A Dozen Different Hours

by o2doko

Summary

A not-so routine kidnapping provides the great Sherlock Holmes with a case unlike any he’s handled before: a race against a clock which obeys no set rule of Time; a world consisting of other people’s conflicting realities; and a search for a girl whom he’s only encountered between the pages of a storybook … [ACD Sherlock Holmes x Alice in Wonderland steampunk crossover, originally written for the Holmes Big Bang 2010 challenge.]

Notes

Note: You can enjoy this story even if you haven’t read the books it’s based off of. However, knowledge of the original texts is a definite advantage to understanding various references and the logic behind my interpretations of the characters. Lewis Carroll’s works are short and available for free online via the Gutenberg Project (see user info for links). And if you haven’t read Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories yet, skip on down to your bookstore and snag a few. You’ll thank me later.

Warnings: drug abuse; kidnapping; implied child abuse; slavery; the fictional presence of historical people; homosexual relationships; Steampunk (the presence of mechanical technology where it historically shouldn’t be); dark imagery; dark humor; absurdist behavior; occasional swearing; and plenty of questionable ethics and extreme moral ambiguity.

There are three gorgeous pieces of art for this story, provided by ptelefolone @ LJ. You can view them here: http://ptelefolone.livejournal.com/18796.html

See the end of the work for more notes.
Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."
"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen.

"The horror of that moment," the King went on, "I shall never never forget!"
"You will, though," the Queen said, "if you don't make a memorandum of it."

His name, or one of his names, is Lewis Carroll. We've never met, and yet I know him intimately - everyone does. He's thirty-two, or he was thirty-two, or something rather like that. And he's greying now (though he isn't greying now), and of course I don't mean his hair. Don't judge him too harshly for this; you would be greying, too, if you'd gone through what he's about to.

He has a peculiar habit of sitting motionless at his writing desk, gazing into the backwards depths of the mirror on the wall. He's at it now, in fact. His pale hands with their bitten-down nails are folded meticulously on the scarred surface before him, his shabby gown ill-fitting enough not to cover his bony wrists with its threadbare sleeves. Outside, it's winter - inside, too, but the cheerless hearth is dark and provides no warmth. He's probably been sitting there a while; his green eyes barely blink, and then only slowly, as though under the influence of a drug or a dream.

He doesn't react to their arrival when the officers burst through the door, crowding in with unnecessary violence. Maybe he predicted it, or maybe he just doesn't care. They salivate for him, though, and bark their useless words like over-excited dogs. There are only two syllables in the whole cacophony that mean anything, and at last they seem to ferret them out; they hold on to the word like a bone, trumpeting it, over and over - "Alice! Alice!" It's certainly the only word he hears.

He told me after (or was it before?) that the cold metal bracelets felt like judgment against his wrists; and he goes without protest when they pull him away, even though they've caught him for the wrong crime.

'Where's Alice?' he wonders as they hustle him down the stairs.

"Where's Alice?" they howl at him furiously as they shove him into the waiting Maria. Tomorrow the newspapers will demand it in their bold black headlines, and all of London will query each other about it while they sip their afternoon tea.

*Where's Alice? Where's Alice?*

Well. Wouldn't you like to know?
One Week Later

One week later.

"And still no trace of her," Watson muses quietly to himself. It's little more than an exhalation, almost lost beneath the dead-leaf rustle of the newspaper as he folds it and lays it aside (tragedy neatly typed and contained and regulated to 'fire-starter.') Holmes hears it, though, as there's no other sound in the room save that of the clock. The detective's restless eyes flicker towards his friend for only a second - there on the tick, gone on the tock - but the words appear to have awoken him from his meditative stupor. He toys with his pipe a moment, as though finally aware that it isn't lit and hasn't been for the past half hour.

"Can they talk of nothing else?" Holmes wonders vaguely. There's no irritation in the words. He's not inclined to spare even that.

The doctor throws him a glance that would be disapproving, if only Holmes would acknowledge it. "He's a children's author," Watson finally points out, settling for resignation. "It's caused quite the sensation."

Holmes doesn't respond, arms spilling listlessly over the sides of his chair as his eyes lose focus again. Watson knows the signs, as he knows it's useless to try and forestall the mood they herald. But he's an optimist and so he tries anyway. "Lestrade has been assigned to the case," he offers, smiling a little with attempted humor. "Seems the poor man is quite at his wit's end." He pauses for the bantering volley he's served up so well, but it doesn't come -- so with a disappointed frown he finishes half-heartedly, "It's a sure bet that he will approach you about the matter, sooner or later."

"I expected him yesterday," Holmes sighs, "which means he'll probably come tomorrow."

There's a tailor-made remark there about not living up to expectations, but the detective's mood is extracting a toll from both of them and neither reaches for it. "And will you assist him?" Watson asks instead, studying his friend carefully. It's an argument they almost-had yesterday.

"Certainly not. There's no stimulus nor enlightenment to be found in dredging rivers for the bodies of dead children."

Those last two words cut the doctor, not because of what they are, but because of what they aren't in Holmes' clinical, bored tone. Holmes affects not to see this, because it is not something he wishes to observe; but he has the grace not to imitate surprise when Watson abruptly pushes himself to his feet.

"I think I'll go for a walk," he announces tonelessly. He isn't expecting an answer and he doesn't get one, though he can't quite resist shutting the door harder than necessary on his way out.

Inspector Lestrade is climbing out of a cab as Watson steps down into the street. "Is -?" he begins when he recognizes the doctor, a hand outstretched in nervous inquiry.

"Yes. He's in his study," Watson replies shortly, biting back the but don't bother with some little effort. He hurries on, then, wanting to distance himself from the pending scene. I can't blame him; it's bound to be horribly boring.

Lestrade is perhaps the only Londoner I've met who manages to be late and early at the same time, and that's an admirable thing. He looks pale and drawn, more anxious and irritable than usual. Obviously, the case is weighing heavily on his mind. His presence at 221b Baker Street has enough regularity and routine in its makeup that he doesn't bother with the bell, simply pushes the door open
and disappears into the foreshadows of frustrated disappointment.

Watson shoves his hands deep into his coat pockets and presses forward.

It's not terribly late, but it is terribly cold. The dregs of a recent snowstorm collect in muddied, grey heaps around the angles of forlorn-looking buildings and in the crevices of rutted streets. His agitated breathing, first from anger, later from exertion, smokes out before him in a hazy cloud - as white as the snow isn't. His leg knows the season, and gives him pain; it is a source of endless frustration for him. One of many.

The doctor arrives at the park almost without realizing it, for his feet have a way of guiding him when his mind is working through other things. He comes here often - occasionally in the company of the detective, but more frequently on his own. He finds solace in this place. What kind and why is anyone's guess. It's doubtful if even he knows. But there's the routine, of course. With these men, there is always a routine. He'll pick out the gnarled tree he likes in that copse over there and lean against it. The tree is old, and he isn't, yet the knots in its twisted branches resemble the braids of scar tissue in his hands: decorations and mementos of the many different wars he’s fought in his lifetime. These hands are older than he is. I wonder what he'll do the day they outgrow him. They’re present now, though, throbbing a little with the cold but still precise and fluid as they sift with nervous energy through the contents of his pockets. This is part of the routine, too.

One by one, Watson withdraws the items and looks over them carefully, as though he can't remember ever having seen them before - as though one day he put on a coat that wasn't his and found himself suddenly in possession of the detritus that marked someone else's life. He collects this wayward dander in the palm of one hand while the other dives for more, fingers cradled and cupped to protect his loot from the curious wind. Tailor receipts, restaurant bills, the stubs of train tickets. Everyday things, most of them bearing at least one notation in his own precise handwriting. (Well, he could hardly chase after ne'er-do-wells with his notebook tucked under one arm, could he?) Occasionally he'll pause longer than usual over an item, because occasionally what he finds really wasn't left there by him.

Sherlock Holmes rarely puts things in his own pockets. Coats, jackets, pants – often empty of all but lint and shadow and sometimes his long, restless fingers. And yet, not everything bears throwing away. Luckily, the detective is a resourceful man. There's always somewhere else to safely deposit such things.

Watson turns these items over carefully between his sun-worn fingers, looking at them as though they were the leaves of some strange, exotic plant. He thinks he saves them in case they're wanted later. I think he saves them in case they're clues to a puzzle only he desires to solve. A curious amount of import is placed on such wayward, physical things. Is identity hidden in the curves and spirals of half-seen fingerprints? Are hearts visible in the loops and curves of handwriting? Perhaps, instead of white-sheeted specters, our ghosts lie in the scattered dregs we leave behind: papers and clothes and pieces of jewelry collecting in the dusty, grey corners of forlorn-looking rooms. In the worn crevices of rutted streets.

A legacy of comings and goings and useless nothings that are somehow dear, pressed between the pages of scrapbooks no one looks at, recorded in all the Dear Diaries no one ever reads.

Sherlock Holmes does not keep a diary. He has never so much as sat for a photograph, and he stridently eludes the press' best efforts to memorialize him in their type and their black-and-white stills. But he has something better: a curator, a dramatist. A partner who presses his forgotten ticket stubs between his fingers as though they were exotic leaves.
It's like trying to lay bare a mystery that has not yet occurred. Like looking at the ghost of someone still breathing.

Now do you understand what kind of story this is going to be?
The Walk

March 7th, 1896

The walk softened my hardness towards him, as I knew it would. My reaction was unfair. I know my friend means no maliciousness or indelicacy by the things he says, and is a slave himself to the whims of his restless and feverish mind. Were he prey to the same emotions and sympathies that so often ensnare me, he would be a man of Inspector Lestrade's cut and character: a hound of Scotland Yard. That is not the path for him. I mean no disrespect for the good constables and detectives who work under the name of that illustrious office, but I cannot help but shudder at the thought of my friend chained to their bureaucracy, muzzled by their protocol. He has a way of working that is unique to him, and so he must pursue the directions that lend themselves best to his methods. I, who have so often delighted in the observation of his work, would be a hypocrite now to judge him.

And yet, I wish that he'd pursue the case - if not in the interests of the missing child, then at least for his own sake. As of late, even his violin gives him no joy. He has forgone his peculiar experiments for his old perch on the sofa in the study and the younger, more dangerous vice at his disposal. Yesterday he worked like a madman, possessed with a supernatural, frenzied energy almost demonic in nature; even without the lethargy that followed, I’d know the source of his unusual stamina.

Well, it is not my business to judge him, even in this. Still, I fervently hope that some interesting case will find its way to our door, and soon. Without gainful employment, my quick and clever housemate becomes a brooding specter of himself: thinner, paler, more withdrawn, haunting the study rather than occupying it. How he scoffs at my attempts to divert him! We played chess two days ago, but I must confess I was poor sport. He won three games in quick succession and, without the presentation of a worthy challenge, soon lost interest. "My dear Watson, you are ever the soldier but never, I fear, the general," he sighed, and then he slipped away from me again.

Occasionally, when I myself am feeling particularly morose, I cannot help but wonder if there will ever come a time when nothing will be remarkable enough to catch his interest. It is ever the hazard of the intrepid explorer. Once each path has been walked, every stone overturned, what then? When all the mysteries in his world are solved and all the peculiarities of crime explained, what will become of the great Sherlock Holmes?
"A lawyer?" Holmes wonders out loud, turning the little white calling card over in search of an explanation. His tone is skeptical, as is the glance he throws the page-boy. The youth merely shrugs.

"Isn't he the gentleman currently handling Carroll's defense?" Watson offers quietly, taking the card when Holmes extends it towards him. "Yes, I'm sure of it. His name appears in the papers almost as much as the author's does."

"Will we never hear the end of this?" Holmes sighs, but he reaches for his pipe - a sign of acquiescence. The boy hurries downstairs to show the gentleman up.

Edward Wyatt is a somber man of medium height, young but stressed with the momentous task laid out before him. There are streaks in his fine blonde hair that are either sun-bleached or prematurely silver, and there's no question that his writing-room pallor is accustomed to looking out windows rather than in.

Routines, routines: Sherlock Holmes is tired and he holds onto his like a handrail, though of course he's made it look effortless enough that no one notices. Invite the gentleman to sit on one, assure him as to Watson's faithful presence at two; make a few casually startling observations at three to win his confidence, and by four he's sitting back in his customary position to listen to the man's story. None the wiser.

Only it isn't his own story that the man has come to tell, and Mr. Wyatt appears more uneasy than reassured by the detective's offhand deductions.

"Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Holmes. I assure you that I won't take but a moment of your time. I'm here on behalf of my client, whom you've no doubt read about already in the papers - Mr. Lewis Carroll? He is, of course, at present quite unable to come on his own but has implored me to visit in his stead, wanting to communicate with you in person rather than by letter - if vicariously." He smiles nervously, though Holmes' attitude remains unchanged.

"Mr. Carroll has just recently informed me that he does, in fact, possess knowledge as to the whereabouts of the missing child - something he had previously denied to all authorities, myself included. However, he has claimed that he will not disclose this information to anyone but yourself, owing to its ... peculiar nature."

"I am in no way acquainted with Mr. Carroll, nor am I associated with this case," Holmes responds evenly.

"Yes, sir, I am aware. I believe it is owing to your success as a consulting detective that he wishes to speak with you. He has communicated to me in private that he believes you are the only person capable of finding Alice, wherever it is she's gone."

Holmes' gaze flickers towards Watson - there on the tick, gone on the tock - though he doesn't look particularly moved. Mr. Wyatt shifts uneasily in the stretch of silence that follows.

"Mr. Holmes, if I may?" he ventures uncertainly. "Scotland Yard has been entirely unable to make headway in this investigation, and Mr. Carroll will not assist them. He claims that their intentions are good, but that they are not capable of following where she's gone. I don't know what that means, sir, but if there's any way you could assist ... Mr. Carroll is quite convinced her life depends upon it."

Mr. Wyatt is peering anxiously at the detective and doesn't notice the way Watson's shoulders stiffen.
Holmes pretends not to.

"He has reason to believe she's still alive, then?" he asks, unmoved.

"Yes. However, he is convinced that it is only a matter of time. ... Will you at least agree to meet with him? I have spoken with the warden, and it would be a simple thing to arrange. After you've heard what my client has to say, then you will, of course, be at liberty to decide whether or not to pursue the matter further. But he is quite firm in his decision not to speak on the issue to anyone but yourself."

Holmes had steepled his fingers together while he listened, and he taps them now, slow and thoughtful. The lawyer does not know the man and continues to anxiously search his blank face; the doctor knows him rather well, and he watches the play of those long, thin hands instead.

"I will give the matter some consideration, and forward you my decision by this evening," Holmes says finally, threading his fingers together. "That is the most I can promise for the moment. I hope it is sufficient."

There's a quick flicker in the man's blue eyes that suggests it isn't, but he's a lawyer, after all, and he smiles when he offers Holmes his hand. "Thank you. I shall anxiously await your communication."

"Well; that was rather unexpected," Holmes drawls when they are alone again, rippling the silence that eddies in the lawyer's wake. He reaches for his pipe and begins to fill the bowl. Watson fails to comment. Holmes is a little surprised at his silence and glances at him when he has the match lit, there on the -

"You will go and hear what the man has to say, won't you?" the doctor cuts in abruptly, staring at the tiny flame.

Holmes lights the bowl and puts out the match, teeth clamping down into familiar grooves. "I can't quite figure out the strange attachment you have for this investigation," he muses quietly with his first exhalation of smoke. Watson blinks: once, twice, trying to see through the effervescent barrier that now hovers between them. "It is obviously the child that has you so concerned, and yet I cannot help but wonder why this child. You are not a father. You are not an uncle. Children go missing every day, but you do not fold back the paper to those stories and leave them sitting suggestively on my tea tray. If I am to consider taking this case, I shall also have to consider whether or not to ask you along in my investigations; and before I do, I should rather like to know just what has you so invested."

Watson stares back at him for a long moment, struggling over the words. He doesn't know how to say that it isn't really the girl he's worried about without saying it isn't really the girl I'm worried about, and that has him at a loss. He's convinced of Holmes' nobility, but knows better than to try and appeal to it. This matter wants more familiar hooks, then, though he fumbles a little in reaching for them.

"You've commented on more than one occasion that the cases which seem the most straight-forward often end up being the most complex. Do you remember the incident of the Blue Carbuncle? How is it that a man's missing hat was enough to rouse your curiosity then, but the disappearance of an innocent child is not enough to do so now?" Holmes' gaze remains bland, but there's an obvious tension in the line of his jaw that reveals he's biting down on the pipe much harder than necessary, and he doesn't look away.

"You have done your best to avoid this case, almost to the point of obstinacy. And yet, despite your best efforts, the matter has now twice appealed to you directly. If you would prefer to languish here in your chemical stupor, then by all means. But it seems appallingly out-of-character for you to
ignore a lead as promising as this."

At the words 'chemical stupor,' the very edge of Holmes’ mouth curls the way it does when he's solved a riddle. "You wish to see me gainfully employed again."

Watson frowns slightly. What's obvious to Holmes is generally a mystery to him, but even more mystifying is when it happens the other way around. "Of course," he agrees without protest, maybe even with relief. "You've been sorely wanting for activity. I expect Mrs. Hudson to put us out on the street any day."

Holmes laughs and leans back in his chair, comfortably on stable footing again. "Mm, yes, and we both know how trying it would be for you to lose her cooking."

"Trying for us both," Watson points out, relaxing a little, too. He hasn't the faintest idea what it is they've just avoided, but he'd felt it brush his shoulder as it barreled past: dark, cold and menacing. "If we leave, you may have to submit to my own preparations."

"God forbid. Alright, then, Doctor, you win. Tomorrow we'll take a little trip downtown and see just what it is Mr. Carroll has to tell us."

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Carroll has sat in that very chair before, during many hushed, terse interviews with his lawyer, but he has a way of looking at his surroundings as though he's seeing them for the first time. The pocket watch of his visitor assures us that it's late afternoon, but there aren't any windows to confirm it and there's a midnight quality to the sooty oil lamp sitting on the table. Strange, how completely people are willing to forsake their own senses in favor of a few gears and springs.

It's difficult to tell whether the author is being overly fidgety, or whether he simply appears that way because the man seated across from him is almost preternaturally still.

The links on Carroll's handcuffs rattle as he twists his thin wrists and one of his pant legs rides a little higher than the other, revealing a pale patch of skin a color I believe is called 'academia'. I brush my tail against it when I slip under the table to listen. An accident, of course, but his startled jump is highly satisfying. The detective cocks an eyebrow at him in silent inquisition, but even his brilliant brother would've been hard-pressed to deduce the cause of Carroll's unease.

"Th-th-thank you for meeting with me, Mr. Holmes, despite these peculiar cir-cumstances." His voice is high and thin, laced with his nervous stutter, and it's a good thing the only other sound in the room is the indifferent chatter of the watch or the detective might not have been able to hear him.

"It is precisely these peculiar circumstances that convinced me to see you, Mr. Carroll," Holmes responds as he lounges back in his uncomfortable wooden chair, apparently at ease with his surroundings. I do rather admire that about him; he so rarely appears ruffled. "Now. Perhaps you would find it best to start at the beginning."

"In this -- In this particular situation, the beginning is somewhat h-h-hard to come by," Carroll warns uneasily. But he begins anyway. "As I'm sure you're aware, I-I-I am a teacher by profession, known on occasion to author various pieces of poetry and a few children's stories. The most familiar of my repertoire and, indeed, the most relevant to our purposes here, are Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and its sequel: Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Saw There. I-I-I don't suppose you yourself have ever had o-occasion to read them?" He sounds almost hopeful at the question, absurd as the suggestion is.
"I'm sorry, Mr. Carroll, but as a bachelor without a niece or nephew I've had no occasion to indulge in children's fiction." To his credit Holmes doesn't sound scornful, though I suspect he is.

The author deflates a little in his disappointment. "If you are to take the case, Mr. Holmes, I strongly encourage you to familiarize yourself with both v-volumes. Y-you see ... the Alice in the stories is the very same Alice that has g-gone missing." His face pinches at the mention of her name, his tone twists - how could any man think him guilty? Maybe Holmes is moved by the display or maybe he isn't; his expression never changes.

"I had suspected as much from the titles, Mr. Carroll. Please, continue."

"Th-th-they're fantasy books, Mr. Holmes. Nonsense, really. Only stories meant to amuse children, and yet ... a-at-at the risk of sounding completely insane and losing credibility with you entirely ... I must caution you now that everything set down in their pages is true." He takes a steadying breath to fortify himself. Holmes merely blinks. "Alice told me the tales of her adventures in Wonderland and Looking Glass World, and I set them down with her permission. I thought other children would enjoy the fruits of her incredible imagination. I myself never realized that she was simply t-telling me the truth of her experiences, and not merely relating the diversions she used to-to amuse herself between studies ... children are extraordinary creatures, Detective! It seems you've not spent much time in their company, but I can assure you that their minds are fertile, w-w-wondrous places. I take great pleasure in speaking with them and hearing their stories. B-b-but the most peculiar attribute they possess is the ability to accept the extraordinary as commonplace. Alice was so sure and matter-of-fact about her adventures, but then, that's hardly strange. Children usually are. I swear to you that I had no idea until ..." He hesitates longer than usual, continuing only at Holmes' slight gesture of encouragement. "... Until I began to see the things she spoke of myself."

Up to this point, Lewis Carroll had exhibited very little strength of character; but there's a defiance in the look he throws Sherlock Holmes now, the righteous indignation of someone who knows he's telling the truth and who is already certain that it will be perceived as a lie.

"What sort of 'things'?" Holmes asks quietly, his expression peaceably neutral.

"Th-th-the creatures she spoke of. The ... well, 'things' is really the only way to describe them."

"And you believe these creatures had a hand in Alice's disappearance?"

"More than a hand in it, Mr. Holmes ... they've taken her. When Alice was in Looking Glass World, she disrupted the balance. She became queen of a chess set that already had a queen, and now those p-p-peculiar people are bent on restoring order again. They've kidnapped Alice, and I do believe they mean to kill her. "This particular shade of white is called 'sheer terror.' Note the difference?"

"I don't quite follow what you mean by 'chess set.'"

Carroll shakes his head impatiently. "You must read the books, it's all there - read the books and know what I tell you, that they are behind this! The inspectors are looking for Alice, Mr. Holmes, but they won't be able to find her because she's not here. She's in Wonderland."

"And you believe that I will be able to find the girl even though the other inspectors are not capable of doing so? Why is that?"

"Finding Wonderland is only as difficult as seeing what lies before you for what it really is. I-I-I speak of it as though it were a world separate from ours, but that's-but that's not really correct; it is here. It co-exists with our world, like ... a sheet of tracing paper overlaying an original drawing, do you understand? But we've trained ourselves, through logic and rationale, to not see what we do
"However, I’ve heard that you are different. I’ve read of your cases, in the papers and in your friend’s memoirs. I consider you to be an imminently rational man, and yet nonetheless you are capable of seeing a thing for what it really is -- not only what you expect it to be. That’s how you find Wonderland, M-mr. Holmes. By facing it and not attempting to rationalize it into something that it isn’t."

Holmes steeples his long fingers together again, staring sightlessly at the table as he loses himself in thought. It is obvious that he’s struggling to resist the lure of the unique. For all the strange cases he's become involved with in the long years of his consulting career, this is certainly the first time anyone has implored him to hunt a fairytale villain through a secret world no one else can see. Carroll watches him as anxiously as the lawyer had earlier, though neither of them is very good at deductions themselves and the author sees as little as his employee had.

"You say these two worlds co-exist," Holmes begins finally, lifting his shrewd gaze to Carroll once more. "Therefore it stands to reason that these people have a presence somewhere here in ... 'our' London, yes? Do you know who or where they might be?"

The author shakes his head miserably. "N-no. They are everyone. N-no one. They might be aware of the parallel realities, or they might not. It is impossible to know them by sight alone."

"Would it be reasonable to assume that her abductor must be someone with whom she’s had frequent interaction – someone her family or her friends have seen?"

"Perhaps. But if they have, they would not suspect anything untoward. Speak to them if you wish, but I doubt they will be of much assistance."

"That is, if they met these people and witnessed any unusual behavior, they would be inclined to rationalize it into something comprehensible, but nonetheless something it isn't?"

"Yes, th-th-that's it exactly."

"I understand." There is a tap at the door, and both men turn to look at it, though no one enters. Holmes glances at his pocket watch. "It seems we're out of time."

Carroll, realizing his chance has almost expired, leans forward to boldly place his ice-cold fingers on the detective's wrist. "Mr. Holmes ... will you take the case?" he implores, the faintest flush darkening his bloodless cheeks (that shade is 'desperation', you understand. I've made quite a study of it). "I know my w-words must seem rather extraordinary, but at the end of it all, whether you believe me or whether you don't, Alice's life is undoubtedly in jeopardy. Please. I-I am a man of significant means, and I will give you all in my possession if only you'll find her ... before it's too late."

Holmes pulls his hands back out of reach, rising to his feet and slipping his watch into his pocket. "I will look into the matter," he says quietly, his face, as always, inscrutable. The promise of external wealth and reward has never much affected him. "I can promise you nothing more than that."

Watson had been barred from the interview by prison ordinance, but he is waiting out in the foyer for his friend. He throws the detective a curious, searching glance as they fall into step, but neither man says anything until they are both back in the cab that brought them.

"Will you take the case, then?" Watson asks simply as they clatter beneath the imposing iron gate.

"Perhaps," Holmes muses evasively, his gaze turning towards the window. "The problem is
singularly interesting on a number of points, at least on the surface - though of course the cases which seem the most remarkable are usually the most ordinary. But nevertheless, the matter bears looking into."

"And what will you do now?"

"Now, my dear Watson," Holmes says with a wry little smile, "we will go to a bookstore. Preferably one specializing in children's literature. And after dinner, I imagine I have a nice spell of reading ahead of me."

"Data?" Watson asks skeptically.

"Of a type to be determined." Holmes chuckles, and he won't say any more than that.
When I Awoke

As he had been in so many times past, Holmes was waiting impatiently at my bedside when I awoke. I could tell from the dull, watery cast of the light that it was still early, but my companion was already fully dressed. "Come Watson," he ordered. "If we linger much longer, we'll miss our train." It was the closest he came to an explanation, and I knew from long experience that pressing him further would be an exercise in futility. Without awaiting further instruction, I hurriedly dressed and joined him.

Holmes was quiet throughout that first short leg of our journey to the station, gazing distractedly out the window and keeping his thoughts to himself. It did not, perhaps, make for the most enjoyable of rides, but I was encouraged by this routine pattern of behavior and trusted that he had caught the scent of a promising lead. It was with confidence and not a small measure of relief that I focused my own attentions on the familiar network of London streets and left my companion to his thoughts. "Tell me, my dear doctor - what do you know about clothes?"

"Clothes," he confirmed, though with that shadowy half-smile I alone know so well.

"... A necessity to the lower classes," I offered, "and a coveted luxury of the upper?"

Holmes nodded graciously. "Very good, Watson. But you've forgotten the middle class."

"A source of envy?" I hazarded. "A game of imitation?"

"Mm. No doubt, in some of the more ambitious cases. But perhaps on a more practical level, to subsistence-minded people such as ourselves ..."

"A business," I finished. I was rewarded with a small, approving smile.

"Exactly so. It is in particular the business of the man who has become our business this afternoon." He leaned forward to hand me a white card with bold black lettering centered across its front, marred only slightly by some faint pencil lines in his own hand.

"'Mr. Warren Bennett'," I dutifully read aloud. "I'm afraid the name is unfamiliar to me."

"The name, but not the character, I'll wager." Holmes had settled back again, one thin elbow wedged against the narrow windowsill and his chin propped in the hollow of his hand. His tone had become mildly speculative. "Perhaps you'd recognize him by a more childish nomenclature. It seems the good Mr. Bennett is none other than Alice's harried White Rabbit -- who is, in reality, a business associate of her father's and has been known on occasion to provide Alice and her elder sister with dresses of his own design."

"It would seem this isn't as eccentric a case as we initially suspected."

Holmes declined to comment, though I couldn't help thinking, even then, that he didn't entirely agree.
The train finally deposited us outside a small, charming town, where we neglected hiring a cab in favor of walking. I assume that the decision had something to do with evidence or the prerequisite survey of the land; for my part, I was simply pleased at the opportunity to enjoy the unseasonably warm weather. It was as though London itself held exclusive rights to the dreary half-light of fading winter. Once outside her boundaries, the gloom gave way entirely to sunshine and the not-so-distant promise of Spring.

Attempts at communicating my delighted surprise over the change in climate to my companion, however, were met with distracted silence. I could only trust that he was seeing things I could not, spinning elaborate clues out of the mundane ordinaris I would never stop to consider twice.

Eventually, our walk led us to a small cottage on the edge of town. I recognized the address as corresponding to the one on the business card Holmes had shown me earlier, though my companion did not seem immediately compelled to enter the premises. My own contemplation of the well-kept vegetable garden was interrupted by the realization that Holmes was watching me instead.

“I must ask you now to avail yourself of your over-active imagination, Watson,” he said. He clearly spoke in all seriousness, and yet he couldn’t quite suppress a wry little grimace when he added, “The one I have occasionally chided you for possessing.”

“Always happy to be of service,” I assured him, continuing my perusal of the grounds to hide my smile.

“I am confident that neither of us has been here before. And yet, I find this place familiar, and I suspect you do as well. Care to theorize?”

I studied the front windows, the roof with its tall chimney, the neatly organized grounds. “… The White Rabbit’s home,” I summarized eventually. “Exactly as it was described in the book.”

“Quite so. Either Carroll has been here, or Alice has; there’s no mistaking the description. The only thing it lacks, really, is the presence of a … well. It seems I spoke too soon.”

I turned to follow the direction of his gaze and spotted a man walking towards us from behind the house. He was tall and skinny, with a slouched sort of cap that shadowed his small, suspicious eyes.

“If his name isn’t ‘Bill’, I’ll eat my hat,” Holmes muttered, mostly to himself. He’d stepped forward at the approach of the stranger and placed a light hand on my shoulder for a moment as he passed; follow my lead.

“Greetings,” Holmes called amiably as the man stopped a little short of us. “Is the master of the house at home? We were beginning to fear no one was in.”

“Mister Bennett is in London on business, m’afraid,” the man sniffed, slipping his hands into his pockets. His eyes flickered between us, behind us: sizing us up, filing our descriptions away. I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of him, but we had confronted enough of his ilk in the past for me to feel certain he would cause trouble somewhere down the line.

“A pity,” Holmes sighed, genuine disappointment registering in his voice. I privately doubted, however, that he was actually surprised. “I had business I wished to discuss with him. Can you tell me when he’s scheduled to return?”

“No, sir, that I can’t. I’m just the gardener. But ask ‘round at the door, the maid’ll take your card.”

“Much obliged.” The gardener shrugged off the thanks and began to shuffle back the way he’d come. Holmes said nothing concerning the exchange, but he continued to watch the gardener while
the man retreated. I wondered what it was he saw.

“Will we be calling at the front, as he suggested?” I asked after a pause.

“Certainly couldn’t hurt our case. Come, Watson; let us test another theory.”

Perhaps I should have been able to guess at what would happen from my recent reading experience, but I must confess that the sight of the little girl who answered the door came as a shock. Indeed, I fear I almost ruined all my companion’s careful attempts at subterfuge. It was Alice!

In that initial moment of surprise, I would have been prepared to swear to it. That endearing face, with its unmistakable head of pale hair and soft, gentle eyes, had graced the front of every newspaper in London; I would have recognized it anywhere. I was quite prepared to whisk the child up and away from whatever unseen danger threatened her, right then and there – so certain that Holmes had once again come unerringly to his target where all of Scotland Yard had failed. But then the detective’s hand was at my elbow, sharp and insistent, and I swallowed my cries of relief and praise.

The girl was young and noticed none of this. At a word from Holmes, she obediently disappeared into the interior of the house to fetch the maid, leaving us alone in the foyer.

“But Holmes,” I hissed the moment she was gone, "That’s -!"

“No,” he interrupted with an impatient gesture. “Remember the story, and when she returns, look again!”

I felt restless and uneasy with this command, but as always I obeyed without protest. The girl returned momentarily with an older woman in tow, who took our cards and offered to take a message for her master; and while he fabricated a reason for our arrival, I did as my master had instructed and studied the child again.

The differences were subtle, but Holmes had been correct; the girl standing before me was not Alice. But then, who was she?

“Mary Ann!” the maid said suddenly, as though in response to my silent question. “Don’t just stand there, girl – go and help Bridget in the kitchen, like I told you!” Mary Ann gave my companion and me one final, sullen glance before vanishing -- silent and nymph-like – back into the recesses of the cottage.

We lingered in the foyer only a moment longer, Holmes’ eyes everywhere and nowhere as he took in all he could before we made our exit.

“Mary Ann?” I wondered as we walked down the lane, back in the direction of the station.

“You remember -- the White Rabbit mistook Alice for his maid servant in the first book,” Holmes prompted. “And the similarities between the girls are indeed striking.”

“But all this brings us no closer to discovering what happened to Alice.”

“Maybe, maybe not. We have determined one very important thing, Watson, which was, in fact, the point of today’s journey.”

“And that is?”

“That there is a grain of truth at the heart of the fiction.”
My Habit

March 24th, 1896

It has been my habit in all my published works to maintain a persistent and, admittedly, deliberate vagueness concerning the details of Holmes’ investigative process. The scientific methodology of his reasoning has been an open subject and one I never tire of relating; however, his contacts, the people whom he calls upon for information and aid, must by necessity remain a matter of speculation. The process would hardly continue to function as the effective piece of machinery it is if all knew the secrets of its turning - this much is obvious.

But here in the pages of my own diary, I can also confess that I don’t know exactly what this process entails. Friend and chosen companion though I may be, I am little more than a gear in the clockwork when Holmes is in the midst of a full-fledged investigation. He calls upon my assistance when he believes it will be of use to him, but when my expertise and observation are not required, I am left quite in the dark. This is not something I’ve ever had occasion to resent or despair of; I could hardly benefit him by constantly getting in the way. After all, I do not share his flair for acting or the occasional well-plotted deception. Those subtle and, at times, morally ambiguous aspects of his character are fascinating and always employed towards the betterment of society – but they are not qualities that I share or even entirely understand. He is quite justified in expecting me to remain patiently behind.

Agree though I do, I must admit that the thought of him wandering the backstreets of London alone does occasion a considerable amount of uneasiness on my part, particularly now. It takes a considerably twisted criminal mind to concoct the abduction of an innocent child. I am convinced that there isn’t much a mind like that would not dare.

There has of yet been no sign of motive. No ransom note has been presented, no body has been found; no hated family vendetta or business rival has surfaced in the history of the little girl’s parents. I know the mystery of the abduction itself stirs Holmes’ curiosity; there is no case he delights in more than one which is entirely unprecedented. And yet, these peculiar circumstances only increase my anxiety. Though I am powerless to name any specific reason or cause, I cannot help but feel that there is something more sinister at work here than either of us had previously suspected. It seems to me that the mind pitting itself against Holmes’ own is more devious – and therefore dangerous – than any he has yet encountered.

It is useless to voice these concerns to him, however, something I know from long experience. Personal danger is, in his word, an entirely satisfactory tradeoff for the work he does. The threat of it will never be enough to drive him off a scent.

I have complete faith in his intelligence and his competence, but I know my gun hand is steadier. I wish he would at least ask me to accompany him.

But it has been quite the opposite. Holmes does not like to discuss a case while it is in progress, preferring to save the details for one nice, tidy package at the conclusion of his work. This time, however, my lack of knowledge is not so much a product of his silence as it is of his absence. He is rarely home, and then only long enough to change costume or check some fact against an obscure reference book before setting out again. In those few, brief instances of contact it has been difficult to read him; I can only hope that his long disappearances bode well for Alice and ill for those who have taken her.
This afternoon, at last, provided a break in the routine. When I emerged from my rooms, rather later than I would readily care to admit, I was surprised to observe my companion seated in his armchair. The stem of his pipe was clenched tightly between his teeth and he was turning a gold pocket watch between his fingers with an absorbed air of curiosity. I requested a late breakfast from Mrs. Hudson for both of us — I could tell by the intense concentration on his face that there was no point in asking whether or not he had eaten — and took up my usual perch opposite him, to observe without interrupting. His cases are always changing and rotating, but my case has always been him.

It is hardly uncommon for him to ignore my presence when he’s like this, but today apparently found him in an amiable mood. “Our White Rabbit,” he began without preamble, still studying the watch in his hand, “has proven an impressively elusive creature indeed. His business associates spread across England and bridge the middle and upper classes. He is apparently very good at what he does, and I have yet to hear a single complaint lodged against him. The only abnormality I’ve been able to observe in his character is his remarkable habit of being Somewhere Else whenever I’ve had occasion to look for him. How he manages to accomplish anything with all the running about he does is an even bigger mystery than the matter at hand.”

“Could he be aware that you’re attempting to track him down?”

“The thought has occurred to me. However, it seems this attitude of extreme haste is fairly common of him. Many of his clients were prepared to admit that they consider him somewhat eccentric, but, because of his skill and fair business dealings, any aberrations in his behavior have been regarded as quite harmless, and tolerated peaceably.”

“The book describes him with passable accuracy, then.”

“Yes, so it would seem — and therein lies the real curiosity. I have been to visit Carroll again, and the author confesses to knowing Mr. Bennett by reputation only. All descriptors in the book, then, are from Alice’s impressions alone.”

“Strange, that she would have such protracted exposure to someone who always seems on his way to somewhere else.”

“Yes, Watson, that’s it exactly. And yet, questioning her household once more on the subject has revealed nothing either telling nor interesting.” He let the watch slide from between his fingers, dangling in the pale sunlight from its fine waistcoat chain.

“My dear Holmes … that wouldn’t happen to be …?”

The detective smiled faintly. “Petty theft isn’t the favored trick amongst my repertoire, but desperate times …” He dropped the disc into the palm of his free hand and offered it to me, watching intently as I turned it between my own fingers. “It’s clearly old, but in excellent condition. No pawn broker’s marks, hardly any scratches despite its considerable use. Its theft involves a rather complicated side-story -- for another time,” he added, lips twitching in amusement at my curious glance.

“Clearly an object highly valued,” I offered as I returned my attention to the watch.

“And yet of little value itself. Upon appraisal, it appears its worth is entirely sentimental. An heirloom from his father, or so I understand, who was himself a station master and perhaps had more cause to fixate on the time than his son -- who has nevertheless inherited that trait along with the watch itself.”

“But why take it?” I asked as I handed it back. “What are you hoping to discover?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been able to find one single piece of incriminating evidence against Mr.
Bennett. And yet, for the moment, he is the only lead we have in this investigation. Either he himself is concealing something important, or he’ll lead us to someone else who is. If neither is the case, then … we’re back where we started. Regardless, something about this watch excited the imagination of a very inventive little girl – a little girl who must have seen men with pocket watches on a regular and unremarkable basis. If she found something worth mentioning in it, I can only conclude that we might as well.”

The afternoon’s reprieve was short-lived. Without touching the food Mrs. Hudson brought us (the physician in me scowled disapprovingly, but the soldier in me knows by now how to choose his battles!), Holmes was soon out the door again in pursuit of another thread. The watch remained where he’d momentarily abandoned it on the side table, filing away the seconds.
You Know My Methods

'You know my methods, Watson' is a phrase Holmes is rather fond of using when he wants his friend to make some clever deductions of his own. Watson does know his methods -- and I daresay you know them, too. Can you deduce how the detective spent his week?

It rains for five days straight, the thin, grey rain particular to winters in London, and I feel no need to go out. Rusted joints aren't the easiest things to manage, you know. Are you disappointed? Do you think now you won't see your theories tested? As if you would've followed him out into that mess; even Watson frequently prefers to stay home and indulge in the company of the day-old news. But you see, you're really not missing much. It's perfectly possible to know what the man was about without ever leaving his sitting room. One needn't even watch him.

There's a sort of rhythm to his work: the way he has of shutting doors, mounting stairs, slotting keys, pocketing change. Shh, listen now. I'll show you what I mean.

It's morning. That faint chime, there, high as silver, clear as summer? That's a spoon finding the edge of a porcelain tea cup. Silverware means he's in no hurry; he's feeling confident. He knows his direction today and he's pretty sure he's going to find something. 'Waiting' sounds much different - the grating slide of fork against knife. Impatience. Leisure time left to fiddle with utensils and cracking food around the abused surface of his plate without actually eating it. 'Anxiety' sounds like nothing - no breakfast at all - and 'excitement' is only a little different; the faint rustle of a napkin wrapped around a cooling roll, lost in the woolen whisper of a settling pocket.

Yesterday, the whisper; today, the chime. Can you guess what tomorrow will be?

Let me give you a hint. When he leaves the room today, there's no warble of mahogany on wood; he lifted his coat gently from the stand, rather than yanking it free. The door clicks and does not rattle. His steps are evenly spaced on the stairs. His departure was not proceeded by the shush of a shutting desk drawer or the metallic snap of a gun barrel locked into place. Watson keeps time all afternoon by methodically rustling newspapers and snoring softly while he dozes in his chair. He's had few cases of his own this week to help him pass the hours. He writes when he's agitated and wanting distraction - the scratch and scribble of graphite on paper - but he does not write today.

The evening's stanza is a little different. Dinner comes and dinner goes - one does not reappear to eat it, the other won't partake without the company of the first. The clock echoes 'home by seven' in the ponderous chimes of 'twelve'. Watson isn't writing, but then there's this: the slow, heavy sound of his footsteps wearing tracks in the floor. It's easy to pick out his stride from another's. One strong tap, one faint one. The third is slightly heavier than the first and will stay that way - 'limp' in Morse code. You can't really see it when you watch him, for he hides it well, but winter's cruel and sound is hard to modify. Dum-da, dum-da, dum-da - uneven steps exactly regulated to the ticking of that mantle clock.

Now comes the long anticipated sound of footfalls in the outer hall. Faster; shorter. The thud of this morning has become a harsh, rigid tap. The door to the sitting room is forced open before the catch has time to slide all the way back, and it grinds audibly in protest. There's the heavy woolen whisper of a coat being thrown roughly aside, with no regard at all for the stand waiting patiently in the corner.

You'll notice that Watson's footsteps have ceased. Holmes', too, though that's only because he's thrown himself into his customary armchair (the slight moan of the springs was audible even beneath his slight weight.) There's the thra-um, thra-um of Holmes' fingers drumming impatiently on one
armrest, and - ah, yes - the snap and shiss of a match igniting. The fingers pause for a moment, there's the hollow chink of the clay bowl brushing against the table, and then the cadence is resumed to the smell of sulfur and smoke.

Another rustle of set-upon furniture; Watson's perched himself on the armrest of the settee. He never fully sits during moments like these, the soldier's training kicking in - ready for action at a moment's notice. But he doesn't like to stand, because there's something off about that when Holmes is so willfully slumped in his chair.

I said we needn't look at them, but I know your voyeuristic curiosity – shall we sneak a little peek? It's dark in the sitting room save for the fire, which throws its fitful, flickering light in subtle caresses along Holmes' night-chilled features. Compared to the lonely solitude outside, this quiet is companionable; the fire has been burning a while now, the room is warm and close and occupied by someone who's spent the night waiting up for a reason. And yet, there is worry. The floorboards remember the pacing and occasionally creak with the echo of a still-lingering fear. There is light, yes, but charcoal-colored shadows hide under the mismatched furniture and inch their way along the walls. The logs pop and crack in the heat, the clock is wound and marching, and occasionally the wind quietly rattles the window pane - but the men do not speak.

I flick an ear in their direction, but you wouldn't be able to understand the conversation they have. Shall I translate for you?

First, the inquisition. It's audible in the creak of the settee as Watson shifts his weight, trying to pin down Holmes' restless gaze long enough to study it. There's success in the sound of stillness again - no creaking furniture, no drumming fingers. It's temporary. Into the profound quiet comes the grinding click of Holmes' teeth along the stem of his pipe - of course things didn't go as planned, does it look like things went as planned? - and the quiet, weary exhalation of previously held breath (of course it doesn't, no need to be so defensive) Watson will lose his grasp on Holmes' attention as the detective looks away, impatient with easy acquiescence, but he gets it back; there's the shift in furniture again, accompanied by one tap; a half-step on the floor, but only that. Their chosen perches are situated close together. The cessation of the teeth-wood grind means Watson has lightly touched fire-warm fingers to Holmes' wrist, and the touch means are you hurt? It would seem like a stupid question, except that it's Holmes, who sometimes forgets to mend his tears in the wake of mental failure. Another sigh, this one equally resigned but coming from the other: No.

The soft whisper of fabric means Watson has dropped his arm back to his side – a gesture of resignation. I should've gone with you.

Holmes huffs a little, almost laughter but not quite. You couldn't have salvaged this one. There's the flexible scrape of heavy paper across the side table as he plants two fingers on Alice and drags her closer. I'm missing something. I read something wrong.

The paper rustles as the volume exchanges hands, the new holder flipping through the pages too fast to actually see their contents. I don't understand what you hope to find in this. It's nothing; it's fiction.

Holmes' chair creaks again as he leans his weight forward, and there's the soft clap of the book shutting, too slowly to be closed by the man currently in possession of it. Leave it. This is my puzzle. I don't expect you to understand. The soft shush of fingers trying to find purchase on the cover, but failing - sliding back instead without catching a hold. Holmes reached for the book, but Watson didn't let go.

I want to help you. Explain this to me.

Another grab; this time harder, this time successful. The chair whines as Holmes leans back again.
No.

The third and final sigh, the *crick* of furniture released; the *dum-da-dum* tread of someone leaving the room, Morse code for 'defeat.' The door seems to let something else out along with the doctor before it closes again.

This all happens rather quickly, much faster than the time it takes to explain. It's a conversation they haven't-had many times before.

Have you guessed it yet? Tomorrow morning there won't be any breakfast. Tonight there won't be any sleep. All true music enthusiasts know that the crescendo comes just before the fall, and the detective's song has been gathering in strength and volume all week. Even now, as I doze by the fireside and listen to him, I hear it coming ... the second act, the darker number. It's a solo to start, performed by a master with an instrument very slight and slender. Beautiful. Deadly. Chaotic. My favorite tune.

The clock begins to slow, *tocks* bleeding into *ticks*. At two, it stops. He doesn't notice this.

But he will.
I have cause now to remember the determined optimism of that previous afternoon with fondness, though I must also berate myself for not noticing the tell-tale signs. ‘Desperate times,’ indeed. Holmes had followed the lead with his characteristically ruthless thoroughness, but that lead had failed to produce results. And as he found his efforts rewarded with another dead-end, a noticeable change came over his personality. I have had occasion to observe these violent moods more than once, but I fear that – as both friend and physician – I am no closer to understanding them. How a mind as inventive and perpetually curious as his can succumb to the wasting periods of inertia it so strongly rebels against remains a mystery to me, but I have come to dread them above all else. Whatever his incredible faculties, Holmes remains human – and each remarkable skill and talent must be balanced out by an echoing fault. While a creature of infinite industry and victim to so few common vices, his inability to accept defeat cries of pride and is as destructive as any more conventional sin. He thrives at the challenge while resenting his difficulty in overcoming it; at best, a dangerous juxtaposition.

Even now, it has a hold on him. I find myself compelled to write in an attempt to drown out the sound of that wretched violin – music as beautiful and fascinatingly complex as its creator, but also dark and faintly sinister. I have never been musically inclined, and I confess I lack the sensitivity to sound that makes good music such a source of joy and delight to my companion. And yet, as absurd as it seems to me to even think it, I can feel the notes he plays now. They resonate against the edges of my very bones, and it is a painful sensation. I begin to feel as though my entire body were constructed of glass, and that the notes are composed of something harder and stronger; one wrong chord could shatter every limb. Exquisite agony! If the music creates such fragility in me, I can only imagine what it is doing to my friend. I long to rush into the room and tear the bow from his hands, dash the offending bit of wood and string to the ground. But in the action lies madness. All these careful lines we’ve drawn, the strange support beams that sustain this peculiar friendship; to cross them creates yet another danger of its own.

Well, if I will not cross my boundaries, I must trust that Holmes will not cross his; that this is another period we must simply wait to pass.

But oh, that damned violin!
A Dark and Stormy Night

It’s a dark and stormy night, but you probably guessed that already.

Not the sort of thing I can take credit for, naturally, but something I can nonetheless delight in. Crystalline droplets on the window, lit internally from some vague storm-glow; thunder that prowls through the streets on velvet paws until the moment of snarling attack. All so deliciously *feline*, this storm, from its jungle-yellow streetlamp eyes to the curled tip of its midnight tail. It’s nuzzling its face into the window frame now, soft and subtle with a false promise of sheathed claws. We make eye contact, but it must wait. For now, the fascinating little tangle of thread dozing so fitfully within belongs entirely to me.

The storm growls its protest and Holmes shifts on the settee, disturbed in his dreaming. One hand lies on his chest just below the three undone buttons of his shirt, fingers curled possessively around something that isn’t there; the other trails downward, fingertips barely grazing the floor. Each twist and twitch of his restless sleep stirs the dust below, creating strange, vague patterns even he would be hard-pressed to understand.

In them, I at last read my cue.

I know what he sees when he opens his still-dreaming eyes; I know, because I am what he sees. Firelight on metal: the mysterious copper of age, the faint golden glint of hidden treasure. Shadows gather between the slats of my body, crowding around the tongues and grooves of spinning gears; the fabric of the sofa’s armrest shreds and pulls as I crouch over it. And through it all, the cogs rattle and whirl.

Don’t you recognize me? Perhaps I’m not *quite* what you expected. He knows who I am, though; the grin is *mine*, you see, in every incarnation. Tonight it cuts like a razorblade through all obscuring haze.

“The Cheshire Cat,” he acknowledges vaguely, with the detached interest of a chronic sleepwalker. He’s drunk too deep from a bottle even little Alice would have marked ‘poison,’ and tonight he’s sacrificed all his beauty and grace to his violin. You’d have as much difficulty recognizing him now as you would in recognizing me. Fortunately, though, we know one another.

“Sherlock Holmes,” I purr in response, flexing my long claws deeper into the fabric of his reality. He blinks slowly, perhaps surprised that his visual hallucination should also offer dialogue. The drug is the gateway, though; as long as there remains a probable explanation for my existence, his mind can relax its defensive perimeter enough to accept what it is I’ve come to say.

My long tail whirs and clicks as I wrap it about my feet, and a frown takes possession of his features. “You’re not what I expected,” he muses, not entirely to me.

“On the contrary, my dear Holmes, I’m *exactly* what you expected. That’s entirely the point.”

He thinks about this for a while, though if he arrives at any definite conclusion he makes no attempt to share it with me. “Do you know where Alice is?” he asks after the pause, with a sort of ‘why not’ attitude I find rather amusing.

“No.” He settles back against the opposite armrest, his posture suggesting ‘defeat.’ “But that’s rather *your* area of expertise, isn’t it? *You’re* the hunter. You found the rabbit.”

“Found, yes. Caught, no.”
“No matter. The rabbit isn’t the one you really want. He’s a lead-in device: you’re not meant to catch him, merely to follow him. Follow him down the rabbit hole, and you’ll find what it is you’re truly after.”

“I’ve followed him for days. There is nothing to find.”

“Not where you’ve been looking, no. But I’ve got a hint, if you’re not too proud to take it.”

I watch him while he works this out, too, and it’s not difficult to guess what he’s thinking. What an extraordinarily proud man! He’d never accept my aid if he thought of me as an entity in my own right, of that I am most certain. But if I’m his hallucination, then I am nothing but an extension of his own (somewhat erratic) subconscious; and therefore any clue I can provide must, by default, be one that awaited discovery in his own mind anyway.

“Of course,” he says finally, “I’d be happy to take into consideration any advice you wish to give.”

I smile again, just for him. Oh, this will be fun.

“Good. Come, then, fetch your coat; we’re running out of evening already, and we have a bit of walking yet to do.”

The idea of leaving the room gives him momentary pause. It’s one thing to have a nice, quiet chat with your hallucinations, but to follow them out into the night constitutes an entirely different brand of lunacy. One he isn’t prepared to commit to yet.

“Where exactly are we heading?” he asks cautiously, though he’s pushed himself into a sitting position and placed both bare feet on the floor.

“Good, boy.”

I stick close to him as we traverse the deserted streets together, taking advantage of his sheltering umbrella (laugh all you want, but I’d like to see you try being omnipotent and alluring with rusted joints and dripping springs!) The storm follows at a respectful distance. Holmes has no way of knowing where I’m leading him, but he wanders each back street with an admirable, uncanny certainty – avoiding holes and grates and rough spots in the road without consciously looking for them. London accepts his familiar tread and makes no move to impede his progress when I finally take him down less familiar alleys, into places he should not be able to go.

“Good girl.”

Nights like these have their own particular colors, you know. Most times they’re lost to the general riot of life’s hues, but tonight I can clearly see them as we hurry along. It’s the strange, underwater light that results when the clouds cut us off from the sky, pinning us between the earth and the storm. Blood reds and cerulean blues can’t survive without the sun. They shrivel up and die, withering into pale, sick yellows and murky, brackish greens.
The phantom doppelgangers of everything he thinks he knows watch from the mirror surfaces of rain puddles and flooded drain pipes as we pass them by.

“It’s late,” he reminds me quietly when I at last indicate a shadowed door. Reality attempting to rear its meddlesome head one last time.

“Only by some clocks,” I promise, and I knock on the peeling wood myself. The door might have once been blue and is most certainly no longer green, warped into a color called ‘doesn’t receive visitors of even the disreputable sort.’ The exact shade doesn’t matter; all that concerns me is that it’s the right color.

No one answers, but then, it would have been highly irregular if they had. So I take the initiative and lead us both inside. When the door shuts again, that right sort of color folds around us; the grey blur of London is left abandoned on the other side of the threshold.

~*~

It’s the staircase that finally smoothes the lines of his face into a sort of neutral acceptance, because stairs such as these cannot possibly exist in his reality and this must, therefore, be a dream. He’s half right in this assumption.

The stairs lead upward – eventually. They do a bit of running around the room first, up the walls and down, along the floor, spiraling shakily around a questionably sturdy pole before tilting sideways along the wall again. They’re the sort of stairs a blind man might have installed in the dark while hanging upside down, if the man in question had no concept of what a staircase was. They’re not impossible to climb, but they don’t provide for an easy journey, either. Luckily, the strange assortments of oddities hanging from the walls help distract from the improbability of the upward trek.

The room boasts many bizarre decorations, not all of which are visible in the half-light of the darkened room; but most prevalent among them are the collections of dissembled doll parts and the many, many clocks surrounding them. They tick solemnly and eternally, though never in concert, more akin to a horde of cicadas in the dark. “But none of them have numbers,” Holmes observes vaguely, pausing in the act of hoisting himself up onto the next illogically placed stair.

“The man who lives in this house has no time left to mark.”

“And yet, the clocks continue to function.”

“His time has run out; but Time itself stops for no one.”

He accepts this, carefully ducking under the frozen, reaching fingers of a suspended hand. “Who is ‘he’?” he wonders when he finally reaches the pole. I am a few steps ahead of him – obviously – so I rest my chin on my crossed front paws and look down.

“A former business associate of your dear, elusive rabbit. You were on the right path, you see – initially.”

“Former, you say?” The detective bats aside a ghostly leg and makes a carefully calculated leap upward. A small cloud of dust puffs outward through his tightly grasping fingers.

“Mm, they had something of a ‘falling out.’ He was a disreputable associate in the best of times, but after what he did to the rabbit’s cousin …”

“The rabbit’s cousin?” Holmes is in excellent shape, but the climb is wearing him out. He expects it
to be hard, so of course it is; easy tasks have never interested him. Wiping his grimy palms on the seat of his pants, he recovers his breath a moment while studying a grandfather clock mounted – upside down – on the wall.

“The March Hare,” I clarify, washing my washers with a rust-colored tongue while I wait for him to catch up. “Child was quite out of his mind anyway, but passing one’s time with the wrong sort of people tends to aggravate things.”

Something clicks into place behind Holmes’ eyes. “Nicholas Bennett,” he exclaims softly. “Yes, I had heard … the one rather peculiar mark on Warren Bennett’s history. But the boy’s been incarcerated for years. How could Alice have possibly … You’re taking me to see the Mad Hatter.”

I smile broadly at him and resume my own climb, confident that his renewed curiosity will provide all the motivation he needs to follow.

“I should have considered that,” he mutters to himself behind me in the dark. “A clothes merchant … a hatter … the mad nephew …”

“Feline eyes,” I purr, making my final leap upward and onto the second floor.

Gaining the landing has its own peculiar effect. Think of it as navigating a tricky ladder in a barn with the intent of reaching the hay loft – but when you get to the top, there’s a ballroom waiting for you instead. Even the least mathematically-inclined individual understands the physics of structure: pyramids may narrow with the ascent but not widen, lest they fall. If you can span the first floor of a building in twelve strides, the second floor of that building cannot possibly be twenty-four strides across.

And it isn’t. It is infinitely wider than that.

If the most intelligent, trustworthy, and deadly earnest individual you know told you one day that 2 + 2 = 7, what would you do?

That is the very question Holmes is struggling to answer now, staring at a ballroom-sized area where an attic loft should be. The enormous tree occupying the far end of the space isn’t helping. Neither is the fact that the room is simultaneously completely enclosed and in possession of no discernible ceiling.

There aren’t any lights in the room, but the long rows of windows to either side emit a midnight-blue glow that’s just enough to see by. The checkered floors are highly polished – they’ve so rarely born the tread of living feet – and even through their layers of neglect and grime they bounce the light back like a flattened prism. It gives the room a somber, bruised-violet hue reminiscent of twilight. I consider warning Holmes not to peer out the windows, because even drugged, even dreaming, even his mind is not capable of comprehending the vast, lonely nothingness that lives outside. Fortunately, there are other things to engage his curiosity.

The majority of the room is occupied by an extremely long, rectangular banquet table. Covered with a cloth now more yellow than white, it is the graveyard for literally hundreds of mismatched tea sets. Cups and saucers of all colors and designs rest eternally beside tarnished silverware, the bone-dry curves of their hollow ribs filmed with thick coats of grey. Silvery cobwebs rope between the arched handles and the spouts of the teapots, though like the guests, the spiders have long since departed. Everything smells of dry, brittle dust.

Including the figure seated at the end of the table facing us, his back to the tree. He hasn’t moved in acknowledgement of our arrival. He hasn’t moved at all in a long, long time.
Cautiously, Holmes begins to advance further into the room, leaving his footprints on the unwashed floor. His eyes trail along the cluttered china as he passes by, even now cataloguing and categorizing and storing everything away. Now matter how ludicrous the situation, he can’t change what he is. I leap up onto the table itself to stay abreast of him, and the ghostly specters of plates and silverware moan their ghostly protest at the intrusion. I may occasionally knock over one or two objects that aren’t even remotely in my path; what can I say? The noise makes Holmes skittish where nothing else has, and I find this amusing.

It takes a great deal of walking at his crabbed, cautious pace before we reach our somnolent host, who increasingly resembles a marionette as he becomes easier to see. He sits slumped forward in his high-backed chair, hands resting motionless on his bent knees. It’s difficult to get a good look at his face between the lowered brim of his hat and the long curtain of his doll-like hair, but the skin of his hands is too pale to be human and visibly cracked in places. The cobwebs have crawled over him as well – woven in his mane, netting his cheeks, looped between his fingers – and the dust leeches away all his colors. Grey streaks his once-black locks and bleeds into the sable material of his hat, his trousers; his jacket is the same not-blue-once-green of the door downstairs.

He might be dead. He might be sleeping. He might be an extremely well-crafted doll.

He is, in fact, none of these things.

For the moment, however, the detective has been sidetracked by the tree. Upon reflection, I imagine possibly-sleeping-maybe-dead people sitting at tables aren’t an unheard of occurrence in his chosen profession. Enormous trees living inside of buildings, on the other hand …

He steps closer to look for roots that aren’t there. He touches the bark with the tips of his fingers, sniffing and tasting what comes free when he lifts his hand. The confusion on his face confirms what I’ve already suspected: he tastes dust, but under that, wood. The tree is alive. His eyes fasten onto a curve of ashen bark and journey upward, and then higher still, his head tilting back so he can gaze into the recesses of a roof that does not actually have a limit.

“Strange, isn’t it?” I call, merely to pull his attention away. Even the sound of my voice is bled dry here, leaden and hollow with no reverberation.

“There are no roots; no soil. Something so large – how does the floor support it? How does it survive?”

“To die requires the passage of moments in which to whither. But time does not move forward here. You see this tree now as it existed in a moment in time; as it will always exist in that moment of time. It does not need to eat. It will not grow. It will not die.”

Gradually, he’s come to notice the chains. They hang suspended from the infinite ceiling – don’t even bother to try and logic it out. Their termination is a more concrete matter and lies at the wrists and neck of the motionless man. Holmes is a delightfully tactile creature, and he automatically reaches out to touch the heavily rusted links of metal.

“-- I wouldn’t do that,” I caution quickly. “They’re quite fragile, and rather sensitive.” I don’t add that they might wake up something that’s better left sleeping. Some explanations are not worth the time they take to give.

He obediently withdraws his hand and at last looks to the hatter. “If the tree cannot die, I assume that he can’t, either?”

“That is correct.”
“He sleeps, then.”

“That is incorrect.”

“I do not understand.”

“I told you; he has killed all his time. But we can loan him a moment or two.” I transport myself from the table to the lowest branches of the tree in the span it would take my companion to blink – but then, humans do move rather slowly. It takes a little bit of searching and scrabbling about with one clunky, iron paw, but eventually I find it: the little knot in the tree that opens its hidden compartment. The wood slides back soundlessly, a fine patina of dust settling against the contours of my face as it reveals a series of gears and springs. Motionless. But only momentarily.

Carefully, I reach inside my chest and work free a gear colored differently from the rest; this form, you see, does offer the occasional advantage. It’s a slightly more complicated matter to locate where it must be inserted, and I can feel Holmes’ curious eyes peering intently over my shoulder all the while. But at last the gear clicks into place. The tree emits a shuddering, creaking groan, and I hold my proverbial breath; but ah, there! The cogs rotate, blunt teeth gnashing together in interminable hunger as all systems prove themselves functioning.

“What did you –” Holmes demands, impatient with what he can’t understand; but he’s interrupted by a sudden movement from the chair.

The hatter has raised his head.

The motion dislodges a shower of dust that shivers and drifts in the stale air around him. The motes are like underwater fireflies, flickering weakly in the solemn blue gloaming.

“- wh-wh-why you c-c-can’t expect an-n-ything from him,” he rasps faintly. It isn’t so much a stutter as it is the hinges of his jaw and tongue battling against the stiff ache of disuse to properly shape the words. He cocks his head to the side in a stiff, jerky movement that almost costs him his hat, frowning as he awaits a response that will never come. The hatter lifts his hands, which shake violently with the effort, and places them on the edge of the table before him. Then he bends forward to peer at the teacup closest to his place setting. Holmes notices for the first time that this cup is not empty: it houses the complete skeleton of a little mouse, the bones black with age.

“G-gone to sl-leep again?” the hatter sighs, and he struggles to straighten in his seat once more. Then he turns his head to look at Holmes.

Of all the oddities associated with this sad figure, his eyes are by far the most disturbing. Were it not for them, one might be able to take refuge in the belief that he really is only a doll: intricate, well-crafted, but something that isn’t alive and never has been. But his eyes are real. The irises are a vivid, intense shade of green flecked with bits of gold. They both exhibit a sharp focus and intelligence at odds with their surroundings, and there is something extremely disturbing about that – though admittedly not as disturbing as the pupil of his left eye. It has been stretched and twisted so that it is no longer circular, but is instead shaped like a thin, skeletal tree. There’s a crack in the pale skin of his face which begins just above his left eyebrow and cuts down through the misshapen pupil and the green iris, terminating beside his aquiline nose. Hairline fractures branch off from the primary split, so that it does not so much resemble a scar as it does a network of roots – the tree stretching its influence beyond the sphere of his eye.

“Guests?” he wonders out loud in his hollow, rusted voice. Those unsettling eyes blink carefully; he’s still trying to recall the basic mechanics of simple motor skills. “Wh-why, after all this time – and I-I-I so ill prepared …” he pats self-consciously at his tattered jacket, and this time the dust is thick
enough to make the detective cough. The hatter extends a hand towards him apologetically, or at least tries to; the chain cinched tightly around his wrist draws him up short. The muscles in his face spasm with a different sort of memory altogether. Redirected in its path, his hand shifts to push back his ancient hat and afford him a better look at his cluttered table. “There were others here … once … or so I seem to recall …” he mutters absently. The words are coming easier now, though that doesn’t make them any less difficult to hear. He twines his pale fingers restlessly in his dark hair and croaks, piteous and desperate: “Would you like some tea?”

Holmes takes a seat in a sort of stricken daze. It’s questionable at first whether the ancient chair will hold even his slight weight, but in the end it does; and then the hatter is pushing a dirty tea cup on its chipped saucer in Holmes’ direction with an excess of sloppy enthusiasm. “Yes, yes! Tea!” he chatters manically. The last inch of his pushing is accomplished by the very tips of his fingers, the chains impeding any further movement. “Tea, and … and jam … or … stories! Yes! You must tell me a story!”

Holmes looks somewhat taken aback by this, and oh, don’t you just know what he’s thinking? ‘Never break up a matched set’, you said once to me. You were talking about flatware, I seem to recall, but the advice applies here as well. At my insistence, Holmes has left his storyteller at home. But we’ve enough distractions present as it is, and there’s more to accomplish before the night is through.

“Stories really aren’t his specialty,” I put in, edging across my branch so I can hang worrisomely over the hatter’s head. My presence comes as a surprise to him. He can’t see me beyond the cover of his silly hat, and it makes him dreadfully nervous. “Perhaps you’d better tell one instead?”

“Yes … a story ….” He chirps anxiously, wringing his hands. The movement isn’t good for the pale plaster; spider-thin cracks are beginning to web out around his stiffly bent knuckles. “Ah … surely I’ll remember one, I’ll surely try …”

“Can you tell me the story about Alice?” Holmes prompts quietly, glancing up from his cautious inspection of the tea.

“Oh! Alice! Little Alice!” The suggestion of a familiar name has worked him up something terrible. “Yes! I recall Alice. Blonde, beautiful Alice … she couldn’t remember her rhymes at all, not a bit, terrible memory she had, and she didn’t like the story the dormouse –” He stops abruptly. I don’t know how it’s possible, but he’s grown even paler. One of his chains hangs quite close to my face, and through it I notice how badly he’s begun to tremble. A new crack has appeared over the pallor of his left cheek, sinuous and suggestive as an old scar. “I-I-I-maybe I shouldn’t tell that story,” he decides anxiously.

But Holmes’ proverbial ears have pricked forward. You don’t need to be a dog to catch a scent. “You knew the White Rabbit once, didn’t you?” he presses carefully. The hatter jerks an unsteady nod of agreement but says nothing – he doesn’t seem any more comfortable with this subject than he was the one which preceded it. Holmes is undeterred. “And the White Rabbit knew Alice, too. Alice has gone missing, you see …”

“They all want her!” the hatter blurts out. He was in the act of raising a tea cup between his shaking hands, but the violence of his own outburst appears to have startled him; the cup crashes to the floor, the dregs of its long-evaporated contents spilling out into the darkness. “Even though she can’t remember her rhymes! Even though she disobeyed the – the – ooooh …” That seems to be all he’s prepared to say on the matter; his thin shoulders hunch inward, head bowing as his hands fall uselessly to his lap.

“The Rabbit, too?” Holmes tries, leaning forward in his chair. I can tell he senses his lead slipping
away between his fingers. “The Rabbit wants Alice as well? For what? What do they want her for?”

“The Rabbit is nobody, nobody – nobody!” the hatter moans. “He works for them, like everyone else … like … like … TEA!” This time, the violence of his exclamation takes all three of us off guard. I almost lose my hold on the branch, and the detective just about overturns his chair. For his part, the hatter has thrown his arms into the air with such ardor that one wrist-chain smacks and whispers against the tree trunk.

Something creaks and shudders in the darkness overhead.

For a long moment, none of us dare to move.

“Tea time, tea time,” the hatter begins to whisper, frantically shuffling the clutter of used cups into a different order. “Tea time, tea time, it’s always tea time, tea time tea ti –” his voice is gradually escalating upwards on the curve of a sharp, panicked whine, and the creak overhead is becoming a deep, echoing groan –

“Time to go,” I call cheerfully to my companion, turning to face the panel in the tree.

“No!” the hatter cries, pausing in his useless rearranging. Then, softer: “No, nononono, if you leave, you can’t leave, you … you haven’t had tea yet! You must –“

The sound overhead has become an unmistakable growl. The hatter subsides into a whimper of sheer terror, and Holmes begins to back away in the direction of the stairs. I quickly find my gear and yank it loose; the inner workings of the tree grind to a mournful halt.

The hatter goes limp in his chair.

There are a handful of ancient, grimy calling cards on a salver at the center of the table. How he saw them in the blue-tinged gloom is anyone’s guess, but Holmes reaches for them even as we begin our hasty departure. As I’ve said, you can’t change what you really are.

“Is it alright to leave him?” he asks uncertainly, leaping from one step to another. Dust and plaster are coming loose above our heads – if anything, the cessation of the gears has only made the growling louder.

“Murder’s a capital offense,” I remind him, leading the way through the dark. “You of all people should know that.”

The snarling ceases entirely once we’re safely on the other side of the door, as though it never existed at all. I can tell the detective’s nerves are shaken, but he does not demand an explanation. Perhaps, for once, he really doesn’t want to know. However, he does make a point of turning around and self-consciously checking the door number. “6.5?” he wonders out loud. “Strange, but I would have sworn it said ‘6’ when we first arrived.”

“You’ll work it out,” I promise with a condescending leer. Can you?

He shuffles through the calling cards then, memorizing the names lest consciousness steal him of a future opportunity, then he slips them into the pocket of his coat. His eyes are more alert than before; the episode with the hatter has rattled him, but more than that, the drug is losing its effect. It’s of little consequence. We’ve already accomplished what we needed to.

“The Mad Hatter … not exactly as Alice described him, was he?”

“Mm, she’s young. Your mind goes to infinitely darker places. Speaking of which, I trust you can
find the way back to your dog in the dark?” I twine between his feet so that he can feel the scrape and tug of my body against his pant legs. Don’t roll your eyes like that – what fun is it without probable doubt?

“Undoubtedly,” he says, though he sounds cautious. He’s not sure what to think now, and so he’s trying very carefully not to think anything at all. It’s obvious he doesn’t like to be touched, so I rub extra hard against his ankles before backing away.

“Good. In that case, I have other business I must attend to.” I smile up at him even as the rest of my body heads off preemptively in pursuit of the evening’s remaining endeavors. “Mind the Storm doesn’t get you,” I purr, and then I leave him in the possessive arms of his London and its grey, grey fog.
Ridiculous as it Sounds

April 13th, 1896

Ridiculous as it sounds, I found myself creeping into the sitting room like a man approaching the mouth of a lion’s den. But it turned out that there was no need; my companion was asleep. I checked for that infamous morocco case, and even though I expected to find it I still felt my heart sink a little in my chest at the sight of it on the side table. I wish I could understand the need he has for this loathsome habit, what he derives from the experience that he cannot find elsewhere.

Spring began making its own furtive advances in the past week, but it’s still cold. I could not help feeling a physician’s concern for his half-dressed state, retrieving a blanket from my own rooms and cautiously advancing on where he slept to cover him with it. His sleep appeared heavy – at the very least, he did not stir. It has never ceased to astound me how a man with such an amazing intellectual capacity can have so little regard for his own well-being. I cannot remember the last time I observed him eating. At the very least, I am glad that he is finally resting, artificially induced or otherwise.

I am somewhat embarrassed to confess, even here, that I felt a strange surge of protectiveness as I watched him. I was reluctant to leave his side – as though by remaining I could help combat the mental demons which tormented him into such a state. Absurd, to say the least! My medical proclivities have certainly fostered within me a delusional sense of grandeur if I honestly believe it lies within my powers to cure this particular illness. But, deride myself as I might, the desire to do so remains.

His disheveled forelock of black hair appeared damp to me and aroused imminent concerns of fever. I pressed the back of my fingers lightly to his forehead but discovered that I worried needlessly. The culprit must have lain in a recent bath or early morning excursion, though I cannot fathom what would have him out-of-doors this heavily sedated.

I allowed my fingers to linger longer, perhaps, than they had any right to – madness! But a sleeping Holmes is a rare creature indeed. The slightest suggestion of pressure was enough to feel the curve of bone jutting hard against the skin of his cheek – his sharp nose, the razorblade of his jaw line. Mycroft is such an enormously large man, and my Holmes so thin; what a household of extremes they must have inhabited in their childhood! I can’t help but wonder which side of the family he resembles. Was his mother one of those delicate Victorian ladies, all ivory and glass? Was his father a tall, brooding scarecrow of a man? Or is he, as I sometimes expect, an entity entirely apart from the claims of genetic precedent: unique unto himself, running off of some internal fuel that does not come from food nor rest nor any natural substance I can name?

His beauty is a rare, subtle thing, not apparent at first glance. Perhaps my protective instincts towards him are more in the vein of an archeologist seeking to preserve a rare and precious find. But it is an agony to watch him waste away in the destructive chokehold of his drugs.

My clumsy efforts at succor and comfort did not, thankfully, awaken him, and when I at last retreated back to the safety of my own room I left him sleeping where I’d found him. Not an hour later, however, as I emerged again in search of nourishment, he had vanished – gone on some unknown errand without note or word of explanation.

Last week marked the two year anniversary of his return to London and to me – a near-miraculous event that we do not speak of, but which I think about often. He had his reasons for disappearing; I may not always agree with his methods, but I must always acknowledge that he does nothing beyond
the dictates of his precise, passionless logic. That is who he is, and I have made my peace with it. But as his long outings become longer still and more regular in occurrence, I cannot help but fear another such term of separation is at hand.

One that is longer, and colder, and from which even my clever friend does not have the means to return.
Fish took the bait. Seen entering the den at 22.00, wearing disguise; confirmed cards were in pocket. Proprietor assures he spoke with C. Observed leaving premises at 23.45.

Tailing, as ordered. Please advise.

- W.

As a precaution only;

I am fully lucid and aware of the risks I am taking in this endeavor. Should the worst happen, there is no one at fault but myself. (That includes you, Doctor.) Mycroft is the executor of my estate, such as it is.

- S.H.
Disruptive Elements

Even disruptive elements such as myself can appreciate the oiled mechanics of a job well done. There’s something so charming about flicking a card and watching hundreds of others fall down in its wake – and none the wiser as to why. The Caterpillar was a watch maker in his day; did you know that? I didn’t sit in on their little chat, but there was hardly reason to. There’s nothing a drug addict likes to talk about more than the time when he wasn’t a drug addict. It’s the only sort of perspective that can still take root in their chemically-wasted brains. Nothing tastes sweeter than the tang of righteous indignation.

My stunt with the Hatter’s tree helped, I’m sure. He was watching me so closely. How could he fail to notice? Find the off-colored gear and slot it into place; replace your time with someone else’s.

And here he is.

Clever man – Holmes worked out the bit about the trains all by himself. Don’t feel bad if you didn’t; he is really rather smart.

I can see him from where I sit on top of the passenger car, though he doesn’t notice me. He’s alone; no baggage. You, with all your silly romantic inquisitiveness -- I write this for your entertainment, of course. Shall I describe to you what he looks like?

After all, this is how you ought to remember him.

He is standing alone on the platform, the uncharacteristically bright wash of midday sun pooling about him, embossing each sharp line in gold. The light drips and collects into the brim of the hat he’s wearing, lends color to the pale patches of skin his old coat sleeves leave bare; one might say it haloes him – the preternatural light of foreshadowing – but I certainly wouldn’t resort to such ludicrous literary devices. What’s important is that the sun is setting behind him, and even inside each uncharted second of hesitation his shadow creeps knowingly closer to the threshold of the car.

I could call out to him: encouragement, instruction. Guidance. But there are no maps for the place where he’s trying to go. This is a very special train with only one destination, and that’s Where You Need to Be.

Humans aren’t terribly fond of anything that smacks of fate. They need options – probable doubt, remember? I suppose that’s what makes it so difficult to climb aboard.

But whatever’s to happen in the days ahead, all you really need to remember is this: He is afraid. He is uncertain. He doubts his own sanity.

And none of that stops him from getting on the train.
The Other Passengers

V.

The other passengers paid no attention to him as he picked his way carefully down the isle, though his sharp eyes shifted restlessly beneath his hat brim, taking everything in. The normalcy of the car and its occupants was almost disappointing, given the fantastical circumstances under which he’d arrived. Men in derby hats talked quietly, gesticulating with familiarly creased, middle-class hands; women absent-mindedly minded chattering children, who occasionally spilled out into the aisles or knelt on their seat cushions to press their noses against the smudged glass.

Eventually, the detective located an unoccupied seat in the middle of the car and settled himself in it. He slanted his hat strategically so he could study the people sitting around him while appearing to gaze out the window. The small gold watch nestled in the palm of his hand remained there, and his long fingers continued to map out the simple contours of its surface – a nervous tick to replace the absent tock.

His attitude did not change when the shrill call of the station master’s whistle finally announced their imminent departure, though a careful observer would’ve noted a new line of tension in his shoulders that hadn’t been there before. Whatever he thought of this excursion, there was no going back now.

The rhythmic clack and hiss of the locomotive tangled with the general chatter of its passengers, a tapestry of sound whose individual threads were soon lost to general distortion; but Holmes was making an effort to concentrate on the conversation taking place in the seat directly before his, and it ran something like this:

“The South Bend, yeah? Supposed to be a whole pack of ‘em camped up that ways. Cato said there was a scuffle last week, said the bastards made off with a whole engine.”

“I ain’t heard nothing ‘bout that.”

“Well, s’not like they’re gonna publish the story or nothing, is it? You think this lot woulda climbed aboard if they knew that –”

The second speaker quite obviously didn’t think they would have, and he jostled his companion roughly before he could finish his statement. “Shut it, Dee, will ya? Boss’ll pitch us out for sure if we get these hens all worked up,” he hissed. It was obvious that he was trying to speak quietly, and it’s possible he even thought he’d succeeded; but the problem with extremely large men is that they often have extremely large voices, and he was certainly a large man. Holmes’ eyes narrowed speculatively and he shifted a little in his seat, altering position so that he could use the window opposite the strangers as a sort of mirror.

At first it seemed the glass performed that function too well, for the passengers seated before him were almost identical in appearance. Giant, broad-shouldered men with matching blue-grey eyes and five o’clock shadows, they both wore their disheveled blonde hair relatively short, the untidy locks sticking out in a haphazard fashion and licking occasionally at the scruffy edges of their strong, square jaws. Their clothes were all that dispelled the illusion of double-vision. Both wore long dusters soiled and creased with use. The one closest to the window’s – ‘Dee,’ as he’d been addressed by the other – wore a dark, chocolate brown; the other’s was a lighter, buttery tan. They wore their coats unbuttoned, revealing equally rumpled linen shirts (one white, one blue); Dee wore a red scarf
knotted around his thick neck. His twin had a pair of brass goggles on his head.

What Holmes found most interesting about them, however, were the strange weapons they held in their hands.

They possessed a matching set of rifles, though rifles of a sort Holmes had never before seen. The stocks appeared to be made of wood, dark and stained with the patina of hard, regular use – in this aspect, at least, the detective was on familiar ground. But the strange profusion of brass work, copper plating, and gears proved more problematic. It wasn’t apparent what weapons such as those would use for ammunition, or even if they’d fire at all. They were gun-shaped and held in sun-worn, calloused hands that looked entirely capable of shooting to kill, but their bizarre composition made him question his initial assessment of their function. And they were not the only strange devices the men carried. The left sleeve of Dee’s dark coat bunched up around his forearm, the cuff unable to accommodate the leather band he wore around his wrist or the metal contraption it held in place. It, too, might have been a gun – the object contained four slim metal barrels and some kind of key-shaped crank on one end - but it’s peculiar design likewise made it difficult to say for sure. The handle of what might have been a pistol was visible through the opening of the second man’s coat, resting in a shoulder harness.

Holmes glanced around the carriage again carefully, but none of the other passengers appeared to be armed.

“Who was workin’ that horse, anyway?” the second speaker was asking his companion, the shadowy image of his reflection scowling in disapproval.

“Some flash-shot,” Dee scoffed. “Member that lot that blew into Term last month? One of them. Thought chasin’ the Gang was just like banging ‘round bucket heads.”

“He was a bucket head, little piss-ant. That crew the lot that was roughin’ the Flowers, too?”

“Mmmh.”

The other cracked his knuckles menacingly. “Bucket heads oughta learn to keep to their side of the bloody line.”

They were both quiet for a stretch, perhaps considering this. Holmes took advantage of their lapse to shift his attention to the scenery flashing past outside and was instantly surprised by two independent factors: the first was the unprecedented speed of the train, which galloped down the stretch of track so quickly the customary click-clack had blurred into one continuous hum; the second was that he didn’t recognize the countryside.

The only thing he could be certain of was that, in a ridiculously short span of time, they’d managed to leave London far behind them.

“Boss says if they lose another horse, he’s gonna make us double-up. Already talked to Rose ‘bout it.”

“We ain’t lost a pony yet, Dum.”

Dum shrugged. “Just a precaution. You wanna get stuck workin’ with a bucket head?”

Dee declined comment on this. “Wish t’Suites I knew who they was sellin’ the herd off to.”

“Part of the Game, ‘s my guess. Don’t protest too hotly; keeps us employed, don’t it?”
They fell quiet again. Holmes crossed his arms over his chest and slouched lower in his seat, affecting sleep as he attempted to get a clear glimpse in his window of the person seated behind him. The light wouldn’t work to his favor, though; he thought it might have been a woman in a white fur coat, working diligently on the knitting in her lap, but the glass’ reflection was oddly distorting. At times her head of tight, white curls almost merged with the collar of her jacket, and the two needles in her hands took on the appearance of six or eight. After a few moments, he gave up the exercise as futile.

The passenger sitting across from him was a young girl with straight brown hair. She was alone and kept her hands clenched tightly in her lap, blank green eyes gazing at the back of the seat in front of her. She seemed anxious and tense, and Holmes absently wondered if this was her first time traveling alone. She was well-dressed but pale, with a black cloth armband encircling her right forearm. It put Holmes in mind of the sort men wore to signify mourning -- an odd device for a girl of her age.

As is often the case with long distance travel, the relaxed chatter of the train’s passengers slowly thinned and trickled before finally giving way completely to the metallic hum of their forward progression. Children abandoned their limited explorations in favor of the comfort of their mothers’ laps or shoulders; heads tilted sideways to prop against the windows. Even the rigid girl across from Holmes eventually slumped into the ‘v’ her seat made with the wall of the car, relaxing the death-grip her fingers had maintained around each other. Only the two blonde men in front of Holmes remained alert, their calm gazes taking in everything without comment.

Perhaps three hours passed, or maybe it was only thirty minutes. The detective, who normally had a decent mental grasp on such things, would have been at a complete loss to say for sure. The silent watch in his hand was certainly no indicator. The colors outside had begun to edge towards the darker end of the spectrum, but whether they owed the change to a persistent cloudbank or a drastic shift in the position of the sun, he couldn’t say for sure. The train had made no additional stops; no one had gotten on or off.

Suddenly, for no reason Holmes could discern, there was a rigid tension in the air.

The dozing passengers obliviously slept on, but Dee, placing one hand on the back of the seat in front of him, pushed himself to his feet and leaned closer to the window. Holmes sat up a little straighter and attempted to follow the direction of the man’s gaze, but he saw nothing apart from flat grassland.

“Three,” Dee said quietly to his companion.

“Scouts,” Dum surmised.

“South Bend’s dead ahead.”

Holmes still couldn't see anything, but Dum reached for his rifle and Dee fumbled with the latches on the window, struggling a moment to manipulate the slender tabs with his thick fingers. When he had the window down, he likewise grabbed his weapon and braced the oddly-shaped barrel on the sill. Dum stepped out into the isle and turned to face Holmes.

“’Scuse me a minute,” he murmured, and the detective obligingly drew up his thin legs to accommodate him as the gunmen carefully maneuvered towards the window. Holmes watched curiously as he, too, fumbled with the catch on the top pane and situated his own weapon in an identical manner to his partner’s.

The two men both thumbed back the strange copper hammers and rested their fingers against the curl of their triggers. And then they froze in that position, unmoving and silent as the train clattered on.
Dum’s blocky form completely cut off Holmes’ field of vision, and so he found himself concentrating on the slant of the man’s massive shoulders instead, searching for some clue as to what they were about to face off against. But both men were impressively stoic. The detective turned the watch in his hand restlessly and waited.

“There,” Dee finally said into the silence. His voice vibrated with warning and expectation, but neither of the two men moved.

“See ‘em,” Dum muttered. “Six.”

“Eight.”

“Eleven.”

“Fourteen.”

“Bloody hell, they’re circling!”

Holmes flattened himself against his seat just in time to clear Dum’s path as the man pushed himself away from the wall and moved quickly into the opposite row. The little girl was awake now, looking up at him in terror as he fumbled open her window and resumed his previous position. He ignored her completely. “Twenty-two over here – it’s the whole bloody pack!” he snarled in warning.

Taking advantage of his absence, Holmes slid closer to his own window and peered expectantly through the glass. This time, he could see something – though what he saw was up for interpretation. The world outside had ceased edging towards darkness and had, instead, become darkness altogether. Within that inky landscape a swarm of shadowy figures moved quickly, stretching out across the ground and keeping pace with the train. At times, they appeared to be men dressed in long black coats and slouched black hats, riding black horses; but then again, horse and man sometimes appeared one creature altogether, loping along like an enormous black wolf, or a panther, or something that was a little of both and completely neither. The harder he tried to concentrate on their distorted forms, the more difficult they were to observe.

“Who’s leading them?” Dee called over his shoulder.

“Nobody.”

“Fuck,” Dee muttered, bracing one knee on the seat and locking himself into position. “Alright. Let ‘em know we’re here.”

The terse quiet of the car was shattered by a sudden wild-cat snarl of sound, and one of the dark shapes outside went down; the noise was repeated on the opposite side of the train, assumedly with similar results.

So they were guns, then.

“Backing?” Dum asked tersely.

“Nope.”

They fired again.

“Now?”

“Nope.”
And then a new sound added its voice to the general chaos – something coming from outside, not unlike the rifle shots but somehow infinitely more unpleasant. It couldn’t compare, though, to the piercing screech which immediately followed it. Holmes reflexively clamped his hands down over his ears, a white hot stab of light flashing painfully behind his eyes. It was a banshee wail, the sound of a finger nail on a chalkboard magnified a billion times over, and it hurt. The gunmen, rather than covering their ears, each removed one hand from their weapons and used it to brace themselves against the wall of the car. A second later, the train jumped.

There was no other way to explain it. Like a wild animal bucking forward to avoid a whiplash, the vehicle had gathered itself together and lunged, its cars rocking precariously with the instability. Holmes, entirely unprepared for the movement, was thrown hard against the wall. Wincing with the pain, he gripped the back of the seat in front of him and held on tightly as the car regained its balance. All the passengers were awake now, and some of the children had begun to cry despite the distracted soothing of their anxious mothers.

“Still on track!” Dum shouted triumphantly.

“River’s just ahead.”

“Last shot?”

“Nobody’s in my sights.” He sounded grimly satisfied with the report. They both fired, almost simultaneously; the magnified explosion of their combined blasts was almost as painful as the mysterious shrieking noise had been.

“Hit?”

“No; bastard swerved!”

“River in half a league.”

They both drew their guns back into the car, hastily reloading with cartridges they pulled from the recesses of their coats. Then they resumed position.

“… Ain’t backing off, Dee,” Dum warned. Dee frowned at the news and sighted along his barrel.

“Almost there.”

“Still ain’t backing.”

“Shit. What’re they thinking?!”

“Incoming!”

The foreign gun report came again, and Holmes braced himself for that inhuman scream of pain. It was louder this time, metallic teeth dragging viciously down his spine. The agony of the sound ripped his breathing into ragged gasps, and he closed his eyes reflexively as the train lunged again. This time it hopped sideways, spilling half of its passengers into the aisle. Dum absently dropped an arm to pin the frightened girl where she was, glancing down at her as she whimpered in terror. He noted her black armband and cursed, but the sound was drowned out by the sharp screech of metal as the train’s wheels tottered dangerously against the rails. They were now moving forward at an impossible speed, and Holmes braced himself again, certain they’d tip – but somehow, the car righted itself.

“River!” Dee warned above the confusion of scared voices.
“Don’t let up! There’s a P-O-N onboard – they ain’t after the bloody train!”

Holmes strained to see past the blurred shapes in the darkness and could indeed just make out a massive body of water glittering in the half-light ahead. What he couldn’t see was a bridge.

It all happened rather quickly: one of the women in the car screamed; Dee and Dum fired their guns, and then fired again; and Holmes felt the train gathering beneath him, like a great animal preparing to make a massive leap …

… which, coincidentally, is exactly what it was.

“Last shot!” Dee called. They both sighted and fired, and then leaned back into the car to latch on to whatever handholds they could find.

With a massive bound, the train leapt over the river.

It was a jump the locomotive had made many times before, but the attack had thrown off its balance and it almost didn’t clear the opposite shore. The caboose splashed noisily through blessedly shallow water while the train struggled up the steep bank, squealing and grunting like a pig as it pushed forward. Finally they succeeded, the manic pace of earlier resolving itself into a more regular trot as they chugged forward in the darkness.

“Bloody Game,” Dee groused, reloading his gun. Dum cast a glowering look at the frightened girl before putting up her window and moving to retake his seat. Around them, the other passengers were still sorting themselves out, agitated and scared, but the gunmen ignored them.

“Careless; didn’t see her sittin’ there.”

“She’s movin’ the right way, though. That’s why we didn’t notice. Only one movin’ the wrong way is he.” Dum turned his head and made eye-contact with a very startled detective. “You with her?” he demanded, jerking a thumb at the child.

“No,” Holmes responded quietly. He noticed with interest that Dee was looking at his sleeves, perhaps in search of an armband. The absence of one seemed to increase his suspicion rather than alleviate it.

“He ain’t playin’,” he warned his companion. To Holmes, he said, “What you doin’ here, then? Your sort ain’t really supposed to be here, you know.”

Holmes blinked, rapidly sorting out his options. “… Is it customary for you to interrogate other passengers?” he asked coolly after a brief pause, settling back in his seat. The gunmen glanced at each other and he waited, tense and expectant; there were a couple of ways this could go, and some of them didn’t end entirely well for him.

But then Dum grinned. “Arrogant as hell, you lot, always,” he chuckled. “Few times that ya ain’t scared witless, anyways. … We protect the train from stuff that’s outside, not in. Can’t ride the train ‘less you’re supposed to. So that’s alright.”

Holmes visibly relaxed, as a gesture of goodwill. “You’ve encountered others of … my ‘lot,’ then?” he asked cautiously.

“Sometimes,” Dee shrugged. “Not in a while, though. Mostly, it’s ones like her.” He jerked a thumb in the direction of the girl.

“I’m looking for someone,” Holmes ventured after a moment of consideration. “Someone ‘like her,’ I
believe. A little girl, about her age.” The companions exchanged looks again, a strange flicker of surprise and consideration crossing each identical face.


“… I’m not entirely sure I understand what you mean by ‘side.’ She was kidnapped. I do not know by whom. That is what I’ve come to discover.” He reached into his coat pocket and showed them the photograph he withdrew.

The look on their faces was difficult to explain. Holmes felt a hopeful lurch in the pit of his stomach and leaned forward in anticipation. “How’d she end up here again?” Dum breathed in confusion, but Dee quickly elbowed him into silence.

“Not now,” he hissed, casting a meaningful glance around the car. No one appeared to be paying them the least bit of attention, but that wasn’t enough to reassure him. “We’ll discuss this when we get to Term’, Mr …?”

“Holmes,” the detective supplied. “Sherlock Holmes.” The name didn’t register on the gunmen’s faces, and for that Holmes was relieved.

“Right. I’m Tweedle Dee, and this is m’brother. Tweedle Dum.” Holmes shook each of their hands in turn, his own completely enveloped by both enormous paws. “We work the Two and Three routes, keepin’ the train hunters off. But we’ll have some time when we get to Term, whilst they doctor the horse and refuel.”

“Term?” Holmes asked curiously.

“‘Termination.’ Final stop. Only stop.” He grinned.

“Sure.” Dee shrugged again. “Where you git on, and where you git off. Only two places you got to be worryin’ about.”

Holmes nodded; it seemed the safest answer. “And how long before we arrive at Termination?”

He was right. After fifteen minutes – or five, or fifty – Holmes felt the train begin to slow. The rough, shadowy outlines of buildings began to appear outside his window, blocky shapes that gradually became more clustered as they eased to a stop. The Tweedle brothers gathered their guns, and Holmes – after a final, speculative glance at the little girl – followed them off the train.

It was hard to make any detailed observations about Termination in the dark, for the clouds hid the moon and shadows smeared the buildings into the night that surrounded them. From what Holmes could gather, however, it had much in common with the frontier towns so stereotypical of the American west: one main street, simple, uniformly constructed wooden buildings, and few people. The majority of the train’s passengers shuffled off towards the only hotel, but the Tweedles led him past the building with an easy familiarity that disregarded the darkness entirely. Eventually they ended up on the outskirts of the settlement, as far from the station as the town extended, and the trio ducked inside the last building in the row.

The interior was well-lit by a series of burning gas lights, revealing a décor that was gaudy and comfortably Victorian. Along the left hand wall stood a crescent shaped bar, the shelves behind it
well stocked with bottles containing liquids in every imaginable color. The back wall hosted a small stage with an upright piano angled along one corner; small, circular tables dotted the remaining floor space. The room wasn’t crowded but it wasn’t empty, small groups of patrons sharing bottles around the tables or laughing drunkenly along the bar. A group of young, brightly dressed women drifted about the premises like butterflies.

Dee headed towards an abandoned table near the back with the unerring directness of a regular costumer, and once they were seated he gestured for the closest of the women to come closer still. “Hullo, love,” she purred to him, though she shared her smile in equal proportions with the entire trio.

“Hey there, Rosie. Lily around?”

The beautiful redhead pouted theatrically, propping one delicate hand on her hip. The other traced invisible, meandering patterns on the scarred tabletop in front of Dee. “Aw, what’s this, now – you sayin’ I’m not good enough for ya anymore?” Long lashes fluttered over bright green eyes, painted lips pursed into a cute moue of disappointment. “Comin’ in here after all this time and askin’ after Lil’? I’m hurt, Dee.”

“Now hold on, Rosie, I ain’t askin’ for me – this gent needs to talk to her. He ain’t from around here,” he said meaningfully, inclining his head towards Holmes. Rosie’s eyes widened as understanding dawned, and Holmes nodded at her in polite greeting. He was trying to recall in what context he had encountered the name ‘Lily’ before.

“Ooooh,” the girl murmured, studying the newcomer with open curiosity. “Won’t do you no good to ask Lil’ for help with the Game,” she warned. “Lil’ hates when anyone so much as mentions it.”

“He ain’t playin’,” Dum cut in. “He’s here lookin’ for someone.”

Rosie’s eyes widened still further. “Alright. I’ll get her,” she relented quickly, and Holmes wondered at the sudden change in attitude. She’d slipped away amongst the tables before he could work it out, and Dum pushed himself to his feet.

“I’ll get us somethin’ to drink,” he announced to the table in general before heading towards the bar. Holmes turned an inquisitive look on his remaining companion, who surveyed the room carefully before he began to speak.

“Tiger-lily’s one of the Lost Ones,” he said eventually, in a low voice. His expression was grave, and he fiddled absently with the straps of his wrist cuff while he talked. “Listen – you gotta be careful who you talk to here, ‘specially about tellin’ people you’re from the other side. But Lil’s alright, she’ll help you. If she can, that is … she’s been here a long time.”

Holmes folded his hands before him on the table, studying the other man’s expression intently. “It’s obvious you’re taking some sort of risk by assisting me. Why chance it?”

Dee snorted. “Not all of us care so much for the Game. What they’re doin’, it ain’t right. Bringin’ the little ones here an’ all. Doesn’t sit so well with all of us. Dum an’ me, we’re just hired guns; low on the food chain, you know? But this effects everyone. It’s dangerous. ‘Specially for your lot.”

“Hullo, Dee. Rosie said you was lookin’ for me?”

Both men looked up at Tiger-lily, who stood at the edge of the table. She was strikingly beautiful, tall and elegant with sleek black hair piled high on the top of her small head. She wore a low-cut black and orange dress that matched the blossom tucked behind her ear, and her dark brown eyes were
“Hiya, Lil’. I want you to meet my friend -- Sherlock Holmes. You an’ him have some things in common. He could use your help.” He stood then, offering her his vacated seat. “Sit an’ talk a minute, alright? I’m gonna help Dum with the drinks.” She seemed hesitant at first, frowning after his retreating figure; but in the end, she took his abandoned chair.

“Can’t talk long, hon,” she told Holmes quietly. “Busy night tonight, and Grif gets himself all worked up when he thinks we ain’t pulling our weight.”

“I understand; I promise I won’t take up much of your time.” Holmes studied her carefully. He’d finally remembered who she was. “I’ve come here in search of someone, someone who’s been kidnapped from my side.” Her eyes narrowed and he reached once more for the photograph in his pocket. “This is not the first time she’s been here, and I have reason to believe you’ve encountered her before. Is her face familiar to you?” He slid the picture across the table towards her, and the healthy flush in her delicate cheeks drained away.

“Why would they take her again?” she murmured, mostly to herself. Abruptly, she recalled where they were and pushed the snapshot back in his direction. “Goodness, honey, put that away – if the wrong person saw it …”

“Can you help me?” he pressed as he returned the photograph to his pocket.

“I … I don’t know. I don’t know where she is. But if they’ve taken her for the Game, I might be able to help you figure out where to start lookin’.”

“Because you once played the Game yourself?”

She flushed a little and looked away, pinning her lower lip beneath a perfect row of straight, white teeth. “… Yes. Like Alice, I was taken. I was very young; I have so few memories of what life was like before. Too young to play, at first; they brought Alice here to take my place. She helped them win. Then they grew careless, and she got away.”

“Why do they require children for this Game? I’m afraid I do not understand how it all works.”

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t really understand myself. The nobility here invented the Game hundreds of years ago, as a means of keepin’ themselves entertained. But eventually they grew bored and started changin’ the rules. It’s really complex now, and important – whoever wins the Game gets real powerful here in this world. As you can imagine, the players are willin’ to go to do just about anything to win. Kidnapping is a crime, and bringin’ outsiders across the border is strictly forbidden; but they break the laws, and no one has the power to punish them. They need children as part of this new, complex Game, ’cause children can see both sides of the divide at the same time. They can exist on one side while viewing another. For some reason, that’s important.”

“Only children?”

“Well … yes. As we grow older, we start cuttin’ up the world into categories: ‘real’, ‘fiction.’ We lose the ability to see certain things, because we no longer have faith in their existence. That’s how I got trapped here. I grew up. I can’t see the other side now.” Her face twisted into a grimace of pain and frustration. “I wasn’t any use to them any more, so they sold me to Grif.”

“But you were younger than Alice. How can she still be of use to them if you no longer are?”

“Time works differently here. I’m an adult now.” She smiled bitterly, leaning back to mockingly display her decidedly mature profile. “But she’s still a child. For the moment.”
“How did she get away before?”

“No one knows. But she’s the only one who ever has.”

“I have reason to believe the White Rabbit may know where she is. Do you know how I can find him?”

“No. But he works for the nobility, I can tell you that much. And he brought her here the first time, or so the legend says.”

There was a sudden commotion near the door. Two men stood at the entrance – one tall and lanky, the other one short and fat – and at the sight of them, Tiger-lily became pale. “Serpents,” she hissed warningly to Holmes, regaining her feet and slipping off into the shadows. The detective glanced in the direction of the Tweedle brothers and noticed that they were eyeing the strangers warily from the bar. The rest of the room had subsided into a terse, uncomfortable silence.

The Serpents didn’t seem terribly bothered by this, perhaps because it wasn’t an irregular occurrence. They sauntered cockily over the bar and ordered their drinks, smirking confidently at anyone within range. The other patrons went back to whatever they’d been doing. Cautiously. The gunmen vacated their stools and returned to the table.

“Friends of yours?” Holmes asked dryly, accepting the drink they handed him. It was electric blue and smelled inexplicably of strawberries.

Dum snorted and Dee simply downed the contents of his tumbler-sized shot glass. “You talk to Lil’?” he asked, wiping his mouth with the back of his gloved hand.

“Yes. She was quite informative.”

“She’s a good kid. You might wanna try –“

“Look out; Serpents found the bucket head,” Dum cut in suddenly, low and urgent. Both brothers turned towards the bar with the vibrating intensity of dogs scenting an oncoming fight.

The lean man and the fat man had opted to sit on either side of a third individual, who was doing his very best to ignore their presence. His chin was propped in the palm of one hand while his other maintained a nervous grip on his drink. Said drink appeared to be one in a procession of many; from time to time, for no discernible reason, he would slip sideways and fall off the stool, though he persistently continued to clamor back up onto it again every time he did. He had long, white-blonde hair that hung in a listless curtain about his drawn face, streaked in places with every color imaginable. His pale, watery-blue eyes never appeared to successfully focus on anything.

He was ignoring the Serpents’ jeering with an air of long-time habit.

“– C’mon, now; you haven’t forgotten how to sing already, have ya?” the fat man was saying, elbowing the blonde in the ribs hard enough to make him fall off his stool again. “Mark of chivalry an’ all that, innit?” he asked his grinning companion. “Singin’ all those pansy verses to the good ladies of the court.”

“Ain’t no ladies here, though,” the lean one sneered, watching the blonde pull himself back onto his stool. “Jus’ droopy ole’ flowers and washed-out has-beens.” The women who were within earshot became a bit tight-lipped at that, but no one challenged the observation. “So c’mon, Mr. Has-Been, sing us a song. Or are yer songs too good for the likes of us?” He nudged the blonde’s stool with the toe of his boot, forcing the other man to grasp at the edge of the counter.
“Alright,” the hassled drunk snapped at last, “You boys want a song? I’ll sing a song, just for you.” He pushed himself to his feet and wobbled unsteadily in the direction of the stage. The Serpents exchanged amused looks; the Tweedles shared a worried one. Everyone in the room was watching the blonde now, and everyone except the Serpents looked uneasy.

“Tom, maybe this ain’t such a good idea,” Rosie tried gently as he passed her, but the would-be musician paid her no mind. He stumbled drunkenly to the piano bench and lined his fingers up against the old, yellowed keys.

Then he launched into his song, and to Holmes’ surprise he really could sing. His voice, still beautiful despite being laced with bitterness and alcohol, carried easily across the room and his piano accompaniment was more than vaguely competent. The detective was even more startled when he recognized the words:

The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright--
And this was odd, because it was
The middle of the night.
The moon was shining sulkily,
Because she thought the sun
Had got no business to be there
After the day was done--
"It's very rude of him," she said,
"To come and spoil the fun!"

The sea was wet as wet could be,
The sands were dry as dry.
You could not see a cloud, because
No cloud was in the sky:
No birds were flying overhead--
There were no birds to fly.
The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand;
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand:
"If this were only cleared away,"
They said, "it would be grand!"

Everyone glanced uneasily at the Serpents, who were no longer smiling. Holmes observed the strange, wicked looking hammer stuck through the lanky man’s belt, and things began to click ominously into place. But the musician was undeterred:

"If seven maids with seven mops
Swept it for half a year.
Do you suppose," the Walrus said,
"That they could get it clear?"
"I doubt it," said the Carpenter,
And shed a bitter tear.
"O Oysters, come and walk with us!"
The Walrus did beseech.
"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach:
We cannot do with more than four,
To give a hand to each."
The eldest Oyster looked at him,
But never a word he said:
The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
And shook his heavy head--
Meaning to say he did not choose
To leave the oyster-bed.
But four young Oysters hurried up,
All eager for the treat:
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,
Their shoes were clean and neat--
And this was odd, because, you know,
They hadn't any feet.
Four other Oysters followed them,
And yet another four;
And thick and fast they came at last,
And more, and more, and more--
All hopping through the frothy waves,
And scrambling to the shore.

(You could have heard a pin drop in the room; the audience scarcely dared to breathe. The Serpents were scowling, though they didn’t yet make a move to interrupt.)

*The Walrus and the Carpenter*
Walked on a mile or so,
And then they rested on a rock
Conveniently low:
And all the little Oysters stood
And waited in a row.
"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--
Of cabbages--and kings--
And why the sea is boiling hot--
And whether pigs have wings."
"But wait a bit," the Oysters cried,
"Before we have our chat;
For some of us are out of breath,
And all of us are fat!"
"No hurry!" said the Carpenter.
They thanked him much for that.
"A loaf of bread," the Walrus said,
"Is what we chiefly need:
Pepper and vinegar besides
Are very good indeed--
Now if you're ready, Oysters dear,
We can begin to feed."
"But not on us!" the Oysters cried,
Turning a little blue.
"After such kindness, that would be
A dismal thing to do!"
"The night is fine," the Walrus said.
"Do you admire the view?"

"It was so kind of you to come!
And you are very nice!"
The Carpenter said nothing but
"Cut us another slice:
I wish you were not quite so deaf--
I've had to ask you twice!"
"It seems a shame," the Walrus said,
"To play them such a trick,
After we've brought them out so far,
And made them trot so quick!"
The Carpenter said nothing but
"The butter's spread too thick!"
"I weep for you," the Walrus said:
"I deeply sympathize."
With sobs and tears he sorted out
Those of the largest size,
Holding his pocket-handkerchief
Before his streaming eyes.
"O Oysters," said the Carpenter,
"You've had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?"
But answer came there none--
And this was scarcely odd, because
They'd eaten every one.

The musician placidly removed his hands from the piano keys, letting them fall listlessly into his lap. Dum swore softly under his breath as the Serpents stood with slow deliberation and walked towards the stage.

“The Oysters?” Holmes asked in an undertone to his companions, watching the Walrus and the Carpenter stalk their way across the room.

“Children,” Dee explained quietly, “black market trade.”

“And the musician?”

“Thomas. Used to be a knight for the White side, ‘fore the White side was destroyed.”

The ex-knight continued to wait for the Serpent’s retribution, no expression on his face. Even though he wasn’t moving, he was still having difficulty staying on the piano bench.

Meanwhile, the Serpents had reached the stage.

(“They’re kidnappers, then?”

“They’re henchmen,” he said in a tone that also implied thieves/spies/murderers/kidnappers/gophers-

“You think that’s funny?” the Carpenter menaced. He eased the hammer free of his belt while the Walrus looked on, leering, “You think we’re funny?”
“No,” Thomas responded flatly, his listless eyes trailing over the weapon. “I think you’re pathetic.”

(“Henchmen for whom?”)

The Carpenter lunged forward and fisted his fingers into the front of Thomas’ rumpled shirt, pulling him to his feet with enough violence to tip the piano bench over. The audience cringed reflexively as it crashed off the edge of the stage.

(“Whoever’s willin’ to hire ‘em.”)

Thomas’ blank gaze followed the trajectory of the hammer as it was lifted above their heads, but he didn’t appear frightened and he made no effort to struggle. “Washed up old has-been, calling us pathetic?” the Carpenter sneered. “Well, funny man; we’ll see if you’re still laughing after I smash out all your teeth.”

He drew back his arm in preparation to strike, the sleeve of his shirt riding up to reveal the snake tattoo on his thin, bony wrist.

(“And these two? Whom do they work for?”)

The Walrus began to cackle – a deep, ugly, choking sound – and some of the women in the room covered their eyes.

(“They’re the Unicorn’s men,” Dee said grimly.)

“Just a minute, now – what the hell’s going on here?”

The gathered assembly turned as one, refocusing on the man who had just clattered imperiously down the stairs. Tiger-lily walked a few paces behind him, looking defiant and satisfied.

“Stay outta this, Grif,” the Carpenter warned. He hadn’t released his captive, but he had lowered the hammer. The Walrus took a menacing step in his direction, but the older, grizzled man paid him no notice. As the proprietor of the establishment, he’d encountered their lot only too many times before.

“What’ve I told you about shedding blood in here? What do you think that does for my business – scaring customers, smashing up my things? Huh?”

“Frightened men drink more,” the Walrus put in with that same ugly chuckle, but a harsh look from Grif silenced him again.

“Oh, no. Not in here, you don’t. And not outside, neither, not this time. Thomas owes me money, and he’s going to help entertain my costumers until his debt is paid. After that, I don’t care what you do to him; but for now, he belongs to me.”

“He insulted us,” the Carpenter growled. “And an insult to us is an insult to the boss.” The threat implied in those words sent another thrill of tension through the room, but Grif remained unimpressed.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about you or your damned employer,” he said flatly, crossing his arms over his chest and studying the two men with the contempt most people reserved for dead, unpleasant insects. “And if you’ve got a problem with that, you can take it up with my boss.”

That, at least, seemed to give the bullies pause. Holmes studied the feathery tufts of white hair on the man’s head and his cruel, curved beak of a nose as he mentally pushed another piece of the puzzle into place.
Grudgingly, the Carpenter released his hold on Thomas and shoved him backwards, hard enough to send the former knight stumbling into the piano. “You got lucky today, bucket head,” he snarled, jabbing the blade of his index finger hard against the other man’s sternum. “But one of these days, your luck’s gonna run out. And I’m gonna be there when it does.”

The Serpents glared menacingly at Grif – and at anyone else foolish enough to make eye contact with them – as they stomped their way out of the building.

Grif spat contemptuously on the hardwood floor. “Go back to what you were doing, folks,” he ordered firmly, and the room obediently subsided into a wave of nervous chatter and clinking glass. The proprietor took advantage of the moment to wheel angrily on his hapless employee, but his words of reprimand were drowned out in the general noise of the room.

“So there are people even the Unicorn fears,” Holmes mused.

“He ain’t got the crown yet, has he?” Dee appropriated the bottle his twin had brought to the table and refilled both their glasses. Holmes had yet to touch his.

“What of the Lion?”

“You’re awfully knowledgeable for an outsider,” Dum observed with a sideways glance for his smaller companion. “You haven’t told us who you’re workin’ for yet.”

“I’m a consulting detective; I’ve been hired by the girl’s parents to find her and, if possible, return her to her home.” For some reason, it seemed best to leave Carroll out of the equation, at least for now.

“That don’t explain how you got here, though, does it?”

Though he would never quite be able to explain why, Holmes’ instincts warned him that it wouldn’t be wise to mention the Cheshire Cat, either. The feline’s motives were at best unclear, and it was impossible to know at whose bidding he’d been sent to show Holmes the way. So instead, he retrieved the Rabbit’s watch from his pocket and placed it on the table for them to see.

“I’ve borrowed some time,” he tried, the Cat’s words tasting strange in his mouth, “from someone who has known Alice on both sides of the divide. That association was the only clue I had to go on.”

The brothers gawked at the watch for a moment, neither attempting to touch it. Then, slowly, Dee began to smile. “We’ve been underestimatin’ this one, Dum,” he said, eyes flashing in mirth. “How the hell did you get that? By the Suites, that rabbit never lets the watch out of his sight!”

Dum didn’t seem quite as amused. “Awfully clever,” he agreed quietly. “Bit like somethin’ a Serpent would do.” Dee’s smile faltered.

Holmes made an educated guess and quickly pushed up both his sleeves, presenting his bare wrists for inspection. “I am not a Serpent,” he said firmly. “As I’ve said, I’m a consulting detective. It’s a career pathway which has necessitated competency in a broad range of skills.”

Dum and Dum exchanged careful looks, and Holmes found himself – not for the first time – wishing it had been possible for Watson to accompany him on this journey. The doctor had always been much better at putting others at ease. It was something Holmes himself had never been quite able to master, regardless of whatever charms he might possess.

Dum sighed. “The Game’s too complicated for me now; too many players, too many sides. Maybe you is workin’ for the Lion, or the royals, or the Suites, or someone else we ain’t even heard of yet. And maybe you isn’t. We done our part. We can’t take you no further no matter why you’re here, so
I guess there’s no harm in havin’ a drink or two, anyway.” He upended his glass demonstratively while Dee nodded his agreement. They looked resigned and tired: men who had been caught up for too long in a political struggle they didn’t want to know anything about.

“But the Fourth Square belongs to you, does it not? Surely you were part of it all at one time or another.”

Dum made a derisive noise in the back of his throat. “Nah. It’s the forest, not us; when the Game was just a game, it was about challengin’ yourself and that. The forest makes you forget things you need to be knowin’. Not easy, gettin’ through. It’s our family land, ‘s all.”

“I’m not certain yet where my search will lead me. It is possible I may have to pass through the forest myself.”

Dee shrugged. “As you like. We ain’t gonna stop you; anyone who’s crazy enough to try for it can, as they please. We can’t guide you, though, if that’s what you mean. We refuse to take a part in the Game. And anyway, no one else can show you the path. That’s up to you to find alone.”

Dum appeared to be mulling something over while his brother spoke, and at last he set his drink down firmly on the table, having arrived at a decision. “Only but one way to git through the third square, an’ that’s by train. And you can be damned sure the gang’ll be out again, causin’ trouble. Make certain you’re here tomorrow to catch the train; we’ll be on it. So we can guarantee you at least make it to the forest, anyway.”

Dee shot his brother a speculative look, but he didn’t contradict the promise.

“What time does the train depart?” Holmes asked automatically, glancing between them. They returned his look with blank incomprehension.

“When it’s Time to Go,” Dum replied.
The Two Gunmen Retired

III.

The two gunmen retired not long after that, leaving Holmes with the table and the drink he was still pretending to nurse. Other patrons glanced his way occasionally, but for the most part he was ignored. He watched the various musical acts while they were performing and studied the room when they weren’t; the patterned wallpaper took on an uncomfortably familiar shade of midnight blue in the light of the muted gas lamps, and he tried not to think about chains and china and voices that snarled in the dark.

Gradually, the other customers drifted off to their evening accommodations, some with brightly dressed females on their arms. The bar tender wiped down his glasses and put the bottles away. Someone began to tackle the dusty clutter of the floor with an old broom.

Thomas emerged from wherever he’d been and took a seat at Holmes’ table.

“I want to speak with you,” he said quietly, leaning forward in a conspiratorial manner as though afraid of being overheard. The fact that they were virtually alone in the room didn’t seem to matter.

“By all means.”

Thomas took a moment to scrub a hand through his rainbow-colored hair. His eyes had lost their limpid indifference, but he still looked tired and faded and too young to be either. “Lily told me why you’ve come,” he began eventually, in an accent markedly different from everyone else’s. “I want to help you.”

Holmes braced his elbows on the table and leaned forward as well, grey eyes sharp and serious.

“You’re the White knight who saved Alice from capture the last time she was here, aren’t you?”

Thomas blinked, surprised. “Yes,” he confessed warily, “but how could you possibly have known? I’m hardly the only soldier to retire from the service. What with all the sides in the war, we’re so frequently hired only to be unemployed again.”

“When Alice returned to her own side, she told her story to a friend who wrote it down in a book. I recognized your description. I am a detective; it’s my job to piece together what I can.” Thomas nodded slowly. Functionality was something everyone in this world could relate to.

“Then your purpose is to find her,” he mused. “That’s why you’re here. I understand.”

“You expressed an interest in helping me.”

Thomas glanced around the room carefully once more. “Yes. I don’t know where she is, or even why she was brought back. But she’s … something of a legend here, I suppose you could say. They will not be able to keep her return a secret for long, not to anyone in a position to know. And I know of someone who is in exactly such a position. He’s – ah -- rather eccentric, as it were.” Something about the confession seemed to make Thomas nervous, and he began fiddling distractedly with the cuffs of his sleeves. “He doesn’t usually consent to see visitors. You’ll need an introduction from someone he’s already acquainted with – I can provide that for you.”

“I get the impression that there will be trouble for you if anyone finds out about this,” Holmes
observed for the second time that evening. Thomas smiled faintly. “Why take the risk?”

The former knight gazed pensively at some unseen point over Holmes’ shoulder. “Things weren’t always the way they are now,” he said. “Once, my people had honor.” He was silent for a long time, and Holmes thought he’d finished. But then: “It is a knight’s duty to protect his queen, Mr. Holmes, and the last time Alice was here, she earned her crown. It was just a game, of course, but then – isn’t it all?” His eyes returned to his companion’s face, his thoughts to the task at hand. “I cannot explain; perhaps you will understand someday, when you no longer have anything left to lose.” He stood then, glancing cautiously towards the door. “I would advise you take some rest, sir; it’s a long ride, and we’ll need an early start. I will be waiting for you out behind the stables.”

“When it’s Time to Go?” Holmes guessed, standing as well.

Thomas nodded seriously and turned to depart. “‘Til then.”
'Til Then, He Sleeps

X.

‘Til then, he sleeps; and while he sleeps, he dreams.

He dreams he is back in the rooms on Baker Street, dozing fitfully on the settee, but not as himself; his consciousness remains outside his body, silently looking on while he tosses and turns. Numerous lamps burn steadily against the gloom, picking out the sickly sheen of sweat glistening on his face. Someone has placed a cool, damp cloth against his hot forehead, and the sound of a familiar tread moments later reveals who.

This muted almost-light isn’t kind to the doctor. His face looks haggard and old, creased with worry and the burden of concerns too great even for his solid shoulders. Holmes watches while Watson kneels beside the couch, checking his patient’s temperature by pressing the back of his worn hand to the detective’s cheek. His frown deepens. “You goddamned fool,” he whispers, rewetting the cloth in a basin on the floor. That’s how Holmes knows he is dreaming; Watson never speaks to him that way, not even when he should.

There is a slip of paper on the side table, covered in what looks like his handwriting. It is bent and creased, as though it has spent too much time in the clutch of frantic fingers. On top of the paper sits a little gold pocket watch, ticking the seconds away quietly in the dark.

Watson replaces the cloth on Holmes’ forehead, but not before gently smoothing aside the damp strands of the detective’s hair. There is something off about him, and Holmes moves closer to peer into his face, trying to discern what it is. The explanation lies in a look he’s never before seen in the doctor’s eyes: fear.

Holmes wants to open his own eyes, or at least lay a reassuring hand on Watson’s bowed shoulders, but he is unable to do either. The spectacle makes him uneasy, and so he withdraws and prepares to turn away.

“And was it worth it?” he hears Watson ask as the darkness crowds in to blot the image away. There’s a strange bitterness in his voice as unfamiliar as his fear.

Yes, Holmes thinks, but of course there’s no way to say it.

Not that it matters. After all, it’s only a dream.
Morning arrived soft and intrusive – a juxtaposition only dawn truly achieves. It rubbed its tawny-colored, feline face against the edges of the furniture and left a golden dusting of hair on the floorboards. Pushy and insistent, it crawled into his bed and silently nudged him away from sleep. He studied the irregular pattern of its paw prints on the coverlet and windowsill and tried to remember just where, exactly, he was.

The question resounded in his tired head like a puzzle he’d yet to solve, rather than something he’d once known and forgotten.

The regular denizens of the saloon, with their candle-soft eyes and ivory-pale skin, were creatures of the night; daylight scattered them like a cluster of vampiric shadows, and the detective made his way out the front door unquestioned and unopposed. He found Thomas waiting exactly where he’d said he’d be, astride one horse and holding the reins of a second. There was a coat and a hat draped across the unoccupied saddle, a way of smoothing Holmes' foreign lines into something more reminiscent of the local color, and he donned them without protest. He was no stranger to disguise.

Thomas was a far better rider than the text had made him out to be, though Alice had pegged some of the knight's other quirks with more accuracy. His saddle had the unmistakable worn-out shapelessness of standard cavalry issue, but some strange, metallic apparatus had been attached to either stirrup. The devices were partially enclosed by a boxy metal casing, but here and there a gear-rusted with weather and occasionally dirt-encrusted with age - could be seen poking about the edges. Questioning on the matter revealed that they were of Thomas' own invention, a creation designed to aid a wounded soldier in mounting and dismounting. Further questing revealed that they had never quite worked right, and an embarrassed silence provoked the knight-come-inventor to confess that the grinding noise often spooked the horse.

The steed in question reminded Holmes of its rider - an animal once active and able now worn down to obsolescence. Its once-white coat had become a sort of murky grey, worn through in patches that mirrored the sores on its protruding lower lip. Rheumy eyes glared balefully at everything and nothing. Its shambling gait caused the long hairs of its fetlocks to drag in the dirt and collect matching bracelets of leaves and debris. Thomas wore a dark, patched coat that had begun to unravel at the sleeves and a hat equally shapeless and old, though he rode with a straight back and clucked encouragingly to the nag when her pace became too slow. At the right angle, with the sun outlining them in silhouette, it wasn't hard to see what they had once been. But daylight was cruel to this illusion of grandeur, the unyielding light transforming all mysterious monsters into unremarkable windmills.

Idly, as his body slowly remembered what it felt like to be on horseback, Holmes wondered where his own mount had come from. The gelding was young, leggy and well-groomed with bright eyes and a finely shaped head. It was obvious that he had been well-trained, though it was equally obvious that he'd been penned up in the stables too long and fancied a run. Occasionally he'd test the strength of Holmes' steady hands against a sideways toss of his head, side-stepping and snorting in a hopeful request for speed. Thomas was the leader of this expedition, however, and his mare showed no inclination to pick up the pace.

The companionable silence stretching between them gave Holmes ample opportunity to study his
surroundings, though there wasn't much to see. As the sparse frontier town dwindled into the heat-
haze rising behind them, the dry, brittle grass of summer swept in like the ocean. This brackish sea of
green-yellow was unbroken by mountain or building and remained remarkably flat; the tall stalks
hushed and rustled as the horses pushed their way through, in some places high enough to flick the
bottom of their stirrups or lap at the ankles of their boots. It sounded a little like a room of children
playing whisper-down-the-alley, only there was no alley and no children, and Holmes had an uneasy
feeling he didn't want to know what this particular message was meant to be. For a time, the sky
looked as though these same invisible youths had finger painted their way across its expanse,
blurring together night's bruised violets with dawn's softer pinks and blues. Gradually, though, all
that was left was blue: cloudless and stretching on into eternity overhead.

Perhaps it was beautiful, though Holmes also found it somewhat disconcerting. Something about the
ocean-hue of the sky and the seaweed quality to the grass made it seem they were moving
underwater; struggling forward against an invisible current, soldiering on to somewhere they didn't
really belong. He fancied the green-yellow light around them gave his skin an unearthly tinge, as
though he were covered in healing bruises -- as though he'd been submerged in murky waters for far
too long.

Sherlock Holmes was not a man to shy away from adventure or an opportunity to traverse the
unknown. But here in this eternal emptiness, dwarfed by prairie and sky, led by the shadow of a man
in the company of whispering ghost-children, he longed for the chaotic claustrophobia of home.
What else should a drowning man wish for if not the support of familiar ground?

As they rode, he found himself murmuring under his breath,

"For mark! no sooner was I fairly found
Pledged to the plain, after a pace or two,
Than, pausing to throw backward a last view
O'er the safe road, 'twas gone; grey plain all round:
Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound.
I might go on; nought else remained to do."

But once begun, all things must eventually terminate. Finally, the detective spotted an island parting
the waves of the sea. Oasis, he mused to himself, and the little cluster of trees surrounding the great
white house seemed to agree. Holmes allowed his eager gelding to come abreast of its less-
enthusiastic companion, and Thomas turned in the saddle to face him.

"The Count is not accustomed to receiving visitors," he warned, one hand gripping the back of his
seat for balance. The mare took advantage of his inattentiveness to stop and
crop at the grass, but he
absently kicked her forward again. "It's not that he's unfriendly, exactly, merely ... reclusive. He
keeps to his family land and rarely ever leaves. As far as he's concerned, what occurs beyond his
personal borders is of no concern to him."

"But you believe he will find our case sufficiently interesting to stir his apathy?"

"He's a, ah, collector, I suppose you could say. Alice is, therefore, quite relevant to his interests."

Holmes was about to push for an explanation when he suddenly became aware of a third party out
with them in the green -- a man who, judging by the style of his clothes and the easy way he
regarded the little collection of trees, could be none other than the count himself.

They weren't making an effort to approach quietly, and in the silence of early morning the swish of
the tall grass was almost deafening; yet, for the longest time, the count appeared unaware of their
presence. It gave Holmes ample opportunity to study him. The man's clothes appeared expensive,
perhaps tailor-made, but he wore them in a haphazard fashion that suggested he'd slept in them and only recently arisen: the black legs of his un-pressed trousers pooled down around his bare feet; the rumpled silk shirt he wore beneath his unbuttoned jacket was unlaced; he had one glove on, though the fingers of it were missing and its companion was nowhere to be seen. Even as they dismounted and drew closer he continued to ignore them, instead studying the little copse with a critical, pleased eye. The way his head tilted back left the smooth line of his pale throat exposed to morning’s soft caress, the breeze toying coyly with the orange tips of his honey-colored hair.

"Aren't they something?" he asked without looking at them when they stopped at his side. He spoke softly, but here in the quiet his words reverberated like gunshot. "I know what you're thinking -- I thought likewise. But those witches certainly do know their craft." He was speaking to them, and yet he wasn't. Something about the dreamy cadence of his rich baritone had the quality of someone murmuring their shopping list to themselves as they hurried to the store. Holmes felt their arrival had dictated the other man's decision to articulate the words, but that it had had no impact whatsoever on the words themselves.

"And what is it you've purchased from the witches, m'lord?" Thomas inquired politely. He'd removed his hat and adopted the attitude of long-suffering patience he'd acquired from dealing with nobility for half his life.

"Hmmm?" The count turned to look at them finally, his soft amber eyes vaguely puzzled and inquiring. Face-to-face, Holmes privately acknowledged that the other man was staggeringly beautiful; but like the prairie, there was something unsettling about him. There was no green-yellow tint to his glowing skin. Here was a man who had learned to breathe underwater.

"The witches, m'lord," Thomas prompted helpfully. "You'd said that they - ?"

"Ah, yes, quite right; the forest my dear, the forest." He gestured to the copse of trees with one elegant hand. Its half-gloved companion proffered a small, rust-colored tin for their inspection. "Poor lambs wanted a real bit of green to play in, so I thought, 'why not try it?' Just have to add water, you understand. Remarkable! I was skeptical, certainly, but their work does tend to speak for itself." He beamed with obvious pleasure. "Then again, you're in the habit of seeing forests all the time, aren't you? You must tell me: is it terribly life-like? I don't properly recall, you see, it's been so long."

"I'm only accustomed to one forest, m'lord," Thomas said quietly, gripping the brim of his hat between his hands, "and you wouldn't want the children to play in there." His tone brought a chill to the air that hadn't existed before, but if the count noticed it, he certainly wasn't affected by it.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," he mused, propping one hand on an angular hip. "And how is business these days? You still wandering about, banging heads in the name of the Pale One?" He'd begun to drift back in the direction of the house, the two travelers trailing after.

"The White team was defeated long ago," the knight revealed flatly. "Now I live out here on the frontier lands, like yourself."

"That does tend to happen, I suppose." It was obvious that the news didn't interest him in the slightest. "Well. It's been long since I've had any guests, but do come in. I fancy you're not paying a house call, but I haven't forgotten all my manners. No sense in conducting business on an empty stomach, is there?" He had a way of phrasing commands like requests without concealing the fact that they were commands - but put so sweetly, so well-intentioned that there was no pride invested in refusing them. A characteristic of a true aristocrat, and a potentially dangerous one. Thomas had said that the count cared nothing for politics and was uninvolved with the rest of the world, and Holmes saw nothing to suggest that wasn't true. However, he also couldn't shake the feeling that they were dealing with a very shrewd politician, no matter how absent and distracted he seemed.
In an ever-changing world, it had to take a special sort of skill to stay out of everyone’s way.

As they mounted the stairs to the expansive front porch, a fourth player was introduced into the scene: a girl, no older than seven at Holmes' best guess, curled into a whicker rocking chair with a wide picture book in her lap. She watched their approach with impossibly large, brandy-colored eyes, though the detective found the pair of cloth tiger ears poking out of her strawberry blonde hair more immediately arresting. A lovely child, and one who promised to develop into a remarkably beautiful adult. But despite this, there were no facial similarities between her and the count to suggest a blood relation.

"Tora, we have guests," the count announced with an affectionate smile. "Will you please go and ask Usagi to lay table for two more?" Wordlessly, the girl set aside her book and bounded to her feet, bare like his. Her darting path through the open doorway revealed a cloth tail pinned to the back of her pink and white sun dress.

"I don't recall meeting her on my last visit," Thomas noted as they trailed after the girl at a more leisurely pace. He once again spoke with that stilted, affected politeness -- and yet the sideways glance he shot in Holmes' direction was significant. Listen, it said, and understand.

"No, no. My precious little Tora's a more recent acquisition. A year ago now, I believe? Quite a lucky find, too. I picked her up for a prayer at a small auction in some ghastly little border town. Afraid her last master wasn't quite as indulgent as I, though; the poor thing was traumatized something terrible. Doesn't speak a word now."

Holmes listened while simultaneously studying the decor of the home they were being led through. It was a beautiful old house, tastefully furnished by someone who'd had plenty of money to spare but who hadn't necessarily been in haste to burn through it. Far from the typical, crowded parlor rooms of his Victorian London acquaintances, everything here seemed designed to give off a feeling of airy spaciousness: pale colors, transparent draperies, floral designs that climbed around pillars and crept up walls rather than devouring them whole. Paintings occasionally adorned the walls, but they weren't portraits, as one might have expected. They were composed of nature scenes, all complete with their own host of animals. Dolphins leaping in the ocean, deer cavorting in a wood, leopards sleeping peacefully in trees; coupled with the tall ceilings and spacious doorways, one half expected to see such creatures wandering through the neat, bright halls.

No dust, no dirt; things were as immaculate as a nobleman's house (doubtlessly equipped with its own army of trained house servants) was expected to be. And yet, not exactly so, because every once in a while Holmes' quick gaze would catch sight of some sign that a child occupied the premises. The occasional doll leg poking out from beneath a piece of furniture; a balloon corralled out of reach in a high ceiling corner. At one point, the count carelessly nudged a brightly colored ball out of their path with the side of his foot, easy as breathing, and every so often the tasteful, framed paintings were accompanied by a tacked-up paper containing a child's enthusiastic scrawl.

Gradually they came to the dinning room, which housed a magnificently long table topped with a delicate white cloth. Two girls were busy setting it for three - Tora, from the porch, and a girl somewhat older. Perhaps twelve or thirteen, this child had a head of auburn ringlets and lovely eyes a true aquamarine color. Her young, expressive face was dusted lightly with freckles, and she wore a more elaborate day dress of yellow and cream (though, as with the other house's inhabitants, no shoes or socks to speak of.) Despite the count's revelation that Tora didn't speak, the older girl had been chattering merrily to her right up until their entrance.

"Are you just about ready for us, my bunny?" the count asked cheerfully as he stepped up to the table, and that was when Holmes noticed the cloth rabbit ears she wore on her head.
"Yes, m'lord," she answered promptly, executing a perfect curtsy. Exquisite manners aside, it was obviously for the benefit of the guests; the count's faintly amused smile (and the girl's pleased blush) indicated that this wasn't a household to set much stock in formalities.

"Excellent, excellent. Everyone's awake, yes? The boys, too? All up and eating?"

"Everyone," she confirmed brightly. "The boys were quite hungry, master -- it's a wonder they haven't eaten the whole table!"

"I can only imagine. Tora, darling, why don't you go and join them, before there's nothing left?" Tora smiled at him and skipped beneath a doorway at the opposite side of the room. "You too, Usagi, you must eat breakfast."

Usagi's lips twisted into a pretty pout, as perfectly crafted as her curtsy had been. "But master, I'd like to wait on you while you dine -- since we have guests, and all. Please, may I?"

The man smiled and took one of her slim, delicate hands in his, kissing the back of her pale knuckles. "Alright, Bunny, alright. You may stay." Smiling with the smug satisfaction of a child accustomed to getting her way, Usagi took up position beside the count's chair. The lordling himself sat and beckoned for his guests to do the same.

"I must apologize, gentleman; I no longer need to maintain a full staff. Mostly, the children help me keep things tidy." He gestured vaguely around the room to illustrate. "Everyone has chores to do, even me; we should all be proud of the place where we live." Usagi nodded dutifully even though he wasn't looking at her. The count insisted on serving his guests himself with Usagi's quick, perceptive aid, a tidy little meal of eggs, potatoes, toast and sausage. Holmes thought back on the vivid blue drink of the previous evening and couldn't help but feel relieved to see food he recognized.

"I don't believe we've been introduced yet, Count," the detective inserted carefully into a food-laden silence. "My name is Sherlock Holmes. I'm a consulting detective, visiting here from London." He watched the man intently, but though the count seemed interested he did not look in the slightest bit alarmed or surprised. And if Holmes was hoping for a reciprocal introduction, he was disappointed.


"Not in the traditional sense," Holmes responded when it became obvious Thomas wasn't going to. "I've been hired to look for someone who's gone missing: a young girl. I believe that she may have been kidnapped for the purpose of the Game, but I am a stranger here and I'm not entirely certain where to begin looking. Sir Thomas suggested to me that you might be of some assistance."

"Hm, how very interesting." The count settled back in his chair, arms draped casually over the rests. "Reconnaissance, then? I've never heard of such a thing. This was a recent abduction?"

"Yes, it was."

"Still, I'm afraid you might be too late to do anything about it. The summer season is just about to end; there have been at least a dozen auctions already. If the girl was sold, she'll be quite impossible to trace."

"I have reason to believe she hasn't been sold," Holmes pressed. "I believe that if she had, there would have been quite a stir over it."

The count shrugged. "These things only concern people in certain circles, Mr. Holmes. There are many reasons to go to market. Chief of all is the Game, of course, but not every child is suited for
that. Others make up the difference for other purposes. We're all looking for something. But that 'something' varies from individual to individual. The only ones who would have taken note of this child's sale are those select few who wished to purchase her."

"I believe this might be an extenuating circumstance," Holmes insisted quietly. "You haven't heard of anything unusual concerning the auctions in the past few months? Anything at all?"

The count gave the matter some thought, but after a pause he began slowly shaking his head. "No, not a thing. But you know, only last week I picked up a charming set at Central Auction. Every child goes through there eventually, especially if they've only just arrived - maybe the boys would better know what you're talking about. Usagi, dear, would you be a darling and fetch the boys a moment?"

Usagi obediently turned and scampered out of the room in the direction Tora had gone. "I might be of more assistance, Mr. Holmes, if you'd tell me the details," the count mused as he watched her go. "Holding back information isn't going to further your cause at this juncture."

Holmes tried to read his expression, but it remained mild and only vaguely interested. Still. Thomas said he doesn't generally receive visitors ... yet he admitted us without so much as asking my name. What does he know? Taking the gamble, Holmes reached into his pocket for the photograph, sliding it across yet another table. "Do you recognize this girl, my lord?" Beside him, Thomas seemed to be holding his breath.

The count studied the image intently. "Beautiful," he murmured appreciatively. "How pale her hair is! I've not seen such a color since ... well. Lovely. But no, Mr. Holmes, I'm afraid I don't recognize her. Boys?"

The two children had entered the room so silently that even Holmes hadn't remarked their presence. They stood side-by-side to the left of the count's chair, holding hands and eyeing the strangers somberly. "These gentlemen are looking for someone, my loves -- a child from the auction. Have you seen her?" He passed the photograph to the closest, a boy of maybe nine years old with jet black hair and dark grey eyes. He wore a set of cat ears on his head. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy beside him looked to be the same age and wore dog ears. They put their heads together over the photograph and observed it carefully.

After a long pause, they straightened again and the dark-haired boy returned the picture to his master's hand. "We know her," he said quietly. "That's Alice."

For a long moment the room remained frozen in place, exactly as though their time had run out.

"Where did you see her?" Holmes asked finally, half-rising from his seat in anticipation.

"She was at the ... the ... the place. With us an' the others. She weren't sold, though. Not when we left. Said they was savin' her for something special." He shuddered and cringed closer to his companion, indicating exactly what 'special' meant in a horror-house like that.

"She was brave," the blonde put in softly. "She'd sing to us an' stuff. After the men would ..." His eyes went curiously blank as he trailed off, and after a moment it became obvious that he wasn't going to say anything else.

"Alright, now, that will do," the count put in briskly. He stood from his seat, placing a comforting arm around each set of thin, hunched shoulders. "You two have been very helpful, like the good boys you are; but there's no need to say anything further. I'm sorry I interrupted your breakfast." He bent down to place a kiss on the top of each head; the children turned their faces up towards him like flowers angling for the sun. "Precious things. My puppy and kitty," he murmured affectionately.
"Now; go finish, and when everyone's done we'll go for a nice walk in the new forest. Alright? Off you get." He walked them as far as the doorway before returning to his seat.

"Alice .... you failed to mention that. But surely you can't mean the Alice?" He looked questioningly between his guests.

"The Alice," Thomas confirmed. His hands were folded in his lap and he seemed to be in a fierce staring match with his untouched eggs.

"My, my ... extenuating circumstances indeed, Mr. Holmes. I do believe you're right; if she'd been sold, there would've been quite a stir. The gossip mill doesn't often reach this far, but I imagine even I would have heard of it. Hmm." He lapsed into silence for a while. Holmes waited patiently, noting that Thomas would occasionally send the count a small, furtive glance that appeared to go unobserved. Finally, the count resumed, "Well, I can tell you this much: last week's auction was the only sale between then and tonight, and tonight's is the last of the season. If she wasn't up for sale last week, as the boys have said, then she must go this evening -- unless she's been sold to a private bidder in the meantime."

"And what do you suppose the odds are of something like that occurring?"

"Slim, I'd say. Can you imagine the sensation that will occur? Why sell to a private bidder when you can have the whole world competing for her? Besides, I can't think of a better way to end the season. Imagine the business it will create for next year!"

"This auction tonight -- where is it?"

"Mm, I'm afraid that information is very carefully guarded and only known to a select few."

"But you do know where it is."

"Of course."

"And were you planning on attending this evening?"

"No, certainly not; nothing but leftovers at final auction, and anyway I've expended all my resources for the season."

"And even now, knowing what might occur, you're still not interested in attending?"

The count studied his well-manicured nails thoughtfully. "Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Her price will most certainly be out of my league -- they'll want her for the Game, and that's a rather nasty, cut-throat sort of bidding crowd. However, I confess I am curious. Just to catch a glimpse of her would be something. The Alice ..."

Holmes sensed he was being toyed with and once again found himself missing Watson's steady influence. He'd always been better at wearing this sort down, freeing Holmes up for more productive ends. "And just what would I have to do, dear count," he asked, a trifle impatient despite himself, "to convince you to allow me to accompany you on this journey?"

"Try to see it from my end, Mr. Holmes," the count placated in soothing, honeyed tones. "Is it entirely beneficial to have you running about the place unchecked? I hardly need to point out how overwhelmingly illegal this trade is - and yet, there are those of us who have a rather invested interest in seeing it continue. An upset to the system now would not be at all advantageous to me."

"I understand that. However, I ask you to understand that I am not the local law enforcement agency,
and I don't have the slightest intention of disrupting your system. I simply want to do the job I've been contracted to do: retrieve the girl and return her to her home. The other children are not my concern."

"Kidnap her from the kidnappers." The count smiled to himself, obviously amused. "I do hope you understand just how difficult an assignment that might be. The security on this place is rather impressive; have your clients paid you enough to sacrifice your life in this venture, Mr. Holmes?"

"I ask only for you to get me through the door. I will see to the rest myself."

"Perhaps." This time, the count's smile was positively enigmatic. "... And what about you, dear Sir Thomas? You've not said a word. I assume you'll want to come along as well?"

"Yes," the other man agreed faintly. He still hadn't looked up from his plate. It was difficult to be sure, but Holmes thought the younger man added, "There is no honor for a knight who cannot protect his own queen."

"Well." The count accented the word by clapping his hands together. "Enough of this for now. I must think on it. We have until this evening to make a decision. In the meantime, I ask you two to remain and partake of my meager hospitality, poor as it is. I believe I promised my children a walk in their new playground. Would you care to accompany us? It is so rare for us to have visitors. I'm sure Usagi has been making up all manner of delightful gossip in your absence."

Holmes was impatient and Thomas remained listless; but, seeing as there was no good reason to refuse, they agreed.

It was thus revealed that the entirety of the count's household consisted of himself and nine children between the ages of seven and fifteen: all well-mannered, affectionate, heartbreakingly beautiful, and wearing the ears and tails of various animals. The two eldest -- Usagi and a fifteen-year-old boy named León -- appeared to be the count's lieutenants. They organized the children as best they were able, delegated tasks to keep all hands occupied, and dealt with any scrapes or bruises that occurred along the way.

As they walked through the forest, the children swirling excitedly around the heels of their master, Usagi kept a hold of Tora's small hand and a watchful eye on their two newest members. León manfully hauled the oversized picnic basket and occasionally let Mucca -- an over-enthusiastic ten-year-old with cow ears and a tail -- 'help.' Eventually, judging that they'd come to the nexus of his artificial wood, the count decreed arrival and his eldest spread out a blanket for him on the forest floor. The remaining children were instantly off and away, though none of them strayed too far, calling out for peer observance as they scaled trees, wove daisy chains, and played with the balls and toys that materialized from the overwrought hamper. Thomas and Holmes perched at the edge of the blanket and watched this shadow-play of a familial outing with restless unease.

"The animal ears," Holmes couldn't help but ask (despite the giant, invisible warning sign that advised it was none of his business); "A game of the children's, I suppose?"

The count, who had reclined back on his elbows to turn his handsome face towards the dappled sunlight, chuckled. "Ah, that -- a fancy of my own. The children are gracious enough to indulge me, you see. Besides, I think it makes matters easier for them. They all know -- somewhere, buried deep in the back of their minds from their Time Before -- that you can't own other humans. But animals? Animals are good pets. It sets their minds at ease."

And your mind? Holmes wondered, but he still needed something from this man and he didn't ask the question.
León, who had been graciously indulging some of the younger children in a game of tag, returned to them then. Sweating and panting lightly from his exertions, he plopped down onto the blanket beside the count and nonchalantly tugged his damp shirt over his head. "It's so beautiful today, master," he purred happily, stretching in an appropriately feline way before -- quite unabashedly -- draping himself across the count's lap. The man merely made an abstract sound of agreement, stroking a hand through the boy's thick golden mane.

Thomas, Holmes noted, was making a very studious point of looking Elsewhere.

Maybe it was better that Watson hadn't come along.

After a while Usagi joined them, and if she found anything peculiar about her associates' behavior nothing in her own indicated it. "Master, Affe's going to get himself stuck in the tree," she complained breathlessly, pushing aside her disheveled curls and peering worriedly skyward. "Little monkeys should climb trees," the count responded placidly, not bothering to open his eyes. "He'll be alright, Bunny. And if he does get stuck, we'll get him down again." When she didn't respond, he finally did crack an eye to gauge her reaction -- and then leaned slightly sideways to kiss the frown away from the edge of her scowling mouth. "No worrying!" he admonished. "You'll give that lovely face of yours wrinkles, my dear. Affe will be fine."

Holmes was discovering just how fascinating Elsewhere could be.

One by one, tired from their afternoon exertions, the children straggled back to the blanket and consumed the food Usagi had packed. Afterwards, his little troops warm and full and definitely drowsy, the count decreed it was time to return to the manor and take a nap. There was a general whine of half-hearted protest, quickly quelled by their general's gentle admonishment; then, all together, they marched homeward.

'Naptime' in a household primarily composed of children wasn't much of a surprise; however, the realization that the injunction applied to all present adult company, too, was. Holmes and Thomas were each shown to their own guest room. And there was something oddly inviting about the notion; the far wall boasted a decent-sized window, partially open to grant access to the warm breeze. The room wasn't overwhelmingly large, but the pale colors and well-utilized natural lighting made it seem so. The bed looked soft and inviting.

But Holmes felt sure, without consulting the watch in his coat pocket, that they didn't have time for this.

The count had issued no decrees banning his guests from any portion of the manor or the general premises, and so -- when he felt certain the rest of the household must be asleep -- the detective silently crept from his room and determined to do some exploring. He wasn't looking for anything in particular. Whatever the count's oddities, eccentricities, or secrets, they had nothing to do with him. So long as Alice wasn't in this house and the count had no part in her abduction -- two things he believed without question to be true -- then there was no need to investigate the man further. Still, Holmes had always possessed an almost feline curiosity, and once given free reign to search a thing, what harm could there be in doing so? There might not be anything here to learn about Alice, but as a citizen of Wonderland, the count's residence provided the opportunity to learn something else entirely.

The second floor consisted primarily of bedrooms, doors shut now to guard the repose of their sleeping occupants. So Holmes carefully made his way down the stairs to the first floor, pleased to note that everyone else -- including the knight -- appeared to be abed. The first handful of rooms didn't have much to reveal: more tasteful, practical furniture, occasionally protected by a dust sheet; a
baby grand piano with a few chipped keys. At the entrance to one room, though, he encountered a closed door, odd enough in itself to warrant further investigation. It wasn't locked as he'd initially feared, so he let himself inside.

Unlike every other room he'd encountered, this one was dusty and closed off to all light. The natural glow of the hall pushed the blackness back into a sort of murky-grey, but, certain he was intruding upon something he probably shouldn't be, Holmes was content to observe from the threshold. There was a couch of some kind near the center of the room, and draped across the back was what looked to be a wedding dress. Some manner of portrait occupied the wall behind the sofa, the only portrait he'd seen in the house, but it was too dark to make out the sitter's features. The bulky, semi-cylindrical shapes that covered every available surface eventually resolved themselves into candles as his eyes grew more accustomed to the gloom. He gazed about him for a few long moments, trying to make sense of the place in relation to its bright, pristine surroundings. Then he quietly withdrew and closed the door behind him.

There was a library in one corner of the building, though the shelves contained almost exclusively children's books. Another room was set up with small desks and a chalkboard, which currently displayed a rudimentary set of multiplication tables.

Holmes' quest, having nothing of further interest to catch and stall on, eventually led him back out to the front porch. The book Tora had abandoned that morning in her excited haste was slumped on the floor, some of the pages curled awkwardly beneath the weight of its gaping covers. Absently, he bent forward and retrieved the book to smooth out the pages. He expected to see a riot of bright, nonsensical artwork, but the image on the facing page immediately caught his attention for being everything but. The drawing depicted an emaciated horse, head drooping as it nosed wistfully at the hard, barren ground. The creature was more skeleton than living animal and, surprised and somewhat repulsed, Holmes shifted his gaze to read the accompanying text:

[Alive? he might be dead for aught I know,
With that red gaunt and colloped neck a-strain,
And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;
Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;
I never saw a brute I hated so;
He must be wicked to deserve such pain.]

Very carefully, he closed the book and returned it to Tora's abandoned chair.

Wondering then if maybe it wouldn't be best to rest awhile in the room allotted him, the detective returned to the house and began to make his way towards the stairs. Which is when he stumbled across them.

It wasn't hard to do; though they were speaking in hushed, rapid whispers (hushed voices in tall grass) they weren't really trying over-hard to be quiet, and neither had bothered to close the sitting room door when they'd entered the room. As he wandered past, a sharp noise drew his attention and Holmes found himself looking at them before he was even aware what he had heard.

The count was half-lying, half-sitting on a Turkish divan, back propped against an oversized pillow. He was positioned so as to accommodate the weight of León, who was quite enthusiastically straddling his lap. The boy remained shirtless from that afternoon and the count's silky white blouse had been pushed down off his shoulders, tangled about his arms like a shawl on a Greek statue. It had been uncomfortably questionable what the nature of their relationship was before; there was nothing questionable about it now.

Holmes knew, with a rising sense of judgmental unease, that he had long missed his cue to disappear
upstairs. And yet, despite himself, he couldn't quite manage to look away. Whether he approved or not, there was something achingly beautiful about the two of them tangled together -- as artistically faultless as it was, perhaps, morally flawed. Sunlight filtered through the patterns on the sheer curtains to dapple the boy's satin-smooth shoulders, light licking sensually down the curve of his perfect spine. Those dreamy sun-shadows shifted and scattered as the count's elegant hands traced up and down León's back, muscles rippling like silk beneath the caress of his artful fingers. The difference in their ages was sharply articulate not in their outward appearances, but rather in their actions; León strained forward, impatient and yearning as he tried to push the count into a harder, faster kiss. But the count gentled each thrust with a pacifying sweep of his slow, steady hands. Indeed, it seemed to Holmes as he watched that they'd never come up for air - *breathing underwater* – and when at last they did, León nipped at the count's exposed throat as the older man's soft, musical laughter crested over the room in waves.

It was that sound which finally drove Holmes away and upstairs, a man suddenly afraid he might no longer know how to swim.
"You win, Mr. Holmes - I've made my decision." Their eyes met in the pane of the count's mirror as he clipped a cufflink into place. The detective had been ambushed as he'd tried to slip past the room earlier, drawn into the chamber to hear the final verdict concerning their evening excursion. León was fast asleep in the count's bed, protected from full exposure only by the sheet wound strategically about his waist -- but then, Holmes was being very sure not to notice anything about that.

"I will take you with me tonight, so long as you understand that, should you land yourself into trouble, I've never seen you before and have no notion at all as to how you arrived at the auction. We're clear on that matter, I trust?"

"Perfectly clear. I have no desire to drag you or yours into this."

"Mm. If only my lambs weren't so determined to draw themselves in!" At the detective's questioning look, the count retrieved an envelope from his bureau and passed it to him. It was unmarked and unsealed. "It was Usagi's idea -- what a mind she has! -- but since she remembers so little and the boys remember too much, it was León who actually drew it for you. Open it and see." Upon obeying the injunction, Holmes found himself in possession of a crudely drawn but scrupulously detailed map. "It's the auction house -- everything hidden back behind the stage section, anyway. You can trust in it. León never forgets anything once he's learned it. The boys even verified where they think Alice is most likely to be." The room in question had been highlighted in red.

"Thank you. This will be of tremendous value."

The count shrugged, his gaze straying to the child dreaming in his bed. "As I said, it was all their idea. Remarkable creatures, children. This one in particular: beautiful, gifted, intelligent. It's a shame he's growing so old! It'll be so dreadfully hard to put him down next year, but I can't bear the thought of the age-sickness setting in .... ah, well, enough of that." He reached out, tenderly carding his fingers through the sleeping boy's hair. "He's safe for now. We must go retrieve the knight and see if we can't make your little one safe as well." Holmes, at a loss for words, allowed himself to be ushered from the room.

The count lent both his guests a voluminous cloak with a deep, concealing hood and a porcelain mask. The masks were exquisite pieces of artwork, functional and yet simultaneously beautiful to behold – nothing less than Holmes would have expected from the count. His own involved delicate scrollwork about the eyes and cheeks picked out in fine silver, the same hue that colored the lips. Once worn with the hood in place, all that became visible of himself were his eyes; a fine grey that might have been colored in with the same silver pen. Thomas’ mask involved far bolder strokes and sinuous crimson slashes; the count’s, an elaborate design in gold and cream. Assembled together they more accurately resembled spirits than men: sexless, ageless, and evanescent.

"Your identity is your most precious commodity this evening, gentlemen," the count advised them enigmatically as he stepped across the drawing room to remove a small wooden box from the mantle. One black, velvet glove swept lovingly over the rose engraved on the lid before he unfastened the catch.

"This is not one of your forests, Sir Knight, and yet it is a wilderness of sorts. All depends upon everyone playing their part. Do not forget who and what you are – and do not allow anyone else to know." He withdrew a pendant from the box, a small metallic circle on a heavy gold chain. Palming
it carefully, he left the box where he’d found it and moved towards the door.

His guests were prepared to follow him through it and outdoors, but the young noble didn’t leave the room; instead, he pulled the door shut and began turning a small dial on the pendant’s surface. With a soft little click, a series of triangular blades sprang out around the circle’s perimeter, and – sliding aside a panel in the door that Holmes was prepared to swear hadn’t been there before – the count inserted the strange little key into a space hollowed out specifically to accommodate it.

“Remember, my dears; allow me to speak for us all, keep your heads down, and if anything goes wrong … you’re on your own.” Holmes could clearly see the noble’s wry little smile, though of course it was hidden behind the mask. The count waited for the detective and the knight to nod their silent acquiescence and then he turned the handle of the door. When he opened it again, the hallway was gone.

They stepped out into a night-darkened street further obscured by fog. Once the count pulled the door shut behind them, the entrance way ceased to exist altogether. Wordlessly, the little party made their way through a maze of abandoned streets and silent alleyways, the shadows of tall, featureless buildings looming overhead. There were no stars and no sight of the moon; what meager light existed came from a series of streetlamps weakly struggling to penetrate the mist. Where are all the people? Holmes wondered as they walked, but a part of him didn’t really want to know. The only sound was the ringing of their footfalls, gradually blended into one noise and then swallowed whole by the fog.

Though there was virtually nothing to serve as a guide or to offer a frame of reference, the count knew exactly where he was going. He moved forward in the same way he did everything else: confident, graceful, and entirely unconcerned. Without once pausing to consider or consult, he guided them unerringly through the labyrinthine maze until their path dead-ended at a building which at last sported a discernable door. The motionless statue standing beside it was a creature of their own cloth, masked and hooded and waiting.

While the other two watched, the count stepped up to the stranger and, without word or gesture of greeting, pushed up his sleeve to expose the skin of his inner wrist. The guard leaned forward to gaze at it awhile, and though Holmes could make out nothing in the gloomy darkness, whatever was there appeared to be enough. The stranger straightened and then turned his shadowed gaze to them. But the count whispered something to forestall any inquiry, and that, too, was enough. After a moment’s consideration, the guard nodded and gestured towards the door, and the three of them proceeded inside.

They walked down a strange, narrow hallway that seemed as if it would go on forever. The walls were bare and composed of bolted sheets of metal, such as one might find on the side of a freight ship. Exposed, dusty glass bulbs hung from rusting chains and emitted a weak, orange-hued glow from where they dangled listlessly overhead. The light flickered and shifted at sporadic intervals, created not from fire but from what appeared to be hundreds of captured fireflies.

There wasn’t much time to consider that particular oddity, however, as very soon they caught up to the rest of the night’s spectators. It was like joining a human river; a mere trickle of individuals at first, but one that gradually swelled to include hundreds. Some walked arm-in-arm or clearly picked out their path together, but no one spoke: all hooded, all masked, and all deathly silent. Phantoms drifting aimlessly down the river Styx.

The detective found himself unconsciously clenching and unclenching his gloved hands, simple reassurance that he remained solid and alive.

A sudden little river crossed my path, he thought, with a grim, invisible smile, As unexpected as a
serpent comes. No sluggish tide congenial to the glooms; This, as it frothed by, might have been a bath For the fiend's glowing hoof---to see the wrath Of its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes.

Gradually, the floor beneath their feet shifted from solid metal to some manner of grate; uniform holes rusted through by the acidic patterns of light. The flow of the human river slowed and eventually stopped altogether, none impatient or surprised. There came the low, long-suffering screech of put-upon metal overhead and a staircase began to lower from the ceiling, composed of the same grating and suspended with the same thick, rusting chains. It drifted down towards them amongst a network of exposed piping and dusty bulbs before it came to rest at their feet with a dull thud; and then the river obediently surged forward again, descending down into the darkness below.

The stairway deposited them into a large, basement room as ugly and exposed as the rest of the building. The masked horde puddled outward with unhurried languor when their feet touched bottom, eventually pooling about the stage which occupied the far end of the area. The stage itself was black and shaped like a gear, allowing prospective patrons to huddle close in the nooks of its boxy indentations.

As more and more individuals trickled down into the sea of hooded masks, the blurred whisper of conversation rippled and swirled between the unoccupied spaces.

“Exits?” Holmes queried his host softly, for León’s map had not included this section of the building. The count turned slightly so that their porcelain cheeks were almost touching.

“One; that which you saw.”

“Will there be movement on the stairs while the auction is in progress?”

Again, Holmes had the ghostly impression of the count’s amused, invisible smile. “They’ll withdraw the staircase, my dear – same as they lowered it. No one gets in or out.”

By this point, the room had become quite crowded. Holmes found himself literally standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his companions (though he had a distinct height advantage over both); close enough to feel how tense Thomas was, and how tense the count wasn’t. He took a few steadying breaths himself, staring sightlessly at a rusting pipe while he conjured up León’s map with his inner eye. No marked exits there, either.

“And that door, to our right?”

“Mm … a lobby, of sorts. Buyers wait there to receive their purchases.”

“Which occurs at the end of the evening.”

“Correct.”

A sudden clank and hiss hushed the room’s muted conversations; the stairs were beginning their ponderous ascent back into the shadowed recesses of the ceiling. It put Holmes in mind of a giant, metallic spider, hovering overhead while it watched the flies buzz past. They were quite effectively trapped in its subterranean web.

A series of gas lamps flickered to life around the stage’s perimeter, writhing flames peering out of dusty, soot-blackened glass. A man emerged from the folds of black curtain concealing the back of the stage – odd, because he didn’t so much seem to step through them as he appeared to materialize from the fabric itself. He, too, wore an enveloping black cloak, but the cavernous cowl of his eliminated the need for a mask. All that could be seen of him were his emaciated, skeletal fingers.
They curled around the surface of the staff he carried, impossibly long and twig-like and the color of wood ash. Claws, Holmes thought; not hands. The staff itself was taller than the creature who carried it, composed of the same age-worn copper of the exposed pipes. Near the top, however, the thick metal splintered into fine, interwoven tendrils, a bird-cage to entrap a glass bulb. Dozens of fireflies glowed and flickered within.

This was the true spider, then; about to put on display all he’d caught.

The strange, imposing figure of the auctioneer waited until all murmuring had evaporated into expectant silence. Then he tapped his heavy metal staff against the floor of the stage, three times in even, ponderous repetition, summoning the sound of grinding gears and sliding chains. A partition opened up in the floor beside him, creating room for the platform which rose up to fill it. And standing on that platform, with her hands bound in front of her in rusted metal cuffs and a matching collar fastened around her frail neck, stood a little girl.

Holmes, along with the rest of the room, found himself straining forward in curious expectation, though the girl didn’t seem to notice them. She kept her head bowed, her dark hair swaying forward to obscure her face. No one said anything, exactly, and yet a decidedly disapproving murmur began to accumulate in various corners of the room. The grim auctioneer stepped forward in response, one frightful hand extending towards the girl and slowly rising upward. As though she were a marionette guided by his fingers, she raised her small head in accordance with the motion.

The patrons studied her a long moment in silence, noting her carriage, her coloring, the condition of her hands and feet. Her once-fine dress was practically in rags, but no one was particularly bothered by that. What Holmes noticed were her eyes. The pupils had either shrunk to indistinctness or enlarged to engulf the iris entirely, black holes devoid of thought, emotion, even comprehension. He peered hard into their lifeless depths until he could see them; little swirling pinpricks of light, like the fireflies captured in the grimy glass bulbs.

And then, one of the patrons raised its hand. The auctioneer acknowledged the gesture with a slow, silent nod. Another hand was raised; another. No one spoke – there was nothing at all to disturb the heavy, profound silence. Holmes attempted to discern some sort of code in the hands, a crooked finger, an upraised palm, but the bidding ceased before he could completely work it out. When no more hands were raised in opposition, the auctioneer pried at the metal staff he bore with one sharp talon, extracting an odd device that maybe resembled a key; this he handed to the winning patron, who had gently shouldered its way to the front of the stage to receive it. Three taps of the staff and the platform lowered again, taking its occupant with it.

The soft ebb and swell of whispered conversation resumed for a moment, and Holmes took advantage of the opportunity to lean closer to the count again. “Her eyes,” he murmured. “What was wrong with her eyes?”

“Temporary measure,” the noble assured him. “He suspended her time to keep her still.”

The detective was beginning to suspect it would be better if everyone would start leaving other people’s time alone.

During the interval, some of the masked patrons made their way through the lobby door and disappeared. "Refreshments," the count murmured, noticing the direction of Holmes' gaze. He nodded to show that he'd heard, but declined to state what they were both thinking.

"You look tired, my friend," he said instead, laying a hand on Thomas' tense shoulder. "Perhaps a little refreshment is just what you require?"
The count smiled to himself as his guests detached themselves from the throng and likewise disappeared through the door.

Once inside, it wasn't as difficult to get backstage as Holmes had anticipated. The auction itself had barely progressed, and there weren't many patrons lounging on the blood-red furniture; but those that were, were far more occupied in their own hushed conversations than in watching the newcomers. Exclusivity had its perks, after all.

Like everywhere else in the strange building, this room was badly lit and partitions were formed with heavy black curtains rather than with doors. With Thomas keeping careful watch, Holmes was able to take advantage of his own dark robe to slip behind one of the curtains and step backstage.

He found himself ascending a wooden ramp in a hallway without lighting at all (cattle chute, leading lambs to slaughter) and he was forced to move slowly lest he stumble and create too much noise. Eventually the flooring leveled off into a narrow hall washed in charcoal-grey light, and he knew by way of León’s map that the doors to either side of him contained the captive children. Most of them were closed; but one about halfway down remained open, a wedge of sickly yellow light spilling out into the gloom. At the sound of voices, Holmes hesitated and listened. To his surprise, someone was singing -- a hoarse, somewhat unpleasant, but undeniably adult someone - and the song went something like this:

The little fishes' answer was, "We cannot do it, Sir, because --" I sent to them again to say, "It will be better to obey." The fishes answered, with a grin, "Why, what a temper you are in!" I told them once, I told them twice: They would not listen to advice. I took a kettle large and new, Fit for the deed I had to do. My heart went hop, my heart went thump: I filled the kettle at the pump. Then some one came to me and said "The little fishes are in bed." I said to him, I said it plain, "Then you must wake them up again." I said it very loud and clear: I went and shouted in his ear. But he was very stiff and proud: He said, "You needn't shout so loud!" And he was very proud and stiff: He said, "I'd go and wake them, if --" I took a corkscrew from the shelf: I went to wake them up myself. And when I found the door was locked, I pulled and pushed and kicked and knocked. And when I found the door was shut, I tried to turn the handle, but—

Shuddering, Holmes carefully inched his way past.

He encountered no one else in his journey to the other side of the building, and he wondered at that. This merchandise wasn't very heavily guarded. Then again, he thought, remembering the strange state of that girl's vacant eyes, perhaps it doesn't need to be. The large room in the corner was the one he'd been heading for, and with bated breath he placed his hand on the knob and cautiously turned. It wasn't locked, and everything was dark inside.

Risking the strong sulfur give-away, Holmes withdrew a match from the detritus of his pockets and struck one against the side of his boot, cupping a hand around the resulting flame to both hide and channel the light. It wasn't ideal as far as searchlights went, but here in this total darkness it provided well enough.

The three lumpy shapes occupying the back wall were beds, made up with a simple blanket. A heavy chain was attached to the right front leg of each, though he was both relieved and disappointed to observe nothing had been fastened to the other ends. And there wasn't much else. He dragged a hand along the chipped plaster of the wall, the dusty floorboards; he searched quickly under the beds. He just needed a sign, some indication that what he was looking for was here --

There was a shabby floor rug beside the furthest bed to the right, odd because the other beds didn't boast a similar accessory. With the flame of his light burning painfully close to his fingertips, he quickly pushed the tattered material aside.
Chalk, he recognized just as the light went out. Something had been scratched out in chalk on the floor. The soft, crumbly chalk British children were given to mark their school slates with. It was worth risking a second light, he decided, after casting a quick glance back at the partially open door. What this second light revealed was a drawing, crude and obviously done in some haste: a stick-figure cat, with over-exaggerated fangs and what might have been a lion's mane, and beside that, a simple, three-pronged crown.

The Lion and the Unicorn were fighting for the crown …

From somewhere else in the building came the murmur of excited voices -- whispers no longer. Something was going on at the front of the stage. He'd passed a heavy expanse of midnight drapery that had to be the back curtain, and quickly extinguishing his match and replacing the rug he hurried back the way he'd come. The murmur grew louder as he moved through the dark shadows, though whether from excitement or proximity he couldn't be certain; louder and louder and louder ...

And then a shrill, terrified scream cut through the sound like a razorblade, and he started to run.

By the time he burst through the curtain and onto the stage, it was too late. The room was in an uproar, swaying dizzily with the crashing tide of too many loud voices. The majority of the throng had gathered around a figure lying motionless on the floor, though no one made a move to touch or assist it. As Holmes drew closer to the front of the stage -- unnoticed and unopposed -- he recognized Thomas' mask. The crimson slashes on the white porcelain seemed to flow down the side of his face, becoming the blood that matted his hair and pooled like a halo around his motionless head.

A hand suddenly closed around Holmes' ankle, insistent and vice-like.

"They're gone," the count hissed up at him, "and he's dead. Time to leave." Holmes glanced at the hovering staircase, still suspended mockingly out of reach, but the count wasn't moving in that direction. The detective leaped down from the stage to join him, even as the noble pulled the strange, circular key from before out of a hidden pocket.

"That door wasn't there before," Holmes protested as the count inserted the key. "There was only the lobby door -"

"Necessity, necessity," came the absent response. The count put a hand on Holmes' shoulder and pushed him through. They were unnoticed in their hasty departure, for many other masked patrons were currently doing the same thing. As though divining his thoughts, the count murmured as he pulled the door shut again behind them, "They think our poor knight was the local law; everyone will make a run for it now." Somehow, they were back in the count's home. And there wasn't a door of any kind in the wall directly behind them.

"And Alice?"

"Gone the way we left, I'm afraid -- which, I can assure you, is entirely untraceable." He pushed back the hood of his cloak and removed his mask. His eyes were a shade brighter with all the excitement, but otherwise the evening's proceedings didn't appear to have affected him. "Only two people bid, you know. It was rather surprising. Not entirely sure the Crow got his money, what with all the commotion." This seemed to amuse him.

"What happened? I left Thomas in the lobby ..." Frustrated and impatient, Holmes tossed his own mask down onto an empty chair, raking his anxious fingers through his hair. "I was barely absent five minutes! I thought you said they'd save her for last."

"You were gone at least two hours, my dear," the count chuckled. He hung his cloak on the peg of
an obliging coat rack and draped himself languidly over a sofa. "I'm not surprised if it felt like less. Time gets a bit muddled in that place. No, I imagine our poor knight became restless with your long disappearance -- you must be careful, you know, setting men of action to wait -- and when everyone started talking, he came out to investigate. Everything went as usual until the Crow attempted to hand off the key to the winner. Thomas made a jump for it, rather foolishly, but the bidder seemed prepared for some sort of ... complication. Seems he had allies planted throughout the crowd. Some of them took care of the knight while the rest snatched Alice from the stage, and then they were gone. Remarkable girl; she broke the Crow's hold on her when she saw Thomas. Imagine! He was in shock, he must've been, lest they never would've absconded with his merchandise."

"I heard her scream."

"Mm. When they stabbed her knight."

"Damned fool ..."

"Don't mourn for him, Mr. Holmes; I daresay this is exactly what he wanted. What higher honor is there for a knight than death in the service of his queen?"

"How about a mission that successfully rescues her from harm?"

The younger man simply smiled.

They were interrupted from their conversation by a gentle knock on the (decidedly real) door. "Poor darlings, they're unaccustomed to closed doors in this house ... it's alright, my pet, come in." The door opened to reveal a rather sleepy-looking Usagi, barefoot and clad in a nightgown.

"I'm sorry, master, but I think I overslept ... did you want breakfast, or should we wait now for lunch ...?" She seemed woefully confused. It was the first both men noticed the sunlight streaming through the room's tall window -- sunlight where only moonlight should have been.

"Oh, dear," the count sighed, propping his chin against his knuckles. "Looks like everything's shifting again. It's alright, Bunny, it's not your fault. Just silly adults and their silly games. Go on and rest some more, we'll see to food once everyone's awake." Once she'd departed, the count unfolded himself from his seat and moved to a safe embedded in the wall. It took two combinations and three ordinary keys to unlock it, but once he had he withdrew a wicked-looking pistol not unlike the one Dum carried. He checked to make sure it was loaded and then slid it into the pocket of his evening jacket. "Best go see what else has changed, before the children find out by accident," he mused.

"Expecting trouble?"

"Expecting anything is rather a waste of effort," he laughed, leading Holmes towards the front entrance. "It's what you don't expect that has a way of causing problems."

It had definitely been summer the last time Holmes had stood on the porch, but it wasn't summer now. The leaves on all the count's trees had turned, burnt siennas and fiery golds, and the sea of grass had become the tan color of hay. Only the impossible, endless blue of the sky remained unchanged. "Perfectly good season wasted," the count sighed, but that's all he said. Together they walked the perimeter of the manor, and all appeared relatively normal --

-- with the exception of the giant field of clover around back and the elephant bees merrily working their way through it.

"Well. How interesting." Holmes suspected he wasn't talking about the flying elephants, and he glanced at the shorter man for confirmation. "I haven't seen them since ... well, last time. Do you
understand what this means? Alice's buyer was indeed a Player. She's already entered the Game."

"I'm afraid I don't entirely follow."

"These are her thoughts, Mr. Holmes. Not mine, not yours. It takes a rather strong Player to so forcibly insert their will upon the world, but after all, that's what the Game really is. All this square-to-square nonsense ... well, every game needs rules. The objective, though, is to force your reality to dominate everyone else's. A rather dangerous notion."

"I need to find Alice, Count."

"Yes, and you must do it quickly." He stroked his long fingers meditatively over the fringe of tall grass, watching the elephant bees. "Nothing now will be without significance. It's autumn for a reason. You must find her before winter sets in, or you'll be too late."

"How do I find her?"

The count shrugged. "She has a decent head-start on you, but if you move quickly ..."

"I have reason to believe the Lion has her. Do you know who that is?"

"No one knows who the Lion is."

"Do you know how to find him?"

"No. But a word of advice, if I may? It's not the Lion you should be looking for. He's too strong for you. You're going to need help from someone who shares your desire to stop him."

"The Unicorn."

"Mm."

"Tweedle Dee told me the Serpents are working for him."

"They do that, sometimes."

"Then I should return to the town and find them."

"You should return to the town and catch your train. If you understand nothing else about this world, you must understand this: overlapping realities tend to result in chaos. The only things keeping that chaos from overrunning all else are the Rules. And the Rules dictate that you must progress through the squares in order. If you fail to do that, Mr. Holmes, then everything else will come undone. There won't be a winner; no one will succeed."

"For a recluse with no interest in world affairs, you know quite a lot about this Game." There was that small, enigmatic smile again, though he declined to comment verbally. It takes a rather strong Player to so forcibly impose their will upon the world ... Holmes gazed speculatively behind them at the count's improbable copse of trees. "Just tell me this; whose side are you on?"

The count spun his pistol around his trigger finger with practiced ease. "Mine," he smiled.
The Tweedle brothers were waiting outside the saloon when Holmes rode back into town, armed and packed and looking tangibly uneasy. The sun had progressed well into its midday position, but no one else lingered in the dusty street.

"Found her, I take it," Dee noted as the detective dismounted. He threw an uneasy look over his broad shoulder to where his brother crouched in the dirt, apparently in deep consultation with a rose bush planted beneath the front window. A rose bush Holmes was fairly certain hadn't been there before. "That why Tom ain't with ya?"

"That's why."

The sound of voices drew Tiger-lily to the entrance. She braced her palms against the doorframe and watched them, though she didn't seem inclined to come forward out of the shadows. Tucked away from the light's observance it was difficult to tell, but Holmes thought there was something slightly off about the girl. Her light almond eyes had taken on a true orange cast, and for some reason, he couldn't visually locate the stem of the tiger lily blossom tucked behind her ear. "He woulda wanted it this way, Lil," Dee said without turning to look at her. "You know how much he hated ... all of this." The girl drew her fringed shawl tighter about her shoulders but didn't say anything. "You still plannin' on movin' forward, Detective?"

"I am. Assuming the train will take me."

"Herd takes anyone wantin' to ride. Them's the rules. But we'd best be gettin' on, then, or she'll leave us behind. An' Dum an' me got a job to do, too."

There were very few passengers in the car they boarded, but that suited everyone's mood just fine; and if those additional travelers weren't all strictly human, well, perhaps that was to be expected.

"So this is the Third Square, yeah?" Dee offered as they clattered along towards the river, his rifle held slanted over his lap. He and his brother were seated across the aisle from Holmes this time, with no passengers in front or behind them to hinder their movements. "You know about that. And the Fourth Square is the one they say belongs to us, though I already explained to ya how that's only sorta true. This square'll be nothin', provided we don't get jumped by those damn bandits. Fourth Square's the one ya gotta be worryin' about. An' you're looking a bit peaky already, friend."

"I'm fine," Holmes assured him coolly, though in truth he hadn't felt quite right since the count had pulled him away from the auction. Colors did things they shouldn't when he moved his head too fast, extending beyond their neatly contained lines to jostle rudely with other shades; singular objects were doubling and even tripling themselves in the corners of his eyes. Looking at the twins didn't particularly help with this, so he focused instead on the comfortably static door to their car. There was no time to rest, and whatever oddities might occur, he was prepared to chalk them up to Alice and the Game. "Tell me more about the Fourth Square."

"Can't, really -- that's the challenge. I don't know what you'll find there, but I can tell ya that it won't be pleasant. Not much of a challenge if it were. Whatever people think they are, whatever -- I dunno, thoughts, memories, ideas? -- they hold onto to help 'em figure all this out, it goes away in there.
"Even your name, even everything else's name."

"What is this challenge, then, exactly? Are you meant to face what you fear? What you don't understand?"

Dee glanced at his brother for help, but Dum was staring with a grim sort of intensity out the window and provided no support. "Ah, well ... yes an' no. It's not that easy to describe. You'll see when you're there." It was hardly a satisfying response, but it was obviously the best Dee could do.

"Dum," Dee called softly in terse warning, and that was the end of the discussion. Both brothers stood, hands on their rifles. The sparse chatter in the train car evaporated instantly.

"Bloody hell, we ain't even to the river yet. That ain't regular."

Dum shrugged. He didn't look any happier about it. "Rules are comin' apart. We expected that."

"But so quickly?" Holmes wondered out loud. The brothers shot him identical looks of blank incomprehension.

"Brother, correct me if I'm off my head, right? But didn't we shoot half of this damned pack last time? Do you see how many of them are out there?"!" Dum made an agitated gesture towards the window.

"I see 'em, I see 'em ... ain't even close to dark yet, neither." Holmes had shifted to the seat directly behind the gunmen to take a better look himself, but if he'd expected the sunlight to offer answers he was mistaken. It was still difficult to be certain what it was that pursued them. Men on horseback, or wolves, or, more probably, something that was vaguely both and absolutely neither.

"The river was our safety net," Dum continued in a low, urgent tone, following his brother with his eyes as the other gunman changed seats and snapped down the window. "Ain't that deep, not this time of year. Summer's dried up all the damn water. If they can cross that river now ..."

"I know, Dum, just shut up and shoot the bastards, will ya?"

Holmes braced himself as best he was able in the bench, pressed the heels of his hands tight against his ears, and leaned close to the window to watch. There wasn't much else he could do. The train's remaining passengers were doing the same.

The firefight that ensued was similar to the one which had preceded it, though the brothers talked considerably less and fired more frequently. The fact that they weren't coordinating their attacks as before seemed to Holmes a bad sign; it was as though they didn't consider it a measure helpful enough to bother with anymore. They both wore gun belts equipped with additional cartridges, but at three shots a round the detective wondered how long the ammunition would hold. They were excellent marksmen; no single shot failed to take someone down. But they were badly outnumbered, and the dark, indistinct swarm outside showed no sign of abating.

"River!" Dum barked suddenly, and Dee whirled to face Holmes.

"We overturn, we're gonna be dead in the water; literally! Stay near a window!" The engine screamed one of its pained, inhuman shrieks, yanking his attention away.

"They're swarming!" Dum growled, and then the car splashed its way into the shallowest part of the stream.

It might have all turned out drastically different, if they hadn't been forced to run so fast for the water
- if it had been summer still - if the marauders they'd already killed would've consented to remain dead. But as the over-heated steel of the over-stressed train made contact with the cool water, clouds of steam billowed upward around its heaving sides. The mist was thick and only vaguely translucent at best. It swept into the train car via the open windows, preventing the passengers from seeing each other, let alone what was going on outside; and no matter how violent and ugly Dee cursed it, it showed no signs of fading.

"We're bricked!" Dum howled, slamming a fist against the nearest available surface, and then the train really screamed; a wail more piercing and terrifying than any sound Holmes had heard yet. The sideways jump was panicked and unexpected, and with a roar and a groan the engine tipped over into the river, the cars rippling sideways after it.

The water wasn't overwhelmingly deep, but it was enough. The muddied current gushed through the windows and filled the car, penning them in. They could hear a storm of splashing outside, undoubtedly evidence that the marauders were now in the water, too, and all hands desperately sought an escape route. Holmes felt the icy dampness flood his clothes and buffer him hard against the wall, and then it was flooding his nose and ears, too; the shock of the temperature change had stolen his breath away, and he knew that if he didn't surface soon he was going to drown. It was a cold, rational thought; there was no time for panic. Pushing away from the wall with his feet he swam for the opposite bank of windows, blind and weighted down. He felt the featureless scrape of glass against his searching fingers - 10 more seconds -- fumbled for and missed the catch – 9 -- 8 -- tried again, caught it with his nail -- 7 -- forced it down with his alarmingly waning strength – 6 – 5 -- forced his head through, pushed, hard, but his torso caught and he flailed a moment in the current, struggling – 3 -- 2 -- everything was starting to feel so heavy and cold -- 1 .... Are you going to let yourself die here?! The voice was all the more convincing for not being his own.

Gasping and shivering, he broke surface. Even as he wearily clawed for an edge of the car and pulled himself upright, the overwhelming cacophony of nothing was replaced by the staccato spit and rattle of gunfire. Still half-blind and more than a little dazed, he tried to keep his head low while locating the source of the sound. It was an exercise in futility; the noise came from everywhere.

There was a loud splash as someone leapt down into the water from atop the train, wading through both stream and fog to reach the detective’s side. Holmes flattened himself back against the prostrate car as best he was able and waited tensely to see which side of the fight his new companion was on.

It was Dum. There was a nasty gash on his cheek and one of his submerged body parts was tainting the water around them red. “Get to the front of the train!” he hissed breathlessly, bracing his shoulder alongside Holmes as he quickly reloaded his handgun. The rifle was nowhere to be seen, and he’d pulled his strange goggles down over his eyes. Holmes wondered vaguely if they helped or hindered in the mist. “Engineer’s gotta pull her up – now, or we’re all dead men! Go!” The detective wasn’t entirely certain what it was Dum expected him to do, but there was no questioning the steel in his voice. Attempting to use the train for cover, Holmes began to inch his way forward in the water, leaving the gunman behind him.

The engineer had a rope looped around the partially submerged smokestack – a rope which looked suspiciously like a lead line – and he was shouting a strange mixture of threats, curses, and pleas at the shuddering engine. “How can I help you?” Holmes called out to him as he sloshed his way closer. The man didn’t give any indication that he’d heard him. His eyes were wide and wild, and something had taken half his ear off. It bled profusely, but was as unheeded as the detective was. The sharp whiz of a bullet terminated in the water two inches away from Holmes’ arm, and he began to look desperately around for something which they could employ as a lever.

In the end, they were left with driftwood tree branches and rocks. It was the sort of physical and
mathematical problem Holmes might have been interested in studying, had there been leisure time to contemplate it. As it was, the best they could manage – once Holmes had managed to enlist the other man’s aid, with gestures and a series of shouts rendered useless by the ringing in the engineer’s ruptured eardrum – was slapdash, only partially effective, and cost both of them a set of artificial holes. Adrenaline did for the pain; it didn’t take a seasoned war general to know that they were running out of time. Had the engine itself been in any worse condition, they wouldn’t have made it. As it was, half the cars didn’t. What stumbled and dragged itself out of the mire wasn’t half the length of the train that had departed that morning, but the marauders paused to inspect the carcass of what remained behind and it bought them the precious seconds they needed to secure their escape.

Holmes was relieved to discover that his two guides were still with them, albeit the worse for wear. They half-stood, half-leaned at the posts they’d previously occupied in their passenger car; it might have been possible that they’d never left, where it not for the evidence of missing weapons, dripping clothes, and bleeding wounds. They both glanced at the detective when he stumbled into the car before turning back to their respective windows. "Never lost a stud yet," Dee panted. Dum merely grunted in acknowledgement.

When it became apparent that they weren't being pursued, the two gunmen collapsed wearily into their seats.

Holmes felt light-headed from the adrenaline crash and the loss of blood, and he struggled against the desire to sleep by studying the two men arguably responsible for his continued existence. They had begun to poke and prod at their wounds with a clinical, professional detachment, though both seemed sullen about something. Fairly taciturn as they were, it took even Holmes a few minutes to realize that they were pointedly not speaking to one another. The cause for this was in no-way apparent until Dum unholstered his pistol, glaring sideways at his sibling before extracting a dirty rag from his coat to wipe away his own bloodied fingerprints.

"I tol’ you I’d bloody well fix it, didn’t I?" Dee growled in response to the look. Holmes decided it was better not to ask; the word 'Rattler' was etched into the silver barrel of the handgun, and that was a good enough explanation for now. He concentrated instead on using a handkerchief to secure his own bullet-pierced shoulder, and the rest of the ride was conducted in silence.

The line eventually terminated at a station barely more than a wooden platform at the forest's edge, and they were the only ones who disembarked. "Well ... this is it," Dee pointed out unnecessarily. "You could use some patchin' up first, I suppose, but as I said, gotta do this thing in order. Our house is on the other side. Worry about makin' it that far, and we can take care of you then."

"You'll not be traveling through the forest to reach your own destination?"

"Couldn't pay us enough," Dum grunted moodily from behind them. "Place's cursed, 's what it is."

Dee ignored him. "We gotta report in at the station master's 'bout why half his train's gone missin'."

The three men looked at each other awkwardly.

"Well. I'd tell ya to stitch your name into your hand or somethin', but you'd just forget why you'd done it. So when you forget everything else, try to remember this: only thing actually matters is that you keep goin' forward."

"Best get started, then." He shook hands with both of them because it seemed like the thing to do; they nodded once and turned to make their way back to the waiting train. And that was that. Checking to make sure the watch was still in his pocket, Holmes squared his shoulders -- injuries and all -- and crossed over the threshold into the forest.
Bits of Damp, Moldering Bark

Bits of damp, moldering bark came away on his palms as he cautiously picked his way forward in the musty gloom. The fog had crept onto the scene with its silent cat-feet, and the moment its misty tendrils began to twine around his legs was lost with the rest of his recollections. There was a low, throbbing sensation in his shoulder that had begun to alarm him; he wondered what he'd done to earn it, and whether or not it had something to do with how frequently he stumbled over the hidden tree roots, writhing beneath the translucent skin of fog like ancient veins. There were no signs of animal life in the woods, no birdsong. The eerie, funeral silence hung static in the air like a tangible thing until, forgetting himself, he began to duck in a low, crouching crab-walk to avoid getting tangled up in it. It was reassuring, the noise his feet made as they parted the foliage, but even that was short lived; as he ventured deeper into the forest, the undergrowth became thicker and swallowed up the sound.

He was starting to feel very, very tired.

Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, he caught sight of something that didn't belong here: something light and gauzy that fluttered on the faint, foul-smelling breeze. He followed it with a child's thoughtless curiosity, and when he finally reached it he was standing at the base of a tree far larger than the rest. The white object had caught in its branches and hung there, trapped and forlorn in its twisted cage.

He didn't like the tree. It smelled wrong, felt wrong, and the animal instinct of his mind urged him away. But the dislike sparked and writhed in his chest, hopelessly tangled with curiosity, and, unable to conjure a solid reason not to, he lingered. The forest was full of similar objects. Why should this one give him pause? He wanted to know. He needed to know. Because even though the forest could rob him of his memories, it couldn't change what he really was.

Firstly, there was something wrong with its skin. It was too pale, and it was too exposed - as though, somehow, the tree had contrived a way to turn itself inside-out. The wood widened and thinned and stretched and looped into hard, ropey cords twisted together to keep its shape, so that it appeared to consist entirely of branches; no trunk to speak of. There were no roots to speak of, either, though it was clearly anchored to the ground. No roots. This tree's veins had been split and exposed to the open sky rather than left to shelter in the earth, twisted and scarred and unprotected. It wasn't alive; the tangled veins left gaping, empty arteries in their network, revealing that the bird-brittle bones they clung to were hollow inside.

And yet, it wasn't quite dead, either.

There was something rather off-putting about its leaves as well. They swayed heavily around the skeletal branches from dirt-encrusted string, all shapes and sizes though all of the same hue - a color called old. When the sickly breeze pushed too hard against them, the tortured tree moaned.

Something made him extend a hand to lay his palm flat against the bleached-bone wood, and it felt cold and clammy. The creaking strings left egg-shell fractures in the oppressive silence, and perhaps that was why he continued to linger; but there was no comfort to be found in this place. It occurred to him then, for no particular reason, that it wouldn't be so terribly hard to crawl inside the hollow not-trunk and sleep and sleep and sleep.
Not like this.

The thought wasn't his. Confused, Holmes turned to look over his shoulder - but there was no one there. He pressed an ear to the tree, but that produced only the oceanic silence of a conch shell. He looked behind the tree, and through it. No one. Nothing.

You can't stop now. There it was again; this time, it had the silver-colored substance of a whisper. He looked around once more, but the only thing he saw was the wound-down grandfather clock. The brassy pendulum reflected the forest back to him a thousand times over. Why should he be so alarmed over a whisper, after all? There was whispering all around. The trees clawed at one another's emaciated fingers and bowed their barren heads together, exchanging secrets like school girls in a playground. He backed away a little space and averted his gaze, because it felt rude to listen.

- reckless and stupid and God, if you'd only open your eyes -

There was another rather peculiar growth not far from the base of the rootless tree. It was hard to say why - increasingly so - but something about it felt wrong, too. The other trees encircled it, and whispered about it. School yard bullying. Why? He carefully picked his way closer. Its trunk was oddly colored and swayed a little in the wind, like the white object did. Curiously, he fingered the green material before his attention shifted to the bizarre nature of its branches. They appeared to be composed of two different materials: the first was long and soft to the touch, dark brown and fragmented occasionally into tiny slivers of the same substance; the second was also soft but tancolored. It wasn't until he reached out to gently touch the second material that he realized he was composed of the same thing. How strange.

Like the giant tree a little ways off, the hide of this one occasionally left holes - empty; nothing appeared to be inside this tree, either. And yet he couldn't shake the impression that wide and green and frightened the gaps had once been plugged by something else.

This tree had no leaves. It occurred to the detective that it might be best if he didn't have any, either. So he carefully picked his way back over to the inside-out tree, climbing over the settee when the underbrush made it impossible to go around, and then he bent forward to remove his shoes. His boots were the wrong size and color when he hung them in the highest branch he could reach, but somehow he knew it wouldn't matter. He left his socks discarded with the other withered foliage rotting at the base of the tree (like an homage, an offering to what isn't sleeping inside.)

Once his bare skin made contact with the earthen floor, the whispering grew louder.

You'll throw away your entire future, your career, everything if you let go now Where is mommy, where is this place Did you see her, not one of us, not welcome here I can't believe you would just throw the goddamned thing at his head Never saw a creature I hated so Alice where's Alice and goddammit, why can't you just open your eyes -

It was too much, too fast, so he began to run to keep up.

The forest floor was painful to his bare feet. He tripped and stumbled over vines that ensnared his ankles, twigs and rocks and places where the fog became a little too substantial. He bolted across a stream, and the shock of the ice cold water momentarily robbed him of his breath. Finally, when he could go no further he redirected his course to the strange white object fluttering in the sinister breeze. It was caught in the branches of a tree with no roots and oddly-shaped leaves, all the exact same color - a shade called old. Every single one of them.

[And just as far as ever from the end!  
Nought in the distance but the evening, nought]
To point my footstep further! At the thought, 
great black bird, Apollyon's bosom-friend, 
Sailed past, nor beat his wide wing dragon-penned 
That brushed my cap---perchance the guide I sought.]

The other trees considered him and murmured together in the shadows. There was a growth not far from the tree which was strange, for a reason he couldn't place, and he gazed at it awhile with his back to the rootless tree.

"You know, I suspect I may be lost," he called up to the creature watching him from a low-hanging branch. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

That depends a good deal on where you want to get to, said the Cat. 
I don't much care where --
Then it doesn't matter which way you go, said the Cat. 
--so long as I get somewhere.
Oh, you're sure to do that, said the Cat, if you only walk long enough.

Its eyes shown like yellow lamp lights down through the murky gloom. "I don't care much for the idea of 'walking'," the detective protested tiredly, "And anyway, I can't recall just now what that is."

"You could sleep," the Cat suggested. Its smile was sharp and sinister and stretched alarmingly far beyond the contours of its metallic face. "Like her."

The yellow light in his eyes had started to fragment into smaller specks that winked in and out of sight. Trying to keep track of them was dizzying, especially behind the obscuring curve of foggy glass. Do you want to know her name? the hooded figure asked as it leaned in closer.

The wind kicked up then and blew then name away

One skeletal hand reached out to curl its talons around Holmes' chin, forcing his face upward. I can end it all, if you'll just close your eyes.

He looks past the creature's shoulder, to the tree, and the leaves, and the sky, and beneath his palms the whispering curls up from the dirt and crawls across his skin I can save you, if you'll just open your eyes.

"No roots," he gasped and shudders, like a man drowning. "No soil -" Only stagnation. What is the challenge, then? Are we meant to face what we fear, or what we don't understand?

He ducked to avoid becoming entangled in the silence, and stammers; "I -"

The whispering is crawling up through his veins, bleeding ink into his empty brain - Holmes, my name is Holmes, and the whispering voice is - the giant black crow strikes him with a talon large enough to encompass his entire chest, pinning him to the writhing ground Shall I open your veins, flood you with the sky? - like a man whose learned to breathe underwater - his heartbeat pounded hard and fast as the shadow pressed closer, and it sounds like o-pen, o-peN, o-pEN, o-PEN - / to die requires the passage of moments in which to wither

"It's okay," he whispers, eggshell fractures splintering his fog-grey eyes. "I know how to swim."

The crow smiles, and the Cat will smile, too, when the giant bird rears back its midnight head and plunges its beak into Holmes' heart.
The blood that stains the forest floor is a very specific shade of once-blue-no-longer-green, until it slowly bleeds away.

["Out of the woods at last," Watson whispered in relief when Holmes finally opens his eyes.]
April 7th, 1896

It has now been three days since Holmes’ awakening, and I am pleased to record that his condition is improving. He no longer appears dehydrated, and the shivering and related muscle tremors have finally ceased altogether. His periods of consciousness are longer and gaining in frequency. I at last feel comfortable that, when he sleeps, he really is only sleeping. How strange it is to see him so still and quiet when I can vividly recall the feel of his galloping pulse beneath my fingers!

In truth, the quiet is what concerns me. He has said very little. Even though all traces of confusion and disorientation are gone, he accepts whatever instruction or remedy I press upon him with alarming passivity. He refuses to answer any of my questions, which is as normal; but he also asks none of his own, and I find this uncharacteristic behavior alarming.

“Merely an experiment, Doctor,” is the only thing he’ll say concerning the incident. I find it rather frustrating, I confess, but my anger is tempered by fear and keeps me from demanding a more thorough explanation. Cowardice, and I recognize it as such; but what could I possibly say to him if that explanation were to echo my own morbid suspicions?

I do not believe he has noticed the disappearance of the Morocco case and its related accessories – the memento of a few days prior, when fear fueled my anger rather than stopping it cold! I do not regret the action, but I find it difficult to predict his response, especially in this current mood. The wrath of Sherlock Holmes is slow to kindle, but I have seen it before; it’s hot enough to burn the bridges we’ve so painstakingly built, and I acknowledge that in the face of it I will have no defense. As it is, one simple business transaction at a discreet shop would undo all my self-righteous heroism. It is not an encouraging thought. But there is little this week that is.

Only one small mystery seems strong enough to hold his attention as well as mine. I can tell the matter preoccupies him. It is simply this: a bullet wound in his shoulder. I had no occasion to search for one when I found him unconscious on the floor, nor did it reveal itself to me throughout the long night I remained by his side. And yet, it is fresh. I’ve extracted the lead and patched the tear, and it appears to be mending nicely. But I am no closer to discovering the nature of its origins. Holmes insisted on retaining the bullet, and I’ve observed him turning it thoughtfully between his fingers. But as is so often the case, if he has any theories he does not deign to share them with me.
Our Armistice of Mutual Silence

April 21st , 1896

Our armistice of mutual silence ended one night about a week ago. I had been away all afternoon tending to my patients, and upon my return to Baker Street I found the most difficult of them seated cross-legged on the floor, absentmly flipping through one of Lewis Carroll’s storybooks. Perhaps it was the suggestion that he was already returning to work; perhaps it was the reminder of what had sent him down that dangerous path in the first place. I confess myself ignorant as to the exact cause, but something about the sight made it impossible for me to keep silent any longer.

“I thought you had given it up, you know,” I said while settling into my familiar armchair, mostly to catch his attention; he hadn’t so much as glanced my way since I’d entered the room.

“I’m assuming you don’t mean the case.” He continued to stare fixedly at the book, occasionally turning over the pages.

“No, I do not.”

“As I’ve said, my dear doctor, it was an experiment.”

“Yes, I’d noticed.” It was almost a relief to hear that familiar irritation enter his voice. “As you may recall, this line of work frequently demands taking risks.”

I bent forward in my chair, wishing he would look at me, but it was not a wish he granted. “Holmes, I realize that I lack your mental facilities. I understand that you often see things that I cannot; that the logic which presents itself so naturally to you in all situations is often obscure and even hidden from me. I have made my peace with this throughout the years, as a necessary measure in our partnership – our friendship. But this … this certainly goes beyond the limits of even my faith. I must insist, as your doctor and your friend, that you explain to me now how overdosing on heroin and cocaine was meant to aid you in the search for a missing child.”

He did look up then, and the intensity of his expression was almost enough to make me regret my earlier desire. “And do you ask me this question, Watson, with even the slightest suspicion that I can answer it to your satisfaction? More plainly put: is there an answer I can give that will satisfy you? An explanation for this particular risk that will justify taking it?”

“You are accusing me of unfairly judging you,” I summarized, genuinely stung by the thought. But that unwavering stare was merciless.

“You have not answered my question, Doctor.”

He had me. I knew what he accused me of was, at the root of the matter, true. And yet, it felt unjust. Had I not always trusted him? Had I not proven to him that my faith was absolute? Holmes could be frustrating at the best of times, but this conversation was pushing me dangerously close to the limits of my endurance.

“Nor have you answered mine,” I pointed out defensively. “Holmes, since the day we met you have deceived me, lied to me, and constantly pushed the limits of our friendship. And I’ve allowed it, because I always believed you understood exactly what those limits were. Asking me to watch while
you actively destroy yourself, however, crosses the line. I would not agree to that, no matter the circumstance. I would not agree to it even if this girl were my own. No, then; I suppose there isn’t a satisfactory answer for you to give me. Perhaps you were right in believing this ‘experiment’ would assist you in your investigation. But even were that the case, it is not something I can condone.”

“It is fortunate for me, then, that I do not require your approval.”

For a long time I did not know what to say. Holmes resumed leafing through the book, but I could sense his tension even from where I sat. We both knew the conversation wasn’t finished. It had been too long in coming for that. I gathered myself in preparation for the speech I had to make, knowing there were things to be said even if I had no desire to say them. It felt like making a last stand of sorts. Luckily, I had previous experience with those.

“I have never experimented with drugs myself,” I began quietly, and I knew he was listening hard – they were not the words he had thought I’d say. “But I recall well my bout with enteric fever. The symptoms are rather severe and they lasted months: fever, agitation, chills, confusion. Hallucinations. Symptoms I trust strike a familiar chord with you.” He glanced up sharply. “The worst of it was lying in a field hospital, on all sides surrounded by wounded soldiers suffering from similar maladies. We were far from the battle, but the battle was never far from us. Every night, we enacted it again in our dreams. We faced the ghosts of the men we’d slain, and the gruesome phantoms of all the friends we had not been able to save. And we could not learn from our fatal errors – a nightmarish eternity of losing the same fight, over and over again. We did not know that we were safe. We did not know that we would heal. All we had to cling to was the pain, and the shame, and the constant fear.

“There have been many stories told about Maiwand, Holmes; man and government glossing over their terrible, epic blunder. But the massacre took place because we walked into the battle blind. Burrows hesitated because he did not know what was in front of him – a glaring lack of reliable information. We were disorganized and unprepared. But soldiers go when they are told, where they are were told, because it is not their place to ask questions. More than half of us lost our lives for it.

“Mystery and crime are your arenas. I make no pretension at any sort of expertise in the subjects. But I do know something about the dangers of fighting across unknown fields. I took a bullet at Maiwand that incapacitated me. The Ghazis would have taken me, subjecting me to horrors I cannot fathom even in my nightmares, had my orderly not saved my life. So I know something about friendship, too, and about the risks of campaigning alone.

“When you first spoke to me of Professor Moriarty, you called him ‘the Napoleon of crime’: a general worthy of battle, and one with an entire army of well-trained soldiers at his disposal. What troops were available to you? A pack of enthusiastic but very young street Arabs, and a retired army surgeon. And yet, you wanted to wage war. And when you said ‘forward,’ I did not ask questions – it is not a soldier’s place to ask questions of his commander. Not even when he returns three years later, back from the dead.

“Time after time, you have asked me to do what I had sworn never to do again: engage a faceless enemy on an unknown field of battle. Your casework has long fascinated me, Holmes. I remain an eager and interested student of your methods. But I follow your mysterious commands because I’ll not leave you to fight alone. And what you are asking me to do this time goes beyond even that; you are asking me to watch you shoot yourself, and then stand back and let the Ghazi take you. The logic of the sequence does not interest me, not this time. I don’t care who the enemy is, and I don’t care how brilliant the scheme. I suppose I should congratulate you on finding the one thing I would not do, not even for you.”

It was the longest speech I had ever made to my companion, possibly the longest speech of my life.
The silence that settled in its wake was thick and heavy. Holmes had closed the book and set it aside, and I hadn’t the faintest idea what he would say.

“Are you finished?” he asked when I didn’t continue. His voice was level and calm, and it called forth a sick feeling of dread. I suspected he was about to be coldly indifferent, and I would have gladly preferred anger to that.

“Yes.”

“You have never spoken to me about Maiwand before, John.” The use of my given name surprised me, but not so much that I failed to recognize it for what it was: a way to soften the blow of what was coming. I found myself mentally bracing for impact.

“It is not a topic I’m overly fond of revisiting.”

“Then let us be clear. Do you invoke it now in order to demonstrate that you resent not being informed about the experiment previous to its execution, or as a way of illustrating that you are displeased that I did not ask you to partake in it with me?”

I had already begun shaking my head before he’d finished. “I am simply trying to explain that you are not alone, Holmes,” I said in exasperation, “and you needn’t always behave as though you are.”

“So this disagreement we are having about the overdose is not actually about the overdose at all.”

“This conversation is about you doing something reckless while I wait in the dark. Again.”

He braced his elbows on his bent knees and steepled his fingers together, staring thoughtfully at a point somewhere beyond my chair. “That is to say, I must now decide whether to approach this directly and address the problem as though it pertained specifically to the present example, or else abstractly, and frame it around the fifteen-odd years we have been associates.”

I merely gazed at him and said nothing; his precise logic exhausted me.

“Suppose, Doctor, that – in this present situation – the reason I have not informed you on the progress of the case is because there has been no progress. And that my ill-fated experiment was merely reconnaissance work. I, too, do not enjoy facing nameless enemies on unknown ground. Suppose that I only attempted this experiment as a very last and very desperate resort, and that I did not inform you of my intentions because I knew exactly what your reaction would be. Bad enough that I should sacrifice my life in the attempt; worse still for me to do so knowing you would hold yourself accountable, since you’d known of the plan in advance and still failed to stop it! Suppose that, knowing your feelings concerning my previous drug use, I was well-able to predict your disapproval. And finally, suppose that I realized the risks involved and would never have been so foolish as to ask my only hope of rescue to indulge in the dangers with me. In that scenario, my dear Watson – what would you have preferred me to do?”

“I would have preferred, Holmes, that you took a moment to realize solving this case is not worth your life.”

“Are you suggesting that my life is worth more than hers?”

“Do not take the moral high ground with me; we both know it is not her life you’re concerned about.”

“You retaliate to my accusation of faithlessness with an accusation of pride.”
“Why must you always be so bloody self-righteous?” I sighed, leaning back in my chair. I had meant it as a sign of defeat, but I was startled by the flash in his eyes. Had I truly managed to sting him through that impenetrable, impersonal barrier? Soldiers know when to take the advantage, so I cautiously pressed: “I’ve had a considerable score of hours with which to think this matter through, Holmes, so now let me see if I understand correctly. You say that this ‘experiment’ of yours was reconnaissance work, in the interest of the case? I know something of cause and effect – you can blame yourself for that – and you would not have attempted such a drastic measure unless you had reason to suspect it might actually work. How did you arrive at that conclusion, then? Did it come to you the night before, while you were sleeping off the effects of a far more routine bout of self-indulgence?” The bitterness had crept into my voice before I could stop it, and it had the peculiar effect of making the restless Sherlock Holmes very, very still.

“And if it did?” he asked coldly.

“Then all your precious logic dissolves into drug-induced delusion, and this entire, well-crafted argument – which you’ve taken such pride in – is nothing more than a smoke screen, allowing you to pin the guilt you feel on me!”

The words slipped past before I could stop them. I could almost see them suspended in the air between us, slowing time to a stifling crawl. And in that painfully interminable moment, we simply looked at one another.

I truly expected him to be angry. I had certainly given him reason enough to be. The longer he sat there, silently staring at me, the more terrible I expected the repercussions to be.

“You may be right,” he said finally. “And if you are?” He could tell from my expression that I did not understand what he was asking me. Shifting, he drew up his knees and clasped his arms around them, watching. “Where do you expect this to go?”

The lack of heat was a relief, but it also made me uneasy. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking behind those level, inscrutable eyes. “I think you should let go of this case,” I offered cautiously. “Leave it to the Yard. Get out of London for awhile.”

“Why is it that every time something happens, your first instinct is to leave the city?” It was a vague, musing sort of question only, not meant to provoke argument. He sounded tired. We both did. “And does this recommendation come from the doctor, or the friend?”

“From both.”

“Two months ago, you were furious with me for my lack of interest in this case.”

“For your lack of interest in general,” I countered. “You have given this your best effort, Holmes. No one, yourself included, can ask more of you. It is not possible to win every game.”

“I am well aware of that.”

“Then come to Cornwall with me for a spell. Take the air. Who knows; there may even be a nice murder or two to take your mind off of things.”

“Or a fussy, over-protective doctor to nag me to death.”

I smiled faintly at him. “Yes – that, too. Will you come?”

He looked away then, gazing down at the book he had abandoned on the floor. I recognized the tension in his jaw and the furrow in his brow that meant he was giving the matter serious
consideration, and I waited.

“Oh, all right,” he sighed.

We have been here almost a week now, and Holmes’ condition continues to improve. There has been a marked difference in his coloring since we left London, and though the prospective murders have yet to show up on our doorstep, my companion is decidedly more energetic. Truly, my only object for complaint or concern is that the silence which governed our lives in Baker Street has reinstated itself once more. It is not oppressive, and I never feel unwanted or intrusive in Holmes’ presence; and yet I wish I knew what dark cloud continues to shadow all his thoughts. Despite his agreement to drop his search for Alice, he has brought both of Carroll’s books along and I know the matter haunts him still. I believe it would help him to discuss it, or at least work through the problem out loud in my company as he’s so often done before, but all attempts at drawing him into conversation have failed.

Whatever he’s preoccupied with, he is unready or unwilling to share it with me.

Meanwhile, we get on the best we can. The weather has taken a decidedly upward turn towards Spring, though the air is still cool out here on the coast. I pass the days walking amongst the somber collection of ruins or writing on the front porch of our cottage. On good days, Holmes joins me on the cliffs or reads over my shoulder (offering his consistently harsh criticism); on bad days, he remains inside, still and brooding. I suspect he’s suffering withdrawal symptoms, but he goes to great pains to keep them from me and I courteously refrain from asking.

And we keep moving forward, one day at a time.
A Rather Unusual Break in Routine

April 28th, 1896

This afternoon provided a rather unusual break in routine.

The weather remains a bit temperamental for travelers and day-trippers, and though we have occasionally spotted a local along the road, Holmes and I have had the shore mostly to ourselves. While we were out walking today, however, we encountered two new companions of a rather singular nature.

Holmes, with his remarkably keen eyesight, spotted them first. They were heading in our direction at a leisurely pace, apparently taking in the sights as we were, and so we paid them little attention. As they drew closer, however, I noticed that Holmes began to watch them intently. The once indistinguishable silhouettes became two young men: one perhaps twenty-four, the other somewhere around fifteen. They walked arm-in-arm as they picked their way across the craggy shoreline, both well-dressed and exceedingly handsome. Neither of them was wearing shoes.

“Gorgeous weather today, isn’t it, Mr. Holmes?” the elder of the two called amiably when they were within earshot. I glanced curiously at my companion, but he simply continued to look hard at the pair. His uncharacteristic rudeness surprised me, though the young man did not seem in the least perturbed. The boy on his arm rested his cheek against the man’s shoulder and smiled at my friend, slow and lazy. I’m not certain why, but something about his expression made me take a step closer to Holmes.

“I would not have thought Spring to be your season,” my friend said finally, and where our shoulders brushed I could literally feel his tension. Something about the two strangers, innocuous as they seemed, had him extremely ill at ease. “Rather far from the estate, aren’t you?”

“Oh … perhaps not quite as far as you’d think.” The man had a beautiful voice, soft and warm as sunlight, but there was something about it I didn’t care for. He spoke each word carefully and with a peculiar cadence, as though one might pluck the words from the air, turn them over and find something else written on their backs. It did not sound like implication so much as a foreign language altogether, but I reasoned that it might just have been the slight accent he had. I couldn’t quite place it.

“And the children?”

“Making daisy chains in the forest when we left, I think. This isn’t exactly an ideal holiday destination for children.”

“Not all children, I suppose.” Holmes was looking at the boy, though he still addressed the man.

“Now, now,” the man smiled. “You’ve brought your dog; grant me my lion.” I didn’t understand the comment, but the boy did rather resemble a lion: leggy and feline and perhaps a little feral. Almost painfully beautiful. “We’ll stay out of your way, my dear detective; León just wanted to say hello. Yes?” He looked to the boy for confirmation.

“I thought of something else that might help,” the child agreed, his voice a playful, velveteen purr. He disentangled himself from the other man and withdrew something from his pocket. It appeared to be a small gold charm in the shape of the number ‘5,’ suspended from a thin, fine chain. I suspected
that it was a lady’s necklace, though he didn’t explain. “Master said it would be alright to give it to you.”

The boy stepped towards Holmes, but when he extended the charm my friend made no move to take it. The child’s face scrunched up in disappointment, though his liquid-soft eyes remained bright and mischievous. “You’ll want it later,” he warned, but still Holmes seemed disinclined to accept. Undeterred, León moved closer. I realized that he intended to slip the charm into Holmes’ pocket. The day was windy but warm, and we had engaged in a considerable climb to reach this point. Holmes wasn’t wearing a jacket.

Without thinking, I reached forward and grasped the boy’s slender wrist tightly. “I’ll hold on to it,” I told him, in a hard voice I hardly recognized as my own. He did not seem surprised or put-off, though the sly smile he gave me was uncomfortably knowing.

“Certainly,” he agreed. I reluctantly released him, and he deposited the charm into my waiting palm. A part of me was sorry he hadn’t put up a fight.

“What are you doing here?” Holmes asked the man, ignoring the exchange completely.

“Traveling in order, same as you.” He shrugged his slender shoulders, turning to glance out towards the sea. “As they say, this one’s mostly water. Not terribly fascinating. But rules are rules.”

“I hadn’t realized you were playing.”

“There are many sorts of games in the world, Mr. Holmes. And many prizes.” He hooked an arm around the boy’s shoulders and drew him close again, and I had the uncomfortable feeling he was illustrating a point. “You needn’t worry. Your game doesn’t interest me in the slightest.”

“Then why help me?”

He shrugged again. “I suppose I sense in you a kindred spirit,” he smiled, and for some reason he was looking at me. “Besides, you’re a wild card. You disrupt their order. I appreciate that.” A bank of clouds had been slowly massing along the horizon line while we talked, and a sudden and unexpected growl of thunder sounded moodily in the distance. The man tracked the source with his eyes. “My, my – storm is coming. I suppose we’d best be on our way.” There was a new sort of tension in the air. The boy hooked one of his fingers through a belt loop on the man’s trousers; I suspected he felt it, too. They smiled at one another and then turned to go.

“Count,” Holmes called suddenly, and the man glanced back at him. “I hadn’t realized what this place was. Coming here happened by mistake.”

“There are no mistakes, my dear. You either play the Game, or you don’t.”

“Then where do I go next?”

“Forward,” the count smiled, and he led the boy away.

We were still about a hundred yards from the cottage when the storm broke, a great deluge of lightening-laced rain that sent us sprinting for the porch. It was dark inside. We spent a long moment standing in the entrance way, panting and conjuring up miniature lakes on the scuffed floorboards.

“Blankets,” I decided after I’d caught my breath, abandoning shoes and socks and then padding off towards the nearest bedroom. I returned with both our duvets and found Holmes standing exactly as I’d left him, lost in thought. I deposited the covers in a chair and returned to retrieve him. “You’ll drown,” I joked gently, attempting to recall his attention to the present as I tugged on his sodden
sleeve.

“What?” The ploy worked better than I’d expected: too well. I felt his shadowed eyes lock on me, pinning me up against the darkness.

“… The puddles, Holmes. I spoke in jest. Are you alright?”

He looked down musingly at the water collecting about his feet, and the next bolt of lightening outlined him briefly in its ghostly pallor. “No,” he said slowly. “I don’t think I am. I – “ What he was became swallowed by the roar of thunder. I tugged harder at his sleeve, dragging him towards the center of the room.

“What you are is wet,” I said briskly, letting habitual professionalism fill uncertainty’s gap. “And cold. You’ll catch a chill if you don’t dry off, and you haven’t fully recovered from the last one yet. Here.” I reached for the top button of his shirt to help him disrobe, but the almost-total darkness of the room lent an added difficulty to the straightforward task. I leaned closer to better see at the exact same instant Holmes chose to turn his head. His nose brushed my cheek and we froze, our mouths a whisper shy of contact.

The thunder snarled overhead, and I swear I felt it in my bones.

Embarrassed, I retreated a step into the safety net of social distance.

“Thank you, Doctor – I can manage,” Holmes said stiffly, and I turned to fumble with the blankets while he worked on the buttons of his shirt. Honestly, I still cannot fathom what happened. The strange encounter with the two young men, the storm. Madness, all of it!

Eventually we were both out of our wet clothes, shrouded in the coverlets and ensconced in a set of chairs that almost – but not quite – faced one another. I don’t think it even occurred to either of us to fetch a candle or a lamp.

“Who were those people?” I asked, after we had sat listening to the storm rage for some time. By this point the thunder had moved off a ways, though the heavy rain was loud and constant on the roof of the cottage. I could smell it from where we sat, even with the windows closed: fresh and tangled with the salt-spray of the sea.

Holmes was silent for a long pause, and eventually I began to doubt that he would answer at all. I watched the lightening paint the raindrops silver against the hazy window glass and counted the seconds between each clap of thunder.

“I don’t know,” Holmes said finally. “I have only encountered them once before. During the night of my experiment.”

“I don’t understand.” I had remained by my friend’s side throughout the entirety of that long night. Aside from Mrs. Hudson and Wiggins, we had most definitely been alone.

“Neither do I, my dear Watson. Neither do I.”

“You dreamt about them, you mean?”

“Perhaps.”

“And the charm the boy gave you. What of that?”

“I’m afraid I cannot explain that, either.”
“And this game that they’re meant to be helping you with? He couldn’t possibly be referring to the chess game in those storybooks, could he?”

Holmes turned his head against the back of his chair, studying me in the dark. “I suspect he might,” he said quietly. “And no, I don’t understand that, either.”

“Could he perhaps know of your case and be taunting you?”

“I can assure you that I have never met that man in this world, Watson. And yet, he appeared today exactly as he did in -- my dream. The boy, too. How should one account for that?”

“You’re certain they were the same? It is often difficult to recall one’s own dreams.”

“Describe them to me in your own words, then. How did they appear to you?”

“Beautiful,” I answered automatically. After, I was grateful that even Holmes’ cat eyes couldn’t see how I flushed in the darkness. I struggled for a cover, but he was already huffing softly in amusement.

“… That they were, my dear doctor.”

The lightening stitched patterns in the clouds and the wind finger-painted on the windows while we sat again a long moment in silence.

“That bullet wound, in your shoulder; how did you acquire it?”

Holmes fidgeted a moment with the hem of his blanket. “In my dream, I was shot by a marauder during a train heist. That is the only account I can provide.”

Neither of us was sure what to say after that, so we resumed saying nothing at all.

Even with the confusion of this new puzzle, I confess it wasn’t long before I began to nod off in my chair. I excused myself and retired to my bedroom, though for a long while I lay in bed listening to the rain and dreaming without sleep. Embarrassing as it is to confess, my thoughts strayed to the strangers on the cliffs. I wondered if they’d arrived home before the storm. It was all-too easy to imagine them in a cottage like ours, damp with the rain, flushed with exertion … tangled together on the floor. Having a writer’s imagination is both a blessing and a curse; I drifted off to sleep imagining the scrape of knuckles against unfinished wood, the silken caress of wet hair and the scent of rain mingled with the smell of skin.

But the eyes I dreamed about that night weren’t amber or gold.
After the initial excitement surrounding the night of the thunderstorm, almost a week went by without anything unusual occurring at all. True to their promise, our strange companions from the cliffs were not seen again. Holmes’ listless lethargy had transformed into something more familiar: restless, frustrated energy. He went for long walks alone on the beach during the day and paced the common room at night with slow, measured steps that threatened to turn us both into incurable insomniacs. His fingers drummed restlessly against the table on the few occasions I coaxed him into sitting down for a meal, though he consumed very little food. If he sat still on his own accord, it was always on the porch and always with one or both storybooks opened in his lap.

“Humpty Dumpty!” he exclaimed in frustration one afternoon, tossing the volume aside. “Forget clues, Watson – I don’t even know what the question is any longer!”

When I could take no more of his nervous agitation, I forced him into a coat and dragged him into town with me. We were running short on supplies, and I imagined a change of scenery might be beneficial for his agonized mind. It was late morning by the time we arrived at the general store, and with the exception of the old woman knitting behind the counter we had the building to ourselves. While I gathered the items from our list, Holmes wandered off to poke restlessly along the dusty cluster of shelves in the back. They hosted the sort of kitschy curiosities given storefront privileges come the tourist season, but for now they waited in a neglected corner, staring out into the nothingness with sightless eyes.

The rows of snow globes in particular seemed to catch his attention. Odd things, snow globes. They appeared en mass last summer on the trade market, an army of glass spheres shipped out to service from Paris. Even Mrs. Hudson had been taken with the things. Last year’s favorite still sits gathering dust in the parlor. Personally, I have never found the objects of any real appeal. What cheer is there in a miniature world drowning underwater, trapped in eternal winter? I saw Holmes select one from the cluttered mass before I lost sight of him around a display rack.

I didn’t give the matter any further thought until he materialized by my side some time later, cradling one of the baubles in his hand. “A study in observation,” he explained in a low voice as he extended it to me. “What do you see?”

“A snow globe,” I responded with a strained sort of patience. I never did manage to answer these riddles to his satisfaction. “A – a tourist trinket.”

“Inside the globe, my dear Watson,” Holmes clarified. “What do you see inside?”

I juggled my purchases to one hand so I could take it from him and peer into the miniature world. As usual, I had not the faintest inclination what he was driving at; but since I had been the one to drag him here, it seemed only fair to humor him.

“A tree,” I told him after a moment’s scrutiny. “And not a particularly attractive one at that.” It was the truth. The little clay rendering was twisted and barren. Something hung from its tiny branches, but the details were lost in the scale. I wondered if it was meant to be some Christmas tree variation, but had to confess the attempt was crude and ineffectual.

Lacking the patience for verbal instruction, Holmes closed a thin hand over mine and shook the
globe briskly to stir the flakes resting at the bottom. “Now what do you see?” he pressed. “Snow?”

The tiny flecks swirling thickly through the water were not white, but rather a sort of pale yellow. I watched them drift about the tree curiously. “Perhaps they’re meant to be leaves?” I mused. “Or …” there was something glitter-like about their composition, not unlike tinsel. The light from the shop caught on them and then vanished again as they resettled at the bottom. “… fireflies?”

“Very good, Doctor – I’d rather thought so myself. But observe.” His hand still covered mine, and he shook the globe again, then once more, letting the flakes almost still before disturbing them. He repeated this exercise three times, then looked at me expectantly.

“It’s almost as if they were changing color,” I speculated. “A trick of the light, I suppose.” Impatiently, he took hold of my arm and pulled me into a darker corner of the shop, further away from the window. We shook the globe again; the effect remained the same. “Marvelous! What a clever little trick. Perhaps the yellow was meant to be leaves, and it is simulating the change in seasons. Autumn to winter. But how does it do that?”

“Winter,” Holmes wondered out loud, his brow furrowed in thought as he ignored my question entirely. “It’s almost winter already …”

He brought the snow globe with him to the front of the store when I approached the counter and paid for our other purchases, still gazing intently at its watery scene. “Is there anything you’d like to buy?” the woman asked him pointedly when she had finished with me. The snow white curls piled on the top of her head rather resembled the knitting sample in her lap. She peered expectantly at my friend over the top of her wire-rimmed spectacles, but to my surprise, Holmes responded in the negative and returned the globe to its place on the back shelf. He made no further reference to it during the long walk back, which I confess I also found surprising. I had expected the strange chemical reaction we’d witnessed to pique his scientific interest.

The rest of the day proceeded according to established routine, but the evening provided a rather unusual visitor. Perhaps it seems overly dramatic to say, but from the moment I responded to his insistent knocking I knew the man was the trouble we’d both been subconsciously waiting to turn up at the door.

He was a lean, lanky sort of fellow, though he had a way of hunching forward when he stood – almost as though he were trying to disguise his height. The slouched messenger hat gave his face a shadowed, hooded edge, and I observed with a soldier’s instincts that he kept his hands buried deep in the recesses of his pockets. “I’m looking for Mr. Sherlock Holmes,” he announced gruffly.

“He’s here,” Holmes called from the sitting room before I could make a response. My companion didn’t rise when I ushered the stranger into the room, though he didn’t invite the other man to sit, either. Something about the visitor made me uneasy and I remained standing, too. We waited for him to speak first, and for a long moment he just stood there, scowling at us and dripping the coldness of the evening onto our cozy floor.

“I’ve a message for you,” he said finally, looking hard at my friend.

“From your employer, I assume?” Holmes offered in his quiet, bored tone, though I could tell he was anything but. “What business does a clothier have with me?” It wasn’t until then that I recognized who our late-night guest really was: Bill, the gardener from Mr. Bennett’s estate. I admit that I had forgotten him entirely.

“The message ain’t from that boss,” Bill sneered. “I got me some … other contracts.”
“You’re a Serpent.”

Bill smiled an ugly, gap-toothed smile. “Yeah, he said you was smart.” He began to pull something from his pocket, and I took a step towards him.

“It’s alright, Doctor,” Holmes cut in swiftly, in a tone that meant sit down. “The Unicorn merely wishes to have a word with me concerning recent events.” The second half of this was directed at our slouching friend. I didn’t sit and Bill didn’t look surprised. I sensed Holmes was irritated with both of us, though of course he never once showed it. Bill withdrew an envelope from his coat pocket and passed it to the detective, who broke the seal and quickly skimmed its contents.

I wouldn’t get a good look at the letter until after Bill departed, but for the sake of continuity here is what it said:

_They told me you had been to her,_
_And mentioned me to him;_
_She gave me a good character,_
_But said I could not swim._
_He sent them word I had not gone_  
_(We know it to be true):_  
_If she should push the matter on,_
_What would become of you?_  
_I gave her one, they gave him two,_
_You gave us three or more_  
_They all returned from him to you,_
_Though they were mine before._  
_If I or she should chance to be_  
_Involved in this affair._  
_He trusts to you to set them free_  
_Exactly as we were._  
_My notion was that you had been_  
_(Before she had this fit)_  
_An obstacle that came between_  
_Him, and ourselves and it._  
_Don’t let him know she liked them best_  
_For this must ever be_  
_A secret, kept from all the rest,_  
_Between yourself and me._

“I’m meant to wait for a response,” Bill put in when he judged enough time had elapsed. Holmes thought about this a moment before rising from his chair and retrieving a book of poetry from a shelf on the wall. It did not take him long to find the page he sought, as though he knew the contents of the volume well (though I considered then, as I do now, the thought of Holmes reading poetry laughable); and when he had, he tore out a page, folded it back to display the proper section, and handed it to the gardener-turned-spy.

His response contained two verses from Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,” and read:

_Yet half I seemed to recognize some trick_  
_Of mischief happened to me, God knows when— --_  
_In a bad dream perhaps. Here ended, then,_  
_Progress this way. When, in the very nick_
Of giving up, one time more, came a click  
As when a trap shuts---you're inside the den!

Burningly it came on me all at once,  
This was the place! those two hills on the right,  
Crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight;  
While to the left, a tall scalped mountain... Dunce,  
Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce,  
After a life spent training for the sight!

My Holmes was engaged in some manner of coded poetry battle with a fictional character, and I confess it was all rather beyond me.

“But what does it mean?” I asked him after Bill had disappeared again into the darkness, quickly and quietly as he had come. I held the original message in my hand. I recognized the poem, of course, from the first of Carroll’s books. But the explanation for its presence here was a complete mystery.

“It means, my dear Watson, that we have at last been granted an island in this baffling sea – solid ground, though of a type I would never have expected.” He paused in his pacing only long enough to light his pipe, then resumed again. It was not the same restlessness as before, however; this was the burning intensity of the hunt. He’d found the trail again long after we had declared it cold.

“Then you know who sent it?”

“Indeed I do.”

“Another one of your strange dreams-turned-flesh?”

“Not quite, Doctor – not quite.”

“I confess I can make nothing of it.”

“Nothing?”

“Well, it is an excerpt from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.”

“Exactly so.”

“From the Knave of Hearts’ trial.”

“Correct. And that gives you no theories?”

“Could it be Carroll himself? He seems the most likely candidate for communicating in riddle. I imagine the prison guards keep a careful watch over his correspondence.”

“Not a bad idea, Watson, but unfortunately a rather incorrect guess.”

I sighed then and settled wearily into his abandoned chair. “Holmes, this sort of back-and-forth questioning scheme is a rather convenient literary device when one wishes to explain your extraordinary methods, but we are not in one of my stories. Perhaps you would be so good as to simply tell me what is happening for once.”

He stopped his pacing to look at me – truly look at me, in a way he seldom bothered to do. One of the hazards of knowing another person so well is that sometimes you simply stop seeing what’s actually there.
“Yes, you have been excessively patient with me as of late, haven’t you? It would only be fair of me to reward your apparently incorruptible faith. But I’m afraid all the nuances of that clever little missive would take a great deal of time to explain, so for now I’ll say only this: I can take away from the message two very important and very concrete facts. The first is the identity of the Unicorn. The second is the location of the Sixth Square, and therefore the next destination on this rather peculiar journey.”

“And the names of these two things?”

He had resumed his pacing and his smoking and was no longer looking at me. “All in good time, my dear Watson.”

I took objection to this, and I am certain he knew it; but for the moment I was content to let it pass. “And your response?” I asked, switching tactics. “I never suspected you to be a fan of Browning’s work.”

That, at least, coaxed a small smile from my friend, the first I had seen in far too long. “You’re a literary man. That is a riddle which lies entirely within your realm of understanding. I’m afraid I shall, therefore, have to leave you solve it on your own.”

I just shook my head, defeated. “Alright, then; keep your secrets. I insist that you tell me only this: what exactly do we do now?”

His gaze flickered towards the timepiece on the wall. “Now, it is late and we, who have both had so little rest in these preceding days, should catch what sleep we can.”

My loyalty to and adoration of Holmes is, of course, absolute. That does not mean he can’t also be the most frustrating companion on the face of this poor earth.

I nodded passively at his instruction, then crossed the room towards the door to retrieve the set of shoes left neatly beside it. They weren’t mine. I could sense his curious gaze on me as I knotted the laces together and tucked the make-shift package under one arm. “Goodnight, then,” I told him as I headed for the door to my room.

He trailed after, watching from the entrance way as I tangled the joined shoes in a hopeless, twisted mess around the front-right post of my bed. He raised an inquisitive eyebrow at me when I turned to face him again, his shoulder braced against the doorframe and his arms folded across his chest.

“I’m not a fool, Holmes,” I reminded him quietly. “I packed for the both of us, since you couldn’t rouse enough interest to bother with such trivialities. These are the only pair you have at your disposal. The difference in our shoe sizes would make wearing mine more painful than going without, which I suppose you may just do; though all that shale outside would make for a rather excruciating journey and would only draw unwanted attention to yourself. I am going out on a limb, here, and appealing to your logical sensibilities.” I crossed the room to stand before him. He merely continued to watch me. “And, just so we are clear on the matter: not telling me the name of your destination will not keep me from tracking you, should you be stupid enough to leave without me.” I pressed a hand against his chest and gave him a little push, forcing him out of the doorway.

“Good night,” I repeated, and then I shut the door.
May 4th, 1896

He was gone when I awoke this morning. So were his bedroom slippers.

I suspect he did it merely to show that he could, though I still believe this particular victory lies with me; he left two notes on the kitchen counter for me to find. Holmes rarely feels the need to justify anything that he does.

The first note was short and to the point, and said only:

*Store; I realized what it is I want to buy.*

- S.H.

The second was written overtop of the letter he had received from the Unicorn, and looked like this:

> They told me you had been to her,
> And mentioned me to him; \( \textit{him} = \text{Mycroft} \)
> She gave me a good character,
> But said I could not swim. \( \textit{could not swim’} = \text{allusion to the waterfall} \)
> He sent them word I had not gone \( \text{Mycroft unconvinced of his death} \)

(We know it to be true):

> If she should push the matter on, \( \textit{she} = \text{Queen} \)
> What would become of you? \( \textit{threat, obviously} \)
> I gave her one, they gave him two,
> You gave us three or more \( \text{allusion to our little war} \)
> They all returned from him to you,
> Though they were mine before. \( \text{ref. to our spies} \)
> If I or she should chance to be
> Involved in this affair, \( \textit{she} = \text{Alice} \)
> He trusts to you to set them free \( \text{ref. to Game} \)

Exactly as we were.

> My notion was that you had been
> (Before she had this fit) \( \textit{she} = \text{Alice} \)
> An obstacle that came between
> Him, and ourselves and it. \( \textit{Him} = \text{Lion}; \text{it} = \text{crown} \)
> Don’t let him know she liked them best
> For this must ever be
> A secret, kept from all the rest,
> Between yourself and me.

I confess that not all his notations were entirely clear to me; I expect some of the allusions were more complicated than this explanatory method allowed for. In truth, however, the only word that completely arrested my attention was ‘waterfall.’

There was something chillingly ominous in how Holmes wouldn’t write out his name.

Dare I write it here? *Moriarty.* Holmes’ arch nemesis, the only man clever enough to pose a serious threat to my friend’s career. The man who ‘killed’ the great Sherlock Holmes five years ago, at the cost of his own life. The fear of retribution for that death kept Holmes in hiding and away from
London for three years – but now, Holmes was suggesting that he had not died after all.

It was certainly a shock, and a rather unsettling way to begin the day. But it was not enough to cloud the general triumph I felt at receiving Holmes’ explanation. He would never say it, not under torture, but it was a sign of concession. I had won a small victory last night, and not even the infamous professor could spoil it.

“Square Six belongs to Humpty Dumpty,” I called to Holmes when he returned from his morning excursion. It had been my turn to sit on the porch and peruse the infamous storybooks. “And Humpty Dumpty is … your brother?”

“Very good.” He settled himself beside me on the highest of the two steps, looking out to sea while I tried not to smile at the sight of his bedraggled slippers. “A rather humorous coincidence in some ways, but still an apt one. There are not many men in London who could command ‘all the king’s horses and all the king’s men’ in a time of crisis. Mycroft happens to be the only one I can think of.”

“He knew Moriarty was still alive?”

“He suspected it.”

“You didn’t agree?”

Holmes hesitated a moment before answering. “I saw him fall, Watson. No one could have survived that. To this day, I am convinced of the truth in that statement. I’m still not entirely certain he did survive it.”

“And yet, you believe the letter came from him.”

“Yes.”

“Under the same twisted logic that allows you to actually meet people who should belong exclusively to your dreams?”

He smiled a little at that. “Precisely so. Mycroft has a way of sensing things other men cannot, of reading patterns others never even see. It is what makes him so valuable. I believe – and I say believe, Watson, because I am entirely unable to prove it – that Moriarty somehow lives on in a sort of parallel dimension, one that we know only through Carroll’s stories. I believe his death in this dimension was very real.”

“Dimensions?” I asked skeptically.

“Mm. We are quite out of our depths this time, aren’t we? And yet, as the count said, there is only one direction remaining to us, and that is ‘forward.’”

“You truly think that there’s a way to pass between various … versions, I suppose – of reality?”

“At this stage, Watson, I have decided that it is best to assume nothing. I can only maintain an open mind and continue to work this case as I would any other. Last night, I was given a new set of clues. At the very least, they bear investigating. I cannot say what they will lead to, or whether chasing them will prove my suspicions true or false. But I am obligated to unravel this mystery to the best of my ability. For the moment, that is all I am attempting to do.”

“So what happens now?”

Holmes reached into his coat pocket and withdrew two small square pieces of paper. “I have
purchased train tickets for tomorrow. Tickets for a rather exclusive train.”

“I re-read the bit about Alice in the shop this morning. She asked for an egg.”

“Quite so. I had to exchange the Rabbit’s watch as collateral, but I suspect it had outlived its usefulness anyway. The shop keeper seemed quite prepared for what I deemed to be an unusual request. In fact, I rather think she had expected me to work it all out sooner.” His expression was a touch rueful.

“But if we are to visit your brother next, why must we take this particular train?”

“Moriarty would not have revealed himself to me unless he wanted to meet. If my theory is correct, the state in which he currently exists will prevent him from moving in our dimension. Therefore, I needed a way to find him in his. The trains seem to create a network of sorts between the squares; it was a logical move, and one I trust he’ll be able to predict.”

“But is it wise, Holmes? To meet with him at all?”

“I suspect he knows where Alice is. The Lion has her, Watson, whoever that might be. She gives the Lion an advantage in the Game. The Unicorn – Moriarty – is the Lion’s opponent. It seems for once that the professor’s objective and mine are the same.”

“No information comes without a price, Holmes. By now, his hatred of you might exceed even his ambition.”

“I am not so certain of that.” Holmes tilted his head to the side thoughtfully. “Moriarty is an imminently practical man. It is possible he regarded our competition of the past in the exact same way he handles his present challenge – as a chess game.”

“You don’t seem terribly distraught at his resurrection.”

“I’m not. His death was a tragic waste of a brilliant mind. I suspect he is no more virtuous or law-abiding in his new incarnation, but the world was sorrier for the loss of him. Duller, certainly.”

I disagreed, but there was no point in saying so. Holmes already knew, as I already knew my opinion would do nothing to change his own.

“And these tickets you’ve bought,” I ventured cautiously. “I saw two slips of paper in your hand. Are they meant to convey two people in one direction, or one person in two?”

“I thought you made it rather clear where you stood on the issue last night.”

“But you didn’t. Holmes, no power on this earth could compel me to let you face that monster alone. And yet, it is foolishness for me to believe I can follow you on a journey like this under my own power. They didn’t exactly cover dimensional travel at medical school.”

“Even so, you would try, wouldn’t you? If I left you behind.”

“Of course I would.”

He studied my expression for a long moment before returning his attention to the sea. “I have given a great deal of thought to what you said that night in Baker Street, you realize – about Maiwand and your convalescence.” The confession surprised me. He had made no reference to it during the weeks we’d been away, and a part of me had been convinced he didn’t remember anything about that night.
“What you said is true; I quite frequently put you in awkward and difficult situations that necessitate your blind faith. And it has always startled me how willing you are to give it. I find it ironic that you, who are so simple and straightforward in your habits and routines, would be one of the few men on this earth I cannot quite figure out.

“I make my living as a consulting detective. You accompany me on cases because it is interesting for you to do so, but you have your own profession apart from this. In spite of this fact, however, you have never neglected to drop everything important to you at a moment’s notice whenever I have had occasion to request your assistance. I know how important the idea of loyalty is to you; I consider it quite central to your entire character. But I am not your general or your employer. I am not family. And what I have so often requested of you goes beyond the reasonable demands of friendship. More than once you have risked your life following instructions of mine that you did not understand or agree with. I am forever placing you in compromising moral or ethical situations that you do not wish to take part in. It is a rather simple matter for me to predict your response to any given request, but until the present I have given little thought as to why you so readily make the choices you do.

“There was no reason to push the matter before, seeing as how your customary behavior was exactly what I myself wanted it to be. But I must warn you that this case in particular is unlike anything we have encountered previously, together or separately. In the past few weeks, I have doubted everything: reality, logic, the state of my own mind. These are the sort of questions that can destroy a person, Watson. I know you are not weak. I have never suspected that of you. And yet, I am not certain that you are equipped to handle these challenges. I’m not certain I am equipped to handle them. The danger is very real, and very unpredictable. Greater than any we have dealt with in the past. I know you will disagree – I even believe I know why – but I would prefer you did not accompany me on this trip.”

“I am an adult, Holmes. My life is not your responsibility.”

“You misunderstand me. I am a selfish creature: terribly, unapologetically selfish. I can assure you, it is only my own welfare which concerns me. I am rather attached to my mind, you see, and I can think of no surer way of losing it than knowing some evil befell you on account of me. I predict you will argue that the same is true in reverse, but that is where the selfishness comes into play.”

I looked at him, waiting until he finally looked back at me. “I already mourned you once; do not ask me to do it again.”

For a long pause, the only sound between us was the quiet murmur of the waves. He’d turned towards the shore again, as though it were easier to deal with this conversation in the abstract. Then: “One of these two tickets is yours. But you still have the option of not taking it.”

I leaned forward and kissed him. It was an impulsive gesture, brief and decidedly haphazard. He hadn’t even been facing me, and my lips caught only the edge of his mouth. ”No, I do not,” I corrected him, and then I stood and made my way back into the house.

He called me ‘simple’, and yet he did not seem to understand how truly simple a decision this was. I could no more leave him than I could learn to breathe underwater.

He remained seated outside for a very long time, past lunch and well into dinner. I busied myself around the cottage as best I could, occasionally checking through the window that he remained where I had left him. It was remarkably unusual to see him stay so still.

When he finally came inside, dusk had brushed the shoreline in soft, gauzy violets and the first of the stars could already be seen overhead. He haunted the doorway awhile and we looked at each other, picking out the words we didn’t need to say and gently laying them aside.
"We'll need an early start to make our train," was what he said out loud. "I will retire early. I suggest you do the same." And then he handed me both train tickets - a gesture of good faith. Our fingers brushed in the exchange, and he didn't flinch away.

Despite the threat of unknown danger lurking ahead, I think it was the first night we both truly slept in a long, long time.
Laugh All You Want

Laugh all you want, but salt water and metal are a bad, troublesome combination! This Square is, decidedly, my very least favorite of the lot.

There's no use in you being all upset at my lengthy disappearance. Didn't I tell you I had other matters to attend to? No point in a juggler who only tosses one ball in the air. As it is, I could've used your help these past few weeks. I'm afraid I've made myself a rather mischievous enemy, one who lies more within your arena than mine. But you have your pretty little hands full with enemies of your own, don't you? How is the tower these days? You must send her highness my regards.

I could have met Holmes at the train station - in the interest of preserving my air of mystery, you understand - but it wouldn't do for the Unicorn to get a good look at me, not at this stage of the Game. Best to leave him to Holmes; I daresay it's the most familiar ground the detective has tread upon so far. Ah, but you don't want explanations, do you? You're only here for the story. How about this, then?

He is sitting up in bed when I pad out of the shadows, and I do give him credit for this, at least: he doesn't look in the slightest bit surprised to see me.

"I was wondering where you were," he greets quietly as I perch myself on the edge of his mattress. "It will be harder for you to pretend to be a hallucination this time."

"How about a dream, then?" I offer with a smile. "It is rather late. I could do something physics-defying for you, if that would help."

"I would prefer you simply told me why you are here."

"Now, now," I purr, kneading his blankets into a more comfortable nest, "No reason to be snippy. We both know you wouldn't have found your way at all without my help; you should be thanking me." I roll over onto my back. He looks better upside-down. "And before you ask, no - I don't work for the Unicorn. Or the Lion."

"Who do you work for, then?"

"That isn't terribly important just now. You met the Tweedle brothers, I assume? The Flowers?"

"You weren't watching?"

"Oh, that had been my intent, but I ran into a little -- trouble. Of the box variety. You've made yourself some rather annoying friends, though I doubt you're even aware of it. Not sure they're aware of it, either."

"Someone trapped you to prevent you from following me?"

"My dear kitten, don't be vain. I stumbled into a trap set for me long before you appeared on the scene. So embarrassing. But it's all right now." I smile my most sinister smirk, letting his imagination fill in the details. Humans are such delightfully morbid creatures, always ready to assume the worst at the slightest provocation! My tormentor was long-gone by the time I escaped his little contraption, but there's no reason he needs to know about that.

"I saw you in the forest."
"Yes and no. Alice saw me in the forest. And when Alice plays the Game, everyone sees what she saw."

"Why?"

"Because she is a Dreamer, and a remarkably powerful one at that. Rare, but not unprecedented. You know about similar individuals, you just don't know that you do. People who change the world according to their personal visions, for better or worse. Adolf Hitler, for example; a much stronger dreamer than our little Alice, and infinitely more devastating."

Holmes looks at me blankly. "That name is unfamiliar to me. What exactly did he do?"

"Oh dear, I'm getting a bit mixed up again. Happens, sometimes. Seeing everything at once gets dreadfully confusing. Never mind, he must have been before your time. Or after your time. Something like that. The point is, what Alice is doing isn't entirely unprecedented. But she's being harnessed for a rather devious end, and it's that end we're trying to prevent from occurring."

"And what precisely will happen if we fail?"

"All in good time, Detective." I do so love how much he dislikes having the shoe on the other foot. "For now, you should just concentrate on finding her. I understand the Unicorn is looking to accomplish that same goal. You've scheduled a meeting with him, then?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"And you mean to bring your dog along. That's good. You'll need him."

Holmes narrows his sharp eyes at me. "I will be extremely displeased - and not altogether compliant - if something happens to him. He is coming because he wishes to; I do not want to bring him."

"Only a knight can guide you through the Seventh Square, Sherlock. Thomas might have done for you, but I understand he went and got himself killed. What a senseless waste; he was still useful. No one else on my end is trustworthy, and no one else on yours is capable." I note the frown at his given name, and resolve to use it more often.

"Something else I don't understand: if it was always possible to enter Wonderland without the drugs, why not show me a way to do so? I almost 'went and got myself killed', too, you understand."

"Oh, I assure you they were quite necessary at the time. Only children can see -- what did you call it? Wonderland? How quaint -- on their own. They use their imaginations, and can suspend their rational understanding of the universe at will. But adults cannot do this. You can only see this dimension by believing you can, and you were not ready to make that leap of faith. We had to find a different-colored door for you."

"And Watson? What will he see tomorrow on that train?"

I turn back over to look at him properly, because it's important for him to know I am being serious. (Don't roll your eyes like that! It's been known to happen occasionally.) "He will see whatever you tell him is there. As always. You've already made your leap of faith; he puts his faith in you."

"That is entirely nonsensical."

"Is it? 'Sanity' is merely the term used to define our mind's ability to rationalize a world that we don't really understand. You've rationalized what you consider to be bizarre and nonsensical in your own way; Alice has hers. Your pup will doubtless find another. He has a beautiful imagination of his
own, but he can only employ it to practical ends; he is, after all, a soldier, and a doctor to boot. I trust he will see nothing beyond what he considers 'ordinary' unless you tell him it is there. As I said -- same as always. This shouldn't come as a surprise to you. Your reliance upon him has never been based on what he manages to observe unaided."

Holmes stares down at the expanse of blanket covering his leg, brow furrowed slightly in dissatisfaction. "That is a rather dangerous burden to bear."

"And always has been."

"You are certain there isn't another way to continue this without his assistance?"

"You chose your knight, Sherlock, many years ago. You've only yourself to blame for that."

He doesn't seem to know quite how to respond to this and picks restlessly at the hem of the blanket instead. "Why have you come tonight?" he asks after a pause. "Neither of us has really said anything the other wasn't already aware of. Is there something else you need to tell me?"

"No, no. Everything in order. It's boring that way, of course, but those are the Rules. The Unicorn will tell you what to ask your brother; your brother will tell you where the second forest is, and your knight will take you there. Your journey through the forest will reveal to you where Alice is. Nice and simple."

"Simple except for the people trying to stop me."

"I suspect that's what the knight is for."

"This all still doesn't explain you."

"We-ll ..." I throw him a sly look while I arc my back in a pleased, slinky little stretch, and then I slink a little closer. "I've come to ask whether you'd like to make things a bit more ... interesting. You're a clever man, Mr. Holmes, but the odds of you winning this Game are not very high. You started late. You've not formed much of a team. The other players are competing on a level I don't think you're even capable of understanding. They are far better equipped than you are, and have much more at stake. If you had a year, maybe two, you might be able to get a better handle on things and present a worthy challenge. That's what I like about you. But I hardly need to tell you that you're running out of time. At this rate, you're going to lose and Alice is going to die."

"What are you suggesting, exactly?"

"I'm offering you a chance to cheat. It won't guarantee victory, but it will even the odds."

"I was led to understand that breaking the Rules of this Game results in dire consequences for all involved."

"Absolutely. But then, cheating wouldn't be any fun without a little risk. All you need to do is make sure you aren't caught."

"And if I am?"

"It's difficult to say, really; the Suites can be impressively inventive, when they put their twisted little minds to it. I don't believe you've had a chance to meet the March Hare, but I'm sure you remember our dear, poor Hatter."

"They played the Game, too?"
"Everyone plays the Game."

"And this punishment would extend to Watson, I take it."

"Of course."

"Do you really think I would risk both our lives for the sake of my professional pride?" The life of the girl never enters into his considerations, and that's another thing I like about him. He's so unapologetically honest about himself.

"Now, now. Don't walk away from the table until you've had a look at all your cards. You've really a rather powerful ally that you don't know about yet." I reach into the hollows of my stomach once more and remove the little snow globe from the general store -- only this time, it's full of actual fireflies. "The Crow was robbed of his prize," I smile darkly, cradling the glowing sphere in my paw, "and he's even more dangerous to anger than the Suites are. He will help you."

"I don't know where to find him."

"Funny thing about that; he's really the sort of person who comes looking for you. Don't worry, I'll take care of it. If you agree, that is."

Well. What do you think he did? You, who have peered into his dreams, seen the mechanizations of his subconscious, watched him at work: stripped him bare and turned him inside-out for the benefit of your clinical and literary scrutiny. Do you think you know him well enough to predict what he said?

Hold on to your theories, my pet, just a little while longer: watch, and wait, and see.
"This is the train?" Watson could not help but feel surprised as they stood side-by-side on the platform, studying the perfectly innocuous engine with a critical eye. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, exactly, though it had been decidedly less... ordinary. Holmes, who had already been in a similar position before, simply nodded. They handed their tickets to the conductor, who tore them without looking at them or commenting on the peculiarity of the journey ahead. The doctor felt vaguely disappointed by it all.

Whether from instinct or the advice of information only he was privy to, Holmes led the way to a private car this time rather than sitting in the third-class area. He chose the door marked '5', and when they found it was unoccupied he ushered them both inside. "A hunch," was all he said to Watson's questioning glance. The doctor thought about the little pendant in his coat pocket, but he'd promised to keep the questioning at a minimum and so he saved the theory for another time. For the moment, he was more concerned with the pistol stored on the other side.

They didn't have long to wait. Both men tensed as the door slid back again, admitting two men wearing suits and hats and long coats with upturned collars. Even in this strangely altered state, Holmes quite clearly recognized Moriarty, who sat down without preamble across from his old nemesis. The other man was obviously a hired gun and remained standing in front of the door.

Then again, 'other man' isn't exactly an apt descriptor, because it implies that the creature sitting across from the detective was human as well. 'Roughly man-shaped' would have been a better way to describe him. The first thought that came to Holmes' mind was 'golem,' and that wasn't terribly far from the truth. Moriarty's body was most certainly rotting at the bottom of the waterfalls in Switzerland. All that had survived of his original form was his brain; the only part of him, as far as Moriarty was concerned, that mattered. His missing limbs had been replaced with a lumbering structure of copper and iron, run by the vigorous encouragement of his clockwork heart. Like the Cat, he possessed lamp yellow eyes, and there was a four-barred metal grate where his mouth should have been. The entirety of this metallic monstrosity might have been a bit overwhelming, even to Holmes, who had began to expect such things; but the concealing nature of the creature's clothing left nothing but his lower face bared to the stuffy air.

(For his part, all Watson noticed was a faint discoloration to his skin and a strange yellow gloss to his irises; his diagnosis settled on a great deal of time spent abroad and the various diseases such travelers were prone to.)

"I hardly expected to see you again," Moriarty intoned in a flat, hollow voice that echoed strangely in the enclosed space. "It seems our red string is stronger than even death itself. How very irritating." He didn't sound irritated. Then again, he didn't sound like anything at all.

"I believe the word you mean is 'convenient','" Holmes corrected, crossing one leg over the other and folding his hands over his knee. It was the gentleman's equivalent of the arms up, palms out, I-don't-want-any-trouble gesture. He hadn't the faintest idea what this new form of the professor's was capable of, but he did have a healthy respect for the evils of the man's imagination. "Mutually beneficial, in this case." He sounded calm, almost indifferent. Watson knew otherwise, and Moriarty might have as well. It was impossible to judge from his expressionless mask.

"That depends a great deal on what you do with the information I have to give you. You are running
dangerously short of time, Holmes."
"Do dead men worry about the time?"
"You tell me. I would very much like to know how you found your way into my little sub-realm, but that conversation will have to keep for another time. I would like to advise you, however, that if you are working with an independent agent, you should not trust him."
"Because he isn't controlled by you, you mean?"
"Because he isn't controlled by anybody. If you had entered through the normal channels, I would know."
"I'm not sure 'normal' is a word applicable to any aspect of this situation."
"Semantics, Holmes. You always were too preoccupied with the details to see the entire picture. But I don't lecture professionally any longer, and so I will tell you what I have come to say."
"You must be unreasonably desperate to ally yourself with me, professor."
"I could say the same about you. Do you want to hear what I have, or not?"
"I'm listening."
"There's only one word you need: it is the key to everything else. Your infernal sibling will be able to fill in the gaps." The metallic man leaned forward stiffly, lowering its modulated voice to murmur, "Pandora."
Holmes blinked once. I ran into some trouble. Of the box variety.
"Not a name to inspire confidence," he mused. "As I recall, she was untrustworthy and not worth the trouble she started."
"She was curious. A trait I thought you of all people would understand. Those who hesitate in this Game are lost, Holmes." Moriarty rose from his seat, and Holmes tensed reflexively. He didn't appreciate the professor's sudden height advantage. "When winter comes, your little Persephone will be swept into the underworld without hope of Spring, and you are no Orpheus. Remember that as you make your choice." He didn't wait for a response before creaking his way out of the car, his servant trailing in his wake.
Watson looked at Holmes while Holmes looked at the seat his greatest enemy had just vacated. "He couldn't have put that in a note?"
"The same thought had occurred to me, actually. No, I suspect he had some other reason for wanting a better look at us. We'll have to let it pass for now, and hope brother Mycroft can, as the professor suggested, 'fill in the gaps.'"
As it turned out, brother Mycroft could.
"It is a rather odd clue to give you, and one that threatens to compromise a great deal of individuals. He is, as you say, desperate." Mycroft was installed in his customary armchair at his club when the pair arrived, and despite the oddity of his brother's report and Sherlock's restless, wiry agitation, he didn't seem compelled to move from it.
Watson maintained a respectful distance. The presence of both Holmes brothers in the same room
always left him a bit daunted, and there was no shame in that. The most dizzying of occurrences was when they talked to one another in short, half-finished sentences, as though playing some strange game of intellectual leap-frog, drawing conclusions a nanosecond before the other had provided the information necessary to inspire them.

Like they were doing now.

"It's a reference to a book, Sherlock; or what we suspect is a book. No one has ever found it, despite knowing where it is."

"The volume at the public library. I've heard of it. Have even searched for it myself, on idle occasion. I am convinced it isn't really there."

"A smokescreen, you mean."

"Precisely so."

"I'm not so certain. Especially now --"

"-- because of the dimensions. But how would someone --"

"Everything else has been in plain sight, has it not?"

"For those who know how to see it."

"Perhaps that now includes you."

"They will guard it --"

"Set a trap, you mean."

"Why else wouldn't Moriarty have simply retrieved whatever is there himself?"

"You spoke of Rules."

"He does not follow rules."

"Of course he does, Sherlock, he's a mathematician. You're the one who doesn't."

"That's why I was a challenge to him."

"That's why he is sending you now."

"To spring this trap --"

"To retrieve this clue and spring the trap."

"A diversion."

"He spoke to you of the need for haste."

"In reference to the Game, I think --"

"Maybe not only in reference to the Game."

"I do not know where this item is."
"Then you must find it."

"Difficult. Perhaps impossible."

"One book amongst thousands."

"Or maybe not a book --"

"A needle in a haystack."

"One leaf in a forest ...

Sherlock held up a hand to forestall his brother's next comment, his head tilted to one side in his thoughtful, strangely feline manner. "Books are composed of paper, paper of trees -- a forest in another form ..." His eyes slid sideways to where Watson watched from the corner, and lightening flashed in the pale grey irises. "The Seventh Square; the second forest. The knight ... Thomas, a bard; literature of the medieval period, Watson and his biographies ... the knight must lead -- what time does the library close?"

Mycroft turned his head and glanced at the clock on the mantle. "Half an hour. You had best hurry, brother. As the professor told you, you are short on time."

Sherlock was already halfway to the door, beckoning Watson to follow him with an impatient gesture. "My thanks, Mycroft!"

"Bring the girl, Holmes, if you find her," he called after them. "I have a feeling she's someone I would very much like to meet."
"You followed all that, of course?" Holmes and Watson were in a hansom clattering rapidly across the city, though the way Holmes' fingers were drumming across his bent knees suggested they weren’t going nearly fast enough.

"You know very well that I didn't." The doctor gave his friend a measured look. "I would like to know what's going on, though. Distract yourself as we ride by telling me."

"For many years, some of the more comfortably-situated of London's criminals -- and, if my brother is correct, its politicians -- have had some way of exchanging very sensitive correspondence right under the nose of the authorities, even when the police had been tipped off ahead of time and were watching for it. Occasionally, petty criminals will strike deals with the Yard in order to reduce their jail time, as you well know, acting as a mole, emptying their pockets of the lint-worthy secrets they carry.

"None of the captured number has ever been high enough on the criminal food chain to know the exact details of this hiding place, but various, presumably unrelated sources have said that it is at the library: a book, a folder, a box, something hidden amongst the shelves. It is known only by the reference word 'Pandora.' A rather apt title, as I imagine it carries quite a few highly-destructive secrets. However, despite knowing this, no one has been able to find it and, as far anyone has been able to confirm, it does not actually exist."

"So you believe that it might be part of this 'other' world: present, but only visible by those who can see the rest of it?"

"Excellent, Doctor -- exactly so."

"And now we must locate it in order to find the next clue."

Holmes nodded. "After, of course, unlocking the clue that allows us to find this object in the first place."

"Which you believe I may be able to help you with?"

"I suspect the clue will be of a literary nature, my dear Watson; I have, of course, read the classics. But I've paid scant attention to most poetry and the larger pantheon of modern works. You, with your love for all things written, might possibly be able to see something that I would miss. At any rate, the Rules dictate that only a knight can lead through this square. You are the closest I have to one." He smiled quietly.

It put Watson rather at a loss for words, so he opted to change topics instead. "Something else occurred to me while you were speaking with Moriarty on the train. Doubtless it has already occurred to you as well, but..."

"Speak, Doctor; I'm listening."

"If all the players must come through all the squares, in order, doesn't that mean that all the players must eventually speak with Mr. Mycroft? Moriarty included?"

"I have considered that. The book states that Square Six belongs to Humpty Dumpty. Considering
that Mycroft does not own territory in London, per se, I have concluded that it must mean the political sector. My dear brother might as well own that. Therefore, presuming it is a correct assumption, not all players must directly converse with my brother. However, given the nature of his work and his considerable abilities, I imagine that he can feel the ripple of interlopers who should not be there. Now that he knows for certain people may be intruding where they are not wanted, I am confident he will be keeping a sharp eye on things. It may be too late to help our case, though. From what I've heard, the other players have a head-start on us."

"Alice specifically referenced Humpty Dumpty in her account, though," Watson pressed. "Does that mean she's met Mr. Mycroft?"

"I have wondered about that as well. To be quite honest, I don't understand it myself. Perhaps, when this is all over, we can bring the girl to see him as he's requested and thus shed a little light on that additional mystery."

"Why didn't Moriarty tell you directly what 'Pandora' was; or, better yet, how to find it? You already knew. Had he but prompted you, the way Mycroft did, you would have come to the realization on your own and saved a considerable amount of time."

"It may have something to do with the order of the Squares; it may also be Moriarty's attempt to cover himself. I imagine there will be more than a few very angry criminal masterminds looking for the person who tipped Sherlock Holmes off onto this particular clue. If I found out on my own, no one can trace the blame back to him."

"Instead, they'll satisfy themselves with coming directly for you."

"A possibility." The hansom drew up in front of the library then, and that was the end of the conversation.

The London outside was theirs, solid and grey and familiar, as Mycroft had been; but once they stepped through the tall doors of the library, all that changed. This was the Seventh Square, the second forest. And like the first wood, it belonged to no one and nothing but itself.

For a long moment the two travelers merely stood side-by-side, gazing down the impossibly long hallway stretching out before them. They were hedged in at both right and left by a wall of books. The room had no ceiling, and the doors behind them were gone.

“No way to go but forward,” Holmes breathed. “Watson …”

“Then forward it is,” the doctor said quietly, and took the first step.

They walked for what seemed like ages in that dimly lit corridor. Wall sconces provided what served for light in that dismal place, flickering and moody and better suited for a Medieval castle. Their alarming, open-air proximity to the mountains of paper added additional tension to the echo of each man’s footsteps.

The pair didn’t stop until they reached the first fork in the path. “Which way?” Watson wondered out loud. They both scanned each option, but both halls looked identical to one another, and exactly like the one they had just traversed.

“We don’t have time for this,” Holmes muttered, his quick eyes scanning the room for some sign of previous travelers. There was nothing but the endless stacks of books, and the sconces, and the evenly dust-coated floor tiles. “Choose,” the detective ordered suddenly, turning towards his companion. “You are meant to lead; pick a hallway.”
“But, Holmes – I …”

“Instinct, Doctor; make a guess. We have to keep moving.”

Uneasily, Watson began to skim the dusty spines of the books lining the shelves. It was almost impossible to read the chipped, faded lettering on the cracked leather spines, but in the left-hand corridor he thought he glimpsed a name he recognized. “Conrad,” he identified. Not a bad man to follow on an adventure into uncharted territory. But all Watson could say for sure was that, regardless of which path they took, they were heading deeper into the heart of this strange, dark place. “To have his path made clear for him is the aspiration of every human being in our beclouded and tempestuous existence,” he quoted absently to himself.

“What was that?” Holmes had been watching him with unnerving intensity.

“Ah … Conrad. A quote, from one of his works.”

Holmes laid a hand on Watson’s shoulder. “I think, my dear doctor, that that might be our road. Come.” They both silently told themselves there was no point in glancing down the right fork as they shifted towards the left, but they both did it, anyway.

Once they’d abandoned the cross-roads, there was nothing about their new path to distinguish itself from the first. It would be so easy to get lost here, wandering eternally amongst the dry, sharp smell of ancient pages. How long would the torches burn? How long could they survive without food, without hope of rescue? Neither spoke, but both seemed to be sharing similar thoughts. Holmes’ thin, cool fingers closed around Watson’s wrist, and the doctor gave no indication that he minded in the slightest.

The next diversion in their path had three options, all worrisome in their unhelpful symmetry. But this time, Watson’s eyes went immediately for the books.

“Self, Faulkner, Kundara, Salinger … I don’t know any of those names.” He eliminated the left branch and examined their remaining options. The road directly ahead included Ovid and John Wilmot amongst its ranks, but the right fork boasted Rossetti, Tennyson, and Catullus. Watson turned the authors over in his mind, frowning while he struggled to make a choice. The pressure of the decision made him tense with anxiety, but the press of Holmes’ fingers was reassuring and presented a sort of equilibrium for the hammering of the doctor’s pulse.

“‘Shape your heart to front the hour, but dream not that the hours will last.’ Tennyson … I think – that feels right.”

“We go right, then.” They stepped forward together with one stride.

And thus their journey continued. Authors Watson did not know were abandoned on principle; they let those who remained guide them based on the strength of their words, echoed in the retired soldier’s memory. Holmes never second-guessed Watson’s rationale nor hesitated once a decision had been made, and it was that blind faith (so often expected of him and so infrequently reciprocated) which gave the doctor the strength to move past bouts of indecision and conflicting literary signals. His memory for quotes and content was startling, rivaling even that of his companion, and the detective watched with a new-found sense of respect and appreciation as Watson picked his way through a map lesser minds would never have even seen.

If only there was any indication that the path they followed was the correct one.

It was impossible to say how long they wandered in that strange labyrinth, a feeling of suspended
time that Holmes appreciated even less the more he was subjected to it. There was no way of knowing whether ‘time’ as a mathematical construct even flowed normally here. What passed for days in these dusty corridors might be mere seconds to the rest of the world; far more troubling was the knowledge that the opposite might be true as well.

It was all quite stressful enough without the distant growling that began following them sometime later.

“‘Where there is mystery, it is generally suspected there must also be evil,’” Watson breathed, staring intently at the loops of Lord Byron’s name far above his head. “I think that might be a warning.”

Not an encouraging thought, and one that became even less-so when they realized they were suddenly moving towards the sound. As the menacing growl arched into a crescendo down the next path they meant to take, they both found themselves questioning their methods for the first time since they’d begun employing them. *Delay always brings danger*, Cervantes warned. *And to protract a great design is often to ruin it.*

They opted to go forward.

“Holmes,” Watson murmured in a tight voice as they walked, “We’ve encountered quite a few classic writers, haven’t we?”

“There are thousands of books here, Watson, I hardly think that strange.” His voice was likewise hushed and strained and his restless eyes flickered like heat lightening into every shadowed corner, settling no where for long.

“The word Moriarty gave you was ‘Pandora’ – reference to a Greek myth.”

“I believe I have already explained that reference.”

“Moriarty also compared Alice to Persephone, and you to Orpheus.”

“Again, aptly. The coming of winter heralds Alice’s death; I cannot journey into the underworld to retrieve her.”

“Yes. It’s just that I have been thinking how very much like a labyrinth this is. And then there’s that growling –“

“Doctor, are you suggesting we may round a corner at any second and run headlong into the minotaur?”

“You do recall what Minos demanded by way of sacrifice? What the minotaur fed on?”

“Children,” Holmes groaned after a moment of thought. “It feeds on children …”

The thunderous snarl sounded again, much louder this time. Somehow, it had gotten behind them again.

“There’s a pistol in my pocket, Holmes, but I don’t think –“ Watson began, half-turning to face the darkness they’d just passed.

*Nothing is ever real until it is experienced*, Keats reminded them from a conveniently eye-level shelf.

“But,” Holmes advised. And then he began to run, pulling Watson after him.

The doctor still dictated their path, but now he did so on blind instinct alone; there was no longer
time for anything else. It was not a responsibility he particularly relished, but it did help him keep his head as whatever pursued them continued to gain on them. They didn’t dare to look back now, but hearing overcompensated for sight, and the creature sounded big, and fast, and very, very angry.

Neither man was in bad shape, but they’d been running all-out for too long. Both were beginning to tire, but their pursuer was not slowing down. In the end, they didn’t have to worry about it.

What they had to worry about was the massive wall of books in front of them, effectively dead-ending their escape.

“Watson!” Holmes implored, finally glancing over his shoulder. It was the first Watson could recollect hearing panic enter into that steady, level voice, and it wasn’t helping. Frantically, the writer scanned the shelves while the floor shook with murderously heavy footfalls.

“Long – Mintzer – Manente … Holmes, I don’t recognize any of these names!”

“Keep looking!” The detective’s hand plunged inside Watson’s coat pocket, grasping for the gun.


“Now, Watson!” Holmes snapped, cocking the pistol and extending his arm towards the darkness.

(This suspense is terrible, Oscar Wilde noted from the bottom shelf. I hope it will last.)

“‘Facing it, always facing it, that’s the way to get through. Face it’ – That’s Conrad, but how can we face that? It’s going to rip us to shreds!”

“‘Through it’ – Watson, you’re a genius! That’s it!”

“‘In order to obtain the impossible, one must attempt the absurd’ – that’s Cervantes – Watson continued to mutter feverishly, as though he hadn’t heard. But Holmes had spun about and grasped his upper arm, shoving them both forward into the bookcase.

Through the bookcase.

They felt hot, acidic breath on the back of their necks and smelled its ancient rot as they fell forward into darkness.

The plunge ended rather abruptly, in hard flooring and tangled limbs. The darkness didn’t.

“‘And all their hearts were chilled into a selfish prayer for light …’” Watson whispered, dazed. He felt Holmes’ hand clasp his in the dark, and then the detective was pulling him to his feet.

“‘Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality’ – that’s Conrad too, isn’t it?”

“I … yes, I think so.”

“And Milton; you said you saw Milton. ‘The mind is its own place and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.’”

The absence of that terrible growling made it easier to think, and even in the total darkness Watson began to see what Holmes was striving for. “‘Till at his second bidding darkness fled,’” he offered, “‘Light shone, and order from disorder sprung …’”

A sphere of light began to glow obligingly at the center of the room. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to see by. It sat on a small, circular table, and beside it sat a thick black book. Cautiously,
they moved closer to investigate. The volume bore no title or identifying marker, but a metal clock had been fixed into the stiff surface of its front cover. It wasn’t wound, and some of the numbers were missing. There was a note taped to the cover as well, which helped distract Holmes from how thoroughly sick of clocks he had become.

The handwriting was thin, precise, and very beautiful, and this is what it said:

XXXIV.
There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
And blew. ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.’
- C.

“Browning again?” Watson wondered as he read over Holmes’ shoulder. “But whose initial is that?”

“Two possibilities come to mind, Doctor, one more probable than the other. To test my theory, I’m going to need the little charm which you have so graciously kept in your pocket for me all this time.” Watson dutifully retrieved the small golden ‘5’ and, after slipping it from its chain, Holmes pressed it into the appropriate area on the book’s clock face. The metallic circle rotated like the dial of a combination safe, and with a soft click the ‘book’ propped open its lid.

“I still don’t quite understand why he’s helping you,” Watson admitted while Holmes pried the lid off of the box. His tone was a touch guarded, but Holmes either didn’t notice or he pretended not to.

“Far more interesting to me, Doctor, is how he could be sure we would be the next people in this room after him. In certain circles, I imagine his handwriting would be rather easily identifiable.”

“It has occurred to me that only pawns move exactly forward, one square at a time, in a chess game.”

“And to me as well. But for now … look at this.” Holmes carefully unfolded the top-most paper from the box, holding it closer to the little globe of light to better inspect its contents.

“No,” Watson inhaled sharply, his voice edged with frustrated disbelief.

“That means …”

“That she’s been in London all this time,” Holmes confirmed grimly.

"But Holmes, that doesn't make any sense; if she's a pawn in this game, then she had to move through all the squares, too."

"She's not a pawn, Watson. She's a queen. A queen who has already been captured ..." He spoke quickly but with the faraway gaze of a man working out the solution to a riddle. "Of course; why didn’t I see that before? The game didn't begin for Alice when she was taken by the Lion's men, it began long before -- here, in London. Cross-dimensional, they told me. Thomas was being manipulated, and didn't even know it. A knight to capture the queen. The Serpents at the saloon, the Flowers, all of this ... we've been set up!"

"Pawns," Watson agreed, sounding dazed again. "Only pawns move forward like this ... but by whom, Holmes? And why?"

"Don't think on it," Holmes warned in a low voice. "This goes beyond us; beyond what we can, for
the moment, understand. We need to focus on our own objective, and that is to find the girl. Regardless of what game they're playing, regardless of what larger force is at work here, a child has been kidnapped and we need to find her. Are you listening to me?" The dazed look on Watson's face had become overwhelmed confusion: the mind at last catching up to what had happened. A labyrinth of books inside a library, the minotaur; people walking right out of dreams and breathing the air alongside him. Adrenaline and faith had brought him this far, but the figurative floor was crumbling beneath his feet. Carroll had warned that only a very rare sort of adult could see Wonderland and cope with it, and Watson was, rather solidly, a man of the world.

Holmes took a hold of Watson's shoulders, fingernails digging painfully past his shirt and into his skin. "John, listen to me. We've entered some kind of -- of dream. Nothing's real; it's a product of your mind, and with your mind you can control it. Milton, remember? I need your help. I need you to get me out of here. You have to find the way back."

"There's no door," Watson protested vaguely, "and the minotaur -"

"Literary symbols," Holmes hedged. "We're in a forest of words. The minotaur is ... fear. Remember Afghanistan. Remember Maiwand. Fear isn't real, John. You simply have to conquer it in your own mind, and it will cease to exist in this reality. Trust me. This is all just madness; temporary insanity. And I need you to take us out of here."

"Madness?" Watson echoed.

"That's right," the Cat purred from the table. "We're all mad here." His words were punctuated by the shink of the razorblade claws projecting from his metal paw.

Holmes' grey eyes widened, but he didn't turn around. "Get us out of here, John," he repeated firmly. "You must trust me. I'm counting on you to -"

"Time's up," the Cat murmured. Watson felt the hot sting of blood on his cheek as the Cat plunged its claws into Holmes’ back, rending the detective’s shirt as they knifed clean through his chest.
He Was No Longer in the Dark Room

When Holmes awoke, he was no longer in the dark room with the circular table. He was lying on his back in a field of midnight-cool grass, and the stars overhead were infinite and terrifyingly close. But his chest hurt like hell, and he took that to be a good sign; whatever happened to souls after their death, he doubted their incorporeal masses could still register physical pain.

He sensed he wasn't alone and struggled into a sitting position. Facing whatever waited for him was easier than facing that endless sky.

"You're a difficult person to reach," Holmes gasped. He could taste blood on the back of his tongue.

As it had done with the curtains at the auction, the Crow appeared to detach itself from the pool of midnight black before him: a cowl of night and eyes the Mars-war red of distant stars. It had no mouth, and when it spoke Holmes heard its voice like a silver-colored whisper in the center of his brain.

Those who have business with me may find me easily enough.

"We want the same thing. The Cat suggested we might be able to help one another."

I have not suspended your time. The moments you have in which to aid me are becoming scarce.

"It is not my time I would ask you to suspend. It is everyone else's."

The Game is in play. What you are asking me to do would violate the Rules.

"Do you fear the Suites?" Holmes challenged softly. It was a gamble of sorts, because he felt certain that angering this creature would be the very last thing he ever did. But as the Crow said, his seconds were trickling past. Moments in which to wither ...

I do not know what it is to be afraid. I am fear. But you, who do not understand the Game, cannot know what it is you ask. There will be consequences for those involved. There will be consequences for those uninvolved. What is it you fear? And would you ask me to do this thing, knowing that what you fear may come true?

Holmes gazed directly into its ancient eyes. "Yes."

A selfish request. You are no different from them.

"And I have never claimed to be."

The Crow considered. And while it considered, the roar of the vast, oceanic silence crept into the detective's pores and breathed its eternal frost into the hollows of his bones. Watson, he thought, just to hear himself think, just to hear something: if you let me die now, I'll haunt you for all eternity.

There is a cost, the Crow's not-voice intruded again. Time can not be created, only reallocated. You request time in which to move; time in which to heal. Additional time than what you own. That time must come from somewhere; someone. Their time is the price for yours. You require I break the Rules to reallocate this time. The person whose time is stolen must also sacrifice their life. That is the price for my assistance. You make this request to benefit yourself. The person who dies must be
someone you love. That is the price of pride. Together, this is the cost.

Holmes hesitated, weighing the odds as the frost in his bones began turning to ice. What if …?

The Crow cocked its head, as though listening to something only it could hear. It was a disturbingly bird-like gesture. Someone else has offered to pay your bill. Someone who will have the right to extract an equal or equivalent price, come the time of reckoning. Will you pay for your wish now, or then?

He was too tired and too cold to voice his relief, but he still felt it. "I accept the trade."

Then know this: the person you love most should have died tonight, but will not. He lives now off of someone else's stolen time.

From somewhere in the silence, as though off at a great distance, Holmes felt, rather than heard, the sound of a gunshot and a brief, shrill cry of pain. One of the stars winked out overhead, but with so many to look at, no one noticed. Someone had died tonight for his request, someone he may never have even known, but he felt no remorse. The only direction to go is forward ... He felt then as if he knew why he'd been chosen, and it had nothing to do with the power of his tightly controlled imagination.

Were I you, I wouldn't waste it.

There was a giant hourglass standing between them suddenly, and yet it didn't appear so much as it had - somehow - always been there. The grains of sand inside of it were black, black as a neglected little dormouse's bones, and Holmes began to suspect it wasn't sand at all. Your time will progress forward - yours and your knight's. No one else's. You have an hour, by your primitive reckoning, before the mechanisms resume.

"It will take at least an hour to get past the minotaur," Holmes protested faintly. The darkness overhead was beginning to crowd into his tunneling vision. The Crow seemed amused by the word 'minotaur.'

With all your intellect, you remain limited by the scope of your human vision. How long do you suppose you've been asleep?

"Three hours, or thirteen, or thirty," Watson murmured wearily as Holmes opened his eyes. "I haven't the faintest idea, but in all cases I feared it was too long. You were barely breathing." There were bloodied claw marks on the doctor's shoulder, and a vicious gash on his forehead was steadily dripping blood into his eye. They were sprawled on the library's front steps, and the doctor wasn't looking at him; he was instead gazing out into the rain that hadn't so much ceased falling as had simply frozen in place. He was undoubtedly talking to Holmes, and yet the detective had the distinct impression that Watson didn't realize he was awake - not until he struggled into a sitting position and rested a soot-blackened hand on his shoulder. Watson, under normal conditions, possessed nerves of steel; but he started then as though a corpse had reached through a muddied grave and grabbed his ankle.

Holmes looked at the odd streaks of blackened ash on his skin and suspected that might not have been too far from the truth.

"Time to go, old boy," the detective rasped. "We've only got an hour."

Watson stood and helped Holmes to his feet, though they had to support one another as they stumbled down the stairs.
"You almost got me killed," Watson muttered, the only thing he said about the journey back through the labyrinth. The human mind is a resilient thing, and his was already scabbing over the (bones and fire and blood and the darkness that went on and on forever) occurrence with a gauzy, nightmarish haze.

"You have no idea," Holmes said softly under his breath as they stumbled to the sidewalk. And I hope you never will.

The cabs, their drivers, and their horses were all as motionless as anything else: like a display in a storefront window, or a tidy set of children's toys. An hour. This wasn't going to be easy.

"What are we supposed to be doing, exactly?" Watson asked as they moved off down the street. He couldn't quite help but flinch every time his progression knocked a motionless raindrop out of place. Their path would be as easy to follow as a sign-posted trail, had there been anyone left to track them. Like a bull in a china shop, he thought vaguely; like a man-shaped bull with a giant axe and -

"We assemble our team, unofficial as it is," Holmes responded. "And then, when time moves forward again, the race to the tower will begin."

"Couldn't we just go to the tower now, take the girl and leave?"

"We've bought ourselves the chance to move out-of-turn: one move. I shudder to think what the price of two turns might have been. Come; we need to get to the Yard."

Half to himself, half to his companion, Watson relented with only: "Why didn't it occur to either of us before that they'd lock her inside a giant clock?"
And Thus an Hour Slipped Past

XII.

And thus an hour slipped past unnoticed in the world.

When time resumed flowing for everyone, there was nothing present to make them suspect anything untoward had happened. Transactions which had been halted mid-stream continued just as though they hadn't been interrupted; people stepped forward where they'd been about to place their feet. Horses snorted impatiently, dogs barked with boredom, and the sun resumed its circular trek. Oblivious.

Well, maybe there were a few things.

Lestrade found a letter sitting on his desk where he was quite sure one hadn't been before, and all without anyone entering his office to deliver it. Wiggins had the slightly more surreal experience of finding a missive in his hand, one that he hadn't previously been holding. There were bandages and needle and thread missing from Watson's medical stores, had anyone bothered to look, and for a very brief moment, there was no sound in a ribbon of space where the rain should have been falling. But the human mind is a remarkable thing. It would have been madness to make much of any of this, and so no one made anything of it at all.

"Much obliged for you including me in on the end," was all Inspector Lestrade said as he arrived at the appointed place, Stanley Hopkins in tow – as per instruction. Wiggins and the little army of street Arabs were already lounging along the walls of the nearby buildings. "I won't be sorry to see this thing put to bed."

"Nor will I," Holmes agreed warily. He was also leaning against the wall, though the term that would best describe his posture was miles away from 'lounging.' "I'm afraid, inspectors, that I must request the usual indulgences. I require your aid, but trust me when I say that time is absolutely crucial, and I cannot immediately explain what I am about to request of you. As a reward for your patience, I promise you that all credit for the girl's recovery will be safely attributed to the Yard, with no mention of my own contributions."

"At your disposal, Mr. Holmes," Hopkins promised cheerfully, and Lestrade nodded in agreement. "What is it you need us to do?"

Holmes knelt stiffly and spread out a map of London on the ground. The pavement was still wet in places and soaked through the paper, but he took no notice of it. The group gathered closer for a better view as the little street urchins scrounged up rocks to serve as paperweights.

"I want you to think of this as a chess game," Holmes told his assembled, rag-tag army. "And I want you to think of it that way because, no matter how trivial the task I'm about to give you may seem, it's all just one tiny part of a much larger strategy. Do you understand?" He waited for their nods, especially those of the children. "Whatever happens, it is absolutely crucial that you follow my instructions to the letter, and that you do not abandon your post. We are attempting to move against a foe who has a slight head start on us, and so I am aiming to spread out our forces to form a sort of net. It is very important that our adversary not get past us, though this is infinitely difficult, because we do not know what our adversary looks like. Therefore, the goal is to funnel any prospective trouble-maker down into somewhere he or she can be identified. Your tasks and their appointed
locations have been designed with that thought in mind. That is as much explanation as I can spare right now." He glanced around at each of them in turn, studying the familiar faces and gauging what he saw there. The youths seemed gleeful at the prospect of causing a ruckus, but then, that was what they did best; the adults somewhat skeptical. Only Watson looked appropriately grim.

"What's to keep someone from finding out?" he'd asked quietly, kneeling on the floor of their Baker Street sitting room while Holmes quickly sewed shut the tears in his shoulder. "That you broke the Rules, I mean. What will happen if they do?"

"I don't know," Holmes responded easily. The ones we care about most are the easiest to lie to. "Let us just hope we never have to learn."

"I feel as though I've been awake a thousand years," the doctor continued, voice thick with pain. "How can it be that all this happened in one afternoon?"

"You could stay here; rest. You've played your part well, Sir Watson. Did more than anyone could have expected. It wouldn't be such a bad thing, to remain behind and sleep."

"We'll finish this, and then we'll come home and rest together." And he'd tilted his head to kiss the lower knuckles of Holmes' bloody fingers.

Holmes deployed his irregulars with their carefully detailed instructions, and then he and Watson made their way towards the opposite end of London together, where Big Ben towered overhead.

"It's like a crass ending to a badly written story," Watson mused as he studied the approaching clock with tired eyes. "Everything's so circular. And nothing has been satisfactorily explained."

"You're looking at the ending to our quest as the end of the Game; it's not. All we are proposing to do is capture the Queen. Until the King is check-mated, the Game will continue."

"If you've been a pawn all this time, what happens when you reach the Eighth Square?"

"As far as I'm concerned, nothing. It was never my intention to play. I merely wish to take the girl off the board. What happens after that is, hopefully, none of our concern." They both knew it wasn't as simple as that, but what was the use of protesting?

It was dark when they at last arrived at their destination, though that only made it easier to break into the building. Watson already had his gun in his hand before Holmes had even forced the lock, and when the detective glanced sideways at him in the gloaming twilight it was easy to see something that wasn't there, but that could have been: a man closer to the Tweedle Brothers and their cut-and-dry vigilante code than the doctor he'd so frequently caught dreaming in his sitting room armchair.

Fear, he realized, thinking of that heart-stopping expanse of midnight nothing. This is what fear could turn him into. Not fear for himself; he feels no more of that than is rationally healthy. No, this is fear for me. The fear of what lies beyond the Eighth Square. The fear of having something to protect and knowing you are not going to be strong enough to do it. He wanted to say something then, but there were no words at hand, and there certainly wasn't any - well, you know.

Silently, they ascended the stairs. Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.

The tower was massive, the stairs too numerous to count. It should have taken them a considerable spell to cross them. Neither of them were surprised to gain the landing in the span of two or three minutes. After all, it was hardly the most remarkable thing to happen to them that day.

"Welcome, my blooded warriors," the Cat purred amiably when they arrived. Watson automatically
took aim over Holmes' thin shoulder, but the detective quickly grasped his wrist and forced the gun away. The soldier threw him a querulous look - *remember when that thing tore a gaping hole in your chest?* - but he subsided beneath the silent, steely reply. The interplay between them amused the animal, but then, most things did.

"Have you come to awake Sleeping Beauty?" he asked when they were through. "Which one of you shall bestow true love's first kiss?" He chuckled rustily.

"Alice is here?" Holmes impatiently stepped past the Cat and into the clock room, Watson not far behind him.

"Well, your borrowed hour was certainly helpful; I can't even begin to tell you how much fun I had with all that free time to play! But it wasn't quite enough. She would've already made her move and you'd be dead," the Cat explained while it followed in their footsteps. "Her knight got himself killed, but he was one of a set. You'd still have to deal with his. And trust me, you really don't want to do that."

Alice was lying on the floor of the room, unconscious in front of a gramophone set to loop the same lullaby for all eternity. Watson let out a startled cry when he saw her, the doctor overriding the ex-soldier, and when he thought about it later Holmes would realize that he'd never felt quite such overwhelming affection for the other man as he did when he saw that transition occur. You can't change what you truly are.

"You killed the knight?" he asked quietly, watching as Watson checked the girl's pulse.

"No, there really wasn't a need. He has no interest in fighting you. But he would've *had to*, you understand - it was the next move. I just changed things around a little to give him something else to deal with. After all, I *did* owe him." The Cat smiled to himself. "However, I was rather less successful at diverting the Unicorn's knight. You weren't supposed to fight him, but then you went out of turn ... the Unicorn wasn't exactly expecting that, and his creatures are markedly less ...*understanding.*"

The sound of gunshots resounded from somewhere outside. They were faint from this high up, but still audible. "I did bring reinforcements, though," he offered. "Your .. erm, men .. couldn't hope to take on such a monstrosity as *that*. And anyway, it was quite convenient timing. They were about to kill each other, all over that ridiculous rattle - I just refocused their energy a bit."

By this point, Watson had gathered Alice into his arms. "She's alive," he reported to Holmes, "but she's cold and probably in shock; we need to get her out of here."

Holmes was looking hard at the Cat. "You *are* working for the Lion, aren't you?" he accused quietly.

"Oh, goodness, no -- I told you, I don't work for anyone."

"But you've been working *with* him."

"I have no present quarrel with the Lion. I rather like him, truth be known. Felines, and all. And he's so wonderfully *devious*. If you and your professor can share a train car without attempting to strangle one another, I imagine I can be forgiven for having a common interest with a sometimes-opponent."

"But why would you help me capture his queen? What's the catch?"

The Cat laughed outright at that: a strange, chilling sound. "Wheels within wheels. Haven't you figured it all out yet? No, I imagine you haven't. Take your prize, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. You've
earned her; if, of course, you can get her out of this building alive."

“Watson, wait – don’t move her!” The doctor froze in the act of carrying Alice across the floor. He had an arm beneath her bent knees and around her back, and her beautiful blonde head was pillowed against his chest. “Why is she here?” Holmes demanded of the Cat, his eyes flying to the clockwork gears above their heads.

“Well, now, that is an interesting question; but I was referring more to him.” The Cat inclined his head in the direction of the stairs, a motion accompanied almost immediately after by the sound of the door being smashed in on the bottom floor. “Best of luck,” he called as his body began to fade. The last thing to go was his very amused, very sinister smile.

They were trapped. This high, a fall would kill them. The only way down was by the stairs. They were both armed with pistols, but Holmes thought of the Tweedle brothers’ rather peculiar, rather powerful guns and had a sinking feeling that his might as well be composed of paper. And of course, there was the girl to protect. If Holmes knew nothing else about their present situation, he knew Moriarty, and he had no doubt that he would be merciless no matter how young his opponent was.

The heavy snarl and rasp of metal was coming closer at an alarming rate. Whatever strange, warped dimensional power had aided them in their trek up the stairs obviously didn’t discriminate between sides. Their impulse was to shrink against the furthest wall, as though the architectural structure might actually offer some manner of support in the fight; but it was at war with the fierce, blood-hot desire not to die like mice cornered in an attic. Watson cradled the sleeping girl protectively and uselessly close to him, and the two men exchanged fierce, desperate looks. They were thinking different things, but both of their expressions clearly said I don’t want to die here.

The monster below had gained the landing, and now it didn’t matter what anyone was thinking. Like its master, it was composed entirely of metal parts: bolted together copper and iron, clock gears and metal grating and yellow, lamp-like eyes. It was significantly larger than Moriarty’s form had been, and if it had a brain at all inside its dome-shaped head, the only thing it concentrated on was destroying anything that stood in its way.

For the moment, though, all it did was stand there, watching them watching it. Ben ticked and tocked; the gears running the creature’s artificial frame ground and whirred. But it didn’t attack.

Holmes realized it was his move – his very last move. He could either figure out a way to destroy the knight with a single blow, or he would be crushed by it. Whatever had happened to the Tweedles, they hadn’t gone down without a fight. The golem’s left arm was mostly missing, and its right eye had dislodged from its socket, left to swing uselessly from its wires; some vicious blow had crabbed its right foot and the scraped indentations of impact marked its barreled torso. But the detective had no delusions of succeeding where the gunmen had failed.

Holmes looked at his opponent. He looked at the clock gears grinding overhead and the staircase that remained just beyond his reach and the stupid gramophone in the corner that was still playing its oily, slightly nauseating lullaby. He looked at Alice, who had unwittingly started this whole nightmare and who, used and abused by the adults who should have protected her, now faced her death without even knowing it, all her lost seconds glimmering weak and captive in someone else’s dusty jar; and he looked at Watson, who had abandoned everything of himself on the threshold of what Holmes had needed him to be, who had fought a bloody minotaur for me, and never asked ‘why,’ not once, not ever – and now I’m about to get him killed by Frankenstein’s goddamned monster.

Their eyes locked and held, the smooth, worn grey of the earth and the calm, rock-solid blue of the sea. Holmes smiled slightly, that little quirk of mouth that Watson and only Watson knew so well, and in that final moment of hesitation the detective said the only thing that needed to be said:
“This is complete, absolute nonsense.”

His last move was to step forward and stomp down hard on the gramophone, disrupting the music and shattering the device to splintered, scattered pieces.

The golem lunged forward with a hollow, rattling roar at the same moment that Alice opened her eyes: Holmes the earth, Watson the sea, and Alice the wide, endless sky.

“Oh, do go away,” she said to the murderous creature with a child’s petulant irritation. “I was having such a lovely dream, before you came and spoiled it!”

With the clattering screech of tortured metal, the knight collapsed into a heap of scraps and bolts at their feet.

She watched until the very last gear had rolled itself to a stop in the dusty recesses of the room. Then she turned her ageless eyes on Holmes.

“You’re late,” she informed him softly. She buried her face into Watson’s shoulder, her tiny arms going around his neck. “Can I go home now?” she mumbled wearily against his skin. “Dinah must be so terribly lonely without me … and mother says I’m not to stay out after dark.”

The doctor and the detective gazed at one another a long moment in silent, baffled disbelief; and then they stared at her with – what else? – open wonder.
It was a long night for them, and I imagine it passed by in a disorganized blur: parents to reassure, press to deal with, paperwork to file (which included a rather specific and hurried prison release form.) And of course, all the stories that needed to be made up and amended. I can’t tell you what finely-crafted version of their adventures they fed to the hounds in the Yard, though, because I didn’t wait around to hear them. Once you know the truth, the fiction is hardly worth going on about. I did see our poor, benighted Carroll pressing Holmes’ thin hand in a rather pointed way, though the swarm of reporters didn’t allow them the chance to communicate in private. I’m inclined to believe Holmes was relieved on that score.

His dog was certainly relieved to get both of them home. Oh, there have been countless little amusements and hilarities in this particular drama, but most delightful of all is how they treat the day’s events as though something has actually ended.

The only thing actually ending are these little notes to you. Most felicitous congratulations on your impending release, my darling Duchess – but you must tell me: do you still plan on committing the crime they preemptively incarcerated you for? It was such a lovely little piece of work. But ah, never you mind that for now. I know that eyes other than ours have been reading our communications.

You know, despite my kind indulgence of your curiosity all these months, I haven’t forgotten what you said to me the last time we spoke in person. Why, I suspect you even laughed at the dreadful little box-trick the count played on me! I have half a mind not to give you the ending you’ve been waiting so patiently for. You want it, though, don’t you? You want to know what happened when the faithful little puppy got his exhausted kitten home from war.

Should I describe to you how Holmes came to straddle Watson’s lap, without preamble or ceremony – how he gently untangled clothes from the body he’d professed to ignore so long, mouthing reverence against the arc and pull of every scar earned in faithful service to his nameless cause? Imagine the way Watson’s hands, sturdy and strong, lock against the angles of the detective’s hipbones, the cool fingers mapping the doctor’s angular jaw. I could tell you that when they finally share their first, proper kiss, as indeed they must, it’s slow and deep and natural as gravity, inevitable forward motion that fits all their curves and edges together into the time and place where they truly belong.

No? Oh, I see: You’re thinking, but the battle with the bloody minotaur, and but the storm, and but the jealousy and the possession and the heart-and-soul longing –

Try this:

The door to their rooms has barely closed before Holmes has turned, fisting Watson’s blood stained shirt as he shoves him roughly back against the wall.

“You fool,” he hisses, with a voice that wants to be angry but isn’t, that cools over clenched teeth and the fragmented memory of something he fervently wants to believe is a dream. He surges forward -- nowhere to go but -- and crushes their mouths together; and at first the doctor is surprised, but not for long. The nails of his calloused hands dig sharply into the detective’s narrow hipbones and drag him closer, Holmes’ elegant fingers losing grace to haste as they fumble inarticulately with the fastenings of the doctor’s clothes …

That isn’t quite right either, is it? It’s not them: you can imagine it however much you’d like – and oh, I know how much you’d like! – but it isn’t what happened, and that will always ruin it a little for
you. The fiction’s more delicious than the truth, my pet, but if the truth is what you want, then I’ll tell you what actually occurred:

They are both thoroughly exhausted by the time they stumble through the door of their old, familiar lodgings, but also too wound for sleep; and their first actions are dictated by their individual personalities. Watson bathes and carefully checks over his wounds, cataloguing and categorizing. He doesn’t think about what happened at all, partly because he isn’t really sure what he’s witnessed, and partly because he knows the strength of his own mind well enough to acknowledge when it’s gone as far as it’s going to without a period of revitalizing sleep. The hot water relaxes him, both physically and mentally, and once clean and comfortable his belief in the world’s solid sensibilities returns to him. The combination does wonders for the restlessness that keeps him awake, and when he wanders back into the common room he is sleepy and as close to content as can be reasonably expected.

Holmes likewise changes, but it’s not long after that he’s sitting cross-legged on the floor and rifling through Carroll’s books again. He doesn’t bother to read the text; he already knows it by heart. But he does look at the illustrations, comparing them to memories which still cut in his mind – too vivid, too sharp. He has been blessed with a host of natural gifts, but the price for these come in what he lacks. He cannot lie to himself about what happened, not even for the protection of his own peace of mind. More interesting and infinitely more dangerous, he doesn’t want to. But he does not look at the books now because he is restless or anxious or overwhelmed, and this is important: he does so because he knows that every time he does he comes one small step closer towards understanding, and that is what gives him peace.

The true sign of Watson’s love is not his adoration of Holmes’ intellect, and it is not the blind faith and absolute trust he bestows in the other man. That is the love of an acolyte for an idol, and worshipers cannot acknowledge or accept fault or flaw. Watson can. No, the real evidence of love is when he sees Holmes at his task and silently comes to sit on the floor beside him, without judgment, criticism or censorship. The detective does not appear to be paying any attention whatsoever to his companion, but it doesn’t matter: the strength of Watson’s love lies in the honest, complete contentment he finds at the end of each day he can continue to live and breathe and fight at this man’s side.

He may not realize that Holmes is aware of him, always; that he, too, derives a similar contentment in that simple, undemanding companionship. But you’re wondering now about ‘love,’ silly thing that you are – do I really have to say?

Take this, then, and it is fact:

Holmes skims the pictures for awhile in silence. Watson remains where he’s seated, but the exhaustion is catching up to him and occasionally his head nods against his chest. Holmes observes this out of the corner of his eye, and it curls the edge of his mouth into one of those small, affectionate smiles he reserves exclusively for his friend. Eventually, he lays the book aside and nudges the doctor’s shoulder with his own, issuing a gentle command for Watson to take himself to bed – an order which is received with only a sleepy, noncommittal sound of acknowledgement.

So Holmes leans forward and kisses him. It’s an impulsive gesture, brief and decidedly haphazard. Watson isn’t even facing him, and Holmes’ lips catch only the edge of the doctor’s mouth.

Another night, it’ll happen again and Watson will turn his head and turn the contact into a proper kiss – but that’s later. For now he only smiles, sleepy and content, and obeys the gentle imperative.

They may have resolved not to waste any more time, but that doesn’t mean they have to hurry.
Holmes waits until the doctor’s bedroom door shuts before returning to his book, smiling quietly to himself and wondering at how anyone’s skin can taste so decidedly of Spring.

~*~

In a tiny frontier town along the borderline of Reason and Despair, two gunmen sit drinking at a table. They bicker good-naturedly and compare their recently acquired battle scars, enjoying the admiring attention of the brightly colored women and the commendation of the saloon’s other patrons. Their hurts are healing and their adventures become better and better every time they tell them: stories are as good a currency as any in this lonely, quiet world, and they are enjoying their pay day.

On a little island surrounded by the sea of the prairie, a rather beautiful young man rests his head in the lap of his owner. His golden eyes are half-lidded in sleep, enjoying the feel of his companion’s fingers in his hair. The count is reading to him from a little book held in his free hand, but the child is not listening: he is dreaming, with the lazy contentment of someone young and wise enough to know what’s real and what’s only a game. And the knight who owns him knows he isn’t listening, but he reads on anyway – fiction to smooth reality into something soft as candle light.

In the middle of the soft grey city, a detective idly rustles the fallen leaves of a children’s book, letting the fantasy sharpen his eyes to a new reality: a doctor slumbers in the next room over, dream-writing a biography half truth and half clever, entertaining fiction.

And out in the suburbs of London sleeps the little girl who brought them all together, safe and secure in her own bed once more: dreaming about them dreaming about her.

[In a dozen different hours and a dozen different places, a cat settles comfortably on a low-hanging branch surrounded by fireflies. He does not sleep, but he purrs with drowsy contentment: watching, and plotting, and smiling.]

End Notes

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