as he starts a slow, twisting stroke with his hand.

John drops to a chair, feeling suddenly rather boneless, and adjusts his trousers. He closes his eyes but the image is now gone, replaced with an amusement that vibrates from wherever Sherlock is; it feels like an invisible thread of a spider's web being triggered. He can practically feel Sherlock's diaphragm jumping, lips being brushed gently between teeth as he laughs at John's flustered state.

You're a terrible bloody tease! John complains.

I was just checking if you were still paying attention, co-pilot.

John tells him to stop driving him round the bend and goes to have a short and frantic toss-off in the shower.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The following two weeks are a veritable frenzy of work. Days in the simulation lab are devoted to operational experience, and John begins to feel as if he is learning to walk again. They need extensive sim experience to make everything regarding the Ravager come together with the ease of movement that will be needed; it is too expensive an asset to trust in the hands of pilots without
routines that have been well-established in simulation. It works both ways: they're learning to work the system, and the system is getting to know them and adapting to how their particular central nervous systems work. Their sessions stretch close to midnight, Colleen's carpal tunnel starts acting up, and John has energy for little else outside training than early morning visits to the gym and collapsing into bed at night. There, he falls into a dreamless, exhausted sleep usually without even brushing his teeth, lulled in by Sherlock's presence. Their connection feels strongest whenever they've just Drifted.

Sherlock’s energy level stays annoying high even late in the night; the novelty of what they're doing clearly hasn't worn off. His enthusiasm helps John tread water when it comes to going through the sims for controlling the Ravager after drudging through the training modules common to all Jaeger models. They have learned to make full use of all the weapons and shield systems, but a more extensive set of battle sims built on PPDC's past kaiju encounters won't follow until they have really piloted a Jaeger for a test run. These are not granted just for anyone: The Corps will only use the funds required to fire one of the war machines up if they are very convinced that they have found a potential co-pilot team.

The Ravager training simulations have enough bugs and glitches to make the usually composed Colleen to cursing; no one has weeded those issues out because until now no one has been able to use these sims after they were written. John finds that the Ravager sims require a lot finer a touch than the Intercept had done. The new Jaeger's balancing system and its adaptive hydraulics are amazingly responsive and fast, allowing for quick turns despite its towering size. Its shielding can absorb kinetic energy and recharge itself with it, but the downside is that this feature adds one more adjustable element into battle where one would want to focus on something else than redistribution of flow between power couplings. At least the Ravager has a lockable hand grip—something most Rangers have longed for at some point when carrying heavy things around with the war machine and trying to fight at the same time. But, the best thing is the fact that a pilot can adjust the intensity levels of different components of sensory feedback from the Jaeger on the go. It's good to feel it at first when there's a damaging hit, but that artificial pain soon becomes distracting. Especially when putting all effort into a last-ditch all-out attack, if one could feel nothing at all at that moment…

John is both glad and worried about the fact that they have only done five easy, preliminary battlesims, which means that he may not face even a single kaiju based on a real encounter before their official Jaeger designation might be announced.

One morning, when Sherlock hasn't arrived yet, he takes up the subject matter with Colleen: "So far, so good, but sims are only, well, simulations. We can still screw up when it’s for real."

"We can get you in on a battle sim right after everything's made official," she promises. "John… Has the Shi Unmei battle come up in the Fade?"

The Japanese name refers to the kaiju who killed Harry.

"Yeah. A couple of times."

"Do you think a sim could be worse than that?"

Colleen's got a point. "No, I doubt it."

No sim contains anything like he had seen and heard and felt that night. In a sim, if a Jaeger is damaged so severely that it cannot fight, the sim ends. Nobody dies. John doesn't doubt his ability to fight, doesn't think he'd freeze just at the sight of a kaiju, but he'd be grateful for a bit of peace of mind that a battle sim could give him.
"Would you like to do one on your own, using an Intercept interface?" Sims can be tweaked so that one pilot can practice alone, but that mode hasn't been yet programmed for the Ravager. John could have probably been granted permission to use this option after he lost the Intercept since he retained his Ranger rank, but without Harry, he had no desire to pilot.

*Until now.* He has surprised himself by how much he wants this, particularly how much he wants this for his future and not just for the purpose of an exorcism. He wants this for Sherlock, but most of all he wants it for himself, and that's how it should be. "No. We're a team, and if I freeze, it's best that he has to face that in a sim and not a real event."

"Ready for the Ravager for real, then? That's next week, isn't it?" Colleen asks.

John nods. He's received the same message that has probably been sent to Colleen as well: since they have passed all training modules, save for two which they should be able to clear today, their appointment for the flagship of Chard's Rift has been scheduled. At first, John had been warned that their first literal run in the Conn-Pod of the Ravager would be scheduled as soon as possible after they'd finished training for it but fitting and 3D-printing their customised battle armour is taking more time than anticipated. A manufacturer of the old classified and highly sophisticated undersuit that contains most of the tech required for monitoring their vitals has gone out of business, and the new version is… more complicated than John remembers. It's not the only change he'll have to adapt to—even the name of the armour set has been changed to 'Drivesuit' since it's a lot more lightweight.

Now, it seems that the manufacturers have finally got their business in order, so it's all systems go. John would have preferred more time between a public announcement and their first jaunt out; the more time they get in the Ravager before being announced as its first co-pilot team, the more certain everyone can be that the right decision has been made.

That they can do this.

John is painfully aware that while he has had no trouble Drifting with Sherlock in the sim lab, piloting again will be the true test to his nerves. He has not been in a Conn-Pod since----

Sherlock interrupts his train of thought by walking in and giving him and Colleen a disapproving look. "Lifts between the mess hall and the maintenance deck are broken again, so it's not my fault that I'm late." He glances at Colleen's screen where the simulation software is still doing its automatic self-diagnostics. "The day is wasting; why aren't the two of you ready yet?"

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In the morning of the next Thursday, in the hot spray of the gym shower room he thankfully has all to himself, John forces himself to think about Harry. He'll never get used to reliving her death in the neural handshake, but it helps that Sherlock is watching over him. He hasn't been as rattled by the memories in the Fade as he would have assumed, but how will he react when he can feel a Jaeger responding to his command again, and hearing the sound of the plasma cannons going off? They had engaged the *kaiju* responsible for Harry's death mostly in hand-to-hand combat, but John had finished it off with the main cannon; the pressure wave had wrecked what was left of the Intercept's balance systems. They'd both been taken down, the *kaiju* and the Jaeger. John had barely escaped with his life. Now, he needs to be able to protect both his own and Sherlock's. The closer they get to the Ravager test, the thought that it could happen again—how Harry's life ended—has begun to haunt him more. He had known it's something he'd have to face sooner or later. He doesn't want to crumble when Sherlock is watching. He doesn't want to crumble when the whole world is watching. He doesn't want to crumble with Sherlock in his head.
After brushing his teeth, John checks his messages. There's a short communiqué from the armoury saying that they've delivered all the gear to the Ravager Drivesuit Room. A specialised team of technicians are assigned to each Jaeger for the maintenance of this vital gear—including the spinal clamps which connect the Jaegers to the motor cortices and corticospinal tracts of the pilots. Those had been around back in the day, and John is glad that the latest model uses a lot less current to signal peripheral nerves. The old model, when in use, had felt like standing close to a source of static electricity. A sophisticated piece of equipment, the clamp contains signal filtering systems similar to algorithms originally developed for anaesthesia depth measurements, and a set of platinum-coated magnetic processors the speeds of which come astoundingly close to human nerve conduction speeds. The slight delay is not noticeable, because shifting around any part of a Jaeger is already slower than it is for a human to move. John had asked Sherlock if the simulation version of this slowness feels awkward or disconcerting; to John it simply feels like wading in deep water, but with Sherlock's sensitive proprioception he'd been wondering if it's a problem.

"With the older Jaegers in the sims it felt like playing a computer game on a system that wasn't quite fit to run the graphics, but the Ravager sims feel very well designed; the lag seems to correspond to my sense of the size of its limbs," Sherlock had answered.

Once their armour has been fitted, it'll be stored in lockers in their respective rooms. They are designed so that they can easily be donned by the pilots in their own quarters, but the spinal clamps must be attached by an assistant, and their function re-booted and monitored by the technicians. That is why they are stored and serviced after each deployment in the Drivesuit room; the clamps are heavy and affect balance until activated; running around the base with an inactive one is not a sensible idea.

When John gets to the Underdome, it's buzzing with activity. It seems that many Ground Crew members and Rangers have come up with some excuse to lounge around the hangar level, wanting to see the Ravager take its baby steps. Its components were built elsewhere, but it was assembled here, in the very spot it has stood ever since.

Like a relic. Like a piece of art. Like the white elephant the press keeps calling it.

Now, that elephant in the hangar needs to come to life. This needs to go well. They will make fools out of both themselves and the PPDC if they end up making the Ravager look like a drunken baby deer taking its first steps.

John takes a small lift up to the Launch level and makes his way through a set of heavy sliding doors adorned with the PPDC logo. Everything is so much sleeker and cleaner than he remembers the technical spaces for the Intercept being. Then again, he and Harry hadn't even been the vintage Jaeger's first pilots.

Inside the Drivesuit room, it's even busier than down in the lower levels. Technicians are checking displays; tools are being passed around, and in the middle of the hexagonal space stands Sherlock, being poked and prodded at and parts being fitted on him. John is reminded of a woman standing in a bridal salon, looking slightly bewildered under the assault.

Sherlock notices him and calls out his name. A technician is attaching a breastplate; once assembled properly, several pieces of the drivesuit can be kept joined together during storage for ease of putting them back on. The latches are self-attaching; once close enough to each other, a system combining hydraulics and magnets pull the parts together and match the edges precisely. It's just one example of how things have changed since John last wore proper Corps battle armour. This new version truly is as sturdy but versatile as promised, allowing for all the hand-to-hand combat moves a soldier would need. It hurts John to know that the tensile strength could now be enough to have resisted the
crushing force of the metal bar that had killed Harry.

A technician steps aside when he notices John to allow him to see his co-pilot now that the armour is in place.

John takes a moment to relish the sight. Sherlock had looked unfairly good even in the rags he'd arrived in, but the Jaeger Corps battle armour encasing that body is truly a sight to behold. His armour is white, with the winged PPDC logo painted across the right chest plate. The surface material of the latest model is nano glass fibre made to resemble honeycomb-like mesh. The silvery Corps emblem looks like it has been painted freehand, and the metallic paint sparkles dimly in the cold blue lighting of the lift. Since the new undermesh is made of some astonishingly-strong alloy the name of which always eludes John, they no longer need to drape as much of the pilot in cumbersome plating; the new design allows for much greater freedom of movement, and the dark understructures nicely highlight the ivory plating that's still thin enough to complement Sherlock's refined musculature and slim figure.

God, John wants to be the one to take it off him, to reveal the sweat-slicked skin underneath, but that'll have to wait, because he needs to be kitted up, too.

While John stands with his arms extended so that the chest piece fit can be checked, he hears the whirr of drills being used to fasten Sherlock's back plate – the piece which will house the spinal clamp – being attached. It will stay in the Drivesuit room as well, needing careful cleaning with repairs after each Ravager outing.

Mere minutes later, John is wearing his full gear. It's dark green and looks somewhat vintage next to Sherlock's latest model. Maybe that is a purposeful move from the PR team – a reminder of the balance brought by a veteran and a rookie. His PPDC logos are on his bicep guards – the same place they’d been back in his day. Maybe the head designer had looked at his old service photos. Such archives are freely available on the intranet, and John had caught a glimpse of Sherlock browsing his old publicity shots on his tablet.

After John's back plate has been attached and he has turned around under Sherlock's approving glance, it's time for the piece de résistance: the spinal clamp.

The thought of how the device works had bothered John for when he had first been recruited, bringing forth nightmares about being paralysed if it malfunctioned. He had known and reminded himself that it was capable of allowing the fixing of injuries and not just controlling the Jaeger, but the discomfort he had felt over the idea must be quite similar to why Sherlock had resisted the whole concept of implants so much.

Two protective shells the size of violin cases are brought out and placed on a table lit from underneath. Their covers slide aside when John and Sherlock step in front of a pillar attached to the table containing a retinal scanner. The clamps are revealed; they look a bit like a rasterised image of plaited hair with its titanium plating to protect both the pilot and the sophisticated tech underneath. On their front side are jaw-resembling clasps that will make a watertight seal with the back plate. The armour is not heavy: it is watertight and contains an inbuilt, collapsible air bladder activated by submersion which will act as a life vest is needed. That's one improvement he wholeheartedly agrees with, given what had happened to Harry. Now, pilots won't sink to the bottom of the ocean if they are thrown out of the Jaeger.

*If they die before they sink, their bodies can be found.* The Pacific Ocean is Harry's burial ground, its waves her gravestone.

Sherlock's turn with the clamp comes first. He is instructed to grab a safety bar as the clamp is fitted
to his back. He grunts when his legs take the weight, but he stays upright. With a series of faint
clicks, the clamp seals itself, and thankfully, Colleen has been watching them carefully since she
manages to activate it at the first possible moment. A series of indicator lights blink on, and Sherlock
flinches, then straightens his back; the weight is now being compensated partly by the enhancement
of nerve signals travelling between his muscles and his central nervous system. The effect won't last
long but is useful for sparing pilot energy at this stage, and for giving them an extra boost of alacrity
in an emergency.

John steps up to hold another set of handles. He manages to stay up as well, but the seconds from
attachment to activation are long. He hears a low beep—an advance warning that the system is
initiating—and then a jolt of electricity travelling down his spine makes him gasp. It tingles down his
limbs for a moment, then fades out. It's hard to believe it's his own muscles doing the work when the
weight feels like it is suddenly lifted from his shoulders.

Two technicians fit them with their communication and conduction headsets.

Without a word, both deep in thought – John can tell when he reaches tentatively out to Sherlock—
they walk through another set of armoured doors. A short, retractable walkway then takes them into
the proverbial belly of the beast—the Conn-Pod of the Reichenbach Ravager. Just off to their left is
the Launch level's LOCCENT Mission Control's Preparation and Bridging Area – colloquially
known as the nerve centre, where the technical aspects of initiating the neural handshake happen,
and where the LOCCENT officers in charge of initiating, calibrating, fine-tuning and monitoring
their Drift do their work.

John doesn't need directions—he's done this before, so the two Jaeger technicians focus on Sherlock,
instructing him how to position himself onto the leg attachments. Four clamps move in to enclose
each leg when an armoured boot is placed in the right spot. The wrist rings of the armour are then
attached to control consoles.

John waits until Sherlock is done, then follows suit.

They're physically ready to go, but the Ravager will hardly do more than fall flat on its face unless
the neural handshake is initiated.

Colleen's voice sounds through the comms system. "Ready, my Ravager boys?"

Are we? John asks.

He sees Sherlock swallow, then narrow his eyes. They can't see Colleen, but they know she's just
behind a bulkhead, seeing through her screens what the Jaeger is seeing, which is nothing but the
drop shaft right now. The blast doors of the shaft had been closed while John and Sherlock were
being kitted up, concealing the Jaeger from the rest of the Underdome.

We have to be, Sherlock replies.

It'll be just like in training, and soon we'll have the nicest view in all of Terceira, John promises.

The drop shaft can be used to either lift the Jaeger out with a helicopter or to drop it down to the
ocean floor from where it can wade to shore. Today, they'll do the airdrop, because it'll be easier for
a beginner to start close to land.

It's not just us, anymore, Sherlock tells him.

No, it won't be, but no one else will be in your head than me. And I like it in there.
"Let's do this," Sherlock tells Colleen.

A warning siren soon begins sounding, the technicians leave, and the blast doors in the neck of the Ravager from where they had entered, close with a bang. It's hardly quiet in the Conn-Pod—electronic systems are humming, and they can feel the increasing vibrations of the Jaeger's main engine and the auxiliary ones starting. The distant sound of one of the base's carrier helicopters can be heard. Lights are dimmed so that they can better focus on what happens outside and what they can see in the console views which will appear once they've been synced in.

"Here we go," Colleen says, sounding like she is having a hard time containing her excitement.

John closes his eyes, letting the sense of deja vu flood in. Countless books and documentaries have described what it feels like to pilot an aircraft or to ride a fine Arabian horse. Still, all that must pale in comparison to this. Raw power, enough to tear bridge-sized monsters to shreds, will soon be under their control. It's the ultimate power trip—wielding the greatest weapon any human could ever control.

It's also the last line of defence between the survival of the human race and the _kaiju_.

He's startled when the sense of falling into a vortex of images and words starts. He scrambles for purchase for a moment until he manages to calm himself down enough to start reaching out for the presence he can faintly make out in the maelstrom—like squinting to find a nebula in a cluster of bright stars.

When he finds Sherlock, he doesn't sense panic or pain or anger. What he feels directed towards him is need, and fondness, and curiosity. Together, they let everything that threatens to drag either of them in float by, instead of pointing out to each other the new memories that are now part of flood—memories of the two of them, together.

Eventually, the cerebral current dies down, and they begin registering their surroundings.

"Neural sync at 97.9 percent. Visuals initiating."

All the gauges and controls they had selected for the customised view appear at the edges of their vision. Then, the image from the front cameras of the Conn-Pod—effectively the Ravager's _eyes_—fill the rest of their visual fields. It's just a concrete wall at this point.

"The Ravager's too big to do the hemisphere calibration here, so we'll lift you out first," Colleen says. "Just kick back and enjoy the ride."

**What do we do now?** Sherlock asks.

They can hear each other loud and clear when close by, but in the Drift, it's as though Sherlock's thoughts are John's thoughts, and vice versa.

**What she said. Just relax.**

A scraping, metallic sound marks the opening of the top hatch of the Ravager's Underdome alcove. Soon, cables are directed it, latched onto the shoulder plates of the Jaeger, and they begin rising up. Once out of the shaft, they can soon see the whole base from above, and once the helicopter begins gaining altitude and heading towards Terceira, they see the whole archipelago bathing in mid-morning light.

It's the most beautiful thing John has seen in eighteen years, especially since it comes with Sherlock's presence feeling as though it's surrounding his consciousness.
He feels warm and alive and not *alone* anymore.

The flight is not long. With expert moves, they are lowered into the waves close to the shoreline of a smaller, uninhabited island off to the south. Half a dozen drones from the base are following them, and naturally, the Control Centre is watching carefully.

The cables are detached, and now they're standing on their own two feet. Literally.

"Time to calibrate the right hemisphere. John?" Colleen asks.

John reaches out his arm, forms a fist and feels the Jaeger responding eagerly. There is much less of a lag than with the Intercept. It's hard to describe the feeling – he can feel the immense mass there, but moving his limb feels as easy as it would be without being connected to the Jaeger.

He controls the right side of the Jaeger and Sherlock the left. The system will feed them both physical feedback from the other side as well, tricking the motor cortices and their cerebellums – which have a huge role in coordination – to think that they are in control of the entire Jaeger. This is why the sync is needed: if the pilots are not neurally compatible enough, this feedback system will not work smoothly and will be highly distracting, or even cause a system failure.

"Sherlock?" Colleen prompts.

With a slight bit of hesitation, Sherlock reaches out his arm, palm open and wrist bent back. They need to move in coordination in bringing John's fist, knuckles first, into Sherlock's palm as though blocking a punch. The closeness of their estimates on when their hands will connect is what determines the sorts of adjustments Colleen will have to make.

Without either of them having even to say anything to signal when to move, they bring the Jaeger's upper limbs together. An alignment indicator blinks red, then yellow.

"That was perfect. I'll hardly have to tweak anything," Colleen says, open admiration in her voice. They let their hands—the Ravager's hands—fall.

"Well, go on, then," Colleen prompts with a laugh. "He's all yours, now."

"What do you want to—" John asks, but then scrambles to join in, when Sherlock launches into a run. Well, it's hardly a run before John brings the right leg into the works, but it takes him so little time to sense what Sherlock wants that he's instantly game.

They jog along the waterline, then wade across a narrow channel connecting two islands, then walk up to shore. The Ravager is so high—a hundred and three metres, higher than Notre Dame Cathedral—that they are roughly at the rim of an old, extinct volcano that comprises most of the island. They turn, and face out to sea, three seagulls screeching as they fly past. Chard's Rift is about three kilometres away.

Drones buzz by, and John is tempted to make the Ravager swat at them like flies. He's impatient to do a weapons test – after that, he can truly relax and enjoy this.

"Control Centre, request permission for target practice."

Hammond grants their request after offering his congratulations for a successful deployment and informs them that a laser-marked target drone will be deployed in the next thirty seconds.

"You do it," John prompts. He doesn't want to be in charge of a plasma cannon within firing range.
of Chard's Rift if he gets a flashback or something else goes wrong.

Sherlock taps a few things on his console; engaging weapons systems requires activating them both manually and through the Pons system. John does his part of the engagement process, then gives the stage to Sherlock.

As promised, a large drone with a targeting laser for practising evasive manoeuvers zips in from behind the volcano.

John doesn't sense any nervousness in Sherlock. He turns his palm upwards so that the cannon is revealed from underneath protective plating, then discharges a perfect shot that drops the drone—now nothing but a steaming pile of scrap metal—into the waves.

Once it disappears from view, John feels Sherlock reaching out to him.

You alright?

John frowns, then breaks into incredulous laughter. He had simply been watching the scene, revelling in the scenery. No sign at all of getting distressed, not even by the sound of the cannon. It had probably helped that the Ravager is obviously much better soundproofed then the Conn-Pod of the Intercept had been.

All these years, why had he thought this would fling him back into those memories?

This is just practice. This isn't battle. And, he will be much better prepared this time around if the kaiju come back. He won't be the weak one in the team, because they're both bringing things to the table which the other couldn't function without. And, they have the most spectacular Ravager in the history of the Corps under their control. It's the first one where running speed has been successfully combined with massive size, and there is enough torque to lift the arms fast enough to react to a kaiju in close combat without having to step back to change stance. Some of the joint stress problems that had greatly plagued the earlier Marks have also been solved with a new alloy to coat the parts with much less friction, and a new sort of intra-articular mesh imitating cartilage. The weaponry is also updated; in the Ravager pilots can use projectiles and melee weapons simultaneously, thanks to a set of auxiliary hybrid accelerators to aid power division between the different systems. All these possibilities are what requires such finely tuned control between the two pilots. He'd known this in theory from the sims, but nothing had prepared him for just how right it feels.

"Team Ravager, can you confirm target eliminated?"

"Hell yes," John announces triumphantly. "Now, I hope the Corps isn't too poor to send another, because there is no way I am letting the newbie have all the fun!"

Their successful run is awarded with half a day off; there are no hurdles to cross anymore to earn their official Ravager assignment. They'll return to the training lab with Colleen in the evening to get a head start on the battle sims, but that had just been on John's and not the Corps' insistence. When he'd suggested this to Sherlock, he'd accepted without asking any question. Perhaps John's reasons had been obvious, or perhaps he had felt traces of them through the connection that now seems to ripple between them constantly, an ambient hum of humanity and companionship cocooning them like an invisible embrace even when not occupying the same physical space.
John doesn't really know how to shield; he had probably done something similar out of shock when he'd first felt the tentative tendrils of Sherlock's consciousness reaching out to him, but he doesn't actively lament the fact that it's a skill he's yet to possess. He doesn't feel the need. A very particular sort of calm has arrived in his life and his head now that there is one person in the world who is privy to all that he is and thinks. There's nothing he'd want or need to hide from Sherlock.

"Let's get out of the base," Sherlock tells him at breakfast. "We can do that, can't we?"

"Since our trial run earned you your stripes, I won't have to call brass anymore to have you signed off under my supervision so yes."

"Any more favourite spots on Terceira you haven't yet shown me?"

John has been thinking about taking Sherlock to Ponta Delgada, but right now he'd prefer not to be surrounded by other people. "There's a path to a beach that starts from a coastal hike; it's a bit of a scramble, but nobody's usually down there."

Sherlock isn't just talking about a bit of scenery. The fact that he is connecting by thought rather than words says it all. Their gruelling schedules for the past two weeks have pushed everything else but work on the back burner, save for a bit of long-distance teasing through their connection. Sherlock is the more talented of the two of them of projecting hints of future developments into John's head, but after their bold start, things have become...less overt. Maybe now that so little stands between what they are now and what they want to be together, a delicious anticipatory anxiety is gaining hold.

It surprises John that after such a long self-enforced celibacy—save for a few anonymous encounters—he isn't in a hurry. There will only be one chance to do this right, to take their time, to savour everything they have both lived without for so long. John wants to explore every bit of what being with some someone. He knows that what is coming will be even better because Ghost Drifting gives them an unparalleled level of intimacy even when not making love. That's what he wants—to translate what he feels into touch, instead of a quick, selfish rut in the shower or a utilitarian handjob in a dark corridor.

He looks up from the scrambled eggs he'd been stabbing with his fork. Sherlock is watching him with a hint of a knowing smile, pupils larger than the lighting should warrant.

*He knows what I'm thinking about,* John realises. This is all still so new. His smile resonates right through their connection.

-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-

By the time they reach the small inlet squeezed between jagged black volcanic cliffs, the midday sun feels as though it's trying to incinerate them. They've drunk most of their water already. Swimming might cool them off, but the waves are high as the currents from the ocean are forced upwards into tumbling a tumbling maelstrom trapped between the cliffs, and there are warning signs about a rip current.

Sherlock slumps down, bottom-first, to sit on a coarser bit of sand underneath a tree, and John takes a seat next to him before lying down completely on the tiny beach. He extends an inviting arm towards Sherlock. They're the only ones there, and it's likely to stay that way.
Sherlock lays his neck on John's arm and readjusts his aviator shades which have slipped down his sweat-shiny nose a bit. He then turns his head to face his co-pilot.

"What's it like?" he asks quietly. "Being in my head?"

John doesn't need to see his eyes behind the sunglasses to sense the almost shy inquisitiveness behind the question. It's hard to describe the sensation of that parallel consciousness to his own when Drifting. "Intense. Relentless. A bit like there was a very loud party going on in the next dorm room when we're piloting."

Sherlock grins.

"It's like... someone cranked up the sharpness setting in an image. That's the best I'd describe it. Different... better than anything I ever experienced with Harry. It's like your focus is in every detail instead of the most obvious thing in sight." John remembers what the Med Bay neurologist had said: that Sherlock can deal with more visual information than the average person and make sense and use of it all. Having a taste of that going on adds an element of distraction for John, but so far it hasn't been too detrimental to his own performance because he knows Sherlock can handle it.

He'd overheard a conversation about this between Sherlock and Colleen; turns out that Sherlock has a theory that John's ability to solo-pilot might illustrate the same strengths that are behind his effortless ability to withstand the strain of having to accommodate the particular way in which Sherlock's brain processes things.

"And, I can see why you get so easily distracted by other sensory stuff like sounds and smells. You don't acclimatise or desensitise to them at all, do you? Not like other people stop paying attention to a smell or an ambient sound."

"I nearly failed some of my tripos exams in Cambridge because they were redoing the piping in my dorm, and I couldn't study in the libraries or reading rooms because other people kept making distracting noises and the light fixtures chitter and vibrate."

John reaches down between them, his fingers creating the shape of an estuary in the coarse sand before finding Sherlock's long, delicate fingers. He slips his own between them and closes his eyes to focus on what he feels—or, more accurate, what he feels from Sherlock. It's such a luxury, not having to guess at all how such a tentative gesture early in a relationship is received by the other person. Like watching auroras in the night sky, he senses the shifting emotions in his partner, from giddy delight to a surge of nearly embarrassed affection, then reassured warmth and a hint of arousal; all this just from the touch of their fingers.

Yes, John definitely wants to savour all this before rushing into more.

"What about being in my head?"

A crease appears on Sherlock's forehead as he thinks; John feels as though his whole being is focusing, homing in on a problem, neural pathways lighting up to process possibilities and formulating a synthesis.

There's an exhalation, a calmness of having found a suitable response; then apprehension of how it will be received.

John gives his fingers an encouraging squeeze.

"Quiet. Calm. So much fewer moving parts."
"Oi!" John elbows him in the ribs.

"I'm not done," Sherlock says pointedly. "And I wasn't criticising," he specifies indignantly. "You're not as perceptive as I am, which makes your life easier. But it means you see the big picture when I get bogged by the sheer amount of data. You see the forest while I can get distracted counting all the pine cones in it. We're a good match because while you're an exceptional pilot, you're also a bit of an idiot—nearly everybody is—and I'm using that word in its most positive possible sense."

"Well, that's lovely then, thank you," John teases him, then rolls to his side bringing their joined hands up and trapping them between their chests. "So, all they had to do to man the Ravager was to match you with someone significantly more stupid."

The sudden anxiety and urgency emanating from the cerebral strand of a spider's web between them quickly wipe the mischievous grin from John's features.

Sherlock scrambles up to a sitting position, and John follows suit.

"I am not good at this, expressing why I would not do this with anyone else than you, why I want to—"

He snaps his mouth shut, and John doesn't need to reach out in his mind to see that Sherlock is suddenly slamming up the walls, embarrassed and disappointed at himself.

If words are difficult and Sherlock is withdrawing from their connection, thankfully there is still one manner of communication that should convey what John wants his partner to understand. He grabs hold of Sherlock's shoulders and leans in, bringing their lips together. Eyes closed, he tries to divide his attention between enjoying himself and trying to gauge whether Sherlock is still panicking.

There's a strange whiteout at first, like a flashing short-circuit as the reality of what they're doing seems to register in Sherlock's consciousness, now only a faint awareness at the edge of John's mind since Sherlock had just been trying to evade him. John expects—hopes—for the sharp focus to which he has grown used to return, but instead, he feels an upwelling of bright, relieved warmth filling his awareness. Maybe he hasn't opened himself up this completely to Sherlock, either, and this new, nearly overpowering feeling crackling and pulsing between them is the result of a merge rather than a one-sided flow of information from Sherlock to him.

He doesn't know who breaks the kiss or how long it lasts, only that they are both short of breath by the time John opens his eyes withdraws slightly. "Teasing you about these things is a bit not good. I think I got the message."

Sherlock unties the laces of his boots and tears off his socks, then curls his toes into the hot sand, arms wrapped around his knees. John is about to take off his shirt when Sherlock nods towards the edge of the beach.

A group of locals with fishing rods have just appeared, and they greet the two men with a wave of hands before making their way to the sea raging against the cliffs.

John checks his wrist console. "We should start heading back if we want to avoid a heat stroke." He stands up, extends an arm which Sherlock grabs to drag himself to his feet.

Before letting go of his grip, John concentrates. When they're touching each other, the messages conveyed seem to come through loudest and clearest.

What you were trying to tell me—I know it, Sherlock. I know.
Author's notes:
Finally, finally, we have our boys in the Ravager! Believe it or not, but this chapter was not part of my original draft. I wanted to focus on the Johnlock and shove what I kept calling "all the silly" to the sidelines (that mostly included the Jaegers and the kaiju), but it turned out that my betas were very much craving for some hot Jaeger action after I'd made such a big damned deal about Mycroft's fancy-arse robots. And, writing such things turned out to be quite glorious. And, not so silly, after all. "Shi Unmei" would roughly translate as "Death Doom".

Firing the canon:
Here's a scene from the first film showing the preparations needed for taking a Jaeger out for a jaunt. Note that the scene features closed helmets and the neural relay gel; in the second film those features are absent. I have gone with the assumption that Jaeger tech simply evolved in a manner that they weren't necessary anymore; hence calling the system John and Sherlock used in Sherlock's early training "the old one". Here's a fun feature about the film crew talking about designing the Jaegers.

Writing soundtrack for this chapter:
Velasco & Dikicyan: Prothean Beacon
Enigma: Push The Limits
Florence+The Machine: Breath of Life
Djawadi, Morello, Glennie-Smith&Randall: Pacific Rim Theme
30 Seconds to Mars: This Is War
Facing The Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After breakfast the next morning, John sorts out some odds and ends of his medical work; there are no simulation sessions scheduled for today after their successful Ravager run. All his medical projects were put on hiatus when they began work in the simulation lab, but that hasn't led to any kind of a backlog. In hindsight, he now sees how hard he had worked to convince himself he had been busy as a Corps physician. He's finally ready to admit it had been a mostly self-invent job.

He and Sherlock had agreed to see about having lunch together, but after he returns from a quick gym stop, there's a message summoning him to the Rangers' lounge. There's no explanation what the occasion is—most likely someone's birthday.

When he opens the door, he's treated with loud cheering and applause, and it takes a moment to register and accept that the lounge is full of his Ranger colleagues, and all their eyes are on him. Most are holding varying kinds of drinks, and John is still quite stunned by the spectacle when LJ Marais walks up to him and slaps a cold beer in his hand. This provokes another round of cheering, clapping and whistles.

"Uhm," John says because there's nothing else that occurs to him. They're all staring like they expect a speech, but he feels highly uncomfortable being the centre of all this attention.

"Isn't it a bit early for beer?" John asks, and most of the crowd erupts in laughter.

"Not when someone's finally got the Ravager off the ground," Wallis points out, a water bottle in hand since he's on duty. "We'd have done this yesterday evening, but you were off base."

"Yes, w--- I was. A bit of hiking. On Terceira. Since the weather was, you know—I guess seeing the scenery from the Conn-Pod gave me a craving for some more fresh air," John explains pithily.

"How's it been, getting back in the saddle?" LJ asks.

"Well, it's a bit like riding a bike—if the bike's the size of a skyscraper and plugged into your brain, really," John jokes, having recovered his composure. He hates how his knee-jerk reaction to attention is still to hide to protect himself.

Once the official announcement is made, he and Sherlock will be the most famous Rangers in the world, at least for a while. Better get used to the idea.

John lets his gaze wander around the room, and spots Colleen on a sofa. She looks slightly apprehensive; a LOCCENT officer is not a common sight in the lounge. John does appreciate that her role in the events of yesterday has been acknowledged like this. Once he's scanned the room, his mood changes because he realises that Sherlock isn't present. Surely they can't have opted out of inviting half of the Ravager team?

"Where's Sh—Holmes?" John asks, then realises that it's probably appropriate by now for him to call Sherlock by his first name. All co-pilot teams do so; nothing suspicious or wrong about it. "I couldn't have done it without him."
"I think it was very much the other way around," LJ Marais points out, a cup of coffee in hand where she's leaning on a cupboard. "I kept an eye on what went on in the lab, and you seem to be quite the Holmes-whisperer."

John doesn't like the way they're talking about Sherlock as though it had all just been down to John sorting him out, making him behave, kicking his arse. It had been a duet, and especially during their first bilateral Drift, he had needed Sherlock as much—or even more—than vice versa.

Anger begins to brew. *If they haven't even invited him—*

"Didn't reply to my message, or show up," Wallis replies with a shrug. "I guess the guy still hates me for all the push-ups," he laughs. "He never protested, though," Wallis adds, probably remembering his tense conversation with John in this very lounge about his disciplining of Sherlock.

John takes a seat on the couch, opens his beer. Colleen raises hers with a smile, and John replies in kind. Now that no one is actively trying to engage him in conversation, he could try to reach out to Sherlock. Closing his eyes might look strange, so he fixes his gaze on a scrape on the wall and concentrates.

He doesn't feel anything. No presence, no dim awareness of another person tickling his consciousness. Sherlock must be shielding for some reason. John wonders how much Sherlock can read from him in general; he's envious of his obviously much greater ability to regulate their connection.

It's not alarming, not really, that Sherlock did not reply to an invitation by Wallis, nor is it unusual that the isn't letting John in. But, this morning John hadn't felt anything from him at all, even though he seems to have picked up a regular habit of seeking John out. It's a cerebral nudge of a good morning, a way for John to gauge his mood and him John's.

This morning, nothing. *Is he alright?*

"They're not wasting any time," Chen points out, taking a seat on the hand rest of the couch. "Saw Hammond yesterday evening; they're planning a press conference for tomorrow, and the Marshal's flying in tonight."

"Oh." Hammond had sent both of them a message which said that their schedules were cleared for tomorrow; he didn't say what for. The command to make sure their parade uniforms were in order was somewhat telling. It hadn't occurred to John that the Marshal would be flying all the way here; couldn't he have made the announcement from London with some footage sent it from Chard's Rift added into the broadcast?

This is a big deal for the PPDC. How big, is hitting home with John over and over again. The Marshal is probably trying to score some personal PR points by attending in person and shaking their hands on live coverage.

"I heard someone's been hitting the gym," Wallis teases. "Getting back into routine, then?"

John replies with a sheepish grin. He'd be embarrassed if they all knew how he's let himself go.

He would have assumed that being in the Conn-Pod again would bring forth a nightmare of two from days past, but he had slept well and without intrusive imagery. No waking up in cold sweat, heart pounding, mind racing to catch up with reality. Even since he began training with Sherlock, those dreams have become scarcer and scarcer, and the best remedy when they do come is reaching out and seeking Sherlock; after they began to Ghost Drift, Sherlock has been waking up to his
nightmares and John to his, since unregulated and intense emotions tend to strengthen what Sherlock playfully calls their uplink.

One night, three days before their Ravager test, John had been hit with a particularly tormenting dream. Even after the worst of the adrenaline dissipated, he couldn't calm himself down. Hands shaking, cold sweat pouring in, he was left hyperventilating, leaning his forehead against the wall. Then, there was a quiet knock on the door.

Sherlock knows what had happened, has experienced, second-hand, what it had been like to lose Harry, for their connection to be severed so violently. He hadn't reached out inside their heads but spoken John's name loud and clear after entering—John had programmed his service number weeks ago into the door lock. He somehow sensed that John wanted to see and hear and touch things, real things. Sherlock brought him some water, sat with him. John could sense apprehension and awkwardness in him; he wasn't accustomed to consoling others; judging by what John has seen and heard about his life he hasn't received much consolation in his life. Yet, he tried, and that was enough. John had been terribly tempted to ask him to stay the night but didn't. He didn't want their first night together to be about how he's broken, still. The way he'll always be broken but not as badly as he had thought. He'd let the memory of Harry keep him from living for years; he just hadn't realised that it had turned into an excuse.

Sherlock left an hour later, like a ghost. Like the ghost he is constantly in John's head. A ghost that keeps him safe from his other ones.

Except for this morning, when he'd been absent.

John wonders how soon he could leave the lounge without being impolite. He lingers for an hour, then crunches up his second beer can, donks it into a trash bin and makes his way to the door, steps faltering by all the well-wishing back slaps.

He makes his way to the dorm level, feeling bittersweet about the way other staff than just the Rangers seem to be paying attention to him. Before the Ravager test, all there was were rumours. Now, everyone had seen the flagship Jaeger out and about, and everyone in the base must know by now, who had been at the helm.

He knocks on Sherlock's door. He doesn't announce himself; it would be a little ridiculous to do so. Sherlock must know perfectly well it's him; maybe he'd felt his approach, even.

"Come in," comes a resigned reply from the other side of the door.

Upon entering, John finds his partner giving his parade uniform shoes a brushing. The other pieces belonging to the ensemble are scattered around the door: hanging from the wardrobe and the bathroom door, draped over his chair. They all look impeccably polished and ironed.

"Preparing for tomorrow?" John asks.

Sherlock sighs, then lets his gaze linger around the scattered pieces of clothing. John has never seen him be this meticulous about his uniform, especially not the parade pieces which he has announced to be ridiculous on numerous occasions.

Sherlock's reply is evasive and clipped. "Tonight."

"What's tonight?" John asks, but then it connects in his head. The Marshal.

Sherlock slumps down onto his bunk, shoving a service uniform boot under it with his bare foot. "I have been summoned—or, should I say ordered?—to a private meeting."
"Just you?" It seems logical that the Marshal would want to see his brother at such an occasion, but Sherlock is making this sound like some official strategy meeting and not a family reunion.

"I haven't heard a single word from him after London. I'd be surprised if he hasn't been updated on my training progress, but he hasn't shown any interest before in talking to me about it." Sherlock grimaces. "Granted, I haven't reached out, either, but why now? Why now, if not for an attempt to cash in on the publicity? He banished me here, I didn't fail like he assumed and probably hoped for to teach me a lesson, so now he wants his due."

John is tempted to point out this sounds a bit harsh and paranoid, but that statement would not take into account what he knows—what he has experienced, second-hand—about the relationship between the two brothers.

"Maybe he just wants to talk and to give his well-wishes," John suggests.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "Every word would be laced with double meanings." Sherlock smooths a crease on his blanket. "I can handle him. He doesn't frighten me."

He looks distracted, upset, restless. Now that they're at proximity, those emotions are bleeding through even though he must still be trying to keep them from John. This is what he's been trying to conceal: how upset he is about having to see his brother.

John sits down next to him, curls an arm around his waist and tugs him closer.

Sherlock sighs. "I don't trust him."

John understands why. It wasn't enough that their parents had outsourced a special needs child to an endless line of ill-prepared nannies and au pairs, but when the Holmes parents died, the only one who could have offered Sherlock any stability, love and care as a family member sealed the deal by effectively abandoning him. It's evident that Marshal Mycroft Holmes has no patience for someone who is different and whose quirks cannot be weeded out by putting them in an environment that uses punishment, peer pressure and archaic principles of military-level discipline as a means to make people behave. It would have been a sad, rage-inducing story even if John had only heard it from someone. But, experiencing the helplessness, the fathomless sadness, loneliness, the isolation and the bullying by being in Sherlock's head—reliving his memories as though they were happening to John instead—had broken his heart over and over again. He had always thought that his own childhood was nothing to celebrate, his and Harry's parents prioritising ideology over the happiness of their children, but his childhood horrors definitely pale in comparison to what Sherlock has gone through.

John tucks an errant curl behind Sherlock's ear, lets his finger rake up his scalp a bit before retreating. Sherlock isn't looking at him, opting instead to look down at the floor, but slowly, he lets John in a bit more. It feels like a door being unlocked and left ajar. Inside, John finds a veritable mess of conflicting emotions.

"I can handle him," Sherlock argues feebly. It's not John he's trying to convince—it's himself. And it's not working.

"You're going to try to deny it, but I know, Sherlock: you are afraid of him, now. Why?"

Sherlock bites his lip. "It's ridiculous and irrational."

"Fear often is, but it's still there."

"I just feel like he could take everything away. All of this. If he said no to the official assignment, I don't think anyone would argue."
John is confounded. "Why would he not want you to succeed? Why wouldn't he be pleased for you—at least he won't have to worry for you any longer?"

"He'll always worry—but not about me. He'll worry how what I do will reflect on him. Most people know who the Holmeses are, but out of the living members of the family, he's always been the star. After this everyone will know who I am, and it will happen overnight, whereas he has spent decades rising to his position. He won't be envious of the imbecilic celebrity worship people direct at pilots, but it will drive him round the bend that I turned a punishment into this. A potential success. It will insult his sense of justice that I may have the same potential to make a mark on Corps history as him, maybe even more. That's the equivalent of flipping him off for good. He wants to have the upper hand, will want to display his influence somehow. He's kept taking everything from me in the name of education and discipline and whatever else moral high ground he thinks he has. I just—I don't want to talk to him. I don't want to see him. I don't want to give him that power."

"Then, you don't have to see him."

Sherlock's head had snapped into his direction. "What?"

"I will go. Either party of a co-pilot team can represent the team. It's in the Code of Conduct of the Jaeger Corps."

"This is not an official function. He could easily contest that interpretation."

"Well, he can file a complaint for all I care. You're not seeing him tonight. I am."

"I can handle him, John."

"You shouldn't have to. Not if it's compromising your state of mind and most of all if you don't want to."

"I don't need you to protect me from him."

"We could all use a bit of protection sometimes. That's what a co-pilot is for; they have your back. You don't owe him anything; you did the work, and you earned this. He didn't get you where you are—you did. And, he should respect what you want, or don't want. It's over, Sherlock—you're not dependent on him anymore."

"He's still the Marshal."

"And you're a bloody Ravager pilot. If humanity has to pick which one they'll send to fight a kaiju, it sure as hell isn't going to be some ribbon-clipping bureaucrat."

Harry had been John's protector, his keeper of secrets. Now, he can be Sherlock's. He had never felt like the strong one in his prior co-pilot partnership, but now he understands that he had had it all wrong; there is no weak one and a strong one. It's a yin-yang thing, each needing the other, lending strengths to compensate for weaknesses like finding a missing piece to a puzzle and completing the big picture. They both have blind spots and Achilles' heels, and when those are encountered, that's when they need each other the most.

A dark-haired, thin, lonely twelve-year-old boy did not have anyone on his side when his brother crushed his hopes of finally leaving the hell of Haig for home. In a way, John has arrived decades too late, but it's still better than never.

John drops down onto the bunk, scoots to lie against the wall, extends his arm and pats the empty patch of blanket next to him. "Come here."
Carefully and almost shyly, Sherlock lies down, facing away from him.

If this were any other day, John being allowed to press himself tightly against Sherlock—to curve himself around that wonderful arse and that lithe form—would lead to arousal, but right now the distress still emanating from his partner which seems to envelop them both keeps his thoughts firmly on his new mission: to protect Sherlock from further upset.

He drops his arm onto Sherlock's hip and pats it. "If Marshal Holmes wants a go at you, he'll have to go through me," he promises the cloud of curls tickling his nose.

Though he can't see it, he feels Sherlock's smile.

-o-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-

It's John's turn to brush his parade uniform shoes. He needs to look his absolute best tonight. While getting ready, he wonders if the explosion of over-groomed uniform parts in Sherlock's room had been an attempt to channel his anxiety.

He'd point out and tut at every single atom of dust or lint, that's all, Sherlock protests.

Eavesdropper. John chastises him with a grin. Want to stay in my head when I see him?

There's a sudden silence, and though there are no words, John can sense that the answer is no from the sudden flare of anxiety.

I'd tell you to enjoy your evening, but you won't.

Sherlock's tone is laced with the refined petulance of a younger sibling and iced with the snootiness of someone who opposed pointless authority.

See you later? John asks.

Maybe. Mycroft's message said the press conference is in the afternoon, so I might go blow off some steam running on Terceira.

Sherlock then seems to withdraw from their connection, leaving John to his thoughts. He is nervous, but only slightly. The Marshal has never been a soldier, only a bureaucrat. They don't speak the same language, nor do they walk in the same worlds.

He's never taken on a kaiju, John thinks. That notion helps. Surely a stuffy Englishman is much less intimidating than a towering monster hell-bent on destroying humanity.

Sherlock was supposed to meet his brother in the Blue War Room on the command deck at eight in the evening. John has never been there; he's aware that it's a space used for visiting dignitaries. Picking it must be Mycroft Holmes' idea of displaying his position.

John arrives on the command deck precisely on the clock. The young security officer posted outside the door—probably a member of the Marshal's personal security detail—steps in front of the door as John approaches and takes a long hard look at his badge. "The Marshal is not available."

"I'm his eight o'clock meeting."

"I was told to expect a Ranger Sherlock Holmes."
"I'm here to represent him," John announces. "Now, let me pass unless you want me to tell the
Marshal precisely who was responsible for our meeting starting late." He then stares down the young
officer, who relents after a moment of hesitation, stepping aside and flashing his wrist console to the
electric lock on the door. John's console would probably not have opened it; command areas are
strictly off-limits to those without the proper clearance.

As the door clicks shut behind him, John gets his first close look at the PPDC's Atlantic Subdivision
Marshal Mycroft Holmes. He's standing at the end of the table, next to the chairman's seat, reading
something on his tablet. He looks up when he hears the door. John has seen the man many times on
TV and from a distance at assemblies, of course. A balding man with a stocky build, he wears
civilian clothing with a military palette of navy blues, greys—tweed may make an appearance around
Christmastime. Today, he's in a crisply cut navy suit, a pin above his breast pocket showing his rank.
John has always found his default expression strange: it looks neutral but seems to signal that there is
much going on behind those serene eyes—a constant calculation being performed on what is
pertinent to be said out loud and what is not? Especially when the Marshal tries to look disarming
when giving one of his televised speeches, he seems the opposite: a smugly superior man looking
down on others. John remembers being irked by his instinctive dislike for the man long before he'd
even met his younger brother and learned more about what Mycroft Holmes is really like.

"Why are you here?" the Marshal asks, the well-rehearsed and oddly plasticine welcoming smile he
had looked up from his tablet with now morphing into dismay. "Explain yourself."

John decides to take this literally. "Ranger John Watson, sir; service number——"

The Marshal cuts him off with a flick of his hand. "I don't need your service details—I know
perfectly well who you are from photos in the reports. I instructed that I was not to be disturbed
while I spoke to my brother. Where is he?"

"He is not available, sir."

"I gave notice of this days ago, and I detest repeating myself: where is he?"

"He is in training, sir. There are preparations still ongoing for the announcement, final compatibility
simulations to run, adjustments to be made. Surely the Corps wants to be absolutely certain they have
the right man for the job," he comments, allowing the tiniest bit of sarcasm and treacle into his voice.
What he's saying is utter poppycock, of course. Most likely Sherlock is at the gym or sitting outside
reading in one of their favourite spots on the higher decks. John doubts he'd stayed in his room—the
effects of their shared, chaste nap had worn off quickly, and by the time John had to leave he had
seemed too anxious even to sit still. John had tried to reassure him that everything was going to be
okay, but Sherlock had remained sceptical.

It just goes to show how much Sherlock's priorities have changed. From a depressed addict to a
Ravager pilot. That should impress even his brother.

"When I summon them, I expect people to be delivered to me promptly. I did not authorise anyone to
act as his replacement. Why do you think you are qualified to do so?"

John is tempted to act stupid, to start repeating his name and rank, but he doesn't want to anger the
Marshal too much at this point. "Article 67 of the Preparedness Charter says that ceremonial duties
are superseded by training and maintenance needs of the base."

"I am perfectly aware of what Article 67 entails and dislike your rather artistic interpretation of it. I
also detest the insinuation that a private meeting is a ceremonial duty."

"He didn't want to see you," John says bluntly, and instantly regrets it. He could have walked away after it was established that Sherlock wasn't coming, could have swept himself out of harms' way.

Now, he has fired the first missile.

"Excuse me?" The Marshal circles the end of the table and walks up to him. His gaze has the same intensity as Sherlock's but with none of the barely concealed vulnerability. "I would be mindful of my words, Ranger, if I were you. I will not be spoken to in this manner, nor do I have any use for your assessments of my brother's motives."

"I daresay I have a clearer picture of them than you have had or a long time."

The Marshal stares at him, then catches himself doing so, squares his shoulders and looks at John down his nose instead. "Ranger Watson. You know who I am, yet you are not afraid."

"You don't seem very frightening," John snarks back and steps closer, then settles into a sharp parade rest.

"Ah, yes. The bravery of the soldier. Bravery is by far the kindest word for stupidity, don’t you think? You’ve been tricked by my brother into this debacle, no doubt."

“No, sir.” John forces his tone to be neutral again. He knows that angering Mycroft Holmes would be a stupid move, but it's hard to curb his anger after experiencing through Sherlock's eyes the role the man has had in some of the turns his life has taken.

The Marshal tilts his head in exaggerated disbelief. "Of all the potential candidates he could have drifted with, why you? You are effectively retired. What business could you possibly have drifting with my brother? You must be aware that he is of exceptional intelligence. How could you possibly complement him?"

"I was retired. Not anymore."

"It was nearly two decades ago that you achieved your solo performance record. You’ve been mothballed for more than half Sherlock’s life. I must confess; when I saw your name on the memo, I assumed it was a much younger namesake. It’s ridiculous, pulling a veteran practically invalided by post-traumatic stress out of retirement to manage my brother. Hardly an ideal solution for the tip of the spear of our defence."

"Well, maybe the recklessness of youth works well with a bit of experience. It's not management; it's a partnership."

Cold amusement flickers on Mycroft Holmes' features. "This is a travesty. Tell me—what did he do to trick them?"

"Trick them, sir?"

"The officers in charge of selection and training? Into believing he could be initiated into any sort of a partnership that would be successful against a kaiju? This … you… must be Sherlock's idea of a joke. A way to set himself up to fail, spectacularly, to show what he really thinks of the PPDC."

The toxic tone makes John sick to his stomach. Coming from a man who is, to a large extent, responsible for Sherlock's reticence to believe that any other human could ever wish good things on him, it feels particularly vile.
Holmes isn't done picking John apart. "Don’t you realise that you’ve been kept on as a relic, a PR exercise? You were never meant to see active service again. My purpose in seeing him today was to call him out on this charade before he made a fool out of himself in the press conference. Do not become my brother's pawn, Ranger. Lucky for you, this partnership can still be terminated, and your reputation salvaged."

"With respect, sir, that’s not going to happen.” It's unlikely the Marshal could force the issue—Hammond and the rest of the brass who have been here and seen it all happen would demand an explanation as to why it wouldn't work, and against the barrage of training data they have available the Marshal's arguments wouldn't have a leg to stand on. The aptitude scores aren't wrong. Their drift compatibility scores aren't wrong. They have piloted the Ravager, for fuck's fake! Whatever objections the Marshal has for their partnership cannot be stemming from anything else than personal issues.

_Sherlock was right. Bloody hell._ John glares at the Marshal.

A patrician eyebrow rises. "Your file says you have trust issues; well, I can inform you that the Corps has trust issues with you, Ranger Watson."

"The Corps or you personally, sir?"

"Of course, Sherlock would have sought someone like you out. He is stacking the odds to ensure he fails. I will not, cannot allow him to jeopardise the security of the Atlantic sector. He cannot be trusted with something as important as the Ravager."

“We’ve made it work, sir. As you will have seen from the data from the first live test in the Ravager. No one else has ever managed to operate it, and the Corps—apart from you, sir—is delighted with the results. Were you so sure that Sherlock would fail that you didn't even keep up with his training reports? How is it that you have no idea how hard he's fought for this?” John doesn't even attempt to hide the incredulity in his voice.

"Can it be that of all the people in the world, the Corps has decided to trust Sherlock Holmes? They don't know him the way I do. You don't know him the way I do. This is the last thing he wants."

"I trust him, even though trust is something I have struggled with for eighteen years, just as you said, sir.” John doesn't hide his hatred in how he spits out the honorific. "And he trusts me enough to allow me to stand here instead of him. If this were just smoke and mirrors, he would not have let me in like that; we wouldn't have achieved a neural handshake.” How little must the Marshal actually understand about the Pons system, if he thinks Sherlock could have deceived John and everyone and kept secrets throughout the process?

"No part of what you have stated explains why you are here pretending to represent Sherlock. I am rapidly losing faith the soundness of the current command's decision-making; selecting you is a case in point. If this is the best that the Corps can do, then vile tongues of the opposition will no doubt call for scrapping the whole program. It happened once, and it nearly cost us the Earth. Relying on a has-been Ranger who hasn't piloted for a decade to compensate for my brother's weaknesses, the greatest of which is his incapability to accept his role in our parents' legacy is—"

_He's like a broken record_, John thinks while tuning out of the rest of the repetitive tirade.

After the Marshal finally falls silent, John takes a step closer and fixes the man with his gaze. "I'm here because Sherlock is the most promising candidate in years, and because we are more compatible than any other pair in the Corps. After all, his aptitude scores were so good that you saw fit to conceal them. Why? To protect him from the Corps, or the Corps from him—from stealing your
limelight? He has made it this far for himself, and somehow, that isn't good enough for you?"

"My brother is, admittedly, of considerable intelligence, and perhaps, had he used that intellect to make better life choices, he could have made an excellent addition to the science division—"

"He is making that better life choice now, and if you assume it was easy for him to accept all that it entails, then it's not hyperbole to say that I know him in a way that you couldn’t possibly know him. Bilateral Drifting is a connection that wouldn't have allowed either of us to hide anything. In your position, you can't possibly be so spectacularly ignorant about how it works to claim otherwise."

The Marshal raises his chin defiantly. "I am perfectly aware of how it all works." His lips are parted for a brief moment more, but then they snap shut; it seems that he hadn't come up with a counter-argument to the verbal trap John had sprung about the inner workings of the Pons system.

John isn't done. "I care about him, as a co-pilot should. You don't know even how that feels, do you, really caring about him?" He could probably get disciplined for such a barb, but he suddenly feels like he has the upper hand.

The Marshal looks as though he doesn't quite know what to do. He looks terribly tempted to unleash some act of revenge, but maybe Sherlock is right: the fact that they have finally found a Ravager team is such a critical PR thing that not even Mycroft Holmes would probably risk public ridicule by interfering with the pilot assignments. There will be two other teams selected later to man the three-shift rota, but it's finding the first one as soon as possible that will salvage the Atlantic section's reputation. Maybe the Marshal's annoyance stems from the fact that for the first time, Sherlock has won. He has told John that his older brother is usually exceptionally good at separating business from his dislike of people; the fact that the Ravager remains without a pilot team is a thorn on the side of the PPDC, and it would be Holmes who was wrecking his own career if he interfered in a manner that disintegrated the team that had finally been formed.

If this weren't the case, then what John is doing right now would be the career equivalent of suicide.

Silence falls as the two men continue to measure each other up.

"You're awfully loyal, awfully fast," Holmes finally says, steps closer and scrutinises John with the same sort of laser-sharp focus that John has learned to expect from Sherlock. Must be a family trait.

A trace of a sneer then forms on the Marshal’s face. "Do you think you are the first person he has been childishly enamoured with after being shown a bit of kindness and patience? Must be flattering to a man your age and in your situation."

Low blow, Holmes.

John doesn't get angry, because he realises that such a cheap shot means that he has gotten through to the man, pricked his skin a bit. "Perhaps you mistake mutual respect and partnership for a childish crush, sir. You don’t know him, not anymore. Not what he has become since he got here. Instead of the con artist you seem to think he is, I find him to be much less of a self-serving bullshitter than, say, most members of PPDC high brass."

John realises that he has some further leverage here: if Sherlock won't talk to his brother, then John is his only way of finding out about what has happened to Sherlock since he arrived at the base and what he's thinking. John is the Marshal's only opportunity to hear it from the horse's mouth instead of some official report. However, that assumes that the man is interested in his brother's feelings or opinions. John wouldn't bank on it.
The elder Holmes sniffs. “A few months cannot make that fundamental a change. He won’t be able to keep up the façade forever. I’ve seen how formidable a liar he can be, witnessed him crumble under the stress of normal life too often.”

*The stress of normal life?* Through the memories shared when Drifting, John knows that Mycroft Holmes had done such things as yelled at Sherlock at their parents’ funeral for stimming when he’d been overwhelmed by the whole situation and the number of people who kept coming up to him to offer condolences, and he didn’t know how to react. Of *course*, normal life in a world designed for neurotypicals would challenge him, but that does not rule out the possibility that the Corps is an environment in which he could actually thrive.

John stomps down on the fury emanating from the fact that this man wouldn’t even want to give Sherlock a chance to see if that could happen. His statement about assuming Sherlock is concealing some ulterior motive, hatching some sinister master plan is just preposterous and reminds John all over again that this man may be high up in the PPDC, but he's not a Ranger. He clearly doesn't understand much about piloting.

"Sherlock now has a chance to prove you wrong, sir, and there is no doubt in my mind that he will."

"I am happy that my brother has managed to avoid prison. I am sure there is some work in the PPDC he could manage, assuming he keeps his nose to the grindstone and his mouth shut."

"And your optimism must have helped him immensely in his life. Have you always thought he'd fail in whatever he attempted?"

Anger flashes—albeit briefly—in Holmes' eyes. "Of course, he will fail! My brother has none of the traits that should make him an effective part of any military organisation. No discipline, no obedience—"

"He has plenty of both when he sees the point of them. This isn't your average military organisation. It's not enough to know how to pick up a gun in the Corps. That's why most of the career track candidates fail."

"All that boy knows is how to demand special treatment, to complain, to shirk any and all responsibilities and to act out. How convenient that he has seemed to find someone to do all of that for him."

"Maybe he wouldn't have such a need if someone had listened to him sometimes. If you had listened."

*He can't touch us*, John reminds himself.

He can still huff and puff, though: "I will not be spoken to in this manner!" the Marshal exclaims, eyes narrowed.

John expects him to announce any second now what disciplinary horrors await him. He grits his teeth and forces himself to continue facing the man with his head held high.

But... nothing happens. Holmes keeps watching him, studying him, as though he has seen a strange new creature he doesn't quite know what to think of it. He looks... for lack of a better word, *curious*.

"You have known my brother for a few months, that is all."

"I've been in his head, and he in mine. It changes how you see a person."
"A highly subjective world, that."

"So is yours. You can only convey your viewpoint in words. Compared to Drifting, it's always an oversimplification, and you can hide and distort whatever you want."

"You genuinely believe that boy needs you to defend him." The Marshal rocks back on his heels and shakes his head, now slightly amused.

"A man, not a boy. And maybe that's because nobody ever did. That's what you seem not to have understood about the Corps; you tried to make him survive on his own, but that attitude will get a Ranger killed. We're only as strong as our co-pilots, and after everything he's been through, I've never met a stronger person. Our Ravager test run should have proven to you as well as others that we're good to go, sir, and if you try to stop us, then the whole world will know that you're allowing your personal feelings about a family member get in the way of us doing our duty to protect the world."

That said, John gives the speechless Marshal an impeccable salute and marches out.

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At ten in the evening, a still-triumphant John is reunited with his co-pilot at an all-night canteen on the Ground Crew dorm level.

Sherlock is sweaty and has twigs in his curls.

"What did you do, throw yourself through a hedge?" John chuckles.

"Did some running on Terceira; hitched a ride with a deliveryman. A farmer's ox had escaped its paddock, and we crossed paths."

John bursts out laughing. "Maybe we can sign you up with that running with bulls thing next year in Pamplona," John chuckles.

"You can laugh, but that thing was huge."

"Maybe we should use them against the kaiju, then," John replies, still laughing.

Sherlock bristles at him.

"Well, aren't you going to ask about Mycroft?"

"I think you'll recount your undoubtedly memorably rendezvous without prompting," Sherlock says and takes a bite from a muffin. "I'd find out sooner or later, anyway, since you can't shield to save your life—"

John gives him a look, then starts his report of his Marshal encounter.

After a few minutes, it's Sherlock's time to be in stitches.

"You said what?! he asks, and then bursts out laughing so loud again that a group of ground crew in a neighbouring table shoots them a disapproving glance.
John dabs at a ketchup stain he has now gotten on his trouser leg. "That he probably didn't know what caring about you felt like."

"Christ. I'm sure that tin pot dictator was awfully tempted to try to have you thrown in the brig for such slander."

"I think he was just so surprised at a has-been Ranger showing up instead of you and telling him what's what."

"I'd give my left arm to have all of that on video."

John grins. "You'll have my memories, and I may have accidentally recorded us on the wrist console. You know how easily the dictation programme gets turned on when you're trying to do something else."

Sherlock's eyes go wide. Then, he says nothing. Instead, he closes his eyes.

_I love you, John my madman._

John melts into a smile in reply.

The press conference for the official Ravager assignment is tomorrow. After that, nothing can touch them. People can stare, they can say whatever they want. Maybe it'll change things in the Corps. Perhaps they could be together as Sherlock tells him people like them can be together everywhere else.

_I love you, Sherlock._

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
Let's all give a big hand for BAMF!Ranger!Watson. And perhaps a boo for Big Bro. I think that, out of all my Mycrots, this is the coldest and most frightening in how he puts his career before everything else.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
Journey: _Separate Ways (Worlds Apart)_ (this is absolutely the song to which John does his Big Dick Walk on his way to see the Marshal)
The Killers: _Deadlines and Commitments_
The Killers: _Flesh And Bone_
The Killers: _Battle Born_
At this point I want to thank some people. Especially since this story requires a lot of auditing by people both familiar and very much not with Pacific Rim to ensure any and all readers could enjoy it, I couldn't have created it alone. So, I must thank my tireless betas AnyaWen and 7PercentSolution and my Pacific Rim expert auditor 88thParallel for their invaluable input and faith in this project. Then there's my husband who I usually try to spare this madness provided some helpful speculation on technological developments between 2018 and 2041.

And then there are the readers. You just kept—and keep—blowing my mind. Seriously. The comments section of this fic goes beyond epic, and you were the thing that made this one of the greatest writing experiences of my life. I love every one of you and shall Ghost Drift with you until the end of time.

When I got this idea I stubbornly decided that even if nobody in this fandom wants a Sherlock/Pacific Rim fusion, I will write one because I can't resist the notion of our boys in Jaeger armour. Little did I know that this fandom had a veritable hunger for a bit of Ranger booty. Now, those booties shall finally burn in the pyre of lust, as we move to enjoy the final two chapters.

The next morning, John cuts his gym session short; he'd gone there later than usual and had soon begun to feel uncomfortable because there were too many of his fellow Rangers present. He decides firmly to stick to his new habit of catching an early breakfast before anyone else, then using the sports facilities when the rest of the base is having a mess hall feeding frenzy, because he doesn't want the others to see how he's let himself go. The months of basic training have given the scrawny, malnourished thing Sherlock had been upon his arrival quite an admirable amount of muscle mass, and the regular helpings of food have done wonders to bring him closer to normal weight. In comparison, John has to face the fact that he's very, very far from the fitness level required from an active pilot and there's a softness to his midriff he'd rather do without. Having a few jogs a week around the base and the occasional hike on Terceira is far removed from the exercise regime he had kept up with before retirement from pilot duty; he used to compete with Harry in doing sit-ups, push-ups and pull-ups, and he usually won at least the pull-ups. He had also been a promising boxer during sixth form—for some reason his father had considered it a suitably manly and Godly sport—but he hasn't pounded a bag in years.

He's looking forward to getting back into shape. It makes him feel less inadequate that he knows that Sherlock, after years of self-neglect, has also had a long road to get where he is right now. Well, there are also the genes which, to John, make him look like a Greek god even when he's puking his guts out from withdrawal, but those can't be helped.

Maybe, once John had gotten a proper start to his newfound sports routine, they could go to the gym
together—just like they'll do everything else together from now on. Enjoying glimpses of Sherlock's
deleciable derrière would certainly enhance John's exercise motivation, if not his concentration.

It works both ways. Sherlock has made it clear that he thinks his success in getting this far in his
training is due to John's influence. And, without him, John would be spending the rest of his life in
self-imposed solitude, wasting his abilities.

*I was so alone, and I owe you so much.*

-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-0-o-

"I checked the regulations," Sherlock breathes into the side of his mouth, eyes pinched closed as
John licks a stripe down the taut sternocleidomastoid tendon on the side of his neck. "There is no
mention of the genders of the pilots in active duty fraternisation rules."

"Good," John says, utterly disinterested in such intellectual research right now. He grinds his pelvis
against Sherlock's bottom, his already achingly hard cock straining against the confines of his
trousers.

He was supposed to pick Sherlock up so that they could attend the press conference together. When
he'd arrived and unlocked the door, a hand had grabbed his lapels and unceremoniously pulled him
in. John has always prided himself in his ability to improvise, so his assailant had soon found himself
pressed up against a wall, face-first, with John pinning him in place, crotch pressed tight against that
deleciable arse, fingers curled around Sherlock's wrists, pressing his palms against the concrete.
"Listened to the recording, have we?"

"I found your approach to keeping my brother in check quite…stimulating."

Sherlock makes a strangled sound when John removes his right hand from holding his right one up,
reaches around him, slithers a hand to his crotch and strokes up the hardness he finds through the
trousers. The throaty moan Sherlock lets out finishes the job of getting John to a similar state of ball
aching hardness.

"God, I want to skip that bloody press conference.

We can't—Sherlock protests.

What he's thinking gets completely intercepted by John tightening his grip. He tries again, this time
with words."—once we get our official Drift team designation—" Sherlock's explanation is cut short
yet again by a need to gasp when John sucks his earlobe into his mouth, shifting both his hands to his
partner's hips.

"—the fratersin—fraternisation rules start to apply," Sherlock finally manages to get out.

"Mm-hmm," John says with a smirk, relishing the thought that he'd made Sherlock so preoccupied
with other things that he'd ended up stating the obvious, which he always hates when other people
do it. John lets him turn, wraps his arms around his waist and tiptoes to press a kiss on Sherlock's
forehead. He then forces himself to take a step back. They're not officially co-pilots yet, and there's
no time to take this further; a glance at John's wrist console tells him that they need to be in the
Underdome in less than five minutes.

"I'm still not sure if testing the waters by requesting a joint room is a good idea," John says, as the
sobering subject of what other people will think promptly starts to deflate his arousal. Sherlock had announced he was going to challenge the Corps co-habitation rule as many times as it would take to earn them a double bed. He's right, the single beds are too narrow for even just spooned sleeping.

Sherlock checks his wrist console, too. "We can spare two more minutes." He flings his arms around John's neck and goes for a series of nipping kisses, finishing with a swirl of tongue. After letting him indulge and trying not to get too worked up since he doesn't want to walk the halls with tented trousers, John lifts his arms up and gently pushes him away.

_We're behaving like a pair of teenagers, for God's sakes._ John hasn't had sex in seven months, and Sherlock had made it clear that whatever acts he has ever participated in, they haven't been pleasant.

"I don't want to wait one more minute," Sherlock complains, adjusting his trousers. He glances at John from beneath his indecently thick lashes, the depths of his gaze rich with desire, hope and happiness. "You think you could... _show me_, tonight, where we could have taken this?"

John gives him a mental example of future developments involving discarded clothing and both their cocks. "How much detail can you see of that?"

He's been meaning to ask, because he's curious how clearly Sherlock sees things in his head. What Sherlock chooses to project comes through loud and clear into his consciousness.

"I can't be entirely sure of the level of detail in your imagination, but I could draw an operational diagram based on that. Especially when you're thinking about me in connection to, well, _those_ kinds of things, it's hard to tune it out. Sometimes, in the evening, you can be very distracting. Must you really service yourself every bloody night?"

John laughs. "That's only after I met you, you berk. As for projecting stuff: I can't turn it off and on like you." He clears his throat. "I, um, if you were wondering—I've been tested after the last time I did anything in Ponta Delgada." He had nearly always insisted on a condom, and regularly gone to a non-profit clinic in the Azores capital where one could get tested anonymously. He's clean.

Sherlock nods. "They told me that the thorough testing they did on implantation day included an extensive pathogen panel since they couldn't help but notice my arms. I had a conversation with Jules Sandford, by the way," Sherlock says tangentially as he dons his uniform jacket, referring to the local head of Neural Interface Design—a tough-as-nails, no-nonsense woman John would never voluntarily approach. "She turned out to be quite professionally fascinated by Ghost Drifting."

John's eyes go wide. "Please tell me you didn't talk to her about—"

"Your virtuous reputation is intact. No, I just wanted to hear what they know about what determines when and to whom Ghost Drifting happens. Their theory—her theory—is that the one broadcasting is usually experiencing something significant, and the other just happens to be calm and idle enough to pick up on it. We knew that much, but she explained further that it may happen more often than pilots are aware, which hadn't occurred to me. All pilots may be doing it, but the connection being strong enough for them to notice what's going on is apparently rare. So, it may well be that we are Ghost Drifting constantly, but the rattle and hum of the rest of the planet and the idiots we're surrounded by drowns it out. But, if the one whose consciousness is being penetrated makes an effort to focus on the connection—"

John licks his lips. Sherlock is inadvertently making it all sound rather erotic.

"—or is distracted enough not to block, then the one broadcasting may notice that their connection has become two-way." He's looking at John pointedly, probably thinking of the first instance they
had both realised Ghost Drifting was taking place. "You were certainly broadcasting things about me intensely enough."

"You make me sound like a radio station", John jokes.

"Well, you certainly had your mast up," Sherlock quips back with a patrician raise of an eyebrow.

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John arrives with two minutes to spare for the time the base's head of PR had told him and Sherlock to be present. Sherlock had still needed a few minutes to change into his uniform from the T-shirt and combat trousers he'd greeted John in, so they had decided not to arrive together, after all.

A podium with the PPDC logo has been set up in the Underdome. Relatively few base personnel are among the already gathering crowd—the press has taken up every bit of free floor surface in the vast hangar.

With only ten minutes to spare before the live broadcast, Sherlock walks in, spots John, and strides up to where he's standing off to the side of the podium.

John stares. Then stares some more.

"What have you done to your uniform collars?"

Sherlock looks unfazed by his incredulity. "The old design looked ridiculous—as though we were heading out for a round of golf. I simply ripped out a bit of a stitching."

The dark blue collars of the parade uniform are sticking up, reaching close to the edge of his jaw. It looks... John can't quite find the word. It looks as though Sherlock is trying to look melodramatically mysterious, especially since he's also wearing a pair of sleek sunglasses. John snatches them and sticks them up on his own head, leaving Sherlock looking scandalised. "There. Much better. You've got those ridiculous cheekbones already, no need to add these to look like some bloody secret agent."

A camera starts flashing, making Sherlock flinch and them both blink. It appears that a photographer is simply testing his settings, but soon others join in.

Sherlock tilts his chin up, quickly tugs at the hem of his uniform jacket and arranges a reserved, regal smile on his face.

*Ridiculous cheekbones?!* he asks John.

I adore your ridiculous cheekbones. How many buckets of product did you pour in your hair?

The right side of Sherlock's mouth tightens just a little bit.

You could have used some, yourself. This disgusting gloop was all the commissary had, and I was terribly pressed for time.

I'll leave all that to you, *posh boy*, John teases. It's your own fault for pouncing on me instead of getting ready.

He has to stifle a laugh while watching Sherlock desperately scrambling to contain his carefully
constructed expression.

The press officer directs them onto standing at the edge of the podium on the right side. She tells them that the press conference is threatening to be delayed because the Marshal is nowhere to be seen.

"Our first run on the Ravager happened pretty damned close to this—what if it hadn't worked? Would they just have cancelled the show?" John asks quietly once the woman has left the podium.

"Mycroft would undoubtedly still have used this opportunity to bore for Britain about fiscal prediction and whatever poncey plans he has for taking over an even bigger chunk of the PPDC. He pretty much fancies himself the new Stacker Pentecost," Sherlock scoffs, referring to the legendary first Marshal of the Corps back when there were only a handful of Shatterdomes and humanity was really struggling to contain the Breach threat. Pentecost had died in battle, but he did not have long to live at that point, anyway, since he had developed cancer from having piloted some very early Jaeger models without proper radiation protection.

Finally, the older Holmes brother hurries to the stage with a group of assistants and Chard's Rift brass in tow. Trailing behind the troupe is Base Commander Hammond, who flashes John and Sherlock a bright smile as he walks past. "Ready, Rangers?" he asks.

John gives him a salute. "Aye, sir."

Sherlock seems oblivious to their exchange. His gaze is scanning the crowd; there is not a square inch of floor due to the heaving mass of journalism.

John has stood in front of lots of people before, of course—at award and graduation ceremonies—but this is different. Today, they are a piece of news for which the world is waiting. Even though their duty is to protect the Atlantic coast, any major development in the Corps will always receive global coverage. The Herculean task of finding even just one Ravager team will be a major PR victory and shut the mouths of comedians deriving fun from the fact that the Ravager has been just an expensive paperweight for years.

The lights are adjusted, and a spotlight directed at the speaker box on podium. Mycroft Holmes taps the microphone and clears his throat. When John glances to his side, he sees Sherlock square his shoulders even tighter. He looks tense, and the thumb of his left hand is rubbing his index finger nervously behind his back where he's clasped that wrist with his other hand.

John would have been surprised is the gravity of this hadn't hit Sherlock at some point. Part of his nervousness might also be due to the proximity of his brother. John is quite sure they haven't communicated after he'd met with the Marshal; he likes to think he would have picked up on it if they had through his and Sherlock's connection.

It's alright. Once this is done, we continue training. The attention will die down in a few days, John tries to reassure his co-pilot.

Sherlock doesn't reply, but a tiny bit of the tension emanating for him seems to dilute.

Marshal Holmes is now looking at his brother; Sherlock keeps his eyes on the back wall of the Underdome. To John he looks distant yet so beautiful it makes his heart ache. He wonders if he should point out to Sherlock that the Marshal seems to be trying to get his attention, but then again, Sherlock might be deliberately trying to ignore him. It wouldn't be surprising.

"Good afternoon," the Marshal starts, then goes through some banalities about the weather and the
history of Chard's Rift's Jaeger population. Then, he introduces the Ravager, going through some of the more easily understandable trump cards of its design. Some footage of John and Sherlock's trial run is projected on a mist screen high above the podium; it's exhilarating to see the Jaeger in action. They'd already watched some material shot that day with Colleen but witnessing the reactions of the crowd gives John a wide grin.

The photographers then shift their attention to the Jaeger itself in its alcove to the right of the podium because additional floodlights have been turned on to present the war machine in all its glory. Its plating has been polished, and the Conn-Pod and reactor lights turned on. John is pretty certain that he will never stop feeling the flood of awe and excitement when he claps eyes on the hulking mass of it.

Marshal Holmes then drones on about a memorial plaque to be hammered to the wall of the underdome carrying the name of the Jaeger's head designer, Peter Reichenbach, who had passed away a year ago in an accident. "Unfortunately, he never got to see his creation in action. Speaking of which, it is time to deliver the news that have been greatly expected—I for, one, am joyous—"

For such a joyous man he looks an awful lot like someone sucking on a lemon.

Sherlock's sardonic comment catches John unawares, and a slight snigger escapes. Next to him, Sherlock manages to keep his expression infuriatingly still despite the amusement John feels emanating from him.

"—to announce the first official assignment of a pilot team to the Reichenbach Ravager, the flagship of not only the Atlantic Subsection, but the entire Jaeger Corps. We will, of course, leave no stone unturned and no innovation untapped as we seek to fill the four other positions in the Ravager rota—"

I do have a position in mind in which I'd very much like to be ravaged, Sherlock points out, face carefully schooled into utter nonchalance before his mouth twitches into an irresistible grin.

John catches himself after just one choked-up chuckle.

We shouldn't giggle, this is a very serious press conference, Sherlock adds, and clears his throat.

John is now struggling even more to keep a straight face.

The Marshal gives them a stern glance before continuing to address the cameras. "The co-pilot team assembled is a balanced combination of fresh talent and experience. The latter will be provided by veteran Ranger John Watson—" he pauses, and John steps forward, as instructed, into standing in parade rest at the front edge of the podium. "—of Diablo Intercept fame. The loss of his co-pilot, Ranger Harriet Jane Watson was a great blow to the Corps, as well as a great personal loss to Ranger Watson."

He's got it wrong; he's got Harry's name wrong—

It's deliberate. Do not give him the satisfaction of reacting, Sherlock instructs.

It helps. John shifts on his feet, snaps his shoulders even straighter, curling his left hand into a fist behind his back.

"—it is a testament to Ranger Watson's resilience that he continued to serve the PPDC as a physician after his pilot career. Now, he returns to active duty as the right hemisphere of the Reichenbach Ravager," the Marshal announces.
The cameras go wild. John tries not to blink; the flashing feels as red ghost images are being lasered onto his retinas. Standing closer to the front of the podium, he can't see Sherlock, but John can feel him struggling the desire to flee from the sensory onslaught.

The Marshal dodges the questions being slung from the crowd by saying that there will be time for inquiries later, and the frenzy dies down. John tries to take a step back, but Hammond who's sitting in the front row signals him to stay where he is. Of course. They want the two of them at the front of the podium, together, for the most salient shots.

"Our younger talent is Ranger Sherlock Holmes, a graduate Cambridge chemist and a very recent recruit to the Corps." The Marshal emphasises the word recent, probably to offer an excuse why it had taken so long to find a co-pilot team.

There is a pregnant silence in the audience. John twists his torso to see why Sherlock isn't stepping forward. He sees the Marshal pinning his brother down with a stern look—for what purpose, John isn't sure. Does he want Sherlock to get nervous, to flee, or is this just a warning to behave?

Whatever the intent, the result is that Sherlock is blinking, eyes unfocused over the heads of the crowd, the fingers of his left hand digging into the fabric of his uniform trousers. He looks frozen in place.

Sherlock?

No answer; maybe the man is so nervous that he's inadvertently shielding. John can’t understand what had brought this on—he had seemed to be able to calm himself down so far. Is it just the sensory assault, or also his name being called out in front of all these people who had lifted his parents to fame and consequently taken them away from him? Marshal Holmes had been right in that Sherlock had not wanted this before he arrived at Chard's Rift, but now it is the only reasonable path spreading out for him to make a life for himself. Anyone would be hesitant, especially under the eyes of a big brother such as Mycroft Holmes.

John looks out at the assembled mass of press, the cameras, the people, the hush of expectation, waiting for it to explode again. That’s when he realises the biggest thing that has pinned Sherlock to the floor: he’s just witnessed, perhaps even experienced second-hand through their connection what had greeted the announcement of John's assignment, and he's frozen in anticipation of what will happen when he steps forward. Fearful of his own reaction, of his ability to function.

John concentrates hard on his presence instead of his surroundings, and now he can feel echoes of the distress and sense of being overwhelmed that's threatening to take over. Sherlock's presence feels dim, hidden behind a veil of rising panic.

So, John uses his voice instead, quietly calling out and extending a hand, palm facing downwards. "Sherlock? Just focus on me."

His words seem to snap his partner out of his petrified reverie. His widened eyes fix on John's before he notices the hand offered.

He takes it. Slides his fingers underneath John's and gently grips them.

In plain sight of the entire world.

Sherlock exhales, and John can sense his presence better, now; the nervous energy emanating from him like white heat is simmering down.

It's alright, John tells him.
Sherlock steps forward, takes his place beside John and tightens his grip on his hand.

We're alright, John promises.

The world doesn't end. The cameras go off, but nothing happens that can alter the truth of the link they have forged during the strange, wonderful, surprising and exhilarating months that have passed.

It's fine. It's all fine.

By the time the press conference ends, Sherlock can be felt as intensely as usual through their connection again. As they climb down from the podium, fingers still laced, John wastes no time in saying what needs to be said.

A reminder. A promise.

I love you. They can't separate us now.

Sherlock's chest is heaving, his eyes closed as he sits on John's bed, his back leaning against the bulkhead, knees spread.

Marshal Holmes is an idiot, John thinks, then determinedly shoves the man out of his thoughts to focus on what's going on.

There is no faking, no pretending here, nor has there ever been between them. They are as naked to each other mentally as they are physically.

John had no idea he could have this. At times, he doesn't even know where his arousal ends and his partner's starts.

His palms are on Sherlock's thighs as he kneels on the floor, watching his about-to-be-lover as he takes a break from exploring the expanse of skin he had revealed moments before from underneath Sherlock's dress uniform. He wishes he had Sherlock's eidetic memory so that he could record the sight of the delicately shaped, long collarbones over which skin drapes as though chiselled from marble. With his eyes, he traces down the lines of Sherlock's now slightly visible abdominal muscles; he has put on some healthy weight, but mostly he has managed to put on an astounding amount of muscle mass during the less than six months of training. There's so much to touch, to kiss, to worship, and more time for it than John has ever had, and he doesn't even know where to start. He's eager, impatient like his much younger self had once been, to lick and bite and caress and hold and cherish.

Now that he's allowed. Now that he can have something better than a frantic fumble in the dark.

There's a faint blush that has spread down Sherlock's pale chest which seems to be changing by the minute like the touch of a sunset on calm water. Its colour is replicated on the rosy fill of his cock, lithe but not thin, impressively long and so hard that John can tell from just seeing it that—like his own—it's begging for release. He slides his palm up to it, hooks his fingers around it like he's seen violinists holding the neck of the instrument, and with the pad of his thumb, spreads the drop of moisture gathered at the slit across the tip. Sherlock's lower abs clench and he lets out a ragged breath; John feels his arousal deepen and bloom through their connection. The sensation is translated
by John's body to something akin to scuba diving through a sudden, warm inflow of water down in the depths. That echo of his own actions makes him want even more desperately to touch every inch of Sherlock and to feel that touch reverberated back to him, transformed into emotion by that utterly brilliant brain of his.

A hand perches on the top of his head; gentle, careful, fingertips start raking through John's hair but not pressing much into his scalp. John shuffles closer, tilt his head and leans his mouth close to Sherlock's shaft, then licks a stripe up its length.

Sherlock's breathing halts.

John straightens his spine, taking a firmer hold around the cock with his curled fingers as he shifts his weight so that he can get his left leg on the dress uniform trousers they'd discarded for a softer spot to kneel on. It's chilly in the room to be naked, but it would feel inappropriate to be anything else right now. There are no secrets between them, now, not after sharing their pasts and their presents in the Drift.

"Is this alright?" John asks, trying to find an answer in Sherlock's now slightly closed-up expression. His thighs have tensed up, and he seems to be trying to adjust to the intensity of John's touch. Hesitation is flirting with want in Sherlock, and John is picking up on it through their joint awareness.

John lets go, rocks back on his heels, waits for permission or dismissal.

Finally, Sherlock nods. "The role of the performing partner I would prefer to avoid but receiving–admittedly I have been hoping that you might—" he trails out, but the rest of the sentence is projected loud and clear through an image that suddenly appears in John's head. Sherlock does want this, from John, badly. He just wasn't expecting it right now, and the suddenness has reminded him of something he is now attempting to shield from John.

"Bad memories?" John suggests, running his fingertips along the inside of Sherlock's thigh towards his groin, just firmly enough not to tickle but a shudder is brought forth anyway. "You don't have to show me any of them, just tell me what you want or don't want." His own catalogue of sexual exploits isn't exactly that nice, either. He hasn't thought of those things a lot lately, so Sherlock probably hasn't witnessed a lot of it.

Before, sex for John had been about need and choosing the fastest and most effective route possible before someone interrupted. It was men's rooms at clubs and back alleys and no love and not even names. It was always the complete opposite of what's happening right now. John wants to do this, wants to give as much as he wants to receive the pleasure he knows can be produced this way. He wants to take his time, to watch Sherlock as he takes his cock in his mouth. He doesn't have a plan, doesn't know where this will end, how and if they will each climax, but that's part of the excitement. It does make things easier that he doesn't have to ask how his acts are being received; he can simply reach out and feel it.

Sherlock's words – 'one day'– which might even mean not right now, not ready–and the conflict still churning in him has already weakened the thrum of arousal John can feel from him. Clearly, this is not the best thing to start with.

"I tried to delete it all, but I guess I wasn't as successful as I would have wanted," Sherlock says. "I've never had this, only—" he trails out, eyes now open as he looks away and John feels embarrassment rippling between them.

He stands up, presses Sherlock's knees together and straddles his thighs, trapping their still hard
"We both need some new memories," John says with determination, slides his palm behind Sherlock's neck and brings their mouths together. They take their time—for both of them, kissing seems to be a novelty compared to orgasms—judging by the shared awe and excitement. John ends the kiss with a lick along the inside of Sherlock's lower lip, then leans back to look at his partner—lover—co-pilot.

Sherlock blinks his eyes open and gives him a smile full of relief and languid expectation. Then, his gaze focuses on John's neck. He grabs John's shoulders to lean him back slight so that he can sprinkle kisses at the notch between John's collarbones in the cradle of the sternum, then continuing his exploration to the left side of John's chest. There, his warm palm slides over John's shoulder, then is lifted to hover over it as he frowns slightly.

Sherlock leans in closer and traces the edges of the barely visible, round area roughly six centimetres in diameter that is slightly more darkly pigmented than its surroundings. "It's not there anymore. The old scar, I mean," he adds needlessly. Sherlock has seen it once, during a hike on Terceira when John had removed his shirt to get rid of a wasp that had crawled underneath.

"I had it removed. They could even fix the nerve damage this late, and it turns out that my recent fitness regime has done a lot of good to the tendons. No need for a separate treatment for them."

"But... why? After all this time, I mean?" Sherlock adds. "Unless it was causing you pain, that is, in which case it's understandable. It could be distracting during deployment."

"I had it fixed, because I didn't need it anymore. I felt a bit stupid when I realised that I once sort of did—it was penance for Harry, in a way. Survivor's guilt." John gently picks up Sherlock's hand that's still poking and prodding at the spot and kisses the fingertips, relishing the shudder this elicits.

"Survivor's guilt is stupid," Sherlock mutters.

John chuckles.

"What do you want to do?" Sherlock asks, studying John with his now sharpened gaze, long lashes framing his oddly coloured, dilated irises.

*He's beautiful,* John thinks, then wants to kick himself for not saying that out loud. Neither of them has had much in the way of such praise. Neither of them has had much of anything nice in their lives, period.  

> **Not as beautiful as you**, Sherlock tells him.

John's entire being melts into a smile. Of course, Sherlock had heard him. After eighteen years of being alone in his head it's easy to forget what's changed, especially since he never experienced any significant level of Ghost Drifting with Harry.

The statement about John's looks could have sounded like hyperbole, but Sherlock doesn't do empty gestures. It's just as John had told his brother: he doesn't think he's ever met a more honest person.

What John wants is to press as much of his skin against Sherlock's. He summons an image of the two of them, lying on their sides, arms around each other, his leg between Sherlock's, the thigh pressing up.

Although it's not in words, John receives a *yes* to his suggestion.
The bed is just wide enough for them to lie side by side. It's almost frighteningly intense to be this close to Sherlock and look him in the eye; John doesn't ever remember being able to really look at a partner, watch their expressions shift, while having sex. Never again will he use the expression 'making love' when referring to his past, because only now is he understanding the difference. A quick rut against a cubicle wall is all he'd thought he'd ever have, and that has nothing to do with love at all.

As though from mutual agreement, their upper hands reach down between them. There's a bit of fumbling at first as they try to work out who does what, but eventually John entwines his fingers with Sherlock's and brings their hands around both their cocks. A bit of lotion John digs out—given to him to keep his scar supple—helps as they begin stroking, momentarily shifting to thrusting into their joined hands, thumb tips gently touching as their joined hands form the perfect circle for chasing a release. Soon, they find a rhythm that works for both.

John presses his cheek to Sherlock's chest, giving a lick to the hardened nipple just within the reach of his mouth, then extends his arm which had been against the bed behind their heads so that he can card his fingers into Sherlock's hair as their hands continue a steady stroke. Sherlock's lower arm gets shoved under John's neck. This doesn't limit the movements of their hands or occasional hip thrusts too much.

John grunts as the pressure begins mounting to critical levels deep in his lower belly. Sherlock seems to pick up on this, because his grip loosens around the cocks, and he gives John's chest a slight shove. "Not yet, not yet, I want to—"

John halts his hand, leans closer for a kiss with a side order of tongues. "You want what?"

John sees a flash of petulance, but what radiates at him in his head is a bit of apprehension. "Don't make me say it," Sherlock warns him, closes his eyes as John reaches a hand behind him to pull him closer so that he can grab a handful of arse firmed up by basic training.

Normally, John would probably tease him gently for this bit of bashfulness, but right now that doesn't feel appropriate. What does seem appropriate, is giving a bit of a nudge to the proceedings with a carefully picked mental image.

"Acceptable," Sherlock instantly announces, cheeks gone slightly red from a sudden flush of arousal, and he turns so that he can stand up beside the bed. John scrambles to sit in the middle of it, feet planted on the floor and back against the wall. Sherlock brackets his knees between his own, then kneels on the mattress, before straddling John properly. Their cocks are trapped between their stomachs, but John resists the urge to grip his own and grabs his partner by the buttocks to get him close enough to slide a finger still slick from the lotion between the cheeks, beginning a gentle massage to prepare for entry. Sherlock's arms circle his shoulders, and his hand drops to his own cock to thumb the tip and coil down the shaft.

Sherlock bends his neck, drops his head towards his left shoulder as he chases his own release. Meanwhile, John breaches him with his forefinger, eliciting a shudder and a gasp. He can actually feel what Sherlock is experiencing at the same time as he starts sinking into the fathoms of his own pleasure as Sherlock continues what they'd been doing earlier; enveloping both their cocks in the circle of his hands. Soon, John has no idea if his name is being called in out words, or in thoughts – it doesn't matter, because neither is inferior or less real than the other. He is lost to anything but Sherlock's presence. He'd thought he knew everything there is to know about Drifting, but now he realises he'd been but a novice, after all, before Sherlock.

Soon, John has him gasping and grunting, and Sherlock's lust is making both their heads swim. After
fumbling around for the lotion again, John adds a second finger and continues the slow rhythm he'd adopted with just the first one in play. He continues until Sherlock starts shifting on his lap so that he can get his weight on his shins to raise his bottom from John's thighs. Then, he scoots forward, and guides John's cock in as he lowers himself to straddle his thighs again, eyes closed in concentration.

The sudden tight heat, soft friction and the very idea of how intimately they're joined right now nearly takes John over the edge instantly.

**Oh my God, fuck yes, God—**

**Shut up and help me move,** Sherlock commands.

John slides his hand underneath his bottom, and after a bit of shifting around they find just the right angle. Sherlock’s back goes taut as John's cock hits his prostate and he wraps his arms around John's neck for support.

John closes his eyes, and the darkness behind his lids is not empty but filled with a presence so all-encompassing that he wants to fling his own consciousness into its flames, burn away the final boundaries between them. They're both so close to coming, about to be completely lost in the ebb and flow of the rising pleasure.

John knows that when two pilots are joined together in the Drift, their control over a Jaeger is increased fourfold. Now, as they tumble over the edge of ecstasy together, he learns that so, too, is their Ghost-drifted climax.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"And this one?" Sherlock's fingertips gently drum a scar on John's thigh before reaching back to stroke the round line of his buttock. He grabs a handful of it to tug John closer. They'd managed to sleep on the narrow bed without waking each other up too many times with a poking limb.

John can't get enough of watching expression change on Sherlock's features, echoed by the ebb and flow of emotions he feels. It's like wading in a river, feeling the flow of the water changing constantly. He places a hand on his lover's cheek, stroking the sharp cheekbone with a butterfly-light touch. "Harry dared me to climb up a tree. Dad was livid; he didn't think it was decent for girls to be doing such things. He and Mum were—"

"—tediously and disastrously religious. You've explained." Sherlock rolls his eyes, then removes his hand from possessively kneading John's arse to rest on his flank instead.

John has learned that Sherlock hates it when people repeat things they have already said because, apparently, he thinks he always remembers everything he hears and sees.

John concludes his explanation: "The branch broke, a twig pierced the skin and I broke my collarbone."

Sherlock runs his finger along said bone until he finds a bump. "They didn't set it properly?"

"It didn't need setting. There's allowed to be quite a lot of dislocation before a kid needs surgery for it. The fracture hurt like hell, though." John swallows. He still remembers it like yesterday, begging his Mum to do something about it besides just cold compresses.

"I think Mycroft broke his, once. It didn't seem painful."
"Your parents probably didn't withold pain meds because they wanted to teach you a lesson for endangering your sister's virtue. And, some of the Elders were suspicious of medical science, thought that the government puts poison into vaccines, that sort of thing."

Sherlock looks shocked. "What the hell—"

"Just as——" John pinches the bridge of his nose. "—I've explained. Like Harry said on the day they threw her out, *fucking nutjob cultists.* He still feels guilty, calling his parents that, even after everything. It must be a strange form of Stockholm syndrome, still wanting to preserve the reputation of those who would deprive him of what he wants and needs in the name of a God John does not recognise as being the one living inside the pages of the Bible. Not that he ever really believed in any other kind, either; he had just been good at wanting to do so. "Mum and Dad never questioned the congregation council, which had to be consulted about everything, including where people were allowed to send their children to school and university. Like I said, medicine was usually shunned—Mum and Dad really weren't happy when I wanted to study it, but some of the Elders eventually saw the benefit of having a doctor of their own who could respect their beliefs, including no contraception and no abortions. That's why I really didn't mind joining the Corps—unless I broke relations with Mum and Dad along with the rest of that lot of zealots, I would never have been allowed to practice medicine with 21st century ethics if I'd gone back to do it. If I had to do it in their world, I preferred to not do it at all."

He remembers Sherlock's amazement at choosing to join an organisation that was only a bit less prejudiced about sexual diversity than the religious movement John's family had belonged to. "How did they feel about you serving in a military organisation, then?"

"I volunteered to go, but they didn't need that many people at first since there were only a handful of Jaegers. I didn't tell my parents that I'd done the aptitude tests. And, when the Conscription Officer showed up at my door, I was relieved— it sort of wasn't my decision, anymore. We joined voluntarily, but if the situation with the *kaiju* had been even a bit worse, they could have conscripted us. I told my parents that I was forced into it, and there was nothing they or the Elders could do to protest. Mum seemed so relieved when I wrote to her that it wasn't so bad, that Harry and I were doing okay. I think the PPDC changed Harry's life more than it did mine, let her come out of her shell."

"You just built a harder one. Did she ever see your parents again?"

"No. Harry had been kicked out of the congregation when I was in high school. The next morning after she handed Mum a letter in which she came out, Dad threw her out. She went to London to find work. Nobody she knew would talk to her anymore. I wrote her letters in secret."

"I'm sorry," Sherlock offers.

"When it comes to shitty childhoods, we're a pretty good match."

Sherlock rolls on top of John, coiling his long limbs protectively around him and tugging the blanket over the both of them. His warm weight feels wonderful.

*It feels like home.*

Neither of them is aroused any longer since both their needs have already been sated this morning, and it's actually the intimacy John can't get enough of, even more so than the sex. He loves the feeling of their cocks and adjoining parts pressing together, even soft and satisfied like this. After doing a quick clean-up of the evidence of their lovemaking, they had returned to John's bunk to hold each other, all items of clothing still forgotten on the floor.
It's still a novelty, a marvel that John gets to hold someone like this, to take his time to cuddle someone he had had sex with. After coming, the priority had always been to leave before someone notices, before the cubicle door got pounded on before someone happens to walk down the alley.

Sherlock is quiet, now. Thoughtful. John imagines feeling the electric hum of his brain as it tries to work out some problem that vexes him. There are frown lines crinkling the edges of his eyes; strange, how they are the same lines that appear when he's properly happy instead of just forcing the edges of his mouth up into a sneer-like fake smile. In John's head, when he's thinking this hard and not shielding, it feels like standing next to a beehive; static, frantic energy with a tinge of danger.

"Why would you ever need it?" Sherlock asks, his tone urgent and insistent. "The scar, I mean," he adds. "I still don't understand. I am not fond of these," he says, extends his elbow and frowns at the scarred veins.

"I thought I was paying back for surviving by not getting rid of that pain."

"Magical, irrational thinking," Sherlock judges and buries his nose in John's armpit, muttering something that sounds very approving.

John exhales forcibly to blow off some of Sherlock's ticklish curls from his cheek and lips. He then slides his hands down Sherlock's sides under the blanket. "Where's this from?" he asks after happening upon a long, raised, slit-like scar.

"Someone tried to collect a debt. I didn't think its value equalled my life."

His wording gives John pause. Isn't that exactly how he'd thought of his shoulder wound—that he was paying a debt in flesh to Harry?

*Magical, irrational thinking.* There has been so much clutter in their heads that has prevented them for reaching a life they want. Sherlock has had to banish the ideas put there by his childhood that nobody cares about him and he'll never amount to anything. John has had the baggage of his upbringing and the way he had built a cocoon out of self-denial during his PPDC years.

He can feel Sherlock curling his toes contentedly between his ankles. Sliding his hands downwards, he strokes the firm, round buttocks he finds, but pauses when even they are marred by faint scars.

"School. The use of corporal punishment in Korean schools began in the tenth century when the country adopted Tang Dynasty's Confucianism-based education system."

John finds the uncaring, downright dissociative tone with which Sherlock rattles off such trivia highly disturbing. "What did they—"

"A bamboo cane. Some of my classmates thought it hilarious repeatedly to stage me as the culprit of various pranks and misdemeanours. If the whole class blamed the same student—"

John wraps his hands around his waist and holds him tightly for a moment. He remembers what he'd said to the Marshal about Sherlock: *maybe he never had anyone to protect or defend him.* "I thought Amnesty got that global ban on corporal punishment hammered though in the UN ages ago," he argues.

"Nobody looks very carefully at the elite schools as long as they produce results."

"I want to say I'm sorry," John offers, "But when it comes to either our pasts, that's all we'd ever be saying to each other."
Sherlock nods, shifts his hips and reaches down to readjusted himself; maybe his balls had been pressed too tight against John's sweaty thighs? John loosens his grip a little.

"A year ago, I would never have bothered to consider such a thing, since for me it didn't even seem to exist," Sherlock muses. "But now, I would very much prefer to think about the future instead of the past."

Chapter End Notes

**Author's notes:**
I promise that the lotion was hypoallergenic and of high quality. I'm sure the commissary sells proper lube for their future needs. And, being intelligent people, they are being STD-safe. Remember your condoms, people, if you don't have such a guarantee of your partner's status!

**Firing the canon:**
Oh, *who cares.* *floats on a cloud of pornsy triumphant bliss*

On second thought, I will mention that the story of Stacker Pentecost is told in the first movie. He is played by the amazing Idris Elba.

**Writing soundtrack for this chapter:**
Vienna Teng: [Level Up](#)
Hurts: [Surrender](#)
Anna Calvi: [Desire](#)
Katy Perry: [E.T.](#)
John is startled out of a nap by a loud noise.

It takes him a moment to realise it's the Battle Alarm.

He nearly falls off his bunk as he scrambles to his feet and shoves up his sleeve to check whether this is a drill. A few taps of his finger, and he can see the War Clock, expecting to see it adding seconds to the quite high count of time passed without a *kaiju* incident.

The War Clock has stopped.

The War Clock is red, and it has stopped.

There’s a moment of hazy panic, then experience and training start kicking in and John runs to the locker next to the door, flinging the door open so violently that it bangs loudly against the wall.

An announcement sounds through the door to the corridor—the loudspeaker in John’s room has been broken for a year,*must get it fixed ASAP if we’re back to this happening*—commanding all on-duty LOCCENT and technical personnel to their posts, and for the pilots to make their way to the Underdome’s launch level.

John works on autopilot as he discards his shorts and T-shirt, trying not to think of Harry. It's easier now than it has ever been because the need to think about Sherlock is much more acute. John had last seen him an hour earlier, headed to first get his wrist console serviced and then to the Command level to file his seventh application for a double room. Sherlock fills out one per month just to spite those who could change this rule if they wanted to, sending an electronic copy of each form to his brother. Maybe one day, these small acts of rebellion might bring on changes in the Corps. Sherlock invariably sees any and all shortcomings of the PPDC as his brother’s responsibility and any bit bad PR as a way to spite the Marshal. There have already been some articles in prominent papers after their Ravager assignment investigating the position and treatment of sexual minorities within the PPDC. It hadn't taken long for word to get to the press that the pilot team of the Corps' newest and finest Jaeger is an all-male couple; sometimes John wonders if Sherlock hadn't been the one to provide the media with that bit of trivia.

What had he thought of when the alarm had gone off, and a glance at the War Clock revealed that this is real? Is Sherlock in his own room, now, putting on his quite new and thus stiff-in-the-joints battle armour?

John raises his chest plate vest above his head and lets it slide down his arms. When it's adjusted into the right position, the pneumatic clasps close automatically, moulding it to his body in the most comfortable possible way without compromising structural integrity. Crossing his hands and reaching them to opposite shoulders, he attaches the shoulder guards to their magnetically sealed joints. It still feels odd not to feel a twinge of pain when putting his left arm through its paces like this.

*Healed, but not forgotten.*
Just like his memories of Harry.

Without Sherlock by his side, John would never have agreed to go through a battle simulation based on the *kaiju* encounter that had taken his sister's life. John had handled it fine—or so he had thought—until the simulation had ended. When the adrenaline dissipated, he couldn't calm himself down. Hands shaking, cold sweat pouring in, he was left hyperventilating, leaning his palms against the wall. Sherlock had left the room moments earlier to get some water, and John had foolishly believed he could conceal his distress from his partner in the commotion of coming out of the neural handshake. When Sherlock hurried back with two bottles made out of recycled dense cardboard in hand—the PPDC has banned plastic ones for environmental reasons—he nearly dropped them when he saw John.

Sherlock called out his name through their connection, trying to gauge what was going on; John could offer no other reply that a simple shook of his head. That was all that was needed; Sherlock understood. After all, he has experienced, second-hand, what it had been like to lose Harry, for her and John's connection to be severed so violently. John is certain the thought has crossed his mind that it could happen again.

Maybe Sherlock somehow sensed that his partner needed something concrete, something real with which he could ground himself, so he held out a hand, and John took it. Sherlock pulled him into an embrace, surrounding him with his body and flooding the torrent of John's anxiety with a resolute calmness.

It did not matter if Colleen saw them. Everyone knew. She'd been one of the first to find out, and she has been nothing but supportive. 'I knew it, I think,' she told them, and that was that.

After holding on to Sherlock like a life line for several minutes, John could finally speak. "We did well," he said, voice hoarse, breathing still off. He tried to count his breaths, to regulate them to a rate of ten per minute. He's a doctor, he knows how hyperventilation works, but it hardly helps him to prevent it when he gets overwhelmed.

"We won," Sherlock confirms. "Just like you did. You and Harry. I've read seven analyses of the scenario, and Harry's efforts were instrumental in ensuring your survival. You won, together."

John opened his mouth to protest that Harry hardly won if she lost her life, but then he realised that Sherlock is right: without their joint efforts, they could not have weakened the *kaiju* enough that John would have been able to finish it off while trying not to pass out from the strain of piloting alone.

Harry hadn't sacrificed herself for him. She'd done what they went out there to do—fight. She'd given her life for the Corps. For *everyone*. To think that she'd done it just for John would be egotistical.

He doesn't owe her anything else than to *live*.

Besides, Harry was never one to meditate on such high ideals. *'Pretentious noble bullshit,'* is what she usually said after listening to the speeches at every big ceremony at the Hawaii base. *'Those fuckwads with their arses shoved full of medals would shit in their pants if they saw an actual kaiju.'*

John suddenly giggled hysterically into Sherlock's shoulder.

"God, Harry was really something."

"You miss her," Sherlock said, pulling John along to sit on a bench.

*I'm not trying to replace her,* he added.
In Sherlock’s eyes there was a question. Rather than try to plunge the depths of John’s psyche, he seemed to acknowledge the fragility of the moment.

"I'll worry about you," John said and looked into those inquisitive, concerned eyes. "I'll worry about you every time we deploy."

"I'll worry about you, too."

How had that not occurred to John? He had worried about Harry and Harry about him, but they had both been so good at pretending nothing could ever happen to them. Until it did. He won't be able to adopt that God complex ever again, that fantasy that a Jaeger can never become a coffin; needing to guarantee Sherlock's safety will be something he'll struggle with because he can't pretend anymore.

Sherlock took his empty cup and put it away. It had felt odd, him looking after John like this, especially considering where they had started from—John being his physician. They both still have lessons to learn about reciprocity. About trust.

"Thank you," John said.

They both knew it was for much more than just two decilitres of iodine-smelling water. Others may think that John has done most of the heavy lifting on this journey, but he's pretty damned determined to help Sherlock prove to everyone that they're perfectly balanced halves of a whole, more than the sum of their parts.

*Parts. Armour!* He needs to find a pair of bloody socks! Otherwise his feet will be blistered to hell by the armoured boots. He grabs a pair from the laundry basket, nearly trips over himself as he quickly pulls them on, then quickly dons the rest of his armour.

He hurries out of his room and runs down the western perimeter corridor to the back lifts—a small, separate set reserved just for the pilots. He unlocks the lift controls with his wrist console just as Sherlock sprints in to join him. He's a formidable sight in full gear.

They exchange a nod.

"Got your console fixed?" John asks, watching Sherlock bend his neck in both directions to make it easier for him to pry his neck curls out from being pinched under the neoprene neck seal of the undersuit.

"They gave me a temporary replacement. The technician thought that it, too, was malfunctioning when the War Clock reset the zero."

"I never noticed back then that they reset it before sounding the alarm."

"Maybe they don't, and some recent recruit messed up."

John is slightly amused at Sherlock's snooty tone which completely disregards the fact that he is still a relatively recent recruit himself.

Despite the banter, they're both on edge. No one knows yet how containable this threat is. How will the *kaiju* have evolved during their absence, and will humanity's answer match that? What size will it be? What are its weaknesses? Where is it heading? Will there be civilians there needing protection and thus forcing pilots to split their concentration? Can the Ravager withstand what the Intercept couldn't?
John can sense the frantic pace at which Sherlock’s thoughts are going through these same issues, and the sharp focus he finds there helps him feel less nervous; with Sherlock’s brain and his experience, they should be nicely covered for whatever is out there.

Still... it's a kaiju! Horror mixes with anticipation. A thirst for revenge flirts with duty.

They step into the lift and turn to face the doors. Sherlock programs in the access code for the Launch level and turns his head so that the retinal scanner can see his eyes. John feels him reach out, seeking to strengthen their connection. After a Drift, he tends to take a moment for himself; the experience is obviously more intense for him than it is for many other pilots. But, after he has done that, he always wants to reconnect with John in other ways, and they both find great reassurance in the other's physical presence. The initiation of the neural bridge is no longer a slideshow of the worst moments of both their lives because they’ve created so many new ones. Good ones. Ghost drifting while scuba diving at Princess Alice Bank together. Sitting in Sherlock’s lap and kissing him on one of the upper gun decks after the Ravager team announcement. The agonizingly slow, tight heat of breaching Sherlock as he rode John after their first time going out with the Jaeger.

If John wants to be accurate, he should not treat the Ravager as a separate entity. The two of them are the Ravager, and it is a more potent emblem of their union than any ring or ceremony could be. Two halves of one consciousness. A union.

He watches Sherlock slip on his gloves. They're thinner than any other part of the armour since they need the dexterity to grip the upper limb control consoles. It can get cold in the Conn-Pod if there's a fracture to its graphene-enforced armoured glass and the Jaeger has a long trek back, so skipping the wearing of gloves is not an option.

"Think I'll get a new collectible card?" John asks, tone mock-serious.

"If you do, I hope it's got a better haircut than the old one. I think I'll send a copy of mine to Mycroft with an autograph. You do know there's one of him?"

John chuckles and adjusts the wrist straps of his own gloves. They need to be adjusted perfectly; otherwise there might end up being a crease underneath the wrist clamps which will result in chafing.

Sherlock is watching him, looking slightly hesitant. "I can't help wondering... You've seen your fair share of these things and the death and destruction left behind. Are you absolutely sure you want to see some more?" he asks.

"God, yes," John replies and every bit of the proud conviction in his voice in genuine. "And it's pretty fucking late to be asking me that. Stop second-guessing us, Ranger Holmes."

"I'm not. Just wanting to gauge your mental state. Isn't that what co-pilots do?"

"Well, what about you, then? I'm guessing you no longer want to let the world burn?" John teases. It has become their private joke, employed especially when Sherlock gets bored and snarky. So many difficult things they used to keep hidden in their own heads have now been softened, put into perspective by sharing them.

"You're in this world, so that would be a no."

John lets his arms hang by his sides and shakes his wrists; it's his ritual of mental preparation for walking into the Conn-Pod.

The tinny voice of the automated elevator announces their arrival at Underdome Launch Level.
As the doors slide open, John glances at Sherlock. "Ready?"

A triumphant smile lights his co-pilot's face. "Lead the way."

— THE END —

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
The boys and girls of the world now have two (more or less new) Rangers to look up to. This means, of course, that new trading cards are due! After I created John's old one, and one for Sherlock, the insatiable 7PercentSolution insisted that John's card should get an update, too. I bet the old one is now an expensive collector's item. Surely there aren't that many Rangers who have returned to active service after being side-lined for nearly twenty years?

So, I give you... the Rangers of the Reichenbach Ravager (and a bonus Mycroft):
Ranger
Sherlock Holmes

PPDC Jaeger Corps
Dossier: Sherlock Holmes

Full name
William Sherlock Scott Holmes

D.O.B.
6th Jan 2011

Jaeger
Reichenbach Ravager

Co-pilot
John Watson

Kaiju eliminated
2

Most memorable kill:
"Touro", 2042

Shatterdome
Atlantic

Status
Active service
Dossier: John WATSON

Full name
John Hamish Watson

D.O.B.
1st Sept 2001

Jaeger
Reichenbach Ravager

Co-pilot
Harriet Watson (2021-23)
Sherlock Holmes (2041-)

Kaiju eliminated
8

Most memorable kill:
"Shi Unmei", 2023

Shatteredome
Atlantic

Status
Active service
Firing the canon:
Who even cares at this point, it's done and they're awesome. Just look at my Ranger boys!

Roll credits tunes:
Sia: Alive
Parademics: Pacific Rim Epic Orchestral Cover

A note on the future of this 'verse:
Rangers Holmes and Watson will return. To ensure that you get to join their next adventure, you'll need to click on the author subscription buttons of not just yours truly, but also AnyaWen and 7PercentSolution. There will be more trading cards, too...

End Notes
Works inspired by this one:

- [Cover] Drift Compatible by allsovacant
- [Art] Implant by ChicxulubZero
- [Podfic] Drift Compatible by Lockedinjohnlock

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