**Over Fathoms Deep**

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by [bittergreens](http://archiveofourown.org/users/bittergreens)

**Summary**

When the youngest son of the aristocratic Holmes family is shipped off to sea in an attempt to cure him of his poor temper and bad manners, he fully expects to spend a long tedious voyage as miserable as ever. What he does not count on is having his heart stolen by the strapping young crewman, John Watson.

**Notes**

Uh...

So I sat down to write something for the second prompt of the [Johnlock Trope Challenge](http://archiveofourown.org/t/challenges/1083/1084) (It's Love, Not Pity), and.... this is what came out.
I don’t know, you guys. All I know is that in my efforts to become creatively unblocked, I’m trying to let myself write about every random-ass idea I get. Whatever it may be. So here it is. Might turn into a multi-chapter thing? I weirdly already have lots of ideas.. We’ll see. At any rate...

The experiment continues.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

The hours at sea are long and lonely.

Sherlock is bored; bored beyond belief, bored down to the very core of his being in a way that surpasses all the tedious hours spent in Sunday services, through long family dinners, under the droning tutelage of insipid schoolmasters. Boredom at sea gives new meaning to the word tedium.

He’s tired of the flat grey line of the horizon—never changing, the relentless pitch and heave of the ship, the creak of the hull, the groan of the rigging above him, even the dull glitter of the sun on cloudless days feels harsh and monotonous—seems to grate on him.

But worse than the boredom is the loneliness.

Sherlock is used to being lonely of course, used to feeling unwanted. That’s why he’s here after all, the youngest son, troublesome, useless, incalculably bright but unsuited for any worthwhile profession by dint of his temper, his sullenness, and his absolute refusal to follow any of the normal rules of etiquette in proper society. It was determined that ‘nothing could be done’ for the time being, so he’s been cast off, sent on a three-month-long sea voyage to some god-forsaken part of the world in the hopes that all the qualities that have made him such an intolerable nobleman’s son will be shaken out of him by trial and tedium.

Sherlock could have spared them all the trouble by assuring them that no change will come of it. A year away from civilization isn’t going to cure him of any of his bad manners because it isn’t going to change the fact that he knows he doesn’t belong in the world, that he can’t stand any part of it.

The other passengers treat him just as everyone has treated him his whole life—like some strange aberration that might do them harm if they get too near to him. They avoid him, and in his turn, Sherlock keeps out of their way. He doesn’t want their company. They’re the same as the society his family keeps—and they bore and enrage him simultaneously. The group is largely made up of petty aristocrats, the lot of them so busy scrambling to win one another’s favor that they don’t give a second glance to the sullen, dark-haired young man brooding by himself in a corner of the deck. Sherlock is glad of it. He’d rather pull off his own fingernails than talk to any of them.

The crew is another matter. They are fascinating to him, but for a different reason entirely they also keep well out of his way. To them, he might as well be another species—a strange dark bird hovering around them as they do their work, harmless, but not to be engaged with.

When the weather is fine, Sherlock spends the monotonous hours up on deck, watching the crew at work, the rhythm of their movements as they wind the rope, the dexterity of their sea-limbered bodies as they climb the rigging remarkable to him. Watching them, he feels overly aware of his own long awkward limbs, his thinness, ashamed of the memory of how profoundly he lost control over his body in the first few weeks at sea, how ill he was, how helpless.

However, if Sherlock is honest with himself, then he must admit that the real reason he spends all his time watching the crew is because of one sailor in particular, a man who stands out from all the rest like the glimmer of sunlight on the crest of the wave, the pearl lying in the mouth of the oyster.

The man is short, neither stocky nor lean, but his body is compact and capable, wiry with muscle
from years of hard work. His hair is a shock of gold—bright from hours spent in the sun. He has a
care-worn, expressive face that often turns up in a smile at the least prompting. However there is a
hardness to him, a darkness in the corners of his face that speaks of hidden depths, of wars won
and battles lost, a thirst for danger glittering just out of sight.

He is a curious mixture of both youth and age—at times Sherlock looks at him and thinks the man
must be close to his own age, no more than a boy really, but other times, at the look in his storm-
blue eyes, Sherlock can see fathoms there, and years of sorrow, ungrieved.

Sherlock spends hours watching his gentle, work-worn hands as he twists together lengths of rope,
his bare torso as he climbs the rigging, the muscles in his arms shining gold under the noon sun,
the muscles in his back as hard, as smooth as marble.

One day, he is sitting and watching the young sailor braiding knots into a length of rope. Sherlock
can’t take his eyes off the speed, the dexterity of the man’s small fingers as he works. He’s trying
to sort out the pattern with his eyes, to follow the rhythm of the complex movements when the
young sailor looks up with a sunburned smile, blue eyes crinkling at the corners, and asks, “Would
you like to know how to do it?”

Sherlock looks up, shocked; unaware his focus on the young sailor’s hands had been so obvious.

He is so flabbergasted it takes him a moment to reply. “What?”

His own voice comes out harsh and rusty, and Sherlock realizes in that moment just how many
days it’s been since he’s spoken.

The young sailor continues to smile up at him, his eyes creasing against the glare of the sun. “I
said, would you like me to show you how I do it?”

Sherlock drops his eyes, shame making the color rise in his cheeks. “No, it’s…fine. I’m sure
you’re busy.”

He starts to rise to his feet, embarrassed that he’s been caught out, sure that the young man is
making fun of him.

“I’m not teasing you. I really mean it. I’ve seen you watching me work. And I know that look, like
your skull might crack if someone doesn’t give you something to keep your hands busy with. I can
show you if you like, help you keep yourself occupied.”

Sherlock risks a look down and is stunned to see the man still looking up at him, now evidently
trying to keep the smile off his face. “It would be my pleasure.”

Sherlock nods, speechless, still shocked that another human would not only take an interest in him,
but show him kindness.

He moves to sit where he had been but the sailor gestures with his elbow. “Come sit by me so you
can see better.”

Sherlock does so, moving as though in a trance.

Very cheerily and with incredible patience, the sailor begins to show Sherlock how to twist the
strands of fiber together to make the rope.

Sherlock watches quietly, with rapt attention, his eyes focused with hawk-like scrutiny as the sailor
explains to him how to emulate his movements.
When he finishes speaking, he hands Sherlock a length of the fibrous material to try himself.

After several false starts, and several gentle corrections, Sherlock slowly, stumblingly begins to copy the sailor’s movements.

They work together in silence for a time, and Sherlock is concentrating so hard, that when the sailor speaks again, Sherlock doesn’t hear what he says. He’s forgotten entirely he isn’t by himself.

“What?” Sherlock says, looking up, feeling foolish in the man’s presence for the second time that day.


*John,* Sherlock thinks to himself, silently delighted. *John, John, John.*

“And whose company do I have the pleasure of keeping?”

“Sherlock,” Sherlock mumbles, careful to keep his eyes on the frayed tangle of cords between his fingers.

“Well, you’re quite good at that you know,” John says. “I’m amazed you’ve gotten the hang of it so quickly. That’s a skillful pair of hands you have there.”

Sherlock says nothing in response to this, but he can feel the pleasure uncoiling within him from the compliment, and it is as warm as the sun on his sallow cheeks.

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That night, at dinner, flushed with his triumphant afternoon of companionship with the young sailor, still warm from the compliment and the man’s steady company, Sherlock is perhaps slightly less cautious than usual. Without realizing he has done it, he lets his guard down, doesn’t hunch his shoulders quite so tightly around his ears as he eats his soup.

It is a foolish mistake to think that any measure of happiness can be his for long. He should know better by now—know not to let his guard down.

One of the lower-ranking officers, who seems to yearn the hardest for the approval of the others, and often picks on Sherlock when he wants to show off—Anderson is his name—notices Sherlock’s buoyant mood, immediately starts in on him.

He leans across the table at Sherlock, his mouth curling into a mocking smile.

“I saw you with that blue-eyed sailor today, Holmes. What were you doing with him?” Anderson leers closer. Sherlock can smell the stink of whiskey on his breath. “Trying to learn a useful profession since your family’s cast you off? You going to join the crew?”

A chorus of laughter erupts at this remark. One of the men pounds Anderson on the back in triumph.

Sherlock drops his soup spoon, his cheeks on fire.

“Maybe you’d like to come and clean out my cabin after dinner? Put your new skills to good use.”

Another roar of raucous laughter greets this remark.

Sherlock, never very good at holding his temper on the best of days, immediately snaps back. “I
thought that was the job of your good-for-nothing wife. Oh no, that’s right, you didn’t dare bring her with you, did you? You had to leave her behind in Liverpool thanks to her tendency to open her legs for any sailor who bats an eyelash her way. She’d have bedded half the crew by now—"

Anderson is out of his chair and across the table before Sherlock has even finished speaking.

The first blow catches him square in the mouth, the second blow knocks him from his chair. By the time another passenger rushes forward to pull Anderson off of him, Sherlock is on his hands and knees with Anderson’s boot in his stomach.

“That’s enough, Anderson! He’s an obnoxious brat, that’s certain, but you’ve had too much drink. Come on now.”

They drag Anderson off, and Sherlock staggers blindly to his feet and out the door, angry tears burning at the corners of his eyes as he races up the stairs to the upper deck.

It isn’t so much the sting of his cut lip, or the ache of his bruised ribs that makes him upset, but the shame that a greasy, weasely good-for-nothing of a man like Anderson can bring him to his knees in a fight.

The cool night air feels good on Sherlock’s face and it is a relief to get the stink of overdone-stew, the smell of warm whiskey, and the closeness of the other passengers out of his lungs. Sherlock drinks it in, in large grateful gulps.

He sits on a coil of rope, and stares up at the night sky, blinking angry tears out of his eyes, trying to calm the storm of impotent fury battering itself against his ribs.

A soft voice from behind Sherlock startles him out of his reverie.

“Everything alright?”

Sherlock jumps like a spooked rabbit, immediately hurries to wipe the tears off his cheeks. It’s the young sailor—John, Sherlock thinks with a swooping feeling, half-delight, half-terror.

Fear curdles unpleasantly in his gut—fear that this man will see him looking stupid, looking weak, because Sherlock is both of those things and he cannot live with himself if this man sees, if he decides that Sherlock isn’t worth speaking to anymore. He hunches his shoulders against John’s gentle, worried voice. All of a sudden, he can’t stand the thought of another human being, especially this man who is so fascinating to Sherlock—so filled with kindness and strength.

“What happened?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer. He draws his arms around himself, silently willing the other man to leave.

When John speaks again, his voice is so quiet Sherlock almost doesn’t hear him. “I see the way they treat you.”

“And what of it?” Sherlock rounds on him, forgetting to hide his tear-stained face in his fury. “Have you come to have a good laugh as well? To marvel at the freak on board? Go on then, do it if that’s what you came for. Have your laugh.”

“That’s not why I’m here.”

The gentleness in John’s voice cuts through Sherlock like a blade.
He turns away, hunches in tighter against himself as though he can block out the stars, the moon, the wind, even John’s kind voice if it means not having to feel so deeply all the time. More than anything most of the time, Sherlock just wishes he could shut it out, make himself completely numb to all the noise, the chaos of the world.

His voice is vicious. “I don’t need your pity.”

“I haven’t come for that either.” John sits quietly beside him. “Just came to say, if you’d ever like lessons in how to dodge a blow, and how to give as good as you get, well…” John shrugs. “I know a thing or two about fighting.”

Sherlock cannot help himself, he looks up, fascinated, speechless for the second time that day that this man would not only willingly seek out Sherlock’s company, but offer to teach him something useful.

Sherlock turns slightly to face him. “That would be…” He licks the blood off his bottom lip, and nods, in his eagerness. “I’d like that.”

The words fail utterly to convey his true feelings.

“Good.” John says, and then stands up. “We’ll start tomorrow. Go on and get a good night’s sleep.”

Sherlock nods again, his rage almost completely forgotten in his amazement over John’s proposition.

“Oh, and Sherlock? One more thing.”

Sherlock turns to look up at John. His worn face is soft with some emotion Sherlock cannot place. “Don’t let them get to you, alright? You’re better than the lot of them combined.”

Sherlock watches John retreat into the shadows.

Long after he can no longer make out the shape of the other man’s silhouette, Sherlock sits in the darkness, listening to the creak of the ship, remembering over and over again the sound of John’s voice saying his name.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please leave a comment if you enjoyed this! I love hearing from you.

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True to his word, John finds Sherlock the next day in the early afternoon, lurking by the main mast, watching a group of men roll up the sails. The more he pays attention to the work done by the crew, the more Sherlock is fascinated by the intricacy, the efficiency with which the ship is run. What he fails to understand draws his attention all the more, and there are so many details of the running of the ship that he is still trying to work out.

As usual, he is so absorbed in watching that he fails to hear John approach.

“You are an observant one, aren’t you?” The man’s voice is warm with amusement, and something else that Sherlock can’t quite put his finger on.

Sherlock turns to look at the other man, once again in awe of his ability to move so quickly without being heard. Sherlock would like to learn this skill. He feels like he’s spent his whole life attempting to vanish from sight, to observe without being seen, and yet somehow he always remains painfully conspicuous and out of place.

Sherlock studies John’s eyes, observes that today they are a different shade of blue entirely—as bright, as transparent as the blue sky stretched above them.

“I like to know how things work,” he says quietly.

John nods. “It’s a good quality to have. It means you’ll learn a great deal about the world very quickly.”

John holds Sherlock’s gaze. This is another thing Sherlock likes about the sailor—he doesn’t seem thrown off by Sherlock’s tendency to stare. He simply looks back, his expression open and searching.

“I have an hour or so before my next watch. Are you still interested in my proposition?”

Sherlock nods, attempts to hide his eagerness and utterly fails.

John laughs good-naturedly as Sherlock hurries to rise to his feet and almost trips in his haste.

“Come on, then. I think there’s a spot over this way that should give us enough space.”
They find an unoccupied spot on the foredeck, tucked away under the sails. Sherlock is relieved that this corner of the ship is relatively private, hidden from the rest of the deck by the sizeable girth of the foremast. He doesn’t think he could tolerate the prying eyes of the passengers and other crewmen while he is most likely about to make an utter fool of himself.

Sherlock has never been particularly skillful at physical endeavors. He’s always existed too much in his own head to spare much attention for the goings on of his tall, unruly body. He’s a fair rider and could have been quite good at it if he’d spent more time on horseback. But Sherlock hated hunting, and avoided it at all costs. It was worth the criticism he was forced to endure from his smug pig of an older brother to not have to spend hours crashing through the woods, searching for the desperate creature.

He always identified rather too much with the fox. “The poor thing just wants to be left alone!”

Mycroft had mocked him for weeks following that comment.

Similar to what Sherlock had experienced the day before, John proves to be just as skilled at teaching fighting techniques as he is at sailing knots. He is patient and gentle, but firm, and good at disseminating information in a way that makes sense.

Sherlock forgets to be nervous almost as soon as John’s smooth voice starts telling him about some of the basics of what to remember in a fight.

“It’s all about making use of the particular strengths of your body. You’re tall, you’ve got long arms—that’s good, that’ll make it easier for you to reach. It also means you can dictate the pace of the fight. If you can get your punch in with those long arms and then get back, you’ll be well out of his reach.”

Sherlock nods, his eyes clinging to John’s frame like a limpet to the side of the ship.

The day is warm. John has removed his double-breasted jacket, rolled his linen shirt up to the elbows. Sherlock’s eyes flicker appreciatively over the cords of muscle that stand out in John’s forearms as he puts up his fists.

“First, let’s go over the basic stance. Keeping yourself on your feet in a fight, more than anything, comes down to balance. So you’ll want to place your feet shoulder width apart, and you want your body at an angle, not directly facing your opponent. That limits the space of his target. You want your left foot in front, your weight back on your right foot. Just like that—good.”

Sherlock mirrors John, copying his movements exactly.

“Now, for your hands, you always want your hands up alongside your chin. Never let your hands drop for a second; otherwise you’re lowering your guard. Keep your elbows tucked. Good. You also want to keep your head down. Don’t look at your opponent’s face—look at his fists. That’s what’ll give you the most information about where the next blow is coming. It also protects your throat, which is a vulnerable place in a fight. So hands up, head down, and bend your knees.”

Sherlock does all this, hungrily absorbing each piece of information as he studies John’s movements.

“When you’re throwing a punch, it’s important to keep your thumb on the outside of your fist—otherwise you’ll end up with a shattered thumb and that hurts like the devil, I can tell you from experience. You want to place it here between these two fingers. Punch with your knuckles not the flats of your fingers, and always keep your wrist straight.”
Sherlock watches John deliver several jabs to the air and finds himself stunned all over again by the compact power in this man’s body—the efficiency of his movements, the speed. Just from looking at him, Sherlock can tell that there is deadly force behind each blow.

“Now you try.”

Sherlock puts his hands up, tilts his body like John said, tries to remain light on his feet, and swings his fist.

“Don’t wind up your fist. That lowers the power of your punch and it’ll make you lose your balance. You’ve got to conserve your energy. Keep your movements small and tight. Like this.” John demonstrates again, his jab fierce and quick. Sherlock’s eyes follow the movement with something like hunger. “Try again.”

Sherlock does, but there’s no force behind the blow.

“That’s better, but remember, even though your movements are tight you’re still using your whole body. Push off from your back foot. Use your hips. Here. Let me show you.”

John steps forward, places his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders to adjust his stance. Sherlock’s whole body tenses at the touch.

“You want your shoulders to be in line with your hips.” John’s strong hands move down Sherlock’s back to settle just below his ribs. Sherlock feels a shiver run through him at the movement like a bolt of lightning down a metal rod. “People think the power comes from the swing and some of it does, but most of it comes from here. You want to roll your hips as you throw the punch. This will help you keep your balance. But you’ve got to relax. Let the tension out of your shoulders.”

Sherlock tries, heat rising to his cheeks as he struggles to quell his body’s response. He is sure John can feel the loud thump of his heartbeat underneath his hands. But John’s grip is sure and steady, never falters, and gradually Sherlock feels his body begin to calm.

“Good, now throw your punch and I’ll help direct you.”

Sherlock does and John talks him through it, his hands guiding Sherlock by the hips.

“Start your punches right by your face and keep your motions tight. Follow through is everything. Keep your arm level with your shoulder, and always bring your hand right back to your face. Good, just like that. Feel the power that’s coming from your hips? Bring the tops of your knuckles just below your eye level, and snap the hand back—good!”

John steps back to eye Sherlock’s stance.

“Remember to stay light on your feet, head down, elbows tucked, fists up by your cheek.”

Sherlock does, tries to incorporate every detail of information that John’s giving him into what his body’s doing.

He’s wishing now that he had had the foresight to remove his own jacket. The sun is hot on his black curls and he can feel sweat beginning to crawl down his back.

“Good, that’s good. Now shall I show you how to block?”

A good while later, red-faced and out of breath, his shirt clinging to his back with sweat, Sherlock takes a step back, lifts a hand. He doesn’t want to suggest they take a break, doesn’t want to give
any indication of his own weakness but he’s so hot he’s starting to feel light-headed.

John, on the other hand, doesn’t appear in the least fatigued. His eyes are glittering, watchful, as he circles Sherlock, throwing light punches his way, light but lightning-quick, to try and break in through Sherlock’s defense.

John is unbelievably fast and even though he’s curbing his punches, Sherlock can feel the power behind each jab as it strikes his fist, resonating through him to the core of his bones. It makes him wonder how it would feel to be on the receiving end of a real blow from the smaller man. He decides he never wants to know.

“Can we—?” Sherlock puts his hands on his knees, struggling to catch his breath. “Take just a brief—rest?”

“Oh, right.” John lowers his fists, laughs apologetically. Sherlock decides in that instant that he will never be tired of John’s laugh. “I’m sorry. Lost track of the time. You must be tired—here.”

John drops himself down on the deck and reaches into his waistcoat to pull out a small canteen. Sherlock follows suit, momentarily forgetting his self-consciousness and stripping off his jacket. He rolls his sleeves up, tugs at his neck scarf to pull it loose, and uses it to wipe the sweat off his brow.

John passes him the flask. “Here, you look thirsty.”

Sherlock takes it gratefully, lifts the bottle to his mouth to take a long drink, and then almost chokes. The canteen is full of some strong spirit that burns like fire all down his throat and into his stomach. He breaks off, coughing and spluttering.

John thumps him on the back, grinning. “Sorry about that. I guess it might be stronger than what you’re used to.”

Sherlock returns it to him, watery-eyed, one hand up over his mouth. He swallows down the taste of fire and shakes his head. “No, thank you, that was… most invigorating.”

John laughs again. He throws his head back and the sound is one of pure joy. Sherlock has never heard anyone laugh so much and so freely. He finds himself smiling in return.

John looks at him and there is something like amazement in his eyes.

The smile drops from Sherlock’s face as quickly as it came. “What is it?”

John’s eyes go soft. “That’s the first time I’ve seen you smile. It’s… lovely. You look lovely when you smile.”

Sherlock drops his head, his cheeks burning. He is certain his entire face has caught fire.

“You should smile more often.”

There is something in John’s voice—regret? longing?—that makes Sherlock experience a strange flip-flopping sensation in his belly where the fiery alcohol is still churning. He suspects it must just be the drink.

Too embarrassed to respond, he stares out over the horizon.

The ocean is bright today and smooth—glittering under the expanse of the wide-open sky. It’s on
days like this that Sherlock grudgingly admits that there is something beautiful about all that blue, but that might just be because of the way it brings out the color in John’s eyes.

John takes another pull from the flask and then twists the cap back on.

“You did well today.” His voice is full of quiet approval. “You’ll need to keep practicing, and more than anything else, you should work on strength training.”

Sherlock’s head flies up with interest.

“I can show you a few simple exercises to practice every day, help you build up your arm strength.”

John spends the rest of his free hour showing Sherlock how to do a series of exercises that will help strengthen his arms.

“Do those every morning, or as often as you can. It’ll give you something to help pass the time as well.” John grins at Sherlock, and then stoops to pick up his jacket. “Well, I’m off for the next watch.”

Sherlock is suddenly filled with panic at the realization that they have not arranged to have another meeting.

“When will I see you again?” he blurts, so panicked he forgets to feel self-conscious about the question.

Sherlock watches John’s face perform a complicated series of different expressions all in the space of half a minute. He cannot read them all, but is reassured when John’s face settles into a smile, tugging at the corners of his lips. “It’s not such a big ship. I’m sure you’ll be seeing me again before too long.”

And then, slinging his jacket over his shoulder, John disappears around the foremast.

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That night, in his narrow cabin before going to bed, Sherlock runs through all the exercises John taught him, twice.

When he throws himself down on his lumpy mattress after, his heart beating fast from his body’s exertions, he realizes he feels tired in a way he hasn’t experienced for many months. He feels more alive than he has ever felt, his body tingling happily from all the exercise.

Sherlock closes his eyes, reflecting that he will sleep long and deeply tonight.

As he lies in the dark with his eyes closed, listening to the creak of the ship, he finds himself thinking back to his afternoon with the fair-haired sailor, remembering the way John’s body looked in motion, the ripple of the muscles in his forearm when he threw a punch, the hard line of his jaw.

For all his gentleness, there is something untamable, something fierce, shimmering just below the surface of his kind good looks. Sherlock feels as though he got a better glimpse of it today while watching John fight—the raw power of his movements as beautiful, as terrifying as the foam on the crest of a breaking wave.

Sherlock could feel the power in John’s hands just from his gentle placement of them on Sherlock’s shoulders.
Sherlock remembers the way John’s hands felt on his hips, small, but so strong, directing his movements; he remembers the feel of those hands sliding down his sides, skimming over his ribs. Even through all the layers of fabric, the resulting shock from his touch was like the heat from an open flame. Sherlock can feel it on his skin still, like two ghostly prints on his hips, gathering heat.

Sherlock makes a little sighing sound and rolls over in his bunk, suddenly all too aware of the coarse feel of the linens under his bare legs, the scratchy quality of the pillow under his cheek.

He feels hot, too hot—he pushes the sheet off of himself, shifts his legs.

There is a growing ache deep in his belly, a shivering, desperate feeling that makes him push his hand down between his legs and wrap his fingers around himself.

Sherlock doesn’t do this often—his body is usually mute to him, and he ignores it in turn, but today, all day, since his lesson with the blue-eyed sailor, Sherlock’s body has felt tingling, awake, yearning for something he can’t quite place.

As he closes his fingers around himself and begins to stroke, a small groan escaping his lips, Sherlock knows all too well what he’s been yearning for all day.

He presses a hand to his mouth to stifle any further sounds—the walls on this ship are as thin as paper, and Sherlock cannot bear the thought of the humiliation that would await him if anyone were to overhear him, engaged in this most private of pursuits.

Under his hand, he bites his lip, hard, forcing his mind away from thoughts of the other detestable passengers and back to the memory of John’s hands on him, so strong and so warm, guiding him.

Sherlock tries to imagine how those hands would feel on his bare flesh, stroking his flanks, holding him down against the bed, and he curls over his own fist, speeding up the movement of his strokes, his breath coming hot against the hand clenched over his mouth.

Instead of his own hand, he imagines it’s John’s hand pressed against his mouth, silencing him. He imagines John bending low against him; his lips warm against Sherlock’s ear as he murmurs an apology. He tries to think how John’s voice would sound in his ear, hushed and private, only for him.

A shudder runs through him at the thought of this, and he’s so aroused by now, his hand is slick with moisture. He rubs his thumb through it, whimpering, imagining it is John’s hand there, his touch hungry, reverent.

He imagines John’s lips on his throat, hot—searching, his hands moving over every inch of Sherlock; he imagines John’s lean thighs straddling his own, imagines the hard lines of muscle as they flex, as John bends to kiss Sherlock’s mouth, his hand stroking faster now.

It is the thought of John’s mouth on his that pushes Sherlock over the edge—his body stiffens, and he feels the hot pulse of liquid against his wrist as he finds release.

He rolls over onto his back, gasping for breath, and it is minutes before Sherlock feels calm again. He lies in the darkness, shivering and overcome, until thoughts of John’s arms around him pull him into sleep.

Chapter End Notes
Pretty please leave a comment if you like what you read- I love hearing from you!

If you're on tumblr, you can find me [here!](#)

There will be more of this very soon, I hope. :)


Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Sherlock struggles to occupy himself; John dances on the yardarm.

Chapter Notes

Sorry these chapters keep being so short- this is all I can manage to gasp out between writing final papers. I imagine they'll start getting longer as soon as I am out of school next week.

Sherlock manages to make it through exactly half the next day before he starts consciously looking for John. But despite his constant scrutiny of the three masts and the corresponding rigging, despite his prowling the perimeter of the main deck like a gawky panther, there is no sign of the blue-eyed sailor.

He lingers by the door of the mess hall at dinnertime, hoping to catch a glimpse of him on his way in, but John does not appear.

Sherlock is too timid to actually enter the area where the sailors eat—he knows he doesn’t belong, and he’s too afraid to ask anyone where John might be.

When Sherlock is almost run down by a sullen-looking sailor with a tattoo of an anchor on his neck, he decides to stay well out of the way and goes to sit by himself on the fore-deck, in the same tucked away spot where John taught him how to throw a punch yesterday.

He sits in silence, wishing he could take up a length of rope and practice the knots John taught him, but the work is not his, and it wouldn’t be right to do it without leave from a member of the crew.

Sherlock swallows down his disappointment, feeling as useless, as unwanted as ever.

A shadow falls over Sherlock’s face and for a brief hopeful second Sherlock thinks it might be John, coming to find him at last. He scrambles to his feet, an eager greeting half-formed on his lips when, looking up, he discovers to his ultimate displeasure that it is not John, but Anderson, who has come to find him.

“What are you doing skulking back here, Holmes? I should think you have something better to do than lounging around on deck. But that’s why you’re here, isn’t it? Your family never could find a useful occupation for you. I suppose being at sea wouldn’t change any of that.”

Sherlock curls his lip, thinks about the jab John taught him yesterday, pictures his fist connecting with Anderson’s smug face, shattering the bridge of his nose.

“What are you smirking about?”

Sherlock chooses not to answer. He moves to step around the other man, but Anderson thrusts his
shoulder in front of Sherlock’s, blocking his way.

“Not so fast, Holmes.” Anderson dips his hideous mouth close to Sherlock’s ear. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about what you said the other night. I’m not ready to let you get off so easy, so you’d better watch yourself, if you get my meaning. I’ll be coming for you when you least expect it.”

Sherlock’s entire torso is vibrating with rage.

The urge to punch Anderson right in the gut is so overpowering for a second Sherlock’s vision blacks out. Before he can properly dismiss the impulse, Sherlock hears a shout from behind Anderson.

“OYE! Anderson! What are you doing?”

Muttering mutinously, Anderson drops back a step, putting a safe distance between himself and Sherlock.

A man appears around the foremast and comes to stand at Anderson’s shoulder, his eyes narrowed, clearly displeased.

Sherlock has seen him before although he doesn’t remember his name—he is second in command on the ship. He’s a younger man, but well weathered from his time in the wars, his hair gone prematurely grey. He has kind eyes, like John.

“What are you up to, Anderson?”

“Nothing, Lieutenant.” Anderson keeps the expression on his ugly face carefully innocent. “I was just exchanging a friendly word with Holmes here.”

“Doesn’t look too friendly from where I’m standing.”

The lieutenant stares Anderson down with a disapproving look.

“I heard you got into a little bit of trouble the other night—had too much to drink.”

Anderson opens his mouth, likely to say something nasty, but the other man cuts him off.

“My advice to you? Stay well out of it, unless you’d like to earn a few stripes.”

Anderson drops his gaze, scowls at his feet.

“Did you hear me, Officer?”

“Yes, sir,” Anderson mutters.

“Good. Now beat it.”

Anderson slinks away with his tail between his legs and Sherlock is so pleased to see Anderson firmly put in his place that he almost smiles.

“You alright?”

The lieutenant is talking to Sherlock, he realizes after a beat. Sherlock nods.

“He’s a trouble-maker that one. If I were you, I’d stay as far away from him as you can manage.”
The man’s warm brown gaze on Sherlock’s face is full of something like concern.

Normally, this kind of interfering advice would incite Sherlock’s ire but instead Sherlock finds he is full of gratitude. Perhaps it’s just that something about this man’s kindness, his steadiness, reminds Sherlock of John, or maybe it’s just the fact that he’s only the second person on board the ship to not treat Sherlock with either scorn or neglect. Or it could simply be the fact that anyone who’s an enemy of Anderson is a friend of his. Whatever the reason, Sherlock finds he takes an instant liking to the man.

“I’m Lieutenant Lestrade by the way.” Sherlock looks up, his gaze sharpening. Lestrade. A French name. But the man’s accent is clearly English. Curious. “If you ever need anything, well…” The officer inclines his head. “I’m at your disposal.”

Sherlock returns the nod, trying to convey his gratitude in his gaze. “I appreciate it.”

“I better get back to my post so I’ll bid you good day Mr. ... Holmes, is it?”

Sherlock nods again. “That’s right.”

“Nice to have made your acquaintance.”

“And yours.”

Sherlock watches the neat blue line of the man’s shoulders until they disappear around the foremast, feeling a bit bewildered by the interaction, but grateful all the same. Although Sherlock cannot understand the reason for the man’s kindness, the thought of an ally in future fights against Anderson is a happy one, and Sherlock will take what he can get.

Sherlock lingers on the upper deck as long as he can before going down for dinner but John never appears.

He casts one last look toward the rigging before heading down the stairs but John is nowhere to be seen. Feeling far more disappointed than he has any right to be, Sherlock descends into the darkness of the lower deck.

***

Another long, dull morning passes with no sign of John, and Sherlock tries to resolve himself to the fact that the sailor has a great deal of work to do, and cannot spend his every free hour in the company of bored aristocrats. The realization makes him feel foolish, and ashamed of his own entitlement, and the corresponding sour feeling in Sherlock’s belly makes him want to spit nails.

He finds himself longing for Anderson to appear and start picking on him just so he can have an excuse to be cruel to someone.

He’s about to retire to his quarters to escape the heat of the noon sun, when Sherlock notices a crowd of passengers gathered nearby, staring up at the top of the main mast, tittering nervously and pointing. He follows the line of their eyes and there, climbing his way down the masthead with a bucket in one hand and a brush in the other, is John.

Sherlock has seen John climb the rigging before but never with both his hands occupied. How he can navigate the tangle of ropes and sails and cables with both hands full is a mystery to Sherlock.

Sherlock stands frozen in place, watching; transfixed.
“What on earth is he doing?” One woman squeals in distress.

A sailor nearby eyes the woman’s quivering parasol with amusement. “He’s tarring the ropes, Ma’am. Got to start at the top and work down. Got to do it all. The shrouds, the back-stays, the spinnakers, the jibs, standing parts of the lifts, the runners, the ties, the foot-ropes… It’s all gotter to be tarred on a regular basis to keep out the rot. Hot day like this is the time to do it.”

“But he’ll fall!”

The sailor chuckles and shakes his head. “You don’t know our Johnny. He’s never fallen once. Ain’t never seen a seaman with such a pair of arms and legs as our Johnny Boy. He’s as nimble as they come. Just wait till he gets out to the yard-arms.”

They all watch as John climbs down below the foretop and then, true to the sailor’s word, when he reaches the yardarm, John straightens up, and begins to walk the length of it as easily, as elegantly as a man might walk down the street.

Sherlock almost gasps in astonishment at the speed with which he moves along the narrow wooden beam out over the water.

The sea is calm and flat today so the movement of the ship is minimal but even so, to see a man walk with such perfect ease on such a slender piece of wood with no trouble, all the way out to the edge of the ship’s vast girth, as though he means to keep right on going out into the sky—it takes Sherlock’s breath away. How John keeps his balance is impossible to understand.

Even from a distance, Sherlock can tell John is enjoying himself. His eyes are creased against the sun, his white teeth stretched wide in a smile. He swings the bucket almost jauntily as he walks, his movements casual but assured.

The woman with the parasol screams.

“Oh, he’ll fall! He’ll fall to his death!”

The jovial sailor laughs again. “Nah, he can hang on with his eyelids, our Johnny. He’s the best man for the job. He’s a right little monkey.”

They watch him reach the end of the yardarm and lower himself down with his bucket, the handle of his paintbrush clenched between his teeth, thighs straddling the beam tightly as he leans forward and begins to daub the thick tar over the stays.

“I can’t bear it! I can’t bear to look.”

The hysterical parasol-wielder is led away by her companion and Sherlock is relieved to be able to watch in silence.

The other passengers gradually lose interest and go about their business but Sherlock cannot take his eyes away.

The way John moves along the narrow yard-arm and then down through the rigging, tarring as he goes—it’s like poetry, like dancing, but it’s better than any of those things because the act itself is so much more dangerous, remarkable for its risk, but still filled with the same fluidity and grace. There is a practiced motion to his movements that makes it clear he’s done this job before, knows the ins and outs of all the places of where to put his feet, where to grip. It’s like the ship is an extension of his body, it comes so naturally to him.
Sherlock feels a thrill just watching him—the joy he takes in his own body is as bright, as evident as the sunlight on his hair, as the strong lines of his muscles standing out in his arms.

But what is most striking of all to witness is his fearlessness. You can tell from the confidence of his movements that he knows he isn’t going to fall. Or if he knows, he does not fear it. And that to Sherlock is pure magic. To have that kind of trust in the world—to leap, without fear of falling, into danger’s arms—it’s like nothing Sherlock has ever seen.

Standing on the deck, squinting up into the ship’s rigging, watching the sun glance off John’s golden hair, his body threading the air like a diving bird, Sherlock makes a promise to himself.

One day, Sherlock whispers silently, fiercely, one day he will be as fearless as John Watson.

***

Sherlock spends the rest of that afternoon in his cabin, running through the exercises John taught him until his arms are trembling, and his back is dripping with sweat, until he cannot physically lift himself anymore off the floor.

Afterward, splashing water on his face from his pewter wash-basin, shirt stripped to the waist, he peers down at his pale, thin torso, discriminating.

Sherlock has never liked his appearance—he’s always thought of himself as too scrawny, gangly arms and legs too long for his body. His coloring is dramatic and ill matched; his shockingly black hair makes his striking paleness all the more exaggerated. He’s been told his eyes are strange—angular, slanted, too high on his face—that they change color eerily depending on the light, on the time of day.

Freakish looking, that’s how he has most commonly been described. Even when he came of age, he never fully filled out, the high collars of his dark frock coat rendering his tall, lean frame into that of an awkward heron.

Unbidden, into his mind, streams the memory of years of insults from other children, from his hated cousins who would tease him, with Mycroft acting as their ring-leader until Sherlock ran, crying and red-faced to tell the Nurse.

“Cry baby! Cry baby!” They would shriek as fat, messy tears rolled down Sherlock’s cheeks, and then as soon as Sherlock lamented that he would tell on them, “Tattle-tale! Tattle-tale! He’s a dirty snitch!”

The Nurse was never much help to Sherlock. Mycroft was her favorite—she always thought Sherlock a strange and brooding child.

“He never smiles enough,” she would say to anyone who would listen, and then, lowering her voice, but not enough so that Sherlock couldn’t hear. “He’s got an otherworldly look about him that one. And have you ever noticed? He doesn’t look like any of the Family. Sometimes I wonder if he wasn’t left by the Faeries. A changeling,” she’d whisper dramatically.

This was another favorite nickname among the cousins. “Go back to the Faeries!” They’d yell, howling with laughter. “You don’t belong here! Go back to the woods where you came from.”

Sherlock would hunch up his stiff little shoulders and do just that. He preferred the woods to the large dark house where his family lived. There at least, there were no people to bother him, and there were miles and miles of fascinating plants and creatures to inspect.
This was perhaps another reason the Nurse considered Sherlock strange. He was always bringing home treasures that he’d found in the woods—beetle carcasses, empty bird shells, snake skins. One time he found a mouse skeleton in its entirety and when he’d tried to show it to the Nurse, she’d shrieked in terror and dashed it to bits on the floor.

Sherlock yanks his shirt back on with disgust, teeth clenched against the memories.

His body is all the more hideous to him now in light of what he saw of John’s that afternoon—the power in his muscles coupled with the levity of his movement—so sure, so strong, as fluid as the surf.

Sherlock thinks about how John’s hands would feel from all that gripping and climbing—the calluses that must surely coat his palms, his fingers—how rough would the drag of those palms be over Sherlock’s skin, gripping his thighs?

Cheeks burning, Sherlock shakes his head, and attempts to clear his thoughts. He’s deluding himself if he thinks that such a thing could ever take place. Best not to dwell on the impossible. No good can possibly come of it.

He sits down at the narrow desk beside his bed and endeavors to forget all about John Watson for as long as he possibly can.

He pulls out the leather-bound sheaf of pages that Mycroft gave him before he left on his journey.

“What’s this?” Sherlock had asked with thinly veiled disgust.

“A parting gift.”

“You make it sound like I’m going to my death.”

Mycroft had shrugged. “You might be.”

Sherlock was often surprised icicles didn’t form around his brother’s words in mid-air they were so cool and unaffected.

“It’s so that you might keep a record of your thoughts during your voyage.”

“What for?” Sherlock had sneered. “No one’s going to read it.”

“You never know, brother mine, what good might come of it one day.”

Sherlock had delivered his most searing scowl and flounced into the carriage without another word.

Mycroft is useless as an older brother, never around when you need him—only there to scold you and look disapproving when things are at their worst.

Sherlock won’t be sorry if he never sees him again.

He dips his pen into the inkwell and holds the quill aloft, watching the ink run down the nib and drip back into the tiny bottle.

*Drip. Drip.*

He tries to think of what to write and realizes he has absolutely nothing of any importance to say.

For one terrible instant he is seized with the desire to write a poem about the blue-eyed sailor, to
somehow try and capture what he witnessed earlier today—the raw beauty of a body in motion.

But Sherlock has never been good with words—when he reaches for them, they skitter away like dust before a wind, scattering.

He presses the tip of his pen hard against the page, watches the ink bleed out, leaving a black mark that mars the unblemished cream of the paper.

He ends up writing John’s name over and over as he thinks. He doesn’t even realize he’s doing it, until he comes back to himself and sees the page covered with John Watsons made out in his scrawling, spiky script.

Sherlock tears the paper out of the book.

Later that night, he sets the corner of it in his candle flame, watches as the letters catch and curl, then blacken before they fall to ash.

He dumps the whole mess into his slop bucket before crawling into bed, determined not to dream of bronze-armed sailors swinging from the rigging, leaping over the waves.
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

Sherlock has a realization. Anderson is becoming a problem.

Chapter Notes

After this chapter, I feel like I should change the title of this story to something like "Angst Festival at Sea." But I promise things will get better- eventually.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning when Sherlock wakes, he is sore all over. For a moment he forgets the cause of this, and then he remembers his relentless regimen of exercises, and the corresponding pain in his arms, his back, his shoulders makes sense.

Sherlock sits up slowly, wincing, and then lowers himself to the floor beside his bed.

He is determined to run through the exercises again this morning—he needs to do them as often as he can—but his body refuses to cooperate.

He tries to push his torso off the floor with the force of his arms but his muscles scream in protest.

Sherlock grits his teeth, tries again.

He makes it halfway up before his arms give out, and he lands on his face on the sticky floorboards.

Sherlock lies with his cheek pressed to the floor, panting, and feels the small kernel of self-hatred that always seems to be wedged somewhere just under his ribs give a vicious twist and then expand to twice its usual size, until it feels like it’s pressing on his lungs and he can scarcely breathe for the pressure.

He squeezes his eyes shut; feels waves of self-hatred wash over him like the slosh of dirty water in the base of the ship.

Why are you even trying? A nasty little voice in his head says. It won’t make any difference. You’ll never be strong. You’ll never be worth anything. May as well give up now and save yourself the effort.

Sherlock clenches his teeth against the voice, and rises, painfully to his feet.

He’ll try again later—he’s not giving up. He simply needs to wait until his body is less stiff.

Getting dressed is a painful endeavor.

Sherlock has never been so sore in his life. Pulling his coat on over his shoulders makes him hiss in
He skips breakfast—the thought of confronting Anderson’s sneering face over a bowl of porridge makes his stomach turn. He considers staying in his room for the duration of the morning until his movements are less noticeably stiff but the threat of boredom gets the better of him.

Besides, no matter how much he wants to deny it, he cannot ignore the fact that he longs to catch another glimpse of John up in the rigging, or doing anything really, so long as Sherlock can see just one of his brilliant smiles, the reassuring white flash of his teeth.

He makes his way stiffly to the upper decks, holding tight to the railing, trying not to wince as each step jars his sore shoulders.

The day is hot and still like yesterday—the sails stretched wide against a bright blue sky, the sun beating hot and golden onto the scrubbed wood surface of the deck.

To Sherlock’s relief, the day is too hot for many of the other passengers to be out in the sun. They are probably all down in the passenger’s saloon, the ladies fanning themselves and gossiping, playing whist; the men, discussing politics.

After carefully scrutinizing every inch of the three masts and finding no trace of John, Sherlock lingers by the quarterdeck, watching the two sailors manning the wheel of the ship. He is impressed all over again with not only the strength, but also the precision it takes to steer this bulk of wood and rope through the belly of the ocean.

The ocean is relatively calm today, has been relatively calm since they left port, but still, Sherlock reflects, as he leans over the starboard rail and looks down at the foaming roar of water against the ship’s hull, the ease of the voyage so far is an impressive feat.

Sherlock suspects this has little to do with the captain, who, when not standing on the quarterdeck barking orders, stays locked in his cabin.

He is a large man with small, suspicious eyes, a sour disposition, and an infamously short temper. He walks with a limp they say is the result of a wound he suffered during the American War of Independence, fighting the French at Martinique. The rumor is that the constant pain in his leg is what gives him his surly disposition but Sherlock suspects there is more to it than that.

He is known to be quite fond of the lash.

Sherlock has never interacted with the man face-to-face but there’s something about the captain that makes him uneasy. He is not a stupid man, that much is certain, but something about his small, shrewd eyes, his distrustful stare, fills Sherlock in turn with suspicion and unease.

He is standing on the quarterdeck now, yelling something to the sailors on the mizzenmast, and Sherlock follows the direction of his eyes to see if he can make out the instructions.

Sherlock is interrupted by a sniveling voice in his ear.

“Well, well if it isn’t our little naval expert, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Always so keen to observe the goings-on of the ship. Tell me, Mr. Holmes, are you indeed planning on joining up before the voyage is out? I should warn you now, I don’t think your frail constitution could withstand the work. You wouldn’t last one day. You’d likely faint from exertion just cleaning up after the morning meal.”

Sherlock hunches his shoulders up around his ears, the sting of Anderson’s words striking far too
How is it that he can always sense when Sherlock is at his most vulnerable? He’s like a wolf that knows when Sherlock has been wounded, that can smell the blood on Sherlock’s flank, and circles in for the kill, jaws slavering.

Sherlock can feel his body actually trembling with rage.

“Those slender white hands of yours—I bet they couldn’t even lift a bucket. You don’t have any idea what real work is like. How could you? You’re a spoiled, aristocratic, little brat.”

Sherlock turns, fury stark in every line of his face. This time he really is going to punch Anderson, right in the mouth. He drops his weight back on his right foot like John taught him, pulls back his fist.

“ANDERSON!”

The roar of the captain’s voice causes them both to turn, Sherlock’s fist suspended by his ear.

“What the devil are you doing down there?”

Anderson opens his mouth to answer but the captain’s wrath-filled yell cuts over him before he has a chance to speak.

“You’re not meant to be diddling around talking to passengers! Get back to it! Otherwise, I’d be happy to offer you another taste of the whip. Or has it been so long that you’ve forgotten?”

Sherlock watches Anderson’s face turn from mottled crimson to white. The threat clearly carries real weight. The fear in Anderson’s eyes is as evident as the sun blazing down from overhead.

Anderson says nothing in reply, but before he leaves, he throws Sherlock a look that could peel paint off the starboard rail.

Sherlock glares at his retreating back. He doesn’t let his shoulders drop until Anderson is safely out of sight. He shakes the tension out of his fist, rage still bubbling, hot and acrid-tasting just under the surface of his calm.

It’s probably for the best that Anderson was called away, but the urge to knock out a couple of Anderson’s teeth, to see the expression on his shocked and bloody face has become an almost physical need.

Sherlock has hated a lot of people in his time, but his hatred for Anderson eclipses all of them combined. The way he constantly follows Sherlock around the ship—it makes Sherlock feel like he is being hunted.

He spends the rest of the morning safely out of sight in his newfound hiding place under the foremast at the prow of the ship.

He is reluctant to go down for lunch, but his hunger has reared its ugly head and he knows he’ll need his strength if he wants to reattempt his exercises.

Luckily for Sherlock, Anderson is absent from the dining table so he is able to eat his stew in peace.

He eats as quickly as possible, avoiding eye contact with the other passengers, shoulders hunched
up around his ears.

No one speaks to him and for that Sherlock is savagely grateful. He can hardly bear the sight of other humans today, much less stand to interact with any of them.

He pushes his chair back with a scrape as soon as his bowl is empty and leaves without a word.

Sherlock’s shoulders still feel stiff and sore and he cannot bear the thought of his body’s potential failure again so soon, so he heads back up top, hoping against hope that he will have just one glimpse of John.

He feels foolish for even thinking it but he cannot help himself.

When Sherlock emerges into the harsh sunlight, he sees a group of sailors sitting under the main mast, mending sails.

It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust but as he draws closer, he catches sight of a shock of fair hair, and to his delight, sees John, sitting in the crowd of sailors, sails covering his knees, his face lit up with mirth in response to what one of his companions is saying.

Sherlock’s chest feels as though it might burst from happiness. He hasn’t spoken with the other man in more than two days and he’s dying to ask John about his feat up on the yardarm the day before.

Sherlock rushes forward, almost tripping over his own feet in his eagerness, but before he can get close enough to say hello, he is seized with a sudden lurching feeling of self-doubt.

The thought of his affection for John on sudden glaring display in front of all those other people makes Sherlock’s insides clench in terror. He can’t possibly interact with John in the presence of all the other sailors. He can’t. He can’t do it.

He ducks behind one of the covered longboats on deck; partially conceals himself behind its bulk so he can watch safely from a distance instead.

Unbidden, into his mind, comes the disapproving voice of his older brother—cold, polished, heavy with disdain. “Always watching, never participating, that’s our Sherlock. One of these days, Sherlock, you’re going to have to do more than simply observe. If you want to learn anything about the world you’re going to have to get involved.”

Growling, Sherlock shoves the memory away, focuses instead on the rise and fall of the sailors’ voices.

They are a boisterous group, talking loudly, laughing while they work. Many of the voices are rough, sharply accented—Sherlock cannot pick out all the dialects but many are unfamiliar to him.

Someone is telling a story that is clearly very humorous. Sherlock can only hear snatches of it, but he’s fairly certain he wouldn’t understand the joke even if he could make it out.

Then, through the undercurrent of other voices he hears John’s laugh; that beautiful, full-bellied laugh that Sherlock has heard once before. The sound of it makes Sherlock’s heart beat faster; it is utterly lovely.

Sherlock peers out from his hiding place to get a better look.

He sees John elbow the man next to him good-naturedly, duck his head down toward the other
man’s ear and whisper something that makes his companion cry with laughter.

He laughs so hard the tears run down his cheeks.

The other man pounds John on the back, and John doubles over, his own eyes creased to mirthful slits, the material in his hands momentarily forgotten as his body shakes with laughter.

Sherlock watches all of this, feels his own chest fill up with a riot of conflicting emotions—envy, longing, self-consciousness.

John makes it look so easy. It clearly comes naturally to him, talking to other people, liking other people; feeling at ease in their company. Sherlock doesn’t understand how John does it, how he can enjoy it so fully, so freely.

The other sailors are slapping each other on the back, telling stories, swapping jokes. There is a sense of comradeship between them that is evident even from where Sherlock is standing. They clearly talk to each other, relate to each other; enjoy one another’s company.

Sherlock isn’t like them; can never be like them.

There is an ache growing inside him, and the more he sees of John’s laughing face, the worse it grows.

John is like the sun—he makes everything brighter that comes within his orbit.

Well, if John is the sun, then Sherlock is a shadow; Sherlock is a scrap of cloud, obscuring his brightness, smothering it, sucking it down into himself. That’s what he wants to do, he realizes. He is like a leech, sucking the brightness out of the world.

Sherlock pulls his head back out of sight. He cannot stand to look anymore. His own freakishness feels as visible as a brand on his forehead.

Suddenly he can’t bear it, can’t stand to be within earshot of John’s laughing voice, knowing he will never be a part of it.

He hauls himself away from the longboat at his back, and makes his way as quietly and as quickly as he can back toward the stairs leading below deck.

Every step between him and the privacy of his cramped cabin feels like an eternity. Sherlock tucks his head down, walks as fast as he can, prays with every fiber of his being that no one will see him, no one will speak to him.

When he makes it to his room, he latches the flimsy door behind him and leans against it with something like relief. No, not relief; this feeling is darker, infinitely more painful. He cannot stop himself from sliding to the floor, his head in his hands, chest heaving with misery. His arms still ache. He curls in on himself, feels the self-hatred growing tighter and tighter within him, until he feels as though it will stop his breath.

*It makes no difference,* he tries to tell himself, *John was never going to understand you anyway. He’s just like all the others—they never understand. To them you are strange, a creature apart. You will always be strange, always be on your own. It’s no different than it has ever been. There’s no reason to be upset now. Nothing has changed.*

Sherlock curls in tighter around himself, his fingers digging painfully into his sore ribs.
Then why does it suddenly hurt so much?

He knows the answer but he cannot bear to think it. However, he can feel it down to the center of his bones.

It’s because John is like no one he has ever met. John is fascinating, contradictory, like a sudden beam of sunlight in an otherwise darkened room. Sherlock yearns to know everything about him—where he came from, what interests him, how he came to be the man he is today. But more than any of that—which Sherlock wants with every fiber of his being—he is realizing that he wants John to be interested in him too. For John to take notice of him, to care that Sherlock is present or absent—for John to want Sherlock just as much as Sherlock wants him.

He has never wanted anyone the way he wants John.

The realization takes Sherlock’s breath away.

He’s never experienced an emotion as complex as this, as deep. The feeling is vast, complicated—so immense Sherlock is afraid it will swallow him whole.

It is utterly terrifying.

Sherlock sits for a long time in the darkness, the fingers of one hand pressed against his mouth, his other hand pressed to the center of his chest, trying to adjust to the magnitude of what he’s just realized, trying to calm the hammering rhythm of his beating heart against his fingers.

He listens to the footsteps of the other passengers coming and going, the occasional creak of a door, the murmur of a voice in the cabin nearby, and under it all the constant deep groaning of the ship as it moves through the ocean.

Sherlock has never felt so alien as he does now, so apart from all the goings on of the other people on the ship—their everyday concerns and cares. It is as though he has been set adrift on his own tiny raft and pushed out to sea, their ordinary lives as far from him, as distant as the ever-shrinking silhouette of the retreating ship.

Sherlock hunches down over his own arms, making his body as small as possible, as though that will somehow lessen the impact of his suffering. He concentrates on the feeling, in the hopes that maybe if he tries hard enough, he can will it away.

He sits in the creaking darkness, feels the shudder of the ship through the flimsy door at his back, every bit of his will bent on ridding himself of this affliction, but it does no good.

Sherlock wraps his arms tighter around himself, presses his forehead to his knees, and aches.

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Sherlock is not certain how long he sits there in the darkness, but gradually he recognizes the familiar swell of voices and the sounds of footsteps making their way to the passenger’s saloon.

It must be dinnertime.

Sherlock climbs stiffly to his feet, his sore shoulders aching worse than ever after so many hours of sitting without moving. He is resolved to go to dinner if only because he cannot bear another moment alone with his own thoughts.

A kind of numbness has settled over him to dull the shock, and he is grateful for it, although it
leaves him with a strange, detached feeling, as though he is walking through a dream.

The other passengers are particularly raucous tonight. Everyone is in good spirits due to the fine weather they’ve been having and the smooth progress of the ship.

Sherlock listens to the ebb and flow of their eager voices, disinterested, but unable to block them out.

“If this weather keeps up, we could reach port earlier than they’ve predicted.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Jackson. Good weather never holds up at sea. Especially days like these. I reckon the wind will die down soon enough.”

“Always the broadcaster of doom, eh, Mr. Summersby?”

The other man puffs out his chest, offended. “I’m merely being realistic.”

A small, nervous woman who Sherlock is fairly certain is sweet on Mr. Summersby speaks up. “I heard one of the sailors say weather this fine means a storm is just around the corner.”

“Now see here, Summersby, you’ve made the women fearful!”

“Poppycock.”

Although Sherlock is seething inwardly at the insipid nature of the conversation, he welcomes the distraction from his own turbulent thoughts. Anything to take his mind off his present situation is something of a relief.

A less welcome distraction is the presence of Anderson, who comes in late, and settles himself in the empty chair across from Sherlock.

Sherlock lowers his head closer to his plate, determined to ignore the scowling face of the man opposite but Sherlock can feel the force of his glare even without lifting his head. Anderson’s rage is as palpable as a sudden cloud moving over the sun. It feels as though all the warmth has gone out of the room.

Sherlock finds his already failing appetite completely abandoning him.

He pushes back his chair to stand up.

No one takes any notice. Sherlock often leaves the meal halfway through. The first few times there was some shocked tittering, but by now the other passengers are used to it, they simply chalk it up to one more strange behavior from the eccentric Mr. Holmes.

But this time Anderson calls him out.

“And where are you so desperate to run off to?”

Anderson’s voices cuts through the general chatter of conversation. Several heads turn with interest.

Sherlock ignores the question, rises to his feet.

“Are you off to go stare at your blue-eyed sailor?”

This question freezes Sherlock where he stands, one hand on the back of his chair to push it in.
Anderson leans back a little in his own chair, smiling in satisfaction, aware that he has the attention of the whole table now. “I saw you earlier today, hiding behind the longboats so you could spy on him. What are you up to, Holmes? Are you really so lonely that you’re desperate for the attentions of a sailor?”

Sherlock feels his cheeks flame with embarrassment.

This isn’t happening; this can’t be happening. He is dreaming and this is a nightmare.

The silence in the room is absolute.

“Oh come now, you can’t be this shocked that I’ve noticed. You’ve been trailing after him like a lovesick schoolgirl for the better part of a week. Surely, everyone’s noticed by now.”

The room is so quiet Sherlock is certain they can all hear the dull thud of his heartbeat, the sickness rising in his belly.

Now would be the time to punch Anderson. Right now. Sherlock should throw himself over the table and knock him from his chair, but it is as though he has been paralyzed. He cannot move; he cannot speak. He can only stand, frozen with horror, feeling the eyes of everyone in the room burning into his face.

Anderson is in his element; his chair is tipped back from the table with casual arrogance, balancing on two legs, and his triumphant smile is so broad it looks as though it will split his sneering face.

“I hate to break it to you, Holmes, but I don’t think your family is likely to welcome you back with open arms if you show up with a filthy, little sailor in tow. You’d better settle your sights elsewhere.”

This is too much.

The words seem to break Sherlock’s spell—either that, or his body decides he simply cannot bear any more, and before he’s made the decision to do so, he is running from the room, almost colliding with the porter on his way into the dining room, tearing down the hallway and back to his cabin.

Almost as soon as he reaches his bunk, Sherlock feels the urge to be sick and lunges for his bucket, heaving up the contents of his stomach until he is gasping for breath.

When he is certain there is nothing more to come up, he pushes the bucket away, and curls into a knot on his bunk, teeth chattering with misery, waves of horror rolling over him in a relentless stream, as constant as the beat of the surf against the side of the ship.

He wishes that the ship would capsize, for a squall to rise up out of the ocean and dash the ship to smithereens, pull them all down to their deaths beneath the waves—anything, anything to spare him the continued misery of life trapped on this floating capsule of other humans and their hatred, their mocking judgment, their disdain.

Sherlock lies without moving; wracked with misery, until sleep claims him and he is dragged down into dark dreams.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for reading!

As always, your feedback is much appreciated, so leave me a comment if you feel so inclined.

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Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

The Angst Festival continues.

Chapter Notes

So it turns out I can't keep myself away from this story for more than a few days. Do not fear! I am simultaneously hard at work on the last chapter of Thirst, I just- sad sea baby Sherlock just won't stop murmuring things in my ear. I dutifully heed his siren call, and thus, present you with this.

Sherlock’s dreams are fragmented, disconnected, snippets of memories spliced with strange images he has never seen.

He dreams of a white bird flying over the ocean, diving down over the cliffs along the coast not far from where he grew up, and Sherlock is following it from the shore, desperate to catch up with it. He runs along the shoreline, but he cannot get close enough. He is high above the water; if he slips, he will fall to certain death on the sharp rocks beneath him, pounded by the surf.

But he must get to the bird. Of that much he is certain.

So he finds himself climbing down over the slippery shale on the cliffs, clutching at the snarled fingers of exposed tree roots as he tries to get closer, reaching out with one hand.

Sherlock slips.

He begins to fall, fear like a dark worm in his belly as he plummets toward the rocks but then, inexplicably, he feels strong arms around him and he realizes it is John, John who has caught him and is bearing him down, as gently as he would a child, to settle on the cold sand.

“You’re alright,” he murmurs, lips brushing Sherlock’s hairline. “You’re alright now.”

He starts to lean back but Sherlock clings to him, desperate not to let him go.

Speech is beyond him but Sherlock hears himself make a whimpering sound, and John seems to understand.

“I’ve got you. I’ve got you, Love. You’re safe now.” And then John’s lips are at his throat, his hands moving warm and sure over his shoulders, pulling Sherlock closer, his body lowering down against him.

Sherlock parts his thighs and then using his grip on John’s neck, pulls John down until their mouths are only a hair’s breadth apart.
Sherlock seems to have recovered his voice. “Kiss me,” he whispers, and John does.

Sherlock wakes up then, his heartbeat kicking a sharp staccato under his ribs, and lies in the darkness, gasping.

His forehead is damp with sweat. He reaches up to wipe it away and realizes he is still in his clothes. The cabin is hotter than it was earlier—the air feels close, stifling.

Sherlock swings his legs over the side of his bunk, feeling the low ache of his previous misery still throbbing unforgotten all through him.

He listens very carefully to the surrounding ship to ascertain the time of night.

The darkness is deeper than it was when he fell asleep and the voices and the footsteps of the other passengers are noticeably absent. Sherlock reasons it must be sometime before midnight.

He is desperate for the feel of fresh air on his face, and because of the late hour Sherlock is hopeful there will be no one else around so he steals as quietly as he can from his cabin and makes his way to the upper decks.

The air is fresher up on deck but the night is oppressively hot and still, even in the open air.

Other than the silhouette of the men on watch, there is no one else about.

Sherlock finds a tucked away corner on the portside of the deck, out of sight of the men on watch, and squints up at the sky.

The moon is absent tonight so the glitter of the stars is sharper than ever, the force of their brightness doubled in the dark expanse of ocean on all sides.

Sherlock reflects that it looks as though they are at sail in the midnight sky.

He is so deep in dark reflection that he does not hear the other man approach until he is standing above Sherlock.

His voice is soft in the darkness but it still makes Sherlock jump in surprise.

“Thought I might find you out here,” John says, and Sherlock can hear the quiet smile in his voice, even without looking at him.

The storm of conflicting emotions that rises within Sherlock’s breast are almost too many to catalogue—fear, resentment, shame, embarrassment, longing, but surprisingly (or perhaps, not surprisingly at all), the emotion that wins out is joy at the other man’s nearness.

John settles himself down beside Sherlock.

Sherlock doesn’t look up. He cannot bear to, for fear of giving away too much, but he can feel his whole body lift with happiness in the presence of the other man. He stares into his lap, biting his lip.

He feels he will burst open with joy.

“How have you been?”

Sherlock cannot think how to answer this. There is too much to say; too much he cannot say at all. So he remains silent, overcome, staring into his lap.
John is silent beside him for several minutes, looking up at the sky, and Sherlock hates himself for not being able to answer, feels the return of his misery with a palpable pang in his chest, but before he can fully re-immers himself in his self-hatred, John’s gentle voice interrupts his thoughts.

“I’m sorry I haven’t had a chance to say hello these past few days.”

There is real regret in John’s voice, and in the presence of it, Sherlock feels his misery begin to evaporate, rising off of his shoulders like steam into the muggy air.

“I was on the midnight watch—and then they had me tarring the ropes for two days. I love doing it, but it’s hard work. Takes a lot out of a man. It’s a two-person job, but old Adelaide who usually works with me, he took a fall last week and has been laid up in bed so it was down to me. Took me longer than usual. Especially the stays, which you’ve got do by getting rigged up to the masthead.”

Sherlock doesn’t say anything but perhaps John can sense the curiosity in his silence, or perhaps he just remembers that Sherlock likes to know how things work because he goes on to explain.

“You take a long piece of rope—topgallant-studding-sail halyards, or something of the kind—and rove it through the block to make a girt-line. Then you take a bowline round the stay, and climb in. A man down on deck holds the other end. It’s the one piece I have to do with the help of a rope. Funnily enough it’s the one time I’m afraid of falling. You’ve got to put your faith in the man down on deck. If the rope slips, breaks, or he lets go, there’s nothing to stop you falling overboard or breaking your neck. But you don’t think about that. You just think about the work at hand. If you leave any holydays—places not tarred—then you have to do the whole thing again.”

The soothing murmur of John’s voice is like a balm to the aches of Sherlock’s misery. He wishes John would just go on talking all night—about anything—about halyards and jibsheets, bowlines and topgallant studding—things Sherlock doesn’t understand but that are made all the more interesting in the warm embrace of John’s sturdy voice.

“The rigging above the martingale is always the trickiest, but I managed all right on my own.”

There is a note of pride in John’s voice and hearing it, Sherlock can no longer hold in his excitement.

“I saw you up there, on the yardarm!” Sherlock bursts out. “Walking along without holding onto anything. You were—” Sherlock struggles to find a word to convey how John looked—how to express the grace, the power of his body, the amazement Sherlock felt just seeing him up there, like a part of the sky. “It’s like you were born to walk those ropes.”

John laughs, clearly pleased, and Sherlock feels his whole torso flood with warmth.

“I’m afraid that’s far from the truth. But I can’t say I don’t enjoy it. There’s no feeling quite like it in the world. Swinging between heaven and earth, nothing to keep you from falling but your own hands and feet; your own belief that you won’t slip. It makes me feel…”

John grows quiet, and Sherlock can tell he is thinking deeply, searching for the right words.

Sherlock finds he has no idea what John is about to say. This is another thing Sherlock likes about John—the fact that Sherlock cannot anticipate how he will act, what he will say, like he can with so many people. This is one of the primary reasons why Sherlock finds so much of the world dull and unworthy of his attention, because people are so easy to read, so predictable. They all seem to share the same petty interests and ambitions, but not John Watson. He is something else entirely.

For the first time, Sherlock lifts his head to study John’s silhouette in the darkness. Sherlock wants
to memorize every detail of it—the downturned corners of his slender lips as he thinks, the sharp slope of his nose, the fringe of his eyelashes as he looks out over the horizon.

“It feels like…”

John’s eyes crease up at the corners and it strikes Sherlock how changeable his face is—so malleable from moment to moment, so expressive. Sherlock is fascinated by it.

“It’s like you’re holding your life in your own two hands—like you’re completely in control of your own fate. Just you, no one else. It’s… freeing. Makes me glad to count myself among the living.” John leans back on his hands; his gaze still on the horizon and Sherlock watches the corners of John’s mouth shift as his expression changes yet again. “It’s a strange thing but somehow I never feel more alive than when I’m so close to death.”

In spite of the contradictory nature of this statement, Sherlock finds he knows exactly what John means.

It speaks to the un-nameable quality that Sherlock has seen glimmering under the surface of John’s steadfast exterior, and all the other contradictory parts of John that Sherlock has witnessed—the hardness and the softness that coexist in his small, muscular frame—the simultaneous storm and quiet in his eyes—and more than anything the sheer, unbridled joy John seems to take in living, his complete engagement with all capacities of life, no matter how dark, how unpleasant.

Sherlock is bursting with things to say in response to this. He wants to tell John that he has never seen anyone look more alive than John does when he’s climbing the rigging, when John throws his head back and laughs his full-bellied laugh, but Sherlock’s tongue feels like wax in his mouth and his own hesitation is a physical force stopping his throat. He cannot bring himself to speak around it for fear he will say the wrong thing, that he will give the wrong impression. So instead, he says nothing.

He drops his gaze again to his lap, concentrates on his tightly clenched fingers.

If John notices Sherlock’s tortured reticence, he gives no sign of it. He speaks easily into the silence, his tone shifting slightly, yet again.

“I wasn’t always so confident. I was as clumsy as a newborn lamb my first day on this ship. Took me a long time to learn to move like that.”

John’s voice softens, becomes serious. “I certainly wasn’t born to it.”

Sherlock is desperate to know—wants to ask how John ended up on this ship, doing this work, but he hesitates, once again stricken with shyness.

However, something about John’s tone indicates that he is not going to speak freely on this topic without prompting.

Sherlock’s curiosity gets the better of him.

“What—” Sherlock swallows around the tightness in his throat, forces the words out. “What led you to it? A life at sea?”

John’s gaze squints out over the water, at the glitter of star shine reflected in the darkness all around them.

He is silent for a long while, looking out over the ocean.
A light breeze tugs at the kerchief around his throat.

“It wasn’t by choice.”

Sherlock considers this. He has heard about press gangs, the navy’s infamous method for forcing men into service as a means of crewing warships, but as far as he knows the practice is limited to men who already have experience at sea.

“You don’t mean…?” Sherlock’s indignation gives him the courage to speak. “But the Impressment Service is only legally permitted to conscript experienced seafarers.”

John smiles wryly. “Turns out they can take anyone they please.”

Sherlock’s curiosity quickly turns to horror as the implications of this sink in. “What—what happened?”

John is silent for another long minute before he answers.

“I come from a little village outside London. My father was a farmer but he was committed to his children having a better life. We helped him in the fields during the day but he taught us to read and write nights. I was going to learn a skill, he said, so when I was fifteen, I moved to London and was apprenticed to a surgeon in Fleet Street. I was old for an apprentice but the surgeon took me on anyway because he needed the help. I was saving up to marry a girl from my village—Mary was her name. She was going to wait for me. Said she didn’t mind waiting.”

John pauses, and Sherlock can hear something in his voice shift imperceptibly at this particular detail.

There are a thousand questions hammering against the inside of Sherlock’s skull. What was the name of the village where John grew up? Did he have brothers and sisters? What did his mother look like? Was she kind? Ill-tempered? What did he do as a surgeon’s apprentice? Did he practice on real bodies? Where did the bodies come from? What does a limb look like once it’s been shorn off? Is there a lot of blood? What does the inside of a body look like? How does it smell? Has John saved anyone’s life?

But more pressing even than these questions—as fascinating as they are to Sherlock—are the ones pertaining to the girl, Mary.

The thought of her makes Sherlock’s heart beat painfully fast. Just the invocation of her name fills Sherlock with a vicious, wounded curiosity. What did she look like? What color was her hair? In what state were her teeth? Was her voice soft or shrill? What were the first words she spoke to John? How slender was her waist? What passed between them? Did John ever take her hand in his? Did he kiss her?

And more pressing than any of these—or perhaps, simply, the singular question which encompasses all the others—that seems to press against Sherlock’s heart, so hard he is certain he can feel the force of it against his ribs: What made you love her?

Of course, he does not voice any of this.

He sits perfectly still and silent at John’s side, waits for him to go on.

“Apprenticeships usually last four or five years but I was a fast learner, so after two years I was nearing the end of my training. Then, two months before I turned eighteen, I was down at the public house one night when a gang of mercenaries came in. They seized all the men in the tavern,
took us to their headquarters on Tower Hill. We were presented to the lieutenant, asked about our experience at sea. I told them the truth—that I had never been to sea, that I was a surgeon’s apprentice. They asked to see my hands. They saw I had a laborer’s hands—the evidence was there from my years of working in the fields. I told them I was a farmer’s son. They laughed, told me, ‘No farmer’s son becomes a surgeon.’ I spent the night in a room with a crowd of other men—mostly merchant sailors, a few fishermen. They barred the door so we couldn’t get out. I’ll never forget that night. I was desperate to get some word to my father, to Mary, to tell them I was bound for sea, but there wasn’t time. We set sail the next day for Gibraltar.”

The wind is picking up; Sherlock can hear it stirring in the rigging, can feel its warm caress on his cheek.

“I kept trying to tell them those first few days that I wasn’t a sailor—that I had no experience at sea, but they didn’t believe me. Looking back, I’m not sure it would have made much difference one way or the other. War had just broken out again with the French. They were desperate for men. There was another landsman they took—he was a clergyman’s son, had never done a day of labor in his life. He fell off the bowsprit on his second day at sea; hit his head on the way down. He was dead before he hit the water.”

John falls quiet and there is a heaviness to his silence that speaks of years of untold miseries.

Sherlock is immobilized by horror.

He tries to imagine being taken in the night, stuffed into the brig of a ship, put to work at a trade he has absolutely no knowledge of, his body just another disposable cog in the machinery used by the Royal Navy to fight their wars against the French.

He finds he cannot imagine it. His own life has been full of misery and neglect but no sorrow Sherlock has experienced can touch what John has been made to undergo. The thought that this could happen to John, that he could be snatched from his life with no means to protest, no chance of resistance, fills Sherlock with a white, hot rage on his behalf.

“How long?” Sherlock asks, dreading the answer. “How long were you at sea before you returned to England?”

“I was at sea for three years, fighting against the French. I was on board the Monarch during the battle at Rochefort. Got shot in the shoulder. They finally sent me home after that.”

Sherlock cannot bear to ask the next question. He is sure he knows the answer already, but he needs to be certain. He realizes John will not say it without prompting.

Sherlock’s voice is a dry croak of fear. “And Mary?”

John swallows, lifts his chin in a sudden sharp gesture, and Sherlock recognizes it as the gesture of a man raising his defenses. Sherlock feels a flash of sympathy so hot and bright he feels scalded by it.

“She died that spring. The spring before I came home. Typhoid fever.”

The wind pulls again at the kerchief around John’s throat. His eyes are screwed up as he studies the horizon, his hands clenched into fists on his knees.

“She never did get married. She was still waiting for me up until the day she died.” Sherlock watches the line of John’s mouth tighten. “She didn’t even have a chance to find happiness of her own. She was still waiting. Never had any idea if I’d come back.”
Sherlock wants to say something, wants to do something by way of offering comfort but he has no experience with this. He doesn’t know what to do, what to say, to ease the weight of John’s suffering. His own feelings are a maelstrom of agonized confusion. He feels sorrow for John’s loss but he cannot ignore the deep throb of jealousy over this past love that seems to tug at his heart.

He cannot remember ever having felt so many emotions at once.

On top of all of this, Sherlock is experiencing a newfound wonder over the fact that John can still take such joy in living after undergoing so much loss. It is remarkable to Sherlock, but at the same time, it makes his own profound unhappiness feel all the more selfish and undeserved.

Sherlock can feel himself physically shrinking with shame.

John stretches beside him, rolling his shoulders as if to physically shrug off the weight of his grief. He flattens his fists out on his knees, rubs his palms over his thighs.

The wind stirs in the rigging, louder this time, and John squints out over the horizon. “There’s a storm coming. We’re moving right towards it. It’ll likely be a bad one.”

Sherlock follows John’s gaze, but can see nothing in the starlit darkness that would suggest rough seas up ahead.

Sherlock is curious, in spite of himself. “How can you tell?”

“Change in the wind. That and all the heat we’ve been having. You can feel it in the air, can’t you? Feel that heaviness? That charged quality?”

Sherlock does feel it.

John looks over at Sherlock through the darkness and Sherlock stiffens under his gaze. He wants to study the expression on John’s face but he keeps his eyes straight-ahead, trained on the horizon.

He can feel the movement of John’s eyes over his face even without looking—something about his regard feels gentle. It’s as though he can sense Sherlock’s inner turmoil.

“I saw you earlier today, up on deck,” John says quietly. “You should have come over to say hello.”

Sherlock thinks of the scene with Anderson from earlier and feels the violence of his self-hatred and embarrassment return like a blow to his gut.

The fact that John noticed his hasty retreat as well makes shame burn in his cheeks, worse than the shame he felt at Anderson’s blatant cruelty. He cannot bear for John to think he is a coward.

“The other men aren’t as rough as they look. They’re actually quite friendly.” John continues, his voice gentler than ever. “I think they’d like you.”

Sherlock can tell John is trying to be nice but that only makes it worse. John doesn’t understand that people don’t like Sherlock; and worse than that, he doesn’t like other people. But he doesn’t have the heart to correct him, doesn’t want John to know how cold and strange he really is.

Sherlock says nothing in response to this. He hunches his shoulders up against his ears, wishing a hole would open up in the deck so that he could drop through it out of sight.

Sherlock feels John’s eyes leave his face and look out again over the horizon, his tone shifting.
once more.

“I missed you, you know. These past few days.” He laughs softly and shakes his head.

Sherlock’s head whips up in surprise. He stares at John openly, too stunned to hide his reaction.

John turns to look at him and Sherlock can see his mouth curling into a smile at the look on Sherlock’s face.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?” He laughs again and Sherlock feels the tension run out of his stiff shoulders like water melting in a frozen stream. “What can I say? I like you.”

John keeps looking at Sherlock, his smile open and unafraid; his gaze warm on Sherlock’s face. There is something mischievous in the corners of his smile and Sherlock suddenly finds he cannot tolerate the directness of his look, what feels to Sherlock like flirtation.

He returns his gaze to his lap, his heart pounding as though he’s just run a great distance.

John leans a little closer in the darkness and all Sherlock can think about is his dream, John’s lips against his hairline, the feel of John’s mouth on his throat.

“What about you?” John asks, something playful in his tone, slightly teasing. “Do you have a sweetheart? Is there a girl back home, with a lock of one of those dark curls tucked away in a locket that she clutches to her breast at night, longing for your return?”

Sherlock feels a cold trickle of horror at the question.

John isn’t flirting with him—he wants to swap stories about past sweethearts.

Of course, Sherlock has never had a sweetheart. Girls are no different than other people—worse even. He finds them difficult to understand, impossible to communicate with. They are like a different species altogether, utterly removed from him, too talkative, too changeable; too full of lightness and levity.

Sherlock feels his stiffness returning, wishes John would change the subject.

“You’re very tall. You’re very handsome. You must have had a sweetheart.” John’s voice is colored with some emotion Sherlock cannot place. His voice is lower, darker, and it pulls at something in Sherlock’s chest. “Even if you didn’t, I bet all the girls were pining for you in secret.”

Sherlock cannot tell if John is flirting with him or teasing him, but the nearness of him, the low pitch of his voice is making Sherlock warm all over. The night air is suddenly too hot on his face, his heart kicking a relentless staccato against his breastbone. He finds he does not know what to do with his hands. He clenches them together, hard, in his lap.

“I bet they wrote you love letters—pages and pages of odes dedicated to your eyes, your hands—your mouth—and then burned them in secret.”

Sherlock stands up suddenly, overcome.

He is sure now that John is mocking him and he cannot bear it. The sudden betrayal guts him; feels as real as a knife in his side. It is a thousand times worse than the scene with Anderson earlier, because this is John, whose opinion matters more than anything.

The hot throb of his own desire suddenly feels as though it’s choking him.
“Sherlock?” John begins to rise to his feet, concern evident on his face.

Sherlock bows stiffly, his voice made rigid by pain. “If you’ll excuse me.”

He turns to leave but before he goes, he inclines his head again. “Please accept my condolences on the loss of your fiancée.”

And then he is walking away across the deck, pain resonating through him with every step, headed for the darkness of the staircase.

“Sherlock!” There is a note of desperation in John’s voice but Sherlock ignores the pang it strikes in his chest. He keeps on walking and does not look back, does not stop until his footsteps have taken him down into the darkness, and the bitter solitude of his narrow cabin.

Chapter End Notes

The angst will abate very, very soon, I promise! Thanks for all your lovely comments so far and your support on this story. Can't wait to hear what you all think of this installment. :)
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Sherlock nurses a broken heart, and something potentially more dangerous. John battles a storm at sea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sherlock lies in the darkness, breathing slowly in and out, trying with every ounce of will to harden his heart against the tide of misery that feels as though it’s eating him alive, that feels as though it’s laying waste to him, body and soul.

It should be easy for him. He’s never cared about anyone before. It’s what he excels at—not caring.

Mycroft has always been gracious enough to remind Sherlock of this at every given opportunity. Strange, cold-hearted boy. Perhaps you don’t have a heart at all, Mycroft would tease. Child of shade, the nursemaid said. Boy without a heart.

Don’t worry, Sherlock, Mycroft would tell him; smiling condescendingly. Its absence won’t do you any harm. In fact, you’re better off without it.

In this moment, Sherlock is inclined to agree with his hateful older brother. If this is what it feels like to care about people then Sherlock is savagely glad he’s never wasted any energy on it before.

He wishes now that he truly didn’t have a heart—at this point he would do almost anything to end his suffering.

Every breath he draws is more painful than the last, at the memory of John’s smile in the dark, the lovely curl of his voice around Sherlock’s name, the heat of his gaze, the way Sherlock was so certain for a moment that John was flirting with him. Oh, how it stings to remember that it wasn’t flirtation at all—just a joke, just a cruel joke at Sherlock’s expense.

Oh, how it aches.

Stop being so foolish, he tells himself sharply, and hears his brother’s voice. He’s nothing to you. You barely know him. Just forget the day you ever laid eyes on him. Forget his blue eyes, the gentle strength of his hands, all the words he spoke to you. Forget, forget, forget. The words beat against the inside of his skull, and he tries, and tries to absolutely no avail.

He falls asleep still trying.

***

When Sherlock wakes again, it is full daylight.

His room is hot, hotter than it was last night— oppressively so. Sherlock can feel his whole back is
wet with sweat where it’s pressed against the mattress. His brow is sticky; his palms slick, his throat, uncomfortably dry.

The sea is still strangely calm—the usual pitch and heave of the ship is absent.

John was right. The heat from yesterday—the heat that he said signaled an impending storm—has gotten worse. The air feels even more loaded than it did the day before—full of pressure, crackling with an electric presence that makes the hair stand up on the back of Sherlock’s neck.

At the thought of John, a deep twinge of pain lances through his breast. Sherlock rolls over onto his side, feels his sticky cheek dragging on his sweat-soaked pillow.

He wills the thought of John away, with several heavy, careful breaths, his fingers clenching involuntarily to fists.

He will not think of John again. He squeezes his eyes shut, pictures himself twisting his mind between his fingers like a sponge, wringing out all thoughts of John, watching them swirl down and drain away beneath his feet.

That’s done now. There will be no more of that.

Sherlock opens his eyes again, studies the pattern of light streaming in through the cracks of his cabin, and guesses it must be mid-morning.

He thinks about getting up, getting dressed, to go in search of cooler air up top, but just as he considers swinging his sticky legs out of his bunk he hears a flurry of voices in the passageway outside his cabin door and with it, the memory of what happened at the dinner table last night rears up to confront him like a slap in the face.

In the wake of his newfound misery, he’s forgotten all about the humiliation at dinner—Anderson’s cruel words, the judging eyes of every passenger in the saloon fixed on him, reading his obsession with John in every shamed line of his body.

Sherlock can taste bile rising up the back of his throat at the memory, and he has to concentrate hard for several long minutes, willing himself not to be sick.

He cannot possibly leave his cabin now; he cannot face the inquiring, judgmental stares of the other passengers, the whispers, the murmured comments that will have doubled in frequency.

No, he cannot bear it.

Sherlock pulls his knees in tighter against his chest, cringing away from the retreating voices as they disappear down the corridor.

With no John to go looking for, now there is truly no reason to leave his cabin.

So he lies on side with eyes clenched shut, throbbing with misery, until he slips back into a listless sleep.

***

When Sherlock wakes again the room is stifling.

Judging by the dim quality of the light, it is almost evening but the room feels like an oven, the electric quality of the air prickling all along Sherlock’s scalp.
By this time, Sherlock’s hunger has manifested itself. He can feel it, twisting in his belly like a living thing, but when he thinks about getting up to go to dinner, Anderson’s mocking face swims before his eyes.

He would know. He would know instantly that Sherlock was suffering, as he always does. He would be able to tell that Sherlock was hiding his wounds, would be able to see it from the stiff way Sherlock held himself, like a wolf picking out the frailest, limping member of a group of prey.

The heat is almost unbearable now—Sherlock’s entire body is soaked with sweat. His hair is dripping; sweat trickling down his temples. Sherlock wipes it away with the ball of his fist, feels the salt sting his eyes.

Sherlock shuts his eyes again, waits for darkness to bring with it cooler air and a respite from the eyes of other passengers, so that then he might chance a visit up top and find refuge from the oppressive heat and stillness of the prison that his room has become.

***

Sometime in the night Sherlock wakes to the groan of the ship around him, his stomach rolling.

He opens his eyes to darkness, hears the thunk of the bucket under his bed as it slides across the wooden floorboards and into the wall. He listens to a clap of thunder overhead tear through the roar of pouring rain and wind.

The ship is heaving to and fro—Sherlock can hear the crash of waves on the deck above, beating against the side of the ship, and more faintly, the sound of water trickling down through the gaps in the wood beside his bunk.

John’s storm, it seems, has found them at last.

At the memory of John, Sherlock feels pain knife through him, churning in a deep sickness in the pit of his belly, but then the ship rolls again—sending the bucket under Sherlock’s bunk sliding back across the floor with another loud thunk—and Sherlock realizes it is not his misery over John that is responsible for the pain in his belly but the violent motion of the heaving ship.

The heat has broken but Sherlock still feels hot, too hot—his throat is parched and dry. He’s aching for a drink of water but just as he considers attempting to crawl down the passageway in search of the purser, another wave of sickness grips him and he flings himself over the side of his bunk, emptying out the meager contents of his stomach.

He misses the sliding bucket by feet and Sherlock collapses back onto his sweat-soaked sheets, reviled by the mess he has just made, but too sick to crawl from his bunk to try and clean it up.

The rolling motion of the boat makes his head swim and he clenches his eyes shut against the motion, feeling desperately ill, dizzy, feverish. He feels as sick as he did when the ship first left port but sicker. His body is aching, and despite the heat in his head, he is shivering, his limbs shuddery and weak.

The ship heaves again and Sherlock’s stomach with it. He throws himself over the side of the bed just in time, coughing until there is nothing left to come up.

Distantly, he hears a woman’s scream down the passageway, over the violent creak of the ship, and the twinge of fear that runs down Sherlock’s spine has nothing to do with the scream but with the distance the ship lists this time—too far, too far—the hull will surely break upon the waves.
Sherlock lies, gasping, pictures the tangled wreck that must be the rigging, the ragged ruin of the sails that surely must hang in tatters from the mainmast—surely, unless the sailors managed to fold the sails in time, and with this thought comes another jab of fear, this time much worse; it cuts right through the heart of Sherlock, leaves him open-mouthed, eyes spread wide in horror.

John must be up there, crawling among the ropes, clinging to the mast like a tick to the back of a wild dog, holding on for dear life as the storm tries to tear him off and throw him to his death in the churning chaos of the sea.

He is the best man for the job, Sherlock knows, now picturing the smiling sailor without any teeth who sang John’s praises when he tarred the ropes. Old Johnny Boy. No one’s quite as clever with his hands and feet, a right little monkey he is, just like them little monkeys we saw in Barbados, climbing up and down the trees with nuts in their fists—no one can hold on quite as well as our Johnny.

Sherlock shuts his eyes, whispers a silent, fervent prayer inside his head. Please save John, save John, save John. Please, please keep him safe.

Even if the ship is dashed to splinters, the rest of them tossed like so much flotsam on the waves before being dragged to a watery death in the depths of the sea, let John be saved.

Let the rest of us drown, be crushed by the wreckage of the failing ship, be chewed to death in the jaws of a giant sea serpent. The Devil take the rest of us, but please, please, save John Watson, Sherlock pleads, eyes screwed shut, his shaking palms pressed against his mouth.

Sherlock is not a religious man by any means so he is not sure whose mercy he is begging for when he asks to spare John Watson’s life but he cannot stop himself from chanting the desperate request over and over, even as he dives back over the side of his bunk, retching, heaving the insides of his belly out over the creaking floorboards.

Save John, Sherlock thinks as he clings to the edge of his bed, shaking. Take me instead if you have to take someone. I’m worthless; I’m nothing. Throw me to the mercy of the gods of the sea, let the storm sponge me out, wipe my body off the face of the earth.

Do anything you want with me, but don’t hurt John Watson.

Please please please please please.

***

Hours later—or so Sherlock would guess if he were in any state to make this kind of calculation—the storm shows no sign of letting up. In fact, it has worsened, as has Sherlock’s condition.

The pounding of the waves against the side of the ship, the shriek of the wind, and the intermittent screams of terrified passengers have become a miserable, relentless backdrop to Sherlock’s ailing body. He has no idea how long the ship has been pummeled by the waves; the time between now and when he first woke to the crash of the storm is a wretched blur of feverish-worry and sickness.

He cannot stop vomiting, long after there is nothing left inside him to come up, he is still coughing, clinging to the edge of his bed, his cheeks running with sweat, throat burning with the taste of bile.

His pleas for John’s life—his desperate bargaining to some unknown powerful entity—have become increasingly nonsensical as Sherlock’s sickness worsens. His worry for John’s safety has slipped into an indistinguishable misery from his own fever-wracked body. He is certain now that they all will drown, that the ship will be pulled beneath the waves. The fury of the storm is now so
great that Sherlock must hold, white-knuckled, to the edge of his bunk to keep from being thrown to the floor.

It takes all his strength to hang on, and he holds so tightly, he imagines he will still be clinging to this piece of wood when the ship sinks, his rigid corpse still holding on, even in death.

All he can think is that he would like to see John’s eyes one more time before the sea takes them all—John’s brilliant smile, the white flash of his teeth.

But Sherlock knows that this is not to be; he’s too weak to crawl from his bed. His body will not stop shaking, the fever and the storm together making his narrow cabin swim around him.

*If I die and not John, then let me become a ghost*, Sherlock thinks deliriously. *So I may follow him always. I’ll keep a safe distance—he need never feel my presence, just let me stay with him. I could watch over him, keep him safe from harm.*

The ship lists harder than ever before, water rushing in under Sherlock’s door, the shrieks of the ladies down the corridor drowned out by the roar of the waves.

Sherlock holds tighter than ever to the edge of his bunk as the ship rolls on its side, his lips still forming the words of his plea.

*Let me be a ghost.*

***

Sherlock’s despair is burning; it is burning him up.

He longs now for the sea to take him. To be plunged into the cool depths of the waves, to have the sickness washed out of his body would be sweet relief to the burning at the heart of Sherlock.

Despite the heat in his body, everything around him feels wet. His sheets are soaked through; Sherlock is not sure whether this is from his own sweat or from the water leaking in beside his bunk—probably both. He is no longer aware of the rolling movement of the ship, nor is he cognizant of the wooden walls around him. He slips in and out of knowing into fevered dreams until he is not sure whether he is dreaming or waking.

He dreams that he lives beneath the sea with a fish tail instead of two legs, and there he dwells on the ocean floor, wreathed in strange flowers and green weeds, a bevy of eels at his calling. He spends his days gazing at the ship above where he knows John Watson smiles and laughs with the other sailors, climbs the rigging like a bird of the air.

One night the ship is taken by a storm and he swims up to find John’s body in the wreckage, pulling him from the debris and swimming to shore to lay his cold body on the sand, bending to put his mouth to John’s to breathe life back into his blue lips.

When John’s chest swells beneath his hand and he leans over, coughing up seawater, Sherlock allows himself a moment to look into his face and John’s blue eyes spark with feeling as he catches sight of Sherlock.

“You’re—”

Sherlock waits for him to call him an abomination; a sea serpent; a monster, readies himself to dive back into the surf.
“Beautiful,” John breathes, his eyes going round with wonder.

He wants to drag John with him back into the sea but John cannot breathe underwater. If Sherlock were to pull John down with him, it could only be as a drowned man. He knows he must leave him, and leave him he does, with a twitch of his fins, in a flash of sea spray.

Sherlock is quick—quick as a flicker of light on the wave—but not quick enough that he doesn’t hear John’s desperate cry before the water closes over his head, the note of longing in his voice unmistakable as he begs Sherlock not to leave him yet.

Deep in the heart of the ocean, Sherlock despairs.

He can no longer take pleasure in the places where he once found it. His longing for the blue-eyed sailor seems to steal the life from his body. He sits in shadow, his life whittled away by grief.

The sea witch offers him a choice—give up his voice for the chance to walk on two legs, make John fall in love with him. Sherlock agrees.

She cuts out his tongue and he is left, white-faced, blood leaking from his mouth, watching his tail split into two flesh-colored entities, strange and flat at the bottom, but perfectly formed with five toes on each foot.

Each step he takes is like walking on knives but he walks with a grace that none on land have ever witnessed. Because he cannot speak to John he tries to convey his love for him through movement.

John smiles fondly at him every day, even lets Sherlock sleep at the foot of his bed, sometimes slides one hand through Sherlock’s silken curls and strokes them back from his forehead, his blue eyes full of a faraway look and Sherlock thinks (hopes) that sometimes in those moments, John may love him, but then John draws away, and Sherlock cannot be sure, cannot be sure what he thinks he saw.

One day, a beautiful girl comes visiting from another kingdom—a princess. She is lovely, has golden curls, bright laughing eyes, a red-lipped smiling mouth. She is like something from a fairy tale, her China doll eyes round with innocent surprise as John explains to her the way the sails work, how the anchor is pulled up from the deep. She laughs and smiles, places a hand on John’s arm, and Sherlock watches in agonized silence, despair breaking open in his chest as he sees the way John looks at her.

The way he looks at her, fond, adoring—that is the way John must look at Sherlock if he is to break the spell, but John sends Sherlock away so he and the princess can be alone together and Sherlock knows then that all is lost.

John and the blue-eyed laughing girl—her name is Mary, Sherlock knows—are to be wed the following day.

It has all been for nothing.

Sherlock stands on the prow of the ship that night, looking down at the sea, wishing he could plunge back into its depths, dash his heart to pieces in his breast so he never has to experience pain like this again, and then, Sherlock sees his brothers, their green heads breaking the surface of the water like seals, the hands of his eldest brother outstretched, offering him a knife.

“Plunge this into the heart of the blue-eyed sailor,” they tell him. “Then you will regain your fins and you can return to us, to where you’re meant to be.”
Sherlock takes the knife—the handle is studded with pearls, the blade is curved and cruelly sharp. He stands over John as he sleeps beside his bride, her golden head pillowed on his sleeping chest, hears John murmur her name in his sleep, and Sherlock thinks about the knife slicing through John’s breastbone, sliding between his ribs to pierce his heart. He pictures the bright blood welling up and staining the white sheets of the bridal bed.

He raises the knife in the darkness, the moonlight glinting off the blade—

John shifts, head rolling on the pillow, mouth falling open as he sighs in his sleep.

Sherlock drops his arm at his side, bows his head.

He cannot do it.

Instead, he turns and throws himself into the sea and his heart is dashed to foam upon the waves.

His brothers bow their green heads in sorrow, lifting their arms to the moon as they sing their lament, their long hair tangling with the waves.

***

Sherlock’s dreams become fragments—shards of pain and sickness mixed with flashes of heat.

He dreams that John is a sea king, running along the waves, naked, gleaming, his arms twined with seaweed, his golden hair so bright it seems to generate a light all its own.

He dreams that he and John become flecks of sea foam together, rising on the air like bubbles, only to melt in the heat of the sun.

He dreams the ship is dashed to pieces, the waves crashing over his head as he clings to a broken piece of the hull, before he is dragged down to the bottom of the ocean.

There he lives among drowned sailors, playing chess with chips of bone and shell, ghostly pipes clenched between their teeth from which no smoke ever issues. It seems they cannot abandon the habit, even in death.

He dreams that he is back home in England, lying in his grave, looking up at Mycroft’s disapproving face, his mother weeping into her handkerchief, his father, in a black cravat.

“Dying at sea of a broken heart.” Mycroft shakes his head and sighs. “You couldn’t even die properly, Sherlock.”

Sherlock opens his mouth to protest but his answer is stopped by the first shovelful of dirt.

He dreams of John, standing on a cliff above the ocean, Mary in his arms. She is wearing a blue dress that brings out the color in John’s eyes. He stoops to kiss her cheek over and over, her damp eyelashes, her little nose, his hands on her shoulders, his voice a soothing murmur.

Sherlock realizes then, with a sudden cold, draining feeling that he is saying farewell.

At the sorrow in John’s eyes, Sherlock cries out, tries to force himself awake, but fever hangs on him like a shroud and he cannot claw himself out from under its heavy weight.

He dreams then that John is with him in his filthy cabin, bending over Sherlock, his hands cool on Sherlock’s shoulders, his voice low and soothing, just as it was with Mary.
Sherlock whimpers, and then the cool hands are on his forehead, smoothing his hair back, and the low voice is murmuring, warm and golden in his ear. “Shh. The storm is over now. We made it through.”

Sherlock whimpers again, and the cool hands slide down his arms—so strong, so gentle. Sherlock can feel the calluses on each finger as they glide over his skin and he imagines them drawing the sickness out of his veins, healing him.

“Jesus, you’re burning up.” The voice sharp suddenly with concern. “Jesus, Sherlock.”

He feels something cool strike his forehead—one drop, two, three four.

He opens his eyes and sees John leaning over him, dripping wet, storm-blue eyes dark with worry. His clothes are soaked through, his shirt sticking to his chest, the blue kerchief around his neck, dark and dripping. His face is creased with concern, deep lines around his mouth and eyes.

“Can you hear me, Sherlock? It’s me, John. Can you answer me?”

Sherlock wants to reach up and smooth the worried lines off of John’s beautiful face but he’s too weak to lift his hand.

“Sherlock, can you hear me?”

Sherlock can smell the fury of the storm on this John—he is drenched with sea spray, his body licked by foam. He smells of the ocean and the storm-split sky, like salt and chaos and the crash of the waves. Sherlock can feel the power thrumming off John’s torso—like a current, like a god’s curse, like a ragged crease of lightning as it cleaves the sky in two.

The force of John’s presence is so strong, Sherlock can feel it bending the walls of his narrow cabin, until it feels as though the wood will pop and split, like the slender ribcage of a bird crushed in the fist of a giant.

He is radiating light and heat, and Sherlock knows then that he was mistaken—John is no sea king, John’s power is the strength of the sun. His golden light fills up the tiny room, is filling up Sherlock’s chest, until Sherlock is certain he will burst open from the force of it.

Sherlock knows then that John has come from battling the sea, and John has won.

“Sherlock!”

The cool hands on his shoulders are shaking him, and Sherlock tries to answer, tries to tell him everything is fine now that John’s here, but his throat still aches, and he is too hot, too hot in spite of the cool presence of John’s hands on his body, and all he can manage is a moan.

“It’s all right. I’m here now. I’ve got you. We’re going to make you well again, in no time at all. Do you hear me, Sherlock?”

Sherlock tries to nod but he is worried now—John’s hands are gone and he hears the creak of a door opening, John’s voice in the distance, yelling for water, for clean towels, and then the sound of receding footsteps.

In his terror, he falls back into darkness, has almost slipped entirely beneath its surface when John’s voice returns, and with it, the feel of something lovely, damp, and cool, pressed to his forehead.
Sherlock whimpers again, this time in relief, and he feels John’s cool, dry fingers take his hand.

“Hush now, I’ve got you. You’re going to be all right now. I’ve got you. Everything is going to be just fine.”

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like to know what I've been listening to while I write this angst festival on the high seas, check out the mix I just posted for this story on 8tracks.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherlock’s dreams turn quieter then.
He dreams of a cool green place, full of trees.

John is there, sitting in the gold-flecked shadows, patting the ground beside him, motioning for Sherlock to come and sit.

Sherlock does. The grass is soft, the air sweet with the smell of flowers. He lays his head against John’s shoulder and John begins to sing.

The melody is beautiful but sad, the voice singing it low and full of longing. It makes Sherlock’s chest ache, fills him with an indefinable sorrow.

He turns to John, intending to offer him some comfort but the dream melts away and Sherlock hears John’s voice, now filled with fear, calling his name, asking him for something that Sherlock can’t make out.

He tries to ask John what he wants, tries to reassure him that he will give John anything, anything he asks for he but he cannot answer and then John’s voice is melting away too, despite how Sherlock tries to reach for it, to hold onto it in the burning darkness.

His dreams dissolve again, turning to a nightmarish patchwork of shadows and heat, punctuated at times with flashes of cool relief like veins of silver in a stretch of dry stone. In these moments, Sherlock imagines John is with him, his cupped palms full of water, holding them up to Sherlock’s mouth—but they never last, the water leaking from John’s fingers before they ever reach Sherlock’s mouth, and Sherlock is continuously turning, continuously reaching, his eyes burning, his throat full of dust.

Try as he might, he cannot fully wake. The walls of his cabin twist and bend, sometimes bleeding away altogether, and Sherlock looks out over the ocean, crystal blue and deep, stretching on and on forever until sky and sea become one entity.

John was right—the storm is over. Sherlock can tell by how calm the water is, how flat.

Sherlock is glad of this.

It means John is safe now.

But sometimes, he is not sure that John has survived. He wonders if he simply imagined John bending over his bed, dripping wet from the storm, his face licked raw by the waves and worry over Sherlock.

This is how Sherlock knows he dreamed the storm-dark, dripping John. The worry in John’s eyes—all for Sherlock—is nothing more than a figment of his imagination, and he cries out in terror then, because maybe John did not survive the storm after all, maybe they wrapped his body in a sail and dropped him over the side of the ship, or maybe John was torn off the rigging by the wind and his body will never be found.
Sherlock cries out, louder this time, twisting in fear, but then there is a low voice above him and cool hands on his forehead, stroking his hair back from his brow and Sherlock looks up to see John is there above him. Really there, pressing a cool cloth to Sherlock’s forehead, his voice low and soothing.

Sherlock opens his eyes wider, disbelieving.

John sits back, the damp cloth held tight in one hand, and Sherlock watches relief wash over his face like water from a burst dam.

“Oh, thank God,” he breathes, and Sherlock thinks for a moment that he sees tears standing out in the corners of John’s eyes, blurring the lovely blue of his irises. “Thank God.”

Then John smiles, so wide, so brilliantly that Sherlock feels as though the sun has burst through the walls of his cabin and he is being drenched in sunlight.

He tries to croak out a question, to ask how John could possibly be here, in Sherlock’s room, bending over him, the worry chased from his face like shadows in the presence of the sun.

But John shushes him when he tries to speak, lays a gentle hand on Sherlock’s shoulder to keep him from sitting up.

“Hush. I’ll answer every question you can think of later when you’re feeling stronger but for now, you need to rest.”

Sherlock licks his cracked lips, wide eyes still roaming disbelievingly over the John-shaped apparition that has appeared before him.

John cannot be here, sitting on an upturned bucket beside Sherlock’s bed, shirtsleeves rolled up above his elbows, haggard with exhaustion, grinning in relief.

Sherlock blinks hard, and opens his eyes again to find John still there.

He knows now he is no longer dreaming.

He can feel the soaked and filthy sheets beneath him, can see the faint beams of light filtering in through the cracks in the door from the passageway beyond, can feel the lank mass of his unkempt hair against his neck.

He stills feels weak and shuddery and thirsty—desperately thirsty—but he no longer feels the disorienting burn and ache of fever. He knows now that the fever has broken, and as he continues to gaze at John before him, taking in every detail of his exhausted face, it becomes immediately apparent that it is thanks to John that he made it through.

Sherlock’s cabin is no longer as hot it was before the storm but John is dressed only in his linen shirt and breeches. His waistcoat and jacket are slung over the back of Sherlock’s chair, the kerchief around his neck pulled loose.

His shirt is no longer drenched like it was in Sherlock’s dream—or was that a memory?—the kerchief around John’s neck now dry. A considerable amount of time must have passed if the presence of storm-drenched John in Sherlock’s cabin was indeed a memory and not a fever-induced hallucination.

The memory of that John—golden, god-like, brimming with the triumph of slaying the storm, stands in sharp contrast to the John before Sherlock now. He is still warm and golden but his
brightness seems to have diminished slightly, or, not diminished but calmed, turned soothing and gentle—the comforting warmth of a low-burning hearth rather than the raging fire of an angry star.

This John looks smaller, tired. There are dark lines under his eyes that speak of sleepless nights and Sherlock wonders suddenly how long he has been sick, how long John has been sitting by his side, pressing the cool cloth to his forehead again and again, urging water between his parched lips.

John sets the cloth back into the bowl of water at his feet and reaches for a cup behind him on Sherlock’s desk.

“Here, drink.”

He raises the cup to Sherlock’s lips and Sherlock drinks deeply, gratefully—drinks until he empties the cup.

John laughs and the sound is like music to Sherlock’s ears, like the clear, sharp notes of bells.

“Easy there. There hasn’t been much in you for several days. You need to go slow.”

Sherlock drops back against his pillow, exhausted just from the effort of lifting his head to drink.

He is desperate to know how long John has been beside him—how much of what he remembers from his fevered dreams is real, and how much imagined.

“How long have I been sick?” he rasps with effort.

“Shh. No more questions now.”

John bends over to reach for the cloth again, wringing it out in the basin before he lifts it, this time to place it on Sherlock’s chest, just below his collarbones where the neck of his nightshirt is stretched open.

The damp cloth is deliciously cool against his skin.

Sherlock shuts his eyes.

“I’ll tell you all about it when you’ve had some sleep.”

But perhaps John can sense Sherlock’s curiosity because he goes on to add, his voice softer, “I don’t know for certain how long you’ve been sick. I came to check on you as soon as the storm was over and found you burning up with fever. That was late yesterday afternoon. I didn’t think…”

John hesitates, something dark and fearful creeping into his voice.

At John’s hesitation Sherlock opens his eyes, looks up at him, curious.

John moves the cool cloth to Sherlock’s neck and Sherlock tilts his head back with gratitude, elongating his throat.

John is not looking in Sherlock’s eyes.

“I’ve seen a lot of fevers in my day—treated men, women, children, little babies in the grips of terrible illness. Some of them I saved. Some of them I couldn’t.” John shakes his head, moving the cloth to the place where Sherlock’s neck meets his shoulder. “I’ve never seen anyone survive a fever as bad as that.”
John’s eyes slide up to Sherlock’s. They are bright with pain.

“I didn’t think you were going to make it.”

There is an ache in John’s voice that makes Sherlock’s throat go dry, his chest pull tight with some sudden, sharp emotion. He looks up at John, at the sorrow in his eyes, the weariness, and knows in that moment how terrified John really was.

His mind floods suddenly with the image of John bent over him, one of Sherlock’s limp hands clasped tightly between his own, pressing it to his forehead, kissing the knuckles, prayers tumbling from his lips, whispering fierce and broken, over and over, for the fever to break, for Sherlock to be well again.

The image shimmers and dissolves as suddenly as it came like a stone shattering a reflection in still water. Sherlock cannot know what happened, but he does know that he is glad John is here now—that this is not a dream.

“Go to sleep now,” John says softly. “Sleep now and we’ll talk when you’re well again.”

Sherlock shuts his eyes, feels weariness pulling at him.

But his mind is restless, still reeling from the revelation that it was John who discovered he was ill; who stayed by his side and nursed him through what he now realizes must have been a deadly fever.

Sherlock cannot stop turning this impossible fact over in his mind, disbelieving.

And then something miraculous happens.

John begins to sing.

He starts out softly at first, his singing smooth and steady, keeping time perfectly with only the cadence of his own voice.

It is an old song, one Sherlock has never heard, but as soon as Sherlock hears John’s voice take up the notes, he knows that the John singing in his dreams was this same John, now sitting by his side.

John, singing to him, to bring his fever down.

Sherlock feels amazement filling him up, hot and sweet, like a mouthful of the strong spirits John drinks.

John’s voice is rich and lovely. He seems to know the rise and fall of the melody as well as he knows the feel of the ship under his feet, the rope under his hands. Sherlock can tell by the loving way John’s voice curls around the notes and seems to savor each one, that it is a song he has known a long time, that it means a great deal to him.

The music seems to creep inside Sherlock’s bones and draw his sickness out. John’s voice settles over him like cool water, slipping softly over his arms and legs, his stomach and chest, until he does not feel his exhaustion anymore. It is as though the cool weight of the song, the measured rhythm of the melody, is touching him all over.

This is John—John—singing to him; John letting music pour out of him just for Sherlock’s sake. Sherlock marvels.
He loves music.

It is the thing he has missed the most since leaving England.

In the Holmes’ vast manor house, if Mycroft was bothering him, if his parents were being tedious, then Sherlock could always slip away to some quiet corner and play his violin. It was his one solace in life, other than the woods.

Mycroft, of course, is a virtuoso at any instrument he touches. He plays several instruments beautifully but he doesn’t love playing any of them. Not particularly.

Sherlock, on the other hand, can play several instruments perfectly decently but the only one he has really taken to is the violin. He loves composing, but more than anything he loves to play.

Music is different than so many of the things Sherlock is fascinated with. It is complex and mathematical, and can be planned and calculated to a certain degree, but what Sherlock really loves about it is that quality that cannot be predicted or planned, that degree to which music is always just slightly beyond his grasp, so that when things are really working well, he is able to move beyond the structure, beyond the physical makeup of the instrument, and the mathematics of the composition.

It becomes about something else—something he cannot pin down, something he cannot touch, and that is the magic to Sherlock.

Of course, he never uses the word ‘magic’ to describe it, at least not out loud, but that’s what it is. It’s bigger than Sherlock himself, bigger than Mycroft, and Mummy and Daddy, and all the silly little people stumbling around in the world going about their everyday lives.

Music is bigger than all of that.

And Sherlock finds he misses it now more than any of his other solitary past times. It is the one activity he has always been able to escape to, that gives him some kind of meaning, that he feels is really all his own.

He brought his violin with him on this godforsaken voyage, but of course, in the close quarters of the ship, he hasn’t dared to play it.

It remains strapped under his bed in its case, wedged tightly between the wall and the wooden legs of Sherlock’s bed, untouched since the ship left port all those weeks ago.

He thinks of it now, distantly, as he listens to the lovely rise and fall of John’s voice. He thinks how he’d love to play for John, someday, in some universe, if ever he has the chance. Sherlock doubts the opportunity will present itself, but here, in the space between sleeping and waking, he can imagine his fiddle tucked under his chin as he pulls the bow across the strings, coaxing melodies out of the polished wood to bring a smile to John’s face.

Sherlock imagines how John would look at him if could hear Sherlock play—the way his eyes might crinkle at the corners with joy, or perhaps go smooth with contentment and peace—the way the light might pour out of him like when he smiles at Sherlock.

These thoughts lead Sherlock finally into a deep sleep during which he does not dream.

***
When Sherlock wakes again it is to the gentle presence of John’s hand on his shoulder.

Sherlock opens his eyes to John’s warm, golden smile unfolding all over his face.

Sherlock stares at John in wonder, realizing yet another thing about John Watson that is impossibly beautiful.

When he smiles, he smiles with his whole face—not just his mouth, not just his eyes, which crease becomingly at the corners, but every part of his face. The lines of worry, the grooves around his mouth are smoothed away; he seems to radiate light.

The expression on John’s face shifts to one of apology.

“I’m sorry to wake you. I’m off duty for the moment and won’t be able to get away later. I thought I’d better check in on you when I could.”

Sherlock wants to tell John that there is no reason to apologize. It is still unbelievable to him that John is here at all—not only in practical terms (how John managed to spend long enough away from his duties to tend to Sherlock is still a mystery to him), but that he should want to be here, at Sherlock’s sweat-drenched, shivery side is impossible for Sherlock to understand.

As he struggles for a way to put any of this into words, another smile breaks out on John’s face, as though he cannot help himself.

The effect it has on Sherlock is as visceral as the effect of the sun breaking suddenly through clouds.

“You look much better. How are you feeling?”

Sherlock is so busy studying each facet of John’s beaming face it takes him a moment to answer.

He sits up a little, considering.

Sherlock’s voice is hoarse with sleep. “Hungry.”

John laughs, and Sherlock wishes he could tuck the sound away, keep it in some hidden place so that he could have it always.

“I thought you might be.”

John reaches behind him for a bowl of something and Sherlock’s stomach grumbles at the smell of it.

“Nothing too exciting, I’m afraid. Just some watery porridge.”

John grins again and Sherlock is suddenly very glad he is lying in bed—the intensity of that smile directed at him is making him feel faint.

“Here, sit up a bit.”

Sherlock does, feeling more light-headed than ever as John reaches behind him to rearrange his pillow and help him into a sitting position.

It is more difficult than Sherlock imagined it would be to sit up, but he manages with John’s help.

John holds up the bowl of thin-looking porridge. Sherlock is so hungry its unappealing appearance
does not deter him. He reaches for it but John lays his hand on his arm and shakes his head.

“Lie back. You’re still too weak. Open your mouth.”

Sherlock does so, feeling like a baby bird.

John spoons the warm porridge into his mouth and Sherlock swallows hungrily, opens his mouth again.

John feeds him the whole bowl, slowly, forcing him to take long drinks of water in between.

When Sherlock has eaten it all, he lies back, feeling sleepy again.

John sets the empty bowl at his feet, reaching out to smooth Sherlock’s hair off his forehead.

Sherlock is too content to question the ease with which John completes this gesture. He feels drunk from the food and John’s warm presence—he can feel himself rising into the touch, back arching like a satisfied cat.

“How are you feeling now?” John asks, his voice as gentle as his hands.

Sherlock doesn’t answer. Instead, he shuts his eyes, and lets himself drift happily, savoring the feeling of John bending over him, his small hand so warm on Sherlock’s forehead.

“You gave me quite a scare, Sherlock Holmes,” John says, voice quieter than ever, his hand continuing to push the hair back off Sherlock’s forehead. “You must promise not to do that to me ever again.”

Sherlock opens his eyes and stares up at John in amazed disbelief.

He can’t not see it now—the way John cares for him. Sherlock is not simply imagining it. It is real, as real as the presence of John’s hand on Sherlock’s forehead.

He can see it now, but that does not mean he understands it.

A thousand questions swarm Sherlock’s mind. He bites his tongue in his efforts to quell the furor, tries to pick just one, decides to start with the most basic.

“How did you know? How did you know that I was ill?”

John keeps stroking Sherlock’s hair. There is no reason for him to do this. Sherlock hopes that he will never stop.

“The captain had us account for everyone once the storm was over. It was a bad one—as I’m sure you could tell. Almost snapped the foremast right in half. We had a hell of a time getting all the sails down in time.”

Sherlock blows out a long breath.

It was just as he suspected then. Of course it had been John up in the rigging in the height of the storm.

Sherlock shuts his eyes briefly, whispers a silent thank you to whoever might be listening for letting John survive.

“I knew that a storm was coming, and I had a feeling it would be a bad one so I urged the captain to
put the sails up before it hit. He wouldn’t hear of it. He told me there was no reason to take days out of our journey with no certainty of a storm.”

Sherlock watches the edge of John’s jaw harden, thinks of what he has seen of the ill-tempered captain, and marvels at the daring of John Watson to challenge this man.

“I couldn’t convince him. It was mayhem as soon as the winds started. He waited until the last possible second to give the order.”

Sherlock watches the hard line of John’s jaw tighten further and he knows there are words that John is holding behind his clenched teeth. Sherlock is about to tell John he need not censor himself for Sherlock’s sake, but then John continues speaking.

“After the storm, the captain ordered everyone up on deck to take an inventory. Most of the passengers were badly shaken, but no one was hurt, thank god. The only person unaccounted for was you. When I asked around, they said when they’d knocked on your door you didn’t answer. Apparently no one could be bothered to open the door to see why.” John’s voice takes on an edge of darkness Sherlock has seldom heard before. “I asked when last they’d seen you and when it became evident no one had seen you since before the storm, I worried some misfortune had befallen you. I had the steward show me to your room. When I knocked and received no answer, I went straight in, only to find you on the brink of death for a completely different reason.”

John’s voice is grim.

“It’s a good thing I found you when I did. Fever or not, if I hadn’t found you when I did you would have died of thirst.”

Sherlock’s mind is whirling.

He is still trying to absorb the fact that John worried enough to come looking for him. Even now that it’s apparent he has been ill for several days, he is not surprised in the least to hear that the other passengers couldn’t be bothered to look in on him. Indeed, he is surprised they noticed his absence at all.

“But how—how did you manage to stay with all of your work? How did you find the time?”

John sits up straighter, lets his hand drop from Sherlock’s forehead.

“I’ve tended to sick and injured men on this ship before. They know about my training as a surgeon—it proved useful during the war. They often took me away from my regular duties to help care for the wounded. The first time someone fell injured on this ship, I told them about my background, and they were eager to have the help. So every now and again when someone’s ill or injured, they give me a reprieve from my regular duties.”

John makes it sound as though it was easy to arrange but knowing the captain of this ship, Sherlock suspects there is more to the story.

Sure enough, John goes on to add, “I didn’t…” He clears his throat. “The captain doesn’t know about it. He likely wouldn’t approve, but I spoke with Lieutenant Lestrade. He’s a good man, and although he made it clear he wasn’t condoning my actions, he assured me he would let no word of it come to the captain through him.”

“What about your fellow crewmen?” Sherlock asks with sudden fear.

The captain’s cruelty, his lack of mercy when it comes to matters of discipline, is infamous. If the
captain learns of John’s transgression, John’s punishment will be severe, of that he has no doubt.

“What if they tell the captain?”

John shakes his head. “It’s a simple matter of swapping shifts. Besides, we trust one another. None of my men would ever peach.”

Despite the complete sincerity in John’s voice, fear still gnaws at Sherlock.

If John were made to suffer on his behalf…

Sherlock does not think he could live with himself.

“I’ve sailed with these men for a long time. We’re like a family. The captain on the other hand is a stranger to all of us. This is the first voyage we’ve sailed with him.”

Sherlock looks up, curious.

“Our previous captain fell ill just before we set sail. We did not know who would be commanding the vessel until the morning we left the harbor.”

Sherlock thinks back to see if he can recollect hearing any part of this, but then he remembers that he spent the majority of the coach ride, and several of the weeks leading up to his departure sullenly ignoring the whole of his family and all their conversation in protest. Little good it did him.

Sherlock realizes then, with a sudden lurching sensation, what it would have cost him if he had not come on this voyage—he never would have met John.

Sherlock feels a creeping dread steal over him just at the thought.

“Unfortunately, in spite of the generosity of my crewmates, there is only so long a sailor can vanish from his post before the captain takes note. Which is to say…” John offers him a small smile before standing. “I’d better get back up top.”

John stoops to pick up the empty bowl at his feet. Even though Sherlock knows John has taken far too many risks, has offered too much of himself already, Sherlock feels a pang at the thought that John must leave again so soon.

“It’s alright, you need to sleep.”

At first, Sherlock thinks John has noticed his sorrow and he feels a hot wave of embarrassment move through him, but then he realizes John is not looking at him at all. He is staring at the empty bowl in his hands, and in that moment, Sherlock wonders if John isn’t in fact saying it to comfort himself.

“I’m only thankful you made it out of danger before my absence became too noticeable.”

Sherlock thinks again of what John must have looked like crouched beside his bed, dipping rag after rag into cold water, wringing them out over him in his desperation to bring Sherlock’s fever down, trying to force water between his dry lips.

Sherlock has only seen someone in the grips of a dangerous fever once before. When he was a boy, Mycroft had fallen ill and come very close to death.

Sherlock was small at the time but he remembers distinctly how his parents had looked huddled in
grave conference with the doctor, the grim set of the doctor’s mouth, how he had shaken his head.

Sherlock had been certain in that moment that his brother would not live to see another day.

Of course, Mycroft had survived, much to Sherlock’s later dismay, but he will never forget the sight of his older brother, pale and sweating, his skin like wax, muttering, restless, his eyes unseeing while death hung like a specter over the shuttered room.

John said earlier this morning that he came to check on Sherlock yesterday afternoon. Sherlock is certain now that John did not leave his side from that time to when the fever broke earlier today, which means that John stayed with him all through that afternoon and night, wide-awake, working tirelessly to try and bring his fever down.

If Sherlock was as sick as John says, how he must have worried.

Sherlock can tell by the slant of the light coming in under the door that it is early evening, and he knows that John has to leave, but he has one more question. It is the most pressing one of all.

On any other occasion, Sherlock would not have the nerve to ask it, but something about the mournful way John is studying the empty bowl in his hands gives Sherlock courage.

“Why?” he asks, his voice the barest whisper. “Why are you doing all this for me?”

John’s eyes flicker up to Sherlock’s. His expression is one of mild surprise.

When he answers his voice has the tone of someone stating the obvious. “You would have died if I didn’t.”

In spite of his better judgment, Sherlock feels a sinking feeling at John’s words.

Of course.

John is a good man. He was trained to be a surgeon. He helps people; he likes to help people. He wouldn’t have stood by and let a man die if he knew he could do something about it.

He has no special affection for Sherlock; he simply believes everyone deserves to be treated well, that every life has value. The sad truth is that Sherlock has such little practice with being treated as though his life has meaning that he didn’t even recognize this basic level of respect as normal treatment.

How quickly he began to suspect it was something more than it was. He’s so starved for affection he’s like a stray dog gobbling down whatever scraps he can find, savoring each one as though it were a delicacy.

Pathetic.

Sherlock nods in response to John’s words, his eyes falling to his lap, trying to hide his disappointment.

However, John must notice he has said something amiss because he goes on talking, as though trying to amend what he just said.

“And because I like you.”

There is something like longing in John’s voice.
It’s unmistakable, but Sherlock cannot trust his senses anymore, cannot trust his judgment of simple statements such as the one John has just uttered. He wants too much not to read into it. He cannot stop himself from reading his own desires in everything John does and says.

He keeps his eyes firmly in his lap.

“Oh, Sherlock, don’t you know?”

All of a sudden, John drops back to sitting at Sherlock’s side, a change coming over his voice.

“How can you not know?”

Sherlock’s head snaps up in disbelief.

There are so many different emotions in John’s voice; Sherlock is desperate to try and decipher each one—sorrow, astonishment, fondness; regret.

“No wonder you ran away from me.”

Sherlock’s voice is stiff with pain. “I didn’t run away.”

“You did,” John says, shaking his head, but there is joy somewhere in the depths of his voice. “Oh, I’m such a fool. Can you forgive me?”

Sherlock’s mind is racing. There is too much new information—too many emotions. He cannot process it all at once.

His throat is suddenly very dry. “Forgive you for what?”

“For failing utterly to convey my true feelings.”

He has to ask. If he doesn’t ask, he may never know. His instincts are telling him to keep quiet—not to embarrass himself; not to reveal his stupidity, but in spite of all his doubt, Sherlock forces his mouth open.

“I don’t—” he ventures, his voice still very stiff. He tries again. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

John’s eyes have gone impossibly soft—all the lines in his face smoothed away by tenderness.

“I thought you knew. I thought you knew how I felt about you.”

Sherlock’s next question is so quiet he’s half-afraid John won’t hear him—his voice the merest scrape of a whisper.

“How do you feel about me?”

Sherlock watches John’s fingers tightening suddenly on the empty bowl in his hands.

John’s eyes are like two stars in the dim room—Sherlock can see them burning.

“There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you.”

The world seems to freeze around Sherlock. He holds his breath, certain he has misheard.

“I noticed you a while back, watching me around the ship, and I couldn’t stop thinking about
you… but really it started the first time we spoke, that day I showed you how to do the knots.”

John’s expression grows shy, his eyes dropping to his hands.

Sherlock’s whole body is tingling. He feels as though he has caught fire.

“Don’t ask me to explain it,” John says, his own voice just above a whisper. “Because I can’t. I truly can’t. But there it is.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say. He can scarcely believe his own ears—much less determine how on earth he can find the courage to tell John that he feels the same way.

John moves to stand up again and the spell is broken.

“You need to rest.”

Sherlock wants to protest but he still doesn’t know what to say, how to put all of what he is feeling into words.

He still cannot believe that it’s true.

“Rest,” John says, stooping down to press a kiss to Sherlock’s brow. “We’ll talk when you’re well again.”

Sherlock is floating somewhere above his bed—his body has ceased to contain him.

John bends to set the bucket right ways up and then pauses, seems to notice something under the bed.

Sherlock realizes what it is at once. There’s only one thing underneath his bed—his violin.

“Do you play?” John asks, straightening up, eyes bright.

Sherlock nods, unable to speak, still floating somewhere above himself.

The joy on John’s face is like that of a small child’s—absolutely pure.

“Oh.” John’s expression is rapturous, full of longing. “We haven’t had a fiddler on board since Danny left. Would you play for us sometime? The men would kill for a bit of fiddle music.”

Sherlock hesitates—the terrifying prospect of playing for a crowd of strangers momentarily drowning out his intense desire to bring happiness to John, but at the transported expression on John’s face, he cannot help but nod.

Holding the empty porridge bowl in one hand, and reaching behind him to pull his waistcoat and jacket off the back of Sherlock’s chair with another, John slings the garments over his shoulder before turning back to Sherlock.

“Sleep now. I’ll stop back to check on you when I’m off duty next.”

John puts a hand on the door before turning back around.

“You need to get well again quick so we can have another boxing lesson. I’m not letting you off the hook until you can best me in a fight.”

John’s grin is like a bolt of lightning through Sherlock’s heart.
“And I still have lots to teach you.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for reading, my lovelies. <3

I'm posting this from the youth hostel on my last night in Copenhagen-*SOB* In many ways, this chapter is brought to you by the city of Copenhagen, and several costly minutes writing in the courtyard of the Royal Danish Naval Museum. For more details on this particular adventure, look here.

Also, please give a listen to the mix I made while writing this story. Lots of sea ballads and fiddly goodness.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Sherlock takes a bath.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John’s promise works better than any medicine he could have given Sherlock.

Sherlock focuses all of his energy on getting well. He is desperate to regain his strength so that he can leave the tedious confines of his cabin and spend time once again with John up on deck.

He is determined to get well again as soon as possible, and when Sherlock is determined about something, rest assured, he will accomplish it, and he will accomplish it quickly.

Never was there a more willing patient.

John has assured him that sleep is the most important thing he can do for his body to ensure its recovery—that, and eating and drinking to keep up his strength.

So Sherlock does nothing but sleep for the next two days (granted it’s not difficult to do, as he is weary to the bone), he drinks as much water as he can, and he swallows down every spoonful of the thin gruel that John brings him, even though he quickly grows tired of the taste.

“Soon you’ll be able to have real food again,” John tells him. “Well, as real as food gets on a vessel of Her Majesty’s Navy, which isn’t much more appealing than this, I’m sorry to say.”

True to John’s word, the bowls of porridge gradually transform into the regular ship’s fare, and Sherlock dutifully cleans every plate—no matter how unappealing, no matter his lack of appetite.

Someone must have a word with the steward because when John is not there to bring him his meals, the steward will appear grudgingly outside Sherlock’s door, bearing a tray.

Clearly, that someone is John, although Sherlock is not sure how he manages it. It’s unheard of for a sailor to dictate conditions for a passenger—even a passenger with Sherlock’s background.

Sherlock suspects that the silver-haired Lieutenant who was so unexpectedly kind to him might have something to do with it.

If so, Sherlock vows to convey his gratitude as soon as he is well again.

John stops by whenever he can to see how Sherlock is getting along.

His visits are rare moments of brightness in the otherwise dark stretch of hours as Sherlock waits for his ailing body to recover.

Following John’s advice is easy at first. Sherlock is so exhausted after fighting off the fever that he can scarcely manage to do little else other than sleep for the first two days.
After that, however, it becomes more difficult.

Sherlock has always suffered from boredom, but now, confined to his cabin for hours at a time, staring endlessly at the same four wooden walls with nothing to occupy his mind, no sound around him other than the continuous, monotonous creaking of the ship and the occasional murmur of voices in the corridor, Sherlock’s overactive mind feels as though it will tear itself to pieces.

If it weren’t for John’s visits (which Sherlock looks forward to with single-minded eagerness), and John’s promise to resume their boxing lessons as soon as Sherlock is strong enough, Sherlock is certain he would go mad.

When John is there, everything is different.

Sherlock could spend all day listening to John talk, perched on the end of his bed, telling Sherlock about the work he’s done that day, recounting the gossip from the ship, his jacket slung over the back of Sherlock’s chair, his eyes glittering in the low light of Sherlock’s cabin.

Sherlock doesn’t speak much, but he listens with rapt focus, studying John’s hands, his face while he talks, sometimes when he grows tired, shutting his eyes and letting the low murmur of John’s voice wash over him.

The most remarkable thing about John’s visits is that John seems to understand that even when Sherlock isn’t speaking, he is completely engaged, completely content. He is somehow able to sense Sherlock’s enjoyment even through his reticence, which fills Sherlock with a deep, incredulous gratitude.

He has never met anyone who isn’t unnerved by his tendency to quietly absorb the world around him without speaking. Most people ply him with questions; consider it strange that he will often go for entire days without saying a word.

John, on the other hand, clearly doesn’t mind at all.

He carries on talking even when Sherlock closes his eyes, sometimes reaching down to smooth Sherlock’s hair off his forehead, which Sherlock enjoys more than he can possibly put into words. So he doesn’t try to, he simply simmers with silent pleasure, sometimes turning his head on the pillow to move it closer to John’s hand.

If Sherlock ever doubted John’s assertion that he cares for Sherlock, he cannot possibly doubt it now, in light of everything that John has done to keep him alive—everything he continues to do.

But still, impossibly, Sherlock does doubt.

Every time John appears in Sherlock’s doorway, that brilliant smile unfolding all over his face, Sherlock wonders if he isn’t dreaming, if all of this isn’t simply one long, mad hallucination.

But then John sits down beside him and takes Sherlock’s hand between his own to feel his pulse and Sherlock can smell the lovely smell that he has come to recognize as distinctly John’s—the faint scent of sweat and pipe tobacco, the brine of the ocean. He can feel John’s strong fingers framing the bones in his wrist, can see the fine shadows cast by John’s eyelashes—the color of autumn wheat in sunlight, can hear the quiet rhythm of John’s breathing as he counts the beats of Sherlock’s heart, and he knows that what’s happening is real (he can’t deny that level of visceral sensory input), and Sherlock doesn’t know what he has ever done to deserve this.

He and John have not spoken of their conversation again. Sherlock tells himself that John will be true to his word; that he is waiting for Sherlock to get well again before they discuss the issue
further, and he is not sure whether he is relieved for the chance to try and summon the courage to communicate to John that he feels the same way, or disappointed that the matter has not yet come up.

Either way, he tries as hard as possible to banish the issue from his mind and concentrate instead on getting well.

“You’re quite good at this, you know,” John says one day, after Sherlock has eaten every crumb off the plate John has brought him, drained the jug of water beside his bed.

“Good at what?” Sherlock asks, sitting up a little straighter, eager for any bit of praise John has to offer.

“ Recovering from the brink of death.”

John looks Sherlock over with something like amazement in his eyes.

“Most people take weeks to recover from a fever like that. You’re looking almost completely well again, and it’s only been a few days.”

Sherlock beams silently in the wake of this assessment.

“I imagine by tomorrow morning you’ll be well enough to be up and about again.”

Sherlock takes this evaluation to heart.

The next morning, as soon as he wakes, he swings his legs over the side of his bunk and pushes himself to standing.

He wobbles for a moment, clutching the side of the bed, feeling the weakness in his legs that comes from nearly a week of lying on his back, but he remains upright, waits for the initial shakiness to pass before taking several tentative steps.

He keeps one hand on the bed for balance. The movement of the ship today is not particularly violent, but neither is it completely calm. It takes Sherlock several minutes of walking back and forth to remember how to compensate for the constant rolling motion, how to walk without falling over.

He keeps at it until he can walk the length of his room without holding onto the bed—and without falling over. As soon as he accomplishes this goal and has dropped back to sitting on the bed, he is disappointed to find that he is exhausted from the endeavor.

Before he can decide what set of exercises to do next, he has fallen asleep.

When Sherlock wakes, hours later, it is to the sound of John, shutting the door behind him, setting something heavy on the floor at his feet before turning around.

Curious, Sherlock sits up and tries to peer around John to see what it is.

“How are you feeling today?” John asks, coming towards the bed, and Sherlock is certain there is an extra spring in his step, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth that he is trying to suppress.

“Better,” Sherlock says, and means it.

“You look better.”
John seats himself on the edge of Sherlock’s bunk and reaches out to take Sherlock’s wrist, feeling for his pulse.

Sherlock tries again to lean around John to see what it is John has set on the floor, and John makes a small stern noise.

“Bit difficult to take the pulse of a patient who won’t sit still.”

Sherlock freezes, momentarily chastened, but he can see the humor in John’s eyes and the shame that threatened briefly to engulf him evaporates in an instant. He is about to open his mouth to ask John what it is when John sits back.

“There, all done. You can squirm as much as you like now.”

Sherlock looks and sees that the heavy thing John has set by the door is a bucket of water—water so hot he can see steam rising from its surface.

“I thought you might like to have a bath.”

Sherlock stares at the steaming bucket for several moments in utter disbelief, before lifting his eyes to John’s face in incredulous wonder.

Any bathing that takes place on the ship is done with cold water. Hot water is a luxury that the passengers and crew cannot afford for an act as frivolous as bathing.

“How did you—?”

The delighted expression on John’s face is enough to make Sherlock weak with gratitude. The thought of washing himself with hot water—of being able to get clean again, properly clean—is so delicious a prospect, Sherlock wonders for a moment if he actually might faint.

“I’m a member of the crew. I have access to the kitchens on the days I cook. I finished the washing up early, and we had a bit extra so…” John shrugs, grinning. “I thought I’d bring you some. I know that if anyone on this ship would appreciate it at the moment, it’s you.”

Sherlock knows there is no such thing as extra fresh water on a voyage of this duration, but John’s lie just makes the appearance of the bucket all the more miraculous.

Sherlock stares at the steaming bucket for another few moments in mesmerized rapture.

He is certain there are people on the ship who need it more than he does, people who might deserve it more than him, but John is right about one thing, and that is the fact that there cannot possibly be another person on this ship who will appreciate it more than Sherlock.

Never in his life has he longed for a bath as badly as he does now. He’s fantasized about baths for weeks at sea, with only the occasional basin of cold water to splash on his hands and face. Granted, the small bucket of hot water is not large enough for Sherlock to immerse himself in fully, not like a proper bath, but just the fact that the water is clean and hot is a wonderful prospect.

Especially now, after a week of lying in his own sick and sweat, his body sour, thick with filth, his hair a matted tangle at the back of his neck, Sherlock cannot imagine anything he could possibly want more.

Sherlock looks back up at John with shining eyes, utterly unable to convey the extent of his gratitude.
“Thank you,” he whispers, knowing it is not enough—it is nowhere near enough—how could it be?

But John seems pleased by his response. His smile grows wider, even as his eyes soften with affection.

Sherlock holds his gaze.

He sees something else there, in the corners of John’s smile, in the depths of his eyes, that makes warmth uncurl low in his belly.

Sherlock drops his eyes, overcome.

“Well, I suppose I should leave you to it,” John says, rising to his feet.

The tension of the moment has broken, but Sherlock can still feel his heart beating too fast in his chest. His cheeks feel warm, his limbs loose and shivery. He swallows the feeling down, lifts his eyes back up to John’s to see John looking at him with gentle concern.

“So unless, of course, you need my help.”

Sherlock feels his cheeks flush scarlet.

“N-no,” he blurts out, too fast, his voice full of panic. “No—it’s fine. I don’t need help.”

John is clever enough to hide his smile with the back of his hand, but Sherlock can still see it, peeking out at the corners, and he’s not sure whether he is pleased by the sight of it, or more embarrassed still.

“I walked a bit this morning, just back and forth beside the bed, but… I managed fine.”

“Good.” John’s voice is suddenly warm with praise. “That’s really good.”

Sherlock can feel himself responding to John’s approval, physically opening up, like a flower opening its petals in the heat of the sun. He doesn’t dare look up at John in that moment, for fear he will catch flame.

“I brought you a bit of soap too… in case you didn’t have any.”

John pulls out a fat cake of soap and sets it on the corner of the desk.

He clears his throat, suddenly business-like. “I’ll come back in a little while to get the bucket.”

Sherlock wants to say something else—wants to say a hundred things to attempt to convey his gratitude but all that comes out is another hushed thank you, his eyes fixed firmly in his lap.

Even as he says it he feels his cheeks burn hotter.

He doesn’t dare look up again until he hears the soft sound of the door closing behind John.

Sherlock waits until the sound of John’s footsteps have died away, before looking up at the fresh cake of soap John has left on the desk, the bucket of steaming water, and he feels a delicious shiver of anticipatory pleasure move through him.

He wastes no time climbing out of bed and stripping off his filthy nightshirt, rummaging around for the sponge he has in his things.
As Sherlock stoops over the steaming bucket, immersing the sponge and his hands up to the wrist, his breath leaving him in a wordless sigh of pleasure at the feeling of all that hot, clean water, he takes a moment to be grateful for the fact that he did indeed practice walking on his own this morning, because the thought of bending naked over the bucket in the presence of John Watson—his strong fingers framing Sherlock’s hips to support him—is enough to make Sherlock drop the sponge.

He wastes several precious seconds (the water is getting cooler every moment, and he cannot afford to let a second of it go to waste), watching the sponge bob on the surface of the water as he thinks about how it would have gone—John guiding Sherlock gently out of bed, instructing him to lift his arms so he could pull his nightshirt off, then sliding an arm around Sherlock’s bare waist to help walk him towards the bucket, telling Sherlock softly, his mouth so close to Sherlock’s ear, “Lean on me. Give me your weight. I’ve got you.”

At the thought of that—John’s warm arm around his naked waist—Sherlock gives a little cry, and has to lower himself to his knees beside the bucket, as he is suddenly incapable of supporting his own weight.

He clenches his teeth, steeling himself against the current of distracting thoughts that has opened up inside him, as though just being alone and without clothing is enough to flip open the lid on a chest that Sherlock keeps locked tight, full of all the things he has been trying not to think about for the past week—of how John would feel against him, touching him—his mouth on Sherlock’s body.

Sherlock shakes his head and grabs for the sponge, resolutely pushing the thoughts aside.

He manages to keep his mind carefully blank as he begins to wash himself, stooped over the bucket, letting the warm water sponge down over his back, his legs. He splashes it under his arms, over his neck and chest, before reaching for the cake of soap and lathering it between his hands.

He isn’t sure where John managed to find the soap—he knows everything on the ship is carefully rationed, and he is certain no sailor is entitled to a piece this big—but oh, he is grateful for it.

He scrubs it over every part of himself he can reach, grateful for the scouring, abrasive quality it has, scrubbing himself until his pale skin turns pink, washing away weeks of dirt and grime and sweat, before dipping the sponge back in the water and rinsing it all away.

He is making a mess of the floor, but Sherlock reasons the floor is just as filthy as he has been and could do with a bit of a wash anyway.

It feels wonderful, and Sherlock loses himself in the sensation of the slightly rough texture of the sponge scratching between his shoulder blades, scrubbing the back of his neck.

He dips his whole head in the bucket, bent over on his hands and knees—feeling like a dog, not caring in the slightest—rakes his soapy fingers through his bedraggled curls, trying to work the knots out.

However, his fingers aren’t enough this time. He reaches for the comb he keeps, bending his head over the bucket as he begins to work the teeth through the ragged snarl of his hair, wincing at the pressure on his sensitive scalp, water running down his naked arms to form a puddle on the floor beneath him.

It takes him a while to comb all the tangles out. By the time he dunks his head back in the bucket to rinse out the soap, the water is lukewarm, no longer as clean as it was at the start.
He saves the area between his legs for last—lathering up his palms with the now considerably smaller lump of soap—and as his hand works under himself, over and around all his most sensitive parts, he cannot help but imagine what it would feel like if it were John’s hands on him instead of his own, helping him, cleaning him so gently.

Sherlock is feeling fatigued by this point, worn out from the exertion of washing himself. He’s still kneeling by the bucket and he lets himself lean back a little, sitting on his haunches. What if he was too weak to go on washing himself? What if John were here with him, and he had to take over at this point?

Sherlock imagines John sitting behind him on the floor, his strong chest against Sherlock’s back—he would have taken his shirt off, Sherlock reasons, so as not to get it wet. He would have one arm wrapped around Sherlock’s waist, holding Sherlock to him, as his other hand works gently to clean between Sherlock’s legs.

Sherlock imagines John’s breath, warm against his ear; his mouth tucked in close, asking Sherlock, “Is this alright? Am I being too rough?” and Sherlock’s answer is one long exhalation of pleasure, sinking back into John with gratitude, his bones like butter.

He is barely able to answer so he just shakes his head, and at that motion, the movement of John’s hand changes deliberately from washing to stroking.

Sherlock can hear John’s breath catch behind him at the feel of Sherlock, stiffening in John’s hand, lengthening and thickening until he is red and swollen, and Sherlock cannot help but hitch his hips up with a small, plaintive sound, desperate for John to stroke faster, to take more of him in hand—the soap, stinging slightly as John begins to pull the skin back at the tip.

“You’re sure, this is—this is alright?” John’s voice would be breathless, the words seeming to stick in his throat.

Sherlock can hear him licking his lips, and he would wet his own mouth in sympathy before turning around in John’s arms to answer him without speaking, pressing his own flushed mouth against John’s in wordless assent.

John’s hand would stroke faster then, his other hand slipping down to grasp Sherlock hard by the hip. Sherlock would help him by thrusting upward, pushing himself into John’s hand to help him find the right pace.

When John found it—his clever fingers so adept at braiding and sewing and climbing equally adroit at finding the precise way to bring Sherlock pleasure—Sherlock would not be able to stop himself from crying out against John’s mouth, a whine building low and desperate in the base of his throat, and John would kiss him harder, the hand on Sherlock’s hip coming up to hold Sherlock so gently by the place where his jaw meets his ear, and that is the gesture that will push Sherlock over the edge—that tender placement of John’s fingers on his jaw line, dragging the orgasm out of him in a burst of light.

Sherlock stiffens, puts a hand up over his mouth to stifle his cry of pleasure as heat blooms long and golden all through him—uncoiling in a lovely spiral that leaves him shivering and weak, working his palm one final time over the sensitive head, pulling one last pulse of warm liquid out of him to coat his fingers.

It takes several moments before Sherlock can open his eyes again, and remember he is sitting on the damp floor of his cabin, naked and wet—fingers still slippery with soap. The bucket of water is cold beside him.
He makes short work of cleaning the last of himself with the cold, dingy water, and then rubbing himself dry with the length of clean fabric he uses for a towel, scrubbing his skin until it is warm and tingling.

He wrings out the sponge, sets the cake of soap back on the corner of his desk, and dresses himself—feeling more awake, more alive than he has felt in days. He has forgotten how good it feels to be properly clean.

He stretches out on his bed to wait for John’s return, but the effort of bathing (and the other activity Sherlock engaged in) wore him out more than he realized because the next thing he knows he is waking up to the gentle creak of the door.

Sherlock sits up, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, yawning so wide his jaw cracks.

John stands in the doorway, grinning.

The sun must be shining up on deck—the warmth of his hair, the brilliant white of his teeth in his tan face seem to carry the sunlight with him into Sherlock’s dim cabin. The room feels brighter and warmer just from his presence.

“How was your bath?”

Sherlock flushes scarlet from the roots of his hair all the way down to his toes.

He cannot meet John’s eyes.

“It was fine, thank you,” he says, graciously to the floor.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.” He can hear the smile in John’s voice even without looking at him.

“You look… nice.”

Sherlock’s flush, impossibly, burns hotter.

He is certain he will die of joy.

“I came to ask if you’d like to venture up on deck, get a bit of fresh air before nightfall. It’s a gorgeous evening, and I’d be happy to accompany you. That is,” he goes on to add, “In case the stairs prove too much.”

In his eagerness, Sherlock forgets that he is too embarrassed to make eye contact. He looks up in undisguised longing. “Oh, will you?”

John’s answering smile warms Sherlock all through.

“Of course.”

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Sherlock follows John out of his room and down the creaking corridor. He manages all right on his own until they reach the bottom of the first staircase. He steels himself for the ascent but then, before he can even ask for help, John’s hand comes out and settles in the small of Sherlock’s back, supporting him gently from behind as he climbs, holding tight to the railing.

The sea is relatively calm tonight, the rocking motion of the ship subdued, but still, Sherlock is grateful for that little bit of pressure at his back, the reassurance that John is there to catch him should he slip.
He makes it to the top of the stairs, and has to pause to catch his breath.

John’s hand stays against him while he waits, and suddenly, Sherlock is flooded with the memory of the last time he thought about John’s hands on his body. He takes a deep breath, forces his mind to think cool, neutral thoughts as he turns to climb the next staircase.

When they reach the open air of the upper deck, and Sherlock feels the wind on his face, the sensation is so welcome, so refreshing, he almost stumbles in his relief. But John’s hand is still there at the small of his back, supporting him, and when Sherlock lurches, John’s other hand comes forward, lightning-quick, to catch Sherlock around the waist and keep him from falling to the deck.

“Easy now,” he says, guiding Sherlock over to the railing where he can hold on and look out over the sea.

Sherlock never thought he’d consider the sight of the ocean a welcome one, but after nearly a week confined to his cabin below decks, the sight of that deep blue horizon on all sides feels as soothing to his eyes as a drink of cool water to his parched throat.

John was right—the evening is a beautiful one.

The sun has set just moments before, the traces of its descent evident in the streaks of pink lingering over the horizon. The rest of the sky is a rich, powdery blue—deepening to purple where the light has begun to leave the sky. In the east, under a thin layer of fragile clouds, the first stars are beginning to emerge.

There is a group of passengers on the other side of the deck, enjoying the evening air, but they are standing far enough away that Sherlock cannot make out the individual words of their conversation, and it is easy to imagine the low murmur of their voices is just the sound of the wind.

The air is soft on Sherlock’s face, but cool. A breeze pulls at the damp tendrils of hair on his forehead, and Sherlock shuts his eyes, drinks it in.

He listens to the creak of the ship beneath them, the low swish of the water rushing by against the hull, and for the first time in a long time, feels utterly at peace.

John stands close beside him, doesn’t say a word, and Sherlock basks quietly in his nearness, feels his body sway closer as though of its own volition.

Sherlock opens his eyes to see John’s hand holding the railing beside his own.

He looks up to see John watching him, his eyes soft and fond. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

John’s hand is so close to Sherlock’s there is scarcely the width of a finger between them.

For the second time since he’s known John, Sherlock takes a risk.

He readjusts his grip on the railing, settling his hand close enough so that his little finger brushes against John’s.

John takes the hint.

He picks his hand up and settles it over Sherlock’s, so that his fingers are covering Sherlock’s where they hold the banister, giving them a gentle squeeze.
Sherlock let his fingers curl slightly off the wood so that they can wrap around John’s.

“So am I,” Sherlock whispers, and he means it.

For maybe the first time in his life, he’s truly grateful to be alive.

He turns his hand so that the back of it is pressed against the wood, tilting his palm up until it fits neatly against John’s.

John laces their fingers together and Sherlock burns with happiness—the intensity of his feelings so silent, so furious he is certain they will burn right through him and reduce him to ash.

They stand like that, without speaking, hands clasped together against the railing until the light has faded completely from the sky and the sea below them is lit by nothing but starlight.

Sherlock listens to the voices of the other passengers recede into the darkness as they descend the stairs below decks, leaving only he and John in this particular corner of the ship, and for a moment he can imagine it is just the two of them onboard, just the two of them alone on the impossible vastness of the open ocean, now transformed into a glittering mirror of the night sky above.

He turns in the darkness to see John studying their clasped hands.

When John’s eyes meet Sherlock’s they are questioning.

“May I?” he asks, gesturing to their hands.

Sherlock nods, his mouth suddenly very dry.

John lifts their joined hands off the railing, turning them so he can study the backs of Sherlock’s long fingers.

“My god,” he breathes, looking at Sherlock’s fingers where they curl around his own. Sherlock’s fingers are so long they easily span the entirety of John’s hand. “Your hands.”

“What about them?” Sherlock asks, an irrational dagger of fear lodged in his throat.

His hands are giant’s hands compared to John’s small, strong ones—Sherlock’s fingers long and spindly, ghostly white, pale in the darkness against the warmer tones of John’s sun-browned skin.

Sherlock looks at John’s neat, square, capable fingers where they meet his own, feels where the pads of John’s fingers are rough with calluses, sees where the skin over his knuckles is scored with scar tissue, and thinks how slender, how useless are his own comically large hands.

“They’re beautiful.”

It’s happening again, Sherlock thinks. He’s hearing emotions in John’s voice that surely cannot be there, but he can’t be mistaken this time. The reverence in John’s tone is so sincere it’s almost worshipful.

John lifts Sherlock’s fingers until they are inches from his mouth.

His eyes flicker up to Sherlock’s. They are deep blue in the shadows, as dark as the ocean around them.

When he speaks, his voice is almost too low for Sherlock to hear.
“May I kiss you?” John asks.

Sherlock’s heart is pounding so hard he can taste it in the back of his mouth.

He licks his lips, gone impossibly dry.

“What did you say?”

“I asked, if I could kiss you.”

John’s mouth is so close to his hand Sherlock can feel the heat of John’s breath against his knuckles.

All thoughts leave Sherlock’s mind. He is an empty vessel. He cannot think.

“Just here…” John clarifies, lowering his mouth to the skin of Sherlock’s hand, his voice a murmur of heat. “Just on the hand.”

Yes! Sherlock thinks violently inside his own head but he cannot speak—his voice has abandoned him.

Luckily, John’s eyes are still turned up toward him so he cannot mistake the wild nodding of Sherlock’s head, even in the dark.

“Oh good,” John sighs, lowering his mouth to graze Sherlock’s hand, his eyes fluttering shut as he presses his lips so softly to the skin over Sherlock’s knuckles.

Sherlock studies the fringe of John’s eyelashes against his cheeks, shining silver in the starlight, the press of his mouth so warm, and Sherlock is frozen in time—he is suspended in a drop of amber, his blood turned to molten fire in his veins.

Sherlock is burning—he is burning up. He has become an inferno of want, of longing.

The touch of John’s lips against his skin tears open a hole inside of him that can only be filled by more of John—all of him—against Sherlock, now, now, at once.

Before Sherlock can even begin to catalogue the firestorm of different sensations and desires that have arisen in the wake of John’s chaste kiss, John has lowered Sherlock’s hand, and Sherlock can hear that he is speaking to him, telling Sherlock something that is likely important.

It takes all of Sherlock’s effort to tune back in.

“…back to work I’m afraid, but I’ll walk you back down first.”

Sherlock realizes John needs a sign from him to show that he has heard, so he nods his head in mute agreement, and then he is walking—somehow, miraculously—his legs are doing what they need to do to carry him forward and down the narrow steps into the hold, John following just behind him to be sure he doesn’t fall.

Far too soon, Sherlock is standing outside the door of his cabin and John is murmuring good night, raising Sherlock’s fingers to his mouth once again, and Sherlock will die—he will surely die—if John does not stay and continue kissing him—if he does not turn Sherlock’s hand over and kiss his palm, his wrist, following the pale blue tracery of veins up Sherlock’s arm, kissing all the way up until his mouth finds Sherlock’s.

Instead, after one final squeeze of his fingers, he is sliding his hand out of Sherlock’s and vanishing.
into the shadows at the bottom of the stairs, leaving Sherlock to stand, clutching the door handle for dear life, his legs suddenly useless beneath him.

His legs are so weak the few steps it takes to cross the narrow distance from Sherlock’s doorway to his bunk are more precarious than any of Sherlock’s earliest, clumsiest attempts to walk at sea.

The effort of removing his clothes takes all his energy—he has to do it sitting down. It takes him twice as long as it normally would, his fingers listless and fumbling over every button, every clasp, completing the motions without seeing what’s in front of him, his eyes staring into the distance like a man in a trance.

When he finally stretches out in bed, years could have passed—the ship could have capsized, been taken by pirates, been blown to pieces by enemy fire—and Sherlock would have no idea.

He feels weak, insubstantial, like he might be floating apart.

Sherlock lies in his bunk in the darkness, holding his knuckles against his mouth, pressing his lips to the place where John’s lips touched him only moments before—the heat from John’s mouth living somewhere inside him, warming him all through.

His bones may have turned to water but his heart remains aflame.

In spite of the weariness of his body, his exhaustion from all that he has done that day, Sherlock’s body is wide-awake. It is lit up, singing, dragged to sudden vivid life by the touch of John’s lips against his skin.

He is torn between his desire to live forever in that memory, in that moment with John’s mouth so soft against him, and his longing for more of John, all of him—to leap into a possible future world where that might happen. He does not even know what it is he wants precisely, except that he wants more.

He will burn up in the fire of his longing, and still he will carry on burning until there is nothing left of him—nothing but embers and ash.

He falls asleep with the knuckles of his left hand still held against his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it!

Sailorlock playlist can be found here.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

More boxing lessons. Sherlock finally gets the chance to show off.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Higher—get your fists up higher.”

Sherlock squints against the glare of the sun and lifts his knuckles until they are level with his cheeks.

“Keep your elbows tucked, forearms close to your body. Remember move with your hips. Counter my blows with your hips.”

Sherlock pulls his elbows in, spares a moment to shake the sweat-soaked tendrils of hair that are clinging to his forehead out of his eyes.

It has been almost a week since Sherlock has completely recovered from his illness and he has been working tirelessly to improve his strength and speed. John was true to his word—as soon as he determined that Sherlock was indeed fully restored to health, he resumed his boxing lessons with Sherlock.

It’s only the third time they’ve managed to find time to do it and in spite of his renewed commitment to the strengthening exercises John taught him, Sherlock is feeling his weakness keenly today.

The day started out hazy and still, but now it is past noon and the sun has burned off the cloud-cover. A low fringe of puffy clouds clings to the horizon but they do nothing to alleviate the direct force of the sun overhead—Sherlock can feel every scorching beam of it beating down against his face.

No breeze disturbs the lagging sails. Part of the reason John has time today to spend with Sherlock is because the ship has hit a spell of dead air and flat seas. There is nothing much the crew can do except wait for the wind to pick back up.

“Remember to keep you knees bent. Stay light on your feet.”

John circles him and Sherlock pivots to keep John in front of him.

Sweat is trickling down his forehead into his eyes. Sherlock blinks hard, tries to blink the sweat out of his eyes without moving his fists from their position where they are now protecting his face.

John swings and Sherlock side steps to the left, managing to dodge the blow, but only barely.

“Good. Better. But remember to look at my torso, not my face. Watch my body.”

Sherlock does, and then immediately remembers why he’s spent the last ten minutes doing
everything in his power to avoid looking at John’s body.

John is stripped to the waist, dressed in nothing but his light linen trousers. His feet are bare, his gold hair blazing in the sunlight. His small brown fists are raised above his face, his eyes sharp on Sherlock’s.

The muscles in John’s raised arms are gleaming with a fine sheen of sweat. Sherlock watches the sunlight glimmering on his shining torso as he moves and all he can think is John is made of gold. He is a deity of sunlight.

John’s jab catches him off guard. Sherlock fails to sidestep the blow. He raises his arms just in time to absorb the punch but the force of it knocks him backward.

Sherlock staggers back a step then rights himself.

“Keep your body loose. If you tense up when I hit you then you won’t be able to recover quick enough to come back at me. Try and loosen up. Shake your shoulders out.”

John drops his fists and demonstrates, rolling his shoulders.

Sherlock lets out a hard breath and copies John’s movements.


Sherlock takes a deep breath, summoning all of his powers of concentration to ignore the glittering lines of John’s golden body, the powerful curves of the muscles in his torso and in his flexed arms.

Sherlock shuts his eyes briefly, centering himself.

He can do this. He just hasn’t been concentrating hard enough.

When Sherlock opens his eyes, he finds John watching him, a grin pulling up one corner of his mouth.

“Give me all you’ve got.”

Sherlock tosses the sweat-soaked hair out of his eyes, puts his fists up.

He tries to remember everything John has taught him—arms in close, body angled, the bulk of his weight centered on his back foot.

He circles John, eyes on his torso, but now he is only taking in relevant data about how John is moving, where his vulnerable points are—all the parts of his brain that were distracted by the beauty and power in John’s lean, muscular frame have finally been silenced.

Sherlock watches just a moment longer, then throws his right fist forward, rolling with his hips to give the blow the proper force, pivoting with his torso.

John falls back a step as Sherlock swings, and Sherlock’s knuckles graze the edge of John’s forearm.

It’s a near miss.

“Good!”

Sherlock pulls his fists back against his face, and continues to circle John, light on his feet, eyes
Now that Sherlock is fully concentrating and is able to read John’s body for clues of his movement, his precision improves exponentially. He can almost always predict where John’s blows will come from even if he can’t always block them.

They keep at it until Sherlock’s face is running with sweat, his limbs shuddery with exhaustion. He’s so focused he doesn’t even realize how tired he is until John steps back and puts his hands up.

“Let’s take a break.”

John drops himself down on the deck, and Sherlock follows suit, tired but content.

He’s managed to dodge or block every blow John has thrown his way in the last thirty minutes. His punches still lack power, but his technique has vastly improved. He no longer forgets to bring his fists back into position, and he’s consistently light on his feet, no longer stumbling and struggling to regain his balance after ever hit.

He still has a long way to go but Sherlock can feel the difference his ability to concentrate has made and he is quietly pleased.

John takes a pull from the flask he left by his discarded waistcoat, passes it to Sherlock.

He watches Sherlock take a long drink of the fiery liquor, his eyes sparking with delight.

Sherlock doesn’t cough this time but he can feel the drink burning all the way down from his mouth to his belly. He reaches up to rub a fist against his watering eyes.

“You have incredible reflexes.” John takes the flask back from Sherlock. “I’ve never seen someone with such sharp eyes. Once you get your strength up, you’re going to be unstoppable.”

John grins at him then—confident and beaming with pride, and Sherlock cannot help but smile back.

It’s incredible how much easier it is for him to smile these days when he’s around John. It actually used to feel difficult to work those muscles in his face. Smiling felt stiff and unnatural—he couldn’t maintain it, but now he can do it, openly, easily, and he finds the more he smiles, the happier he feels.

John passes him the flask again and Sherlock takes another drink.

“Your strength is already improving though. Have you been doing the exercises I showed you?”

Sherlock nods earnestly, and John’s smile widens.

“Good. I can tell. You know what else we can do to work on your arm strength?”

Sherlock takes one final drink from John’s flask before handing it back. He can already feel the effects of the alcohol uncoiling within him, making him feel sleepy and loose-limbed. He is suddenly aware of the deep fatigue in his body after the hour or so they’ve spent practicing in the hot sun. Sherlock reaches up to push the sweat-soaked curls back off his forehead. “Mmm?”

John laughs at his answer. It is a low, good-natured sound. “Well, I was going to suggest arm-wrestling, but I think you’ve had enough physical exertion for one day.”

Sherlock looks over at John—at his cheeks flushed dark from the exercise, his blue eyes bright in watchful. 
the direct light of the sun, pupils shrunk to almost invisible pinpricks. Other than the color in his cheeks, he doesn’t even look winded from the exertion.

Sherlock thinks about clasping his hand in John’s, pushing with all his might as John tries to pin his arm to the table, and something flashes through him, hot and bright as a stroke of lightning. He feels heat spread through him that has nothing to do with the sun overhead, and is suddenly grateful that John has decided the activity will have to wait.

He doesn’t think he could take it.

Sherlock isn’t sure what gives him the courage to ask this question—perhaps it is the alcohol, or maybe his guard has started to come down around John just that little bit more. Whatever the reason, he finds himself shaking his head in wonder as he looks at John.

“How do you do it?” he asks. “How do you work so hard, all day, every day, and never get tired? How are you so strong?”

The last part of his question comes out more emphatic than Sherlock intended, but he can’t keep the amazement out of his voice. He genuinely doesn’t understand how John does it.

John laughs again, softly.

“I’m not sure I know how to answer that.” He looks down at the calluses on his palms, spreading his hands in his lap as he goes on talking. “I’ve always worked—my whole life. Work is what I know. I’m not sure I would know what to do with myself if I wasn’t working. It’s just a part of life. And I enjoy it. Well—most of it.” John smiles wryly. “There are some tasks that I don’t think I’ll ever warm to.”

“How do you do it?” Sherlock asks, brimming with curiosity.

“Holystoning is probably one of the least pleasant.”

At Sherlock’s look of confusion, John goes on to clarify.

“Scrubbing the decks every morning. They call it holystoning because we have to get down on our hands and knees to do it—someone thought at some point it looked as if we were kneeling down in prayer.”

“What’s so unpleasant about it?”

Once again, Sherlock’s curiosity overpowers any self-consciousness he might have over his lack of knowledge about something as basic as the physical discomfort caused by heavy labor.

“We use a bucket of saltwater to get it clean and then a block of sandstone to do the scrubbing. It’s hard work, and tedious. It’s hell on your knees. Worst of all is when it’s cold out. You’ve got to be barefoot to do it. And it’s got to be done every day.”

Sherlock tries to imagine beginning every day bent over on his hands and knees, sleeves and trousers rolled up to keep them from getting wet, scouring the long expanse of the ship’s upper deck, shivering in the icy spray lashed against him from the waves.

He knows in that moment he wouldn’t survive one day as a sailor.

“The officers always supervise. If any of them are in an ill temper, that’s a sure way for them to take it out on us. It’s not so bad on this ship, but on bigger ships, in wartime, discipline is always
tighter, and there’s a lot more petty officers struggling to assert their authority over those beneath them. It was much worse when I was onboard the Monarch.”

Sherlock is treated to the mental image of a deck full of Anderson’s, red-faced and shouting, yelling criticism, standing with their boots on the backs of the working men; and shudders inwardly.

Sherlock is certain that John had to put up with a lot more than cold, tedious morning chores on board that ship but he doesn’t want to press John into telling him anything he doesn’t want to remember—not now.

“I have it better than a lot of sailors because I happen to be good at the work that’s required of us. I’m very fortunate in that way. Many men are not so lucky.”

“Like the way you can walk out on the yardarm without holding onto anything!”

Sherlock’s exclamation is so enthusiastic that John laughs. The sound of it is sweet and spontaneous.

“Yes, like that, for instance.”

Sherlock bites his lip, embarrassed. The alcohol has definitely gone to his head. But John’s laugh is so lovely, so appreciative he cannot feel embarrassed for long.

“I’m lucky as well to have been trained—if only partially—in another profession. Having a surgeon’s training has proved more valuable than I ever could have guessed on a ship like this.”

Sherlock is fascinated by John’s history as a surgeon’s apprentice. The litany of questions in his mind is so numerous he cannot pick just one to ask. He knows little of the work performed by surgeons, but now knowing that John served as a sometimes surgeon during his time onboard the Monarch, he imagines that John has had his share of grisly, horrifying work.

“What about you?” John asks, taking another drink from his flask before screwing the cap back on. “I’m sure you have many, many talents—”

He pauses to throw a grin in Sherlock’s direction.

Sherlock’s heart turns over in his chest.

“But is there any one thing in particular that you’re really good at?”

Sherlock thinks about it, hard, for several minutes.

Objectively, he knows he’s extremely intelligent—so intelligent that it’s proven a problem for him his whole life. It’s always done more harm than good. Indeed, it is Sherlock’s extraordinary intelligence that is mostly to blame for his passage on this voyage. His family didn’t know what to do with him.

No tutor was able to keep him sufficiently academically challenged. He outstripped every one of them in a matter of weeks. His parents eventually got so fed up with it that they enlisted Mycroft for the job, which he naturally resented. That worked to Sherlock’s favor though as after about a week, Mycroft left him to his own devices. After reading every book in his father’s library, Sherlock began conducting his own experiments. He was able to occupy himself some of the time but boredom plagued him at every corner.
Most days he refused to come out of his room. He was fairly content being left up to his own devices but there was always someone nagging him—telling him what to do. Sherlock took to locking the door so no one else could come in or out (the household staff were continually disturbing and therefore ruining his experiments). Sherlock became very adept at climbing up and down the ivy outside his window.

He took to bringing strange specimens back from the woods and hoarding them in his rooms. The maids began to complain of the mess and the smell and the housekeeper insisted she couldn’t work in a household where she was barred from entry to clean the rooms. When Sherlock accidentally set fire to his curtains one night, his parents decided they had had enough, and even though he was only sixteen at the time, they packed him off to university.

He only lasted two seasons before he was thrown out for insulting all of the most esteemed faculty members. Sherlock had no problem correcting them when they made mistakes. Some of their theories were so backwards it was impossible for him to understand how they’d ever been able to receive their professorships. Sherlock was convinced at the end of his first season that the whole place was corrupt and full of impostors. If he was smarter than most of the faculty, then what did that say about the quality of the education he was getting? It was ridiculous; it wasn’t worth his time.

Sherlock thinks about all of this and bites his tongue.

He doesn’t know what to tell John. Not one event in his lonely, pampered life is worthy of John’s attention. Sherlock has done nothing, seen nothing; earned nothing on his own terms. It’s all been given to him, and he has nothing to show for his enormous privilege.

He thinks again of the difficult life John has lead, a life of hard work and misery—a life in which choice was taken from him. Sherlock is certain John has undergone suffering that he hasn’t even begun to communicate, and in spite of all that, the joy John takes in life is evident in everything he does.

Sherlock should be grateful for the leisure he has had, the benefit of being born into a world of entitlement and opportunity, but despite his best efforts, he cannot find it in himself to summon up even one morsel of gratitude. Sherlock has spent his life controlled by his family, bullied, hated, misunderstood at every turn, and as a result, he is filled with spite, suspicious of other humans, and resentful and unappreciative of the fortune birth has brought him.

Shame bubbles in his stomach at this realization and Sherlock’s shoulders curl inward. He feels as though he’s being crushed by the weight of his own ineptitude, as though his own inherently sour disposition is curdling any good feeling he might be capable of having. His aristocratic blood may well be full of poison. Any good thing that comes near him withers and dies.

“Hey—”

John reaches over, puts a hand on Sherlock’s knee, inquisitive and reassuring all at once.

“Sherlock, can you look at me?”

Sherlock doesn’t want to but the note of kindness in John’s voice draws him out.

“Hey.” He looks up to see John’s eyes swimming with concern. “Where did you go?”

Sherlock looks back at him, picking out the flecks of color in John’s irises. Today they are the color of the sky in a storm. Sherlock wishes he could get lost in them and never come out. He
watches a furrow appear between John’s brows.

“You do that sometimes. You go away even though you’re sitting right in front of me. What happens? What are you thinking about?”

At the concern in John’s eyes, Sherlock feels something give way inside him.

He draws a sharp breath.

“It—” He stops himself. How can he begin to put into words the depths of misery inside himself, his failure to reconcile that with the joy he feels in John’s presence?

“Why are you always so sad?”

“I think you’re incredible,” Sherlock says in a rushed breath.

John looks momentarily taken aback, but then his face floods with the sweetest expression Sherlock has ever seen on it. He does not know how to describe what he sees. John looks pleased, happy certainly, but it’s more than that. His eyes are shining, his lips curling upward, but still parted in surprise.

It’s like seeing light pour suddenly into a darkened room.

“You do?”

The look of shocked delight is still unfolding—John’s face is growing brighter every second.

Sherlock nods, unsmiling. It is imperative to him that he conveys to John how serious he is. “I do.”

John’s expression shifts fractionally again. His hand is still on Sherlock’s knee, warm and solid. His fingers slide slightly, his thumb grazing the inside of Sherlock’s thigh. There is sorrow in his eyes. “And that makes you sad?”

“No!” Sherlock begins, then immediately doubles back. “Well, yes, but only because—”

He stops himself again. Words are so traitorous. They fall so utterly, utterly short of the enormity of what Sherlock feels, the complexity of it. This is why he usually never even tries. But he has to try for John, who’s looking at him so searchingly, so earnestly. It’s becoming apparent to Sherlock that John does not know what Sherlock is thinking and feeling. He has no idea. Sherlock finds this hopelessly frustrating, but he has to try, he can’t stand to have John looking at him the way he is now—the delight and pleasure almost completely gone from his face.

John waits. Even his patience is more than Sherlock can take—it just makes the ache of longing in his chest all the worse. How—who will he ever possibly convey to John how much he means to Sherlock? He can’t, he can’t, but John’s hand is warm on Sherlock’s knee and he wants to say something that will make John inch it further up his leg, instead of keeping it still and frozen like it is now.

Sherlock takes a breath.

“It’s only because I like you so much, and I know—well, I’m nothing like you, so…”

This is the hardest thing Sherlock has ever done. He only hates himself more with every botched word.

John is still waiting so patiently.
“So?” He prompts.

“So it’s a shame I’m not worth your company.”

Sherlock stares at his lap. He cannot look up at John. He looks instead at John’s hand on his knee.

John is quiet for several of Sherlock’s long, painful heartbeats. When he finally speaks, his voice is full of incredulity. “Do you really believe that? That you’re not worth my company?”

Sherlock jerks his head sharply in assent.

John takes his hand off Sherlock’s knee, and laughs. It is a sad, incredulous laugh. “Sherlock! Do you realize what you’re saying?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve got it completely backwards. Sherlock, you’re landed gentry. I’m the one who should be ashamed to be seen in your company!”

Sherlock’s cheeks flush hotly. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

John is shaking his head. He lets out another disbelieving laugh. “I assure you, it does.”

“All of that is meaningless! Titles and wealth and heredity—it means nothing. It has absolutely no bearing on the intelligence, the worth of a person, on their character.”

In his rage, Sherlock has turned his eyes back to John’s. He sees John’s face filling once again with surprise at his words.

“It’s an absolutely absurd assumption that one’s lineage—” Sherlock speaks the word with acidic disdain, “has any bearing whatsoever on the nature of one’s character. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it has the opposite effect. Lands and titles, if anything, bring out the worst qualities in people, taking their worst traits and exaggerating them to intolerable proportions. Having that amount of comfort and privilege makes people grasping, shallow, squabbling, presumptuous fools. I should know my own brother is one of them.”

Sherlock keeps on talking, suddenly eloquent with anger.

“I’ve known more cruel, crass, absolutely worthless aristocrats than good ones. I’ve known smarter serving girls than countesses, boot boys with more integrity than barons, and peasants with more depth of feeling in one little finger than any titled man or woman in the whole of England. The combined intelligence of the aristocrats I know could be contained on the head of a matchstick.”

John sits in shocked silence. He doesn’t move for several moments. Gradually, a smile begins to overtake his face.

Sherlock looks at him, his self-consciousness momentarily forgotten. “What?”

John shakes his head, eyes full of wonder. “You.”

Sherlock feels his cheeks burning again. “What about me?”

“I’ve never seen you speak so passionately about... anything. It’s incredible.”

“What is?” Sherlock asks, his self-consciousness returning as rapidly as it left.
“All of that… everything you just said. The fact that you believe that.”

Sherlock bristles. “Why?”

John shakes his head again, still smiling hugely. “Sherlock, no one thinks that.”

Sherlock frowns, shifts slightly. “Well, of course not. It’s like I said. They’re all imbeciles.”

“Sherlock, that’s… that’s remarkable.”

Sherlock darts his eyes back up to John, a feeling cresting within him that feels very like hope.

John’s eyes are growing softer by the minute. Now they are the color of sea-glass worn smooth. “It’s… beautiful.”

“It is?”

“You see people for what they really are, not the trappings they’re surrounded with. That’s a rare talent.”

“It isn’t.” Sherlock is stubbornly belligerent, still thinking of all the people he’s met and hated over the years. “It isn’t difficult at all to know that you’re worth a hundred of them.”

John’s face changes again, and this look, this look Sherlock wants to preserve forever in his memory.

Sherlock is flushed suddenly with a burst of rare confidence prompted by John’s last remark.

“There is one thing…”

The tenderness blooming in John’s face is so lovely to behold Sherlock has to stop speaking for a moment just to watch.

“What thing?” John whispers.

John, Sherlock realizes, is looking at his mouth.

Sherlock purses his lips. “One thing I’m especially good at.”

John’s lashes look heavy. They are dripping golden in the bright sunlight—they make Sherlock think of honey oozing slow and sticky off a knife.

John’s eyes are still fixed firmly on Sherlock’s mouth. “Tell me about it.”

Sherlock doesn’t know why—why suddenly he feels hot and flushed at the collar, like the air has been stolen from his lungs—just because John is speaking at a slightly lower timber, and is looking at his mouth.

Sherlock lifts his chin, ignores the fluttering feeling in the pit of his stomach. “It’s a game my brother and I used to play, to see how much we could learn about a person just from looking at them… just from observation.”

John’s eyes finally flicker back up to Sherlock’s, his expression curious. “How so?”

“For example…” Sherlock scans the deck. “Do you see the woman standing opposite us? With the yellow parasol?”
John nods, following the direction of Sherlock’s glance.

“Well, I can tell you that she’s twenty four years old. Her father is a widower—mother died when she was very young. She has three sisters—all older, all married with children. Her family is firmly middle class; she has no inheritance. She is on this voyage because she is headed to a position to be a governess for a magistrate’s family. She likes children but she resents the position; she would rather have children of her own. She is not close with any of her sisters. She is comelier than all of them. She’s terrible at mending, loves reading novels, and she is left-handed, in spite of the serious interjections of all her governesses.”

Sherlock looks over at John, expectant.

John looks doubtful. “You can tell all that from looking at her?”

"You don't believe me,'" Sherlock states plainly, his heart sinking.

"Well, it's just that..." John looks hesitant to confess the nature of his doubts.

Sherlock knows immediately what the trouble is. “There’s no reason for you to believe that I didn’t simply know all of that already.”

John nods, still looking hesitant.

“That’s a fair point. Fine, then. Pick someone you know well. One of your crewmates. I’ve never spoken with any of them.”

John chews on his lips, considering. His eyes search the decks for a familiar face. John gestures to a sailor standing about ten yards off, working on the rigging. “How about Old Leroy?”

Sherlock studies the man for a moment or two, his eyes flickering over his torso, his limbs, watching as another sailor calls down to him, observing the way he answers; then his mouth quirks up in a smile. It’s too easy. He should ask John to pick someone more difficult, but it wouldn’t make any difference. He’s too good at it.

He puts his shoulders back, and begins speaking very fast.

“In spite of his grey hair, weathered features, and his nickname, Old Leroy isn’t actually old at all. Life at sea has aged him considerably. I’d venture he’s somewhere between thirty-five and forty years old. He was married once but his wife is no longer living. He has one son—eighteen years old—who he hasn’t seen in years. He worries over him, although he’d never tell him that. They had a falling out some years back. The boy wanted to ship to sea like his father, but Leroy was against it. It’s no life he’d recommend to anyone, especially not his own kin. He himself started as a cabin boy on a schooner that traveled to China and back. Rose to the rank of able seamen but never progressed past that. Worked on merchant ships for years before the war broke out. He’s been in several battles—sustained two separate injuries that nearly cost him his life. One to the right hip—shrapnel from the cannons—the other on his left arm near the elbow, gunshot wound, I’d say, although it’s difficult to tell at this distance.”

Sherlock is running out of breath, but he keeps going, the words tumbling out one over the other, in an almost unstoppable current. There are so many details, and he wants to include as many as he can in order to impress John.

“He’s tried to leave twice—once after each injury, but the truth is, this life is all he knows, and he knows no other trade so he just kept coming back. He smokes a great deal, never touches liquor, and can play the mouth organ with quite a bit of skill.”
Sherlock finally runs out of breath and stops.

John stares at him, speechless.

Sherlock waits, slightly nervously. He knows he’s right (well, about most of it—some of it is always guess work), but that doesn’t change the fact that he’s dying for John’s good opinion and he hopes this will help him to it.

John is still staring at Sherlock with his mouth agape.

Sherlock shifts uncomfortably. “Did I get it right?”

John nods with his mouth open, his face full of amazement. “Every detail. How on earth did you do that?”

“Observation.”

“Tell me.”

Sherlock takes a deep breath. “I can tell he’s spent his life on ships from the way he moves on the rigging, and the way he walks—with the slightly bow-legged stance typical of sailors. I know he’s older than he looks because of his wrinkles—they’re the result of years spent in the sun. It’s the case with many sailors that they look far older than they are. It’s also the case that most sailors work primarily on merchant ships if they can help it because of the difference in wages, but I know he’s been to war because of the scars on his hands and neck. That, and his deafness, which is likely due to his post below decks by the cannons.”

“How do you know about his deafness?”

“Because he cups his ear every time the man above calls down to him. The injuries are easy,” Sherlock goes on before John can ask. “It’s a simple matter of noticing the way he carries himself—see how he leans slightly to the left when he turns? That’s because of the wound in his hip. He’s compensating for the lack of flexibility on his other side. I guessed shrapnel because the majority of injuries on warships are from the shrapnel blown into them by cannon fire. The elbow injury is even more apparent. You see he can’t fully extend that arm? It’s always slightly bent. In fact, it’s remarkable he was able to keep the arm with an injury like that.”

John looks at him, flabbergasted.

“How do you have such knowledge of the human body?”

“I’ve always been fascinated by anatomy.” Sherlock looks down shyly, considering his long pale fingers. “My father has an enormous library so I learned as much as I could from books.”

“You learned all that from books?”

Sherlock shrugs, feeling self-conscious. "I had little else to do."

The look on John's face is a curious one—part wonder, part envy.

"How did you know he was a widower?"

“That’s easy—a man that ill and that badly wounded wouldn't have chosen to stay at sea for so long if he had a family at home.”

“What about the falling out with his son?”
“His time in the war and the grave injuries he sustained would mean he wouldn’t recommend a sailor’s life to anyone, but his boy—left behind, all alone, his father his only living kin—would always look up to an absent father, would want to do as his father had done and start a life at sea. Naturally, they argued about it.”

“How on earth did you know his son’s age?”

“Also, easy. See the tattoos on his arm? There are two—one with two dates and a pair of initials—that’s for his wife, year of birth and death. The other is a pair of initials and just one date, eighteen years ago—that’s the year his son was born. And the tattoo on his neck? That’s a Chinese character. That’s how I know he worked the Eastern trade routes to China and back. No Englishman would know how to make a symbol like that.”

John is silent for several moments and Sherlock waits, feeling apprehensive.

He’s never taken someone through his observational process like that before. Usually when he deduces details about people and tells them what he’s figured out, they become angry, sometimes frightened. He and Mycroft used to sit and do it with their parents’ party guests. Sometimes they’d play the game with Sherlock’s hated cousins, which usually ended badly for Sherlock, as he was better at it than any of them.

His cousins were always convinced he cheated. Once they got so angry they dragged him out back and tied him to a birch tree. They snapped off the branches to make switches and struck him on his arms, on his stomach, until he told them how he cheated. He got so angry his face turned bright red, but he refused to lie so they kept on beating him until he was covered all over with welts, his swollen cheeks streaming with angry tears.

Gradually their cries of ‘Witchcraft! He used witchcraft, that’s how! He got his faerie friends to help him!’ roused the attention of one of the gardeners who chased the children away and untied Sherlock. The kind old man was one of the only allies Sherlock had on the grounds of the house. He used to scold Sherlock for picking things from the gardens that he wasn’t meant to, but gradually he began to take pity on the boy and left him to his own devices.

That day Sherlock learned of the man’s intense capacity for kindness. He took Sherlock to his cottage and let him sit on the edge of his iron bedstead while he boiled some rags in clean water and made a poultice out of herbs. He made Sherlock drink a cup of strong tea with a generous dose of whiskey in it (‘There’s no need to tell your parents anything about tha’. It’ll help to calm ya, is all’) before coating Sherlock’s wounds with the sticky balm of boiled herbs, shaking his head as Sherlock whimpered in pain. ‘I dinna ken why on God’s green earth, when there’s so much suffering already, little children must be so cruel to one another.’

Sherlock remembered the gentleness of his gnarled fingers as he rubbed the salve into the stinging welts, the sorrow in his eyes as Sherlock fought to keep his chin from trembling, and his quiet admonition, ‘There, there now. Crying over it won’t help now, will it?’

Afterward, he wrapped the worst places in the clean rags to keep them from rubbing against Sherlock’s clothes. ‘Keep them on as long as you need to, and come back to see me if you have any itching.’

Sherlock had nodded dutifully, wiping the last of the tears off his cheeks with the back of his hand, feeling slightly dizzy from the whiskey.

‘I’ve got to get back to work, but you stay there and rest a while,’ he said, rising stiffly to his feet. He re-filled Sherlock’s chipped mug with plain tea, and urged Sherlock to drink it down. ‘You can
sit there as long as you like. Give those nasty cousins of yours a chance to cool off. And don’t forget what I told you about the bandages. You come and see me if they start to give you any trouble.’

Sherlock never forgot the man’s kindness. Indeed, a sort of pact was forged between them that day, and thereafter followed many happy months of Sherlock visiting the old man’s cottage to ask him questions about various growing things, showing him the bones and stones and specimens he found while traipsing through the woods. In spite of all his duties, he always managed to find time to talk a bit with Sherlock, to listen to what he had to say.

To Sherlock’s profound dismay, the old man fell ill that winter, and did not recover to see the spring. That was around the time Sherlock decided to give up hope entirely on the human species. In the aftermath of the old gardener’s death, Sherlock became more spiteful and solitary than ever.

The worst part about the incident with Sherlock’s cousins was the way Mycroft—who was the oldest of the group—acted the part of ringleader in the beginning, and then did nothing to intervene on Sherlock’s behalf, despite the fact that he was the one who taught Sherlock how to play the game in the first place. Sherlock suspected it was because it irked him that Sherlock had surpassed him at a game he’d invented. Mycroft supported the cousins in their initial taunts and then wandered off looking bored and important as soon as they started getting too raucous, saying Mummy and Daddy were missing him at the party.

Sherlock’s hatred of his older brother solidified that day into something hard and immovable. The image of Mycroft, standing coolly off to the side while one cousin held Sherlock’s shirt up above his waist so the other could beat him on the soft skin of his belly, is one that is forever burned onto the inside of his brain. Never in all his young life had Sherlock felt so betrayed.

Instead of putting Sherlock off the game for good, the episode made Sherlock stubbornly obsessed with getting even better at it—mostly with the intent of spiting Mycroft. So rather than forgetting all about it, Sherlock worked as hard as he possibly could to improve. When he got to university, he used to do it to try and impress people upon first acquaintance. However, he learned very quickly that it almost never impressed people at all, and instead tended to elicit their immediate derision.

When it became apparent to Sherlock that he was absolutely abysmal at making friends, he kept on doing it with the sole purpose of annoying people. It gave Sherlock a sick sort of satisfaction to see people’s reactions when he blandly rattled off every detail of their petty, unimportant lives.

He hasn’t done it during all the time he’s been at sea, or at least not out loud to anyone. It’s difficult to stop the constant flow of information in his brain as he observes the world around him. He’s trained himself for too many years to really cull the habit.

He worries now what John will think—kind, intelligent John, who can make friends as easily as breathing. Will he be offended on Old Leroy’s behalf? Is he disturbed by Sherlock’s strange ability? Will he find it sinister and unnerving like so many others?

John shakes his head and Sherlock stiffens in fear.

“That was…”

Sherlock ducks his head, avoiding John’s gaze.

“Absolutely incredible.”

Sherlock looks up in disbelief. “You think so?”
“Of course, it was. It was extraordinary. It was quite extraordinary.”

“That’s not what people usually say.”

“What do people usually say?”

“Piss off.”

John’s face breaks into a smile, and then he laughs and laughs.

“Sherlock Holmes, you are a wonder!”

Sherlock ducks his head, blushing furiously. He fiddles with the edge of his coat, mutters, “It’s nothing.”

But internally, he’s beaming from head to foot. He feels as though his chest will burst with happiness.

John Watson thinks he’s clever. John Watson thinks that he’s a wonder.

“Do another one!” John urges, “Do someone else!”

Sherlock spends the rest of John’s free shift deducing various details about members of the crew. When he’s done every available seamen in view, he moves onto the passengers, which somehow still manages to impress John even though he knows very little about any of them.

By the time the bell tolls, ringing out the hour, Sherlock is grinning to rival John’s sunniest smiles. He has never felt so happy.

“Well, that’s me. Got to get back.”

John is still laughing as he moves to stand but before he can rise to his feet, a shadow falls over them both, blocking the light of the late afternoon sun.

Sherlock looks up and his stomach drops.

Anderson is standing above them, the corners of his lips pulled back into a sneer.

“Watson, didn’t you hear the bell?”

“I did, sir.”

“Then what are you doing still sitting here? You’re on the dog watch.”

John rises to his feet, calm as ever. “Yes, I’m well aware of that. Coming right now, sir.”

“Well, look lively,” Anderson barks. He eyes John critically as he stands. “Seems to me you’re lagging behind these days, Watson.”

John is now standing in front of Anderson, and in spite of the rather significant height difference between the two men, it strikes Sherlock that even from where he’s sitting, John doesn’t look all that much shorter than Anderson.

*It’s because he carries himself with so much confidence*, Sherlock thinks, taking note of the strength of John’s open shoulders, the slight lift in his chin.
John makes no reply to Anderson’s comment other than to raise a single eyebrow in his direction.

“What have you been doing these last two hours? You’ve been sitting here with Holmes haven’t you? Don’t you have better things to be doing than wasting your time with cast-off members of the gentry?”

Sherlock feels Anderson’s eyes cut to him, and even though it’s a silly, throwaway comment, just the prospect of Anderson making a fool of him in front of John makes his cheeks fill with fire.

John’s response is smooth as butter. “You are well aware that I am at liberty to spend my two free hours in any manner I choose. If there has been any complaint as regards my work, I’m sure I will hear it from Lieutenant Lestrade, and not yourself.”

Anderson leans in, lip curling menacingly. “Are you giving me cheek, Watson?”

“Not at all, sir.”

John’s tone is utterly without malice but Sherlock can see tension in the line of his shoulders. It is clear to him in that moment that if there were no issue of rank, John would have already given Anderson two black eyes, and likely several broken ribs.

“It sounds to me like you’re giving me cheek.”

“I was merely answering your question.”

“I was merely answering your question, sir!” Anderson snaps.

“Precisely, sir. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have duties to attend to.”

John bends down to snatch up his waistcoat and discarded shirt where he left them beside Sherlock. As his mouth dips close to Sherlock’s ear, he says in a low voice that only Sherlock can hear. “See you later, you lovely thing.”

He straightens up before Sherlock can be sure he’s really understood, striding away down the deck, with his jacket slung over one shoulder.

Sherlock feels his cheeks fill with color. He looks up to see Anderson watching him with narrowed eyes, before he turns to glare at John’s retreating back.

“Yes! Get to it!” Anderson calls lamely after him.

Sherlock can see how badly he wants to reprimand John, but it is not technically within his purview to do so. He turns back around, his face splotchy with rage.

“What are you looking at, Holmes?” Anderson snarls. “I suggest you get off the deck and out of the way before you become a problem.”

Sherlock stands, glaring at Anderson with every ounce of his ire, unconsciously assuming his haughtiest expression.

Anderson’s face twists with hatred.

“I’ve warned you, Holmes, that you’d better watch yourself, but it seems you didn’t take my warning seriously. So I’ll tell you again now, and I’ll make it very clear. If you spend any more time distracting members of the crew, you’re going to be very, very sorry. Is that understood?”
Sherlock raises himself up to his full height. The joy from his recent interaction with John is still sparking within him, giving him a sense of assurance he rarely feels in Anderson’s presence.

“You can’t tell me what to do. You’re just a midshipman.” His voice lingers on the word with pointed scorn. “You have no authority at all on this ship, and that infuriates you, doesn’t it? Because you love controlling people, don’t you, Anderson? It makes you furious, how utterly unimportant you are, how impotent. I suppose that’s why your cheating wife left you. She’s not going to wait around for you to gain a position when you can’t even pass your examination. How many times have you failed it now? Is it twice now? Or just the once?”

Anderson’s face ripples with rage, before going absolutely stiff. He leans in close to Sherlock, his face a mask of hatred.

Sherlock feels his triumph pierced momentarily with real fear. He resists the urge to drop back a step.

Before Anderson can open his mouth a voice cuts over him.

“Anderson! We need you up on the quarterdeck—where are you?”

Anderson’s lips curls, his face now sickeningly close to Sherlock’s. His voice is soft as death.

“Well, well, saved in the nick of time once again it would seem. Next time you’re not going to be so lucky, Holmes. You’re going to be sorry you ever crossed me, mark my words. I’m going to make you wish you’d never been born.”

Anderson’s breath is hot and putrid against Sherlock’s cheek. He wants to turn his face away but he holds Anderson’s gaze, his hands tightening to fists at his sides. His heart is pounding with suppressed fury.

“ANDERSON!”

Anderson steps back, his eyes traveling with vicious intent down the length of Sherlock’s torso. “You mark my words.”

He turns away before Sherlock can respond, making his way back towards the stern of the ship.

Sherlock lets out a breath, shakes out his fists. There is so much hatred coursing through him he fears for a moment that he might be sick. He puts his hands on his knees and takes a deep breath, waits for the sensation to pass.

He’s furious that Anderson spoiled the end of what otherwise would have been the perfect afternoon. But the shadow cast by his ugly presence recedes quickly in the wake of the joy Sherlock feels at John’s reaction to his strange ability, the look on John’s face when Sherlock told him how he feels about him, the way his eyes lingered on Sherlock’s mouth.

This thought warms Sherlock all through, and it’s not long before he’s forgotten Anderson’s hateful words entirely, burned up in the heat of the memory of John’s mouth close to his ear, his low voice calling Sherlock ‘lovely.’

***

That night, as Sherlock lies in bed, thinking back over his conversation with John, he is seized with the desire to compose.
He has not had the inclination to write music in months and months, but suddenly it is gripping him like an unstoppable force, filling him up with its sweetness, the melody sweeping through the inside of his head, curling and dipping, twisting and rising, and he is desperate to get his nib into the ink, to get the pen to paper to start notating what is a whirl of color in his mind.

He reaches for his quill, spilling ink all over himself in his desperation, scribbling down the notes as quickly as they come—his hand not nearly quick enough to keep up with the notes unfurling in his mind, like a long sweep of rolled parchment being shaken out.

He works at it late into the night, hunched over the paper, pages and pages of notes spiraling out of him until his candle burns itself to nothing and he lights another, disregarding the fact that he may regret this decision later. He only has so many candles to his disposal on the voyage. But for the moment, Sherlock doesn’t care. He couldn’t stop writing even if he was dragged from the tabletop.

Finally, his eyes blurry with fatigue, his fingers cramped and aching, smeared with ink, he sets the pen down, sprinkles the paper with powder to help it set, and leans back in his seat, cracking his knuckles.

He blows the candle out, and crawls into bed.

Sherlock dreams the composition—it looks like light cutting through water from above.

It looks like John Watson running on the yardarm, the sun winking in and out of existence behind his leaping frame.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you for reading.

Comments keep me going, so take a moment to let me know what you thought! :) 

Sailorlock playlist can be found here.
The wind picks up again, and John is kept busy for the next few days working on the sails. He is almost always aloft, crawling up the masthead, walking on the rigging below the yardarm to help unfurl the sails, bending and unbending, tacking as the wind changes.

For the first time since the voyage began, Sherlock doesn’t mind.

He feels more content than he can ever remember feeling; his mind is more at ease. The little spark of confidence that John awoke in him during their last conversation has been growing steadily, expanding until it has become a bed of embers, glowing hotly under Sherlock’s breast, even when John is not near him.

Sherlock can feel the heat of it giving him the confidence to ask questions of the other sailors when John isn’t around, as long as they’re not too busy. His shyness is still so debilitating that he keeps the conversations brief, but all the sailors he has spoken to are friendly with him, and don’t seem to mind Sherlock’s questions. They seem to have become accustomed to Sherlock’s solitary presence on the deck, perched just off to the side, quietly observing.

He is learning more about the ship, bit by bit, every day. He likes to impress John with what he has picked up in his observations, casually pointing out a part of the ship’s rigging and asking, “Those are the jack-stays, aren’t they? And that’s the martingale?”

The look of surprise on John’s face every time as it gradually transforms into a stunned smile helps to fan the embers of Sherlock’s confidence into a tiny flame.

“You’ll be up on the masthead before we know it,” John says with a fond smile. “One of these days I wouldn’t be surprised to come out and find you hanging off the foretop!”

Sherlock smiles back every time, beaming with pride at John’s praise, but Sherlock knows there is a grave difference between knowing the words for things and knowing how to do what John does every day—how to manipulate such a complicated system of ropes and rigging to steer the massive wooden structure through the water. The more Sherlock learns about the intricate workings of the ship, the more impressed he is by John’s abilities until it feels as though Sherlock’s awe of John is as vast, as unending as the ocean they are sailing over.
The ship’s progress south is evident in the growing warmth of the climate. Each day as they draw nearer to the equator, the winds gather force and the heat of the sun intensifies.

“We’ve almost hit the trade winds,” John tells Sherlock one day, while they are standing together on deck. “Which means smooth sailing for three or four weeks, if we’re lucky.”

“Does that mean you’ll have more time to yourself?” Sherlock asks, afraid to hope.

“It does, indeed,” John says with a smile. “I wonder how on earth I’ll stand to occupy myself with all those hours of freedom. Can you think of any useful occupation for me, Mr. Holmes?”

John’s gaze as he casts it over Sherlock is decidedly heated. “Anything at all?”

Sherlock flushes scarlet from the roots of his hair down to the tips of his toes.

He stares at his fingers on the railing, and shakes his head.

John laughs, warm and low, and the sound makes Sherlock feel as though his stomach has detached itself from his body and is floating somewhere out over the open ocean.

John leans closer, and his voice is a tendril of heat, curling itself around Sherlock’s heart. “I’m sure you and I can think of something.”

When Sherlock is not up on deck observing John and his fellow crewmen, he is working on his composition, which he has come to think of as a study of John Watson. When he is not working on it, he is thinking about it—twisting and manipulating the melody in his mind, changing the texture, the scope of the notes ever so slightly. At night, he goes over the cramped lines of script, making corrections, shifting the breaks in the movements, adding other instruments. He has forgotten the thrill of working on something that takes his attention so completely, the joy of work that actually has meaning.

Although Sherlock doesn’t have the command Mycroft has over every instrument he touches, he has had extensive training in all of the strings and a good number of the woodwind family, so he can write music for them with considerable skill. The main weight of the melody is carried by the violin but he adds a medley of other instruments to support it, to give it nuance and depth, so that it will have the necessary gravitas, but also the vibrancy of what he is struggling to express.

It only takes a few nights of furious composition, before Sherlock cannot resist the temptation any longer to pull out his violin. Even though he knows he won’t be able to play it properly, he longs to hold it, to press the notes into the fingerboard, slide his fingers up and down the strings. He can at least work through the notes, and the feel of it under his hands will help him get closer to the sound, even if he cannot actually hear it.

So Sherlock drops to his hands and his knees beside his bed and unfastens the intricate system of straps and buckles he has employed to keep his instrument safe from the violent movement of the ship.

The sea is calm tonight and Sherlock can take his time as he seats himself on the bed and settles the case over his knees.

His fingers slide into place against the clasps with practiced ease and he doesn’t even realize he is holding his breath until he pushes the case open and sees the violin tucked in its familiar bed of worn blue velvet, and all his breath leaves him in a sigh.
How could he have forgotten? How could he have forgotten how much it means to him just to
smell the slight must of the velvet lining the case? The smell of the rosin, the crisp scent of the
polished wood rising up to meet him in a fragrant rush of sensory memories, memories of fire lit
nights when Sherlock played for Mycroft in a corner of their drafty nursery, rare moments of peace
between them that seemed only to come when Sherlock had his violin in hand—memories of
colder nights, up on the roof of their vast home, the world spread out at Sherlock’s feet in a tangle
of silver-tinted shadows, the cost of slightly frigid fingers worth every moment of blissful solitude
he spent, playing to the moon.

He studies its lovely dull gleam for a moment longer, lost in memories, before pulling it carefully
free, mindful of the slight rocking of the ship as he holds it in his hands, wrapping his long fingers
around the neck, running a palm down the curve of the waist. He tucks it under his chin and closes
his eyes, feels the glow of his memories warming him like a flame cupped between his palms.

His fingers itch to play but he doesn’t dare pull the bow across the strings for fear of disturbing
someone. However, he can pluck out the notes, pizzicato style, and he does, as he works through
the new composition, testing it out, rewriting those parts that don’t quite fit.

He works at it until his candle has burned down to a puddle of wax, finally extinguishing itself
with a quiet hiss, leaving Sherlock to settle the instrument back in its case in darkness.

He does so without difficulty, crawling underneath his bunk, feeling his way to the straps to secure
it firmly back in place.

This incident causes Sherlock to consider the alarming rate of candles he has already used up and
he resolves to work from now on in daylight in order to keep himself from exhausting his supply
completely.

As he drifts off to sleep, Sherlock thinks about what John said about the sailors longing for a
fiddler, and wonders when the opportunity will present itself.

The opportunity, it turns out, comes sooner than Sherlock thinks.

The next night at dinner, Sherlock is sitting in the passenger saloon, making short work of a bowl
of beef and barley stew (his appetite has increased in frightening leaps and bounds in the wake of
his weekly boxing lessons with John), only half listening to the drone of conversation around him.
His mind is occupied with the newest alterations to the movement led by the second violin (he’s
thinking of adding an arpeggio toward the end, just before the melody comes back in), so he almost
doesn’t hear the piece of news, but the enthusiasm in the man’s voice catches his notice.

“—hit the trade winds at long last. They say if the good weather holds, there’s to be a celebration
tomorrow night, a party for the officers and passengers!”

A young man to Sherlock’s left gives an incredulous chuckle. “Our captain? Throwing a party?
I’ve never heard the like.”

Henrietta Long, a blonde-haired, buxom young woman who is only too fond of displaying her
myriad charms, leans forward with undisguised eagerness. “Oh, do you really think so, Mr.
Jackson? A party? On this ship?”

The beaming Mr. Jackson nods jovially, lifting his wine glass to underscore his words. “Indeed,
Madame that is what the officers are saying. I heard it from the mouth of Lieutenant Lestrade,
himself!”
Several of the women break into excited giggles, and duck their heads together in fervent conference.

A young woman with thin brown hair and a nervous, melancholy smile—Miss Hooper is her name—lifts her eyes to Mr. Jackson. Sherlock has never heard her say two words together. Therefore, he assumes he is as startled as everyone else at the table when Miss Hooper asks, in a voice just above a whisper, “Will all the officers be in attendance, sir?”

Mr. Jackson inclines his head in a deferential gesture. “I do believe so, my lady.”

Miss Long leans closer to Miss Gibbons to speak in a carrying whisper. “I think we all know which officer Miss Hooper is counting on, don’t we?”

Miss Hooper’s pink cheeks turn a vivid shade of crimson, her eyes dropping to her lap.

Sherlock feels a flicker of rage lick the base of his spine as the other women laugh conspiratorially together.

Sherlock is so deeply encased in his own desire to remain invisible that he is rarely aware of the social dynamics between the other passengers, but now he feels a small burst of sympathy for the brown-haired girl in the faded, polka-dotted dress.

For the first time, he really looks at her, and sees in her flushed cheeks, her thin lips, her threadbare shawl, a girl who is as cast-off as he is in the small, vicious social order of the ship. He decides, in that moment, to be more aware of her suffering, and see if he can’t help prevent it in some small way in the future.

“Oooh, do you think they’ll bring our trunks up for us, so that we can dress in something decent for the occasion?”

“As to that, I’m afraid I cannot say,” Mr. Jackson intones with mock-seriousness, staring mournfully into the depths of his wine glass. “Although it is customary for passenger ships on voyages of this length to have a day for airing and arranging. I’ll have a word with Lieutenant Lestrade tomorrow morning, and see what he has to say. I believe weather will be the final determinant in the matter, but never fear, ladies!” When he looks up again, his eyes are twinkling with good humor. “I am, as ever your humble servant.”

There is a great deal of appreciative giggling in the wake of Mr. Jackson’s promise.

The young man to Sherlock’s left speaks up again. Sherlock can tell by the lurch in his voice that he’s had more wine than he can stomach. “But seriously? Captain Thunderbrows wanting to throw a party? Can you imagine—him dancing a quadrille? What’s he going to do? Shout us into having a good time?”

“Watch yourself, Bailey.” A beetle-browed gentleman in a worn frock coat speaks up from the end of the table. “Everyone is subject to the rule of the captain on his vessel, not just the crew. You want to be careful what you say.”

“I was only joking,” Bailey concedes, taking a drink of wine, but Sherlock can hear the slight quaver in his voice.

“Nothing that you say on board this ship is ever private. Remember that. Ships have ears.”

The boy takes another nervous sip of wine, casting his eyes downward.
Taking advantage of the silence created by the boy’s remark, Sherlock clears his throat. He raises his voice, gathering his courage to himself like a blanket. “Are all members of the crew invited?”

Several heads turn to stare at him in mild fascination. Sherlock is certain they have forgotten he has the power of speech.

A large man named McKinley answers him, his booming voice filled with mild scorn. “Don’t be daft, boy! The point is to provide an opportunity for good relations between passengers and officers. Give us the chance to get to know one another better, lift the spirits and all that.”

Sherlock can feel his stew curdling in his stomach as he thinks of Anderson striding the length of the room, trussed up in his uniform like a hideous peacock, trying to catch the eyes of the female passengers, all the while hissing insults at Sherlock under his breath.

The momentary flicker of excitement he felt at the prospect of a party where John would be present vanishes, leaving him cold.

“The crew will have their own more primitive means of celebration,” McKinley adds with a derisive smile. “Of that I have no doubt.”

A few snickers follow this remark.

Sherlock narrows his eyes, feeling another lick of fury move through him like a stroke of flame, but he bites his tongue; none of these people are worth the breath of his reproof.

“If you think that’s the reason for the party you’ve got another thing coming,” a thin man with an unnervingly scrutinizing gaze says darkly into his cup.

“What’s that, Ferguson?”

The man shakes his head with a bitter smile. “I’ve heard plenty where it concerns our captain, and spirit-lifting is not one of his better known qualities. He’ll have his own reasons for the festivities, you can be sure of that.”

The beetle-browed man—Knott is his name, Sherlock recalls—leans forward in his chair, his expression deadly serious. “You heard what I told Bailey. I’d watch what you say, Ferguson. Especially at the Captain’s table.”

“He hasn’t come to dine with us once, has he?” Ferguson says, with something like bravado in his voice. “He barely sets foot outside his cabin. I don’t see any reason for him to change his habits now.”

There’s a woman sitting to the left of Mr. Knott, fanning herself nervously. Sherlock recognizes her as one of the women who screamed in terror seeing John up on the yardarm. Her eyes skid from one man to the other. “Well, I for one, hope he does make an appearance at the party. We’ve hardly seen him since the ship left port!”

Ferguson’s gaze is fixed on unwavering on Mr. Knott. “Don’t think there isn’t a reason for that.”

“Ferguson,” Knott growls. “I think it would be wise to abandon this particular thread of conversation. Especially in present company.” His eyes flicker meaningfully to the curious faces of the other passengers around the table. Old Mr. Mills has leaned so far forward in his chair that his cravat is dangling in his soup bowl. “None of us wants any trouble.”

“Whoever said anything about starting trouble?”
There is a moment of palpable tension as the two men lock eyes across the table.

Sherlock can feel the struggle between them as clearly as though a sudden draft has swept into the room.

The other passengers can clearly feel it too. Miss Goodfellow, the prospective governess, is pursing her lips so hard they seem to have vanished completely, and the young man named Bailey is so full of nervous energy he upends his wineglass with an abrupt gesture, spilling wine all over the lap of the elderly Mrs. Mills.

The accident breaks the tension of the moment.

Mrs. Mills gives a squawk of surprise, and Mr. Bailey leaps to his feet, stammering apologies.

Loud, good-natured Mr. McKinley scolds the boy in earnest while Miss Hooper helps Mrs. Mills to her feet and out of the dining room.

The diners go back to their individual conversations, their interest in the conflict between the two men already forgotten, but Sherlock keeps the corner of his eye fixed on Mr. Ferguson. His eyes have returned to the bowl in front of him but he looks angrier than ever; the hand that is holding his soupspoon is white-knuckled with rage. Clearly, there is more the man wants to say but Sherlock is certain from the iron gaze of Mr. Knott that he will do everything in his power to keep that from happening.

For the first time since he’s set foot on the ship, Sherlock finds he is interested in the affairs of his fellow passengers, if only because the matter relates so clearly to their nefarious captain, a man who has far too much power over all their fates. If there’s one matter upon which Mr. Knott is entirely correct it is that it is the ship’s captain, first and foremost, who will determine the outcome of the voyage and all those who are a part of it.

The thought makes Sherlock’s blood run cold.

For this reason, Sherlock vows silently to pay attention whenever the captain’s name comes up in conversation. More knowledge in this matter can only be helpful at this point, to avoid falling victim to the cruel man’s whims.

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The next day, Sherlock is up with the sun.

He runs through his morning exercises, spends two hours perfecting the final movement in his composition (the arpeggio for the second violin, it turns out, was exactly what was missing), and then ascends to the upper decks with a newfound levity to his movements, eager as always for his first glimpse of John.

The sun is shining with full force up on deck. It is now glaringly evident that they are moving through tropical climates, Sherlock thinks, as he reaches to wipe the freshly accumulated sweat off his brow. He has only been above deck for several moments and already he is regretting his decision to wear his coat.

A band of officers is standing, looking hot and miserable, below the main mast, taking their mid-morning calculations.

Sherlock recognizes Anderson’s scowling face in their midst and gives the group of officers a wide berth, working his way instead back toward the quarterdeck, where he sees broad-shouldered Mr.
Jackson standing beside Lieutenant Lestrade, deep in conversation.

Sherlock thinks back to the conversation at dinner the previous evening, and in spite of himself, feels a flicker of curiosity as to whether the aforementioned festivities are actually going to take place.

Despite his disappointment over the fact that the alleged party this evening will not include John, Sherlock has been unable to shake the disagreement between Mr. Knott and Mr. Ferguson from his mind, and he is curious to see for himself whether the party will take place, and if so, how the captain will behave if he decides to make an appearance.

It strikes Sherlock that Mr. Ferguson is entirely correct in his assessment that providing opportunities for merry-making is not a trait the captain has ever been known for. The decision does not fit with what Sherlock has heard of the captain’s behavior; therefore it is more than a little curious that the man would go out of his way to do so now.

It is also apparent that Mr. Ferguson has some theories of his own as to the captain’s motivations. How truthful they may be is difficult to say, but Sherlock is interested in any information that anyone has, surmised or no, on the captain’s reasons for throwing a party in the middle of the voyage.

Sherlock positions himself under the eaves of the quarterdeck, out of sight of the men standing above him, but just close enough to be within earshot of their conversation.

Mr. Jackson’s usually carrying voice has lowered to a more discreet volume, but he is speaking loudly enough that Sherlock can easily hear his words.

“—were of course curious to know how much truth there is to the proposition.”

“It comes as much of a surprise to me as to any of you, I’m sure. But yes, the captain gave me instructions this morning to get the preparations underway. It shouldn’t be too grand an affair, just a little something to commemorate crossing the line. Typically, there’s one sort of celebration or another to mark the event. The captain doesn’t go in for any of the more pagan rituals, King Neptune and all that, but now that we’ve hit the trade winds, there’s a bit more time for the men to relax. He thought it might be a good opportunity to allow for some fraternity on board, and to celebrate coming successful through that storm. Everyone’s nerves were a bit jangled after that.”

“Oh, indeed, sir. My own Tabitha has yet to fully recover. She hasn’t left her berth since the storm. She subsists on nothing but broth and lemon tea. She is too weak to do much more than lift her head from the pillow, but I do believe this party will be just the thing to rouse her spirits.”

“T’was very glad to hear it,” Lestrade offers politely.

“Well, you may tell the captain that I commend his decision making. Might I also inquire, on behalf of the ladies you understand, whether the trunks will be sent up?”

“Yes, I’ve just given the order actually.”

“Splendid, splendid. Do I have your permission then to begin spreading the good news? It’s only that… well, the ladies have much to prepare for, sir. I believe they would appreciate the additional hour or so.”

“Yes, by all means—”

Lestrade’s assurance is cut short by the appearance of the captain himself.
Sherlock recognizes him instantly by the sound of his approach—the heavy, dragging tread is unmistakable.

It seems the prospect of the party has done little to improve the captain’s own sour disposition. The man’s evident displeasure can be heard in the resounding bark of his voice.

“What’s all this, Lieutenant?”

Sherlock presses himself closer against the shadow under the railing.

“Just speaking with Mr. Jackson about this evening’s festivities, sir.”

“And did anyone give Mr. Jackson permission to be standing on the quarterdeck?”

“I did, sir.”

“Well then, as your superior officer I override your decision, and request that Mr. Jackson remove himself from the quarterdeck at once.”

“Very good, sir. Right away, sir.”

Mr. Jackson appears to have enough savoir-faire to know when to remove himself from a sticky situation, as Sherlock sees him retreating with haste down the staircase to Sherlock’s right, before Lestrade has even finished speaking.

“Who is in command of this ship, Lieutenant?”

Sherlock clings to the shadows, listening hard.

“You are, sir.”

The captain’s voice is a low snarl of rage. “You would do well to remember it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sherlock hears the angry footsteps approach the stairs. “Keep the passengers OFF the quarterdeck!”

Sherlock holds himself perfectly still as the captain pounds past him and makes his way into the waist where the officers are gathered around the mainmast, finishing up their readings.

Sherlock hangs back.

He has no desire to cross paths with the captain under any circumstances, and certainly not when he is in one of his moods, as he clearly is today. But there is no sign of John up in the rigging, and it’s too hot to venture back below decks.

Sherlock can hear the sound of the captain’s voice, yelling criticism at the assembled officers in training. It occurs to him that if the captain’s mood is as black as it seems, then the officers are in for it, no matter how competent their work.

The opportunity to hear Anderson criticized is all the motivation Sherlock needs.

He creeps closer, hugging the larboard rail, until he is once again within earshot of the captain, but well hidden behind a crate stacked on deck.
“You call these calculations, Patterson? Tell me, were you born in a barn?”

“N-no, sir.”

“Well then, why is it that your marks more closely resemble chicken scratch than legible calculations?”

“I don’t kn-know, sir.”

“Figure it out, Patterson, and figure it out quick. I don’t have time to waste on dribbling school children who don’t know one end of a slate from another. And get rid of that stammer before I have to beat it out of you.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

“Who’s next?”

Sherlock listens as the captain continues down the line of midshipmen, criticizing and mocking each candidate in turn. Anderson is the very last to be subjected to the captain’s scorn.

“What’s this, Anderson?”

“There are my calculations, sir.”

There is an audible crack, which cannot be mistaken for anything other than the back of the captain’s hand hitting Anderson’s face.

“This work is unfit to line the inside of my privy, and you are the oldest in this company. How many years have you been a midshipmen now, Anderson?”

Anderson’s sullen silence is audible even from the other side of the crate.

“Don’t test me, boy.”

“Seven.”

“What was that? Speak up!”

“Seven.”

“That’s right, seven years and you’re still fumbling through simple astrological readings? You better shape up, Anderson, if you want to remain in this fleet. The Navy’s got no time for stupid, lazy sailors, much less officers. You’re on deck duty for the rest of the afternoon.”

Anderson makes a sound of outrage. “But, sir, you can’t—”

“What did you say to me, Officer?”

Sherlock can hear the menacing drag of the captain’s bad leg as he draws closer to Anderson with malicious intent.

“That’s right, deck duty, until I say otherwise. In fact, you’re on deck duty the rest of the evening. No festivities for you tonight, Anderson.” The mocking curl of the captain’s voice around the word is acidic enough to strip the varnish from all the wood on the ship. “And if I hear one word—_one word_ of complaint out of you, I will thrash you so hard you won’t be able to walk for a week, is that understood?”
Anderson’s answer is a mumble of discontent.

“What was that?”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“The rest of you, get out of my sight. Make sure you get everything done before sundown if you have any desire to be present at the celebration. Any questions, speak with Lieutenant Lestrade.”

Sherlock ducks into the darkness behind the crate as the captain strides past him on his way back to the quarterdeck.

The rest of the officers disperse in silence. It seems the captain has effectively quashed all feelings of fellowship between them.

Sherlock thinks on this, reflecting that the captain’s decision to throw a party clearly has very little to do with wanting anyone on board the ship to have a good time. Indeed, his attitude towards the whole affair seems to be one of grudging acceptance. It’s as if the idea was never his in the first place, as if he’s being pushed into it by someone else. But this is a man who does not stand to be pushed around.

Lost in contemplation, Sherlock almost misses the seething form of Anderson as he strides down the deck and into a boy climbing down from aloft.

Anderson seizes him by the shoulder and spins him around. “You there! Boy! I told you to go aloft with those spunyarns an hour ago. Why haven’t you done it yet?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I was told to do this fir—”

Sherlock winces as he hears the sharp crack of Anderson’s hand against the boy’s cheek.

“Don’t talk back to me!”

“But you asked me—”

The second crack is louder than the first, and is followed by a thump as the boy falls hard to the deck.

“How dare you speak to me like that? You never question an order from one of your superiors, is that understood?”

Sherlock sees the boy nodding from where he’s still splayed on the deck, blood running from his split lip.

“Now get on your feet and do as you’re told. I want those cables sorted and taken up top by the time I come back. Or you’ll have much worse to contend with than the back of my hand.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Sherlock watches Anderson stalking away across the deck, he feels rage boiling in him, hot and poisonous. The tiny scrap of pity that Sherlock may have felt for Anderson in the wake of his humiliation at the hands of the captain vanishes in the span of a single heartbeat.

Sherlock has seen the boy around the ship. He’s a green hand, which means he’s responsible for all the jobs no one else wants to do—slushing masts, sweeping and clearing up decks, assisting the seamen in their duties and running errands for the officers. He’s the youngest person on the ship,
but he works harder than anyone. Every time Sherlock sees him, when he’s not up in the rigging with the sailors, he is running somewhere with his arms full.

The sailors are obviously fond of him. They treat him like a favorite pet when they’re not asking him to help with other duties, rumpling his hair, teaching him how to smoke a pipe, but he’s still something of an outcast because of his age. The fact that Anderson would take advantage of this boy’s status at the very bottom of the pecking order is perhaps more despicable than anything else Sherlock has seen him do.

Sherlock watches the boy reach up to wipe the blood off his face and feels a pang of sympathy move through him so visceral he can almost taste the bitter copper of the blood himself.

Sherlock waits until Anderson has vanished from sight before going over to the boy who’s still sitting where he fell, his cheeks flushed dark with shame.

He stops in front of him, stiff with uncertainty, wanting to help, to offer some gesture of good will, but he doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t want to embarrass the boy even further. He feels panic tightening his throat. What should he say?

What would John say?

The answer comes to him then in a burst of clarity. It’s the simplest thing possible.

Sherlock crouches down beside him, holding out his handkerchief.

The boy looks from the handkerchief, startled, up to Sherlock’s face.

There is a moment’s hesitation and then he takes it, wordlessly, his expression shifting to one of gratitude as he begins to dab at his swollen lip.

“What’s your name?” Sherlock asks, still crouched beside the boy.

“How long have you been working on ships like this?”

“This is my second year—third voyage,” Billy says, and Sherlock can detect the infinitesimal degree with which his chest expands, the fractional lift to his chin. He recognizes the posture as one he has adopted all too many times himself, and feels another twinge of sympathy.

“Well, Billy,” Sherlock says, “If I’m right—and I usually am about people—you’re going to make a fine officer one day.”

Billy stops wiping at his lip to stare at Sherlock in amazement. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve seen you around the ship. You’re clever. You learn on your feet, and there’s no better quality for a seaman than that. Except one, which is the one that makes all the difference. It’s the one Mr. Anderson doesn’t have.”

“What’s that?”

“Kindness. You’ll make a better officer than he ever will because you’ll never treat the boys on your ship so unfairly.”

Sherlock offers him a hand to help pull him to his feet.
Billy takes it, and then stands looking at Sherlock considering, before nodding solemnly. “You’re right. I won’t.”

He tries to hand the handkerchief back to Sherlock, but Sherlock shakes his head. “You keep it. I have plenty more.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Call me Sherlock.”

Billy nods again, tucking the handkerchief into his pocket.

“If he gives you any more trouble,” Sherlock says, nodding in the direction where Anderson walked off. “You let me know.”

Billy nods at Sherlock, his expression still deadly serious. “I will.”

Sherlock watches as Billy stoops to lift the heavy coil of rope and sling it over his shoulder, before climbing back up into the rigging.

Sherlock lowers his eyes to find a woman in a faded polka-dotted dress watching him from across the deck, the parasol in her hand shading her eyes from the sun.

As his eyes catch hers, Miss Hooper drops into a nervous curtsy of acknowledgment before hurrying away toward the stairs.

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John must be employed in some task down below decks because Sherlock doesn’t see him for the rest of the morning.

When Sherlock goes down for lunch, the corridor outside the passenger cabins is a flurry of activity. The corridor is lined with bags and boxes; the trunks that have been brought up so that the passengers might dress in their finer things for the festivities have their lids flung open with ladies spilling out of them, pulling out lengths of cloth, feathers, ribbons, cooing with excitement over items they packed weeks ago back in England.

Sherlock’s own trunk is standing beside his cabin door. He walks past it without interest—there is little inside of it to give him cause for excitement.

The prospect of a party with no John seems gloomier and gloomier with every passing moment, and as Sherlock drops into his chair, eying the stack of papers with the scrawled and re-scrawled notes of his composition, he feels a wave of bitterness rise up in him and overtake any of his previous feelings of accomplishment at having finished.

What good is a piece of music that he cannot play?

Sherlock tucks the pages out of sight and stretches out on his bunk, trying hard as he is able to ignore the muffled squeals and exclamations from the hallway.

Maybe he won’t go to the party after all. He’s already witnessed enough of the good-for-nothing captain, and based on what Sherlock observed this morning, it would be highly surprising if the captain even showed up. Sherlock doesn’t think he can bear the prospect of the music, the lights, the dancing—with no John in attendance.
The trouble is Sherlock loves music, and he loves dancing. Standing so near to it without the one person he wants to enjoy it with would be sheer torture.

Sherlock turns petulantly toward the wall, pulling his pillow over his head to drown out the commotion from beyond his door. He lies on his side, staring at the slats in the wood until they blur together before his eyes.

However, he can only lie so still for so long with his newly finished composition lying so near to him. After a time, he sits up and pulls it out again, studying the notes, listening to the rise and fall of music in his mind, thinking of John.

He spends the rest of the afternoon copying what’s written on the heavily inked pages onto clean sheets of parchment, marking in the notes as neatly as he is able.

When he is finished, he sets the fat sheaf of pages on the desk and stares at it with satisfaction, then turns to look at the corner of his bed where his violin is tucked away. His fingers are itching to play it. He wonders if there will be musicians at the celebration tonight and feels a hot spike of jealousy at the thought.

He consoles himself with the realization that he wouldn’t want any of them to hear him playing anyway, with the exception of Miss Hooper perhaps. He still hasn’t made his mind up about her, but there’s a chance she might be different than the rest of them.

The chaos in the corridor outside his room has died down—everyone seems to be inside their cabins getting dressed—and Sherlock decides to head back up on deck to distract himself from the temptation of pulling out his violin.

The first thing Sherlock notices when he reaches the top step is the distinct lack of activity on the usually busy deck. Then he hears the sounds of shouts and laughter, and looking around, notices a crowd of men standing by the starboard rail, peering down into the water.

Curious, he draws closer and leans over the railing to see what the commotion is about. Down in the water a large makeshift pool of white canvas has been strung up alongside the ship, and to his astonishment, Sherlock sees men swimming in it, splashing and laughing.

“What are they doing?” Sherlock gasps.

A wizened sailor to Sherlock’s right, chuckles lightly. “What does it look like? They’re bathing, me boy.”

“But—how?”

“They rig up a steering sail with some shot in the middle to make it sink—see how it bows down there underneath? It makes a nice spot for bathing. It’s quite deep in the middle, and does a lovely job keeping the sharks away.”

“Sharks?” Sherlock can’t keep the trace of alarm out of his voice.

“Oh, aye. They’re always on the lookout for something falling overboard. Clever creatures, sharks.”

A flash of gold catches Sherlock’s eye, and to his mingled horror and delight, he spies John Watson in the water, the sunlight gleaming off his bare, muscled back as he flips over and dives down out of sight.
“Nothing beats a swim in the Tropics in this heat,” Sherlock’s companion goes on conversationally. “Some captains don’t approve of it, mind you, but as ours hardly shows himself morning or night...” He shrugs. “Lieutenant Lestrade gave us the go ahead, and what with the festivities tonight, I suppose he’s in a lenient mood.”

Sherlock scarcely hears him.

His eyes are all for John, who is flipping and diving through the water as gracefully as a fish, his strong arms parting the water in neat even strokes as he swims. Sherlock watches the golden streak his body makes as he dives down under the surface, vanishing from sight for minutes at a time before breaking the surface again, spraying his companions with a triumphant shout, his sleek head cresting the water like a seal.

Just when Sherlock thought he couldn’t stand to be more in awe of John Watson, the man goes and does this.

He is as radiant as ever and Sherlock stands and looks and looks, and he cannot decide what he is feeling there are so many emotions pounding through him—joy and envy and lust, perhaps primarily, as all Sherlock can see of John, other than a flash of white covering his thighs, is bare, glorious, golden skin made brighter in the glare of the late-afternoon sun arching down through the water.

Sherlock swallows hard, finds his throat suddenly dry and aching.

“Alright lads, come on out, there’s work to be done yet before the sun goes down!”

One by one, the men begin to climb up the side of the ship, with help from a rope ladder thrown over the edge, and Sherlock watches with wide eyes as John emerges from the water, the muscles in his arms and back visible with each powerful reach of his hands as he pulls himself up, until he is swinging himself over the starboard rail to land on his feet, light as a cat, and Sherlock doesn’t care how foolish he looks, he doesn’t care who sees him, he stands, open-mouthed, and stares.

If this is Sherlock’s last moment on earth, he will die happy because John Watson is standing in front of him, dripping wet, the sun picking out the droplets of water on his skin like jewels, his white-blonde hair slicked back flat on his head, clad only in a pair of white linen breeches that are clinging to the muscles in his thighs and everything else below his narrow hips, and oh, thank god for linen, Sherlock thinks, (Sherlock will write odes to linen forever after this moment, he will dedicate his life to its production if necessary) because linen goes transparent when wet.

“Sherlock? Are you alright?”

He might actually be whimpering, and he must look the worse for it because suddenly, John is rushing forward, his cool hands on Sherlock’s arms, guiding him to a packing crate nearby to sit, dropping into a crouch in front of him, his blue eyes bright with concern.

“What’s the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Sherlock manages to shut his gaping mouth but that’s about the best he can do with John’s cool hands still resting on his forearms, his warm blue gaze so focused on Sherlock’s face.

“What is it? What’s wrong? Are you too hot?”

One of John’s cool hands reaches up to brush the hair off of Sherlock’s forehead, and the sweep of his fingers—so filled with tenderness—is the same gesture he performed so many times when Sherlock was sick, but now, with John crouching between his knees, fresh from the ocean, his skin
glowing with heat, smelling of salt and blue sky and wind (yes, these things do have smells, Sherlock knows that now, John smells like all of them), the gesture takes on a whole new meaning.

Sherlock shuts his eyes, losing himself in the sensation of John’s cool palm against his skin, still damp from the ocean. He feels a drop of water strike the tops of his hands where they lie useless in his lap, and maybe he’s actually swooning now, because John is dripping on him.

“Sherlock, you’re scaring me a little. Can you look at me?”

Sherlock opens his eyes to find John’s eyes on him, the color of a cloudless sky. There are tiny droplets clinging to his long lashes like beads of light.

Sherlock does whimper then.

“Here, just sit for a minute. You’ll be all right. It’s blindingly hot out here, I know. You’re not used to it. Why are you wearing this heavy coat? You should take this off.”

John’s hand are reaching for the edges of Sherlock’s coat and he makes a strangled cry of protest, because with all that has happened, with all that he can take, John removing his clothes on the deck of the ship in broad daylight is the limit.

“I’m fine,” he gasps out, reaching up to pull the lapels of his coat out of John’s hands. “Just—hot. Too hot. I’ll be fine in a minute. Like you said, I just need to…sit.”

John lifts his hands away in a gesture of surrender and sits back on his heels.

Sherlock can’t bear to look at John directly but he can feel the intensity of John’s gaze as he studies him, his concern still issuing out toward Sherlock in hot, bright waves. It’s as though there’s something extrasensory connecting them, another force, more than sight or touch or taste or smell, something in the air between them, feeding Sherlock information, enabling him to perceive the proximity of those clinging linen breeches, even without looking at them—

Sherlock shuts his eyes again.

“You sure you’re all right?”

Sherlock nods frantically, with his eyes still shut.

“Well. If you’re sure…” John sounds uncertain but Sherlock hears him rising to his feet.

Sherlock counts his throbbing heartbeats with his eyes squeezed shut, waiting for the storm of his desire to ebb back to a level he can tolerate.

“I better get back to work,” John is saying, with a touch of reluctance in his voice. Then Sherlock hears something in his tone shift. “And you’d better get down below. You’ve a party to get ready for, if I’m not mistaken.”

Sherlock opens his eyes and looks up at John to find him grinning mischievously.

“Don’t you want to look your best for all the young ladies?”

Sherlock feels a stab of disappointment at the remark, but instead of dropping his eyes, he goes on looking at John—recognizes the high color in his cheeks, the deep glitter in his eyes, and realizes that John is teasing him.

“No, I do not,” Sherlock answers stiffly.
John leans back in toward Sherlock; his mouth dipping so close, Sherlock can feel John’s smile brushing his ear. “What about for me then?”

Sherlock’s mouth drops open in shock.

Heat courses through him—instantaneous, all consuming, searing every rational thought in his brain. He clenches his hands tightly in his lap as the sudden rush of feeling overtakes him, grateful that he is still seated as all the blood leaves his brain.

“B—but you won’t be there,” Sherlock protests, painfully aware of the whining quality in his voice.

The brutal disappointment of a party where there will be music, wine, dancing—but no John—crushes Sherlock all over again, dousing the heat of his desire as effectively as a bucket of cold water. He feels petulant, wounded, like a small child who has been promised a treat, only to be punished instead.

He knows he is acting foolishly, but he cannot help himself.

Sherlock hangs his head, trying to swallow the bitter taste of his disappointment and failing.

Then all of a sudden, John’s fingers are there under his chin, tipping his head up to meet John’s gaze. There is no mistaking the fire Sherlock sees there.

“I’ll just have to come and find you then, won’t I?”

Before Sherlock can find the breath to respond, John has risen to his feet.

Sherlock stares fixedly at John’s face—avoiding everything below his waist with the self-restraint of the most pious holy sister.

John’s lips are curled in a smile, but the look in his eyes hasn’t changed.

Sherlock feels a shudder run through him.

“Now go and get dressed. I’ll come for you after I’ve finished my work. Once the sun has set, I’ll come find you.”

Perhaps John sees the creeping doubt in Sherlock’s eyes because he takes Sherlock’s hand between his own and squeezes it briefly, once, before letting go.

“I promise.”

As Sherlock watches John walk away across the deck, his self-restraint crumbles.

He cannot help but let his eyes slide down John’s muscular back, still shining with water, to the curves of John’s buttocks beneath the clinging linen of his trousers, each powerful flex of the muscle as he steps—his gait as strong, as graceful as a dancer’s—fanning the flames of Sherlock’s desire until it is an inferno of need.

It is a long time before Sherlock has the strength to rise to his feet, and feels that he can walk again.
Thank you for reading!

Comments are my bread and butter.

Soundtrack for the high seas is available for your listening pleasure here.
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

Sherlock attends a party, and is an awkward gay baby.
Sinister events ensue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Sherlock reaches his cabin, he wastes no time digging through his trunk and pulling out his deep green tail coat, his velvet knee breeches, a fresh pair of stockings, and a clean shirt. The waistcoat he chooses has slender golden stripes stretched horizontally across the breast, and a row of golden buttons that gleam when they catch the light. The neck cloth he selects is a creamy ivory.

They are the finest clothes he owns.

He never thought for one second that he would have a reason to wear them on the voyage. And he wouldn’t be wearing them now—party or no party he wouldn’t waste the effort—if it weren’t for his conversation with John just now. Usually, Sherlock doesn’t care one way or another about the clothes he wears. He feels awkward and unsightly no matter how he dresses. But tonight is different. Tonight, John has specifically requested that Sherlock dress his best. And so he will.

He wishes longingly for a moment that he had another bucket of hot water for a proper bath, but he quickly dismisses the extravagant thought and settles for a thorough scrubbing with the cold water from his pewter basin.

He strips down to his bare skin and splashes cold water on his face and neck, under his arms and between his legs. Despite the relative warmth of the evening air, Sherlock finds he is shivering uncontrollably, like a harp string tightened past endurance and then plucked. He feels hot and cold at once, his skin strangely light as though it is too fragile to hold in all the feelings that are thrumming underneath his ribs.

His flagging disappointment over the party has been rekindled into a feverish delight over an unexpected opportunity to spend time with John. He isn’t yet sure what capacity it will take but the promise in John’s eyes, in his voice, leads Sherlock to believe that something about tonight will be different.

There is something in the air, perhaps it is the communal giddiness over the party, perhaps it is something else, but it has left Sherlock feeling alive with possibility.

Everything around him looks different—the little lights skipping in under his door from the lanterns outside, the crisp lines in his jacket as he lays it out upon the bed, even the goose bumps on his skin from the cold water make him aware of how much it’s possible to feel, how much sensory input is constantly streaming in on him from all sides—his own hands skimming up over his ribs are making his body react in unexpected ways. He has to concentrate very hard to not let his attentions stray while he finishes washing himself.
He dresses carefully, meaningfully, lacing up the ties on his breeches with trembling fingers, tucking the scarf in at his throat with more attention than he has ever bestowed upon it, tugging his waistcoat so firmly into place that it feels as though he is being embraced by its snug fit.

He wets his hair, combs it back from his face with fastidious care, calming the dark, unruly curls into sleek submission. He gazes at himself briefly in the foggy sheet of glass above his desk that doubles for a mirror, and although the reflection is hazy, he can make out the deep lights of his eyes, the soft sweep of his hair as it curves back from his brow, the strong lines of his cheekbones, his full mouth.

Looking at his own blurred image he wonders briefly how someone like John can see anything in him he finds appealing. He feels his cheeks flushing at the thought as he tries to study himself from John’s eyes—what is it that he sees?

He gives it up as a lost cause and then, with one last longing look at his violin case where it’s poking out from under the bed, he exits his cabin and makes his way to the upper decks.

The celebration is being held in the rather grand stateroom just below the quarterdeck that serves as an antechamber to the captain’s private quarters. Sherlock is surprised that the captain would allow the festivities to take place so close to his own rooms, however, there aren’t very many other places on the ship large enough for such an event. The ship that they are on, although less grand than some of the frigates in Her Majesty’s Navy, is possessed of a stateroom spacious enough to comfortably fit a large gathering of people with just enough space for a small dance floor.

By the time Sherlock arrives, the room is already filled with people. He is surprised by the size of the crowd, but then, it’s easy to forget just how many people are on board the ship when they so rarely congregate anywhere all at once. Even more overwhelming to consider is that the present crowd represents only a fraction of the ship’s population, as none of the ship’s rather sizable crew is in attendance.

The ladies are decked out in their customary finery. The afternoon of excavation in their trunks, it seems, did not go to waste. Indeed, there is such an impression of ribbons and feathers and lace that Sherlock can hardly see the lights beyond the window pouring in from the setting sun.

The officers are in uniform, and are mingled throughout the passengers, talking heartily, with glasses in hand. They are easy to pick out in the crowd—their coats providing bright splashes of color in the sea of dark coats worn by the men and the pale dresses of the women.

The room is modestly decorated with several strands of paper bunting strung overhead, and though the sky outside is still light, the candles are already flickering in their sconces along the wall. In one corner of the room stands a table with a punch bowl. In the corner opposite, a rather forlorn trio of musicians have taken up residence and are sawing away at their instruments with disinterested gusto.

Sherlock winces internally at the violincello’s plodding rhythm and helps himself to a glass of punch to give himself something to do. He makes his way to a far corner of the room—as far as possible from the industrious musicians—and stands between two guttering candles with his back to the wall, wondering suddenly why on earth he decided to show up at all.

The brief shimmer of excitement he felt as he was getting dressed is rapidly diminishing in the presence of the well-dressed, chattering crowd. There is absolutely nobody in this room that Sherlock has any desire to talk to, and there is nothing to take his mind off the dragging minutes as he waits for the sun to sink below the horizon beyond the windows.
After sunset, John said, but that may as well be hours from now based on the glacial pace with which the sun is making its descent. The longer Sherlock looks at it, the more convinced he is that the sun isn’t actually moving at all.

The only consistent bright spot in the evening is the fact that Anderson is not among the guests. Every time Sherlock sees the flash of a uniform out of the corner of his eye, his heartbeat starts to pound in fear, until he remembers with a wave of relief that Anderson has been banished from the festivities.

Meanwhile, there is no sign of the captain at all.

Within ten minutes, Sherlock’s excitement has been replaced entirely by boredom. He is making his way back to the punch bowl to refill his empty glass when he is stopped on his way by a gentle touch on the shoulder.

Sherlock turns, exasperated, preparing to make an apology for having accidentally trod on the hem of a lady’s gown, and finds, to his surprise, the worn, smiling face of Lieutenant Lestrade looking at him with open good will.

“I say, Sherlock Holmes, I’m glad to see you up and about again!”

Sherlock is so startled that at first he doesn’t know what to say.

Luckily, Lieutenant Lestrade proves to be a man not easily deterred by silent, awkward conversation partners because the next thing Sherlock knows Lestrade has seized hold of his hand and is pumping it up and down with vigor.

Sherlock must look slightly overcome because Lestrade lets go of his hand with an apologetic smile, and goes on to explain.

“Crewman Watson brought the matter to my attention—that you were ill, I mean. He came seeking my permission to look in on you. I admit I was hesitant at first, but when he told me of his medical history I didn’t see how I could refuse. And now, seeing you fully recovered, I’m only too glad I was able to help in some small way.”

Sherlock is touched by the man’s genuine expression of concern and startled all over again that the Lieutenant considers him worth speaking to, much less congratulating him on surviving a deadly illness.

“Ah, well. It was just a fever but… I guess it was rather a bad one as far as fevers go. I’m… very grateful to Mr. Watson for his help.”

“By the way he tells it, if he hadn’t gone to look in on you when he did, you wouldn’t have made it through. It’s a very good thing he’s got his eye on you. Otherwise, I’m not sure we’d be having this conversation right now.”

Sherlock nods, uncertain what to say; and then remembers the vow he made to thank Lestrade for all his help. He is more certain now than ever that it wouldn’t have been possible for John to come to his aid if not for the Lieutenant’s intervention on his behalf.

Sherlock takes a deep breath. “Actually, Lieutenant, I’ve been meaning to thank you for… ah, well, for being so lenient with Mr. Watson that week, and letting him… assist me the way he did. I’m… well, I very much appreciate anything you did to help the matter, that is… by way of not informing certain individuals of certain transgressions, turning a blind eye and all that. It was… well, I guess what I mean to say is… thank you.”
As this horrible speech stammers its way to its inevitable conclusion, Sherlock is seized with violent regret that he didn’t in fact perish in his cabin last week, if only because it would mean he wouldn’t be standing here making a fool of himself now.

Sherlock wants very much to crawl under the punch table and die.

But Lestrade appears not to mind Sherlock’s sudden loss of all verbal fortitude. He claps Sherlock hard on the shoulder.

“Don’t mention it. I really had very little to do with it. You should be thanking Mr. Watson, not me. You’re very lucky, Mr. Holmes, to have a friend like that.” There is something knowing in Lestrade’s warm brown gaze. “It’s clear he’s very fond of you.”

Sherlock can feel his cheeks turning steadily pinker as the full weight of this sentiment takes hold of him.

“I… I…”

Mercifully, he is saved from responding by a corpulent passenger in a decaying military jacket coming up behind Lestrade and throttling him in what Sherlock can only assume is an expression of good will. While Lestrade is being grappled in the man’s vise-like grip, Sherlock slips behind his back and away toward freedom.

Sherlock is still trying to make his escape, struggling to squeeze his way between two corpulent men engaged in passionate conversation, when a ripple of excitement moves through the crowd. The trio of musicians has struck up a minuet, and Sherlock is relieved to find the crowd dispersing somewhat as couples flock to the floor in partners to begin the dance.

The two men Sherlock is trying to work his way around, turn to one another in evident relief.

“Oh, it looks as though there’s to be some dancing.”

“About time, I dare say! Those musicians would have had a hard time rousing me from sleep the way they were playing. Let’s hope they improve now that they have a concrete objective.”

They move off in the direction of the dance floor and Sherlock flees to the other side of the room. He takes up residence directly opposite the window, where to his dismay, he can see the sun still hovering above the horizon, staining the sky a dark gold.

He’s just wondering how on earth he will tolerate another moment of this awful evening when he feels another tap on his shoulder, this time much more delicate.

Sherlock turns with an exasperated sigh to see who could possibly want his attention, prepared to say something very rude indeed to whichever individual dares to interrupt his inner monologue of suffering. However, when he sees who it is, he shuts his mouth with a snap.

Standing before him in a very pink gown that’s clearly two seasons out of fashion and at least two sizes too big (must be inherited Sherlock thinks, the young lady certainly has older sisters) is Miss Hooper.

“Good evening,” she says to her shoes, before dropping into an exaggerated curtsy.

“Er… good evening, Miss… Hooper, is it?”

“That’s right.” She nods, her face trembling briefly into a smile before reassuming its habitual
nervous look. “I… I know we’ve never spoken before but… I just wanted to come over and tell you
that I saw what you did earlier today… for the boy, Billy. They treat him abysmally. It makes me
sick to see it. I always want to intervene but I never quite know how to help. When I saw what you
did today, that was—”

She ducks her head, as though looking for her fallen courage somewhere at her feet. When she
looks back up at Sherlock, she is smiling again, this time without a trace of melancholy. The
genuineness of the smile changes her whole face. Instead of pinched and nervous, she looks
young… sweet.

“That was really kind of you.”

Sherlock feels his cheeks heat with embarrassment. He has no idea what to say in response.

“Oh. Well.” His discomfort feels as though it’s strangling him. “It was nothing.”

“Well.” She purses her lips, tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. Her hair seems to be eternally
escaping around her face in frayed wisps. She dips her head in a nervous approximation of a
curtsey. “Well, I’ll let you get back to enjoying the party…”

She begins to back away.

Sherlock feels relief wash over him but then remembers with a stricken feeling, his promise to
himself earlier. About offering Miss Hooper some kindness if he can.

The minuet has just finished. The couples on the dance floor are bowing to one another and
moving into position to start the next dance.

“Actually, um.” Sherlock stares hard at her left elbow. “We could um… that is… would you care
to dance?”

Sherlock risks a glance up at her face to gage her reaction, and watches as her cheeks turn pink with
pleasure.

“I’d be delighted,” she says, accepting his proffered arm.

Sherlock leads her stiffly out into the small throng of other dancers. Thank goodness, it’s a waltz.
Sherlock thinks anything else might prove too much for his nerves.

But then, Sherlock has always had a knack for dancing.

It’s been a while since he danced properly with anyone. He refused to attend any and all parties his
parents gave in the last year before he went to school. He hated the way his mother would push
him toward any eligible young woman in the neighborhood in the hopes that he might find a
suitable marriage partner, since in his mother’s eyes there was little else he could do for the family
that was worthwhile.

Sherlock liked the dancing but hated the presumption on his mother’s part, the expectation that he
must engage his partner in amicable conversation. He never had anything to say to the women he
was forced to dance with. They had no interest in his experiments and he couldn’t care less for the
vapid things most women spend their time thinking about. So as a form of protest, he always kept
his mouth resolutely shut, and sometimes trod purposefully on his partner’s foot so that she would
refuse to dance with him again.

However, when he chooses to be, Sherlock is an exceptional dance partner—as he is now. He
moves Miss Hooper over the floor with grace and skill. For her part, she is a relatively forgiving dance partner, only clinging to his arm a little too tightly on the turns.

He prays desperately that she won’t try and make conversation and is rewarded with her contented silence—only occasionally does she flicker her eyes up towards him and offer him a grateful smile.

Indeed, she looks so pleased by the activity that Sherlock doesn’t have the heart to dismiss her at the dance’s conclusion. They’re halfway through the next dance (it is a quadrille), when Sherlock feels a tap on his shoulder.

He turns to see Lieutenant Lestrade. “Do you mind if I cut in?”

Sherlock steps graciously aside, trying not to broadcast his palpable relief. “Not at all.”

Miss Hooper has turned a becoming shade of vermillion bright enough to match her dress.

“May I have this dance, Miss Hooper?”

Lieutenant Lestrade takes her slight hand in his, bowing deeply over it.

“You may, sir,” she whispers, as she inclines her head in acceptance.

Sherlock is concerned the girl might actually faint, but before her swoon can take effect, the Lieutenant has stepped in to take his hands in hers.

Lestrade, in turn, is beaming all over his worn, handsome face. “Very good.”

Sherlock watches the two of them return to the dance floor and feels a curious sensation come over him. Although he does not know either of them well he feels strangely glad seeing them together. He feels a sort of fondness for them both as well as… recognition. There is something achingly familiar about the way they are looking at one another, the light in Lestrade’s eyes, the lilt to Miss Hooper’s mouth. The realization strikes Sherlock as hard as a physical blow—it’s the way John sometimes looks at him.

At the thought of John, Sherlock looks to the window, and sees—at last, at last!—the sun has disappeared below the dark curve of the sea, leaving the sky a wine-drenched crimson obscured here and there by fragments of cloud steeped in gold.

Sherlock wonders fleetingly if John will come looking for him here, and he scans the room wildly, his eyes searching for a shock of white blond hair. He is disappointed, of course, and is about to make his way toward the doors to the stateroom to go looking for John when he finds he has been backed rather effectively into a corner by two elderly gentleman speaking together in loud, self-important voices.

“I say, rather a dull affair, wouldn’t you agree, Edwards? Where’s the pomp and circumstance we were promised? Something about a king of the sea being sacrificed to the gods? Or is it the other way around?”

“I do believe, my dear Bartholomew, that you are entirely mistaken. I heard from Mr. Jackson earlier this afternoon that the sort of primitive rituals to which you are referring are precisely what Lieutenant Lestrade and the captain wish to avoid. No, no, this is meant to be a far more civilized affair.”

At the mention of Lieutenant Lestrade, the other man’s voice drops to a conspiratorial murmur. Sherlock has to lean slightly forward to catch his next words. “No sign of the captain at all, yet. A
“Bit suspicious, wouldn’t you say?”

“No, I haven’t. Although he doesn’t seem the sort to go in for parties much, does he? Bit of a gloomy chap.”

“Not as gloomy as that Mr. Knott.”

The two men share a conspiratorial chuckle as they move off through the crowd.

The air is close in the stateroom, and heavily scented with perfume; made warm by the heat of so many bodies in a small space. Sherlock decides conclusively in that moment that he has had enough of this party.

Just as the two gentlemen remarked, there has been no sign of the captain, nor of the other two disgruntled conversation partners from the previous evening. If anything sinister is taking place, it’s certainly not taking place in the stateroom filled with people.

The sky outside is now a dusky blue; the sun has well and truly set. John must be free by now and even if he isn’t, Sherlock would much prefer to stand in the open air of the upper decks, rather than in the stuffy air of the crowded stateroom.

However, Sherlock has scarcely taken two steps toward the doors when he hears a small, gasping voice calling his name.

“Mr. Holmes!”

He turns to see Miss Hooper walking toward him, with her arm around Lieutenant Lestrade’s waist. She’s walking strangely with a heavy, shuffling step, and it takes him a moment to notice that her arm is not around his waist out of affection but rather because she is struggling to keep him on his feet.

“Mr. Holmes,” Miss Hooper squeaks as the Lieutenant begins to slide out of her grasp. “Oh—help!”

Sherlock rushes forward to take Lestrade by his other arm, steadying him on his feet.

The man’s face is pale, his eyes unfocused.

“What on earth…?”

Miss Hooper begins speaking in a hushed voice. “I’m not sure what’s wrong. One moment we were dancing and the next, he was stumbling and couldn’t seem to stay on his feet.”

“Has he been drinking?”

Miss Hooper’s brown eyes are wet with worried tears. “Not that I know of.”
“Lieutenant,” Sherlock ducks his head down next to Lestrade’s. “Lieutenant, can you hear me?”

Looking over at his companion in the lamplight, Sherlock can see sweat standing out on his brow, and notices with a sharper pang of worry that his color is not right.

Lestrade tries to reply but he seems to have lost control of his faculties so profoundly that all he can do is hang off Sherlock’s arm.

A feeling of alarm comes over Sherlock then, so rapidly and with such conviction, that it is not until much later that he can point to the source of it, but he is certain in that moment that drunkenness is not the cause of the Lieutenant’s illness.

A man like Lestrade would not let himself become this intoxicated, even at a celebration, Sherlock is certain of it. There is no smell of alcohol on him, and even if he had been drinking, the likelihood of the drunkenness hitting him all at once like this is rare at best.

Worry is now beating hot and swift in Sherlock’s temples. He can feel his pulse hammering at the base of his throat. He needs to get Lestrade to his rooms and lying down before anyone notices, but more important than that, he needs a doctor.

Sherlock is afraid that the man has been poisoned.

Sherlock glances up at Miss Hooper, attempting not to display the terror he is feeling on his face. “It’s not drunkenness—of that much I am certain, but he’s very ill. We need to get him to his bed.”

Miss Hooper nods, her pinched face very white. “What can I do?”

Sherlock hesitates.

She clearly wants to help, and he is impressed with her determination, in spite of himself. Many women would have fled in terror at the first sign that something was amiss. But it is imperative that no one notices that the Lieutenant is ill, and it would be far too conspicuous for both of them to help him from the room. Besides the fact that as an unmarried woman, if Miss Hooper were to set foot in the Lieutenant’s private quarters, her reputation would surely suffer.

“I’m afraid nothing more at the moment. I want to get him out of here without causing a disturbance and the pair of us will arouse too much attention.”

Miss Hooper nods again, but the fleeting look of disappointment on her face is impossible to miss.

“I’d better get back to Ms. Grimsby anyway—my chaperone.” Miss Hooper clarifies, lips pursed in an expression of evident displeasure.

Sherlock is treated to the mental image of an older woman he has seen in Miss Hooper’s company who spends the majority of her time peering disapprovingly at everyone over the tops of her pince-nez.

“I’m grateful for your offer.” Sherlock bows his head in thanks. “I’ll keep you abreast of all developments to the best of my abilities.”

Miss Hooper’s dark eyes flash up at him with gratitude as she dips into a final curtsy. “Thank you, Mr. Holmes. I appreciate it.”

Sherlock watches her move away through the crowd with a pang of regret. But it cannot be helped. He turns away, readjusting his grip so that he is supporting Lestrade more firmly by the waist.
Luckily, the party is in full swing at this point, and those guests who are not dancing are clearly deep in their cups, talking loudly and laughing, so no one pays any attention to the slender young man in the dark green coat leading the officer towards the back of the room and the door to the officers’ quarters.

The first mate on a ship as large as this always has his rooms in connection with the captain’s cabin, so thankfully it is easy for Sherlock to find his way to the somewhat modest berth beside the captain’s more stately quarters where Lieutenant Lestrade sleeps.

In the time it takes Sherlock to get the man through the crowd and down the corridor to his room, his condition has worsened considerably. His face is set; sweat running down his cheeks as he concentrates on putting one leg in front of the other. Although he is unable to express it, he seems to understand the dire nature of his situation, and this, more than anything, causes Sherlock’s worry to transform into terror.

He guides Lestrade to his bunk, helps him somewhat awkwardly until he is lying down, and then straightens up, his eyes scanning the room for water. Luck is with him. There is a pitcher of water on the stand beside the Lieutenant’s bed and Sherlock seize it and pours a full glass, holding it carefully up to the man’s shaking lips to drink.

“I don’t want to alarm you,” he says, as he holds the glass up to Lestrade’s mouth. “But I’m very much afraid that you have been poisoned.”

Lestrade’s color worsens with Sherlock’s words and Sherlock wonders suddenly if he shouldn’t have told the man as much.

“Who were you with earlier this evening? Did anyone offer you anything to drink?”

Lestrade shakes his head, overcome. He lies back against the pillows with effort and shuts his eyes.


Sherlock hates to leave him, but he knows nothing about poisoning other than that every second he hesitates this man’s life might be slipping away.

He pauses in the doorway, offers uselessly, “Don’t go anywhere, and don’t let anyone in. I’ll be back with help shortly, I promise.”

Sherlock is forced to make his way back through the throng of party guests on his way to the deck, and he has to squirm breathlessly past several people in order to reach the door to the outside. It is moments like these that Sherlock is thankful he is thin as a rail, with knobby elbows perfect for digging into people’s ribs.

Darkness is falling as he makes his way outside onto the deck, the sky around him the color of a deepening bruise. Sherlock freezes, his eyes scanning the rigging above him for a sign of John.

But the only sailors around are the two men at the helm, and the man on the watch, who is not John Watson, and Sherlock realizes with a terrible sinking sensation that he will have to head down into the hatch at the front of the ship that leads into the forecastle, the stairwell that is forbidden to him as a passenger.

He wastes several valuable seconds looking again just to be sure, but he doesn’t see John anywhere, so he sets out, at a run, toward the stairway at the front of the ship.
But luck is on his side again. He is halfway down the stairs, heart pounding in his throat, when he crashes into someone coming up.

Sherlock staggers sideways but the person he crashed into has better balance than he does, and catches him lightly by the arm, steadying him.

“Woah, woah! Easy there, where are you rushing off to in such a—”

Sherlock looks up, breathless, and then gasps out in relief as he is met with the steady blue gaze of John Watson.

“John! Thank god—”

“Why are you in such a hurry?” John’s eyes are twinkling good-naturedly. “I told you I’d come find you after—”

His expression changes at the look on Sherlock’s face. “What is it?”

“Lieutenant Lestrade, he isn’t well—I’m afraid—” Sherlock stops a moment to catch his breath.

“I’m afraid he may have been poisoned!”

John’s look of confusion quickly changes to one of alarm.

“Where is he?”

“He’s this way, in his cabin—”

Sherlock has never been more relieved to be in the capable company of his friend than he is now, tearing back across the deck, about to throw open the doors of the stateroom when John stops him with a hand on his arm. “There’s another way in. It’s much faster.”

John takes them through another doorway on the larboard side of the ship that leads right into the corridor with the officers’ rooms. Sherlock opens the door and follows John in until they are both standing at the Lieutenant’s bedside, where he is lying grey and still against the pillows.

As soon as he enters the room, John is all business, pulling up a chair beside the bed, rolling up his shirtsleeves. “How long has he been like this?”

“I—not long, a quarter of an hour, at most. He was fine one minute and the next—it was like he was drunk. His condition worsened rapidly. He started sweating, he couldn’t speak, his color changed from yellow to grey…”

John is feeling along the Lieutenant’s brow line and then checking his pulse, the concerned expression on his face worsening by the minute.

Not stopping for a moment in his assessment he speaks to Sherlock in a low, urgent voice. “I need my medical kit. You’re going to have go and fetch it for me. It’s in the trunk stowed under my berth, down in the forecastle. Lieutenant,” John’s tone is somehow deferential and apologetic all at once. “Lieutenant, I need you to sit up for me if you can. I’m going to have to do something unpleasant.”

Lestrade’s eyes are unfocused but he manages to sit up with John’s help, slumped over on his shoulder.

“Sherlock, pass me that basin.”
Sherlock does so and John sets it on the floor at his feet.

John’s tone is gentle but matter of fact; he is speaking quickly and to the point. “You’ve been poisoned, sir. I’m going to need to make you sick to try and get the poison out of you.”

Lestrade’s head lolls in acknowledgment, and John turns to Sherlock.

“If you can’t find your way, ask someone to direct you to John Watson’s hammock. If anyone questions you, tell them you are doing so with my permission. In fact—” He adjusts his grip on Lestrade momentarily to reach for a chain around his neck that Sherlock has never seen before, tucked away under his shirt. He lifts it off over his head and places it in Sherlock’s outstretched palm. “If they question you, just show them this.”

The delicate chain is silver and thin as a spider’s web. It weighs almost nothing in Sherlock’s hand. Suspended from the chain is a small silver locket with the initials M.W. carved into its surface in elaborate script.

Sherlock is momentarily speechless with the weight of this gesture—his mind lurching with fear at the possibilities of those two entangled letters—but then John’s gentle voice is urging him from his trance.

“Go, now. Time is the only weapon we have to fight this and we haven’t much of it left.”

Sherlock doesn’t need to be told twice. He loops the delicate chain over his own head so as not to lose it, and races from the room.

***

His journey back down the corridor and across the upper decks, and even down through the hatch into the forecastle is met with no obstacles and Sherlock is breathless with relief.

It takes him a moment to find his way under the beams to the area at the front of the ship where the crew sleeps, but it is easy to locate once he does, the forest of hammocks swinging with the slight sway of the ship is impossible to miss.

There are a few men about, playing cards in the center of the room—some of whom he recognizes from his time up on deck. They look at him strangely when he appears, and he must look a sight, dressed in his best clothes, breathless from running back and forth.

“Excuse me,” Sherlock begins, speaking through the fear tightening his throat. “I’m looking for John Watson’s hammock. I’m here on his orders. I need to bring him his medical kit. He’s with the Lieutenant who is very ill.”

The men stare at him for several heartbeats, apparently uncertain as to what to make of this speech.

Sherlock holds up the chain around his neck that John has given him, adding, “He gave me this to show I’m acting on his orders.”

Still the men hesitate and Sherlock is beginning to wonder what he will do if they do not help him, when a young voice behind him causes him to whirl around.

“Oye, it’s Mr. Sherlock Holmes come to visit!”

Sherlock recognizes the slight form of Billy, whose ruddy smiling face is turned up toward his with good humor.
“Billy! Thank goodness, I need your help! Tell me, where does Mr. Watson sleep? I need to fetch him his medical bag.”

Billy swings himself off the beam in the ceiling and lands on one of the hammocks, agile as a monkey. “He sleeps right here. And there’s all his kit, down underneath.”

Sherlock hurries forward, dropping to his knees to pull open the top of a worn canvas sack, stitched with the initials J.W.

Billy leans over the hammock to watch Sherlock as he looks, swinging back and forth.

“Who’s ill then?” he asks, conversationally, evidently untroubled by Sherlock’s grave demeanor.

“Lieutenant Lestrade,” Sherlock says, distracted, as he pulls out what he’s looking for.

John’s belongings are few and it’s only a matter of seconds before Sherlock’s hand closes on the case that must be full of a surgeon’s tools.

He rises to his feet, the bag clutched under his arm. “Thank you for your assistance, Billy. Your help has been indispensible.”

Sherlock doesn’t wait for his response but he hears Billy call after him, “Don’t worry, Mr. Holmes! If it’s John Watson helping him, he’ll be well again in no time!”

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Sherlock’s journey back through the mazelike corridors under the forecastle, and up the stairway to the main deck is mercifully uneventful, and he sets off at a run back across the outer decks, John’s medical bag tucked tightly under one arm.

However, just before he reaches the main door to the quarterdeck, a uniformed figure glides into view, effectively blocking his path.

“Well, well, well, what have we here? A gentleman in his best coat running like a creature possessed back and forth across the ship’s decks, in the middle of a party no less. Whatever can be the reason for his haste?”

Sherlock is caught in the shadow between lanterns, so it takes a moment for his eyes to adjust in the gloom, but even without the sight of his repugnant face, the mocking voice of Anderson is unmistakable.

Sherlock shuts his eyes briefly in fury, and then opens them again, begging whatever deity may be listening for patience. “Let me by, Anderson.”

“Why should I? I think you should tell me where you’re off to in such a hurry first. I am the only officer on duty at the moment, and as a passenger on this ship, you’re expected to obey me.”

“Because a man’s life depends on it, that’s why!” Sherlock spits, shaking with fury. “Every second you detain me leads him one step closer to death!”

“My, my, such dramatic claims. Did anyone ever tell you you’re a wretched liar, Holmes? What’s that around your neck?” Anderson sneers, pointing to the chain John has given him. “Let me guess—it’s a love token from your blue-eyed sailor. How quaint. Does that mean he’s marked you as his territory now? Just like a dog pissing on a tree stump. But I bet you’re thrilled, aren’t you? Anyone can tell just from looking at you that you’re gasping for it. You’re just waiting for him to get you
alone so he can turn you over and bugger the living daylights out of you.”

Sherlock has never been so angry in his life. There is blackness at the corners of his vision. “Get. Out. Of. My. Way.”

“Or what? None of your sailor friends are here to help you, are they?” Anderson draws a menacing step nearer, snatching the medical bag out from under Sherlock’s arm. “What’s this? Did he give this to you too? Are you going to play surgeon with him?”

“Give it back.” Sherlock has gone utterly still.

“You know…” Anderson drawls, his bored voice full of superiority. “If you pinched this from someone, I can have you whipped for theft. Do you know what they do to thieves at sea, Holmes? They bend you over a cannon and flog you senseless. God, what I wouldn’t give to see that. Your pretty little face all twisted up and covered with tear—”

It is only the matter of a few seconds’ work to set up the punch. All the hours of training have made the movements second nature to him now—pivoting his body slightly, making sure his weight is shifted so that the force will come from his back foot, squaring his shoulders and pulling back his arm to ensure he delivers maximum force—but the look on Anderson’s face as Sherlock’s fist connects with his nose is one Sherlock will savor for the rest of his life.

Sherlock hits him so hard he can feel cartilage shifting under his knuckles, and there is a satisfying spray of blood upon impact, spattering the exposed cuff of Sherlock’s shirt.

Anderson lets out a mingled yell of pain and fury and drops the medical kit.

Sherlock lunges for it, and although he wants nothing more than to stop and gloat, reveling in the glory of his first successful punch, he doesn’t waste a moment. He’s off and running again, back through the door that leads to the officers’ cabins, and to the lieutenant’s room at the back.

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As soon as Sherlock hands John his medical bag, he takes it without a word, and if he notices that Sherlock is slightly more breathless than usual, or that there is an aura of triumph about him, he doesn’t remark upon it, and instead gets straight to work.

Billy’s prognosis turns out to be utterly correct. However, the assurance of Lestrade’s recovery does not come without an anxious hour of John leaning over his bedside with his bag of medical tools as Sherlock paces the floor behind him.

He’s in an agony of nerves, not only due to his worry over Lieutenant Lestrade—who John assures him, has indeed been poisoned but thankfully not with a lethal dose, just enough with the intent of making him very, very ill—but also, due to the wealth of new information Sherlock has been treated to this evening about John Watson. The influx of new stimuli surrounding this remarkable man is almost more than Sherlock can tolerate.

He has now seen where John spends his hours when he is not up on deck; he has seen (Sherlock feels faintly light-headed at the thought) where John sleeps. He has touched, with his own hands, some of John’s possessions. He can still recall the feel of the worn canvas in his hands as he pulled it apart, the slightly crooked tilt to the initials stitched into the satchel leading Sherlock to believe that they were put there by a younger sister, new to the art of needlepoint perhaps (he tells himself this to supplant the other, much less desirable theory, that the letters were put there by the dreaded Mary), the faded quality of the thread giving him further evidence for the fact that John may have
smoothed his fingers over the letters more than once in passing.

All of this, however, pales in comparison to what Sherlock is witnessing right now, which is a whole new side of John Watson that Sherlock has never been treated to, and that is John Watson in his role as healer, as physician, and Sherlock may very well drop dead where he is standing, so overwhelmed is he by this tremendous new capacity of which John is capable.

He is utterly focused on his work; he could be alone in the room, save for himself and his patient, so intent is he on the matter before him. His brow is creased in concentration, his blue eyes serious and dark, thin lips pursed as he pulls out another instrument from his bag and sets it to the man’s skin.

Sherlock is torn between feeling helpless at John’s side, frustrated that he cannot be of more assistance, and relieved that John has not asked for his help so that he can concentrate all his efforts on watching John, taking in every facet of this new side of him.

At long last, John sits back, closing his leather bag with a snap, and looks up at Sherlock.

“He’s out of danger now. He needs to rest, but he should be perfectly all right again by morning, and none shall be the wiser.”

Sherlock lets out a long breath of relief. “Thank goodness.”

John continues looking at him with a steady regard. “The dose he’s been given wasn’t meant to be lethal, of that I am certain. It was only enough to… detain him for a while. However, if it wasn’t for your intervention, he would have been out of commission for several days.”

Sherlock is nodding, too relieved to pay attention to the steadiness of John’s gaze. “I think whoever it was that poisoned him was counting on the fact that it would go unnoticed because of the party. I think they imagined everyone else would simply think the man was drunk.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t. I don’t know him well but it just seemed… uncharacteristic for him to lose control of himself like that. He wouldn’t drink to that excess.” Sherlock shakes his head. “He just wouldn’t.”

“I’m certain the dose wasn’t intended to be lethal, but I’m also certain that Lieutenant Lestrade was given far more than was intended. What we see here is the work of an amateur poisoner. If you hadn’t come and found me when you did…”

John rises to his feet, his eyes still on Sherlock, and Sherlock is suddenly very aware of the particular nature of his gaze.

“Sherlock, you may very well have saved this man’s life.”

In response to the look John is giving him, Sherlock feels breathless all over again. He drops his eyes, flustered. “It’s lucky that I noticed.”

“No,” John shakes his head. “No, this wasn’t luck. This was you putting your extraordinary abilities to use. This time, to save a man’s life.”

John’s eyes are dark, intent—there is a ferocity in his regard that Sherlock has seldom seen before and Sherlock wonders if this is what John looks like staring down the barrel of a gun.

Sherlock feels a shudder run through him at the thought.
Suddenly, the lieutenant’s small cabin feels far too intimate.

“We should…” Sherlock glances over at the now-sleeping man, lowering his voice. “Shouldn’t we let him rest?”

This question finally causes John to break the intensity of his gaze. “Yes. Yes, of course. Let’s leave him to sleep.” He stoops to pick up his physician’s case. “I’ll send Billy by later to check in on him.”

They exit the room, shutting the door softly behind them. The noise of the party is much louder in the hallway. They hesitate in the corridor together, the spell of the quiet room behind them now broken.

Sherlock feels suddenly uncertain what to do with his hands. He tugs at his waistcoat.

John’s eyes are drawn to the nervous gesture. His gaze alights on Sherlock’s hands.

“Is that… blood on your knuckles?”

“Oh…” Sherlock looks down, sees the spatter of dried blood and hastily covers it with his other hand. “I may have… that is, there was a bit of an incident on the way here. Someone I encountered was trying to detain me and had to be… dealt with.”

John’s look of dawning wonder transforms to a grin.

“Why, Sherlock Holmes, you devil, did you just throw your first punch?”

Sherlock ducks his head, trying to keep the smile off his face, and failing miserably.

He looks up at John, and shrugs. “I may have.”

The sound of John’s laugh is pure and unmediated. Sherlock is grinning so hard his face actually hurts.

John sober. “It was that midshipman, wasn’t it? The one that’s always giving you trouble.”

Sherlock nods darkly, but can’t help grinning in spite of himself. “I think I may have broken his nose.”

John laughs again, and then looks up at Sherlock, seems to notice for the first time the way Sherlock is dressed. His eyes skip up Sherlock’s torso, flickering over the bright buttons on his waistcoat, and up to the creamy white cravat at his throat, eyes lingering on the dark gleam of Sherlock’s hairline.

“You…” John swallows hard. Sherlock can see the muscles in his throat shifting as he does. “You’ll be wanting to get back to your party, I imagine.”

Sherlock feels the smile fade from his lips. The evening certainly hasn’t gone the direction Sherlock thought it would, and in spite of his relief that Lestrade will be all right, he feels a surge of disappointment at the realization that now he and John must part ways.

He makes a noncommittal movement with his shoulders.

“That is, unless…” John coughs nervously and Sherlock looks up at him in shock. What on earth does John have to nervous about? “Me and the lads are having our own celebration below decks—nothing fancy. Nothing anywhere near as grand as this party,” John says, gesturing with his head
down the corridor toward the civilized sounds of the string trio, the distant tinkle of polite laughter. “But, well, I thought…” John looks down at his own hands clutching the handle of his case. “Well, I thought you might like to join us. Of course, if you want to go back to your own party I completely understand.”

“John.” Sherlock doesn’t even have to make an effort. He can hear every ounce of longing in his own voice, plain as day. John looks up at him, and Sherlock sees hope in his eyes. “Please, take me with you.”

John’s answering grin makes heat flare hot and bright in Sherlock’s chest. “Good, good, that’s what I thought you might say. Come on then, follow me.”

John starts off at a trot down the hallway and then stops so suddenly Sherlock almost walks right into his back. “Oh, but we need to make one stop on our way.”

At Sherlock’s quizzical look, John’s face lights up.

“We’ll need to stop by your room. So you can get your fiddle, of course.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, my cupcakes, for all your beautiful, beautiful comments. They keep me going. Truly. Please leave me more. I love them. They are everything.

I’m sorry that this had to end on ANOTHER cliff-hanger of sorts, and that these two idiots STILL haven’t kissed yet. Next chapter will be much more exciting in that regard, I PROMISE. I will not let you down.

As always, ye olde sailorlock playlist can be found here.
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

John takes Sherlock to a real party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sherlock is halfway down the corridor behind John when he remembers his promise to Miss Hooper to keep her apprised of all developments pertaining to Lieutenant Lestrade.

He stops John with a hand on his arm. “Wait, before we do that. There’s just one more thing I have to do. There’s someone I made a promise to.”

John nods and follows behind Sherlock as he heads back to the door of the stateroom.

“I’ll be just a moment,” Sherlock says, before ducking in through the open door.

He hasn’t gone far at all when he spots Miss Hooper on the arm of her dreaded chaperone, making their way toward the exit.

He calls out to her to halt her progress, and turning, she looks back at Sherlock, her face flooding with anxiety.

He runs the last three steps to her, and remembers just in time to bow to her chaperone, inquiring in the politest voice he can manage whether he might have a word in private with the young lady.

The older woman sniffs disdainfully but nods her consent, turning away with a flutter of her fan and walking a few steps distant so that she’s out of earshot.

Sherlock dips his head to Miss Hooper’s ear, speaking quickly. “The Lieutenant is out of danger. He’s sleeping now, but he should be fully recovered by morning. It seems that someone may have had… ill intentions against him.”

Miss Hooper’s face is filled with relief, but her eyes widen as Sherlock goes on speaking.

“I’m not sure yet as to the nature of the offense, so please don’t say anything to anyone. Our discretion is imperative at this point until we have more information.”

Miss Hooper nods, and then reaches down to press Sherlock’s hand briefly in gratitude. “Thank you.”

Sherlock glances down in surprise.

“For taking the time to let me know. I appreciate it more than I can say.”

Sherlock nods, his cheeks turning briefly pink with embarrassment. “It was no trouble at all.”

Miss Hooper looks up then, a smile pulling at her lips. “I think someone’s waiting for you.” She nods to the door where Sherlock sees John in the doorway, watching them from across the room.
“Ah.” Sherlock takes a step back, dropping Miss Hooper’s hand. “Yes, it would seem so. I… must go.”

Miss Hooper curtsies as Sherlock backs away, her face once more lit up in a genuine smile. It changes her look completely, Sherlock reflects for the second time that evening.

“Thank you, Mr. Holmes. I’ll speak with you again soon.”

“Indeed.” He nods to her one final time, and then turns to make his way back across the room to John.

There is something slightly off about the way John is looking at him when he rejoins him in the doorway, but before Sherlock can question it, the look is gone and it’s replaced by John’s smile as he moves out onto the deck. “Ready?”

Sherlock nods.

He follows John down the staircase to his room, his eyes intent on the lines of John’s strong shoulders as they descend the steps. He thinks fleetingly of the last time he watched John walk away from him earlier today and Sherlock has to bite his tongue to keep the memory of John’s strong thighs and buttocks from completely overwhelming his current mental faculties.

John watches from the doorway as Sherlock drops to his knees and crawls forward to pull his instrument free from where it’s strapped beneath his bed. One shoulder propped against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest, he is the picture of casual nonchalance, but Sherlock is observant; Sherlock knows otherwise.

He can sense the tension in John’s body even from across the room, can feel the anticipation leaping off of him like tiny sparks from a growing flame, and as Sherlock straightens up, violin in hand, and sees John watching him, his dark blue eyes simmering with suppressed desire like a storm at the edge of an autumn sky, Sherlock feels his own want leap up inside him like a flash of light.

Sherlock has to look down at his feet, draw several deep and steadying breaths before he can stride forward to follow John back up the stairs and across the deck. The night air is warm but it feels cool in contrast to Sherlock’s heated cheeks. As they reach the hatch leading down to the staircase into the forecastle, Sherlock feels a wave of nervousness overtake him.

The distant sounds of music and laughter can be heard drifting up from down below. At the thought of all those people, all those strangers watching him play; Sherlock seizes up, in the space of a few heartbeats, his excitement transforming into utter terror. His legs suddenly feel like two planks of wood beneath him.

Sensing his hesitation, John reaches back in the darkness and takes Sherlock’s hand in his. He smooths his thumb over the back of Sherlock’s hand, offers him a smile. “Come on.”

The warm note of invitation in his voice thaws the ice encasing Sherlock’s legs just enough to get them moving again.

John tugs on his hand and Sherlock lets himself be led down the steps. By the time they reach the bottom, the distant sounds of revelry have grown in volume. Sherlock can see the dapple of light just up ahead from the many lanterns hanging from the beams.

John must sense Sherlock’s nervousness from the grip on his hand; must be able to feel it thrumming through Sherlock’s body like a badly tuned string because he turns to Sherlock in the
shadows at the bottom of the stairs, worry creasing his forehead. “What is it?”

“John, I—”

Sherlock hesitates. He is clutching his violin case so tightly in his hand that he can feel his heartbeat pounding along the lengths of his fingers.

John takes a step nearer to him and when he sees the expression on Sherlock’s face, his eyes soften. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m—I don’t…” Sherlock shakes his head. “John, I’m not good with people. I’m worried that…” He drops his head, staring at the gleam on his boots in the light of the distant lanterns. His voice is a whisper. “What if they don’t like me?”

John steps closer still, pulling the hand that is already holding Sherlock’s close to his chest so he can place his other hand on top of it. “They already like you. Sherlock. Look at me.”

Sherlock looks.

John’s gaze is filled simultaneously with warmth and darkness; it reminds Sherlock of the light at the very heart of a fire; crackling, and dangerous, full of heat.

“They do. And if they don’t, we’ll leave, and no harm will come to you, alright?”

Sherlock nods, his throat tight.

Still, he hesitates. His fear of their derision is like a shadow hanging over him, haunting his every movement.

Sherlock’s hand is still clenched hot between both of John’s. John looks up at him, tilts his head in the darkness. When he speaks again his voice is lower, resonant.

“I haven’t told you yet…” Sherlock feels the instinct to lean closer to catch John’s words. He does so, feels the soft exhale of John’s breath against his cheek as he continues. “Just how lovely you look. In your dark green coat, and your ivory and gold.”

Sherlock feels his face fill with fire at John’s words, but it is a pleasant heat. The warm curl of John’s voice in the darkness is like a caress.

“We don’t have to go in there, you know. I would be just as happy to find a private corner of the ship to sit with you, and watch the stars come up.”

The weight behind this quiet statement strikes Sherlock like a physical blow. His yearning for the very thing that John has just expressed moves through him with dizzying force. He feels light-headed with want, but he’s not ready for that, not quite yet.

The fact that John would be willing to leave his friends, to abandon his rare chance to sing and drink and laugh with them, just to be with Sherlock, is so staggering it wrenches the world back into perspective. Sherlock wants this, wants to try and be a part of John’s world.

Sherlock shakes his head. “No, no, I want to go. I do. I’m just… nervous.”

Sherlock can feel John’s eyes, still warm on his face. “There’s no pressure for you to play. If you don’t want to…”

Sherlock shakes his head again, his voice adamant. “No, I want to. I want to play.”
He’s been so looking forward to this—he knows he will not be able to live with himself if he does not take the opportunity before him now.

“You’re sure?” John’s eyes are so careful on his face Sherlock is afraid for one moment that he might actually melt under John’s gaze.

“I am. However, I wouldn’t say no to a sip of that uh… liquid courage you carry around with you?”

It takes a moment for John to catch his meaning and then understanding dawns on his face, smoothing the lines from his brow. John throws back his head and laughs.

John takes a step back to reach into his jacket and pull out his flask. He hands it to Sherlock with a wink. “Knock yourself out.”

A ripple of heat passes through Sherlock at the brush of John’s fingers over his own. He accepts the flask and takes a very long drink, coughing only slightly as he hands it back to John.

John tucks it back into his jacket, his eyes on Sherlock steady and warm. “Ready?”

Sherlock throws back his shoulders, lifting his chin, and nods.

***

John leads him under the beams of the lower deck toward the front of the ship, where Sherlock stood only an hour earlier, desperately searching for John’s bunk. However, in the mere space of an hour, the room has utterly transformed.

The space under the ship’s bow that before was relatively empty is now a chaos of noise and lights and people.

Most of the hammocks that Sherlock saw before have been rolled up and stowed out of sight, and the tables where the crewmen were sitting have been pushed to the edges of the room. Everywhere Sherlock looks there are sailors crowded close together, shouting, laughing, playing cards. Some are sitting on the table, others are perched on hammocks and crates, with pipes clenched in the corners of their mouths, but all have tankards in their hands.

The lanterns suspended overhead cast everything in their swinging golden light, the wreaths of the pipe smoke coiling in and around the bodies of the men like friendly ghosts. The slide of the lights over their faces, the sinuous movement of the tendrils of smoke, gives the scene the shifting otherworldly quality of an underwater grotto, puts Sherlock in mind of the dream he had when he was ill, of the drowned sailors congregating at the bottom of the sea.

The difference between what Sherlock sees before him, and the orderly celebrations going on upstairs could not be more striking.

The air smells of sweat and liquor, of many unwashed bodies crammed for too long into close contact. The voices rising and falling around Sherlock are loud, raucous, accented with many different tongues. These men, who Sherlock has observed over the past few weeks so closely when he is up on deck, take on another quality altogether here, in their element, at ease and unafraid.

Sherlock recognizes Old Leroy, playing a tune on his mouth organ to the evident delight of several men around him, who are clapping their hands and stomping their feet—and there is Billy, sitting at Old Leroy’s knee, his mouth stretched wide with laughter. Sherlock recognizes Matthews and Stapleton, Banana Bill and Lean Jack, MacTavish and Patterson, Stewarts and Half Pint Lee. He didn’t even realize how many of their names he knew until now, and seeing them, spitting,
laughing and carrying on, Sherlock feels a wave of something like fondness overtake him. He feels far more at home here than he ever does up above.

Sherlock is so absorbed in his study of the scene before him that he has not realized John is watching him, still and silent, at his side.

Sherlock turns to him and sees John’s eyes on his face, and realizes at the look of apprehension he sees there that John is nervous of what Sherlock thinks; worried it will be beneath him, that Sherlock’s delicate sensibilities may be offended.

John offers him the briefest grin, tinged with nerves. “What do you think?”

Sherlock smiles back at him and he can feel the grin chasing all the tension from his face. “I already like it much better than the other party.”

John grins back at him, for real this time, the worry sponged away in the blink of an eye, until he’s beaming at Sherlock, reaching over to grab him by the shoulder. “Welcome to a party with the other half of the ship.”

A roar of greeting interrupts the shared moment between them as the room becomes aware of John’s presence.

“OYE! John Watson! Where have you been?”

“About time!”

“Johnny Boy, come give us a song!”

“We’ve got your hand all ready for you here, John.”

John strides into the sea of people, pulling Sherlock behind him by the hand, and it is like being in the presence of a king, or a god, the way the men part before him and then close back in, pounding John on the back, calling out in greeting, pushing tankards into his hand.

The requests and the entreaties roll off of him like water off an oil skin, grinning all the while, acknowledging the greetings with a wink and a nod, before he’s climbing up to stand on a table in the center of the room and yelling for silence.

Sherlock stands just below him; violin case clutched tightly in his hand, gazing up at John through the haze of shuttered lantern light, the tendrils of smoke around his head as becoming as any crown.

“Alright, listen up you lot! Tonight, we’ve got a very special presence among us—my good friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Some of you may recognize him from up on deck. He’s a very keen observer, and clever as they come. He can give you a run for your money on just about any topic so tread carefully if you choose to engage him in a battle of wits.”

Sherlock’s cheeks flush hotly at John’s words of praise, but he fights the instinct to stare down at his boots in favor of watching John’s radiant face.

“Now, as this gentleman here is a friend of mine, I’d like you to treat him as well as you treat me. And if we’re very good to him, and very lucky, then maybe he will give us a bit of music later on, as he’s a damn fine fiddle player to boot.”

John flashes a grin down in Sherlock’s direction so bright with affection, Sherlock feels seared by
John’s words are greeted by a roar of approval from the crowd. Sherlock is nearly deafened by the thunderous sound of applause, and the various whoops and hollers of delight. As John leaps down from the table, Sherlock feels several hands clapping him hard on the back.

“Welcome to the crew, Mr. ‘olmes,” a smiling, toothless sailor says to Sherlock’s right, pushing a very full tankard into his hands.

“T-thank you,” Sherlock stammers, accepting the tankard with his free hand, still holding onto his violin case with the other as though for dear life. “I’m honored, truly.”

An enormous man with a red beard and a tattoo of a mermaid on his muscular forearm booms a greeting from Sherlock’s other side. “Anyone who has the good opinion of our John Watson has mine as well. Good to make your acquaintance, Mr. Holmes.”

“Please, call me Sherlock,” Sherlock says, wondering suddenly where John has got to as another sailor pushes forward to offer Sherlock a boisterous word of welcome.

“They call me, Ironsides Jake,” the sinewy man says, reaching down to take the hand that is holding Sherlock’s violin and shaking it vigorously. “I fought with her in the Barbary War. Lost me eye but managed to preserve me dignity, which is all that matters in the end, wouldn’t you say, Mr. Holmes?”

“Indeed,” Sherlock says, unable to keep from staring at the vivid scar bisecting the man’s face.

“When we leave this world, we will not take our worldly possessions with us after all, only our dignity what we’ve earned in this life.”

“Alright, Ironsides, don’t start your pontificating on him just yet.”

An older man, with a neatly trimmed silvery beard, steps forward to gently disentangle Sherlock’s hand from the other man’s enthusiastic grip.

“Burns is the name,” he says, eying Sherlock up and down with a stern gaze. “I’ve seen you up on deck, Mr. Holmes. Watson’s entirely correct about you, I imagine. You’ve got a keen eye for the sailing life. Is this your first time aboard a frigate?”

“It is,” Sherlock manages, still trying to juggle his overflowing tankard of ale with the violin case in his hand.

“Well, your interest seems genuine enough. Much more so than some of the other brainless birds that call themselves passengers on this ship, begging your pardon, sir.”

“There’s no need. I quite agree.”

The man gives a curt nod of acknowledgment. “If you’d ever like a tour of the ship, I’d be happy to show you around.”

Sherlock nods. “Thank you, that would be—”

But he is saved from more enthusiastic sailors by John, reappearing at his side, placing one gentle but firm hand above his elbow to lead him away.

John smiles at the older sailor in apology. “Excuse me, Burns, but I’ve got someone I’d like
Sherlock to meet.”

The silver-haired Burns nods and turns back to his companion.

John takes the tankard from Sherlock’s hand as he guides him to a less-populated corner of the room, and Sherlock leans down to whisper gratefully into John’s ear. “Thank you. They’re all lovely but a little…”

“Over zealous?” John looks up at him with a grin. “I told you, you had nothing to worry about. They already like you.”

Sherlock is about to say something to the tune of ‘No, they clearly like you,’ but he’s interrupted by the presence of another smiling sailor coming up to make his acquaintance.

This man is younger—about John and Sherlock’s age, heavy-set, with kind brown eyes, and a ruddy, good-natured face.

“Sherlock, I’d like you to meet my good friend, Mike Stamford. Mike, this is the wonder I’ve been telling you about.”

Sherlock can feel his cheeks flushing at John’s words, even as he reaches out to shake Mike’s hand. He has a warm, solid grip, and to Sherlock’s relief he lets go after just a few seconds.

“John’s told me quite a lot about you, Mr. Holmes.”

“Please,” Sherlock says, wondering just how many times he will be forced to say the words this evening. “Call me Sherlock.”

“Mike is our inimitable cook on board. He truly works wonders with the scraps he’s given.” The two men share a grin and Sherlock can tell at a glance that their friendship is an old one. “We were pressed together, Mike and I, same ship, same squalid tavern they herded us into that night, isn’t that right?”

“It is indeed.”

“I would have regretted that incident if not for the good friend I made that day in Mike. He’d been on merchant ships before. Without his help, I never would have learned the ropes as quickly as I did. Hell, I wouldn’t have lasted a single day.”

“As ever, your friend is being modest,” Mike says, with a smile. “John Watson has saved my life on more than one occasion. He’s quite a man, if ever I met one. You’re lucky to have found him, Mr. Holmes.”

Sherlock is feeling slightly overwhelmed by the insinuations at work behind this good-natured man’s remarks. He’s struggling for what to say in response when John tugs on his sleeve again to lead him away.

“Alright, Mike, enough now. I don’t want to scare him off.” John laughs and the sound is meant to be light-hearted but Sherlock can see the color rising in John’s cheeks and he realizes with a small jolt of surprise that John is embarrassed.

Embarrassed about what?

“John, what did—”
But Sherlock’s question is drowned out by a roar from the assembled crowd.

“D’you hear that lads? It’s time for dancing!”

There is a small but frantic shuffle of activity as space is cleared in the center of the room. Old Leroy sets his stool down on the edge of this space, a man with a silver hoop in his ear sits down next to him with a tin whistle, and a younger sailor in a stocking cap pulls out a curiously flat drum with a handle on the inside, and a stick in the other hand to hit it with.

Someone calls out the name of a tune and the three musicians begin to pick out the notes with earnest application. The red-bearded man with the mermaid tattoo who introduced himself to Sherlock earlier gets up and begins to dance a hornpipe with shocking nimbleness.

John pulls Sherlock by the arm until they are sitting on a bench at the edge of the floor. He puts the tankard back into Sherlock’s hand, and takes one for himself from the man beside him before raising his own with a smile.

“To your good health.”

Sherlock lifts his glass to John’s, his eyes serious as he studies John’s face. “And yours.”

Sherlock takes a long drink, his eyes on John’s throat as he swallows. He feels slightly breathless when he lowers his tankard again to turn back to the music. Distracted, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, eyes intent on the trio of musicians.

He’s heard of the cheap whistle favored by sailors, made of tin, often called the penny whistle, but he’s never seen a drum like the one in the stocking-capped sailor’s hands before and he is mesmerized by the dexterity with which he strikes it using the small stick.

“What kind of drum is that?” Sherlock asks, his eyes still on the man’s quick-moving hand as he flicks it over the surface of the drum.

The toothless sailor who initially handed Sherlock his ale leans over to him. “It’s an Irish drum. It’s called a Bodhrán. Our Fionn’s quite clever with it, wouldn’t you agree?”

Sherlock nods, still unable to look away. Something is happening to him—he knows the feeling, but it’s been so long since he’s experienced it he’s almost forgotten what it feels like. It is the feeling of music stealing over him, moving deep into his body and affecting him in such a profound way that he forgets where he is, who he’s with, all the details of the room around him—it is almost as good as when Sherlock is playing himself. It’s nothing like the music of the plodding musicians playing in the stateroom upstairs. This music has substance; there is something about it that is greater than the three men drawing it into existence, and suddenly, Sherlock cannot bear another second of his fiddle resting in its case, silent and useless.

He waits until the song they’re playing comes to a close and then, before he can think too much about what he’s about to do, he’s risen to his feet, and he’s striding across the small, cleared space, his violin case clenched tightly in his hand. He stops in front of the three musicians.

The room behind him has gone silent.

The three musicians look up at Sherlock expectantly. He bows his head. “I… I’d love to play with you. If you’ll have me.”

Old Leroy grins up at Sherlock. “Of course! Pull up a chair, laddie. Or stand if you like, whatever pleases you.”
“I’ll sit, thank you.”

“GET THE LAD A CHAIR!” someone hollers and for a few minutes there is general chaos as the room shifts around to make room for Sherlock to sit up at the front. The proffered chair turns out to be an upturned slop bucket, but Sherlock hardly notices. He pulls off his jacket—the heat of the room has only gotten more intense since they arrived—and folds it neatly by his side, before settling the case on his knees, flicking open the clasps, and pulling out the violin to the general pleasure of the assembled crowd.

There is a chorus of appreciative sounds as the curve of Sherlock’s lovely instrument catches the light. He raises it to his shoulder, sets his bow against the strings, fingers on the tuning pegs.

“Isn’t she a beauty?” Sherlock hears someone murmur, and he’s almost grinning already, so contagious is the general atmosphere of excitement awakened by the appearance of his violin.

The sweet vibration of the instrument as he pulls out the first note is so lovely, so satisfying Sherlock can feel it all the way down to his bones. It’s like a piece of himself that has been missing all these months has suddenly been handed back to him.

It’s as if a spell has been wrought to dispel his nerves. Even the prospect of tuning in front of a crowd of onlookers isn’t daunting to Sherlock so eager is he to begin playing. Simply being able to pull the bow across the strings again in earnest is enough to make the hard weight at the center of Sherlock’s chest begin to uncoil.

Even though his attention is focused completely on the instrument, there is still a part of him that can feel John watching him from across the room; his blue eyes intent on Sherlock as he begins to work the instrument back to life under his hands.

When his instrument is fully tuned, he sets it on his knee, and then looks up at the other musicians. Sherlock feels a small flutter of anxiety at the prospect of playing with three other people who he’s only just met and perhaps they can sense his discomfort because Old Leroy says, “What shall you play for us, lad?”

Before Sherlock can answer, a sailor shouts a song out from the crowd. “‘Sweet Moll of Plymouth!’”

“No! ‘Drowsy Maggie!’”

“What about ‘Old Maui’?”

Sherlock’s cheeks flush dark with embarrassment. “I—I don’t know those.”

Panic hovers at the edge of Sherlock’s excitement. He’s going to disappoint them. Of course, he doesn’t know any of the songs they know and love. He’s on the verge of convincing himself that coming up here was a terrible mistake when John’s voice cuts through the din of chatter. “Just play us whatever you know. Doesn’t matter what.”

Sherlock looks at John across the room, his face, smiling and patient as ever and feels a bit of his boldness return.

Sherlock lifts the instrument to his shoulder and settles it beneath his chin. “I-I could try to play one of those. If you could sing a bit of it?”

An old sailor with a face so wrinkled his eyes look perpetually shut, opens his mouth and begins to sing in a carrying voice. “Sweet ladies of Plymouth, we’re saying goodbye!”
The rest of the room takes up the chorus. “Ro-o-o-oll down!”

“But we’ll rock you and roll you again by and by—”

“Walk her round, me brave boys and roll down!”

Sherlock is momentarily astounded that the rest of them all know the words, but on the heels of that astonishment comes the realization that of course they would all know the same songs. These are working songs, and men who work as much as they do must know a lot of them.

“And we will ro-o-o-oll down! Walk her round, me brave boys and roll down!”

The wrinkled old sailor has a remarkably melodious voice. “Now the anchor’s aweigh and the sails are unfurled—”

“Ro-o-o-oll down!”

“And we’re bound for her to take her half-way around the world—”

“Walk her round, me brave boys and roll down!”

As Sherlock listens to the swell of voices take up the chorus, he begins to pick out the tune. The melody is simple and repeats with every verse, so it only takes him a minute or two to get it right. By the fourth verse, Sherlock is playing along as though he’s always known the tune.

Fionn, the drummer, takes up his drum and begins to tap out a rhythm. The piper joins in not long after, and soon the three of them are developing their own accompaniment to the rise and fall of the men’s voices.

The song is over far too quickly, and Sherlock and the drummer play twice more through the melody before drawing to a close.

The thunderous applause that greets the end of this simple song makes Sherlock’s cheeks flame scarlet. He sets his fiddle on his knee and the drummer reaches over to clap him on the back.

“Play us another one!”

The same wrinkled old sailor starts to sing again, and almost immediately Sherlock picks out the melody. Old Leroy has abandoned his mouth organ for the time being, content just to watch, but the piper and drummer join in as soon as Sherlock starts to play.

From across the room, Sherlock can see John staring at him, his eyes enormous, his mouth fallen partway open. Sherlock can read the expression on his face as easily as reading a book. It’s amazement, pure spellbound amazement that Sherlock can play a song that he’s only just learned as though he has always known it.

It feels so good to be playing again, and the songs they are singing are so simple, it’s easy for Sherlock to embellish them almost as soon as he has learned the melody. The drummer at Sherlock’s side is clearly as gifted at improvisation as Sherlock; the rhythm he’s beating out on his drum complements the flourishes that Sherlock adds so well for a moment it’s difficult even for Sherlock to believe that what’s happening is happening right now without any prior preparation.

Again, when the chorus of men’s voices reaches the end of the song, Sherlock and the other two musicians play on long after the singing is done. When they finally come to a stop to the furious delight of the crowd, the drummer leans over to Sherlock.
“What’d ya say about playing a jig?”

His accent is so thick it takes Sherlock a second to understand what he’s saying.

Sherlock shakes his head. “I don’t… I don’t know any off the top of my head.”

“There’s a lovely little one called Elderberry Jig. Aidan here can start us out. You’ll pick it up in no time. Just join in whenever you’re ready.”

Sherlock nods.

The two men start to play and the drummer was right, the melody is easy for Sherlock to pick up. He joins in after just a few bars and Fionn grins at him over the top of his drum.

Although this song has no singing accompaniment, that doesn’t deter the enjoyment of the listening crowd. Almost as soon as Aidan starts playing, the men begin to stomp their feet in time with the music. Sherlock cannot blame them—the rhythm is infectious. It’s impossible to sit still listening to it. Sherlock can feel it beating in his blood, feeding the notes to his fingers as they fly over the strings.

Sherlock has heard jigs played at country dances, and he’s played one or two in his time—simple exercises to warm up, but never like this, never in the heat of the moment in the middle of a sea of people, pounding their feet and clapping their hands. He’s never played music like this before. It’s nowhere near as complicated as the arrangements that Sherlock usually plays, the symphonies and concertos on which he cut his teeth, but the energy of it is affecting in a visceral way.

Something is beginning to take hold of Sherlock as he plays and it is what he has been missing all these months, the part of that himself that’s been hollowed out, left behind him somewhere back in England, and suddenly it’s so full, it’s full to bursting and Sherlock needs to keep playing to keep filling it up.

The jig ends, but without stopping, Aidan begins playing a reel, and this one, the men must know—several of them rise to their feet with whoops of delight and begin dancing.

Sherlock watches, breathless, his bow poised over the strings until he’s learned the melody, and this one, this one is even more infectious than the previous one, or maybe it’s just that Sherlock has finally warmed up because the room starts to fade around him as he loses himself in the music.

It feels these past few weeks as though he’s been pinned up, as though his arms were bound behind him, as though a great pair of wings on his back was folded shut and strapped down and they have suddenly burst from their holdings and are beating free. He may as well be flying. He can do anything in this moment, and looking across the room to see John’s eyes on his face filled with wonder, his lips parted, his eyes almost sad, Sherlock grins at him and he has never smiled so wide in his life. He wants to share this with John, this utterly weightless feeling that makes him feel as though he will break through the walls of the ship and go soaring over the sea.

They play and play and play and Sherlock has no idea how much time has passed because time has become immaterial, the only thing anchoring him to the world the sight of John’s face across the room, watching him in amazement, bathed in golden light.

They finally stop to refill their glasses and catch their breath, and it is only when he lowers his instrument that Sherlock realizes how long they have been playing. His fingers are filled with a buzzing sting; it’s been so long since he has played his calluses are almost gone. His forehead is damp with sweat, all his earlier efforts to tame his hair rendered ineffective as several dark curls
have slipped free and are hanging over his brow.

He reaches up with the back of his wrist to wipe the sweat from his forehead, pushing the hair back from his face. He leans down to settle his violin back in its case and when he straightens up there are sailors on all sides, clapping him on the back, shaking his hand, offering him tankards full of ale.

Sherlock does up the clasps on his case, nodding politely, as the eager faces around him seem to multiply. The room is hotter than ever, and the swirl of the lights and the noise and the people seem to rise in volume. Sherlock tries to back away, his violin case clapsed to his chest like a shield, but his spine bumps up against the edge of a table and he cannot move for the press of people around him.

He’s on the verge of complete panic when he hears John’s voice from the back of the crowd. “OYE, you lot! Clear off! You’re gonna suffocate him.” And then, mercifully, John’s golden head emerges from the throng, the lantern light glinting off his hair.

Sherlock nearly gasps in relief as John reaches out to take his hand and pull him away from the clamor of eager sailors.

John leads Sherlock to a stool on the far side of the room, partially hidden from the dancing shouting crowd by the sway of a hammock.

John guides him gently to a sitting position and then eases the violin case from his hand. He sets it on the ground at Sherlock’s feet, and drops into a crouch in front of him, a fond smile unfolding over his face.

“Hey,” he says, and Sherlock’s heart swoops and plummets several leagues into his own belly where it continues pounding, loud as Fionn’s drum.

“Hi,” Sherlock says shyly, unable to bear the intensity of John’s gaze longer than a few seconds. It’s as though his nerves have expanded to twice their size in the wake of his playing. Without even realizing he was doing it, Sherlock opened himself up in order to let all of the music in; and looking at John now, with his senses still stretched wide and open, is like looking directly into the sun.

“How are you?”

“I’m…” Sherlock pauses to catch his breath, searching for a way to put the enormity of what he’s feeling into words. He doesn’t know where to begin.

“You look like you could use a drink,” John says, reaching into his jacket to pull out his flask. He passes it to Sherlock, who takes it gratefully, and takes a long sip. He doesn’t cough at all this time. The burn of the liquor in his throat and belly is a welcome one.

Sherlock takes another long drink before passing it back.

“Thank you,” he says, still searching for a way to describe to John what he is feeling. He can feel the alcohol unspooling through his veins, warming him up. He pushes an errant lock of hair off his forehead, struggling to find the right words. “That was… I love playing music, and I’ve missed it, but…” He looks up at John, joy bursting to life all over his face as he recalls the feeling it gave him. “I’ve never experienced anything like that… that was something else entirely.”

Sherlock looks back at John and the look in his eyes takes Sherlock’s breath away.
It’s the same way he was looking at Sherlock when he was playing earlier but it’s somehow more awe-struck, more reverent; more full of tenderness than Sherlock could make out from across the room. His brow is furrowed as though with sorrow, his blue eyes deep and dark.

“I can’t believe you,” John breathes. “Watching you play like that… You’d never heard any of those songs before in your life. How did you do that? How… how can you be so—?”

Sherlock leans closer; he wants to smooth the lines of sorrow from John’s face.

“What?”

Before John can answer, there is a commotion behind them.

“Johnny Boy! Your presence is requested!”

The man who calls himself Ironsides Jake appears before them, arms crossed over his lean chest.

“You haven’t sung a word yet tonight and that needs to be remedied.”

John opens his mouth to protest but a crowd of sailors surges around him like the sea itself, pulling him to his feet and leading him in their midst back to the cleared space in the center of the floor.

Sherlock trails behind, situating himself on the edge of the crowd to watch, torn between frustration and amusement.

“Just one song, John, and then we’ll let you get back to your young man.”

A tide of snickers breaks out in the wake of this remark but dies down almost immediately as John takes his place on a stool at the front of the room.

The crowd falls silent and it occurs to Sherlock that this is the quietest he has heard them all evening. All eyes in the room are on John. The musicians have set down their instruments, and even the men playing cards have turned from their game to watch.

“What’ll you sing us Johnny? Sing us a love song!”

“Naw, sing something sad.”

John lifts his chin slightly, the line of his mouth firm, something commanding in his eyes, and the men fall silent. Sherlock feels heat spreading through his chest in response to that look. He tugs at his neck cloth, filled suddenly with the desire to pull it off.

John looks down for a moment, and then lifts his head and begins to sing.

*There is a young maid and she lives on the shore,*  
*She lives on the shore all alone, oh.*  
*And nothing she could find could comfort her mind,*  
*Then to roam all alone on the shore, oh shore.*  
*Then to roam all alone on the shore.*

His voice is strong and clear, the melody sweet but full of sorrow. The only accompaniment to his lovely, resonant voice is the time he keeps with his foot.

*There is a young captain who sails the salt sea,*  
*Let the wind blow high, blow low, oh.*  
*I will die, I will die, the young captain did cry,*
If I can’t have that maid on the shore, oh shore,
If I can’t have that maid on the shore.

Well, I have lots of silver,
I have lots of gold,
I have lots of costly ware, oh.
I’ll divide, I’ll divide with my lowly ship’s crew,
If they’ll row me that maid on the shore, oh shore,
If they’ll row me that maid on the shore.

There is something raw in his voice, a longing that resonates through every word, the depth of emotion in each note so present that Sherlock feels an ache in his chest at the sound. Sherlock is certain then that if anyone else were to sing this particular song, it wouldn’t be half so full of feeling. But listening to John sing it, the downturned corners of his sorrowful mouth as he sings the refrain, it hits Sherlock like a punch to the gut.

After much persuasion they got her on board,
Let the wind blow high, blow low, oh.
They replaced her away in the cabin below,
There’s an end to all sorrow and care, oh care,
There’s an end to all sorrow and care.

They replaced her away in the cabin below,
Let the wind blow high, blow low, oh,
So pretty and sweet, so neat and complete,
She sang captain and sailors to sleep, oh sleep,
She sang captain and sailors to sleep.

The emotion in John’s voice shifts slightly, and there is a quirk to his mouth as he continues, something playful in his voice, but the longing is still there, and Sherlock leans forward without realizing he’s doing it, utterly drawn in by the spell of John’s voice.

Then she robbed them of silver,
She robbed them of gold,
She robbed them of costly ware, oh,
She took his broad sword instead of an oar,
And she paddled her way back to shore, oh shore,
And she paddled her way back to shore.

Oh, me men must be crazy,
Me men must be mad,
Me men must be in deep despair, oh.
For to let you away from my cabin so gay,
And to paddle you back to the shore, oh shore,
And to paddle you back to the shore.

Oh, your men was not crazy,
Your men was not mad,
Your men was not deep in despair, oh!
I deceived all your sailors as well as yourself,
And I’m still the maid on the shore, oh shore!
Yes, I’m still the maid on the shore.

There is half a beat of silence after the song draws to a close, and then the men are on their feet,
whooping and cheering, calling for another.

John smiles, and Sherlock has to reach out to grab hold of the beam behind him to support his weight as his knees buckle beneath him.

John motions for silence and the men press forward with eagerness. “One more. But that’s it, all right? Then you’ve got to entertain yourselves for the evening.” John’s tone is serious but he’s smiling as he says it.

The next song John sings is clearly one the men know well and love because there is a murmur of approval as soon as John starts up.

_Fine friends and companions come join me in rhyme,_
_Come lift up your voices in chorus with mine,_
_Come lift up your voices, from grief we’ll refrain,_
_For we may or might never all meet here again._

The men sing along with him on the chorus, lifting their glasses, and a chill moves through Sherlock at the sound of so many voices coming together with John’s.

_So here’s a health to the company and one to my lass,_
_Let’s drink and be merry all out of one glass,_
_Let’s drink and be merry from grief we’ll refrain,_
_For we may or might never all meet here again._

Again, it is apparent that this song in the hands of any other singer might be completely unremarkable, but the lilt of John’s voice lifts it up, opening up the notes, filling the song with such feeling that Sherlock’s chest is tight with an emotion he has no words for, until he is lost somewhere beyond himself, carried along on the current of John’s lyrical voice.

_Here’s a health to the wee lass that I love so well,_
_For style and for beauty there’s none can excel,_
_There’s a smile on her countenance_
_As she sits upon my knee,_
_There is no man in this wide world as happy as me._

As Sherlock listens to the words John is singing, it strikes him that maybe the reason there is so much emotion in John’s voice is because he is thinking of a particular person as he sings. At this unwelcome thought, Sherlock feels a spike of sorrow in his chest.

Sherlock thinks back to the depth of emotion in John’s voice in the previous song, as he sang about the young captain’s love for the girl on the shore. That yearning in John’s voice that had filled Sherlock with a longing of his own now twists in his gut, making him feel sick. Suddenly, it all makes so much sense.

Sherlock’s hand flies to the locket around his throat. He forgot that he was still wearing it, forgot to give it back to John in the chaos of the evening. He holds the locket up to the light, studying the entwined letters on the case, the chain as soft as silk against his fingers. _M.W._

The ‘M’ could very well stand for Mary.

Sherlock’s throat is suddenly tight with a different emotion altogether as John’s haunting voice sings out the final verse.

_{Our ship lies at anchor she is ready to dock,}
I wish her safe landing without any shock,
And if ever I should meet you by land or by sea,
I will always remember your kindness to me.

The men take up the chorus one last time, raising their glasses as the song comes to an end.
Sherlock looks at the faces of the sailors around him as they lift their tankards, the warmth of the lantern light softening their faces, giving the scene an intimate feel. Sherlock watches it all as though from a great distance, his body rigid with sudden misery.

It takes John a moment to work his way back through the crowd of men to Sherlock’s side. When he arrives, Sherlock is so lost in his own bitter thoughts that it takes him a moment to notice John is speaking to him.

“I’m sorry about that, they never would have left me alone if I hadn’t…. Sherlock?” John puts a hand on his arm and the touch seems to bring Sherlock back to earth. “You alright?”

Sherlock looks up at John, at the concern in his eyes, the lovely grooves around his mouth, and he can’t make sense of it.

If John is looking at him like that, then he must feel something for Sherlock, but Sherlock has never been a good judge of human emotions. Maybe he’s wrong, maybe he’s been wrong all along. Perhaps what Sherlock is seeing is just John’s concern for Sherlock out of the goodness of his heart. But oh, if that is the case, then Sherlock cannot bear it.

His own longing seems to rise up and choke him.

“What’s the matter?”

Sherlock watches John’s eyes fill with sudden sorrow, and something darker underneath that, something painful—an echo of what Sherlock saw earlier when John was watching him play his violin.

Sherlock’s heart lurches at the sight.

“Let’s…” John ducks his head, licks his lips. “Let’s get out of here, yeah?”

Sherlock nods, his throat now tight with worry at the depths of suffering he sees in John’s eyes.

He follows behind John, silent as a shadow, as he makes his way to the staircase leading to the upper decks.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you, for the continued stream of wonderful comments and love and support. I cannot tell you what it means to me to hear from you every time. You all are so lovely, and I am bowled over by your love of this story. <3 <3

If you’d like to hear versions of the two songs John sings in this chapter, for the first one click here, and here for the second.

And I know at this point, my promises are probably meaningless to you, but I swear, THE KISS IS COMING, and so much more. Hang in there, gentle readers! YOU
WILL BE REWARDED FOR YOUR PATIENCE MULTIPLE TIMES OVER.
They are silent as they make their way back up the staircase to the open air.

Sherlock’s jacket is folded over his arm, his violin case still clenched tightly in one hand. He is clinging to it like a talisman, as though if he holds it tight enough it will give him the power to go back in time to an hour before, when he still existed in that transcendent space with John’s eyes on him from across the room, his fingers flying over the strings, before he realized what John was singing about, who he was singing for.

The night is warm but after the heat and the chaos of the party, the press of so many bodies, the change in temperature comes as something of a shock. Sherlock shivers as he mounts the final step, but not because of the change in air. His misery seems to have leached all the heat from his body, leaving him hollow and cold. He stops to pull his jacket on again over his shoulders before following John into the shadows under the rigging.

John leads them up to the front of the ship, to the more or less private space behind the foremast where he gave Sherlock his very first boxing lesson. There is no one about save the man at the helm, a ship’s length away in the darkness. The distant sounds of the party in the stateroom still carrying on drift toward them on the night air, but they are far enough away that the sound blurs almost instantly to insignificant background noise.

Sherlock stops beside John at the railing, sets his violin case at his feet.

The stars have come out since they’ve been below deck, and the sight is astonishing even to Sherlock, who doesn’t usually pay attention to such mundane atmospheric details. The light of the stars is so bright for once even he can’t ignore it.

John looks out over the sea, where all the stars are mirrored in the dark water around them, and Sherlock can tell he is gathering the courage to speak, trying to think how to begin.

Sherlock wishes he were brave enough to tell John he already knows what he is going to say. In the brief space of time it took them to climb the staircase, the reason for the sorrow in John’s eyes struck Sherlock like a slap in the face. John is going to tell him that he cannot love Sherlock. Maybe he even wants to, but he cannot because he still loves Mary and his love for her is too much —there isn’t enough room left in his heart. Sherlock could spare John the pain by just telling him he knows already, that he understands.

But Sherlock isn’t brave like that.

He can feel the locket still around his neck, lying against his breastbone where it fell earlier when he let it drop from his fingers.

It feels like a weight at his throat, dragging him down.

John takes a breath. “I… owe you an apology.”

Sherlock waits, his heart pounding painfully in his breast.

“I… should have said something earlier in the evening, as soon as I noticed it but…” John sighs.
and the sound is full of regret. “I was hoping maybe I had imagined it, that I had… misinterpreted somehow. But I realize now I should have said something right away. It isn’t fair to either of us. In all honesty, I think I was trying to pretend like I hadn’t seen anything, hoping maybe that I’d imagined it. As though wishing it could change things.”

John looks out over the sea and his voice is edged with a bitterness Sherlock has never heard before.

“But that was selfish of me. I care about you too much to treat you like that.”

John straightens up and looks at Sherlock, and of all the sad expressions Sherlock has ever seen on John Watson’s face he’s never seen anything like this.

Horror steals all the moisture from Sherlock’s throat. He cannot imagine what he could have done to make John Watson look like that, but whatever it is, he would do anything in that moment to take it back.

“Tell me,” he says, voice stripped of emotion. “What the matter is.”

John turns away from Sherlock. His look is cold, closed off, and it sends a dagger of pain through Sherlock, hot and sharp.

“The trouble is I care for you so much, it’s easy to forget sometimes that I don’t… that I’ve had no confirmation that you return those feelings. And I shouldn’t have assumed. I presumed too much. When I saw you earlier with Miss Hooper, I should’ve realized…” John shakes his head, still not looking at Sherlock. “I’m sorry. I let my own feelings blind me to your intentions this whole time.”

Sherlock is so shocked and confused that for a moment he cannot speak at all.

His tongue feels like a block of wood in his mouth. “What?”

“In the ballroom, when you said goodnight to her… I didn’t realize… the way you felt about her… I should have known as soon as I saw, but I didn’t want to believe it.”

Sherlock cannot make sense of what John is saying.

“What?” he repeats stupidly.

“I should make it clear now,” John says, his voice still full of pain despite what Sherlock can tell are his best intentions. “That no matter what form our relationship takes, I will be content. If it just remains friendship, if that’s all that you desire…” John takes another deep breath. “My life will still be better for it.”

Sherlock shakes his head. He is so shocked by John’s incorrect assumption that it takes him a moment to find the words to convey how utterly wrong he is.

“No,” he says, still shaking his head. “No.”

“No?” John turns his head to look at Sherlock, his voice full of tentative confusion.

“No,” Sherlock says, more adamantly than before. “You’re mistaken. You’re entirely mistaken. Miss Hooper is sweet on Lieutenant Lestrade! They were dancing together when he became ill. I promised her that I would let her know how he was getting on. She was so worried about him I couldn’t break my promise.”
There is a note of apologetic anguish in Sherlock’s voice. He’s desperate to justify to John why it was so important that he make that particular errand—to make clear that it had nothing to do with any secret feelings he was harboring for Miss Hooper and everything to do with his awareness of her own feelings for the Lieutenant.

It occurs to Sherlock now that he was thinking of how he would have felt if some ill had befallen John but he wasn’t able to help, if he’d been kept in an agony of waiting. If anything, Sherlock’s decision to tell her had more to do with his feelings for John, than his feelings for her.

“I promised her, John. She was beside herself with worry and I promised her.”

John is now looking at Sherlock full on and Sherlock can see the dawning understanding on John’s face mingled with a look of deep embarrassment. His mouth drops open. “Oh, God I…”

John lets his head fall to the railing. He presses his face against his forearms and doesn’t move for several moments. He speaks into his arms, his embarrassed voice muffled by the sleeves of his shirt. “Oh, Sherlock, what a fool I’ve been.”

When he lifts his head again to look up at Sherlock, he is smiling weakly. “Can you forgive me?”

Sherlock jerks his head stiffly. “There is nothing to forgive.”

“I’m sorry.” John is looking at his hands where they are still clasped together on the railing. “Sometimes I just can’t believe my luck, meeting you, and the fact that you… seem to genuinely want to spend time with me.”

Sherlock stares at John, his mouth agape. John is speaking the very feelings that Sherlock feels every day. John—glorious, beautiful, confident John—cannot believe that Sherlock wants to spend time with him? Sherlock wants to shake his head. It doesn’t make any sense. He feels three steps behind in the conversation, still reeling from the discovery that John was convinced he had feelings for Miss Hooper.

But the way John is speaking, it sounds as if… Sherlock’s thoughts are a whirl, struggling to catch up. John said he cared for Sherlock. He said it. And the sorrow in his voice when he thought Sherlock had no more interest than friendship… Sherlock heard it. Perhaps he mistook the sadness in John’s eyes for something other than it was.

He almost doesn’t dare to hope.

Sherlock hears John take a deep breath, and he squints at him through the darkness. He looks… nervous. All at once, Sherlock recalls the flickers of nervousness he has seen in John throughout the evening, like the glare of the sun on the surface of the ocean, obscuring the depths beneath.

“I just get…” John takes another deep breath, looks back at his hands. “Sometimes I don’t know how to talk to you.”

Sherlock’s stomach sinks.

He knows he is difficult to talk to, that his sullen silence is a foreclosure to all easy conversation, but he thought he had been making progress. Shame roils through him, stifling his hope as effectively as a damp blanket smothering a flame.

“T“I know,” he says, voice low with shame.

“No, no, please don’t mistake my meaning. It isn’t because of anything you’ve done, it’s just—”
John smiles that wry smile, shaking his head, and Sherlock watches as his eyes grow sad again. “I couldn’t believe you earlier, playing your violin. You looked… I’ve never seen you look like that. You were transcendent, unreachable, as though you would vanish into air if I tried to touch you.” John shakes his head again. “Sometimes I just… can’t believe you’re real.”

Sherlock is so shocked by this declaration that he can’t think what to say.

John sighs, seems to realign himself. He shifts his weight forward on the railing and looks out over the sea. When he speaks again, his voice is soft.

“What do you know why I sang that song?”

“What one?” Sherlock asks, thinking suddenly of Mary, his heart pounding hard against the locket at his breast.

“The Maid on the Shore.”

“No, I don’t know,” Sherlock says truthfully, dreading the answer.

“She reminds me of you.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The girl in the song.”

Sherlock is genuinely puzzled. “Why?”

“Well, you’re clever like her for one thing. And because… you’re solitary like she is, apart from the rest of the world. But it’s more than that. You’re independent. I think… you go where you like in life. You don’t let it push you where you don’t want to go. You’d never let anybody own you.”

Sherlock is both surprised and pleased by this assessment in equal measure. He feels that the opposite is true. He feels like he’s been beaten by life, cast hither and thither like a leaf on the wind, never exerting control over his own fate, never fighting back as hard as he should. He considers this. Well, perhaps he has fought back, but never with very promising results.

“If someone tried to catch you, I don’t think you’d stand for it. I think you’d break free. You wouldn’t let anyone take you against your will.”

Something about the phrasing of John’s words makes a dark shudder move through Sherlock.

“How do you know that?” he whispers, his mind filled suddenly with the image of John appearing before him, his arms full of golden chains, using them to pinion Sherlock’s wrists behind his back and lead him away to a room from which he could not escape.

The thought makes his breathing quicken.

John may be right. If anyone tried to take him against his will Sherlock would be furious; but John is different. If John tried to take him… Sherlock swallows, hard, fingers clenching on the railing.

“You’re like no one else I’ve ever met. You’re like… something from another world.”

“I’m not,” Sherlock says breathlessly; eyes on John’s sorrowful mouth. “I assure you I’m quite ordinary.”

“You’re not,” John’s voice is dreamy, low and sinful. “Everything about you is the opposite of
ordinary.”

Sherlock lifts his head in the darkness, studies the silhouette of John’s face.

“I do feel for the captain though,” John goes on, his voice softer.

Sherlock’s chest tightens with sudden fear. “Why?”

“He never got the girl he wanted. That kind of longing…” John’s voice is full of pain; Sherlock can hear the ache in his words. “It doesn’t go away. There’s only one cure for it.”

Sorrow is like a splinter in Sherlock’s throat—swallowing around it actually hurts. He knows whom John is thinking of. He doesn’t want to ask the inevitable question, but John is his friend. If John needs Sherlock’s help to make his confession, then Sherlock can’t abandon him now.

“You… you’ve felt that before?”

John nods, wordlessly.

Sherlock already knows the answer but he forces himself to ask it anyway before he loses the courage, although the words seem to stick in his throat.

“For Mary?”

John turns to look at Sherlock and the expression on his face is one of genuine bewilderment.

“No,” he breathes, and there is light dawning in his eyes, and Sherlock’s heart begins to pound again, harder than before, although he isn’t yet sure why—that expression could mean anything. He has no idea why John is looking like that all of a sudden. “No, Sherlock, it’s you.”

Worlds shift and planets realign in the time it takes for Sherlock to absorb what John has just said.

His voice is a dry rasp of disbelief. “What?”

The distant sounds of the party across the deck fade away completely, and it is only John and Sherlock, alone on a wide sea; the night stars could be singing in Sherlock’s ear, he is deaf to them in this moment, blind to everything but the shimmer of John’s eyes in the dark as he turns toward Sherlock.

Sherlock can hear now that John’s breath is speeding up.

“But…” Sherlock reaches for words but they vanish before him like dust on the wind. “But her necklace…”

“Whose necklace?”

Sherlock pulls at the chain around his neck, lifting the locket out into the light. “Mary’s necklace that you still wear!”

“That isn’t Mary’s necklace. It was my mother’s.”

Sherlock is staring at John, the locket suspended from his fingers. “But… the initials…”

“Those are my mother’s initials. M.W. is for Margaret Watson.”

“Oh…” All of Sherlock’s breath leaves him. He shuts his eyes, allows the full meaning of John’s
words to sink in. Margaret Watson.

Sherlock keeps his eyes shut. It’s not so scary to say what is on his mind if he cannot see John’s face when he says it. “I thought you sang the song for her. I thought… that’s why you looked so sad when you were singing. Because you missed her.”

“Oh Sherlock, I do miss her. But not like that. Not anymore. I’ll always think fondly of Mary but… in truth, I scarcely knew her. I wish she hadn’t waited for me all those years, that she had found love somewhere else, that she hadn’t died so young but… none of that has any bearing on my feelings towards you.”

Sherlock opens his eyes.

He watches John lick his lips. “No Sherlock, it’s you, it’s you. It’s always been you. But I—”

John stops himself, physically from taking a step forward into Sherlock’s space, his hand clenching compulsively against the railing as though the gesture pains him, demands all his effort, which Sherlock thinks, it might, because that is how he feels, holding himself at a distance from John.

They are like two magnets held close enough together to feel the pull, but always kept apart, or like a wound that needs stitching. It feels wrong, unnatural for space to exist between them. Sherlock wants to close it, draw the edges back together but he stays where he is, rooted to the spot, terrified.

Sherlock risks a look up at John’s face.

It is dark in this corner of the ship but the stars are bright here under the tropical sky and Sherlock can see that John’s eyes are enormous, filled with hunger.

“John…”

In a fit of bravery, Sherlock reaches out to take hold of the hand that John has balled into a fist against the railing. He tugs gently at John’s fingers, pulling them apart until they fit in against his own.

He hears John’s breath catch in the air between him as their palms slide together.

Sherlock swallows, looking down at their hands. “John, you must speak plainly with me. I’m not… I’m not good with innuendo. Just tell me. Tell me what the trouble is.”

He can see John working to calm himself. “I don’t want to pressure you, or rush you into anything you don’t want. I’ve tried to be careful, Sherlock. You’re so young.”

“So what?” Sherlock whispers, suddenly painfully aware of his own naiveté, his inexperience, how foolish he must look to John.

He pulls his fingers out of John’s grasp as though scalded.

“No, it’s not—” John is shaking his head again.

This is going all wrong, Sherlock thinks, and once again, it’s his fault. He feels like he’s ruined this evening every step of the way; made it so difficult for John. He hunches his shoulders, crowding into himself, putting the walls back up.

John reaches for his arm.

“No! Don’t do that! Don’t shut yourself away.” The note of desperation in John’s voice cuts
through him like a blade. “Please.”

They both look down at John’s hand where it’s wrapped around Sherlock’s wrist.

John lets go, his expression apologetic.

“I’m just…” John’s eyes are wide and glittering, reflecting starlight. “I’m afraid of hurting you.”

The ache in John’s voice seems to reach down into Sherlock’s chest and catch hold of his heart.

“You won’t.” Sherlock whispers. “You can touch me. I won’t break.”

Sherlock hears John’s quiet inhalation of breath at his words.

Sherlock watches John shut his eyes, as though steadying himself. When he opens them again, they are darker than Sherlock has ever seen them.

“Do you know the song I would have sung if the two of us were alone?”

Sherlock shakes his head.

The note of restraint in John’s voice is all too apparent, as though he’s holding himself back from something, but it’s still there under the surface, hot and traitorous. “Shall I sing it for you now?”

Sherlock nods in the darkness, his heart pounding in his breast.

John puts his head down close to Sherlock’s and starts to sing.

He sings quietly, presumably so as not to arouse the attention of the man on watch, but the presence of John’s voice at Sherlock’s ear is so intimate, the touch of his breath so warm, so alive against Sherlock’s neck, all Sherlock can think is that John’s voice is only for him. The words in the song seem to speak it true.

Black is the color of my true love’s hair,
His lips are like the roses fair,
He’s the sweetest smile, and the gentlest hands,
I love the ground on where he stands.

John’s rich voice is as melodious as ever, somehow more so in the dark. Perhaps it is the presence of the open sky above them, or the ocean at their feet; perhaps it creates a richer canvas on which to experience the sound, or maybe it is just the fact that Sherlock can feel every nuance of John’s breath, every inhale, every exhale of gentle heat as he sings each note, holds it and shapes it with his voice, so that Sherlock is feeling the song as much as he is hearing it.

I love my love and well he knows.
I love the ground on where he goes.
I wish the day it soon would come,
When he and I can be as one.

John is standing so close Sherlock can feel the vibrations of the music in his chest. It is the most intimate experience Sherlock has ever had with anyone. It is like a part of John is inside him, filling him up, and suddenly, Sherlock feels the way he did earlier when the music was pouring in to fill the hollow place in his chest, but this time it is John, John’s warm voice touching him with a physical presence.
Sherlock is warm all through at the thought.

*I go to the Clyde, and I mourn and weep,*
*For satisfied I ne’er can be,*
*I write a letter, just a few short lines,*
*And suffer death a thousand times.*

The song is simple but John infuses every word with a sorrow that pulls at Sherlock’s heart. There is a sweetness, an emotional pitch to the notes that speaks louder than any declaration Sherlock has ever heard pronounced from any lover’s lips. Now that he knows the song is for him, and no other, as he listens to the words, he realizes John is truly singing to him.

*Black is the color of my true love’s hair,*
*His lips are like the roses fair,*
*He’s the sweetest smile, and the gentlest hands,*
*I love the ground on where he stands,*

*Oh, I love the ground on where he stands.*

The last note rings out into the darkness between them and Sherlock’s breath is coming short, his heartbeat pounding a tattoo of desperation underneath his ribs. He feels as though his body has turned to starlight.

John licks his lips. When he speaks, his voice in Sherlock’s ear is startlingly rough compared to the sweetness of the melody. “Do you believe me now?”

Sherlock nods, clinging to the railing.

“I’ll tell you then,” John says, his voice as quiet as a shadow, as deep with feeling as the sea beneath their feet. “I’ll tell you what the real trouble is.”

Sherlock stands utterly still, listening with his whole body.

“The trouble, Sherlock Holmes,” Sherlock can see John’s gaze in the darkness falling heavy on his mouth. “…is that I’m falling in love with you.”

Now it’s Sherlock’s turn to catch his breath.

John goes on talking; his voice more serious than Sherlock has ever heard it. “And if you don’t return those feelings,” his voice catches briefly but he presses on, “That’s quite alright. But I need to know that now, so as to stop… to stop all this before I get ahead of myself.”

Sherlock scarcely has the breath to speak. It feels as though his heart has swollen to such a size that it’s crushing all the air from his lungs, pressing against his ribs, but if he knows one thing, it’s that it has never been more important than it is right now for him to try and communicate to John just what he means to Sherlock.

“You’re not.” Sherlock whispers, his voice as fragile as a dry leaf. “You’re not alone in your feelings. I’ve never felt about anyone the way I feel about you. You’re…” He struggles, as he always does, to find a word, any word, that can begin to convey the depth of his feelings. As always, he fails, feels frustration prick him like a thorn. His voice shrinks to the size of a pin. “You’re everything to me. It’s… well, it’s a little frightening to be honest.”

John lets out a soft laugh into the air between them. “I’d say it’s bloody terrifying, actually.”
Sherlock feels some of the tension go out of his shoulders at the sound of John’s quiet laughter.

He forces himself to keep speaking, his heart hammering so loudly in his own ears it almost drowns out the sound of his voice. “I’m sorry I haven’t… been better about conveying that. I just… it’s difficult for me… all of this.”

“I know,” John says, his voice so filled with compassion it makes Sherlock’s heart turn over in his chest. “I know it is. There’s no need to be sorry. I suspected as much, or I should say, I hoped that was how you felt.” Sherlock can see the wry glimmer of John’s grin through the darkness. “But I had to be certain before…”

Sherlock can see John’s eyes returning again to his mouth. He wishes suddenly it wasn’t quite so dark in this corner of the ship. He wants to know the color of John’s eyes right now, as he looks at Sherlock the way he is, lashes growing heavy, his lips dark against the pale tip of his tongue.

“But what?” Sherlock asks, his mouth dry as a bone.

“Before I kiss you,” John says, his voice gone low and dreamy again.

“Kiss me where?” Sherlock asks, breathless, unconsciously parting his lips.

“Oh,” John’s fingers are reaching out to take Sherlock by the wrist, lifting that hand up to his mouth. “So many places.”

Sherlock can feel the heat of John’s breath against the back of his hand as he lowers his mouth to it, the long drag of the ‘so’ as John stretches it out, until it sounds halfway between a prayer and a moan.

When John’s lips touch the skin on the back of his hand, the kiss is so light Sherlock scarcely feels it, but Sherlock is so starved for John’s touch that even the feather-light suggestion of a caress sets Sherlock shivering with delight. It feels like the best kind of flirtation; it feels like a promise of what’s to come.

Sure enough, before Sherlock has even fully absorbed the sensation of John’s warm lips against the skin of his knuckles, John is turning his hand over and pressing a kiss to the tips of his fingers.

“These hands…” he murmurs, mouth drifting down to the center of Sherlock’s palm, his dark eyes looking up at Sherlock as he does so. “I could spend lifetimes just kissing them.”

The feel of John’s eyes on him as he presses his lips to the sensitive skin at the center of his palm is so intimate Sherlock gasps aloud, his body leaning instinctively against the railing at his back, searching for support as his knees begin to buckle.

John smiles and lifts his mouth to kiss the skin of Sherlock’s inner wrist.

“John—” Sherlock gasps as the heat from John’s lips seems to sink directly into his veins. “I have one request, and then… then you can kiss me anywhere you like.”

“Anywhere?” John asks, his teeth flashing white in the dark as he grins and then Sherlock’s knees actually do give out beneath him as a surge of pure desire drags him down like a wave.

“I—yes,” Sherlock rasps, grasping at the railing behind him like a drowning man as John’s eyes travel up his waistcoat to the fabric at his throat.

“Tell me,” John says, the note of urgency in his voice transforming those two simple words from a
request into a demand.

“Please, will you—” Sherlock swallows, licks his lips. The plaintive note in his voice is unmistakable. Oh god, how he has longed for this. He almost cannot get the words out, and he realizes as he draws breath to speak that he is shaking with desire. “Will you kiss me on the mouth?”

John makes a sound that Sherlock cannot describe other than to say that it is the sound of a man who has but one desire in the world that he has been deprived of and has just been told he is allowed to have it.

“Yes,” John breathes, stepping in close, his eyes soft in the darkness, full of glimmering lights and Sherlock thinks fleetingly that John’s eyes are like the sea around them full of starlight. “Yes, of course, I will kiss you on the mouth.”

Sherlock drops his eyes to John’s lips, feels his breathing growing shallow as John leans in closer to him still until his mouth is inches from Sherlock’s own.

John is shorter than him but Sherlock is not standing at his full height; his weight still supported by the railing at his back. His entire body is trembling like a leaf in the wind and suddenly, he is worried that it will be too much, the feel of John against him will be so much sensation he will not be able to stand it.

His senses still feel blown open by the music from earlier and every scent, every touch resonates through him at ten times its normal resonance.

“Don’t worry,” John says, rubbing his thumb in a soothing circle around the inside of Sherlock’s palm. “If it’s too much, you just tell me to stop, all right?”

Sherlock nods, draws in a ragged breath.

John lifts a hand and places his fingers under Sherlock’s jaw, tipping his chin up.

“You have the most beautiful mouth I’ve ever seen,” John says and his voice is heavy and slow, like liquid sunlight; full of beautiful, unspeakable things. Sherlock can feel the effect of it traveling from somewhere below his sternum deep into his belly.

“And your hair, your hair,” John murmurs, bending closer to slide his other hand into the tumbled curls at the back of Sherlock’s neck, his voice reverent, lilting, more than a prayer; it is like a song. “I’ve lain awake thinking about it, wondering if it’s as soft as it looks.”

Sherlock gasps at the feel of John’s fingers sliding in against his scalp.

“Oh,” he says, as John’s fingers begin to move in tiny circles, his eyelids sliding almost shut.

John’s breath comes out in a sigh to match his own at the look on Sherlock’s face. “Oh, you beauty…”

And then Sherlock’s eyes are fluttering open again as John tilts his face ever so gently with the press of his fingers and settles the curves of his lips against Sherlock’s.

At the touch of John’s lips against his, Sherlock goes absolutely still.

His eyes are wide open, studying every detail of John’s face up-close, the golden blur of his eyelashes, the slope of his nose, his heart racing as the reality of the situation makes itself known.
John’s lips are soft and dry; he smells like tobacco and salt and something else, a smell that is distinctly his own. Sherlock has smelled it before, but to have it now, so close against him is entirely different and wonderful and he whimpers then, at the nearness of John, and the gentleness of his mouth against Sherlock’s.

John pulls back, his eyes flickering open, full of alarm. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, John,” he sighs, his voice softer than breath. “Please, kiss me again. Please.”

“Oh, love,” John says, and there is such tenderness in his voice that Sherlock knows in that moment that his bones have turned to molten gold; that he will burn to a crisp on this ship’s deck beneath the stars. “I haven’t even really kissed you yet.”

Sherlock draws in a breath to ask a question, but before he can ask it, John’s smiling mouth has found his own again and this time, John’s lips are sliding against his so softly, the fingers that are cupping Sherlock’s jaw moving back toward Sherlock’s ear and down the skin of Sherlock’s neck, and Sherlock gasps at the sensation that light touch awakens in him, and feels John’s smile grow against him. The changing shape of John’s mouth fills Sherlock with new information, sending little stars of pleasure skipping over Sherlock’s skin.

He is surrounded by John on all sides—one of his hands in Sherlock’s hair, the other cradling the corner of his jaw, and this, Sherlock thinks, seared white-hot by the power of his feelings, this is what John’s lovely, laughing mouth feels like pressed against his own.

Sherlock feels like he is filling up with music, like he is filling up with light, as though he is one moment away from dissolving into something more than flesh and bone, his soul bursting out of him in a shimmer of notes.

The hand in his hair slips down to the back of his neck and Sherlock makes a crying sound of pleasure.

John pulls back slightly to look at him. “Is that all right?”

“Yes, yes, more than all right,” Sherlock gasps, clutching in desperation at John’s sleeves to tug John back against him.

“You can touch me more than that if you like,” John says, breathlessly, and Sherlock readjusts his grip, places a tentative hand on John’s upper arm.

In response, John shifts his grip on Sherlock, moving his hands down to hold Sherlock by the waist. Sherlock feels the muscle in John’s arm flex with the movement and he shudders, hard, and closes his eyes.

“Still all right?” John asks, and Sherlock hears something unsteady in his voice, a note of another emotion John is struggling to contain.

Sherlock nods, with his eyes still shut.

He cannot open them just yet; he’s too busy cataloguing the feel of John’s arm under his hand. He’s spent so long looking at John’s body as he works, the flickers of muscle beneath his skin, but now Sherlock is feeling it and it is both harder and softer than he imagined, and suddenly, Sherlock finds, he cannot catch his breath.
“Do that again,” he breathes.

“Do what?” John asks.

“The muscle in your arm, it—”

Sherlock feels the quiet exhalation of John’s laughter before he hears it. “You mean this?”

John curls his forearm up towards his torso, flexing the muscle in his bicep, and Sherlock makes a soft little crying sound, opening his eyes to reach out for John’s other arm with his free hand.

“How was that?” John says against his mouth, his voice teasing, full of mischief, and Sherlock clings to him with both hands, pulling John down against him and back to his mouth.

“That was good,” Sherlock says, “You should do it again, but kiss me while you’re—”

John doesn’t wait for him to finish. He presses his lips against Sherlock’s again, this time with more force, and Sherlock feels something flutter in his belly in response to the feel of John surging in against him, his movements still gentle but underscored with something less controlled.

This time, Sherlock moves his mouth against John’s, just a slight drag of his lips, tipping the angle of his head, exploring the feeling of his lips sliding over John’s, and then something remarkable happens: John’s mouth is opening against his, and Sherlock is awash in new sensations. The inside of John’s mouth is warm and wet and he can feel John’s tongue—John’s tongue!—against the seam of his lips.

John’s hands lift again from Sherlock’s waist to cup Sherlock’s jaw, the muscles in his arms bulging under Sherlock’s hands, and Sherlock thinks nothing could possibly be better than this when John whispers, in a rush of heat, “Open your mouth,” and Sherlock does, curious, and then John’s tongue is pushing in between his lips, and Sherlock gasps because he didn’t even know this was a thing you could do with another person and he can taste John, and it is heavenly, and John’s tongue is in his mouth.

Sherlock holds his open mouth very still at first as John’s tongue moves around the circumference of his teeth, overwhelmed by how intimate this act is, how much of John he can feel and taste—how warm, how slick—how shuddery and soft it makes him feel, how tender and exposed, like John is reaching down inside his chest to cradle Sherlock’s heart, but then John’s tongue starts to move against his own in a rhythm that sends heat funneling down Sherlock’s spine in a shower of sparks. The feeling of it is undulating, slow; it is the lewdest thing Sherlock has ever experienced and as John repeats the motion, Sherlock realizes that John is licking Sherlock’s tongue with his own and all thought leaves him.

Sherlock can no longer think; he is nothing but feeling, and the whole of his world has shrunk down to the feel of John’s tongue moving over his, dragging sensations out of Sherlock that he did not even know he was capable of having. His body responds to John as though of its own accord. There is no deliberation, just reaction; just the hot, pulsing need to thrust his body forward into John’s, his hips seeking friction, his entire being alive with a singular desire, which is to have more of John against him now, ringing through Sherlock’s body as clear as the tone of a bell.

All the blood has left his head and is beating hot and insistent between his legs. He has never felt like this before, in all the times he has thought of John when he was by himself. He pulls on John’s arms in an effort to bring John closer against him, a moan sounding low in his throat as John stumbles one step forward, his thigh brushing against the front of Sherlock’s breeches.
John breaks away, breathing hard, his hands dropping to grip Sherlock by the upper arms, holding him in place. “Woah, woah. Easy. Easy now.”

Sherlock’s breathing is ragged, his own hands insistent on John’s arms. “John,” he pleads, surging forward to kiss the corner of John’s mouth. His voice is shredded raw with longing. “Kiss me again.”

“I think,” John says, licking his lips, and pressing his forehead in against Sherlock’s. “We’d better find someplace a bit more private if we want to continue… kissing.”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, edging John closer against him by the grip on his arms until John’s thigh is nudging in between his own. “We can use my cabin. It’s more private than anywhere else.”

“Alright. But only if you’re cer—certain,” John says, and then his breath hitches as Sherlock finally drags John close enough to press in fully against the front of him. “Oh my god.” John’s eyes fall shut.

Sherlock lifts his hips ever so slightly so John can feel the full length of him, where he is straining hard against the soft fabric of his breeches.

“I can’t wait anymore,” Sherlock says, his voice breathless, deeper than he’s ever heard it. “Even if I wanted to, I can’t, John. Please. Don’t make me wait anymore.”

Sherlock can hear the shaking exhalation of John’s breath as he struggles for control. He reaches down to take hold of Sherlock’s hands. “Sherlock, I—”

“I want everything. I want all of you.”

John’s face is so close to his own Sherlock can see that the center of John’s ink-dark eyes have all but eclipsed the blue. “Only if you’re absolutely certain…”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.”

John laughs shakily, and squeezes Sherlock’s hands. “Good. That’s… good.”

Sherlock wonders suddenly if John might be as nervous as he is.

He steps back in against John, reaching up with his arms to loop them around John’s neck. He pitches his voice low, as low as he can, and into it he pours every fragment of desire that has been burning through him since the very first time he laid eyes on John.

He parts his lips to speak, hears John catch his breath.

“John, take me to bed.”

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to my lovely reader, FollowTheMadness for introducing me to the song John sings in this chapter. For an absolutely gorgeous rendition of this song, click here.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for all your delightful and generous feedback and
support. It gives me such joy to write these chapters with all of you in mind.

I'll admit, I might be even more excited than I usually am to hear back from you all. I hope this moment lived up to twelve chapters worth of anticipation. ;)
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

SEX.

Chapter Notes

This is it, y'all. What you've been waiting for. Trembling gay baby Sherlock swept into the strong, knowledgable arms of golden sex god, John H. Watson. Please enjoy yourselves. And be sure to have those smelling salts on hand!

Sherlock takes John’s hand in his and leads him over the scrubbed surface of the deck, shining slick with moonlight, toward the staircase at the back of the ship, back the way they came so many hours earlier but now with their positions reserved, Sherlock leading, John following soundlessly behind, and Sherlock reflects just how much has changed in the short space of time. When he walked this way earlier, he did not know the feel of John Watson’s hands in his hair, the taste of his mouth, how he looked just before he kissed Sherlock, and Sherlock pities this former version of himself for all he did not know, how naïve, how inexperienced was this self from just a few hours ago.

It feels as though they are moving through a dream, Sherlock thinks, as they pass the lights of the party in the captain’s stateroom, still glowing bright, the loud clamor of voices and laughter rippling out over the open sea. The time that he spent in that room earlier this evening feels like lifetimes ago, or as if it were a dream and only now has Sherlock woken up. It is as if he and John occupy a different reality entirely, as though those people laughing behind the lit-up windows are the dream, and only he and John are in the real world.

The walk from their hidden spot behind the foremast down to Sherlock’s cabin is brief, but it does not feel brief to Sherlock; it feels heavy and slow, weighted with meaning, each step bringing him closer to something he has dreamed of ever since the first day he laid eyes on John.

Sherlock’s body feels strange, distant, dreamy, his own heartbeat loud and heavy in his ears, and it is only when he and John come to a halt outside the door of his cabin that John turns to him, his eyes dark in the shadows, to ask him, “Are you all right?”

Sherlock nods in the darkness and John squeezes Sherlock’s fingers between his own.

John’s low voice is a ribbon of heat between them. “Remember we don’t have to do this. We can do whatever you like, and if that’s nothing at all—”

Sherlock lifts his fingers to John’s mouth and settles them against John’s lips.

John falls silent.
John’s lips are soft under Sherlock’s fingers; Sherlock can feel the gentle rhythm of his breath coming in and out, the warmth of it. It makes Sherlock want to replace his fingers with his mouth, right here, in the corridor outside his room where anyone can see them. Instead, Sherlock licks his lips before bending forward to put his mouth to John’s ear.

His voice is heavy and slow, like he feels. “I want everything. Everything you’ll let me have, everything you’re willing to give me. I want it, however long that takes. I’m not going to change my mind.”

Sherlock hears the sudden exhalation of John’s breath, as though he’s been punched in the sternum. He tips his head back, eyes closed, whispers, “Oh my god.”

Sherlock watches him, curious. “That’s the second time you’ve done that.”

John drops his head back and opens his eyes. “Let’s get into your room, before someone comes.”

Sherlock nods, pushes open the door.

The room is as black as pitch within. John waits in the doorway, presumably for Sherlock to light the lantern by his bed before losing all the light from the hallway, but before Sherlock has time to do so the sound of approaching voices echoes down from the top of the stairs, followed shortly by the sound of footsteps descending from the upper deck.

John steps with haste into the room and Sherlock lunges behind him to pull the door shut, plunging them into total darkness.

They stand still, listening to the sound of the women’s voices speaking in fervent whispers as they pass by Sherlock’s room and continue down the corridor. The words of their conversation are indistinguishable but the murmur of their voices continues for several moments more until they bid one another good night and the creak of a cabin door signals the end of their conversation.

Sherlock lets out the breath he was holding, hears John do the same, and realizes suddenly how close together they are standing in the dark.

All at once Sherlock is nervous, the dreamy heaviness of his mood evaporating in the space of a heartbeat, transforming to a torrent of nameless anxiety.

John is with him, here with him, in his room, with the intent of…

Sherlock swallows.

He knows not all of what John’s intentions are.

He is not nervous about what John will or will not do—he meant it when he told John he wanted everything—but rather of his own responses to these things, whether he will know to do them well, or right. He feels suddenly vastly unprepared for what is about to take place, and Sherlock hates feeling unprepared, unpracticed, lacking knowledge.

A thousand anxieties swell to the surface of Sherlock’s mind, quenching his desire as effectively as water to a flame. What if John finds his ignorance, his lack of experience childish, unappealing? What if John decides Sherlock is hideous without his clothes on? What if Sherlock does something to offend him? What if John finds him foolish, awkward, clumsy?

Sherlock feels a hot flare of panic burst open in his chest.
Sherlock knows the details of a coupling between a man and a woman, of course he does. But he does not know quite all the details of how desire is expressed between two men. He has heard the vulgar things that people say about two men together, what they do, but he’s not sure precisely what they mean, or even how they would be possible. Of course, he has had his own imaginings about the things he would like, the things he would do if he and John were alone together, but he has no idea whether these are things that John would also be amenable to.

John must sense his anxiety even through the dark because John’s voice suddenly speaks into the silence, soft and careful. “Sherlock? Should I light the lantern?”

Sherlock feels conflicted. He is both grateful and distraught by the current atmospheric circumstances. He is grateful as the darkness means his sudden panic may remain invisible to John, but he is distraught by the fact that it means he cannot see John.

“It’s alright if you want it to be dark but…” John’s hand reaches out for his and Sherlock gasps at the sudden brush of John’s fingers. “I’d like to see you.”

Sherlock feels John lift the hand that is holding Sherlock’s up to his mouth. Sherlock feels the touch of John’s breath before his lips descend and the feeling is so charged with intimacy that Sherlock shivers from the roots of his hair down to the tips of his toes.

John kisses his knuckles lightly, and then lifts his mouth away to continue speaking. His voice is so soft, so full of heat Sherlock can almost feel its weight against his skin in the dark.

“I want to see the curls in your hair as they catch the light, the shape of your mouth when I kiss it, the color rising in your cheeks as I kiss you here,” John pushes back the fabric at Sherlock’s wrist to kiss the bone, “And here…” John straightens up and leans in to press a kiss to Sherlock’s jaw, “And here.”

His mouth descends to the skin just below Sherlock’s ear and Sherlock tips his head back, his mouth falling open at the sensation of John’s warm mouth moving over his skin.

“You see,” John says, and his voice is a low murmur against the skin of Sherlock’s neck. “I’ve spent a long time imagining just how you would look when I do this to you, and although hearing you and tasting you are probably more than enough, I’m greedy.”

John’s mouth slides down the side of Sherlock’s neck and Sherlock tips his head back, his mouth falling open at the sensation of John’s warm mouth moving over his skin.

“Sherlock Holmes, you’ve given me a thirst I cannot quench.”

In the wake of the heat of John’s mouth against his skin, the issue of whether or not to light the lantern has fled from Sherlock’s mind to make room for much more pressing concerns, such as where John’s mouth will go next.

“J—John?”

John’s mouth lifts off of his neck and Sherlock almost cries out at the loss. “Yes, my love?”

“Will you… kiss me again? On the mouth?”

John’s answer is a sigh of heat against Sherlock’s lips and then John’s mouth is sliding in against his and Sherlock parts his lips in a gasp of pleasure as John’s hands settle in his hair.

John kisses him sweetly, lightly, but Sherlock is having none of that.
Sherlock decides right then and there that open-mouthed kissing is far superior to kissing with mouths closed. Honestly, what a waste of time.

He opens his mouth wider and pushes his tongue with gentle curiosity into the wet heat of John’s mouth.

Oh, Sherlock thinks, as John’s tongue comes forward to meet his own, John’s hands sliding from his hair to cup his face. This is what all the fuss is about, what all the poets and playwrights are sighing over.

Sherlock has always found poetry desperately overrated, but as John’s tongue slips in against his own, John’s moan pouring out like a song from his throat, Sherlock begins to understand why so much ink has been spilled over this endeavor.

Sherlock has never kissed anyone in his life before tonight, and if you had asked him an hour ago whether he was nervous about his lack of expertise in this area he would have blushed and glared at you, while thinking secretly, ’Yes of course I’m nervous! I don’t know a thing about it!’ But Sherlock is realizing, as John begins licking into his mouth, Sherlock’s own tongue rising with enthusiasm to meet John’s, it is perhaps not something one needs much practice at.

Sherlock pushes his body forward against John’s, his nervousness all but forgotten, and he’s so adamant about kissing John, about getting his body as close to John’s as possible that he’s entirely forgotten where they are until he feels John stumble against the edge of his bunk.

John breaks away, breathing hard, Sherlock’s hands holding his hips.

“I want…” Sherlock kisses him between words, missing John’s mouth in the dark, kissing his chin instead, not caring as he drops his hands to the fabric at his throat. “I want… to feel you… without anything in the way. These clothes…!”

Sherlock is shuddering hard now, like a horse that’s just run a race. He wants the layers of fabric between him and John gone as soon as possible but his shaking fingers make it difficult for him to make any headway.

He tugs with frustration at his neck cloth and then feels John’s hands reaching up to hold his own, the sound of his chuckle against Sherlock’s cheek momentarily pausing his frenzy.

“Easy, easy there. This is why the lantern may be of some use. It’s much easier to do this with a bit of light.”

Sherlock nods, breathless, before he remembers John can’t see him and then gasps, “On the stand beside the bed, there are matches.”

John reaches for them, and it is only a second or two before John’s nimble fingers find a match and are dragging it to life against the tinder.

He lights the candle on top of Sherlock’s desk and then leans over to light the one in the lantern above Sherlock’s bed, kneeling on Sherlock’s bed to reach it.

Sherlock thinks about John Watson’s knee pressing into his mattress and feels heat climbing up his throat.

John shakes out the smoking match, sets it on the desk beside the candle, and then comes toward Sherlock, the ghost of a smile of his face.
John Watson by candlelight is arguably no lovelier than John Watson in the sunshine, his hair shining like a flame, no more breathtaking than John Watson on a misty morning halfway up the rigging, or John Watson in a storm, his face streaming with rain. Sherlock thinks that there is no version of John Watson that he could ever take issue with, but right now, in this moment, it is his conviction that John Watson by candlelight coming towards him with a smile on his face, his eyes blue-black with wanting Sherlock, is by far the best John he has ever known.

“Come here,” John says, stepping up against Sherlock, settling his fingers over Sherlock’s fingers where he’s still struggling to pull apart the fabric at his neck. “I’d like to do the honors, if that’s alright with you.”

John’s grin is so sudden and full of mischievous intent that it is all Sherlock can do to nod his assent. He lifts his chin to give John more room.

“Yes, that’s lovely,” John murmurs as he pulls the strip of cloth free, baring Sherlock’s throat. “Oh god, yes.”

He folds the length of silk with several deft movements before settling it with care on top of Sherlock’s desk. Then he leans in, lifting himself up on his toes to press his mouth to the long white expanse of neck that he has uncovered. He kisses Sherlock where his pulse is throbbing, hot and insistent, underneath his jaw, his mouth so warm, so wet that Sherlock makes a whimpering sound, his hands coming up to clutch John by the shoulders.

John mouths his way down to the groove between Sherlock’s collarbones, pulling wide the collar of Sherlock’s linen shirt, his hands slipping around beneath Sherlock’s jacket, over the ivory and gold stripes of his waistcoat to hold his waist.

“God, how I’ve dreamed of doing this,” John says in a burst of heat against Sherlock’s collarbone. “You—you have?” Sherlock manages, his mouth falling open as John’s mouth returns to his neck to suck on the sensitive skin. This time, Sherlock cries out, loud and keening, and John’s fingers fly up to Sherlock’s mouth to stop the sound, his laugh a breathless rush of air against Sherlock’s cheek.

“Shh.” He kisses Sherlock as his fingers begin working apart the gleaming buttons on his waistcoat. “I’m sorry. I should have given you fair warning before doing that.”

John grins at Sherlock, the white of his teeth a flare of brightness in the dark.

“But your neck has been driving me wild for the past few weeks.”

“It has?” Sherlock asks, half-curious, half-completely distracted by John’s clever fingers already halfway through the endless line of buttons on his waistcoat. He feels strangely breathless watching John’s hands on his buttons, working them apart. Even through two layers of fabric the feel of John’s fingers against his belly makes him feel light-headed, shivery with want.

“Oh, I’ve spent hours…” John says, his voice wistful, as he pulls the last button free. “Hours and hours thinking of how I would kiss this lovely neck of yours, how it would taste—the corner of your jaw, the shadow here—could it possibly taste as sweet as it looks? There’s only way to be certain.”

John presses his mouth in just below Sherlock’s ear and licks.

Sherlock makes a keening sound, his knees buckling beneath him, hands reaching helplessly for John’s arms as he begins to sink towards the floor.
“Woah, woah, woah. Easy now!”

John grabs Sherlock by the arms and spins him around, pushing gently until Sherlock is sitting on the bed.

Sherlock sits, shuddering hard, gripping the edges of the bed with white-knuckled fists, taking deep breaths, trying to calm the storm of desire that feels like a live thing trying to tear its way out of his breast.

“Easy, easy,” John sighs, like gentling a spooked horse. “Let’s go slowly all right? It’s a lot to take in.”

John kneels in front of Sherlock, settles his warm hands over Sherlock’s knees before running his palms up Sherlock’s thighs, his face tipped up toward Sherlock’s with attentive focus, the curves in his face made soft by lantern light.

“There’s no need to rush.”

Sherlock imagines the touch is meant to be soothing but the feel of John’s calloused palms stroking so deliberately up his thighs, sets Sherlock’s entire body to quivering as though he were a harp string John has just plucked.

“John—” Sherlock’s voice, full of desperation, catches on the single syllable, like a fish caught in a hook.

“I know,” John says, his voice low, soothing, as he runs his hands back down Sherlock’s legs to pull off his boots.

Somehow, even the act of John tugging his boots off—an act that Sherlock performs himself every evening with no aplomb—is loaded with erotic force simply because John’s hands are holding his calf as he does so, John’s eyes focused with reverent intent upon the curve of Sherlock’s ankle as he frees it from his boot.

It doesn’t help that as soon as John has set the boot aside, his hands cradling Sherlock’s heel as though it were made of crystal, his mouth is descending to kiss the instep of Sherlock’s long pale foot, his lips so soft that Sherlock gasps in shocked delight.

John strokes his hand over the underside of Sherlock’s foot and Sherlock jerks at the touch, gripping the bed so hard he can feel the edge of it leaving marks in his palms.

John moves his attention to Sherlock’s other leg, pulling off his other boot with equal tenderness, this time running his hands up over Sherlock’s calf, his mouth following in the wake of his hands, not touching, just hovering over the muscle until his mouth finds Sherlock’s ankle where he presses a kiss to the bone, his thumbs rubbing into the bottom of Sherlock’s foot.

Sherlock cannot stop himself from crying out again and he puts his hand up to his mouth to stifle the sound, fingers pressing hard against his lips.

“I know,” John murmurs again, his voice full of sympathy. “I know. I feel it too. Truth be told, I want to devour you.”

He looks up at Sherlock then and Sherlock can see how wide his pupils have grown, the black swallowing up the blue of his irises until they are nearly invisible.

John runs his hands back up over Sherlock’s knees, up this thighs, up, up, until his palms are
framing the bulge in Sherlock’s breeches, and he leans in close, his breath hot against Sherlock’s inner thighs, even through the fabric. Sherlock can feel it and he has to close his eyes for fear he will ruin himself before John has even started.

John holds his mouth there, his breath coming out in warm, unsteady plumes as he continues speaking. “I want to eat you up.”

Sherlock cannot bear it. The hunger in John’s voice sends a bolt of feeling straight to his cock, and before he can stop himself, Sherlock’s hands are reaching down and fistling in the material of John’s shirt, dragging him up on one knee to pull John’s mouth against his, lips parting immediately to allow John’s tongue into his mouth.

John kisses him back greedily, his mouth open against Sherlock’s, tongue plunging in to stroke the length of his tongue, climbing to his feet without moving his mouth from Sherlock’s and putting his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders to direct him backwards on the bed.

Sherlock pulls his mouth away, gasping, to turn his attention to crawling up the bed. He drops himself back against the pillow, his breathing quick and shallow, his entire body trembling with need.

John bends down to remove his own shoes with haste, and then he’s climbing in beside Sherlock, shockingly agile as he maneuvers himself into the narrow space, the gold in his hair glinting in the soft light from the lantern above the bed.

All at once, Sherlock is struck again with the magnitude of what is about to take place. John Watson, his John Watson, who can do anything—who swims in the ocean as sleek as a fish, who runs through the air as though the weight of the earth does not hold him down, who sings like the gods of the world are in his lungs, who battles storms and surf and emerges, triumphant, laughing, his cheeks bright with rain—this man has chosen to lie down with Sherlock in his narrow bunk, and suddenly, Sherlock is wilting beneath the pressure.

John notices the change in him immediately—whether he sees it in the nervous dart of Sherlock’s eyes, or the sudden paleness in his cheeks, Sherlock cannot be sure but he knows John is aware of it, because his body stills, his eyes enormous in the flickering candlelight as he looks down at Sherlock.

“What is it?”

Sherlock feels all his fear rise up and stop his throat. He turns his head away from John’s worried gaze.

“Don’t do that,” John says, reaching down to place one hand over Sherlock’s where it’s clenched into a fist against his side. “Don’t slip away. I need you here, with me. I need all of you if we’re going to do this. Tell me. What’s wrong?”

Sherlock looks up at John’s lovely face, the corners of his eyes creased tight with concern. It’s so difficult to say what he’s thinking, to tell John what he’s afraid of, but he wants so much, and the gentleness in John’s eyes gives him the courage to speak.

“I’ve never…” Sherlock’s voice is shy, choked tight with anxiety. “I’ve never done any of this. With anyone.”

Sherlock sees the flash of distress in John’s eyes. “Sherlock, if I’m going too fast. If we start doing anything you don’t want to do—”
“No!” Sherlock all but cries. “No, it’s not that, it’s just I’m not… I won’t be…” Sherlock swallows hard, forces the words out. “I don’t know what to do! I don’t know… anything.”

The shame he feels at this admission is so great Sherlock wants to curl up into a ball and hide his face. He hates not knowing things, hates admitting to it even more, but he is saying this for John’s sake, so that John will drop his expectations down to the appropriate place, will be prepared when Sherlock utterly falls short in every way.

He wants to be the best for John, needs to be the best lover he has ever had, will ever have, but how can he be when Sherlock doesn’t even know what he’s supposed to do?

Sherlock’s chest is heaving now, not with arousal, but with shame. Perhaps it would be better if he banished John from his bed right now—sent John away so he would never have to taste the bitterness of disappointment.

It takes all his effort not to lift his hands and cover his face, so great is his embarrassment, but the wretchedness in his tone is apparently evidence enough of his discomfort because John squeezes Sherlock’s fingers under his own as though in supplication.

“Sherlock, you lovely, foolish creature, look at me a moment.”

Sherlock swallows hard, looks up at John, his expression full of sorrow.

“It doesn’t matter to me that you don’t know what to do. I don’t care how much you know or don’t know; I want you, Sherlock. And that includes the parts of you that don’t know what you’re doing.”

Sherlock is still tense with doubt; he looks up at John, his lips trembling and John reaches out with his other hand to trail his fingers down Sherlock’s cheek.

Sherlock shivers at the delicate touch before pressing his face into John’s hand.

“Have you ever thought…?” John continues, his voice like liquid darkness, like heat itself, “That it might be appealing to me? The thought of being the first one to who gets to do these things with you? The first one to kiss you…” John’s thumb strokes down Sherlock’s cheek, brushing the corner of his lips. “And touch you…” The hand covering Sherlock’s begins to trace light patterns on the back of his wrist. “And see you like this?”

John goes on speaking, his voice like syrup, like honey, like molten chocolate drizzling off a spoon.

“I can’t lie.” Sherlock watches John lick his lips, his pale pink tongue shining in the low light. “The thought of being the one to make you come apart, the first one to touch all the secret places in you that you don’t even know yourself,” Sherlock can hear John’s breathing growing less and less steady as he goes on speaking; the thumb at the corner of Sherlock’s mouth stroking gently over Sherlock’s bottom lip. “It’s kept me up most nights.”

A shudder goes through Sherlock at John’s words.

Hearing John describe the things he wants to do to Sherlock coupled with the way John is looking at him, like he is a feast that John wants to devour, like John is a cat and Sherlock is a bowl of cream—it burns away his shame in a shimmer of heat.

“And if you’re nervous,” John goes on. “Don’t be. I’ll be here to guide you through it. I’ll show you what to do.” John’s thumb strokes back across the plumpness of Sherlock’s bottom lip. “And if
you don’t like it—any of it, you just tell me.” His thumb stops stroking abruptly, his eyes deadly serious. “If you want to stop, we’ll stop. It’s all fine by me. But you must tell me if it gets to be too much. Will you promise me that, Sherlock?”

Sherlock nods, his eyes wide, and then, because he’s tired of waiting for John’s thumb to start moving again, he pushes his mouth into the palm of John’s hand, parting his lips against it, his breath stuttering out in a plume of heat. He presses a kiss to the center of John’s hand and then pulls it down to clasp it with his own against his stomach.

He watches John’s eyelashes flutter closed at the touch of his mouth and at the sight of John so visibly affected by this simple gesture, Sherlock feels tingling warmth fill his body.

“Good,” John says, his eyes growing darker as he lowers his mouth down to Sherlock’s. He licks his lips before pressing them to Sherlock’s, his voice rough with longing. “Then let’s begin. Let me draw you out.”

Sherlock barely has time to suck in a breath before John’s lips are covering his and moving over Sherlock’s, soft and slow and wet. Sherlock pushes up into the lovely heat of John’s mouth, parting his lips, inviting him in, his fingers tightening around John’s where they lie against his belly.

John kisses him slow and deep, the hand not entwined with Sherlock’s sliding into his hair, pulling gently at his curls and Sherlock’s entire body jerks in response to the slight pressure on his scalp.

Sherlock breaks his mouth away, shocked, breathless.

“John! Do that again—”

John tugs gently, tilting Sherlock’s head back on the pillow, baring his throat, and Sherlock can feel his entire body filling with heat, his arousal gathering force between his legs. He can feel their joined fingers rising up and down with the rapid movement of his belly.

“John—” Sherlock’s voice is plaintive. “Kiss me while you’re doing it…”

John tugs at the curls, lowering his mouth to Sherlock’s and Sherlock cries out low in his throat, his body surging up against John’s, his free hand reaching out to clutch at the material of John’s shirt to pull John closer.

His body is electric, shivering, overwhelmed with the desire to feel John against him, all of him, every inch of skin and bone and muscle on top of him, touching him, but John holds himself at a distance.

“Sherlock, wait.” John’s breathing is ragged. “God, there are things I want to do to you…” Sherlock watches John shut his eyes and take a deep breath. “You’ve got to help me go slow, right? You’ve got to… stop me.”

“Why?” Sherlock gasps, thrusting up against John, parting his thighs, pulling John down into the heat between his legs, not conscious of what his body is doing just wanting, wanting, wanting.

“Because,” John gasps as their hips come together in a spark of heat. “You’ve never…” John licks his lips and Sherlock pulls his mouth down against his. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“Then tell me,” Sherlock breathes against John’s mouth, “Tell me what you’re going to do.”

John drags his mouth over Sherlock’s in a not-quite kiss, his lips barely touching Sherlock’s in a
slow slide of temptation, causing just enough friction to make Sherlock mad with the need for more of it, the heat of his breath unsteady over Sherlock’s mouth.

“Do you really want to know?” John asks, teasing, the corners of his mouth curling over Sherlock’s.

Sherlock tightens his hands in the fabric of John’s shirt, half-mad with frustration. “Yes,” he pleads, not even bothering to disguise the whine of need in his voice.

“Shh,” John kisses the corner of Sherlock’s mouth, soothing, but Sherlock can see the glitter of mischief in his eyes as he leans back a little to continue speaking. “I’ll tell you.”

He sits back so that there is space between them, causing Sherlock to give another little whine of frustration but from here, now, he can see more of John, and his eyes as they fall heavy on Sherlock almost make up for the absence of John’s thighs against his own.

Sherlock can feel his breathing quickening just from the look in John’s eyes—John’s gaze on his body, almost as visceral as the touch of his hand.

“First, I’m going to rid you of all of these beautiful clothes.”

John trails a hand down the front of Sherlock’s chest and Sherlock sucks a breath in and holds it as John’s hand moves all the way down to his belly button and over his hip, where it rests, warm and light, fingers spread over the top of Sherlock’s thigh.

“And I’m going to look and look.”

John leans back down against Sherlock, until his lips are at his ear.

“And then I’m going to kiss every bit of you I can reach until you can’t bear it anymore, until you’re begging me to touch you in one particular place…”

Sherlock, emboldened by the sudden force of his desire, by the warm weight of John’s hand on his hip, turns his head towards John’s mouth, parting his own lips against it, his voice light, breathless. “I think I might know where that place is already.”

“Good,” John purrs in low satisfaction, one hand coming up to hold Sherlock’s face, his thumb smoothing at the hollow of Sherlock’s cheek. “That’s very good.”

John’s lips part under Sherlock’s, his tongue invading Sherlock’s mouth in a burst of heat. Sherlock opens his mouth wider, his own tongue pushing up against John’s to feel the lovely thrust of that muscle that is so intimately John.

The feel of it—John in his mouth pushing into him, stroking him, hot and slick and wet, makes Sherlock melt, at the same time as it incites a fire inside him that feels as though it can never be quenched. It’s not enough. He needs more, so much more.

There is still space, infuriatingly, between John’s body and Sherlock’s, and John, Sherlock notes with vivid dismay, is still fully dressed in his jacket and shirt. This is intolerable, Sherlock thinks.

Sherlock reaches up to loop his arms around John’s neck and pull John down against him, his hips writhing against the mattress, desperate, seeking friction.

“John!” Sherlock pulls his mouth away to try and communicate to John what he needs. “I need you. I need—”
John’s hands settle on Sherlock’s shoulders, pressing him back gently against the pillow.

“Tell me,” John says, his voice soft and rough all at once.

Sherlock whimpers as John’s hands hold him not quite gently against the mattress, his palms on Sherlock’s shoulders leaking heat.

“I need you… against me…” Sherlock licks his lips. “With… no clothing between us, just you. Just me.”

The sound John makes in response to Sherlock’s words hits him right between his legs. He surges up against John in an effort to pull John down closer against him.

The buttons of Sherlock’s waistcoat are all undone but the garment is still around his shoulders, flapping open at his chest to expose the expensive linen shirt beneath, the quality of the fabric so fine, it is soft as a breath against Sherlock’s skin as he squirms against the mattress, desperate to bring John’s body into contact with his.

He reaches up to tug at the knotted fabric around John’s throat, his fingers trembling as he struggles to pull the knot loose and John sits up, pulling himself out of Sherlock’s reach, settling back on his knees to undo the knot and pull the fabric free.

Sherlock lets a whine of displeasure escape him as John pulls away from him but it dies in his throat as he watches John, tugging the material from his neck, shrugging out of his dark jacket and tossing both garments to the floor beside the bed.

“Is that better?” John asks, sliding back down against Sherlock, his voice low and rough, like the purr of a cat.

“Y-yes,” Sherlock gasps, but also thinks No, as John’s shirt is still on him, keeping John’s chest from Sherlock’s eyes, preventing it from touching Sherlock’s skin.

He doesn’t say anything though because John is back against him now, his hands pushing the waistcoat off of Sherlock’s shoulders, his mouth at Sherlock’s ear, gently coaxing him to sit up so he can free him of the garment.

John takes the expensive material between his hands, begins to fold it, but Sherlock makes an impatient noise, and pushes the fabric out of John’s hands so it drops to the floor.

“Don’t worry about that,” he sighs, leaning forward against John’s chest, sliding his arms around John’s waist.

“But—”

Sherlock swallows John’s protest with his mouth, pushing his body forward into John’s.

Sherlock will never get tired of the feeling of John’s mouth against his own, the soft slide of John’s lips against his. He still feels slightly clumsy, not wholly sure where to put his tongue, how to tilt his head, but it’s impossible to care when John’s mouth is there, warm, and wet and opening beneath his own. The corresponding rush of heat in his belly, surging down between his legs, when John pushes his tongue past Sherlock’s lips, hot and slick, moving with delicious intention, makes Sherlock moan in response, his arms tightening around the small of John’s back.

John pulls back slightly to look at Sherlock, his eyes enormous in the low light of the candles. “You may have no experience but I can tell you, as someone who has a great deal of it, you are
getting the hang of things very quickly.”

Sherlock feels a flush of pleasure at John’s words.

John leans back in to recapture Sherlock’s mouth, his breath soft against Sherlock’s lips. “You’re a natural.”

John kisses him deeply, sweetly—the touch of his mouth soft and lingering, the feel of his tongue against Sherlock’s like warm silk—pulling away every few seconds, grinning, to give Sherlock a chance to catch his breath, which just makes Sherlock more desperate than ever, tightening his arms around John’s back to pull him close again.

They are both still sitting upright, John on his knees, Sherlock with his legs folded under him, leaning into John.

Sherlock wants to go on kissing John forever. Of all the pursuits he has taken up in his life (and he has tried many), this is by far the most superior. He never wants it to end. However, the slow, soft slide of their mouths is making the melting heat deep in Sherlock’s belly burn hotter than an inferno, and he finds the need for stimulation between his legs is distracting to say the least. His hips have begun rocking of their own accord, seeking some kind of friction.

Luckily, John is attentive to these sorts of details.

“I think—” he says, his mouth reluctant to separate from Sherlock’s to continue speaking. “We’ve gotten…” Another kiss interrupts his speech. “A bit… side-tracked from our initial plan.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agrees, his response more of a gasp than an intelligible word. “Yes, we were going to…”

Sherlock entirely loses the thread of what he was saying as John’s mouth has moved from his own and is now sliding, hot and open, down under his jaw. He feels John begin to suck lightly and Sherlock whimpers, letting his head fall back.

John’s mouth continues moving down the slope of Sherlock’s neck to his shoulder, where the collar of Sherlock’s linen shirt has slipped down, revealing the pale skin of his shoulder and throat.

“My god,” John whispers, his mouth skimming, hot and open over the bare skin of Sherlock’s shoulder. “You unbearably lovely thing.”

Sherlock sits back a little to give John room, and John’s hands drop to his sides, tugging gently to pull his shirt free from his breeches. His mouth continues down to the front of Sherlock’s chest, still covered by the thin material of Sherlock’s shirt.

Sherlock can feel the heat of John’s breath through the linen and he waits, trembling lightly, to see what John will do.

John presses a kiss to Sherlock’s chest, just above his heart, and Sherlock gasps and trembles harder.

John smoothes his hands down Sherlock’s arms—they are warm and strong—and it is only for their presence that Sherlock does not fall back in shock when John’s warm, wet mouth opens over Sherlock’s nipple and sucks it softly through his shirt.

Sherlock’s mouth drops open, his hands coming up to seize John by the arms, and he cannot even make a sound because the feel of John’s mouth touching him there—there—feels like nothing,
nothing, he has ever experienced.

He can feel John smile against him in response and when John’s mouth pulls away briefly the heat of his breath on the damp material of the shirt makes a shudder run through Sherlock that he feels all the way through his cock.

He makes a strangled sound and John shushes him quietly before moving to lower his mouth to Sherlock’s other nipple, this time licking it through the shirt before he sucks. A sound escapes Sherlock that he has never heard before—it is guttural, low, filled with longing, and John sucks harder in response.

Sherlock makes the sound again and John breaks away to kiss Sherlock briefly in entreaty, his eyes laughing, although his mouth is serious. “Shh. You’ve got to be quiet, my love.”

Sherlock kisses him back in desperation, whimpering against John’s mouth. He’s certain that his fingers have left bruises on John’s arms where he’s clutching them; he loosens his grip as soon as he becomes aware.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, voice trembling as hard as his body. “I’ll try, but… what you did, that was…”

John’s eyes are very close to his, his pupils liquid black. They are filled with humor, but also, hunger that Sherlock can feel down to the very center of his bones. It makes him shiver and press himself forward into John.

“Kiss me there again, John. I promise I’ll be quiet.”

John’s answer is a low groan, his hands falling to Sherlock’s hips.

“Well, if it’s alright with you, before I do that, I think I’ll carry on with our original plan and rid you of the rest of your clothing.”

Sherlock’s breathing picks up at the feeling of John’s fingers at his waist, settling on the fastenings of his breeches.

John’s fingers hesitate. He lowers his mouth to Sherlock’s ear, his voice more heat than sound. “But only if that’s alright with you.”

Sherlock nods soundlessly, pressing his face in against John’s shoulder. He feels a burst of nervous self-consciousness but he knows, he knows that he wants this more than anything else in the world.

John’s fingers are gentle but steady as he pulls the fastenings free and then moves to tug the material down.

“Lie back,” he breathes in Sherlock’s ear, one hand guiding Sherlock down against the pillows, the other warm on Sherlock’s hip, until Sherlock is lying, stretched out beneath him.

John is leaning over him, both hands now back at Sherlock’s waist.

“Lift your hips,” he murmurs, and Sherlock does, all his breath leaving him as he feels John’s hands pulling the material down his hips and to his knees.

Sherlock’s heart is pounding, and he is shaking harder than ever as he feels cool air on the skin between his legs. He feels John’s fingers brush the bare skin on the inside of his thigh as John reaches to tug the material free of his legs and he jerks, once, violently, as though he’s been struck.
John freezes mid-tug and lifts his hands from Sherlock’s legs.

He leans down to press his mouth to Sherlock’s cheek, warm and soothing, both hands coming up to cup Sherlock’s face. “I’m sorry, if I startled you. Shall I stop?”

Sherlock tries to answer but finds he cannot speak, so overwhelmed is he by the feeling of lying underneath John, with his breeches halfway down his knees, almost completely nude except for the linen shirt that falls just past his hips. He feels bare, exposed, and the feeling is as terrifying as it is exhilarating, with John Watson leaning over him, his kind eyes creased with worry, strong hands so gentle on Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock lifts his own hands to cup the backs of John’s, as though in disbelief that John is really here with him, holding him so gently, as though he needs the touch of John’s hands beneath his own to convince him that what’s happening is actually taking place.

Sherlock shakes his head. “Don’t stop. Please.”

John must hear the evidence of his longing in his voice, must see it in his face, because his mouth is descending to kiss Sherlock, long and deep, and perhaps it is only Sherlock’s imagination but he feels as though he can taste an extra note of urgency in the movement of John’s mouth. Sherlock rises up into the kiss, lifting his chest to press it forward into John’s, inviting him closer with the thrust of his body.

With his mouth still on Sherlock’s, John reaches down between them and pulls Sherlock’s breeches the rest of the way down his legs. He breaks the kiss to shimmy partway down the bed and free first one foot, then the other from the soft material, before dropping it to the floor and out of sight.

John stays where he is, crouched by Sherlock’s knees, and Sherlock lifts himself up on his elbows to look down at John, where he is leaning forward to settle his palms on Sherlock’s shins.

Such a banal place for John to touch, but once again, Sherlock’s body leaps in response to the placement of John’s hands as though he has been struck. John does not take his hands away but his eyes flash up to Sherlock’s face, silver-quick with worry, a question evident in the lines of his face.

Sherlock shakes his head again, licks his lips. “Don’t stop,” he gasps, voice shaking more violently than ever as John’s hands slide around to caress his calves and up to the backs of his knees.

It shouldn’t feel this good to have John’s hands touching his legs in such an innocent place but somehow, Sherlock knows in this moment, there is no place on his body that John could touch that would not be charged with feeling, that would not feel as though his skin were set aflame from the dragging heat of John’s callused palms.

John’s hands circle back around, cupping Sherlock’s knees, his thumbs stroking the curves where Sherlock’s knees become his thighs, and Sherlock can feel the heat rising in his cheeks, in his chest and throat, staining the pale skin over his collarbones a mottled red.

It is not only the touch of John’s hands that is making him feel as though he will come apart at the seams, it is also the sight of John, his thin lips flushed and swollen from kissing Sherlock, his long eyelashes dark gold in the candlelight, heavy with lust as he gazes at Sherlock’s legs; and the sight of himself, clad only in his linen shirt, the jut of his erection all too evident through the thin material, so apparent above his bare thighs, is utterly obscene.

John’s hands slide up his thighs, up, up, to hold him by the hips, and Sherlock’s breathing is so shallow that for a moment he is frightened he will not be able to draw enough air into his lungs.
Sherlock has to shut his eyes; the flood of information is too much, he cannot possibly withstand both the sight and the feel of John’s hands, where they have now slid below the hem of his shirt. Just the feel of them, warm and heavy on his hips is almost more than he can take.

John takes hold of the edge of Sherlock’s shirt, rubbing the thin material between his fingers as he bends over Sherlock, his voice dark and deep—the sound of the shadows at the bottom of the ocean—the feel of it, a wave of warmth over Sherlock’s bared throat. “May I take this off?”

Sherlock nods, eyes still shut, trembling so hard he feels he will shake apart, and then John’s mouth is pressing a kiss into the skin of his throat, whispering, “Can you sit up for me?”

Sherlock opens his eyes to do as John asks, raising himself off the pillows to give John the room he needs to free him from the garment.

John lifts the material in his hands, pulling it off, slowly, over Sherlock’s head, and Sherlock looks down at himself, sees his pale thighs, the dark patch of hair between his legs and then the rosy head of his erection coming free, and embarrassed, overwhelmed, he covers his face with his hands.

He stays like that, his back bowed slightly, his own face hot under his palms, feeling so naked, so horribly exposed, and it’s terrifying, it’s awful—the thought of his scrawny torso, his long pale legs, his very obvious arousal all made plain to John’s eyes—it’s enough to make him want to curl up into a ball and hide, drag a blanket over his head and send John from his side. What John must think of his body, so different than John’s sun-warmed, capable one—so white and frail and useless, nothing more than skin and bone.

Sherlock feels the mattress shift as John leans forward, and he flinches, hunching into himself, pushing his face deeper into his hands.

Gently, so gently, John takes one of Sherlock’s hands between his own and lifts it away from his face. “Oh, my love. My love, look at you…. Look at you.”

John’s voice is soft and so filled with reverence that at first Sherlock thinks he must be imagining it, but then he feels the warm murmur of John’s breath against the palm of his hand and then John’s mouth is pressing a kiss to the center of his palm and there is no imagining the reverence in the touch of John’s mouth, the way his lips part hot and sweet against the center of Sherlock’s hand and linger there.

Sherlock sucks a breath in and feels something begin to uncoil deep within him. “Do you know…?” John goes on, his voice hitching slightly, as though he is too overwhelmed to draw breath. “Do you know how beautiful you are? You must know. You must.”

John is pulling the other hand from Sherlock’s eyes and kissing the knuckles, pressing his lips to the curve on the inside of Sherlock’s fingers, to the heel of his palm, the inside of his wrist. “You rare, rare beautiful thing.”

John lowers his mouth to kiss the slope of Sherlock’s shoulder, the hot humming presence of his lips like a match being dragged over Sherlock’s skin, gathering flame as it goes until there is a burning trail in its wake. One of John’s hands settles in his hair and Sherlock tips his head back slightly, his body uncurling from its hunch of displeasure.
Sherlock can feel himself opening under the touch of John’s mouth, softening and loosening—the tension chased out of his body by the warm slide of John’s lips.

“You’re like a sculpture, carved from ivory.” John’s voice is as warm and soft as the touch of his mouth, as his lips trace the vein in Sherlock’s throat. “You’re like a siren, a mermaid, some sea-wrecked god who stumbled out of the deep.” John’s fingers curl in Sherlock’s hair, pulling lightly, and Sherlock gasps with pleasure. “Your mouth is a rose, your eyes the sea. Oh, Sherlock, Sherlock, you beautiful, impossible creature.”

John is a poet, Sherlock thinks, blushing at his words, color rising to heat his pale cheeks, the skin of his throat. He knows the words are fanciful, the claims utterly false, but he cannot discount the feeling in John’s voice, the tone of conviction that tells Sherlock he believes every word. He cannot stay shut inside himself in the presence of such adoration. Sherlock can feel the ice of his own self-loathing melting under the heat of John’s worshipful tone.

He opens his eyes and the sight of John kneeling before him, his golden head bowed over Sherlock’s chest makes him give a little cry and lean back against the pillows.

“Yes, yes, yes…” John chants, his breath still hot on Sherlock’s neck, as Sherlock lowers himself down, John’s body following Sherlock’s until he is crouched over Sherlock, his hands on either side of Sherlock’s naked chest, one clothed knee pressing in against Sherlock’s bare leg. “God, look at you.”

The reverence in John’s voice is unmistakable. His hands are gliding down Sherlock’s shoulders, over the curve of his hip, and Sherlock gasps at his touch, suddenly acutely aware of the way John is looking at him, how awed, how hungry is his look.

The touch of John’s hands, the tone of his voice were enough to make Sherlock forget his self-consciousness, but now, at the look in John’s eyes, Sherlock feels his arousal returning, beginning at the very center of himself and skipping out along his limbs and down to the tips of his fingers in little star-bursts of crackling heat.

John skims his knuckles over Sherlock’s bare hip and Sherlock arches his back, lifting his body up to the hungry touch of John’s eyes, feeling something come over him he has never experienced before. He licks at his bottom lip, feels how plump it is beneath his tongue, how sensitive, and then bites down on it, lightly, looking up at John from under lashes grown heavy with desire. The sound John makes in response—urgent, filled with longing—makes Sherlock reach up and fist his hands in the material of John’s shirt, pulling John down against him.

John lets himself be pulled, his clothed body covering the length of Sherlock’s, making Sherlock gasp at the rough feel of John’s trouser-covered thighs pressing in against his own, the heavy weight of John against his aching erection almost more than he can take.

John’s hand is still between them, trailing so lightly over Sherlock’s hip, and Sherlock presses up into it, seeking movement, seeking friction. He is desperate for John’s hand to creep several inches further and take him in hand but he does not know how to ask for it; it feels too intimate, too obscene, so Sherlock parts his thighs instead, urging John’s body to settle closer against him.

John’s mouth is in his hair, close by his ear, and he feels John’s breathing change against him at the movement, and then, in one miraculous, infinitesimal shift, John’s hips have settled against Sherlock’s and Sherlock feels the long, hard length of John pressing into him.

Sherlock’s mouth falls open, and as though of its own accord, his body thrusts up into John’s, his hips pushing John’s erection into his, and the hot rough drag of it—the knowledge that this is John
—John—blood hot and hard because of him, his body pushing into Sherlock’s at this most intimate place, is so filthy-sweet that Sherlock cannot make a sound at all; his voice is stolen from him.

John’s fingers tighten on his hip, lips dragging over Sherlock’s ear, and Sherlock thrusters again, grinding up into the heavy weight of John, pleasure sparking down his limbs in response to the friction, and this time, John moans against him, the sound low, unsteady, filled with heat.

It’s glorious, but still it’s not enough, because there is clothing between them creating a barrier between John’s skin and Sherlock’s, and this is intolerable.

Sherlock pulls on the fisted material of John’s shirt, trying to push it off. “I want you too…without clothes on.” His voice is shaking with need. “Take this off.”

“Yes.” John kisses him briefly before sitting back. “Yes, of course.”

Sherlock is almost sorry for the loss of John against him, the absence of his warm weight between Sherlock’s legs, but then he forgets his sorrow as he is treated to the sight of John kneeling in the trembling light of the candles and reaching up to pull his shirt off over his head.

Sherlock has seen John without his shirt before—more times than he can count, and to be sure, he has savored every instance—but this time is different. This time it’s John baring himself for Sherlock’s eyes alone, and this realization, coupled with the sight of John’s muscular shoulders, the swell of his biceps as he drops his shirt beside the bed, the ripple of his abdominal muscles as he twists back around, is enough to make Sherlock moan, long and low, and bite down on his lip.

The look in John’s eyes at the sound Sherlock makes is sinful—how someone’s look can be so sexual is something Sherlock cannot understand. Perhaps it has something to do with the heaviness of John’s eyelids and the depth of darkness beneath those heavy lids, in each pupil a single drop of gold suspended from the reflected candle flame above the bed. But it’s more than that. It’s also the way his fingers settle on the fastenings to his trousers, pulling them apart with slow deliberation, so slowly that Sherlock sits up on his elbows to get a better look, licking his lips, his thighs spreading apart against the mattress as John pushes the material down over his hips.

Oh, John’s hips—Sherlock has seen them before, showcased most prominently earlier today—was it really today? How could it be?—when John climbed up out of the ocean, dripping wet, the translucent material of his trousers clinging to the grooves of his slender hips—but now here they are with no fabric to hide them, just the luscious sight of golden skin curving over bone, two grooved shadows pointing toward what Sherlock cannot believe he is about to see. His mouth is actually watering, although he does not understand why.

John sits up higher on his knees to push the material down his thighs and then, oh then, at last, at last, Sherlock can see all of John, and there is oh so much of John to see.

John shifts around to pull the garment off his ankles, tossing it into the darkness at the end of the bed before returning to his knees.

Sherlock was overcome by the sight of John earlier, when the damp material of his trousers seemed to showcase every nuance, every curve of flesh, but now, not only is there no fabric to obscure a single detail, but John is swollen with arousal, the hard length of him curving up against his abdomen, and Sherlock moans again, louder, filled with desperation at the sight of John’s desire, so prominent, laid bare to Sherlock’s eyes, and without any prior thought, he is sitting up and reaching out to settle his hands on John’s slender muscular hips.

John goes absolutely still, and Sherlock pauses too, eyes flickering up to John in question.
“Is it… is it alright if I touch you?”

John’s brows come together momentarily as though he is in pain, and for the briefest of moments, Sherlock is concerned, but then John’s answer is sighing out from between his lips, and Sherlock realizes that the look on John’s face is one not of pain, but pleasure. “Oh my god, yes.”

Emboldened, Sherlock slides his hands up John’s hips, up over his lean muscular sides, fingers rippling over John’s ribs, feeling every muscle, every bone, and he marvels not only at the sight of his pale fingers against John’s darker skin, but also at the feel of John’s warm, living body shifting and breathing underneath his palms.

Tentatively, his slides his hands over the hard muscles in John’s chest and over the flushed circles of his nipples, which stiffen under Sherlock’s touch, hardening into peaks.

Sherlock gasps at the instantaneous effect his touch has on John and looks up at John’s face to see that same look of almost pain, his breath coming in shallow gasps from between his parted lips, his eyes half-shut.

His hands keep sliding, up over John’s collarbones and to his shoulders—oh, his shoulders. Sherlock shifts slightly closer in delight at the feel of that smooth, warm, golden skin beneath his palms. How John can possibly feel better than he looks is a mystery to Sherlock.

“You feel so good.” Sherlock breathes; his voice full of wonder, and John laughs in response, but he can’t quite complete the sound. It comes out breathless, broken, a single gasp of sound.

Sherlock lets his fingers continue down John’s upper arms, his thumbs trailing over the swells of John’s biceps, and by the time Sherlock’s hands reach John’s wrists, his own breathing is as shallow as John’s, breath coming out in short, desperate pants.

“John,” Sherlock whispers, his voice trembling as hard as his hands, not even knowing what he’s asking for anymore, overcome by how much of John he’s already been given, how much more he wants.

His fingers clench around John’s wrists in desperation, and although Sherlock cannot find the words he needs, John seems to understand. His hands settle on Sherlock’s shoulders, pushing him gently back down against the bed.

“Tell me what you need.” John says, against Sherlock’s lips, his body following Sherlock’s down to lie not over him, but just beside, the top of one naked thigh pressing in against Sherlock’s.

Sherlock is hot, so hot, the want in his belly trembling and twisting like a living thing. He knows what he needs—it’s what he’s needed all along, but hasn’t had the courage to voice aloud.

“I want…” His voice is as soft as a sigh, his mouth lifting up against John’s. “I want you to touch me.”

He parts his thighs as he says the words, hitching his hips up in invitation, and at the shuttered look in John’s eyes at his plea he knows John understands.

John kisses him softly, slipping his tongue between Sherlock’s parted lips, as his hand slides down between them, over the trembling muscles of Sherlock’s stomach and along the curve of his hip.

Stretched out naked underneath John, Sherlock’s body feels completely new to him. He’s never felt so alive, so aware; his skin is like an unknown landscape, a whole new country of sensations. He can feel every shift in touch, every slight gradation of texture, of heat—the slow progress of John’s
fingers over his hip drawing him out, shivering and raw, until he’s lifting his body up in desperation, moaning softly with need.


And then finally—finally, finally—John’s warm fingers are closing over the stiff flesh between Sherlock’s legs and Sherlock’s entire body goes still as the heat of John’s palm surrounds him.

“Oh,” he breathes, his mouth falling open, hips lifting of their own accord, urging John’s hand to move.

Sherlock wants to watch the expression on John’s face but his eyes are falling shut, and he cannot stop them—he is overcome, and with his eyes closed he can concentrate better on the feel of John’s callused palm gripping him, and on the feel of John’s thumb as it slides over the head of his erection, swirling in an agonizing circle.

He is already wet and leaking—Sherlock can feel the moisture slick under John’s thumb, and now his thighs are trembling and he is moaning with want because he cannot take it, he needs John’s hand to move.

He reaches out blindly to seize hold of John’s arms, whimpering, senseless, his voice a dry rasp of need. “John—”

“I’m sorry, love. I know. I was being selfish. I can’t help drawing it out, you feel so good in my hand.”

Sherlock cries out at that, his fingers biting into John’s arms, and finally, finally John’s hand begins to stroke, using the moisture under his thumb to coat the length of Sherlock.

The feel of it—the slow, slick slide of John’s hand around him, the flex in the muscles of John’s arms as he strokes—is so good, Sherlock almost cannot stand it. He tosses his head on the pillow, his breath coming out in short, panting gasps. He can feel perspiration beading on his brow, making his hair stick to the back of his neck.

His eyes are still squeezed shut but he feels the heat of John’s mouth pressing a kiss in against the side of his neck, before asking in a constricted voice. “How does that feel?”

Sherlock forces his eyes open, licks his dry lips and tries to speak, but when he opens his mouth all that comes out is a keening cry of pleasure as John’s fingers shift around him.

John presses a kiss to Sherlock’s swollen lips, pulling back to murmur a warning.

“You’ve got to be quiet, my love. They’ll—” His own breath is lost in a shudder of heat as Sherlock pushes his hips up into John’s hand, urging him to stroke faster. Sherlock feels John licks his lips against him. “They’ll hear us.” His voice is soft with apology. “We can’t let them hear us.”

Sherlock nods, desperate, biting hard on his lip to keep from crying out as John shifts against him, rising up to his knees and leaning down over Sherlock, straddling one of Sherlock’s legs with his muscular thighs, changing the angle of his grip.

John’s mouth is at Sherlock’s ear, his breathing hot and ragged, growing less and less steady with every stroke of his hand.

“My god, Sherlock, you—you’re so beautiful like this. You’re exquisite.”
The hand that isn’t stroking Sherlock is warm against his thigh and Sherlock presses up against it, needing the pressure, needing an anchor, feeling as though he is going to float apart.

Sherlock whimpers in his throat and John seems to understand; the press of his palm against the sensitive skin of Sherlock’s inner thigh as warm as a brand as John pushes it down against the mattress.

Sherlock cannot hold back his cry then, a whine clawing its way out of his throat, and John lifts his hand to press his fingers in against Sherlock’s mouth, a flash of worry in his eyes.

“Hush, my love. Hush now. They’ll hear us.”

Sherlock tries, he really tries but the feel of John’s fingers pressing in against his mouth only make it harder to keep the sounds from slipping out—and Sherlock remembers in a dizzying rush of heat how he imagined this very scenario, John leaning over him with his fingers at Sherlock’s mouth, and the fact that it is really happening now, John, bending over him, his eyes as dark as the shadows beyond the candle flame, the lines of his body gleaming gold in the gentle light, means that Sherlock cannot possibly be quiet now, not with John’s eyes on him like that, John’s hand drawing every ounce of feeling out of him through the touch of his hand.

He cannot stop the chorus of desperate little moans streaming from his mouth, nor can he stop the force of his hips rising up to meet each of John’s strokes.

Sherlock shakes his head on the pillow, clutching in desperation at John’s arm. “I can’t—I can’t! I’m sorry—”

“Shh, it’s alright. It’s alright.” John lifts a hand to cup Sherlock’s cheek, bends low to kiss his mouth, his hand never stopping in the rhythm of his strokes. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

It is John’s quiet assurance that pushes Sherlock over the edge, the gentle feeling of his mouth opening against Sherlock’s.

The sweet, wet heat of John’s mouth coupled with the lovely friction of his hand on Sherlock’s cock drives a spike of pleasure through him so intense, so white-hot with feeling that he fears in that moment that he will break apart.

His body arches, his back lifting off the bed, fingers clenching on John’s arms; the cry that issues from his lips lost in the heat of John’s mouth.

Pleasure bursts open within him, coursing through his veins, and Sherlock has moved outside his body. He is heat, he is light; he is speed without sound, nothing more than a swell of upward movement toward something that he cannot see or describe.

He is shaking with the force of it, so swift, so all encompassing that for one frightening moment Sherlock fears he will be carried away with it and lost, unable to come back to himself; but then, he is crashing back to earth and into the awareness of his body with shattering abruptness.

Dimly, Sherlock registers his body sinking back down to the mattress, his chest heaving with exertion, his forehead damp with sweat.

John has settled fully between his thighs, his weight on his elbows to hold himself above Sherlock’s chest, and he is kissing him, softly, all over his face. Tiny, gentle, close-mouthed kisses against his hairline, his temple, his chin; each one a reassurance and a question in its own right, seeming to ask, ‘Are you alright? Are you alright? Are you alright?’
When Sherlock flutters his eyelids open—his eyelashes sticking with what Sherlock suspects might be tears—he looks up to find John gazing down at him with worry, his hands lifting immediately to frame Sherlock’s face, blue eyes swimming with tenderness.

“Are you alright?” he asks, his voice rough, and Sherlock lifts his arms up around John’s neck to pull him down against him.

“Yes,” he whispers, his lips sticking against John’s cheek, his heart pounding harder than he’s ever felt it with love for the man above him. It’s as if what John has given Sherlock has shaken something lose inside himself—something that was caged up and trying to break free, but had no means of doing so.

It’s as if John has suddenly presented him with the key.

Sherlock opens his mouth, feels his lips tremble with the weight of the words he’s about to speak.

“I love you,” he whispers, voice growing bolder with each word, arms tightening around John’s neck. “I love you, John Watson.”

Sherlock says it again, and this time, the words come easily, come effortlessly, as natural as the wind moving over the sea.

“I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry, John will get to come in the next chapter. Thanks to his status as golden sailor god of sex he’s got great stamina, so he won’t suffer too much.

OBVIOUSLY, I’m eager to hear what you thought. Please comment accordingly. :}
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

More sex. :D :D :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherlock waits, his arms still twined around John’s neck, to see what John will say.

John is silent for several long heartbeats but Sherlock does not even feel afraid, so full up with joy he feels at any moment that he will overflow.

Never before has he felt the way he feels right now, his body is quiet, humming with satisfaction. He feels soft and open, like a flower whose petals have been gently pulled apart, and now all the light of the world is streaming in, filling him with warmth.

There is a quietness in him, a contentedness that he has never before experienced, but at the same time, there is an undercurrent of new awareness thrumming through him, like a secret spring he did not know was in him all along come suddenly to life. He feels alive with possibility, his body tingling, wide-awake.

And John is here with him, here, here between his thighs, his body hot and hard against Sherlock, the force of his arousal still very present against Sherlock’s hip. Sherlock shivers at the weight of it, gently shifts against him, full of pleasure at the thought of helping John find his own release.

But John is still quiet against him.

Sherlock’s face is pressed in against John’s neck—he can feel the hot rhythm of John’s pulse against his cheek, but he cannot see his face. He pulls back a little to see John’s expression.

John’s face is turned away from him but Sherlock can see the sorrow in his expression in the down-turned corners of his mouth.

“John?” he whispers softly, voice full of horror. “What’s the matter?”

John looks down at Sherlock—his face is not so very far away, his weight still supported on his elbows to hold himself above Sherlock—and Sherlock can see tears standing out in his eyes.

“Forgive me,” John says, and then he’s rolling off of Sherlock, pushing the heels of his hands in against his eyes to wipe his tears away.

He stays like that, with his fingers pressed against his eyes, his bare chest heaving in the soft light, and Sherlock watches him, motionless with worry, studying the shadowed grooves of John’s ribs, that grow more distinct with each inhaled breath, that soften with each exhale.

He wants to reach out and touch John, offer him comfort, but it was his words after all that made John react this way, so he stays where he is, frozen with fear, watching the trembling line of John’s mouth grow smaller with every passing moment.
After what seems like an eternity to Sherlock, John lowers his hands, blows out a long breath.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his voice unsteady, his eyes still wet. “I would say I don’t know what’s come over me, but I know exactly what’s come over me.”

“Did I do it wrong?” Sherlock’s voice is smaller than a speck of dust.

John shakes his head, a burst of breathless laughter rising to his lips, but it comes out sounding like a sob.

“No, you didn’t,” he says, smiling briefly before his mouth shrinks, lips bending at the corners before vanishing completely as he presses them together. “No, it’s…”

Sherlock watches the line of John’s mouth shrink again, and feels a prickling wave of dread move through him. He hates it—he hates seeing John look like his heart has been torn out of his chest and then flayed open. It’s all wrong. John should be happy; John should be overjoyed, but instead…

“It’s you, Sherlock. Having you here with me, the fact that you feel this way about me… I’m having a hard time believing this is real.”

John reaches down for Sherlock’s hand, which is lying motionless between them, palm up. He traces a finger over Sherlock’s palm and down to the tip of his middle finger. Sherlock shivers at the touch.

“I can’t believe how lucky I am,” John breathes into the darkness between them. “Hearing you say it, I…”

John shakes his head again, his voice growing thick, and suddenly Sherlock understands. He knows exactly what John is describing. He has felt it almost every day since he first met John. The experience of loving someone so much that it feels as though his body cannot contain it, as though it’s bursting out of him from every pore, as though he will drown in it, be burned up in the heat of his feelings. Perhaps John has felt it all along too, but he didn’t realize that Sherlock felt that way as well, until now, until Sherlock let himself come apart beneath John’s hand, until Sherlock said the words out loud.

Sherlock curls his fingers around John’s; looks down at their entwined fingers.

“So you’re not… actually sad then?”

John lets out another breathless laugh, but this one sounds less like a sob.

“No. No, Sherlock, I’m not sad at all. Quite the opposite.” John squeezes Sherlock’s fingers between his own, so hard it hurts. Sherlock is grateful for the pain. It takes the sting out of his worry; makes the moment feel more real.

John’s eyes flicker up to Sherlock’s face for the first time since he rolled away, and his expression changes yet again, real sorrow flashing in his eyes.

“Oh, Sherlock, love. Don’t look like that. I’m crying because I’m happy, fool that I am. My god, I’ve never been so happy. Oh love, come here.”

John reaches out and wraps an arm around Sherlock’s shoulders, pulling Sherlock to his side.

Sherlock’s worry is gone in an instant, washed away by the feeling of John’s warm naked body.
against his own, John’s bare arm hard around his shoulders.

He is naked and John is naked and here they are, lying against one another, John’s mouth against his hair.

Sherlock’s body feels so soft, so loose. There is a warm tingling feeling moving all through him, growing louder every moment as he becomes aware of every point at which his body is touching John’s.

His face is on John’s shoulder, his chest pressed in against John’s ribs, his hips tucked in against John’s thigh. As an experiment, Sherlock shifts the leg that is laying against John’s, lifts it so that his right leg twines around John’s left, feeling the slide of skin against skin as he settles it between both of John’s.

Sherlock listens to the sound of John’s breathing growing unsteady above him, and feels delight unspooling hot and fluttering inside his belly. John is here against him, all his, to touch, to taste, to become acquainted with. He shifts his hips a little closer into John, feeling giddy at the prospect.

He rubs his cheek against the smoothness of John’s chest and then wriggles back a bit, readjusting so that his nose is pressed into the warm hollow under John’s arm.

The fact that John is warm and smooth to touch comes as no great surprise to Sherlock—he was already deeply appreciative of the sleek lines of John’s body, the cords of his muscles standing out under the skin—but what’s unbelievable to Sherlock, what was impossible to imagine before now, is the smell of him.

There is soft golden hair underneath John’s arm, slightly damp with sweat, and Sherlock finds when he pushes his nose into it and inhales, there the smell of John is strongest. He smells like clean sweat and heat and sunlight, and truly Sherlock thinks, there are no words to describe the smell of John, other than to say he smells like sex itself.

John makes a soft sound above him as Sherlock buries his nose underneath his arm.

“Sherlock, love, what—?”

But John’s question is swallowed by a gasp of shocked delight as Sherlock opens his mouth and licks at the warm, wet flesh.

He pulls back and settles his weight on his elbows to look down at John. His eyes are serious.

“You taste as good as you smell.”

“Oh my god,” John says and his head is falling back against the mattress, his eyes sliding shut.

In contrast to the warm, loose pliancy of his own body, pressed up against John, Sherlock is suddenly aware of the tension present in John’s. There is a tremor running through him, as fine as a ripple of wind across the surface of still water, and Sherlock sits up a little higher on his elbows, feeling determined. He wants to give back to John what John has just given him so selflessly.

Sherlock runs a hot palm down the center of John’s chest, watches John’s torso jerk in response.

“John,” Sherlock whispers, his voice full of reverence, stroking his long fingers down over John’s muscular hip, his thumb lingering in the groove of his pelvic bone. “Tell me what to do.”

John lets out a soft groan and opens his eyes.
“Oh my god,” he says again, and Sherlock notices how black his eyes have become, blacker and blacker with every passing moment until Sherlock is certain he will tip forward into them and drown.

“You’ve said that a lot tonight.” Sherlock’s voice is soft, his thumb still stroking over the groove in John’s hip. It feels so good he never wants to stop touching him there.

John tries to laugh but it comes out all wrong—a breathless, helpless sound. “I can’t handle you looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” Sherlock asks, sitting all the way up so he can hold John’s other hip with his free hand. Now he is holding John’s body between both of his hands. It feels right. He likes the way his long white fingers look framing John’s golden hips. It looks like something beautiful.

“Like you’re a wolf pup that hasn’t eaten in a week. All teeth and dark eyes.” John’s voice is low and heavy, as heavy as Sherlock’s body feels as he leans over John, hands hot on his hips. He feels like any second now he will dissolve, become liquid just so he can pour himself over John, seep into every inch of him.

He notices that touching John there, holding him by his slender hips, where he feels both hard and soft at once, is making his own arousal come flooding back between his legs, hot and insistent, as though it never left. Sherlock shifts slightly to give his stiffening flesh the room it needs.

Sherlock looks down at the swollen length of John’s cock where it’s straining up against his stomach, the head of it flushed and leaking, and feels a hard tug of arousal in his abdomen.

John’s heavy golden lashes are sliding low over his eyes. “Honestly, you don’t need to do much of anything, just go on looking at me like that and I’ll be all set.”

John licks his lips, shifts up to his elbows, and Sherlock releases John’s hips to watch hungrily as John takes himself in hand.

Sherlock sits on his knees, leaning forward with eagerness, his attention rapt on John’s face, the soft ‘O’ of his mouth stretching open as his fingers curl around himself, his eyes fluttering completely shut.

The sight of John like this is breathtakingly gorgeous but Sherlock doesn’t simply want to watch, he wants to know what John feels like when he is touching himself. He wants to be involved.

Sherlock doesn’t ask, he simply follows his instincts, climbing up and over John’s legs and then lowering himself down so that he is straddling John’s thighs.

John’s eyes fly open with a shocked gasp.

“Is this alright?” Sherlock asks, feeling hesitant but not wanting to move now that he has settled into place. There is already so much more information available to him from where he is sitting and oh, it is delicious: he can feel the hard muscles in John’s thighs under his bare arse, can feel the way John’s body tenses under Sherlock’s weight.

“Oh my god, yes,” John says, his breath coming out in one long hiss, his fingers sliding down the length of himself and then back up as his low-lidded eyes take in the sight of Sherlock gazing down at him, face shining with eagerness.

In an effort to bring himself closer to John, Sherlock leans forward and as he does so, he hears the soft silvery sound of metal moving against skin, feels the gentle pull of the chain around his neck,
and for the first time since John undressed him, remembers that he is still wearing John’s mother’s necklace.

The locket is warm against his bare chest and looking down at himself and realizing that he is naked except for the thin silver chain, the heavily ornamented locket glinting softly against his pale flesh, he feels his cheeks flush hot. There is something obscene about the knowledge that he is nude except for this keepsake that does not belong to him.

“John,” he whispers, his voice trembling slightly. “Your mother’s necklace. I forgot to take it off.”

John looks up at him and groans, fingers stuttering around himself at Sherlock’s words, eyes flickering over the silver chain at Sherlock’s throat.

“John,” Sherlock repeats, voice still soft with anxiety. “Should I take it off?”

“No,” John breathes, his voice thick and heavy sounding. “Don’t—don’t take it off.”

“But—”

“I like you… in it,” John says, tongue tracing the length of his bottom lip, fingers stilling on his cock. “It’s all I have left of hers. I wouldn’t let just anyone wear it.”

Sherlock sits back.

“Alright,” he whispers, feeling the locket settle against his chest and shivering at the weight of it, the implication that something impossibly precious to John is circling his neck. The realization that the object that lay so close to John’s heart now hangs against his own, fills him with a swooping, dizzy feeling, as though the ship is tilting in a heavy gale. He thinks of Anderson’s cruel words from earlier, about John marking him, and finds that instead of filling him with shame, the association makes his heart beat faster, fills him with a shuddery feeling of pleasure.

“I like seeing you in it,” John says, his hands leaving his cock to lay heavy on Sherlock’s thighs.

Sherlock takes the locket in his fingers, studies the intricate pattern of the interlocking letters, the sweeping curves that twine together like the vines that grow up around young trees. “It’s so beautiful,” he whispers.

“That’s why it suits you,” John breathes, his hands sliding around to cup the curves of Sherlock’s arse where it rests against his thighs.

Sherlock gasps at the touch, the necklace falling from his fingers. He lifts up, so John’s hands can continue exploring, tracing the swell of his buttocks down to where they meet his thighs.

“J-John,” he pants, shocked at the charge of feeling surging through him like a spark to gunpowder, leaning forward to place his weight on his palms. John’s hands are so warm, so rough against the soft skin of his arse. Sherlock has never thought about this particular part of his body as having any sort of erotic appeal, but now, as John’s hands knead the muscled flesh, Sherlock can feel the corresponding ripple of arousal move directly through his cock.

He pushes back into John’s hands, wanting pressure, wanting… something, he knows not what, other than the fact that he knows he wants John’s hands to do it.

He hears John’s breath catch at the movement, fingers squeezing in response and Sherlock makes a little mewling sound he did not know he was capable of.
“Oh God…” John’s hands leave his arse and Sherlock’s face must show his disappointment because John is apologizing almost immediately. “I’m sorry, love, but I need—”

He interrupts his own words with a moan as he returns his fingers to his cock, and Sherlock lowers his arse back down to John’s thighs to watch.

He decides in that moment that he could never, never tire of watching John like this, the full length of his magnificent cock clenched between his fingers, the muscles in his body lit up gold in the shuddering light of the candles, shifting and becoming more prominent with every movement of his arm.

“Oh god, you watching me like this it’s…” John’s hand tenses, his head falling back, his eyelashes flickering on his cheeks like two streaks of gold.

Sherlock leans forward to press a curious hand against John’s stomach, to feel the muscles flexing in John’s abdomen as he strokes, his eyes raking over John with awed wonder, and John’s breath leaves him in a long hiss.

“Oh-Sherlock…”

The flush is high on John’s cheeks, staining the skin of his throat. Sherlock reaches out another hand to touch it, to see if he can feel the heat.

John makes another strangled noise.

Sherlock snatches his hand back as though he has been burned. “Was that—?”

“No, no, it was lovely. Do it again. I just—you, touching me, it’s… oh, Sherlock.”

Sherlock has seen John in all states of physical duress, has observed the power in his arms as he tows the line, muscles hard and gleaming under the sun, his face running with sweat as he turns the capstan, body bowing against the weight of the anchor; but this state of exertion is like no other Sherlock has witnessed.

It’s like John is more alive than Sherlock has ever seen him. He is like a brighter version of himself, like a lantern that was covered by a shade but now is shining out, undimmed.

His body is hot under Sherlock’s thighs, the muscles in his stomach tensing under Sherlock’s palm, and it’s as though Sherlock can feel all the power in the heart of John thrumming up into his own body.

The feeling makes him hot all over, makes him want to grind down into John, to feel the lovely friction of their bodies coming together—to somehow join himself to the heat and the strength that is John Watson.

“Can I help,” Sherlock breathes, scooting forward, feeling the lovely drag of his arse over the muscles in John’s thighs. He gasps at the sensation, but refuses to be distracted. He leans forward over John, licking his lips, eyes intent on the movement of John’s hand. “Please. Let me help.”

“Oh god, y-yes you can put your hand over mine if you like…”

“Like this?” Sherlock asks, concentrating hard, the world’s most eager pupil, his tongue poking out one corner of his mouth as he leans forward to wrap his long pale fingers over John’s.

John’s breath leaves him in a rush, his own fingers momentarily falling still as Sherlock’s fingers
press in against his own.

“Oh, that’s… yes. Yes, that’s perfect. J-just keep your hand there.”

The movement of John’s hand begins to speed up. Sherlock clenches his fingers tighter around John’s, fascinated. He has never experienced another person giving himself pleasure and it is simultaneously nothing like he imagined and so much better because this is John, John at his most vulnerable, at his most intent. In this moment, John is more himself than ever, and Sherlock is a part of it. The realization fills Sherlock with an ache somewhere deep inside himself that seems to throb within him, that he feels will never be satisfied.

Sherlock studies him as his hand moves with John’s, concentrates on memorizing every detail of this new, wonderful version of John that is all for him.

There is a shimmering feeling in Sherlock’s belly growing brighter the faster John strokes. He shifts his hips against John’s thighs, unconsciously seeking friction against the growing heat of his own flesh, licking at his swollen lips.

He has never seen John lose control like this. John, who has such mastery over his body, who is so confident, so sure of himself, to see John, to feel John trembling between Sherlock’s legs, his eyes squeezing shut, his body pushing up into Sherlock’s weight—it is beautiful like the stars are beautiful, like the first curl of frost on the window in winter, like the light of the sun on Sherlock’s cheeks. It is rare and so delicate, so brief, Sherlock wishes there was a way he could capture this moment and all its sensations and bottle it up somewhere, to ensure that he could have some part of it always within himself.

“John?” Sherlock’s fingers tighten over John’s. “Can I…?” Sherlock licks his lips. He cannot seem to stop doing that. It’s as though he’s hungry, ravenous, as though he hasn’t eaten in weeks, and John is a feast laid out just for him.

John’s lust-starred eyes slide up to his. In the shadows of the candlelight they seem to shine with a light of all their own.

“What is it, my love?” His voice is bright with tension. Sherlock can hear the effort it takes him to speak.

Sherlock slides a little closer over John’s thighs, feels the heaviness of his genitals drag against John.

John’s breathing hitches, thighs tensing under Sherlock’s weight, his body so sensitized that even the subtest shift in movement makes his powerful body quiver like the most breakable thing.

“Would it be alright if I… that is—may I touch you? I mean, just me. I want…” Sherlock licks his lips again, his mouth unspeakably dry. “I want to feel you in my hand. I need to know what you feel like now. When you’re like this.”

John curses then, and it is the foulest string of words Sherlock has ever heard put together.

His cheeks blush hot in the wake of his own request, but also because of the lewdness of what John has just said.

“My god, Sherlock, yes. Jesus Christ, yes, please. Please.”

John lets go of himself, lifting his hand away, and Sherlock leans forward, replacing John’s small competent fingers with his own longer, paler ones. He leaves them there for a moment without
moving them, just feeling, feeling every inch of John under his hand.

“Oh John,” Sherlock whispers, completely overcome.

John’s flesh is hard and hot under Sherlock’s hand, but also, soft, so soft, like living silk. Sherlock can feel John’s pulse along the length of him, can feel every vein, every ridge of flesh, and he is breathing hard now, so hard he almost cannot catch his breath.

Sherlock lets his fingers slip down an inch or two, and John’s body rises up beneath his, his mouth parting with a gasp.

“How—how is that?” Sherlock asks, hearing the tremor in his own voice. He is so overwhelmed by the feel of John he realizes his own eyes are half-shut.

“It’s…” John nods with his eyes closed, breathless. “Perfect. You’re perfect.”

Sherlock drags his swollen bottom lip in between his teeth, biting down on it to keep himself from grinding down against John’s trembling body, like an animal in heat. He has more self-control than that. At least, he hopes he does.

“Sh—should I…?” Sherlock is seized with sudden self-consciousness. His voice shrinks until it is barely more than a whisper. “How should I do it?”

John’s eyes are still shut. Sherlock wants to kiss his trembling lashes, so gold against his cheeks.

John swallows. Sherlock watches the movement of John’s throat as he does, wants to lick the length of it. For one dizzying moment, he is seized with the desire to have his mouth on every part of John at once.

“However you like,” John’s lovely voice says, pouring out of his chest like a ribbon of gold. Sherlock can feel the vibration of it between his thighs. His hips give a little jerk in response. “Whatever you do will feel good, my love. Just start out gently and I’ll tell you how it feels.”

Sherlock nods, serious, suddenly all business, and sits up a little straighter on John’s thighs.

John lets out a moan at the movement. His voice is strained. “Whatever you do, just know that I’m not going to last much longer.”

Sherlock shifts his fingers all the way up to the head of John’s lovely cock, finds the moisture there, slides his fingers through it, and uses the slickness to ease the movement of his fingers as they slide back down, the same way John did for him, and—oh god, the thought that John is wet like that because of him—Sherlock lets out a breathy little moan and John’s hips buck beneath him at the sound.

Sherlock starts to stroke John, slowly at first, still in too much awe over the feel of John under his fingers to pay attention to the rhythm of his movement.

“You can—you can hold me a little tighter if you like… and go a little—yes, like that—a little faster.”

Sherlock takes John’s advice to heart, tightening the circle of his fingers to increase the friction as he strokes, and to his amazement he sees the immediate effect it has on John, as his hips thrust upward, his eyes flying open with a low groan.

“Y—yes, that’s p-perfect. Keep going, j-just like that.”
John’s eyes are sliding shut again, his head tipping back against the mattress, and Sherlock can see that the skin of his neck and shoulders is flushed with arousal, the golden line of his throat shining with a fine sheen of sweat.

So many times, Sherlock has seen John’s body glowing under the sun, the muscles in his arms and chest gleaming with sweat, but never, never has he looked as beautiful as he does now, and the sight of him like this, the feeling of his body under Sherlock’s weight, the feeling of his live desire under Sherlock’s hand, sharpens Sherlock’s hunger to an unbearable pitch, makes him reach forward with his other hand so that he can feel John with both hands at once.

Sherlock wraps the fingers of his left hand around the base of John’s cock, slowly, reverently, letting two fingers drift down to touch the hot skin underneath, gathered tight against John’s body, the intimacy of touching someone there (Sherlock can feel the soft hair covering the delicate skin, the intense heat of him) causes Sherlock to gasp aloud.

John makes a sound that is somewhere between a cry of pain and a groan, his entire body tensing under Sherlock’s legs, hands tightening to fists at his sides, hips thrusting upward.

Sherlock would be worried he has hurt John as his neck arches against the mattress, eyebrows drawn together as though in pain, but then he hears the words issuing from between John’s lips, soft and desperate, repeated over and over like an invocation.

“Oh my god, your hands. Your hands, Sherlock, oh my god…”

Sherlock’s own breathing has become as labored as John’s, and it feels for a moment as though they are both fighting toward the same thing. It feels like fighting to Sherlock right now, his entire body coiled up tight with need, making him desperate, light-headed with all the things he wants, but he is determined to help John get through to the other side, god, he wants to help him get there so badly.

He starts to stroke again with his right hand, slowly, but careful to apply the right amount of pressure that before seemed to have such a profound effect on John, continuing to hold the base of John’s cock delicately with his left hand.

This time, John’s reaction is even more intense.

Sherlock watches his mouth fall open in a soundless cry, the muscles in his abdomen flexing as he pushes up into Sherlock’s hand, hands reaching out blindly to clench in the sheets.

Sherlock sees the tension in John’s fists, and can guess the effort it is costing him not to cry out.

“John!” he gasps, pausing briefly in his strokes. “You—you can hold onto me if you like… where you did before.”

John’s hazy eyes look up at Sherlock, at first not understanding, and then Sherlock gives an unconscious twitch of hips and John’s hands reach up to settle on the swell of Sherlock’s buttocks.

Sherlock lets out a little moan of appreciation at the feeling and resumes his stroking.

His hands are full of John, and oh the feel of him, hot and hard and aching under Sherlock’s hands, it’s like nothing Sherlock has ever experienced—Sherlock can feel his own cock bearing heavily down against John’s thigh as his own desire swells in the wake of John’s. He feels John’s fingers tighten against the flesh of his arse in response, dragging Sherlock closer against him.

He cannot help himself, his hips begin to twitch forward against John’s thigh, seeking friction. The
movement of his hips mirrors the rhythm of his strokes around John, every slide of his fingers over John’s swollen flesh causing the shivering want in his belly to grow more desperate. He feels so good under Sherlock’s hands—the velvet heat of him, the slickness, the blood red beat of his skin.

He starts to cry out under his breath, so softly at first he’s almost not aware he’s doing it, a little chorus of ‘oh’s as he continues to stroke, rocking his hips against John’s thigh, the firmness of the muscle a lovely point of pressure beneath his aching flesh.

“Oh, John, Oh, Oh, Oh.”

John’s hands clench on Sherlock’s arse, pulling him forward, so that Sherlock’s weight is bearing down on John’s thigh, finally giving Sherlock the friction he needs. The sudden movement causes the locket around Sherlock’s neck to swing forward between them, the change in position making Sherlock gasp, and he almost loses the rhythm of his stroking so perfect is the new angle at which his body is bending over John’s, connected thigh to hip.

His eyes flutter closed briefly as he loses himself in the perfection of having John’s hands on his arse, John’s cock between his hands and John’s body under his. Never could he have imagined a scenario so absolutely right in every way.

If there is a heaven, Sherlock thinks deliriously, surely it is this.

But Sherlock can feel the tension radiating through the body under his, so he refocuses, concentrating as hard as ever on the speed, the angle of his strokes, searching for the ideal balance between gentleness and pressure, in awe every moment his fingers travel over the slick heat of John’s sizeable girth. He is unable to stop the rocking motion of his body, so he uses it to his advantage to help direct the rhythm of his hands on John’s cock, as though he is stroking John not just with his hands but with his whole body.

The locket around Sherlock’s neck sways forward with the movement, each jerk of his body sending it swinging back against his chest in an obscene counterpoint to his thrusting hips. The metal is warm where it strikes his chest, just above his heart, and Sherlock thinks again how wearing this necklace is like having a part of John around his neck, possessing him. The thought makes him shiver all over again, pushing down with his hips to grind hard against John’s thigh, fingers tightening inadvertently around John’s cock.

John cries out in response, his body arching up beneath Sherlock’s like a bow pulled taut, fingers biting hard into the flesh of Sherlock’s buttocks.

This is it, Sherlock thinks, beside himself with anticipation.

Sherlock can actually feel John’s cock swelling in his hands, feels it jerk, and then spurts of warm liquid are pulsing out to coat Sherlock’s fingers, his wrist, the skin of John’s belly.

John is as beautiful as Sherlock has ever seen him in this moment, his cock still hot in Sherlock’s hands, his head thrown back, mouth open, the trembling arc of his body pressed up close against Sherlock, every inch of bare skin glowing in the light of the candles.

Gold, Sherlock thinks, not for the first time, He is made of gold.

But it’s more than gold, it’s something brighter at the heart of John, as though he’s made of light itself, and now it’s pouring out of him, heating Sherlock’s hands and thighs, his arse where John is holding him.

Oh, how foolish Sherlock has been all this time, to think that John’s hair, the color of his skin are
such that they pick up the color of the light. No, no, he’s gotten it all wrong—John is the source of it, and here now, with John as alive as he can be in Sherlock’s hands, the light is pouring out of him, so hot, so bright that Sherlock can hardly stand to look at him without crying out.

His body stays stiff beneath Sherlock’s for several seconds more, his cock gradually softening under Sherlock’s hands as he sinks back slowly to the bed, and Sherlock leans forward, feeling as greedy as ever, overwhelmed by how many places on John he wants to taste in this moment—the gleam of sweat on his bared throat, the fading flush along his cheeks, the moisture in his eyelashes, the soft pink shadow of his mouth—in order to discover how he is just after he has taken his pleasure, whether he tastes as heavy and golden as he looks.

He decides John’s mouth is foremost on his list, so he bends low against John’s chest and with an open mouth, kisses the trembling line of John’s lips.

He tastes just as good as Sherlock imagined—better even, dreamy-sweet and hot, but softer, gentler than he felt before, his mouth opening so easily under Sherlock’s, his tongue less insistent, letting Sherlock’s tongue explore his mouth with no resistance.

Sherlock pulls back after a moment, and John throws an arm up over his eyes, sighing deeply, the sound full of satisfaction.

Sherlock shifts off of John’s thigh in order to lie beside him, nuzzling his face into the sticky hollow of John’s neck, and John hums in approval, eyes still shut, lifting his arm to drape it around Sherlock’s shoulders and pull Sherlock in against him.

Sherlock wants to be good, he wants to lie still and appreciate this new, gentle, sleepy John, whose hard lines have all gone soft as molten fire, whose hand is stroking lazily up and down the line of Sherlock’s back, drawing shivers out of him; but his own cock is hard and aching again, his pulse pounding insistent along the length of it and Sherlock cannot help but squirm a bit against John’s side.

John kisses his hairline, must notice Sherlock’s wriggling because he lets his hand drift lower back down to Sherlock’s buttocks. He kneads his hand into the muscle and Sherlock cries out, hips shooting forward into John as though he’s been shocked.

Sherlock can feel John’s warm chuckle in response vibrating all through his chest.

Sherlock is so aroused he is certain in this moment that if he does not touch his own cock he will surely die.

He slides his hand down between their bodies but before it gets there John’s hand is on his wrist, strong fingers curling warm against the bone.

“J- John, I need—”

“I know what you need, love. I’m going to give it to you. I’m going to give you something so much better than you can possibly imagine.”

Sherlock whimpers in response to this.

John kisses his fingers. “I know. I promise it’s going to be worth it. Sit up for me. I need you on your back again.”

Sherlock lifts himself partway off of John, but his body is trembling so hard he can scarcely complete the movement.
John’s strong hands reach out to help him, and in one smooth motion, John is sitting up, hands on Sherlock’s shoulders, guiding him back down against the bed.

Sherlock licks his lips, hips jerking, dizzy with need. He wants to reach down and touch himself but he knows what John will say if he does so he clenches his fingers into fists to stop himself.

“Good. Oh, look at you, you’re being so good.” John’s voice is a low purr of approval as he bends over Sherlock’s body, and Sherlock writhes with pleasure at the sound of it.

John drops his head to place a kiss on the skin of Sherlock’s belly—close-mouthed, so innocent, but Sherlock cannot stand it, any touch from John at this point might be the end of him. He pushes a fist up to his mouth, biting at his fingers, whimpering around them.

“I know, I know,” John breathes, voice low and soothing, mouth moving now to place a kiss on the bone of Sherlock’s hip.

Sherlock’s hips jerk in response. He cannot take much more of this. He reaches down to grip at John’s shoulders in supplication, his voice breaking. “John…”

“Yes, yes, you’re right. I won’t be able to drag this out as long as I might like. That would just be cruel.”

John’s mouth has moved again and now, oh god, now—where is it going? What is it doing? What does John think he is doing? His mouth has moved along Sherlock’s hip and is hovering above the hair at Sherlock’s groin.

John presses his face in against the base of Sherlock’s cock and inhales, and no, Sherlock cannot take it—his fingers must be leaving bruises on John’s shoulders, his nails biting half-moons into John’s flesh—because John’s mouth is right there against the base of him, and John cannot be thinking—? He cannot be thinking of…

“J—John, what are you—?”

John looks up at Sherlock, his blue eyes glittering and bright, his teeth stretched wide in the most lascivious grin Sherlock has ever seen.

“You can put your hands on my head if you like.”

“John, what—”

And then all thought leaves him as John leans down and takes the head of Sherlock’s cock into his mouth.

John’s mouth, John’s mouth is around his cock—his cock is in John’s mouth. John’s beautiful, incredible, singing, smiling mouth is currently folded warm and wet around Sherlock’s cock.

The thought of it alone would be enough to blow the last of Sherlock’s self-restraint to bits—so obscene! John’s mouth! On him, around him—his mouth! But nothing, nothing on earth could have prepared Sherlock for the feel of it.

Not only is it hot and wet and velvety soft, but John’s tongue, oh god John’s tongue is licking the skin around the head, and Sherlock knows in that moment, that this act will be the death of him because there is no way that he can survive this.

He takes John’s advice without thinking, blindly reaching out to move his hands from John’s
shoulders to his head, fingers grasping at the short strands of hair, too short for him to grip properly but so soft, and Sherlock realizes in a delirious jolt of disappointment and amazement that he has never felt John’s hair before this moment—every moment of his life before this suddenly making itself known to him as a complete waste—and it feels as lovely as it looks, as though he can feel the sunny brightness of it shimmering against his fingertips.

John’s hair in Sherlock’s hands is almost enough to finish him—he can feel the tightness in his belly and his loins, gathering like a spring that is about to uncoil, pulling and pulling until he feels as though he cannot bear another second. It as though every part of his body is somehow connected to his cock in this moment; every slight shift of John’s mouth against him sends minute currents of pleasure rippling through him, as though his body is crisscrossed with a network of the finest threads, all culminating in the place where John’s mouth is sliding warm and wet around him.

It is the downward slide of John’s mouth that finally breaks him, slipping down Sherlock’s cock an infinitesimal distance, sucking lightly. Every muscle in his body draws tight, his hips thrusting up off the bed. The feel of it, the slick hollows of John’s mouth enveloping him, cheeks and tongue curling close to enfold the heart of his desire, is what sends the first wave of pleasure crashing through him. But it is also the realization that one of John’s hands is curled around the base of his cock, fingers nestled in the dark curls, his other hand, hot on Sherlock’s hip, pushing him back down against the bed, and most of all the knowledge that this is John—John’s mouth around him—made desperately real by the feeling of John’s hair under his hands as fine as sunlight.

The fragile cords holding Sherlock’s body together seem to break apart, and distantly he is aware that he is crying out, his body drawing up and rising, rising; in spite of the pressure of John’s strong hand on his hip, he feels as though he will go on rising forever, pleasure unfolding from him in continually renewing waves—like the ocean, Sherlock thinks in a haze of bliss, like the never ending pounding of the surf against the side of the ship, surging, powerful, carrying him away in a rush of foam and salt spray.

He can still feel John’s mouth around him, the movements of his cheeks and tongue suggesting to Sherlock that he is swallowing down each burst of Sherlock’s pleasure as it issues from him, and that thought alone—John is drinking down a part of Sherlock—causes a renewed tide of feeling to rip through him, driving him harder up against John with a ragged gasp.

He is breathing so hard he cannot catch his breath, gasping for air as though he has been underwater and his head has only just broken the surface.

Minutes seem to pass before Sherlock’s body sinks back down against the mattress, and it is the soft feeling of John’s mouth sliding off of him that causes Sherlock to open his eyes, to become aware that his body is shuddering, his breath still coming impossibly fast as though he has run a great distance.

John’s hands are smoothing down Sherlock’s flanks. He leans in to press a kiss to Sherlock’s sweat-dampened cheek, his voice as gentle as his hands. “Breathe, my love. You have to breathe for me now. Take a deep breath.”

Sherlock looks up at John with wide, panicked eyes, feels the heaving motion of his own chest under John’s warm palms.

“Do it with me now—in.” Sherlock watches John and does as he says, drawing a long, slow breath into his lungs. “And out.”

Sherlock breathes out with John, before drawing in another long breath. He repeats the motion several times. Gradually he feels his hammering heart begin to slow down.
“Better?”

Sherlock nods.

John reaches down to push the sweat-soaked hair off of Sherlock’s brow, his eyes full of tenderness and something else, something that seems to spark like a living flame at the center of each iris.

“John.” Sherlock’s voice is a low rasp.

“Yes, my love?”

“What you just did…that was…”

Sherlock shakes his head. He wants to convey to John what it meant to him, but there are no words to describe the feeling.

John bends down to kiss his temple and Sherlock can feel his smile in the curve of his lips. “I’m glad you liked it. I was hoping it might have a positive effect on you, but I must say, it went over even better than I had hoped.”

When John sits back, his eyes are full of the same bright fondness, his hand still soft in Sherlock’s hair. “I keep thinking, ‘This, this is Sherlock at his most beautiful,’ and then, I see a new side of you, and I have to amend that thought. It keeps happening, so I think it’s safe to say that you are simply growing more beautiful every moment.”

Sherlock flushes hot at John’s words. His voice is shy. “You think I’m beautiful now?”

Sherlock feels like a sponge that has just been wrung out—his body limp, his hair damp with sweat. He is still shaking lightly from the effects of his orgasm; he feels weak, fragile.

John’s face softens at the doubt in Sherlock’s voice. The hand in Sherlock’s hair pushes through the tangle of curls, and Sherlock responds immediately to the feeling, face lifting into the touch, body relaxing. If he were a cat, he would be purring.

“You look like a mermaid just pulled out of the sea—dark hair soaking wet, blue eyes bright, your red mouth the color of sea poppies.”

John’s voice is low and heavy. It seems to work on Sherlock like a spell. That, combined with the feel of his fingers, combing slowly through Sherlock’s hair, pulls Sherlock down into an almost trance-like state.

“Your body is trembling at the shock of the air, the shock of seeing a man with two legs instead of a tail, a dangerous man who surely wants to devour you. He keeps licking his lips, and looking at your mouth, and when he finally leans into kiss you, you think your heart will stop for fear of him, because you do not know what kissing is, and when his mouth opens on your mouth, you are certain he is going to eat you up.”

Sherlock wants to laugh at John’s words, wants to say in an incredulous voice, ‘Sea poppies? Surely, there is no such plant,’ but there is something darkly romantic about John’s words, and the tug of his fingers in Sherlock’s hair, the possessive slide of his hand on Sherlock’s hip makes Sherlock gasp in shocked delight just as John leans down to kiss him.

The kiss is slow and soft and Sherlock parts his lips for John, inviting him to deepen the kiss. John does, and when his tongue slides into Sherlock’s mouth, he tastes completely different, and Sherlock realizes with a little shock that he is tasting himself on John’s tongue. The thought makes
him warm all over and press closer into John.

When Sherlock pulls back after several moments to catch his breath, he says to John, in a quiet voice. “I think the same thing about you, you know.”

John’s voice is playful but his eyes are dark. “You’re afraid I’m going to eat you up?”

“No,” Sherlock says with a shake of his head. “That you grow more beautiful every time I look at you.”

“Oh, Sherlock…”

Sherlock hears the break in John’s voice before John bends down to kiss him again, his mouth trembling against Sherlock’s, his lashes flickering on Sherlock’s cheeks as he tilts his head to kiss him deeper.

John’s eyelashes feel wet against Sherlock’s skin, and he pulls back slowly, a note of admonishment in his voice. “John, you’re not crying again, are you?”

John’s shaky burst of laughter in response is all the confirmation Sherlock needs, and he leans back all the way to look sternly up at John, who’s rubbing a fist against his eyes, and smiling in apology.

“I suppose you’re disappointed that a man who survived three years of war at sea goes to pieces at any sign of affection.”

The stern expression stays on Sherlock’s face. “That isn’t what I was thinking at all.”

John sniffs and blinks the last of his tears away.

Sherlock’s voice goes soft. “I was thinking you’re even beautiful when you’re crying.”

“Oh Lord.” John puts a hand up over his mouth as several new tears well up in his eyes.

Sherlock sits up so he can wrap his fingers around John’s wrist and pull John’s hand away from his mouth. He places a gentle hand against John’s cheek, and then leans in to kiss the tear that is sliding past John’s down-turned mouth.

“Don’t cry, John.” His voice is soft and pleading. “It makes me sad.”

“Alright,” John says. He reaches up and places his hand over Sherlock’s where it’s cupping his face. He offers Sherlock a watery smile. “Anything for you. My sea flower, my mermaid, my impossible beauty.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Sherlock whispers, but he’s blushing with pleasure.

Sherlock is still holding John’s wrist in his other hand. John’s pulse is a pleasant flutter against his fingers. For the hundredth time that night he thinks how remarkable it is that he gets to see John like this, so soft and open, that Sherlock gets to have him, so strong, so warm, and his to touch.

He wants to go on kissing John all night long, exploring John’s body with his mouth—there is so much of him to taste, to touch—but the candle on Sherlock’s desk is guttering in its pool of wax, and fatigue is crowding in to slow his thoughts.

John must see his weariness in his face because he smooths a thumb over the back of Sherlock’s hand, and says, “I think it’s time we got cleaned up.”
Sherlock nods, sighing as John pulls his hand away, and climbs from the bed, his movements as graceful and efficient as ever.

Sherlock watches with sleepy contentment as John pours water from the pitcher on his desk into the pewter basin, his eyes moving appreciatively over the strong lines in the backs of John’s bare thighs and over the muscular curves of his buttocks. John should never be allowed to wear clothes again, Sherlock thinks sleepily as he reaches for the towel nearby, the muscles in his back leaping to vivid life under the soft touch of the candlelight.

This is not the first time Sherlock has seen John’s naked back, but it’s the first time he’s had a chance to study it in detail up close, and for the first time, he sees all the little scars crisscrossing the golden flesh, some of them small and very fine, but others, deeper, longer, the evidence of much more grievous wounds. Sherlock wonders with a feeling of growing horror what might have caused them all.

There is one that is worse than all the others, a deep knot of scarred-over flesh on John’s left shoulder, and Sherlock feels a tightening in his belly at the sight of it. John said he was wounded in the war against the French, that’s what finally got him sent home—the scar on his shoulder must be the result of that wound.

John sets the basin on the chair by Sherlock’s bed, and dips the towel in it, wringing it out before he turns toward Sherlock to wipe the stickiness from his belly.

“What is it?” John asks, seeing Sherlock’s face.

“Your back,” Sherlock says, his voice soft. “So many scars.”

John’s expression goes hard. “Yes.”

“The one on your shoulder it—is that the wound that took you out of commission?”

John’s hands are gentle as he wipes Sherlock clean, but his face is still hard and distant. “Yes.”

Sherlock’s voice shrinks with fear. “What about all the others?”

John turns to wring the cloth out over the basin, and Sherlock thinks he wrings it harder than he normally might—the whiteness of his knuckles evidence of the pressure. Sherlock cannot see John’s face from where he’s standing and John is quiet for several moments as he cleans himself briskly and efficiently.

When he turns back around, his face is softer but the hard look in his eyes remains. “I’ll tell you someday. Not right now.”

“Alright,” Sherlock says with a sinking feeling, now regretting that he ever asked. He wishes he could take back the question.

John bends over Sherlock’s desk to blow the dying candle out. As he’s straightening up, a loud crash sounds from beyond the door. John’s body tenses in response, immediately poised for action, but he relaxes as several loud and slurring voices follow the noise. It is the sound of several drunken passengers descending the stairs from the upper deck, returning at last from the party to their cabins.

The disruption breaks the uneasiness of the moment, and as John climbs back onto the bed and leans over Sherlock to blow out the candle on the wall, in the moment before the flame goes out, Sherlock sees a smile on his face.
John slides in next to Sherlock, reaching down to pull the sheets up around them both, and Sherlock is so overcome with delight at the prospect that John is going to stay and sleep with him that it takes him several moments to realize John is speaking.

“What?” Sherlock whispers with numb lips, distracted by the feel of John’s warm leg pressing in against his, the curl of John’s toes as he stretches.

“I said, it’s a good thing the party proved such a hit with the passengers.”

Another crash from the corridor confirms John’s words, followed by the sound of raucous laughter.

Sherlock holds himself very still, heart pounding hard against his ribs. He is frightened in spite of himself, remembering with a sudden lurch of unpleasantness just how thin the walls really are, how flimsy a barrier they provide between him and John, and the hostile world of the surrounding ship.

He had forgotten—all through the slow unfurling beauty of their lovemaking—he had forgotten entirely that he and John were not alone in the world. For Sherlock in the last few hours, the whole world had shrunk to the four walls of his narrow cabin, bathed in the light of the candles, heated by the warmth of their bodies coming together.

Sherlock remembers now with sudden, stinging clarity how John begged him to be quiet, how he failed to do so. A slow trickle of horror creeps cold through the pit of Sherlock’s stomach at the realization of just how loud he really was.

“John?” Sherlock whispers in the dark, his voice catching in his throat with fear. “Do you think they heard us?”

“Oh, my love. Come here.”

John’s arms pull Sherlock to him in the dark, and Sherlock acquiesces gratefully, lets John turn his body gently so that he is on his side and John is lying close behind him, tucking his hips in against the curve of Sherlock’s arse.

One of John’s strong arms folds in around Sherlock’s waist, and Sherlock settles back against him with a happy sigh, already feeling calmer, more at ease.

John’s voice is warm against the back of Sherlock’s neck. “No, I don’t think they heard us. I think we were very lucky that the party went so late and that the alcohol was freely flowing. I think most of them were still above deck when we came down, and I imagine the ones already in their rooms were stone cold drunk.”

Sherlock is quiet for a moment, considering this. He feels some of his fear begin to recede.

“However, we’re going to have to be more careful in future. We will not always be so lucky.”

Sherlock feels a twinge of regret move through him. “I’m sorry, John.”

“Oh, love, there’s no need for you to be sorry.” John tightens his arms around Sherlock. “Believe me when I tell you that I want to hear every gasp and cry of pleasure that comes out of your mouth. It kills me to have to tell you to be quiet.” John’s voice is low with sorrow. “But under the circumstances, we have no choice.”

“I know,” Sherlock says in a small voice. He squeezes John back with all his might.

“As much as I’ve grown accustomed to a life at sea sometimes I wish…”
John’s voice is full of yearning, and Sherlock wishes, not for the first time in his life that he was better at comprehending other people’s emotions. There is so much feeling in John’s voice but Sherlock cannot pull apart all the threads to begin to sort out what they are.

“What?” Sherlock asks, uncertain whether he should.

John sighs. “Sometimes I wish that things were different.”

Sherlock does not know what to say to this, so he stays quiet, holding tight to John’s arm.

John’s fingers are moving meditatively against the skin of Sherlock’s belly, through the hair below his belly button. Sherlock shivers in appreciation, pushes closer back against John’s hips.

“John?”

“Mmm?”

“Are you going stay with me all night?”

John presses a kiss to Sherlock’s hair. “I’ll stay with you until the sun comes up and then I’ll have to get back.”

John’s fingers continue their slow, hypnotic movement. Sherlock can hear John’s breathing growing steadier behind him, can feel the press of John’s belly against his back with every exhaled breath. Contentment spirals through Sherlock, slow and sweet. He cannot remember ever feeling so happy. His body feels heavy and sleepy. Sherlock closes his eyes.

“John,” Sherlock whispers, after they have been lying quietly for a time. “Will you sing to me?”

John says nothing, but he shifts against Sherlock, his body curling closer, slightly adjusting his head on the pillow beside Sherlock and Sherlock knows John’s answer by his movements.

In a voice so soft it can only be for Sherlock, John begins to sing in a language Sherlock has never heard.

The melody is beautiful, sweet and haunting, the strange syllables on John’s tongue so close to Sherlock’s ear, so intimate and dark with feeling that Sherlock shivers at the sound.

Although he cannot understand the words, Sherlock can guess at the meaning from the depth of feeling in John’s voice. It is both sad and sweet at once. John’s voice sounds like light piercing through dark clouds, like high cliffs coming into view over the sea through a veil of mist.

The sound of it makes Sherlock’s chest ache, although if you asked him why, he could not put the feeling into words.

Sleep comes to claim him before John has finished singing, tiptoeing up behind Sherlock to draw him down into deep dreams.

Chapter End Notes

If you’d like to hear a version of the song John sings to Sherlock at the end of this chapter, you can listen to it [here](#).
I hemmed and hawed a bit about whether or not to post a link to this yet, as this song is going to return in future chapters with more explanation, but I figured why the hell not? Those of you who'd like to know what it is now are free to listen, and others who want to imagine something else entirely until it comes up again in the fic are free to do so!
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

John needs to leave. Sherlock refuses to let him.

Sherlock’s dreams are heavy and deep, carrying him far from the narrow bunk where he lies between John Watson’s arms, down into the shimmering landscape at the bottom of the sea.

He dreams of the ocean floor, its caverns and dark grottos, peaks of coral rising up like pale mountains to break the surface of the waves, covered here and there with strange flowers that open and close in the gentle rhythm of the surf, frail golden tendrils uncurling from each flower’s mouth only to recede at the slightest sign of movement.

He dreams of beds of white sand that stretch on and on like rolling plains, illuminated by the sunlight far overhead, striped with green in places from the gloom of nearby weeds.

He seems to float above it all, as though he himself were a fish, a member of this world to which he does not belong, privy to its secrets, its mysteries and dreams.

He dreams of things he can’t remember, images that flicker and fade as soon as they awake within him, vanishing like the storm of bubbles that evaporate in the trail of some underwater creature.

He dreams of a city sunk beneath the sea, its spires and turrets coated dark with algae, the delicate majesty of its intricate architecture now home for schools of fish. Where light once shone upon its rooftops, radiant and clear, now shadows creep and stretch dark fingers over crumbling stone. Eels wind their way through the arches in the colonnade and polyps climb the spines of buildings like multi-colored hands. Where panes of glass once gleamed silver in the sunlight now blank windows gape like empty eyes.

Sherlock drifts above it all, feels an ache within him at the sight, sorrow rising in his heart like a wave breaking over a dam, and just as he wonders how a city came to rest at the bottom of the ocean, he awakens with a gasp to darkness.

He does not know what woke him—some sound from beyond his door, some disturbance in the corridor. Or perhaps the movement of the ship changed subtly. Sherlock lies, eyes stretched wide in the darkness and listens, but the steady creak and groan of the hull around him does not change in tempo.

Something else, then.

Sherlock is so focused on discovering the source of the sound that it takes him a moment to register the feeling of the body curled against him. Looking down through the darkness, Sherlock can just make out the soft contours of John Watson sleeping soundly, his body turned in toward Sherlock, one arm stretched over Sherlock’s hip, his mouth slightly open, his breathing even and deep, golden lashes heavy on his cheeks.

The sight of him, the feel of his solid warmth against Sherlock’s side and the spool of lovely memories his presence brings, fills Sherlock with a spike of joy so fierce it feels like pain. A tiny
sob of agonized relief escapes his mouth and Sherlock lifts a hand to muffle the sound, for fear that he will wake John.

It was real then, everything that happened. It wasn’t just a dream.

He settles back against John, head tucked in against John’s chest and lets the soothing rhythm of John’s heartbeat underneath his cheek lull him back to sleep, back to the world of dreaming.

Sherlock dreams he hears the noise again. He dreams it is the rush of angry footsteps pounding down the stairs, that he and John are discovered naked, twined together, the full measure of their sins made glaringly apparent as the flimsy cabin door bangs open, grey daylight rushing in. The entire population of the ship streams forward, fills the room, Anderson at the head of the commotion, sneering and pointing, his smug face twisted up with satisfaction, saying over and over, ‘I told you! I told you they were in here together! Didn’t I tell you?’

The captain seizes Sherlock by the hair and pulls him from the bed into the corridor. John, leaping after, his nudity somehow rendering him all the more glorious, his body lit up by the splendor of his fury like Achilles charging in the heat of battle, jaw clenched and muscles gleaming, but before he can reach Sherlock’s side, he is restrained. It takes half a dozen men to seize him, and when they finally succeed, his arms pinned to his heaving sides, John roars like a lion they have chained.

They drag the pair of them up on deck—John is brave and ferocious and golden, standing completely upright, not a drop of his magnificence tarnished by their filthy hands on his arms. In contrast, Sherlock feels bowed down by the weight of their hateful stares. He is hunched over, shivering in the cold light of dawn, his pale arms drawn around himself, terror and fury and shame all mingling in his belly in equal measure, the captain still holding tight to a fistful of Sherlock’s air.

“The punishment for the sins which you have committed—is DEATH!”

There is no time to think, no time to protest. He and John are pushed together, their shoulders knocking hard against one another, the crowd surging in behind them with shouts and jeers to press them toward the edge of the deck. John takes hold of Sherlock’s hand, squeezes it tightly as they’re driven toward the railing. The last thing Sherlock sees before they’re shoved over the edge is Anderson’s maniacal, grinning face stretched in a rictus of demonic glee.

“PUSH THEM IN!” he screams, and then they are falling over the side of the ship, down into dark water.

Down, down they plummet, their hands clasped tightly, Sherlock’s legs kicking hard to stop their descent, but his efforts are useless against the force of their plunging bodies.

They break the surface and all the furor of the yelling crowd is swallowed in a single heartbeat by the silence of the waves.

Down, down they sink, never stopping, Sherlock’s legs still kicking weakly without result, the water growing darker the further they sink.

Sherlock’s eyes follow helplessly the stream of silver bubbles pouring from his nose as they travel downward, and he looks up to see the webs of light stretched overhead, bisecting the dark hull of the retreating ship, painting lines through the water like the arches on the inside of a cathedral.

Death may be all around them in the water, but oh, what beauty there is too, down here among the green.
John turns to him, pulling Sherlock close by the grip of his hand.

“Breathe into me. We’ll live down here together, we’ll be safe.”

Sherlock tries to answer but his words all turn to bubbles.

Sherlock cannot breathe underwater; neither of them can. Sherlock knows this but he does not know how to communicate it to John, John whose short golden hair is rippling in the movement of the current, whose smiling face bears no awareness of the knowledge that they will surely drown.

Maybe Sherlock is wrong. Maybe John can breathe beneath the water. After all John is practically a god in human form.

But Sherlock knows that he cannot. He does not even know how to swim. He can feel the water pulling on him, like long fingers trying to drag him down.

Already it has been too long. His lungs are tightening, his field of vision shrinking as he fights for breath.

John pulls Sherlock to him, dawning horror on his face as he realizes what is happening, too late, too late—his mouth closing over Sherlock’s in desperation.

But John is only human. His last breath is not enough.

The last thing Sherlock sees before the darkness takes him is the sorrowful curve of John’s mouth opening before him, screaming his name.

Sherlock wakes with a start to the feel of John’s hand on his shoulder, his John, real John, shaking him awake.

Sherlock turns toward him with a gasp, heart still pounding in his chest.

“Sherlock?”

John’s worried face is leaning down over him. The light in Sherlock’s room is dim, but it is no longer the pitch black of night so he can make out the concern stark on John’s face. “Are you alright?”

“You’re here,” Sherlock breathes in wonder, not yet able to dim the raw admiration in his voice so recently pulled from his dreams.

John lifts a gentle hand to Sherlock’s face. “Yes, of course, I’m here.”

Despite the terror of his dream, Sherlock’s body feels soft and warm, and Sherlock realizes with a little shock of delight that John is still curled around him, just as he was when Sherlock fell asleep, hips tucked in against Sherlock’s thigh.

Sherlock turns toward him with a happy sigh, burying his face in against John’s shoulder. He inhales deeply, savoring the scent that is so distinctly John’s. When he speaks, his voice is muffled by John’s warm skin. “I was afraid it might have all been a dream.”

John pushes his fingers through Sherlock’s hair. “No, love. It really happened. I’m really here.” His fingers card through Sherlock’s hair, and then gently he guides Sherlock’s face until he can see him. His voice is filled with tenderness. “And I really love you.”

Sherlock gasps softly with delight. Every time John says it, it is a revelation to him.
Sherlock shifts forward on his elbows and leans in to press his mouth to John’s.

John tastes different after sleeping, warmer and softer—somehow more like himself—and Sherlock loves every bit of it.

There is faint stubble on John’s jaw that wasn’t there last night; it’s scratchy against Sherlock’s mouth. He rubs his cheek against it and feels a spark of pleasure skip down his spine.

Sherlock wants to rub his face all over John, discover every part of him with his mouth, but John pulls back, worry still present in his eyes.

“You were whimpering in your sleep.” He reaches up to smooth the hair back off Sherlock’s forehead. “What were you dreaming about?”

Sherlock drops his face back down against John’s chest.

“I dreamed they found us.”

John’s arms come up around him, wrapping warm around Sherlock’s back. “Oh, love.”

“They burst in through the door and dragged us out of bed. They brought us up on deck, then pushed us overboard to drown.”

Sherlock shivers with dread at the memory of Anderson’s face twisted in hatred, the cold dark water closing in over their heads. He feels John’s arms tighten around him.

“You tried to save me underwater. You told me you could breathe for me, that we could live down there together. But I couldn’t do it. You tried to save me but you couldn’t. We were drowning, John. We were both going to drown.”

John’s arms shift against him. “Sherlock, I want you to look at me.”

Sherlock looks up at the note of urgency in John’s voice, and sees John looking at him with deadly seriousness.

“I want you to listen to me very carefully. Are you listening?”

Sherlock nods.

“No harm is going to come to you while you are onboard this ship. Do you hear me? While I am still alive to draw breath, they will not dare touch a single hair on your head, is that understood? They will not hurt you. I will not allow it.”

It’s absurd; it’s an absurd promise to make, impossible to carry out. As strong as John may be, as determined as he is, he is only one man. The ship is staffed by dozens of men. If even half of them put their minds to subduing John, they would win. There is no question about it. Simply by sheer force of numbers, they would win. But something in John’s voice, in his demeanor, inspires absolute belief in Sherlock, makes a chill run down his spine, makes the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

The glimmer of fire that lies at the center of John has rarely had cause to make itself known, but now is one of those times when Sherlock can see it blazing out of him, can see why John survived being pressed to sea with no knowledge of seamanship, why he was able to endure three years in service at war with the French, loading the cannons and lowering the sails in the heat of battle, three years spent up to his knees in blood and bilge-water sawing off men’s legs in the stinking
bowels of ships that were being blown to pieces all around him.

There is steel at the core of John Watson that Sherlock has yet to truly witness, that makes him wonder if there is nothing this man cannot accomplish if he sets his mind to it.

Sherlock finds himself nodding, utterly in awe by the change in John’s whole regard.

“Good,” John says, and seems to soften slightly, but the crackle of energy in the air around him in the wake of his speech lingers on, sets Sherlock’s heart to pounding.

“John,” Sherlock says, feeling slightly dazzled in the presence of this new John. He feels as though he has just taken several long pulls from the flask John carries in his jacket. He feels light-headed, his skin spark-shivering with heat.

“Yes, my love?”

“You’re incredible,” he breathes, the awe in his own voice painfully evident.

John laughs softly in response and the feeling of John laughing against him, this John who is so fierce and full of strength, who commands such immediate respect simply with the look on his face, that he can laugh so openly and warmly, just moments after, his torso shaking under Sherlock—that all this can be contained in one small person—it is almost too much for Sherlock to take.

He crawls up John’s body to get nearer to his laughing mouth.

“John,” he says again; this time his voice is pleading. “John, kiss me.”

John’s eyes go dark and he slides his hands low on Sherlock’s back, just above the swell of his arse, to pull Sherlock in against him.

John kisses him long and deep, his mouth opening under Sherlock’s with a low groan that seems pulled out of him almost against his will. The sound of it makes desire leap to life in Sherlock’s belly, makes Sherlock spread his legs around John’s muscular thigh and rub himself against John in a slow, needful thrust.

John’s tongue is warm in Sherlock’s mouth; pushing softly against his own, and then John’s hands are sliding down to cup his arse, fingers kneading at the muscled flesh.

Sherlock makes a whimpering sound and thrusts against John’s thigh again, his tongue slipping over John’s.

Much to Sherlock’s disappointment, John breaks the kiss and falls back against the pillows, breathing hard.

“We can’t do this now.” His voice sounds resolute, even though his face is filled with longing.

Sherlock wriggles down against him, chasing John’s mouth with his own. “Why not?”

John tips his chin up, pushing his mouth into Sherlock’s until their lips brush, in a not-quite kiss. “The sun is almost up.” John pushes a hand through Sherlock’s hair. The touch feels full of sorrow. “I have to leave you.”

A tiny trickle of cold despair stirs in Sherlock’s chest but he ignores it.

He opens his mouth against John’s, licks the lovely soft expanse of John’s pink bottom lip.
John’s eyes flutter shut in response, another groan sounding low in his throat.

“Not quite yet,” Sherlock says. “They haven’t rung the bells.”

Sherlock lets his mouth skim down John’s jaw to the softer skin under his chin. He licks the skin there experimentally. John’s breath comes out in a hard rush.

“My love…” Sherlock presses his tongue against John’s neck, searching for his pulse. He wants to feel the life of John pounding underneath his tongue. His tongue slides, seeking. John’s hand clenches in his hair. “My love.” His voice is breathless. “I need to get up top before anyone…sees me. I should go now.”

Sherlock knows that John is right. He knows he should let John up, but John’s body is so warm beneath his, John’s skin is salty underneath his tongue, and apart from his words, John is making no sign of protest at the downward progression of Sherlock’s hot, inquisitive mouth.

He licks all the way down the side of John’s neck, marveling at the flex of muscle underneath his tongue as John’s head turns slightly. He continues down, pausing to lap at the hollow in his collarbone, and then down to John’s chest until he reaches the tiny pale pink circle of flesh, which he runs his tongue over experimentally, delighted at the way it stiffens immediately beneath his tongue. Sherlock licks at it again and when John gasps involuntarily, his torso arching under Sherlock’s mouth, Sherlock decides in that moment to be completely shameless. He decides it’s worth the risk.

Sherlock shifts his weight onto his elbows so that he can reposition himself, settling the aching flesh of his now very present erection down against John’s groin. They are still both completely nude, the only thing covering their nakedness the sheet twisted around them both, so when Sherlock presses his hips down into John’s, he is rewarded by the stiff heat of John’s very full and very naked cock sliding in against his own.

John’s breath leaves him in a hiss.

Oh, Oh, Oh—the feel of John against him, the feel of John’s hard cock hot pressing in against his own is so good for a moment Sherlock cannot breathe. What an utterly ingenious idea. Why has Sherlock never thought of this before?

Sherlock’s weight is still on his elbows—although his arms have started to shake from the effort of holding himself up. He lowers his mouth down to John’s and breathes a plea into John’s open mouth. “Please, John, please. Don’t go yet. We can be quick. Just don’t—” He rolls his hips and they both groan together. “Don’t—leave…just yet.”

John’s breathing is labored, his body tense beneath Sherlock’s.

“You are a very bad influence, Sherlock Holmes.” John’s fingers clench on Sherlock’s arse, prompting Sherlock to thrust forward with his hips again, causing lovely friction all along his aching cock. The added realization that the friction is the result of John’s own erection dragging over his, makes Sherlock’s eyelids flutter shut with a soft moan of pleasure.

“God help me, I don’t think I could leave now if I wanted to.”

John lets out a stuttered breath of air, presses his forehead into Sherlock’s.

“Alright, my love. You want it quick? I’ll make it quick.” There is a hard edge suddenly in John’s voice, a roughness that makes Sherlock think of smoke and gunpowder, of John yelling orders over the roar of cannon fire. His eyes are dark in the dim light of Sherlock’s cabin but there is something
dangerous glittering at the center of each pupil. The sight of it makes Sherlock shiver in anticipation.

John shifts beneath him; he spreads his legs, bending his knees and settling his feet flat against the bed so Sherlock is effectively clench in between them. Then, using his grip on Sherlock’s arse to guide Sherlock’s movements he begins to thrust up against him, pulling Sherlock down to meet him as he pushes up.

The new position means their cocks are sliding directly over one another, trapped between their bodies. The resulting sensation makes Sherlock gasp aloud, his arms shaking harder than ever as he struggles to hold himself up.

“How’s that?” John asks, his teeth flashing briefly as he grins up at Sherlock.

“It’s… uhhh.” Sherlock’s words evaporate into the sound of a moan as John drags Sherlock’s body harder down against him. Sherlock can feel the muscles flexing in John’s strong thighs as he thrusts, each powerful stroke of his body causing more sweet friction against Sherlock’s throbbing cock.

“Tell me what it feels like,” John says, something commanding in his voice as he lifts his mouth up for a kiss. Sherlock takes it, breathing messily into John’s mouth as their lips slide together.

“It’s so good, John,” he gasps, his own breath panting out around his words. “You feel s-so good.”

“Do I?” John asks, his eyes glinting in the brightening room. “Tell me, Sherlock. Tell me how it feels.”

Sherlock is rocking his hips in time with John’s thrusts, faster now, more controlled; John’s hands on his arse have helped him find the right rhythm.

There is slickness between them, and Sherlock cannot be sure if it is the result of his own leaking cock or John’s, but the feeling of it makes him groan, long and low, dropping his head between his arms as he thrusts.

“It’s so good,” Sherlock slurs, feeling drunk with pleasure, desperate to convey to John just how good it is. “I’ve never felt anything—anything—like this, like you. Oh God, John, you’re m-magnificent. You’re everything.”

John digs his fingers into Sherlock’s arse in response to Sherlock’s words, and Sherlock hears John make a sound that can only be described as a growl.

It feels so good but it’s not quite enough. Sherlock wants more pressure, more of John against him.

He plants his hands on the mattress on either side of John, pushing himself up with a shaky burst of strength, so he has a better angle to push back against John.

His thrusts renew their vigor, but still it’s not enough.

Sherlock locks his eyes with John, biting at his lips. He feels a drop of sweat glide down his temple, licks more sweat off his upper lip before opening his mouth to speak. “Harder, John. Please. Please.”

John curses and the sound of it, so filthy in John’s breathless voice makes Sherlock drive his own hips harder down against John, faster, losing the careful rhythm that John has established, his movements uneven, desperate.
“You want it faster?”


“You want it harder?”

Sherlock nods, whimpering.

“I need to hear you say it, love.”

“Yes! Please, John. Please!” Sherlock whines.

“Shh.”

John slides one hand up Sherlock’s back into his sweat-soaked curls to pull Sherlock’s mouth down against him, his other hand sliding up to rub circles into Sherlock’s lower back. Sherlock whimpers at the loss of John’s hands on his arse, at the loss of the added pressure, his hips bucking wildly.

John slips his tongue into Sherlock’s mouth, and Sherlock gasps in conflicted pleasure. The slow sweep of John’s tongue over his feels so good but he’s desperate for more friction on his cock. He ruts against John, keening into his mouth with need.

“Shh. Quiet, my love. I know. I know exactly what you need.”

“J- John.” Sherlock pushes his quivering body into John’s, unable to ask for what he wants, senseless to almost everything except for the feeling of the blood pumping through his cock.

“I know.” John kisses him again, as if in apology, and then murmurs. “Lift your hips for me, love. Just a bit. I’m going to make you feel so good I promise. That’s it.”

John’s hand shifts from Sherlock’s lower back to reach between their bodies, and Sherlock jerks violently as he feels John’s fingers slide in against him.

“Just you wait,” John whispers against Sherlock’s swollen mouth, his own voice trembling slightly. “It’s going to feel so good.”

And then all of Sherlock’s breath leaves him, because John has wrapped his hand not only around Sherlock’s cock, but also his own—the two of them together in his grip, the hard, throbbing heat of both of them contained within the circle of John’s fist—and finally it’s the right amount of friction, of pressure that Sherlock has been craving, as John’s hand begins to stroke.

Sherlock moans into John’s mouth, the sound long and guttural, pulled out from somewhere deep within him, his hips rocking into John’s hand in time with his strokes, John’s body rising against him in response. The feel of John’s fingers moving over him combined with the slick length of John’s cock so hot and velvet-soft against his own—it feels so good that Sherlock is afraid he will go mad with pleasure.

John begins to stroke faster and Sherlock thrusts against him with abandon, a chorus of small, desperate noises forming in the depths of his throat.

Sherlock bites down hard on his bottom lip to stop the noises—aware in some distant corner of his brain that he isn’t meant to make a sound, but it’s hard. John feels so good, too good, the slick thrusting heat of John’s cock against his own is almost more pleasure than he can take, the steady rhythm of John’s hand pulling on his cock in long even strokes better than anything Sherlock has ever felt.
His arms are shaking on either side of John—he’s biting his lip so hard he’s about to break the skin. He can feel the peak of his pleasure drawing closer, like a wave gathering force, tightening the muscles in his belly and his legs.

John is making little panting sounds beneath him as he strokes the two of them in his fist. Sherlock risks a look down at him, and can’t stop the groan that pours out of his throat at the sight of John, pink lips parted, tongue pressed against the corner of his mouth, his heavy-lidded eyes focused on the place where their bodies come together, on the movement of his hand between them—the obscene thrust of Sherlock’s hips each time they come to meet him.

John sees Sherlock watching him, lifts his chin in invitation and Sherlock bends down to press his mouth to John’s. He tries to kiss him but he’s too far gone to complete the action with any kind of precision. Instead, his mouth slips wetly over John’s, John’s tongue coming out to meet him, tracing the swollen length of Sherlock’s bottom lip.

Sherlock whimpers into the kiss and feels John speeding up his strokes.

“How does it feel?” John gasps, his words more heat than sound against Sherlock’s mouth.

“S-so, so good. It’s so good, John.” Sherlock shakes his head, feels sweat running down his temple into his hair.

“You’re so gorgeous when you’re like this, do you know that?” John breathes into Sherlock’s mouth, the movement of his hand slowing momentarily as he pushes his mouth closer against Sherlock’s. “The way you feel in my hand…”

Sherlock feels John’s thumb circling the sensitive head of his cock, and he cries out, hips twitching, desperate for John to re-establish the speed of a moment before.

John slides a hand up into Sherlock’s sweat-soaked curls. His eyes are dark and brutal. “You’re going to come when I say so, alright?”

“Y-yes, John,” Sherlock pants, his whole body shuddering.

“Only when I tell you,” John says, his voice a tendril of heat uncurling between them as his hand begins to speed up again. “You beautiful, beautiful thing.”

Sherlock holds his mouth there, panting into John’s as John licks at him, tiny little swipes of his tongue against Sherlock’s, the softest moans sounding in the base of John’s throat, and it’s as if he’s offering them to Sherlock, these sounds he’s making just for Sherlock, sliding into Sherlock’s open mouth and down his throat, and that gesture—the lapping of John’s tongue against his own is so soft, so wet, so utterly obscene that Sherlock can feel his limbs start to shake as the pleasure builds within him, tightening and tightening.

“J-John,” Sherlock gasps, terrified that he is going to break John’s reprimand because he cannot hold it off any longer—he can feel the first ripples building in him low and sweet. He tries to stop himself, tries to hold his body still to keep the exploding force of his pleasure at bay. “I’m—I’m going to…”

“Yes, my love,” John says, pushing his mouth up into Sherlock’s. “Come for me now.”

Then John is lifting his legs and wrapping them around the backs of Sherlock’s thighs, pressing in just below his arse, pulling Sherlock in against him with the grip of his legs.

Sherlock was already too far gone to pull himself back from the edge, but the feeling of John’s
muscular thighs gripping his body, pulling him in down close to John’s, John’s knuckles dragging over the skin of Sherlock’s belly as his hand works the slippery heat of both of their erections marks the beginning of the end.

Sherlock drops his head, his elbows giving way as pleasure rips through the center of him, coursing through his body in great shuddering waves. His body stiffens against John, the muscles in his arse pulled taut, hips bearing down as he shoots pulse after pulse of warm sticky liquid between them.

He presses his face in against John’s neck, muffling his cries in the damp skin of John’s throat, and his cock is still twitching through the aftershocks when he feels John arch up beneath him with a bitten-off cry.

He hears John swear once, feels John’s fingers clenching in his hair, his fingers tightening around them both, pushing, pushing against Sherlock with all his body’s strength and Sherlock marvels at the force of it, the heat of John against him, the warm liquid of John’s release against his belly.

Sherlock collapses hard against John’s chest, and lies completely boneless on top of him, panting into his neck as John’s body slowly sinks beneath him back down to the mattress.

He can feel John’s breathing against him, rapid and erratic, John’s hand smoothing through the damp hair on the back of his neck, over the quivering muscles in his back, rubbing soothing circles.

Sherlock’s whole body is still trembling lightly, his lips pressed in against John’s neck. He feels John press a kiss to the top of his sweaty curls.

“How are you, my love?”

John chuckles against him and kisses his temple. “I bet you are. Here.”

He leans over and reaches for the pitcher of water and the cup that Sherlock keeps beside his bed. One-handed, he pours water into the cup and then settles back against Sherlock, raising the cup to his lips. “Drink.”

Sherlock sits up a little to do so, and obediently parts his lips, suddenly aware of just how thirsty he is as John tips the cup, and the cool liquid slides into his mouth. He gulps at it, desperate, feels water spill down over his chin.

John holds it for him until Sherlock has drained the contents of the cup. He sets it back down, before reaching out to wipe the water from the corners of Sherlock’s mouth with fond fingers.

“I’m sorry if I was a little rough there towards the end.”

“No!” Sherlock says and lifts himself up onto his elbows. “You were magnificent. John, you were —”

He looks down and sees John’s warm blue eyes watching him, gone soft—a deeper blue than he has ever seen them.

“Yes?” John asks, one corner of his mouth quirking up in a smile.
“Oh, John.” Sherlock says, overcome, and bends down to kiss the smile off of John’s lovely mouth.

He lies with his chest pressed against John’s, feeling the steady rhythm of John’s heartbeat underneath his own, and all over again, the thought of John leaving fills him with a fresh wave of despair.

“Don’t go back,” Sherlock whispers against John’s chest, needy, desperate, heedless of the fact that he knows his words are nonsense; that of course, John has to go back, that he should have left five minutes ago. The sun is surely up by now. It’s difficult to judge precisely in Sherlock’s windowless chamber, but the thin line of grey light creeping in beneath the door has grown brighter and Sherlock knows they can’t ignore it for much longer.

“Stay with me,” he begs, knowing the request is impossible, cruel even because John will want to honor it.

“I can’t, my love,” John says, tightening his arms around Sherlock and Sherlock can hear the pain in his voice as clearly as he can see the light seeping in under the door.

“I know.” And then Sherlock feels ashamed, and he buries his face in John’s neck and refuses to let him up.

John’s hands stroke his back for several moments more and then John is shifting his arms on Sherlock’s shoulders, hands sliding down to hold Sherlock by his upper arms, his voice apologetic.

“I’ve got to go.”

Sherlock nods, once, silent and miserable, his mouth drawn into an unhappy bow.

“But I’ll be back.”

Sherlock says nothing, feels once again like a petulant child, embarrassed by the force of his emotion, unable to stop it.

“Sherlock?”

He feels soft fingers settling beneath his chin, pulling his gaze up.

“I’ll be back, all right?”

“I know,” he whispers, ashamed of his misery.

John kisses him on the forehead, the placement of his mouth so soft, so sweet that Sherlock wants to cry out from the touch of it almost as badly as he cried out when he came.

“I’ll be back with you again before you know it,” John says, gently shifting Sherlock off of him, lifting his body upright and swinging his legs over the side of Sherlock’s bunk.

He stands in one smooth, graceful motion and Sherlock curls over on his side, drawing his knees up against his chest.

Sherlock lies with his head on the pillow, and watches John brusquely and perfunctorily wipe the expanse of his belly and chest with a rag that he dips in the cold water from the pewter basin. He dabs under his arms and over his lovely, softened cock, and all of a sudden Sherlock wishes he was helping John instead of just lying and impotently watching him, but when he sits up, a question
half-formed on his lips, John shakes his head.

“It’s alright,” he says, as if he knew instinctively what Sherlock was about to ask. “I know you want to help but I’ll be quicker if I do it myself.”

All too soon, John has pulled his trousers back on, dragged his shirt on over his head, and shrugged into his jacket. He’s just lacing up his shoes, the line of his back one strong beautiful curve for Sherlock’s eyes when the sound of the ship’s bells sound through the morning haze.

John turns to Sherlock who is sitting naked, with the sheet pooled in his lap; dark curls in disarray against his forehead, watching John with equal parts awe and sorrow. John leans in and presses one last kiss to Sherlock’s frowning mouth.

He’s turning back around to stand when Sherlock asks, his voice a breathless rush. "When will I see you again?"

"Soon."

"But when?" Sherlock presses, leaning forward to catch hold of John’s wrist in desperation.

Sherlock’s heart is pounding. He cannot explain the irrational feeling of dread that if John leaves his side everything that happened between them will vanish like a curl of smoke, as if John’s physical presence will take away all traces of the event, and it will be nothing more than a dream—as if John leaving his side means he will never see him again.

"I don't know," John says and there is real sorrow in his voice. "Whenever I can get away."

He takes hold of Sherlock’s hand. His fingers under Sherlock’s are so strong and warm.

"Tonight?" Sherlock asks, his voice a whisper.

"Perhaps,” John says, and squeezes his fingers.

Sherlock nods and ducks his head to hide the sorrow on his face. Looking down, he sees the gleam of silver on his chest.

“You should have this back,” he says, reaching behind his neck to undo the clasp but John stops him, wraps his fingers around Sherlock's own where they hold the locket and press it in against his heart.

“No,” John says, his voice firm but full of tenderness. “I want you to keep it for me. I want you to wear it. I don’t have many things I can give you. So let me give you this.”

Sherlock, awed by this gesture all over again looks down at where John's hand is folded over his, pressed in against his chest.

John places two gentle fingers under Sherlock’s chin and tilts his head to lift his gaze to John’s. John’s eyes are fathomless.

“Consider it my promise that I’ll come back to you. Consider it a symbol that my heart is yours, if you’ll have it. Will you, Sherlock?” John’s voice is as soft as breath. “Will you keep it safe for me?”

“Yes, of course,” Sherlock breathes and then John is kissing him, his hand sliding up to cup Sherlock’s cheek, pulling Sherlock’s mouth to him, his thin lips warm and full of feeling.
Sherlock lets the necklace drop back against his chest as he leans into the kiss, his whole body melting at the touch of John’s mouth, at John’s strong fingers so gentle on his face.

John pulls away far sooner than Sherlock would like, his breathing slightly unsteady.

"Now I really have to go."

He runs one hand down the curves of Sherlock’s face—his touch lingering, full of tenderness and Sherlock’s chest resounds with the feeling, like the tone of a bell.

“Goodbye, my beauty,” John says, his eyes soft and deep. “Get some rest.”

And then, before Sherlock can answer, John has slipped from the room, closing the door so softly behind him that it does not make a sound.
Sherlock tries to follow John’s advice; he does. He tries to go back to sleep. John’s right, of course, he is worn out. He’s never experienced so much sensation, ever in his life. He knows, in some part of himself, that he is exhausted in a bone-deep, weary way, but he finds he cannot possibly fall back asleep.

For as exhausted as he is, he is also exhilarated.

Every time he shuts his eyes and tries to clear his mind and wait for sleep to come, his thoughts are flooded with memories of John’s hands against him, the glow of John’s body in the light of the candles, John’s soft, hot mouth under his own, John’s thighs gripping him, John’s lips tracing the tendon in his throat—the feeling of John’s cock beneath his hand. The sensations are too numerous for him to count, he wants to go over every one in his mind, relive every moment, obsessively catalogue each press, each touch of John’s body against his—how he looked, how he tasted in every moment, the slide of his hands, the hitch of his breath, the way his mouth curled up at the corner as he looked at Sherlock—so that he cannot possibly forget a single one of them.

They are so numerous, each so delightful in turn that Sherlock finds it’s only been minutes since John left and already he’s fully hard again, a deep ache in the center of his belly as he thinks about everything that passed between them.

John has given Sherlock a new appreciation for his body, has made him aware of a capacity for pleasure that he never knew he had. Yes, of course Sherlock has experienced pleasure at his own hand, but it never, never felt the way it did with John. It was always somewhat rudimentary, somewhat mechanical—mostly he was desperate just to get it over with as quickly as possible so that he could go back to ignoring his body and all its petty miseries and yearnings.

But there was nothing petty about what he experienced with John. Every touch, every look was loaded with meaning.

And now, even in John’s absence, the feeling remains. His skin feels thin—translucent even, humming with the memory of John’s touch. His body feels so new to him, feels different, full of possibility. He never knew he was capable of so much feeling.

Sherlock shifts under the sheets, slides his hand down over his own hip—remembers how John’s eyes widened when he performed the same gesture, how his breathing changed. Sherlock licks his lips and sighs at the memory, clenching his hand into a fist against his thigh to stop its movement.

He rolls over, dragging the sheets up underneath his chin. He squeezes his eyes shut tight, tries valiantly to sleep, because John said so, and John knows what’s best, willing himself not to think about any of it, but when he pushes his face into the pillow he smells John, as sure as if he were there himself.

Sherlock buries his nose in the scent, inhaling deeply, wriggling his hips against the mattress as the smell brings him a renewed flood of memories—the taste of John’s skin under his tongue, the smell of that golden hair beneath John’s arm—so strong, so viscerally the smell of John.

It’s no use.

Sherlock gives a little moan, and reaches down to take himself in hand.

Part of him feels ashamed that he’s doing this, not an hour after he just came between John’s
thighs, but he cannot help himself, it’s as if John has awakened something within him that has always been there, slumbering and dangerous, just out of sight, that now refuses to go back to sleep.

Sherlock has never felt his way, not ever in his life, and the feelings are so deep, so satisfying that he has no wish to stop them.

He strokes himself in long, hard strokes, remembering John’s mouth, John’s eyes as dark as the ocean under the evening sky as he looked at Sherlock without clothes on for the first time, the gentle drag of John’s fingers down his arm, the sound of John’s voice telling Sherlock how beautiful he was. Sherlock groans into the pillow, his body curling tight over the increasingly rapid movements of his hand.

“Oh, John,” Sherlock moans into the pillow. “Oh John—oh, oh!”

He comes in a burst of pleasure, the light whiting out behind his eyes, jerking up against his own fist as he imagines John watching him, John’s cock against his hip, John’s lips hot on the back of his neck.

It’s too easy to imagine now—Sherlock has such a wealth of material to work with.

He sags back against the mattress, warm and sticky and filthy and sated, and only then—as he imagines John, gently smoothing his hands down over the curve of Sherlock’s back, whispering endearments into his hair—does Sherlock slide down into a deep and dreamless slumber.

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When Sherlock wakes—hours later, stiff and covered in dried sweat and fluid—it takes only a second for the memories of the last twenty-four hours to come flooding back and he can feel his face breaking into a smile even before he has fully regained consciousness.

“John,” he breathes to the room around him, so softly, so full of joy that even the sound of John’s name being spoken aloud fills him up with warmth as though there is a tiny flame inside of him that grows brighter with the sound.

He buries his face in the pillow, grinning, giddy with the knowledge that he and John are lovers now—in every sense of the word.

Lying there, face down against his mattress, grinning like a fool, Sherlock can feel John’s locket digging in against his breast. He rolls over onto his back so he can hold it in his fingers and study it again.

It’s a beautiful object, so delicate—so at odds with John himself who is coarse and strong and sturdy—somewhat rough around the edges, but then, Sherlock thinks, as he turns it in his fingers, watches it reflect the light, how like John to be in possession of such a rare and beautiful thing—complicated John who has such hidden depths, who is so full of light himself.

John said it was his mother’s; that it’s all he had of hers. Sherlock wonders now what she was like—was she kind to John? How old was John when she died? Where did she come from? Was she of gentle birth? It seems a very fine object for someone from John’s background to have in his possession. There is so much Sherlock does not know, so much Sherlock wants to ask, and Sherlock’s heart gives a sudden lurch, wishing John were with him now.

Take it as a symbol of my heart, John said. As a promise I’ll come back to you. Sherlock shuts his eyes, feels a hot, tight wave of feeling overtake him at the memory of John’s words. He clenches
the locket in his fist, and presses it against his breastbone where his heart is pounding.

Even with his eyes shut, Sherlock can tell that it is full daylight now, getting on towards afternoon, and he is aware that he should rise and wash himself and dress and go in search of food.

But there is part of him that does not want to move at all—that simply wants to lie, curled around his memories, sifting through them in his mind, savoring each one, picking them up like sacred objects to run his fingers over every contour, every smooth and shining edge, tucked away inside his mind until John returns to make new memories with him.

The thought is a seductive one but hunger wins out in the end, his growling stomach reminding him with urgency how long it’s been since last he ate.

Sherlock stretches like a cat, pushing one pale wrist far above his head, his feet pushing the sheet off of his torso. He sits up, feeling dreamy, light-headed, and wonders what John is doing right at this moment. It is that question—and his eagerness to find the answer to it—that gives him the burst of energy he needs to propel him to his feet.

He has a silent battle with himself over getting clean. There is a deep and fearsome part of him that does not want to wash himself, that wants to keep the marks of John’s body against him, the traces of John’s release on his skin as silent talismans of what passed between them. He has no desire to wash them off.

But sense wins over in the end, and Sherlock reassures himself with the knowledge that the John of their future interactions will not want to touch and lick a Sherlock that is still encrusted with the remains of their last encounter. Just the thought of that future John, his hungry eyes eating up the sight of Sherlock’s smooth, clean skin, sets him to shivering, and for once, Sherlock is grateful for the lack of hot water. The bite of the cold water against his skin helps to dampen the flames of his rising arousal.

Sherlock dutifully scrubs himself clean, listening with thinly veiled disdain to the sounds of the other passengers coming and going in the corridor beyond his room, whispering and gossiping no doubt about the events of the previous evening.

He has just finished washing himself and is reaching for his shirt when he remembers with a horrible shock the disturbing events of the previous evening that resulted in Lestrade’s poisoning. He stands completely still for several seconds, heart pounding in sudden distress. That he could have forgotten about the incident so completely fills him with shame.

He pulls the rest of his clothes on with haste, all thoughts of his own hunger forgotten in his eagerness to go up top and find Lieutenant Lestrade and ensure that he’s all right.

Sherlock takes the stairs two at a time, emerging into the open air to find a day that is clear and hot and lovely, the tropical climate they have entered fully evident in the force of the sun overhead and the bright blue of the sparkling water.

All these details register distantly in Sherlock’s mind as he scans the quarterdeck for a sign of the Lieutenant. There is a very good chance that the man might still be in bed, not yet fully recovered from the effects of the poison, in which case Sherlock will be very worried indeed—not just for the Lieutenant’s health (although John’s prognosis that he was out of danger was surely correct), but for the fact that people might notice his absence and begin asking questions.

However, to Sherlock’s great relief, Lieutenant Lestrade is on duty, standing at the shoulder of the
helmsman, looking slightly paler than usual but otherwise no worse for the wear.

Passengers are not allowed up on the quarterdeck, but Sherlock is so desperate to speak to the Lieutenant and inquire after his health that he is halfway to the stairs, heedless of this rule, when he sees the captain appear at Lestrade’s side as if from nowhere, his small eyes hard and bright as he surveys the deck.

Sherlock freezes where he stands as though the man’s gaze has the power to arrest movement. He feels the captain’s eyes move over him and Sherlock turns toward the railing at his side as though he has noticed something of interest on the horizon.

There is nothing there to hold his interest of course, other than the bright glitter of the sun on the waves, but Sherlock stands for a long time looking out as though transfixed, until he feels the captain’s eyes retreat from his back to focus on something else.

The man’s gaze on the back of his neck is as palpable as a physical touch and the absence of that hard, dark look when it finally leaves him comes as a relief, even though he cannot see it.

Sherlock stands for a long time looking out over the waves, stricken with the uncanny feeling that the captain knows he was making his way to the quarterdeck, even though he had not yet reached the stairs and there’s no reason for the man to suspect that Sherlock would have business there.

None the less, Sherlock cannot shake the feeling that the man was watching him for a reason.

He decides to postpone his quest to speak with the Lieutenant until the captain has left the quarterdeck, and Sherlock heads back toward the staircase leading below decks, careful to keep his head down all the while, and never once let his gaze stray toward the helm of the ship.

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Sherlock missed the midday meal but he manages to find the porter and convince the man to give him some bread and cheese to stave off his hunger until suppertime.

Sherlock is pleasantly surprised that the man is amicable to Sherlock’s request. A month ago—even a week ago—Sherlock never would have dared to ask for such a thing, but he feels emboldened, more confident in these past few weeks than he has ever felt.

When the porter returns with the food and sets it before Sherlock, in response to Sherlock’s eager word of thanks, the man offers him a smile. “I’m happy to give it you, Mr. Holmes. You don’t eat enough if you want my opinion on the matter, so I’m more than obliged to help you with some feeding up.”

Sherlock is so taken aback by this open display of good will that he does not think of a response until the man has left the room. Perhaps, Sherlock thinks, blinking at his retreating back, perhaps he has been too quick to assume that everyone on the ship despises him; perhaps he hasn’t been paying quite enough attention.

However, as he sits alone in the passenger saloon, he is blessedly grateful for the solitude, and he finds himself reflecting how pleasant it would be to eat every meal safe from the eyes of other passengers.

Sherlock eats the cold bread and cheese scarcely tasting it, his eyes fixed on the shimmer of blue beyond the windows, puzzling over the event of the poisoning in his mind. What could be the reason for it? Who would have cause to poison Lieutenant Lestrade?
Sherlock turns a piece of bread over in his hands; considers it without really seeing it.

John said that the dose was not large enough to be lethal, which would imply that someone wanted the Lieutenant out of commission last night, presumably so he would not be aware of certain goings on. But what? What events would need to be kept hidden from the ship’s first lieutenant?

Sherlock finishes his meal, brushes the crumbs from the table, nods his thanks to the porter, and drifts back down the hallway to his room, deep in thought.

Sherlock has no proof of it, but he is sure, as sure as he is of his own bones under his skin, that somehow the captain is responsible.

Sherlock is so lost in thought that it is not until he arrives again before the door of his room that he realizes that the flurry of activity around him is that of the other passengers, busy packing their fine things away into their trunks.

"The crew are coming to take the trunks back down before suppertime. You’ll want to get yours sorted before then,” drawls Amesbury, the snobbish barrister who occupies the cabin directly next to Sherlock, noticing his stare.

Sherlock nods to convey he’s heard and then ducks into his own room before the man sees cause to speak with him again.

A tiny bubble of hope has risen up within him. It could be John—John could be one of the sailors coming to take the trunks back down.

This thought propels Sherlock into motion as he busies himself tidying up the trail of discarded clothing on the floor of his room.

His heart gives a little throb as he takes up each garment and is assailed with the memories of the corresponding removal of each item. Each silk stocking causes a pleasant shiver down the backs of his thighs, the discovery of his crumpled waistcoat beside the bed bringing with it the memory of how John tried to neatly fold it, how Sherlock tore it from his hands and threw it aside. Finally, his neck cloth, coiled in a puddle by the door, sets off a reaction in Sherlock so strong at the memory of John’s lips at his throat that he has to sink down on the bed for a moment to recover himself.

Eventually though, he collects it all, and returns to the hallway where he kneels before his trunk to tuck the fine clothes away inside.

Sherlock’s irritating neighbor is still standing and gawking by his door. He tries as hard as possible to ignore Amesbury’s nosy stare—why the man has cause to stand for hours outside his own cabin is a mystery to Sherlock—and lifts the lid of his trunk.

The contents of his trunk are obscured by the bulk of his folded overcoat, the heavy garment that he has had little cause to wear since leaving England. Sherlock reaches in to move it out of the way so that he may place his other garments underneath, but when he lifts it from the trunk, a flutter of several scraps of paper descend as if from nowhere to land at Sherlock’s knees.

Puzzled, he reaches down to take one in his hand, and upon seeing the torn edges of the paper, knows exactly what it is.

As discreetly as possible, Sherlock gathers all the scraps and stuffs them into the pocket of his waistcoat. Then tucking the remainder of his clothing back in his trunk, he rises to his feet and returns to his room without another word to Amesbury.
Sherlock sits on the edge of his bunk, and piles the stack of paper fragments beside him on the bed. He selects one at random and smoothing the paper open in his hand, he recognizes immediately the small, even lines of his brother’s script.

Holding the torn scrap of paper in his palm, seeing his brother’s familiar neat writing, transports Sherlock back as effectively as though time itself had rearranged the contours of its fabric, back to the grey day all those weeks ago when he had been loaded with the trunk containing all his worldly possessions into the coach that would take him to the harbor where the ship lay at anchor; his mother and father standing apart—his father cold and distant, his mother with her face tucked away against the rain, and Sherlock’s hateful older brother, dressed himself for travel, looking bored, impatient, continuously pulling the watch out of his waistcoat pocket to check the time. He was meant to accompany Sherlock on his journey to Portsmouth, to see him off at the harbor, but Mycroft’s new appointment as secretary to the chief officer of financial affairs had called for his immediate attention in London on urgent business, and so Sherlock would be making the journey by himself.

Sherlock tried to tell himself he didn’t care—that in fact it was a great relief not to be faced with the prospect of staring at Mycroft’s bland and puffy face for two days rattling over miles of uneven road—that he would rather be alone; but the feebleness of this lie, even to himself was undeniable as Sherlock’s misery and solitude and fear ran like a poison river through his heart, blackening his every thought as surely as the rain soaking the back of his neck as it ran off the brim of his hat.

The truth of the matter was so plain Sherlock couldn’t hide from it anymore: His mother and father were happy to be rid of him, and so was Mycroft.

The disinterest of his parents came as no surprise but Mycroft’s abandonment of Sherlock had come as rather a nasty shock. When the subject of Sherlock’s shipment to the East Indies had first arisen, Sherlock had vehemently protested, and he had expected Mycroft to stand by him in acknowledging that the suggestion was a preposterous one. However, much to Sherlock’s horror, Mycroft had been the biggest proponent of the plan, stating that he believed the voyage would do Sherlock “a world of good.” Indeed, it had been due to Mycroft’s insistence that his parents hadn’t completely forgotten about the idea altogether.

The sting Sherlock felt at Mycroft’s betrayal made him aware that there was still some part of him that craved his brother’s approval, that longed for his respect; that wished he could summon one scrap of affection to throw his way, but Sherlock would never admit this to anyone. He had hardly admitted it to himself.

All he knew was that he was filled equally with misery and rage as he climbed into the coach under the spitting rain.

He hunched low into the seat and out of sight as the driver flicked the horses to life. He didn’t want to look back. He had no desire to see their hateful faces ever again. But as the coach turned at the gate onto the road he couldn’t help himself. What if his ship capsized? What if he caught a fever and died? By the time he returned to England, if he ever did, they may well all be dead and cooling in their graves—so Sherlock turned in his seat for a final look at the three lone figures standing by the grand entryway, only to see that they’d all gone back into the house.

None of them had stayed long enough to see the coach leave the drive.

His wounded fury at Mycroft had been the reason Sherlock had so violently torn up the note that he now held the remains of in his hand, the note he had received the night before his ship left its berth.
The night before his voyage began, Sherlock was sitting alone over a grey supper in the tavern where he was boarding, hunched in his cloak, watching the rain pelt the thick glass of the tavern windows, the misery that was lodged cold and hard in his throat preventing him from taking even one bite of his dismal supper when a boy had found him at the table, drenched from the rain, breathless, his cheeks pink from the cold night air. “Mr. Holmes?”

Sherlock looked up without interest. Nothing was able to shake him from his fog of misery.

“I have a letter for you, from a Mycroft Holmes, Esquire.”

Sherlock held his hand out blandly without saying a word.

The boy hesitated.

“Well, give it to me,” Sherlock snapped, his patience worn thin by exhaustion and misery.

“He said to deliver it into your hands alone. That I was to be sure…”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. His brother’s dramatics were apparently only increasing as he climbed his way up through the ranks of the government.

Sherlock pulled a ring from the depths of his purse. “The Holmes signet ring?”

He never wore it but he was careful to keep it with him at all times, per his brother’s instructions. Although in that moment, Sherlock was seized with the desire to throw it in the mud of the alley as soon as he stepped outside. What need did he have for tokens such as these where he was going?

The boy looked at it carefully and then nodded. This seemed to satisfy him.

He pressed the letter into Sherlock’s hand, and Sherlock gave the boy a coin for his trouble and turned his attention to the note. However the boy remained standing where he was.

“What is it?”

“Are you going to eat that, sir?” He pointed to Sherlock’s cooling dinner.

Sherlock shoved the bowl across the table at the boy without another word.

The boy sat and ate hungrily, desperately even, until every bite of the congealing stew had been cleaned from the bowl.

Sherlock felt something in his chest give way at the depth of gratitude in the boy’s face. For one rash moment, Sherlock was tempted to give him the entire contents of his purse, just to spite his brother and his family and everything they stood for, but it was all he had and the days ahead of him were long and unknown so Sherlock kept it although the weight inside his coat felt as heavy to him as an iron chain.

Sherlock tucked the letter in his waistcoat out of sight but he never read it.

The next day, as Sherlock’s coach made its way through the mud of the filthy streets of the harbor town, he discovered the letter, unread, and in a fit of rage, he tore the letter into bits.

If Mycroft had something important to tell him, then he could just as well have told Sherlock himself.

He’d tucked the crumpled pieces of the letter into his overcoat and then completely forgotten all
about it until now.

At the time, Sherlock had been so lost in his own misery that he hadn’t given the matter a second thought but now, Sherlock wonders at his brother’s urgency. Surely, the contents of the letter were important if Mycroft had secured a tavern boy to deliver the letter who had insisted that Sherlock prove himself.

Indeed, Mycroft’s script, usually neat to the point of absurdity, looks messier than usual, suggesting that the message was written in great haste.

Sherlock peers down at the scrap in his hand but the fragment is too small to be of any use in making sense of his brother’s missive.

He sifts through the fragments beside him on the bed, pulls out the largest piece he can find and reads:

—note comes to you. H—is with an ill wind—your hands. I wrote to—it seems that the cap—are to depart tomorrow m—strange circumstances a few—typically not be cause for alarm—take his place at the helm is—little that is good. A captain—war hero but with a spot—ink over such trivial m—through various circles i—to say the least. The—

Overwhelmed with rage at his former self, Sherlock reaches now with frantic fingers to unfold each scrap of crumpled paper and smooth them out upon the bed in the hopes that he can rearrange them into their former order.

Sherlock stares down at the mess before him in hopeless frustration. Some of the fragments are so small and so badly torn, Sherlock seriously doubts whether he can make any sense of them at all. But he has to try.

It takes him the better part of an hour to rearrange the torn bits of paper into any kind of sense. A large part of this time is spent tearing the contents of his trunk apart all over again when it becomes apparent that there are pieces missing. Despite his thorough search, and recovery of one or two more fragments, the disappointing result of all his effort is that the message remains incomplete.

As far as Sherlock can determine, his brother’s letter reads as follows:

My Dear Brother,

I have———your coach has made it to Porstmouth without incident and it is my hope that you are staying as planned at the Horse and Hound by which this note comes to you. How———is with an ill wind———your hands. I wrote to you as soon as I heard the news. It seems that the cap———are to depart tomorrow m———under very strange circumstances only a few days ago———would typically not be cause for alarm———take his place at the helm is———little that is good. A captain—war hero but with a spot———not waste ink over such trivial matters but it has———in London———that the man ———rumors of———too late to secure your passage on another ship, and I am ———to tread cautiously———above all else do not cross the captain in any matters ———your burning desire to assert your intelligence over all those around you who are in positions of authority, but brother, I beg of you, for once in your life, keep your head down and do not cause trouble. The cost of your insolence in this matter could very well mean your life.

I hope this letter finds———health.

———Brother,
Sherlock’s frustration at his former self has never been greater than it is in this moment. From what he can make out, Mycroft wrote to him with some news of the captain, who as John said, came to the position late, due to the fact that the original captain fell gravely ill only days before they were to set sail.

However, every part of the letter that seems as thought it might have contained useful information appears to be missing—gone in the unthinking consequences of Sherlock’s juvenile fury.

Half the fragments probably ended up on the floor of the coach and have long since been swept away, dissolved into meaningless pulp in the mud of that stinking harbor town.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Of course, it would just so happen that the most in tact portion of his brother’s note is the part that contains Mycroft’s warning to “keep his head down” and “not get involved.” Rereading the words, Sherlock can hear Mycroft’s smug, condescending tone as clearly as if he were standing before him.

In an instant, Sherlock’s rage and frustration shift from his sullen former self to his brother.

Knowing Mycroft, the letter probably didn’t contain any kind of valuable information at all—he was probably just writing to Sherlock to warn him to stay out of trouble. He never would have told Sherlock anything interesting.

Well, if Mycroft intended Sherlock to stay out of trouble then Sherlock is dead-set on becoming as involved as he possibly can. He’s determined to speak with Lieutenant Lestrade at once.

Sweeping all the scraps of the letter together, Sherlock stuffs them into the back of the leather-bound book Mycroft gave him before the voyage, and tucks it away out of sight.

As he’s closing his cabin door behind him, he has to duck out of the way of a sailor carrying one of the lady’s trunks toward the stairs. Sherlock recognizes him almost immediately as the boisterous fellow who lost his eye in the Barbary War, who introduced himself to Sherlock last night as Ironsides Jake.

“Afternoon there, Mr. ‘Olmes!” The man calls jovially, catching sight of Sherlock.

“Good afternoon.” Sherlock nods politely, his back still firmly against the door of his room.

“You enjoyed the rest of your evening last night, I trust?”

“Y-Yes, thank you,” Sherlock says, stammering, caught off guard by the appearance of this man who brings with him memories of the magic of the previous evening, of the smoke-filled space between the hammocks, the laughing men, the light of the candles filling everyone’s faces with warmth, the sound of the drum and the pipe transporting Sherlock to another world, and most of all, the memory of John’s face as he watched Sherlock from across the room, transfixed.

“We lost track of you and Johnny… we was wonderin’ where you might have got to…”

The smiling sailor gives Sherlock an exaggerated wink and Sherlock can feel every inch of exposed skin turn beet-red, from the collar of his shirt to the roots of his hair.

Luckily, the grinning man does not wait for Sherlock to scrape together a response but continues
on his way up the stairs, the heavy trunk perched precariously across his narrow shoulders.

Watching his retreating back it occurs to Sherlock that the trunk must weigh nearly half as much as the man and yet he carries it as though it were nothing more than a sack of flour.

Sherlock waits until Jack’s footsteps have vanished up the steps before hurrying after him to look once again for Lieutenant Lestrade.

The air is hotter than before, the sun high in the vivid sky. Several sailors are sitting by the mainmast, mending sails. Sherlock scans the group briefly for a sign of John, and tries to tell himself that his heart doesn’t sink when he doesn’t find him among the assembled sailors.

All the better, Sherlock tells himself firmly, as he makes his way back to the quarterdeck—he can’t afford to be distracted at the moment. It’s imperative that he speaks with Lieutenant Lestrade as soon as possible.

To Sherlock’s profound relief, he finds the Lieutenant still present on the quarterdeck speaking to one of the officers. Mercifully there is no sign of the captain anywhere about.

Sherlock hovers in the shadows at the foot of the stairs, no longer feeling bold enough to dare set foot on the staircase. He waits until Lestrade has finished his conversation with the officer before drifting back into the man’s line of vision.

“Excuse me, Lieutenant?” Sherlock calls up to him, trying to keep his voice as low as possible so as not to attract attention.

Lestrade’s eyes flicker for the source of the speaker for a moment before settling on Sherlock.

“I was wondering if I might have a word?”

Lestrade nods his assent, turning to the helmsman to give him direction before making his way toward the stairs.

Sherlock meets him at the bottom of the staircase. “I wanted to ask you ab—”

But the words haven’t even left Sherlock’s mouth before Lestrade is shaking his head, and putting his hand on Sherlock’s arm in warning.

“Not here,” he mutters in a low voice. “Someone might overhear us. I know another place where we might talk unnoticed.”

With an incline of his head, Lestrade gestures for Sherlock to follow him.

Sherlock does, silently, keeping some distance between himself and the Lieutenant so that it’s not immediately apparent that he’s following him.

The Lieutenant makes his way to the front of the ship, and then, to Sherlock’s surprise, heads down the staircase where John led Sherlock last night, on their way to the sailors’ celebration.

But Sherlock does not question him. He simply follows the Lieutenant without a word, down and around the beams under the stairs, away from the forecastle where the party was held the night before, down to the deck below it where the ship’s cannons line the narrow gallery.

This is where the sailors eat, Sherlock knows, observing with curiosity the boards that they pull down between the cannons, which are currently folded up out of the way.
However, there is no one about now, and they pass no one on their way. Not for the first time, Sherlock marvels that there can be any privacy at all aboard a ship this size. The ship, by no means a small vessel, is so stuffed with people that it’s a wonder to Sherlock that such hidden spaces can exist onboard.

Lestrade leads them to a dark corner under the bulwark at the midsection of the ship. The area is cloaked in shadow and when Lestrade steps into the darkness, Sherlock can only see that he is there thanks to the gleaming buttons on his uniform.

Sherlock steps in beside him.

“I’m sorry for all the secrecy,” Lestrade says in a hushed voice. “But it will soon become clear to you why we have need of it.”

Sherlock nods. The shadows make it so that it is difficult to see the Lieutenant’s face, but even through the darkness he can see that his eyes are ringed with circles, his skin is pale and wan.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better, thank you. Much better than I would be feeling had you and Watson not intervened when you did. I’m glad you came to find me today because I want to thank you. I am certain now that your medical friend was right. I would have died had he not intervened in time. I owe both of you my life.”

“It was nothing.”

“No.” Lestrade’s eyes are hard. “It really wasn’t. That’s one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you. You put both of your lives at risk just by coming to my aid. There’s still the possibility that whoever made me ill did so with the intention of killing me. If that was their intent, they are by now well aware that they didn’t succeed. If they know that either of you tried to help me the two of you could be in very real danger.”

Sherlock feels a prickle of dread creep down the back of his neck at the Lieutenant’s words. He cannot help but think of the captain’s gaze on him earlier up on deck.

Sherlock leans in. “Lieutenant, I wanted to speak with you because I have reason to believe—”

He hesitates.

The words he is about to utter are dangerous on any ship, possibly more dangerous than any words that can be spoken at sea. And although he feels as though he can trust Lestrade, he has very little basis for that trust other than the fact that he knows Lestrade played a part in allowing John to come to his aid when Sherlock was sick. Even so, to confide in Lestrade in the way that he is about to is a very great risk.

“What is it?” The Lieutenant’s voice is full of tension. “I can assure you that we will not be overheard here. Whatever you need to say, I advise you to say it now.”

“There is something I must tell you however… before I do so I must be certain that I have your trust. I… I feel already that I can trust you after what you did for me in allowing John Watson to look in on me when I was ill.” Sherlock draws a breath and hurries on. “But what I am about to tell you could be considered insubordination of the worst kind. Therefore, I must ask for your word that you will repeat to no one what I am about to tell you.”

Lestrade nods once, deeply. “You have my word.”
The empty gun deck is at Sherlock’s back so he cannot see if anyone should approach but he trusts that Lestrade is keeping a watchful eye.

Sherlock ducks his head closer to Lestrade’s ear, careful to keep his voice as low as possible. “I received a letter from my brother the night before the ship left port—he gave it to me at the last minute and—” Sherlock hesitates briefly over how to explain the embarrassing fact that he tore the letter up in a fit of juvenile fury. He decides to leave that detail unmentioned. “This letter did not come to my attention until just now, today, as I was going to put my evening clothes back into my trunk. Unfortunately, the letter was damaged so I could not make out the entirety of its contents, however, what was utterly apparent even from what I could make out, was that there is reason to doubt the captain’s intentions.”

Sherlock feels Lestrade give a gentle start of shock and lean back slightly. “Now listen, Holmes…”

“I am well aware of the danger I put you in by even broaching the subject. I realize I risk my own life as well as yours in bringing this matter to your attention. But there was talk also, before the party yesterday evening, one of the passenger’s—Ferguson is his name—he seemed to imply that the captain had ulterior motives for throwing the party last night. It wouldn’t have caught my attention if not for another man trying his hardest to keep him quiet. There may be some quarrel between them, but it is highly suspect that this man Ferguson would have cause to doubt the captain’s motives in the first place. What makes the matter all the more strange is the fact that he was right to suggest that the captain would not appear at the festivities. Did you see him at the party last night? At any point?”

Lestrade shakes his head. “No. Only just before. When he gave the last calculations up on deck.”

“And what—if I may ask—is your opinion of the captain?”

Lestrade frowns, considering. “He’s certainly a strange man. I have sailed with many captains and never have I been at the helm with a man so… mercurial. When he’s not yelling at the officers and the crew, he keeps to himself. Indeed, I barely speak with him. As far as I can tell he hardly speaks to anyone. And yes, I have heard the rumors too about the strange circumstances under which Captain Adams fell ill before the voyage. He was not an old man, nor was he inclined to illness. I believe they were still searching for the cause of it when we left port.”

The wheels in Sherlock’s mind are turning rapidly as he takes in what Lestrade has said. It only confirms his suspicions.

“How did he seem?” Sherlock presses. “The captain—this morning when you returned to work, did he seem surprised?”

“I—” Lestrade pauses to reflect. “It’s difficult to tell with him. His temperament is frequently sullen and disinterested. I cannot say that it was any different this morning.”

“Did he notice that you looked unwell? Did he comment on your appearance?”

Lestrade shakes his head. “No. No, he made no comment other than to ask whether I had enjoyed myself at the festivities the previous evening.”

“And what did you say?”

“I told him that I had, very much.”

“You did not mention the poisoning?”
“No.”

“Good.” Sherlock is silent for a moment as he prepares to utter the words that may well be the most dangerous words he has ever spoken. “It is my belief that the captain is responsible for your poisoning.”

Lestrade’s face goes grey. His voice is a vicious whisper. “Why would the captain want to poison his first officer?”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock says, shaking his head. “He must want you out of the way for some reason. Or wanted you out of the way yesterday evening.”

“Now listen here, Holmes, you can’t simply make an accusation like that without any evidence—”

But Sherlock’s mind is already racing on ahead of himself. It’s obvious that the captain wanted to throw the party to distract the passengers and officers from some business that he had to carry out, and whatever it was, it was serious enough to demand that the ship’s first officer not learn about it, at all costs.

But what? What could he be doing that necessitated such a high level of secrecy?

“What is this ship’s cargo?” Sherlock demands.

The question seems to catch Lestrade off guard. “Well, the ordinary things. Textiles. Steel—”

The sound of voices coming down the stairs at the far end of the gallery causes Lestrade to stop talking abruptly.

Both men stand utterly still until the owners of the voices head in the opposite direction and the sound of their conversation gradually becomes indistinguishable again.

Lestrade draws an urgent step closer to Sherlock, putting his head down next to Sherlock’s ear and speaking low and quickly. “Listen to me, Holmes. What you are implying is—as you’ve said—a risk to your life simply by virtue of the fact that you have mentioned it. Under gentler command, this kind of talk is dangerous—it could mean you spend some time in irons. But on this ship, under this captain, your suggestion of the matter guarantees you will hang, likely without trial.”

Sherlock feels a sharp twinge of annoyance that the Lieutenant’s words should sound so similar to the explicit warning in the letter from his brother.

Lestrade must sense Sherlock’s insolence from his silence because he continues, his voice slightly pleading.

“Please don’t misunderstand me. I appreciate what you have done for me more than I can say, however, that does not change the fact that whoever it is that wishes me ill—whether it’s the captain, or some other party—must know by now that I had help. I am hopeful that they do not know who it was that helped me, but there is always the chance that they do. So please, for this reason, whatever you do, be careful. And for the love of god don’t mention any of your suspicions
to anyone but me.”

Sherlock has no intention of remaining uninvolved. However he realizes that the Lieutenant will not let the matter rest until he agrees, so he nods once, to show that he has understood.

He can see the evidence of Lestrade’s relief in the relaxing line of his shoulders. “Good. I think it’s better for all of us if the whole matter is forgotten as quickly as possible. Let us not speak of it again.”

Sherlock nods once more, suddenly grateful for the darkness, as he is confident that the poor lighting hides the tightness at the corners of his mouth, what would otherwise be a sure betrayal of his irritation at being told to forget the issue so completely.

“I better get back up top.”

Sherlock steps back to let the Lieutenant by.

“However, I think it’s best if we are not seen together returning to the deck. Will you wait several minutes until I have returned before going back up?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.” Lestrade takes a step in the direction of the staircase but before he leaves he puts a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. “And please pass along my thanks to Mr. Watson. I wanted to express my gratitude in person but I think it’s best if none of us are seen in conversation for the time being.”

Sherlock inclines his head solemnly. “I will.”

“Don’t forget what I told you. Be careful, Holmes.”

Sherlock nods again, and Lestrade, seemingly satisfied with this, turns and heads toward the staircase at the end of the gun deck.

Sherlock waits a good ten minutes after Lestrade’s departure before he heads back the way they came, weaving his way around the massive, silent cannons, and the casks of supplies that are stored in and around them. He imagines what this part of the ship must look like in wartime, men running every which way, yelling orders, covering their ears and ducking out of the way of the leaping cannons, the air acrid with the bitter smell of gunpowder.

Although he does not yet have the evidence to prove it Sherlock is certain that the captain is responsible for Captain Adams’ sudden illness. If the man has a hand for poisoning—which he clearly does—it would make sense that he aimed to get rid of the other captain in the same manner with which he tried to incapacitate Lieutenant Lestrade. But what Sherlock can’t figure out is what motive a wartime captain like Roberts would have for commandeering a merchant ship to the East Indies.

He cannot possibly arrive at a solution with the limited information that he has at hand—he needs more evidence, for which he will have to go looking, his brother’s warnings and the Lieutenant’s cautions be damned.

Sherlock is so deep in thought over the puzzle of the captain’s motives that it is not until he is back up on deck in the open air that he recognizes the sounds of shouting, and looking over, sees a crowd of sailors gathered to one side of the deck.
There is a mood of concentrated excitement around the men—some of them are leaning so far over the railing it looks as though they might pitch over the side into the water—and many of them are whooping and hollering words of encouragement to what Sherlock can only guess must be someone down below.

Sherlock recognizes Billy, who’s bent forward with his head between the bars. He comes to a halt beside him to ask the boy what’s going on.

“Billy? What’s all this?”

Billy turns back to look at Sherlock, his face shining with excitement. “It’s a bet, Mr. Holmes! Mr. MacTavish offered a wager of five pounds if John Watson could go down the side of the ship, strike off into the water without a net, and come back onboard again.”

“What?”

“See for yourself! He’s on his way back now!” Billy points down into the water, and there, carving through the water like part of the ocean itself, is John, swimming back through the crystal blue waves toward the side of the ship.

Sherlock’s heart is in his throat.

John’s body looks miniscule in the vast expanse of open-ocean and he is far, too far from the side of the ship for Sherlock’s liking.

“But why would he…?”

“If a man is issued a wager of five pounds, he can’t rightly turn it down, Mr. Holmes. Not if he wants to retain any kind of self-respect.”

Sherlock turns to the source of the reassuring voice and sees the matter-of-fact face of one of the sailors who introduced himself yesterday below decks as Mr. Burns.

“Especially not John Watson,” the man adds with a low chuckle. “If ever there was a risk-taker—and I’ve known many in my day—he goes by the name of John Watson. Never known that man to say no to a bet. The trick of course is getting back on board without arousing the attention of the sharks.”

“Oh my god.” Sherlock clings to the railing under his hands, his eyes trained on the golden dot of John’s head moving through the water back toward the ship.

“Don’t you worry,” Burns says, clapping Sherlock on the shoulder with formidable strength. “John is as strong a swimmer as ever I saw. He’ll be alright.”

John is now only several yards from the side of the ship, but as far as Sherlock is concerned every inch of ocean water between John and the hull is too many. Sherlock’s mind is a litany of silent pleas as he leans forward over the railing, his stomach churning in fear. Why? Why would he do a thing so reckless?

“COME ON JOHNNY!”

“Hurry up now! Them sharks is lookin’ mighty hungry!”

The men are jovial, hitting each other on the back and laughing—none of them seem concerned that John won’t make it, that he’ll be swept away in a rogue current, or that one of the rumored but
not-yet-visible sharks will make itself known by taking a bite out of John’s side.

Sherlock is sick with fear, clutching the railing as though his life depended on it.

It is only a matter of seconds before John touches the side of the ship and the men erupt into triumphant cheers.

Sherlock lets out a breath he didn’t even realize he was holding, his body going weak with relief.

“Hey there,” Sherlock feels a much gentler touch on his shoulder, and turns to see Burns, watching him closely with something like sympathy in his eyes. “You were really worried about him, weren’t you?”

Sherlock can only nod weakly, his eyes fixed on John’s lean body as it emerges, dripping, from the water, whole and uninjured, unable to take his eyes from the sight of John, pulling himself up hand-over-hand with the help of a rope, walking up the side of the ship as easily as anything.

When John reaches the railing, he rises to his full height and pauses for a moment to look down at the men as they break into a chorus of renewed shouts, his face lit up in a triumphant smile, bare chest heaving slightly from the exertion, the gold of the late-afternoon sunlight glinting off his wet hair, and it occurs to Sherlock, not for the first time, just how impossible John Watson is, with his impeccable balance, bare feet gripping the railing with ease, the light pouring out of him until Sherlock is not certain whether it is John that is responsible for his brilliance, or the sun at his back.

Sherlock’s fears of a moment ago now feel completely ridiculous. This John standing above them is clearly invincible, he is immortal—he cannot be defeated by war, or cannon fire, not even the rage of the sea can tame him. If a shark had tried to take a bite out of him, John probably would have wrestled it into submission before it even opened its mouth.

Of course Sherlock knows this—how could he have forgotten?

Someone offers John a hand, and John reaches down and takes it, leaping, laughing into the center of the crowd, and then someone is clapping him on the back between the shoulder blades with a stinging sound, while another sailor ruffles his hair with rough affection, and a third thrusts his own shirt into his empty hands.

Sherlock retreats to the back of the boisterous crowd, feeling suddenly small and pale and insignificant in the face of so much raucous glory.

“Well go on then, MacTavish!” Someone shouts. “Pay up!”

“Here, here!”

Sherlock recognizes the large burly figure of the red-bearded sailor with the mermaid tattoo on his forearm shuffling forward to the heart of the crowd, looking somewhat sheepish.

Sherlock sees John, shirt now draped around his shoulders, shaking the wet hair out of his eyes before placing his hands on his hips and turning to face the significantly larger man. “That’s right. Time to put your money where your mouth is, friend.”

His mouth is unsmiling but Sherlock can see the spark of humor in John’s eyes even from where he stands.

MacTavish reaches into his jacket to pull out his purse. “What was it, we said? Three was it?”
John drops his chin and crosses his arms over his chest.

It’s preposterous—John is a third the other man’s size, half-naked, unarmed, soaking wet, and yet the raw power in his regard is enough to make the other man visibly quail before his gaze.

He doesn’t need to say a word; the look on his face speaks volumes.

“Er… that’s right. It was five, wasn’t it? Yes, I do believe we agreed on five.”

MacTavish pulls out the coins, fastidiously counting them several times before dropping them into John’s outstretched palm.

The assembled crowd watches the entire proceedings with careful attention, the tension of the moment evident in their silence.

As soon as the last coin is pressed into John’s waiting fist, John curls his fingers around the money, and looks up at MacTavish with a blinding grin.

Sherlock feels all the air leave his lungs in a single breath, just as he can feel the tension go out of the crowd at that simple change in John’s expression.

“Lovely,” John says, tucking the money into the pocket of his soaking trousers and out of sight. “I’m so glad you saw sense, Angus. I was worried we’d have to discuss the matter over fists.”

He reaches up to clip the other man on the shoulder good-naturedly, and MacTavish beams back at him.

“Ahh Johnny, you know I’m good for it.”

The crowd moves with John as he makes his way toward the front of the ship and Sherlock shrinks into the shadow of the mast, feeling hesitant, uncertain of how to make his way through the sea of people to catch John’s attention.

The crowd is so raucous and moving so quickly that Sherlock decides it isn’t worth the effort. Even if he could squeeze his way through to get close to John, what would he say in front of all these people?

Sherlock turns toward the staircase at the aft of the ship, feeling sullen and hateful, angry at himself for his jealousy over the attention of the other sailors. It’s ridiculous to feel jealous—John didn’t even see him there, it’s not John’s fault. Besides, Sherlock reminds himself bitterly, he is not the only person John thinks about.

Unlike Sherlock, John has other things, other people to occupy his mind. It hasn’t even been a full day since they parted after all. John probably hasn’t had time to even miss Sherlock yet, unlike Sherlock who spent half the day mooning over John’s absence.

Sherlock’s cheeks burn hot at the memory of his desperate pleas from earlier this morning, his chest filling with shame.

John probably doesn’t even want to see him tonight; maybe he wants to spend time with the crew, maybe he wants to play cards and drink with his messmates, like any other sailor.

It’s fine, Sherlock tells himself, although the words resound with bitterness even inside his own head. There’s nothing to be upset about.
Sherlock is just putting his hand on the railing of the staircase, his entire body vibrating with misery at the possibility that he will not get to see John tonight, when he hears his own name being shouted over the din of the crowd.

Sherlock turns, searching for the source of the shout, and is momentarily disoriented by the light of the setting sun cutting into his eyes. He takes two unsteady steps toward the starboard railing, a hand thrown up over his eyes to block out the glare of the sun, and all of his misery vanishes in a single heartbeat as he sees John Watson walking towards him in a blaze of light, shirt still thrown around his shoulders, his mouth stretched wide in a brilliant smile, gold hair dripping down into his eyes.

John reaches Sherlock in two strides, leaning in toward Sherlock with casual grace to place one hand on the railing between them, until he has made a pseudo cage around Sherlock with his body.

John’s smile could set the whole ship aflame.

His voice is low and sweet as honey. “Hello there, Beautiful.”

Sherlock’s heart is pounding so hard he feels light-headed.

He licks dry lips. “Hello.” His voice sounds frail to his own ears.

“Did you see me win my bet?”

Sherlock nods, his worry and his awe and his relief all struggling for dominance on his face.

“And what did you think?”

Sherlock can hardly respond—he’s so overwhelmed by the presence of this soaking-wet, half-naked John leaning into his personal space, his blue eyes fixed on Sherlock with unwavering scrutiny, bright and searching.

Sherlock watches a bead of water make its leisurely way down the edge of John’s jaw, and shuts his eyes.

“I think…” Sherlock remembers how his chest tightened with fear at the sight of John as he swam toward the side of the ship, how small he looked in all that endless ocean, how powerless. Sherlock draws a shaking breath. “You’re a madman.”

Sherlock can hear John’s grin grow wider, even with his eyes closed, and he resists the urge to open them to see if he is right.

“Is that all?”

John leans closer. Sherlock knows because suddenly he can smell John; suddenly he is awash in the sharp, masculine, salt bright smell of him, and oh, Sherlock’s mouth is watering, and now he cannot open his eyes because if he does he knows he will not be able to resist the urge to bend down and lick the trail of water off of John’s torso, all the way from his belly button to the hollow of his gleaming throat.

“No,” Sherlock manages, swallowing hard.

“And why, may I ask, didn’t you come say hello?”

Sherlock opens his eyes at this question because he can hear—underneath the bravado—what
sounds like a trace of real sorrow in John’s voice.

Their eyes connect and at the look in John’s eyes, tender, loving, playful—slightly hurt—Sherlock feels all at once how foolish he was to doubt.

“I thought—” Sherlock begins but then stops, suddenly ashamed at his conviction that John might already be tired of him. The words seem to stick in his throat. “I thought you wouldn’t want to see me.”

“Why would you think that?”

Sherlock can hear the wounded incredulity in John’s voice and his shame doubles in force.

How to explain that his self-doubt is something that is with him always, like a shadow he cannot shake? That his self-worth is so fragile it can apparently fall apart under the influence of a single poisonous thought worming its way into his brain?

“I—”

Sherlock opens his mouth to answer but is interrupted by a loud holler and several shrill whistles from behind them.

“Don’t believe a word he tells you, lad!”

“Our John can sweet-talk the bristles off a coconut but that doesn’t make a single word of it true!”

“You should see him when we reach a new port—the ladies are lining the docks even before we’ve laid anchor.”

“How do you think he earned his nickname—Three Continents Watson?”

“OYE!”

It only takes one word.

By the time John has turned around to glare at his raucous crewmates, they’ve already headed, laughing, in the direction of the stairs. But when John turns back to look at Sherlock, in addition to the anger that’s clear on his face, Sherlock can see his cheeks are pink with embarrassment.

Sherlock is momentarily stunned—he’s never seen John get embarrassed before.

“Sorry about that,” John mutters, not meeting Sherlock’s eyes. “They’re idiots—the lot of them. They’ve had far too much to drink this afternoon.”

Sherlock looks at the thin line of John’s mouth, which seems to have grown smaller with his fury, and feels something inside him melt.

Sherlock wants so badly to reach out and take John’s hand but he can’t, not out here on the deck in broad daylight.

John still won’t meet his gaze. Sherlock can see the water beaded on the lashes of his downcast eyes; Sherlock wants to kiss them dry.

John’s voice has grown stiff, formal. “Please accept my apologies on their behalf.”

“John—”
John looks up at the note of urgency in Sherlock’s voice.

“You don’t need to apologize.”

As Sherlock studies John’s upturned face, he notices, for the first time, that there is a fresh cut on John’s cheek, just below his eye.

There was no cut on John’s face this morning when he left Sherlock’s room.

Sherlock draws a sudden breath, lifting his hand to gesture toward John’s cheek. “John, what—?”


At the establishment of this minor point of contact between them—the touch of John’s fingers on Sherlock’s wrist, so simple, so innocent—the fragile thread of Sherlock’s self-control snaps. He can feel the world shift, the roar of his desire suddenly drowning out every other thought.

The press of John’s warm fingers seems to awake in him the memory of every touch John has ever given him, and Sherlock shivers in spite of the sun, his skin erupting into goose bumps, his breathing going shallow.

“John.” Sherlock starts forward, his voice pleading. “Will you—?”

“Yes.” John answers before Sherlock has even finished speaking. “Yes, I will. I just—” John looks over his shoulder in the direction of the stairs leading down into the forecastle, and his face is agonized, as though the gesture actually pains him. “I need to go below and get cleaned up. I still have work to do before the sun goes down.”

He turns to look back at Sherlock.

The tension between their bodies is like a living force, vibrating with possibility. Sherlock can almost see it, like the shimmer of heat that’s visible on summer days. It’s as though the warmth of both their bodies is filling up the space. Sherlock’s face feels hot and for the first time today it’s not because of embarrassment.

They are standing too close together. Sherlock should take a step back. If anyone were to see them... But he can’t bear to. John is breathing hard and fast, the sound of it loud between them.

“I have to wait until dark. As soon as it’s dark…” John’s eyes are like a flash of sunlight on the water. “I’ll come to you.”

Sherlock nods to show he’s understood because words are beyond him now. His throat is too tight.

“I’ve got to go.”

Sherlock licks his lips and drops back a step. It takes all his effort to do so. “Yes. Yes, you should go.”

There is someone who has paused across the deck, someone watching them. Sherlock can feel it as sure as he could feel the captain’s eyes on him earlier today. He holds himself very still, his posture perfectly upright, forces himself not to look.

John takes the hint, his body language changing in an instant—the looseness in his posture, the inward tilt toward Sherlock resolving back into his natural gait, upright, broad-shouldered,
confident.

“Until tonight,” he says, the words so low Sherlock almost doesn’t catch them, the look in his eyes filled, unmistakably with heat, and then he’s turning and making his way back across the deck, and disappearing down the staircase.

It’s not until John is out of sight that Sherlock turns to look and see who has stopped to watch them from across the deck, and when he does, all the heat in Sherlock’s body turns to ice.

Anderson is standing, watching him, unmoving. There is something about his utter stillness, the unwavering quality of his stare that makes Sherlock’s skin crawl. His face is vivid with bruises from where Sherlock hit him yesterday; the skin around his nose badly swollen, and Sherlock cannot help but experience a savage jolt of pleasure at the knowledge that he is responsible for the violent markings on Anderson’s injured face.

But his pleasure—however vicious—is short-lived as Anderson refuses to break his gaze, even after Sherlock stares back at him with all the hatred he can muster, his own mouth convulsing to a sneer. Even then, Anderson goes on staring, the cold fury in his eyes so unpleasant that finally it is Sherlock who is forced to look away and retreat, with hurried footfalls, toward the staircase at the back of the ship.

Even after he has reached the flimsy solitude of his cabin, his back pressed solidly against the door, even then he cannot shake the memory of the cold, unwavering fixedness of Anderson’s stare, its presence as heavy, as unwelcome as a hand on Sherlock’s skin.
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock are reunited once again. What do you think happens?

Chapter Notes

MERRY CHRISTMAS MY BEAUTIFUL BUNNIES!

This last month has been a particularly difficult one for me- then things got better and then I was traveling (still am) and my computer's falling apart soooo for a number of reasons I have had very little time/ability to write. This chapter was going to be much longer but I figured... eh, why not just post what I have so far? I figured you would all appreciate having something to read in the interim while I try and whip the rest of this chapter into shape. Also, it's Christmas! So think of it as my little holiday gift to you, whether you celebrate Christmas or not. I hope you enjoy it!

Sherlock does not go to dinner.

It's not because he’s afraid of seeing Anderson again—no, it isn’t that at all, he tells himself firmly, and only half-believes it—it’s because he feels too tense and jittery, too hot, too full of feeling after those brief moments on the deck with John.

His heart has not stopped pounding since John approached all lean and wet and smelling of the ocean, bright gold and shimmering like the sun itself, his longing for Sherlock pouring off of him in waves.

How foolish, how foolish Sherlock was to think that John would rather not come see him if he could, that John would rather drink with this friends then come to Sherlock’s bed—Sherlock shivers even as he thinks the words, and falls, hard, into the chair beside his desk, legs as weak as water. He thinks of the sorrow so plain in John’s voice and feels the ache of his regret still sharp within him.

He will make it up to John, he thinks fiercely. As soon as John is here, he will show John just how much he missed him.

After dark, John said. He will come to Sherlock after dark.

Sunset is still an hour away at least, Sherlock realizes in a burst of agony. There must be something he can do to occupy himself while he waits, otherwise, he surely will go mad.

Sherlock hunches forward over his desk, his hands buried with frustration in his hair, casting his eyes around the room for anything to take his mind off of the minutes crawling by.

Luck is with him. His eyes alight on the stack of pages that he tucked out of sight yesterday
afternoon before the party—was it really only yesterday? It feels like eons ago—the neatly copied pages of his composition.

Sherlock pulls them out and begins flipping through them, running through the music in his mind. It occurs to him now that the ending is all wrong—the movement with the second violins—no, that isn’t right. That isn’t right at all.

He pulls out his pen and ink, almost spilling it in his haste to wet the nib, and begins scratching out notes to write new ones in.

He finds himself filled with a burst of inspiration as the melodies from the night before, the rhythms of the reels and jigs, unspool within him. He thinks of the sound of that curious drum, the way the stick beat so fast against the skin—how that music made him feel, the raw power in it, how it seemed to stop his breath, so much like the way John made him feel when Sherlock saw him climbing up the side of the ship, the muscles in his arms gleaming as he pulled his body up with just the strength of his arms.

The notes are appearing so fast in Sherlock’s mind that his fingers can’t keep up. He reaches for a fresh sheaf of pages to mark down the unstoppable stream of new music that is welling up within him.

This piece of music is about John, and Sherlock has so much new information about him since the day before. He’s now seen John in action as a surgeon—bent low over Lestrade, brow furrowed in concentration, one nimble-fingered hand reaching into his medical bag to draw out an instrument, every action graceful, filled with confident assurance; he’s seen John in revelry—the way he can command the attention of everyone in the room with his easy laugh, the low cadence of his voice in song—the way he seems to grow brighter in the presence of their open affection.

All of this fills Sherlock’s mind as the music rises up within him like a tide, the memories of John mingling with his memories of the music from last night; the beat of the drum, the reedy, haunting notes of the whistle, and the sweet sonorous sound of his violin moving in him to create something unlike any piece of music he’s ever written.

And of course, that isn’t all that’s new that he’s learned of John—he now knows John, also, as a lover.

He thinks of John stretched out beside him, the heat of John’s body, the power of it under his hands—the way John’s mouth felt against him, the low sounds he made when Sherlock touched him.

Sherlock feels his cheeks heat and bites his lip, pressing his pen so hard against the page that he makes a blot across the last three measures.

Cursing lightly under his breath, Sherlock sits back a moment to wipe at the sweat on his brow.

It’s hot in Sherlock’s cabin.

Now that they’ve entered the tropics, the heat is an ever-present reminder that they are very far from the cold and foggy shores of England. Sherlock does not mind it; for the most part it’s an improvement over the stinging rains and bitter cold that he has grown accustomed to. But tonight, the air feels close and stifling, and he finds himself longing for a window in his narrow berth so that he could feel the cooling touch of the evening air.

The best he can do is to remove his jacket, pull off his neck cloth, and roll up the sleeves of his shirt. It helps a little but the more Sherlock thinks about John, the hotter he gets, until the sweat is
dripping off his forehead onto the pages of his composition.

He writes furiously, feverishly—like a man in a trance—for how long he does not know, but suddenly he is aware that the light in his room is so dim he can scarcely see the page beneath him.

He is just rising to light the candle on his desk when a gentle knock sounds at his door.

Sherlock starts like a rabbit at the sound of the hunter’s rifle. He drops the matches he was holding, almost tripping over the chair in his eagerness to reach the door.

He pulls the door open, heart-pounding, terrified in the instant before he does that it will not be John at all but Anderson, or some other passenger come to disturb him.

All of his breath leaves him in relief at the sight of John’s sun-browned face beaming at him through the dimness of the corridor.

John inclines his head in a formal greeting, the light from the candle in Sherlock’s room shining gold off of his hair as he bows his head.

“Good evening,” he says in a low voice before looking up at Sherlock with a grin.

Sherlock’s heart flips over in his chest, and he is so spellbound by the sight of John really there outside his door that he is completely motionless for several pounding heartbeats.

John’s smile lifts at one corner in amusement. “May I come in?”

Sherlock snaps back to life, stepping quickly to one side to let John pass; mortified that one of John’s smiles should cause him to forget all his manners. “Yes, of course. Come in, come in.”

John steps in at Sherlock’s invitation, moving past Sherlock without touching him but close enough that Sherlock can feel the air move as he passes. He shuts the door behind him with a click.

John turns to look at him and his smile in the candlelight seems to flicker with his delight.

“How are you?” he asks, in that same low voice that seems to pull at Sherlock’s belly as though it’s connected to it with an invisible thread.

“I’m—I’m fine,” Sherlock stammers, in awe all over again at the effect that John can have on him, just from being within arm’s reach.

John has changed since Sherlock saw him up on deck; he’s in a worn blue linen shirt, the color faded, the fabric soft with age, but the color of it brings out the blue in John’s eyes, makes them shine a deep indigo. His sleeves are rolled up to reveal the cords of muscle in his golden arms; his jacket is slung over one of his hands. He’s no longer dripping wet but Sherlock can see the salt stains on his temples from the ocean water, and his hair looks softer than usual. Sherlock wants to touch it.

Sherlock can hardly think what to say; he’s suddenly overcome with nervousness. He can scarcely believe that it was just this morning that he and John lay naked in each other’s arms in this very cabin.

Sherlock blushes hotly at the memory.

He finds he does not know what to do with his hands.

“Would you—would you like some water?” Sherlock flushes deepens at the utter banality of this
offer, but he cannot think what else to say, what else he has that he can give to John.

John throws back his head and laughs, and Sherlock feels some of his nervousness dissolve at the sound. “That’s very kind of you.” He’s smiling at Sherlock in a way that looks as though he’s trying to keep his mouth serious but the smile just keeps finding its way back onto his face. It’s infectious. Sherlock feels his own lips twitch. “Yes, thank you. I’d love some.”

John gestures towards the chair in front of Sherlock’s desk. “May I?”

“Oh, yes. Please. Sit.”

John is like a breath of fresh air in the close space of Sherlock’s cabin. Everything about him is cool and clean and blue. His neat appearance makes Sherlock painfully aware of his own less than pristine state of dress, of the damp hair on his forehead, and the way his shirt is sticking to his back with sweat. He wishes that he had at least had the foresight to change his shirt.

John moves to sit, and as he does so, Sherlock sees what John’s jacket had hidden from view; John is holding a dusky bottle in his hand.

“We could also drink this,” John says, with a mischievous grin, holding it up. “I don’t know much about wine but Styles assures me it’s a very good vintage.”

“How did you—?”

“One of the lads who lost the bet, he didn’t have wages he could offer me, so I accepted this in lieu of payment.”

Sherlock stares at John in utter shock. The mysterious abilities and accomplishments of John Watson are boundless, he realizes. There really isn’t anything that John can’t do.

John is already pulling out the cork with his teeth. “I didn’t bring any glasses though, so we’ll have to share a cup if that’s alright with you.”

Sherlock nods, speechless, the water he has offered John completely forgotten, as he sinks down on the bed to sit opposite John.

“It’s either that or drink straight from the bottle.”

John grins at Sherlock again and Sherlock is very glad that he is sitting down. The promise in that smile makes his knees go weak.

The energy between them that was there up on deck is between them still, shimmering, hot—like a wall of flame, like a living thing twisting its way up Sherlock’s spine, making him feel dizzy and light-headed, shivering, hot and cold at once.

“We can use my cup,” he says, reaching for it, his heartbeat pounding hard in the base of his throat as he leans over.

Sherlock passes it to John who fills it halfway with the deep red liquid, before passing it back to Sherlock for the first drink.

John raises the bottle in a silent toast as Sherlock lifts the cup to his lips.

“To your health,” John says, and Sherlock can scarcely take a drink without spilling, his fingers are shaking so hard.
He does drink, deeply; feels John’s eyes on him all the while, watching the movement of his throat as he swallows.

He lowers the cup, licks his lips; sees John lean slightly forward in his chair, and when he passes the cup to John, the brush of John’s fingers over his own make Sherlock start so violently that he almost does spill the wine then, but he scarcely notices because John’s eyes still haven’t left his.

“John—” he begins.

“Yes?” John says, before he’s even finished, the cup frozen in the air between them, still held by both their hands.

“You look… you look good,” he stammers, feeling his cheeks flush with embarrassment as his words utterly fail to convey what he’s trying to say. He tries again. “I mean, you look nice, tonight… your—your blue shirt.”

Sherlock stammers to a halt, and bites his lip. His face is on fire.

“My blue shirt?” John asks quietly, grinning, his tongue coming out to trace one corner of his smiling mouth. “Do you like it?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says and lets go of his hold on the cup to drop his eyes into his lap.

“I’m glad,” John says and Sherlock feels John lean a little closer still.

There isn’t much space between Sherlock’s desk and his bed, and sitting opposite John now they’re close enough that if Sherlock shifted only slightly, their knees would brush.

“I missed you today,” Sherlock says, painfully aware of the longing plain in his voice. He keeps his gaze firmly affixed in his lap, embarrassed.

“Did you?” John asks, and there is something in the cadence of those two words that seems to respond to Sherlock, something lilting, something lifting, something equally filled with longing.

“I couldn’t—” Sherlock is encouraged by what he hears in John’s voice, but he is still too shy to look up and confirm it. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I couldn’t… I couldn’t think of anything else.”

John has taken the cup of wine from Sherlock but he hasn’t raised it to his mouth—it remains forgotten in his hand.

“What did you do all day?” he asks, his voice soft, filled with genuine curiosity.

“I…” Sherlock dares a look up at John’s face and his breath catches in his throat. “Thought of you mostly,” he admits, cheeks flushing hot as he thinks back to what he did this morning just after John left.

“You did?” John asks, setting the cup of wine on the desk beside him, untouched, his eyes only for Sherlock, all for Sherlock. His voice is growing breathless. “What did you think about?”

Sherlock is squirming where he sits, remembering how he buried his face in the pillow and thought of John, how he couldn’t resist touching himself.

“I…” He darts a nervous hand up to his mouth, worrying the edge of his bottom lip with his finger, unsure as to the source of the gesture, but compelled to do it, and John catches hold of his wrist,
stilling the movement.

“What’s this?” John breathes, pulling Sherlock’s fingers towards him, cradling them gently between both his hands, uncurling Sherlock’s fingers one by one to study the length of them.

Sherlock’s fingers, he realizes, are covered in ink-stains.

“I was… composing.”

John’s eyes, as they slide up towards Sherlock’s from his hands, are so filled with tender passion that Sherlock is certain that if he keeps looking into them he will catch fire.

“Oh god, you brilliant thing.”

John’s voice is as near to a caress as any touch Sherlock has ever felt and he gasps softly at the sound of it, leans forward on the bed until his knees brush John’s.

“It… it isn’t finished yet but when it is…” Sherlock swallows hard, studying his long white fingers, curled lovingly against John’s palm. His eyes flicker back up to John’s. “When it is, I’ll play it for you. I want you to hear it.”

“God, Sherlock…”

Sherlock feels John’s hands tighten on his fingers as he says it, and he can no longer stand the distance between them. He clutches back at John’s hands, holding tightly, so tightly John looks up at him in surprise.

“I missed you,” he says again, this time not bothering to disguise the ache in his voice, the ache in his chest that he’s felt all day, that feels as though it’s tearing a hole open inside of him, that only now might be filled by John’s hands in his.

“I know,” John says, and Sherlock knows now for certain that he’s not imagining the breathless quality in John’s voice, the ache to match his own.

“It was only a day, I know,” Sherlock rattles on, aware that he’s speaking more than he’d like to, but unable to stop the torrent of words that have been burning at the brink of his lips all day, waiting to burst forth. “But I couldn’t stop thinking about you. Your hands, your mouth… the way your body felt against mine…” Sherlock hesitates at the sound of John’s indrawn breath, his eyes darting up to hold John’s. “That’s all I could think about.”

John’s breathing has grown ragged, his fingers tense against Sherlock’s where he holds them.

“I… I couldn’t stop touching myself even after you left.”

John actually groans then, the sound long and loud between them, and Sherlock dropping his voice with embarrassment but encouraged by John’s reaction, goes on speaking, his breathing low and quick.

“I tried to go back to sleep like you said but when I turned over—the pillow, it smelled like you and I…”

John’s nails bite into Sherlock’s palm with sudden force. His voice sounds strangled. “And you…?”

Sherlock’s voice is now a whisper. “I took myself in hand while I remembered… and I… I touched
myself… all the while imagining it was you, that it was your hand around me.”

Sherlock risks a look up at John’s face. His lashes are heavy over his eyes, his pupils black and deep and glittering. Sherlock’s eyes drop to the line of John’s lips, which are parted slightly, flushed a lovely pink.

Sherlock wants so badly to kiss him.

“John,” Sherlock says and his voice is shaking. He leans in closer; feels John’s fingers tighten around his. “I want…” Sherlock wets his lips, his eyes never leaving John’s mouth. “Will you let me…”

John leans closer in turn, his posture a mirror for Sherlock’s. His breathing is shallow. “What is it?”

“I want to kiss you.”

John’s answering smile is slow and full of heat. “Good. That’s… good.”

Sherlock is still tipping forward slowly, as though his body is drawn toward John’s through a force of its own.

“May I…?” Sherlock licks his lips again, sees John’s eyes watch the progress of his tongue across his bottom lip. “May I kiss you?”

John’s answer is a sigh. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Emboldened by the longing in John’s voice, Sherlock leans in until he can feel John’s breath—soft against his parted lips. He holds himself there, overwhelmed, his mouth trembling, his own breath loud and quick in the infinitesimal space between them.

Just this is almost too much for Sherlock—just being in this space, so close to John, so close that he can feel his breath, his face a blur in Sherlock’s vision, his fingers tight in Sherlock’s, makes him feel as though his heart will burst within his chest it’s so full up with feeling.

“Sherlock…” John’s voice is a warm exhalation against his mouth. “Close your eyes.”

Sherlock hesitates, his eyes spread wide to take in the sight of John’s cheek so close against his, the curl of his eyelashes just visible in Sherlock’s field of vision.

His heart is pounding—he feels light-headed with the intensity of his desire, like he might fall off the earth if he doesn’t keep a grip on the feeling, as though if he surrenders to it, he will be washed away.

“Sherlock.” John’s voice is so gentle.

Sherlock closes his eyes.

He feels John tilt his head, his eyelashes fluttering against Sherlock’s cheeks as he moves in closer until John’s bottom lip gently grazes his own.

Sherlock gasps at the sensation, made doubly intense by virtue of the fact that his eyes are closed. John holds himself still, breath coming out warm against Sherlock’s lips, and Sherlock is grateful that John understands, that as much as he wants John to keep moving, to press in further, for his tongue to come out and find Sherlock’s own—he needs a moment to absorb the feeling of just this,
the miracle of John’s mouth against his again.

John’s lips are soft, and they feel softer still for the contrast of the stubble on his cheek—he did not have time to shave this morning after leaving Sherlock’s room and Sherlock can feel the vivid scratch of it against his chin. He wants to rub his face in it until his skin is tingling all over.

Up close John smells even more like himself—a lovely blend of sea and fresh wind—and Sherlock draws a breath in to pull the scent into his lungs, let it spread slowly through the heart of him and into the stream of his blood.

*Come into me,* he thinks. *Become a part of me.*

Even as he thinks it, he parts his lips and John responds in turn, the soft heat of his own mouth opening, fitting over Sherlock’s so perfectly, the wet sweep of his tongue finding Sherlock’s bottom lip and tracing it with careful reverence, making Sherlock gasp again in shocked delight.

That it can feel so good still fills Sherlock with amazement—why, why is it that having John’s mouth against his mouth can make everything right with the world, can fill him with so much feeling that he wants to cry out as though he is in pain?

John’s tongue is now stroking the dip in Sherlock’s top lip and Sherlock is trembling from the gentle exploration of it, torn between the desire for John to keep doing what he’s doing and for John to plunge his tongue into the heat of Sherlock’s mouth with more force, to stroke the length of his tongue.

John slides his mouth over the curve of Sherlock’s bottom lip, pulling it gently in between his teeth. Sherlock lets him, shivering at the hint of pressure. He feels John’s knee press in against the inside of his thigh, and Sherlock parts his legs wider in response, reaching out as he does so to take hold of John’s forearms so that he can feel the muscles flexing under the skin.

John’s arms are smooth and warm—so warm it’s as though Sherlock can feel the presence of the sun still on John’s skin and he slides his hands up, up over the cords of muscle, gasping into John’s mouth as he feels the shift and flex.

He hears John make a low sound of pleasure in response, somewhere in the back of his throat, and Sherlock feels a flare of heat burst into life between his legs at that sound. He slides his hands back down John’s arms until he’s caught hold of both of his hands and then surges forward, pushing his tongue into John’s mouth.

John’s lips part willingly to let Sherlock in, mouth opening wide, and Sherlock finds John’s tongue and strokes it the way he remembers John doing for him.

John’s hands come up to hold Sherlock by the arms and then his tongue is licking back against Sherlock’s, tiny little lapping movements that make Sherlock’s bones feel like they are turning to jelly, causing the fire burning low inside him to burst into an inferno of need.

John’s knee is pressing hard into Sherlock’s inner thigh and Sherlock realizes if John’s knee just moved slightly further inward it would be rubbing against the part of Sherlock that currently needs the most attention.

He twists on the bed, leaning forward in an effort to get closer to John, almost falling in his eagerness.

John’s hands come up to Sherlock’s shoulders to steady him and John pulls back with a smile on his lips, breathing hard.
Sherlock actually cries out at the loss.

“I think… it might be better if I came and sat next to you.”

Sherlock’s cheeks are hot as he straightens up. He undoes his shoes and kicks them off, then scoots backwards onto the bed.

There’s no reason to feel nervous; he and John just did all this not twelve hours ago, but somehow his anticipation is sharpened to an almost unbearable pitch. It’s like his skin cannot contain the enormity of his desire, it feels as though he will burst open at any moment.

John takes a long drink from the cup of wine on the desk before reaching down to pull off his shoes. When he straightens up to look at Sherlock he is grinning. He offers the cup to Sherlock who takes it and swallows down half the contents without tasting it. He’s too focused on getting John back against him again to notice trivial things like the taste of the wine. Although some distant part of his brain registers that it’s actually quite good. He can feel the effects of it, warm and pleasant, uncurling in his chest.

John takes the cup from Sherlock’s distracted fingers, trying to contain the smile that keeps breaking over his face. He only half-succeeds and the result is that his mouth remains quirked in lopsided amusement.

It makes him look more handsome than ever.

He sets the cup of wine back on the desk and then gestures to the bed, his face sobering as he becomes suddenly formal once again. “May I join you?”

Sherlock nods his head, his hands clenched tight between his shaking thighs.

He is so aroused he feels as though it will all be over as soon as John kisses him again.

John kneels on the bed, his mouth quirking up again in that impossible grin that makes Sherlock feel simultaneously breathless and as though he is looking into the sun.

“Do you know…?” John says, crawling toward Sherlock on his hands and knees, his smile shifting imperceptibly the closer he gets, glimmering at the corners with something dangerous, something full of hunger. “I also couldn’t stop thinking about you all day. No matter what task was before me it seemed to disappear as I found myself thinking of your hands, the sounds you made… your mouth.”

As he says the word, his eyes drop to settle on Sherlock’s mouth, his eyelashes low over his eyes, casting spiky shadows on his cheeks in the candlelight. He leans in and Sherlock can scarcely breathe, he is so desperate for John to close the last inch between them and bring their mouths together again.

“You… you did?” he asks, parting his lips and leaning in towards John even as John brushes his mouth against Sherlock’s.

“I did.”

Sherlock’s entire body shivers once, hard, and then John’s mouth is opening on his and his tongue finds Sherlock’s—lovely, warm and wet, and Sherlock moans softly and leans into the kiss, opening his mouth as wide as possible to invite John in.

John is still on his hands and knees, leaning into Sherlock with his whole body, lapping at the
length of Sherlock’s tongue with the same long obscene licks that make Sherlock’s bones feel like they are melting.

The feel of it makes Sherlock remember vividly how John performed the same sort of licking gesture on another part of him the previous evening.

Sherlock makes a whimpering sound in the back of his throat, his hands flying up to seize John by the front of his shirt and pull him closer, thighs spreading apart on the mattress as though of their own volition.

John tips forward into Sherlock and breaks away, laughing, breathless, resettling himself so that he’s sitting on his knees opposite Sherlock. He reaches up a hand to cup Sherlock’s cheek, his thumb smoothing fondly over the corner of Sherlock’s lips. His smile is affectionate but his eyes are dark and full of sin. “You like that don’t you?”

Sherlock nods, unsmiling; his hands still fisted in the material of John’s shirt. He pushes his forehead against John’s, breathing hard, eyes heavy on John’s mouth, before using his grip on John to pull John’s mouth back against his.

John obliges, his tongue coming out to lick into Sherlock’s open mouth, the hand cupping Sherlock’s face holding him gently, guiding his head so that he can deepen the angle of the kiss.

John pulls away after another minute or so, settling his forehead against Sherlock’s just like Sherlock did. His voice is low and heavy, his hand warm on Sherlock’s jaw line. “Do you know which part of you I missed the most?”

Sherlock licks his kiss-stung lips, tasting John and shivering hard. “No,” he whispers, his own voice rough with longing.

“Your hair,” John breathes against Sherlock’s mouth. Even as he says the words his hand is sliding into Sherlock’s curls, nails scraping lightly against Sherlock’s scalp as he goes, and Sherlock melts.

His whole body bows, leaning into the touch of John’s hand and John presses his mouth to Sherlock’s hairline, burying his nose in the dark curls and inhaling deeply. “Oh god, the smell of it —Sherlock... god.”

Sherlock can feel John’s open mouth moving over his part as his fingers card through the hair at the base of Sherlock’s neck.

He goes on talking, mouth still buried in Sherlock’s part. “It’s so dark, so rich. Do you know, Sherlock, how long I wanted to touch it? Ask me. Ask me how long it’s been.”

Sherlock’s head is tipped back; his neck is extended, lost in the sensation of John’s strong fingers working through the thick curls. It’s almost as good as John kissing him. Almost. Sherlock feels drunk from the sensation.

His voice comes out slurred. “How long?”

“Since the first day I met you. God, I wanted to bury my hands in it. Just like this. And do you know what I learned, Sherlock?”

Sherlock’s head rolls forward on his neck as John’s mouth finds his ear, murmuring against it.

“What?” Sherlock asks, already forgetting the question, the hypnotic movement of John’s fingers against his scalp setting his whole body to tingling.
“It’s so much softer than it looks,” John answers, lips sliding over Sherlock’s ear, tongue coming out to trace the whorl at the center, fingers fisting in the curls and pulling.

Sherlock whimpers, letting his head tip back, baring the long curve of his throat.

“Kiss me, John,” Sherlock gasps, his voice breathless, desperate. “God. Please. Kiss me while you’re—”

John falls on Sherlock’s upturned mouth, plunging his tongue between Sherlock’s parted lips and stroking the length of Sherlock’s tongue, hands pulling gently all the while at Sherlock’s curls.

The combination of John’s tongue licking sweetly into his mouth with the pressure of John’s hand on his scalp is almost more than Sherlock can take. He can feel all the blood in his body pounding hot between his legs.

If John doesn’t touch him soon he will surely perish where he sits.

Sherlock kisses John back, hungry, desperate, his mouth slipping over John’s even while John tries to keep his kisses slow and deliberate.

John is sitting up on his knees so that he is above Sherlock, leaning down over him. Sherlock surrenders to the pull of John’s hand in his hair, letting his body curve backwards as far as it will go and he is on the edge of over-balancing when he feels John’s hand slide from his hair down his side until he’s holding him gently at the small of his back, holding him up.

John keeps one hand in Sherlock’s hair, fingers carding through the curls.

He breaks his mouth away from Sherlock’s, kissing down his chin and over the edge of his jaw. He sucks lightly at the underside of Sherlock’s throat and Sherlock cries out, reaching up to seize hold of the front of John’s shirt again and tug John down against him.

John lets himself be pulled, falling in between Sherlock’s spread thighs, his arms braced on either side of Sherlock’s torso to support his weight.

Their hips fall into satisfying alignment. John’s groin is a welcome heaviness against the aching length of Sherlock’s trapped erection.

Sherlock immediately thrusts his hips up against John’s body and is rewarded with the feel of the long ridge of John’s very hard cock pressing through the thin material of his trousers.

Sherlock gasps with pleasure, hands going slack in John’s shirt as John thrusts back against him, his open mouth traveling hot and wet down the length of Sherlock’s bared neck, pausing to suck hard on the side of Sherlock’s throat—so hard that Sherlock feels John’s teeth bite the sensitive skin.

Sherlock cries out, bucking upward with his hips and John’s fingers fly immediately to Sherlock’s mouth to silence him.

“Quiet, my love.” John’s mouth is warm against Sherlock’s ear. “Remember, you’ve got to be quiet.”

Sherlock nods, distracted, breathing hard against John’s fingers, not bothering to close his mouth.

He’s desperate for more friction against his cock; he lets his knees fall wide open, squirming against the heavy weight of John against him, shuddering as the movement causes both their
erections to slide against one another.

Sherlock watches John gasp above him in response, mouth falling open, eyelashes fluttering closed.

The movement pushes one of John’s fingers in past Sherlock’s parted lips and Sherlock, seized with some mindless desire that he cannot explain, opens wider, pulling the length of it into his mouth and sucking hard around it.

John groans, his eyes flying open to look down at Sherlock.

“Oh my god,” he manages, voice trembling audibly.

Sherlock sucks harder in response, hips pumping into John, his mind flooded with thoughts of the way John’s mouth felt around his cock the day before. He imagines suddenly what it would feel like to have his mouth not around John’s fingers, but his cock—the hard, silky heat of it against his tongue, his lips stretching wide to take it into his mouth. What would it feel like on his tongue? Would he be able to fit it all? What would it taste like?

His mouth waters at the thought and he watches John’s eyes grow hazy with pleasure as his tongue laps at the calluses on John’s finger, over his knuckles, his own hips still thrusting in an attempt to reestablish the drag of their cocks coming together.

He’s about to pull his mouth away to voice this desire, to ask John if he might return the favor from last night when John, ever attentive to his needs, slides a hand down between their bodies to find Sherlock’s cock, his palm settling over the hard heat of it where it’s straining through his trousers.

All thoughts of Sherlock’s previous plan are lost as John palms the length of him; Sherlock cannot stop himself from thrusting up into the pressure of John’s hand, gasping at the welcome drag of John’s palm against him.

John pulls his hand from Sherlock’s mouth to better prop himself up as his other hand is now occupied. His eyes as he looks down at Sherlock are heavy and dark, his lips parted. “That’s right,” he says, as he begins to slide his spread palm over the ridge of Sherlock’s cock. “You can let go now. I’m here.”

Sherlock’s hands fist helplessly again in the front of John’s shirt. He begins to rock his hips in time with the movement of John’s sliding palm and oh, it feels so good.

He wants so many things—he wants to pull the soft blue shirt from John’s torso, to feel John’s belly against his own, to watch the muscles flexing in John’s lean stomach as he moves—he wants to lick the salt from John’s temples, to feel the softness of John’s hair against his mouth—he wants John’s cock hard and naked in his hand—in his mouth. He wants all of these things but he is so overcome from his yearning for John all day, and John’s hand against him feels so good, that all he can do is cling to the front of John’s shirt, hips rising up to meet his hand with every stroke, breath panting out of him in shallow bursts.

He wants to tell John how good it feels, how relieved he feels to have John here with him again but all he can manage is a broken gasp as John’s fingers find the fastenings to his trousers and begin to work them apart. Before Sherlock can even think to reach down and help him, John’s warm fingers have slid inside his trousers and taken the length of him in hand.

Sherlock does cry out then, the feel of John’s fingers on his bare flesh almost more than he can take, and John leans down to stop his mouth with a kiss as he begins to stroke, fingers slick from the moisture at the head of Sherlock’s cock.
Heaven—Sherlock is in heaven with John’s tongue in his mouth, his hand stroking the length of Sherlock’s erection in long, even strokes.

He’s too far-gone to kiss John properly; he keeps his mouth open and John licks into it, panting slightly at first, and then sucking hard on Sherlock’s tongue as he increases the speed of his hand.

Sherlock can feel the peak of his desire coiling in his belly, drawing up tight at the base of his spine—and he wants to make it last, wants to draw it out so that the bliss of John’s mouth against him and his desire hot and naked in John’s fist can last forever—but the combination proves too much.

John licks obscenely over Sherlock’s tongue, his fingers squeezing slightly at the base of Sherlock’s cock and it’s all over.

Sherlock arches up against John, his cry of pleasure lost in the heat of John’s mouth, hips thrusting brokenly as his orgasm rips through him, sending pulse after pulse of hot liquid splashing over John’s fingers and the fabric of Sherlock’s shirt.

Neither of them even managed to remove a single garment of clothing.

Sherlock sags back down against the bed, feeling boneless and heavy, a low sweet note of pleasure still humming through him, filling him with contentment.

John’s mouth moves to Sherlock’s temple, pressing a kiss to the sweat-soaked curls, and Sherlock unclenches his hands from the front of John’s shirt to slide his arms around John’s shoulders and pull John flush against him.

The weight of John’s body is a welcome one against Sherlock, as is the presence of his very prominent erection pushing in against Sherlock’s hip.

Sherlock wriggles his hips against it and feels John stiffen in response, breath catching.

Sherlock’s breathing is still harsh and quick; he lets his mouth drag over John’s ear, feels John shiver against him.

Sherlock licks dry lips. When he speaks, his voice comes out rough. “I’m sorry that was over so quickly. I wanted—” Sherlock wets his lips again, feeling his shyness returning. “There are so many things I want to do with you but I… it felt so good what you did—I couldn’t…”

John shifts so he is looking down at Sherlock. His eyes are full of tenderness. “Don’t you dare apologize for that,” he says, his voice heavy and soft all at once. “I’ve been wanting to do that all day. And besides,” he goes on, mouth curling into a wicked smile. “We’ve got all night ahead of us.”

“Yes,” Sherlock breathes, happiness stealing over him warm and sweet, like stepping into a sudden beam of sunlight. He wiggles his hips under John to settle John firmer against him, looping his arms around John’s neck to pull him down for a kiss. “Yes, we do, don’t we?”
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

In which Sherlock gives as good as he gets.

The kisses between them are long and lazy. Sherlock is happy to keep his mouth open, slack, while John licks into it, slow and leisurely, his clean hand coming up again to twine in Sherlock’s curls. The pace of John’s kissing is unhurried, sensuous, but Sherlock can feel the tension in John’s body, the way he holds himself somewhat stiffly against Sherlock, like a cord that is pulled taut, thrumming with possibility.

John’s other hand is still clenched sticky and hot against Sherlock’s hip, trapped between both their bodies. Sherlock’s waistcoat and the linen shirt he wears underneath are bunched up, twisted from his desperate thrusting into John to bare a strip of pale skin. He can feel the softness of John’s blue shirt where it’s pressing into his naked stomach.

This may be Sherlock’s favorite part of sex so far—the moment after he has come and his body feels slow and heavy and sweet, when his brain has disconnected, and he’s finally able to relax. It’s made even better by the fact that the last few times this has happened, Sherlock has been lucky enough to have an incredibly aroused John still against him, his whole body vibrating with tension, just waiting to be uncovered by Sherlock’s hands, his mouth.

Sherlock is hotter now than he has been all evening with John on top of him. His linen shirt is soaked completely through with sweat, and he can feel his temples gleaming with it, wetting the hair against his forehead and the nape of his neck. He doesn’t mind the sticky, debauched feeling anymore because now it feels like it belongs to him and John both, like it’s a result of the pleasure that they are shaping between them, and Sherlock loves it, revels in it, wants to rub his face over the length of John’s body to discover which parts of him are wet and why.

However none of that changes the fact that he is still very hot, and desperate to get rid of every garment of clothing preventing his body from touching John’s.

John is still kissing him, lazy and slow, when Sherlock runs his palms down the expanse of John’s back. John’s worn blue shirt is soft under his hands, the muscles in John’s back so prominent even while relaxed—just the feel of those powerful muscles makes Sherlock’s breathing speed up.

He tugs at John’s shirt where it’s tucked into his trousers and John pulls away from Sherlock’s mouth, grinning, his eyes glimmering at Sherlock through the dim light.

“What have we here? Someone is eager to get me undressed I see.”

“Too much… clothing,” Sherlock pants as he begins to haul the shirt up and off of John’s back.

“I thought you liked my blue shirt,” John says cheekily, leaning back down to recapture Sherlock’s mouth.

“I do,” Sherlock says against John’s lips as he struggles to pull the material off John’s shoulders. “But I like just… you… better.”
Laughing, John sits up and out of reach of Sherlock’s hands.

Sherlock opens his mouth to protest and then sees that John is reaching to pull the shirt off over his head.

Sherlock sits up with him, reaching down to undo the buttons on his own waistcoat while John throws his shirt to the end of the bed, but he freezes, fingers frozen on the buttons, at the sight of John before him, shirtless now, his bare chest gleaming in the light of the candles, his pectorals, the graceful line of his abdominal muscles all so lean and firm—glowing golden from the touch of the sun.

Sherlock cannot help himself—he surges forward, half-unbuttoned waistcoat completely forgotten under his hands, to press his mouth to one gleaming shoulder—lips parting against the heat of John’s skin, tongue coming out to slide, smooth and wet over John’s chest down to the slightly darker skin of his nipple.

Sherlock licks it, tentative at first, quickly growing bolder at the sound John makes in response. He’s encouraged by the way the flesh stiffens under his tongue, beading into a tiny pearl. Sherlock loves the texture of it against his tongue, the fact that this part of John is so small and sensitive, sensitive enough to make John gasp above him as Sherlock rubs his open lips against it.

“Oh, Sherlock… your mouth…”

Sherlock licks it again, swirling his tongue around the circumference of the beaded flesh before lapping at it like a cat, in long wet strokes, like the way John lapped at Sherlock’s mouth that drove him to near madness.

“Oh my god.”

John’s hands come up to seize Sherlock by the hair, the gesture rougher than John usually is, and something about the slight loss of control in John’s movements makes something flip in Sherlock’s stomach, makes him push his mouth harder against John’s chest, closing his lips around his nipple and sucking.

John cries out sharply, fingers tightening in Sherlock’s curls.

“Sherlock—”

John’s breathing is harsh and fast above Sherlock, and Sherlock, emboldened by John’s reaction, slides his open mouth across John’s chest—pausing to lick at the line between John’s pectorals—before focusing his attention on the other nipple, licking his way around it several times before settling the flat of his tongue against it and sucking.

John’s skin is salty and slightly rough under his tongue—he tastes like how Sherlock imagines the sun would taste; he tastes like the sea.

Sherlock loves, loves, loves the feel of John’s fingers pulling just a little bit too hard in his hair, the sounds of John’s breathing growing ragged above him.

His hands come up to hold John’s waist, thumbs smoothing over the ripples of John’s ribs, amazed at how strong and fragile John’s body can feel beneath his hands—how alive and powerful, and yet how delicate.

His fingers find a scar low down on John’s left side and Sherlock traces it with the tip of his index finger, fascinated by the swollen line of scar tissue on John’s otherwise smooth side.
Sherlock pulls back to look at it, and John’s eyes follow Sherlock’s gaze, hands still coiled in Sherlock’s hair.

“Sword wound,” he says, breathless. “Battle of San Domingo. A Frenchman came at me from behind—I was engaged in combat with two other men and he snuck up behind me, caught me unawares. Not very gentlemanly. But he didn’t live long after that.”

The corner of John’s mouth quirks upward in a hard smile, and Sherlock sees, for one brief moment, a glimpse of the way John might look on the battlefield, the graceful line of his arm as he delivers a killing blow, his eyes full of dark fire—unstoppable. It makes Sherlock’s breath catch.

Sherlock’s finger traces the raised flesh again and he sees John shudder in response, looking down at Sherlock’s long fingers.

“Your hands, Sherlock.” He reaches down to take hold of Sherlock’s fingers in his own and pull them up to his mouth pressing a kiss to the knuckles, before turning them over to kiss the sensitive skin on the pads of Sherlock’s fingers.

It’s Sherlock’s turn to shudder as John’s warm mouth slides down to his palm, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to the center of his hand. There is something so erotic about John’s mouth there against Sherlock’s palm, about the way he holds Sherlock’s wrist so gently in one hand, fingers cradled so tenderly in the other. It makes Sherlock feel like John is holding his heart in his hands.

“I could spend my life kissing these hands and never tire of them.”

John’s mouth slides up to the inside of Sherlock’s wrist, pushing the sleeve of Sherlock’s shirt up his forearm to bare more of his white skin.

John’s breath is warm in the wake of his wet mouth but the feel of it against Sherlock’s damp skin is deliciously cool in the heat of the room.

“There is no one on earth more beautiful than you,” John murmurs as he reaches the crease of Sherlock’s elbow, pulling back to look Sherlock in the eyes as he says it. “And I should know, I’ve traveled the entire world.”

Sherlock leans in then and kisses John’s smiling mouth, the kiss somehow sweet and desperate at once as Sherlock’s hands drop to the front of John’s breeches and begin to pull at the fastenings.

“Yes,” John says, breathless, recapturing Sherlock’s mouth between every word, his own hands going to Sherlock’s half-unbuttoned waistcoat and pulling at the buttons, twice as fast as Sherlock could. “Yes, yes, yes.”

“John,” Sherlock pants, his forehead pressed hard against John’s, fingers shaking as he pulls the fabric apart above John’s straining cock. Lovely, patient John who’s been hard for what probably feels like hours. “John, there’s something I want—”

“What is it, my love? Tell me. Anything. Anything you want it’s yours.”

“What you did for me yesterday…I want—” Sherlock licks his lips. “I want to do the same for you.”

John abruptly stops unbuttoning, his hands finding Sherlock’s and holding them still. “What?”

“When you…” Sherlock can feel his cheeks blushing hot even before he can get the words out. “I want to—”
He’s too embarrassed to say it out loud, so he leans forward until his lips are against John’s ear, face almost hidden in the curve of John’s neck.

“I want to put my mouth around… around you.”

John’s hand comes up to clasp Sherlock by the back of his neck, the gesture sudden, fierce; Sherlock can feel a quiver go through John’s body like a bolt of lightning. He can feel John holding himself very still.

His voice is soft against Sherlock’s ear. “Sherlock, you don’t have to do that.”

Sherlock rears back, affronted by the suggestion that he wouldn’t want to do this for John, to experience John in the most intimate way Sherlock can possibly imagine—in a way he couldn’t have imagined before last night.

It’s all he wants.

“I know I don’t have to,” Sherlock says, offense clear in the stiffness of his voice, his fingers obstinately continuing to pull apart the buttons of John’s trousers. “John, I want to.”

John lifts his hands away in surrender as Sherlock works the last button free, his breathing growing ragged. Sherlock can feel the unsteady warmth of it against his neck.

Sherlock pushes the fabric apart and then moves his hands to slide the garment off John’s hips. John leans back on his hands to give Sherlock more room.

Sherlock glances up at John with sudden worry. “But… I might need your help. I mean—to figure out exactly what to do. I don’t—” He licks his lips, his voice growing frail. “I don’t know how to do it.”

John reaches a hand out to cup Sherlock’s jaw, tilting Sherlock’s eyes up to his own. They are full of flame.

Sherlock’s voice drops to a whisper. “Will you teach me, John? Will you show me how to do it?”

“Of course, I’ll help you.”

Sherlock feels some of his anxiety ebb away as John’s thumb caresses the hinge of his jaw.

“Although I don’t think you’re going to need it. Anything you do with that mouth of yours will be enough for me.”

Sherlock licks his lips again, self-conscious.

“Actually I do have one request to start out.”

Sherlock’s eyes flicker back up to John’s with attention.

“Do you mind if I finish undressing you first?”

Sherlock nods; mildly surprised by this request.

John’s hands return to the buttons on Sherlock’s waistcoat. He undoes the last of them in no time and then pushes the silk off Sherlock’s shoulders with gentle hands.

Sherlock sighs as the material slithers off of him.
John drops his hands to Sherlock’s waist, tugging at the hem of his sweat-soaked shirt, leaning in to press a kiss to Sherlock’s temple as he begins to lift the garment off.

“You taste good,” John says, lips hot against Sherlock’s forehead.

Sherlock hums noncommittally, lifting his arms as John pulls the shirt off over his head.

It feels good to be free of the dingy garment and Sherlock shakes his curls to help lay them flat once John has thrown the shirt down to the end of the bed to join his own.

Sherlock’s hesitation returns almost immediately. “Should I… should you…that is, should you be lying down?”

John smoothes his hands down Sherlock’s bare arms and Sherlock’s shivers at the touch, at the feel of John’s callused palms rough against his hot skin.

“Here.” John leans behind Sherlock to take hold of the cup of wine. “Have another drink of wine first.”

“John I—”

But John kisses him quiet, pushing the cup into Sherlock’s hand.

When John finally pulls away they are both breathless.

“Alright,” Sherlock says, feeling slightly disoriented, flushed with arousal. He takes a long drink of wine, sparing a fraction of his attention to notice fully how good it really is. The taste is rich and dark, peppery but also sweet, with hints of oak and cherry.

“Plum,” Sherlock says, handing the cup back to John. “And cherry.”

“Really?” John asks, dropping a hand to rest on Sherlock’s thigh as he raises the cup to his lips.

“Yes. It’s delicious.” Sherlock is distracted by the presence of John’s thumb creeping up his leg. “It tastes French.”

“It is,” John says before draining the contents of the cup and leaning backwards to reach the bottle off of Sherlock’s desk, somehow managing to do all this without moving his hand from Sherlock’s leg. “Styles got it off a French ship. I told you—he assured me it was the very best.”

John sets the bottle back on the desk and then passes the full cup to Sherlock.

Sherlock’s head is already swimming from the delicate movement of John’s thumb up his thigh, from the intent look in John’s dark blue eyes, his whole body tingling with arousal, but he takes the cup, long fingers brushing over John’s as he does.

He drinks again, shutting his eyes briefly to savor the rich flavor of the wine on his tongue, losing himself in the complex unfolding taste of it in his mouth, still very much aware of John’s hand which has settled in the crease of his hip.

John takes the cup from his hands and Sherlock hears him setting it back on the desk. Sherlock’s eyes are still closed when John’s mouth finds his again, his tongue coming out to stroke the seam of Sherlock’s lips.

John’s mouth is warm and soft. Sherlock parts his lips to let John in and is rewarded by the slick heat of John’s tongue pushing in against his own. He tastes like the wine they have been drinking
Sherlock feels John’s fingers drop to the front of his trousers, which still hang partly fastened at his hips, and push them off.

“Up on your knees,” John breathes into Sherlock’s mouth.

Sherlock acquiesces, hands on John’s bare shoulders, John’s tongue still in his mouth, and John tugs his trousers down his thighs to his knees.

“Sit back,” John says and Sherlock does so that John can pull the garment down his calves and off over his feet.

Sherlock is now completely nude and John leans in over him, his own unbuttoned trousers still hanging loose on his hips, one hot hand stroking up Sherlock’s leg from his knee all the way to the crest of his hip, his eyes wide and ravenous as his gaze follows the path of his hand.

Sherlock is still leaning back on his hands and as he looks down at his body splayed out under John, his cheeks flame briefly with self-consciousness at the lewdness of his posture, at the sight of his own cock visibly thickening before his eyes just from the touch of John’s hand on his leg.

But his embarrassment is short-lived; it’s only a pale shadow of the crippling self-consciousness he felt yesterday being completely exposed to John’s eyes. Now he knows he would be a fool to doubt John’s attraction to him. The reverence in John’s gaze as his eyes trace every inch of Sherlock’s naked body is unmistakable, blazing as bright as the hottest flame.

“My god, Sherlock Holmes,” John says, sinking low over him, shaking his head, one hand planted next to Sherlock’s chest to support his weight as he leans down. “Your beauty will be the death of me.”

“I should hope not,” Sherlock whispers back, his tongue loosened by the wine, sliding his hands up John’s deliciously bare back, feeling every scar, every hard muscle, every inch of smooth hot flesh before pulling John down against him. “I plan to keep you with me for a very long time.”

“Is that so?” John murmurs, brushing his lips against Sherlock’s. “And how do you plan on doing that?”

Sherlock locks his hands around John’s waist, opening his mouth under John’s as he says: “By refusing to let you leave my bed.”

Sherlock can taste John’s smile against him, and then he gasps at the feel of John’s thigh nudging in between his legs. “That does sound fairly foolproof.”

“J-John?” It takes all of Sherlock’s self-control to break free of John’s warm, insistent mouth.

“Yes, my love?”

“It’s my turn now.”

“Your turn for what?”

Sherlock’s hands have slid down to the luscious curve of John’s buttocks and now he’s completing the task that he started minutes before, pulling John’s trousers the rest of the way down his hips.

“Time for me to be on top.”
As he says it, Sherlock locks his hands again around John’s back and rolls until John is under him, wide-eyed with surprise and something else, licking dark and unquenchable at the base of his gaze.

Sherlock is straddling him, nude thighs spread wide, and Sherlock experiences a delicious flutter in his stomach at the feeling of John pinned, however ineffectively, beneath him.

He licks his lips and scoots down John’s legs to kneel between them, pulling John’s trousers as he goes, all the way down over each beautifully muscular knee, and Sherlock cannot help but catch his breath at John’s long flushed cock springing free, so hard and thick that it sets Sherlock’s mouth to watering just at the sight of it.

Now Sherlock understands why.

He wants to put his mouth around it at once but he forces himself to pull John’s trousers completely off his legs before he leans back in.

John’s chest is rising and falling rapidly, his breathing quick and shallow.

“My god, Sherlock, I’m not going to last long with you looking at me like that.”

“I’m going to do much more than look,” Sherlock says and feels his mouth going dry.

“Oh Christ.” John drops his head back against the pillow, shutting his eyes, and Sherlock is stricken briefly that John can get as overwhelmed by this as he.

Sherlock settles his hands on John’s knees, thumbs rubbing over the hard muscle in John’s thighs. Now it’s Sherlock’s turn to let his eyes sweep with reverence over every inch of John.

“You’re so strong, John,” he hears himself whispering as his hands glide up John’s thighs, up to the dramatic grooves of John’s pelvis, fingers lingering over the smooth skin, the sharp dip around the bone. “Sometimes I think there’s nothing you can’t do, even if it meant moving the world with your bare hands. You could do it. I know you could.” Sherlock’s voice is low and worshipful.

“You could do anything you set your mind to.”

Sherlock knows it’s the wine talking—that it’s gone slightly to his head, but it’s also John. John makes him feel as though Sherlock is a boat pulled loose from its moorings, cast helplessly out to sea. He always has that effect on Sherlock; it’s only that the wine takes down the barrier between these thoughts and the world outside Sherlock’s head, so Sherlock feels no hesitation voicing them out loud.

“You’re incredible,” he whispers.

His hands keep gliding upward, over John’s slim waist, up, up over his ribs until his thumbs find John’s nipples again, rubbing them in rough circles, smiling as he hears John gasp in response.

“You like it when I touch you there.” It’s not a question.

John nods, eyes still shut.

Sherlock wants to touch John everywhere at once, wants to rub his mouth all over John’s body but he knows John has been hard for a long time now and as apprehensive as he is about getting it wrong, he’s desperate to get his mouth around John’s cock, so he lets his hands slide back down to frame John’s hips.

He leans forward and then pauses, uncertain where to start.
John must sense his hesitation because he’s opening his eyes and hitching himself up on his elbows to look down at Sherlock.

His irises are thin slivers of blue, almost completely eclipsed by pupil. The depth of his arousal is impossible to ignore but so is the look of intense tenderness he’s giving Sherlock.

“Sherlock,” John says in a soft voice. “You don’t have to do this.”

John’s gentle voice only intensifies Sherlock’s determination.

Sherlock shakes his head, resolute. “I want to. I just… I’m not sure exactly…” He darts his eyes back up to John’s. “I’m not sure exactly where to start.”

Sherlock can hear how tense John’s breathing is. “Start wherever you like.”

Sherlock nods briefly, eyes flickering back down to John’s erection.

Perhaps what John said earlier was true—maybe he doesn’t need to do much more than put his mouth around John. After all, he thinks, remembering the way it felt to have John do this for him yesterday, if John has anything like the same experience then it shouldn’t require too much skill on Sherlock’s part.

He reaches forward to take the base of John’s cock in his hand, eyes flickering briefly up to see John’s lashes already falling heavy over his eyes as Sherlock’s fingers wrap around him.

Sherlock eyes it apprehensively and licks his lips. John’s cock is big—thick, and for a moment he’s concerned he’s not going to be able to get his mouth around it but oh god, he wants to so badly.

“Should I… I mean, how should I…?”

“Just do what feels good. I promise you, whatever feels good for you will be good for me too.”

Sherlock nods, reassured by the searing tenderness in John’s eyes.

He decides to start by exploring the base of it with his mouth—putting his face down close to it and inhaling deeply. He feels John’s body jerk in response.

“Yes,” John manages, his voice sounding strained. “That is more than alright.”

Sherlock drags his mouth back up to the tip, his own breathing heavy; his mind going a bit blurry with want at the raw scent of John this close. He pauses over the swollen head of John’s cock, his eyes darting up to hold John’s.

“He can feel the pulse in John’s cock beating under his fingers.

“John, I’m going to…” Sherlock licks his lips. His breath must feel warm against John when he speaks. “I’m going to put my mouth around you but… will you talk me through it? Will you tell me what to do?”

“Yes,” John says, his voice so tight Sherlock wonders he can speak at all. “Yes, I’ll tell you. Open your mouth.”

Sherlock does.
“And—” John is breathing so hard he can scarcely get the words out. “Now put—put your mouth around the head if you can manage it.”

Sherlock lowers his mouth down.

“Y-yes, just like that now, open your mouth w-wider... oh, god.”

John’s cock is so thick Sherlock is briefly worried about fitting the whole of its wide circumference in his mouth but he manages with no trouble, at first surprised, and then delighted by the taste of the fluid generously coating the tip.

Sherlock swirls his tongue through it, tasting it. What a remarkable piece of anatomy the tongue is that it can satisfy the curiosity of two senses at once: both taste and touch. Remarkable, Sherlock thinks—what other body part is so wonderfully capable? He is one moment away from selecting the tongue as his preferred piece of human anatomy when he remembers that that would make the organ currently in his mouth second best, and that isn’t right at all. No, he supposes, the cock would have to be his favorite.

Or at least John’s is, Sherlock thinks as his tongue slides around the head, tracing every crease, every fold of skin—each delightful inconstancy he finds giving him new information about this part of John’s body. His tongue is following the vein on the underside of John’s very swollen cock when he feels John’s thigh tense under his hand.

Sherlock pulls back, worried, suddenly very conscious of John’s absolute silence above him.

But when he looks up at John, he sees John looking down at him with parted lips, brows knitted together as though he might be in pain, his eyelids so low over his eyes they are barely open, and Sherlock suddenly understands the reason for his silence.

John is utterly overwhelmed.

“Is this alright?” Sherlock asks, just to be sure, his fingers still wrapped around the base of John’s cock—because he’s never done this before; because he has to be certain.

John nods; pale pink tongue coming out to lick his lips. It seems to take him a moment to find his voice. “Yes,” John manages, his voice almost unrecognizable. “Just keep—doing what you’re doing. Your tongue—good. Everything you’re doing is very, very good.”

Reassured, Sherlock lowers his mouth back down, and, feeling inspired, decides to lick at the head of John’s cock without putting the whole of it in his mouth.

“Oh my god, Sherlock.”

Sherlock glances up at John as he repeats the motion, just in time to see John’s eyelids flutter helplessly closed.

Sherlock runs his tongue around the wet, swollen head, savoring the feel of it, marveling once again at how delicate, how sensitive is this place on John’s strong, capable body. The thought that he can have such an intense effect on John, that he can reduce John to this completely undone state of pleasure makes the desire leap up in Sherlock’s belly, and he can actually feel his cock thickening where it hangs heavy between his legs.

It’s not just that Sherlock now has access to the taste of John, he can also smell John better this close, and Sherlock does not even have to think about it, it’s second nature for him to drag his parted lips down the length of John’s cock, inhaling deeply as he goes until he reaches the soft
golden hair at the base, burying his nose in it, breathing in the musky, animal scent of John where it is strongest, feeling almost dizzy from its effects.

He drags his face downward until he finds John’s testicles, drawn up tight against his body. Sherlock licks at first one, then the other, curious, desperate to know what every part of John feels like under his tongue—to gain this new knowledge of John that is only available to him from this remarkable organ. He is tentative at first but when he hears John make a strained noise above him, he swallows the whole of one into his mouth, and experiences a sharp swoop of pleasure at the obscenity of what he is doing.

John gives a low cry, and Sherlock, lost in the sensation of having such a warm, soft part of John in his mouth, pushes at John’s thighs to spread them further apart, sliding his attentions from one to the other. He resettles himself between John’s legs to get a better angle, lying flat on his belly so he is closer to all the most sensitive parts of John.

He releases John’s testicle from his mouth only because he’s eager to return his attentions to John’s neglected cock, which is easier now for him to reach from his new position lying between John’s spread legs, his weight on his elbows, his gaze trained on its flushed curving length. Sherlock places his hands on John’s thighs and then licks his way back up John’s cock, letting his tongue trail over every ridge and vein, delighting in just how much he can feel with that incredible part of his anatomy.

It’s clear to Sherlock now that the presence of his mouth here should feel good to John—but what Sherlock cannot understand is how the feel of John’s hot, soft skin against his lips and tongue should feel so good to him. It’s as though there is a direct connection between their two cocks, forged by the presence of Sherlock’s mouth, so that every slide, every caress of his lips on John’s cock reverberates through his own, making his cock swell and twitch despite the fact that he hasn’t even touched it yet.

Tongues and cocks, he thinks. Yes, they are definitely two of his favorite body parts.

He knows it’s the wine talking now; he can feel its warm, buzzing presence all through his limbs, combining with the deep and ever-growing throb of his arousal for John, making him conscious of every point of contact between his body and the world—of the roughness of the sheets under his belly, the strength of John’s tensed thighs beneath his hands, the pulse pounding down the length of his own achingly hard cock.

He’s stricken once again by how much more awareness he has of his body since John came into his life—how much more appreciation he has for all its faculties, sexual and otherwise. There is so much that John has showed him, and some part of Sherlock knows in an intuitive way that this is only the beginning.

Sherlock’s tongue has reached the head of John’s cock again, and as he licks over the slit, he hears John make a strangled noise above him.

Sherlock looks up to see John’s hands fisting in the sheets. His cheeks are flushed dark with arousal—his teeth clenched in a white grimace. Sherlock can see the effort it is costing him to keep supporting himself on his elbows so he can look down at Sherlock. The sweat is standing out on his forehead, shining in gleaming stripes down his chest.

When their eyes connect, John actually gasps.

“My god, Sherlock, I can’t—the way you look right now… I wish you could see yourself. It—"
John loses all faculty of speech as Sherlock flattens his tongue and strokes it over the head. He cannot get enough of the taste of John there, of the feel of that tiny hole against his tongue.

The tense note in John’s voice sharpens Sherlock’s desire to a razor sharp pitch. He’s desperate to have more of John in his mouth, to get him to make that sound again.

Careful to keep his eyes on John’s, Sherlock rubs the swollen head of John’s cock against his closed lips, nuzzling at it, before parting his lips and taking it back into his mouth.

“Oh my god.”

John’s head falls back against the mattress with a strangled curse and Sherlock feels a burst of arousal deep in his belly at the sound, prompting him to keep sliding his mouth down until he can feel the head of John’s cock bump the roof of his mouth.

There’s a brief, frightening moment where Sherlock thinks he might be about to choke because how can he breathe with his mouth so full? His hands must clench where they hold John’s thighs because immediately, Sherlock hears John’s voice, gentle above him.

“Easy, Sherlock, easy. Breathe. You’ve got to remember to breathe.”

But Sherlock won’t give up so quickly—if John can do it, then so can he. He refuses to concede one inch.

“Breathe through your nose.”

Oh.

Of course.

Sherlock does so and instantly feels some of his panic recede.

“Good,” John says, and his voice is still strained, but Sherlock wants—needs John to be speechless again.

Sherlock thinks about all that John has given him—all the times that John has put Sherlock’s pleasure first—how gentle he has been, how patient—and suddenly it is imperative that Sherlock gets this right.

Sherlock knows there is no way he’s going to be able to take John’s cock as deep as he wants, at least not this first time, so he does the next best thing. He slides his mouth off John’s cock briefly to rub his fingers through the slickness at the tip, then wrapping his slippery fingers around the base of John’s cock he begins to stroke.

He swallows down the head of John’s cock again—careful this time to breathe through his nose. Sherlock experiments with sucking lightly, and feels a thrill go through him when he realizes that he can actually feel the pulse throbbing in John’s cock against his tongue.

John makes a guttural sound in response, and Sherlock watches John’s fists tighten in the sheets.

The sight of John’s clenched fists fills Sherlock with the memory of John’s hands in his hair; causes Sherlock to pull back with a wet sound and gasp, “Hair, John! Put your hands in my—”

John does not need to be told twice.

Before Sherlock has even finished speaking, John is reaching out, burying his fingers in the soft,
dark curls. Sherlock returns his mouth to the head of John’s cock and just the sight of it—red and slick and shining from Sherlock’s mouth is enough to make Sherlock moan around it as he swallows it down, flicking his tongue against the underside, and then John is tightening his fists in Sherlock’s curls and Sherlock moans again, deeper, rutting against the mattress.

“Oh, that’s p-perfect, Sherlock. Just like that, just like—Christ.”

Encouraged by John’s rough voice, by the presence of his hands in Sherlock’s hair, Sherlock drops his mouth and swallows more of John than he has dared; feels his lips stretch around the width of John, feels the slick hard heat of John filling his whole mouth, trying to remember all the while to keep breathing through his nose. It makes his jaw ache, holding his mouth open so wide but the pain is somehow connected to his pleasure because it’s like he can feel the ache of his jaw in his cock, and oh god, it feels so good.

Sherlock whimpers, grinding his hips against the mattress, and John must be able to feel the sound all the way through his cock because his hips jerk reflexively up into Sherlock’s mouth, and then Sherlock really does choke.

He pulls off, gagging, coughing, and John is gasping, “Sorry. I’m so sorry,” his hands smoothing at Sherlock’s curls, his voice breathless, filled with worry. “Are you alright?”

Sherlock nods, equally breathless, desperate to reassure John. “I’m fine. It’s fine.”

John’s hands have slid down to his shoulders and are trying to pull Sherlock back up against him. “You don’t have to keep going. You can stop, if it’s too much…”

But Sherlock shakes his head, insistent, resisting the pull of John’s hands.

He can feel how wet his lips are, how swollen. “No. Please, John. Let me keep going.”

“Are you sure?”

Sherlock looks up at John with hard, glittering eyes. He licks his tongue deliberately over his swollen lips. “Yes. And I want you to pull my hair while I’m doing it. I like it when you’re rough.”

His voice drops to a self-conscious whisper then, loses some of its confidence. “Please, John.”

“Oh god.” John’s fingers tighten in Sherlock’s hair and Sherlock gasps happily, his eyes sliding back up to John’s. “Of course. Of course.”

John rakes his fingers through Sherlock’s curls, fingernails scraping lightly against Sherlock’s scalp and for a moment Sherlock lets his head drop back into the touch, lets his eyes fall closed— and then John takes two fistfuls of Sherlock’s hair and pulls.

Sherlock’s eyes snap open. He sucks in a sharp, delighted breath, and then lowers his head to take John’s cock back between his lips. This time he does not relent. He strokes his tongue along the underside as he slides, hollowing his cheeks to create suction like John did for him. He lets the hand that’s holding the base of John’s cock stroke as much of it as he can reach, two long fingers slipping down to find John’s testicles again and tease them lightly. Sherlock hums in pleasure at the feel of them and feels John’s hips give another involuntary jerk.

“Jesus.” Sherlock can hear John clenching his teeth around the word as he struggles to keep his hips flat on the bed, his hands tightening in Sherlock’s curls. Sherlock whines low in his throat, and speeds up the pace of his stroking, swallowing down one more impossible inch.

“Sh-Sherlock, th-that’s enough you don’t have to—”
John’s fingers are clenching hard in Sherlock’s hair, and it feels so good, Sherlock whines again, higher, more desperate.

He shifts on the bed, pressing his hips against the mattress. He knows this moment—this act—is for John but he’s so desperate for some friction on his aching cock that the movement is almost unconscious, and he begins to grind his hips, hard, into the bed beneath him.

John’s breathing is ragged above him, and Sherlock knows that he is close. He wants to take John deeper into his mouth, to return the pleasure that John is giving him by offering his body up to Sherlock like this, but he knows that he cannot do so without choking.

The solution is intuitive—it arrives from the need in his own thrusting hips. He may not be able to take John deeper into his mouth but he can simulate a sort of friction by sliding his mouth up and down John’s cock. So Sherlock does just that, mimicking the rhythm of his own rocking hips in the slide of his lips, careful all the while not to catch John with his teeth.

The effect this act has on John is immediate. He cries out above Sherlock, fingers pulling so hard in Sherlock’s hair that Sherlock’s eyes water from the pressure. It feels so good Sherlock almost loses his rhythm, but he’s determined to keep going now until John finds release.

He’s breathing through his nose hard and fast—he can hear the sound of it harsh in his ears. His lips are tingling; there is drool sliding out of the corners of his mouth and dribbling down his chin; his jaw is aching worse than ever, but all of these discomforts somehow only sharpen his arousal.

The sounds John is making above him only incite him to suck harder, to bob his head faster. He’s never heard John make noises like that before—the sounds are low, continuous, helpless-sounding—little, breathless moans that seem pulled out of him by some unstoppable force. Sherlock can feel each one between the circle of his lips, under his hand, deep in the pulse of his own throbbing cock, and he wonders for one wild moment whether he is going to come before John.

But then John’s fingers are tightening in his hair with purpose, suddenly desperate, trying to pull him off.

John can barely speak above him.

“Sher—Sherlock, st—stop I’m going to—”

Before he can get the words out, John’s whole body arches off the bed, hips pressing up into Sherlock’s mouth and Sherlock pulls off just in time, as the first wave of come spurts fast and hot out of John’s cock, splattering against Sherlock’s lips.

Delighted, fascinated, Sherlock runs his tongue over his lips, tastes bitterness and something else—tastes John, and Sherlock dives down to take John’s twitching cock back between his lips to catch the next burst of come.

John makes a guttural noise, hips contracting sharply, frozen halfway off the bed, and Sherlock can actually feel John’s cock pulse against his tongue, feel his release well out, hot and bitter.

Sherlock keeps his mouth there through another pulse and tries to swallow it, but he’s not coordinated enough to manage it with his mouth full of cock, so he pulls back, tongue slick with come, and the last pulse hits him on the cheek.

John’s eyes are shut, his temples slick with sweat, his whole body shuddering as it sinks back down against the bed.
He lies there, shaking; his eyes still shut tight, his breathing harsh and irregular for several long seconds.

“Oh my god,” John finally says from under the arm that he’s thrown up over his eyes. His voice sounds wrecked.

“What is it?” Sherlock rasps, realizing that his own voice sounds far worse.

John lifts his arm off of his eyes and reaches his hands down to Sherlock. “Come up here.”

Sherlock does, feeling slightly stiff as he rises to his knees and crawls up John’s body.

John pulls Sherlock down against his side, and Sherlock can’t help but gasp as his hips settle in against John’s thigh. His cock is still achingly hard and even that brush of contact is enough to make his whole body stiffen in response.

John curls one hand up to settle it in Sherlock’s hair, pulling Sherlock’s gaze up to John’s eyes. The look in John’s eyes makes Sherlock’s chest feel like it’s going to burst open. It’s full of so many emotions Sherlock cannot possibly identify them all—gratitude, admiration, desire, tenderness—and something deeper, more complex that Sherlock has no word for.

“You are…” John licks his lips, shakes his head and tries again. “That was… that was the most incredible sex I’ve ever had.”

Sherlock can hear his own shallow breathing, magnified in the hollow of John’s throat. His voice is a harsh whisper. “You’re just saying that.”

John shakes his head. “No, I’m not. Sherlock, that was…” John sighs; stretching his fingers in Sherlock’s hair and Sherlock melts a little more against him. John settles his lips against Sherlock’s hairline. “I’ve been hesitant to tell you this because I don’t want you to feel…” John pauses for so long that Sherlock actually starts to worry. “Intimidated… by it. But… well, I’ve had a fair number of sexual partners over the years and a lot of sexual experiences and that… no one has ever made me feel like that.”

Sherlock is quiet against John, digesting this.

John was right to worry. This new information does make Sherlock feel intimated, and absurdly jealous over John’s past lovers, but if he is perfectly honest with himself then Sherlock has to admit that he had already suspected as much. John being who he is, Sherlock doesn’t understand how half the world hasn’t already fallen in love with John.

But the awe in John’s voice, the sincerity is real, and Sherlock cannot feel jealous for long when there’s a hot bubble of pride swelling in his chest at John’s words, crowding out every other emotion.

“Really?” Sherlock whispers, wanting to be fully present for this conversation but still distracted by his very hard cock against John’s hip. It is taking all his effort to keep his hips from rubbing off against John’s side.

“Really,” John says, his voice washing over Sherlock like a warm tide, quenching all his fears. His breath is hot against Sherlock’s hairline. “You’re unbelievable,” he goes on, voice still full of awe. “That was unbelievable.”

“John?” Sherlock says, unable to keep the slightly frantic pitch of yearning out of his own voice.
“I… I want to hear more about all this but I... first will you…?”

Sherlock doesn’t even have to finish asking. John has already slipped his hand down to take hold of Sherlock’s cock, tilting Sherlock’s chin up as he does so to bring Sherlock’s mouth against his own.

As John’s lips close over his, Sherlock realizes just how long it’s been since he’s kissed John—his lips are still somewhat sticky with John’s come.

John groans softly into his mouth. “Oh god, you taste like me.”

And then it’s Sherlock’s turn to moan softly as John’s expert thumb has found the head of his cock and is rubbing circles over it, before slicking down to encircle the whole of Sherlock’s aching erection in his fist.

Sherlock makes a stuttering sound of pleasure at that first long stroke, his open mouth pressed hot and desperate against John’s.

“I’ll just have to compliment you while I’m doing this,” John says, smiling against Sherlock’s mouth. “Lucky for you, I’m very good at doing two things at once. You,” John continues, the smile melting off his mouth as quickly as it came, his lips turning down at the corners, turning serious, “…are the most remarkable creature I’ve ever met.”

Sherlock whimpers helplessly in response as John’s fist begins to stroke his cock, clenching with the perfect amount of friction.

John’s other hand slides down Sherlock’s back, nails scraping lightly down Sherlock’s spine. Sherlock hisses at the feel, hips pressing closer into John’s fist, then gasping in surprised pleasure, as John’s hand comes to rest on Sherlock’s buttocks, fingers digging into the muscular flesh.

Sherlock is relieved that John seems to sense just how desperate Sherlock. There is nothing teasing or hesitant about his touch. His strokes on Sherlock’s cock are generous and steady, and the direct touch feels so good after so much aroused anticipation that Sherlock cannot keep his eyes open. He lets his eyes drift shut, his open mouth still pressing into John’s.

“No one,” John says, emphasizing his words with each pull on Sherlock’s cock, “No one I’ve ever met has been as clever, as talented, as beautiful as you. You’re exquisite, Sherlock, you’re perfect.”

John presses a kiss to Sherlock’s jaw, the movement of his hand speeding up.

Sherlock clings to John’s arm with his free hand, John’s words slipping over him like beads of mist in the spray of an ocean wave, lost in the pleasure of John’s tight fist around him, John’s other hand kneading the flesh of his arse, pulling Sherlock closer against his body.

It’s too good—it’s perfect, and as desperate as he is for relief, Sherlock wishes it would last forever, that he could stay in this place always—pulled hard against John’s body, caught between John’s hands, John’s lips hot at his throat.

“That’s it—yes, come for me, Sherlock. Come for me, my beauty, my love… I’ve got you.”

Sherlock’s orgasm is explosive, bursting over him in the wake of John’s gentle prompting.

He can feel his body seizing up against John’s as pleasure overtakes him, his hips driving forward into John’s hand, John’s fingers clenching hard on his arse as he shoots his release, hot between their bodies.
“Yes, yes… so beautiful.”

John’s warm lips are soft against his throat, drifting up to find his mouth, and kissing Sherlock so fiercely, so sweetly, as Sherlock shakes through the last of his orgasm.

John breaks the kiss to let Sherlock breathe, guiding Sherlock’s down to rest on his shoulder, the hand that was holding Sherlock’s arse coming up to rub his back.

As his orgasm leaves him, Sherlock finds exhaustion crowding in to take its place, bone-deep and all encompassing, making his eyelids slide shut.

Sherlock’s eyes are closed but he feels John’s fingers on his cheek, and then the gentle exhalation of John’s laughter against him.

Sherlock cracks one eye to look up at John.

“God, you have my come on your cheek.”

Sherlock grins up at him, warm and sleepy and content.

He’s still thinking up a witty retort when he falls asleep.
In which Sherlock gets a little drunk, and tries his hand at poetry.

When Sherlock wakes, the cabin is dark.

John is still with him—Sherlock can tell by the very warm body against his own, the gentle rise and fall of John’s chest beside him, but he must have gotten up to blow the candle out. He’s lying in a slightly different position than when Sherlock fell asleep on his chest.

Sherlock sits up on his elbows, squinting through the darkness. It’s fully dark now; the evening must be getting on toward midnight. He can’t have slept for more than a few hours, but still the knowledge disappoints him. That’s a few hours less that John and he can enjoy in each other’s waking company.

“John?”

John stirs beneath him, one warm hand coming up reflexively to hold Sherlock’s shoulder.

“Mmm?”

“John, wake up.”

Sherlock leans over to light the candle on the desk, the sizzle of the flame dragging John’s sleeping form to life before Sherlock’s eyes, throwing the curves and hollows of his nude body into sharp relief.

Sherlock allows himself a moment to simply sit and look.

John is lying on his stomach, one arm thrown up over his head, fingers curling loosely towards his hair. The groove of his spine is one long sensuous line leading to his firmly rounded buttocks.

Sherlock’s eyes follow it hungrily, noticing for the first time that John has two dimples in his lower back on either side of his spine, just above his buttocks. Sherlock reaches out a hand and trails two fingers over the indented flesh, feeling his heart clench as his eyes roam over the scars on John’s back. Seeing them there, seeing the way John’s body has been used as though it is something other than his own over the years, like so much disposable cargo, makes anger trickle hot and swift through Sherlock’s gut, makes him want to go back in time and bring the perpetrator of each and every mark to justice.

Sherlock’s gentle, inquisitive touch causes John to rouse beneath him and Sherlock feels a momentary throb of guilt for waking him, but it dies in an instant as John shifts, the muscles in his back flexing as he stretches his arms out above his head, before rolling onto his side to look up at Sherlock.

He is still exquisitely unclothed and Sherlock lets his eyes travel shamelessly down the front of John’s torso, over his compact muscular chest, down the lean lines of his abdomen to his still slumbering cock, as beautiful as the rest of him, and more fascinating to Sherlock for the fact that he has rarely had the chance to gaze on it in its non-erect state.
John settles his head on one hand and smiles up at Sherlock, blinking sleep out of his eyes.

“Mmm… good evening, beautiful.”

“Good evening,” Sherlock whispers, as though he needs to use a reverent tone for the god that has surely tumbled straight out of the heavens and into his bed.

He stays where he is, momentarily stricken, by the stunning beauty of this creature before him.

Every time, every time he sees him it’s as though it is the first.

“Come here,” John says. He reaches out with one hand, his smile lazy and confident, filled with affection, and that’s all it takes.

Sherlock slides back in against him, shivering at the feel of John’s warm legs tangling with his own.

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” he says as John’s arm comes up around his shoulders, pulling Sherlock in against his chest.

John presses his lips to Sherlock’s hair. His voice is a low murmur against Sherlock’s curls. “I didn’t want to wake you. You seemed pretty worn out after your extraordinary performance.”

Sherlock experiences a small shiver of pleasure at the naked admiration in John’s words. “How long was I asleep?”

“Just an hour or so.”

John’s warm mouth is traveling over Sherlock’s ear.

“John?”

“Yes, my love?”

“I want to tell you about what happened yesterday.”

John’s mouth is opening against Sherlock’s ear. “Mmm, I thought you told me. You thought of me…”

John’s breath is hot and moist; it makes Sherlock squirm in anticipatory pleasure. “Yes, but... not only that.” Sherlock is struggling to focus, but he has to tell John; he can’t miss the opportunity to brief him on what happened. John must return to work in the morning, and Sherlock is not certain when he will see him again. He pushes this dark thought away to continue speaking. “I spoke with Lieutenant Lestrade.”

John pulls back from Sherlock’s ear, his expression suddenly serious. “How is he?”

“Better. Almost fully recovered thanks to you. He wanted me to thank you for what you did. He said he owes you his life.”

John’s eyes are grave as he looks back at Sherlock. “I hope you conveyed to him that he owes me nothing—it was my duty to come to his aid.”

Sherlock nods and hurries on. He’s eager to get to the important part of the story. “I wanted to talk to him, not only to see how he was getting on, but because I came across what I believe to be new information as to the identity of the poisoner.”
John is sitting up now to listen, his gaze focused, intent.

“I tried to go up and speak with him as soon as I woke up yesterday. Well… not quite as soon as I woke up,” Sherlock adds, blushing fiercely. John’s answering grin almost makes Sherlock lose his train of thought. “But when I got up on deck, the captain was on the quarterdeck so I had to wait until he’d gone. When I went back down to my cabin to pass the time, I was returning my evening clothes to my trunk when I found a letter that my brother had given to me before I left England. I had never opened it.”

John nods, prompting Sherlock to go on.

“I…” Sherlock hesitates, the same apprehension filling him as when he told this story to Lestrade. But John is different; John might understand what an absolutely infuriating idiot Mycroft is. In fact he has to—he’s John. “My brother is an intolerable person. He is smug, manipulative, and conniving, and without fail he will always put his own needs before those of everyone around him.”

“Sounds like a real treat.”

Sherlock is encouraged by the look of distaste in John’s eyes.

“He sent me a letter that arrived the night before I boarded the ship. But I was so… frustrated with him that I didn’t read it. In fact, I tore it up.”

Sherlock flickers his eyes up to John’s, fearing he will see disapproval, disappointment, but John only nods again, encouraging him to continue.

“I found the fragments of this letter in my trunk. It must have fallen out of my coat pocket. It was only upon attempting to reassemble the pieces that I realized that the letter contained information about the captain.”

John sits up straighter, his attention rapt. “What did it say?”

“That’s the most frustrating part—Mycroft, prat that he is, didn’t disclose any really useful information. Also I…” Sherlock clears his throat self-consciously. “There’s the small matter that I couldn’t find all the fragments so there was some information missing. But knowing my brother, it wouldn’t have been very helpful. All I could make out was that our current captain came into command of this vessel just a day or so before the voyage, and under very strange circumstances. There was some allusion his unsavory reputation. In fact…”

Sherlock wriggles backwards off the bed to pull out the leather-bound journal that holds the fragments, then shakes them out onto the bed between them.

John sits back to make space, his eyes spread wide.

“Just give me a moment.”

It takes Sherlock less than thirty seconds to re-arrange the scraps into the order he pieced together. He has an excellent memory, and once he has seen the way the bits of paper go it’s as simple as anything to put them in the proper place.

“There,” Sherlock says with a touch of self-satisfaction.

John bends forward to read, his forehead nearly touching Sherlock’s as they both lean in.
“So you can see there’s hardly anything useful there.”

When John leans back, his brow is furrowed deeply. “Your brother? He’s… someone important?”

Sherlock sniffs. “He thinks he is.”

“I mean does he work for Parliament?”

“Something like that.”

“Seems to me,” John says, his frown deepening. “Important person like your brother, if he has cause to worry—to worry enough to warn you? Well… that’s not good at all, is it?”

“No,” Sherlock says. “No, it isn’t.”

“I’ve heard some things too—below decks. The men don’t like him. None of us were too pleased to learn that Captain Adams had taken ill, and it was odd, seeing as we’d just returned with him from the West Indies not three weeks before and he was fit as a fiddle.”

Sherlock lurches forward with excitement. “John, that’s exactly what this letter made me think! What if the captain—what if he was responsible for Adams’ illness? What if whatever he used to make Lestrade ill was the same method he used to incapacitate Adams?”

John’s eyes on Sherlock’s fill with dawning understanding. “You don’t mean…?”

“That the captain poisoned Lieutenant Lestrade? Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

John’s brow furrows further. “But what would his motivation be for poisoning his first officer?”

“I haven’t figured that part out yet. But I’m sure of it, John. I’m sure of it.”

“What did Lestrade say when you told him?”

“He…” Sherlock exhales in frustration through his nostrils. “He told me to stay out of it—that it was too dangerous.”

“He’s right, of course.”

Sherlock’s head whips up to stare at John.

John’s voice softens. “It is dangerous, Sherlock. A man who ruthlessly poisons those who stand in his way—even those in positions of authority—wouldn’t hesitate to harm a passenger whom he caught meddling.”

Sherlock is stung by this to the core. John is supposed to take his side in everything—John is supposed to understand, to help him.

“John,” Sherlock leans forward to take John’s hands in his, his voice filled with urgency. “If the captain is responsible for poisoning the Lieutenant—and I am certain that he is—he did so with a specific purpose in mind. We’ve got to find out what that purpose is so that we can stop him.”

“Sherlock…” John’s voice is gentle but matter-of-fact, as though trying to talk Sherlock back from some wild pursuit, which Sherlock realizes, is precisely what he’s doing. “What you’re suggesting—it… that’s treason. The pair of us could be hung simply for having this conversation.”

Sherlock tightens his grip on John’s hands. “I know,” he says, leaning in. “I know it’s dangerous
but whatever the captain is plotting is likely more dangerous. All of our lives could very well already be at stake.”

John looks down at their hands as though considering.

“I know that he’s responsible, John. I know it. I just don’t have the evidence yet that I need to prove it.”

“And what would that look like—getting the evidence you need?”

“I don’t—” Sherlock falters. “I don’t know yet.”

John’s fingers shift in Sherlock’s, his thumbs tracing the inside of Sherlock’s palms. His eyes follow the movement as he speaks. “I have no love for the captain. He pays far too much attention to his own affairs, and far too little to the needs of his crew. That much was made clear by his actions during the storm. He put the entire ship at risk by insisting that we keep the sails up until the last possible minute. He said it would ‘unduly compromise the progress of the ship,’ which shows he cares more about expedience than he does about the lives of the men and women on board.”

Sherlock watches John’s expression harden as he goes on speaking. “I don’t trust the man, not one bit. And I don’t doubt that your suspicions are entirely correct. But I think the Lieutenant’s right.”

Sherlock opens his mouth to protest but stops when he sees the look on John’s face. When John’s eyes flicker back up to Sherlock’s, they are hard as flint.

“He’s a dangerous man, Sherlock, and clearly a very shrewd one. It won’t do any good to be seen poking around in his affairs. It’s like you said, we have no evidence to go on, and until we do there’s really nothing we can do.”

“But—”

“As the commander of this vessel, his power is absolute. The captain’s word is law. He can do what he likes with any of us—especially while at sea. I’ve seen captains—far milder men than he—abuse their power, and I hate to think what he would do if he suspected someone trying to cross him, which is why for the time being, I think it’s best to simply lie low. As much as I hate to say it, I think your brother’s right.”

Sherlock drops his head, fuming. This is not how this conversation was supposed to go at all. John is supposed to take his side in everything.

He can feel his own mouth shrinking with displeasure.

“So you’re saying you think we should just… wait until he poisons someone else?”

“What I’m saying is that we already know the captain has an incredibly violent and unpredictable temperament, and he occupies such a position that if he were to become aware of anyone on board this ship harboring suspicions about him, he would not hesitate to render the lives and duties of those men as unpleasant as it is within his purview to do so. And I can tell you from experience, he will make the situation of all those who cross him as uncomfortable as that in which any human being may be placed. I do not say this lightly, Sherlock.”

Sherlock knows that John is speaking the truth but it bothers him that John should take the side of the Lieutenant—and his brother against him. He feels all over again that he is being treated like a
silky child.

He pulls his hands out of John’s grasp.

“Sherlock, look at me.”

Sherlock doesn’t want to look up. He stares petulantly at the sheets between them.

John’s voice is insistent. “I say all this because I care about you. Your life is worth more to me than anything else in the world and I will stop at nothing to keep harm from coming to you. I’ll stand by you no matter what you do, but if there’s anything I can do to keep you safe, I’m going to do it and that includes telling you this. I won’t stop you, Sherlock,” John says, his voice gentling, “but I have to warn you, all right?”

John’s fingers settle over Sherlock’s where they’re clenched against the mattress. The touch is so soft it makes something in Sherlock’s chest ache.

“Just promise me that no matter what you do, you’ll be careful.”

Sherlock lifts his head at the imploring note in John’s voice, and when he sees the love blazing fiercely in John’s eyes he feels all his anger melt away.

Of course John is on his side.

Sherlock drops his head again, suddenly ashamed of his feelings of wounded betrayal.

“I will,” he whispers, turning his hand up to squeeze John’s fingers in his own.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help you, if you need me,” John continues, his voice fierce, fingers holding tightly to Sherlock’s. “You’ve got me in this—no matter what. I’m yours.”

At John’s words, Sherlock’s eyes flicker back up to John’s face, and he feels a burst of pure feeling erupt in his chest at what he sees there. John’s expression is both fierce and tender at once. The sight of it makes the throbbing ache in Sherlock’s chest triple in size, and swell until he can feel it closing up the back of his throat.

What—what has he ever done to deserve this man?

Sherlock is so overcome that for a moment he cannot speak. He clings to John’s hand, his eyes tracing over every contour of John’s face as if to memorize it. His eyes alight on the half-healed cut on John’s cheek and Sherlock realizes that in all their desperation at seeing each other again he never asked John how he came by it.

Sherlock reaches up and trails his fingers over it, the gesture soft—inquisitive. His voice is as soft as his touch. “What happened, John?”

John’s eyelids flutter at the touch of Sherlock’s fingers but do not close. Something dark moves through his gaze like a shifting storm cloud.

He shifts back gently, away from Sherlock’s touch to reach for the wine bottle and the cup behind him on Sherlock’s desk. He pours the cup full and offers it to Sherlock first, who shakes his head; then takes a long drink.

John chews his lip, takes another long sip of wine, then sets the cup behind him again.

“I’m close with my mess. I’ve sailed with some of them for close on two years now— they’re like
family to me. Some of them I like more than others, of course, but for the most part they’re good lads.”

Sherlock waits for John to continue, feeling inexplicably nervous. Something about the shift in John’s body language puts Sherlock on edge; it’s as though John is putting his defenses up, just recalling the incident.

“We tease each other a lot—it’s part of our rapport. I can tolerate teasing as well as any man, better than most actually. But this morning, they were teasing me about… where I was last night.” John clears his throat conspicuously, lifts his chin, his spine straightening imperceptibly to make himself taller even as he’s sitting down. “They were teasing me about us.”

Sherlock watches John’s lips thin as he says the words, his nostrils going hard and flat with irritation.

“And that’s just fine—they’re welcome to tease me all they like. Like I said, I don’t have a problem with that. Where the problem comes in—” John’s nostrils flare with sudden rage. “Is when they start to have a go at you.”

Sherlock’s heart is pounding in his chest. His tongue feels dry, too thick for his mouth. He’s afraid to ask but too curious not to do so.

“What… what did they say?”

John’s jaw tenses. “Nothing worth repeating. But that’s beside the point—the point is they don’t get to talk about you. Not a single one of them. Not to my face and certainly not behind my back. They don’t get to say one bloody word about you.”

The transformation that is taking place over John before Sherlock’s eyes is magnificent to behold. Even while simply sitting on the bed, his stature changes—seems to broaden, so that he looks bigger, more powerful, more graceful all at once. Sherlock can see the quiet energy sitting in his tensed shoulders, in the taut line of his jaw, in the relaxed but anticipatory way he holds his arms. Sherlock can feel the rage shimmering off of John like heat in a desert; can feel the threat of danger as vividly as though he were holding a lit fuse in his hands.

It should be frightening, but to Sherlock, who knows he’s not actually at risk, it’s utterly breathtaking.

“So what happened?”

“It was just two of them—one of them really—and as soon as I heard what he said, I asked him to repeat it. He wouldn’t so I told him—you ever say anything like that again, so help me god you will not walk off this ship. The other one—his mate, he made the ill-advised decision to keep talking. I didn’t warn them again. Words evidently had no effect, so I made it clear to him in a more… demonstrative way.”

There is a look of grim satisfaction on John’s face, and Sherlock can see from the way John’s fists are tensing on his thighs that he’s having a hard time recalling the incident without losing his self-control again.

Now that Sherlock is paying attention he can see that the knuckles on John’s left hand are split. He wonders suddenly just how badly John hurt the other man.

“Is he… all right?”
“Oh, he’ll be fine. He only got one punch in before I brought him to the floor.” John lifts a hand to touch his own cheek, distracted, his eyes far away. His mouth is twisted in a humorless shape. “I have a feeling neither one of them will make the same mistake again.”

“Is that why you…” Sherlock swallows hard, his eyes flickering over the tendons standing out in John’s flexed forearms. He knows he should probably be upset in light of what John has told him but instead he feels a spreading warmth in his chest from the knowledge that John came to blows in his defense. “Is that why you took that bet?”

John’s eyes seem to really see Sherlock for the first time in minutes. A gentle line appears between his brows.

“I… well I hadn’t thought about it like that, but I suppose in a way… yes. I’m something of a betting man. Always have been.” Sherlock sees the guilty shift in John’s features and wonders just how deep the problem goes. “When MacTavish made the wager I thought ‘Well, that’s easy. I can manage that with no trouble,’ but I admit I was still… not quite calm after what happened this morning. I suppose there was a part of me that wanted to show them that I wasn’t somebody easily challenged. That if they wanted to hurt you in anyway, they’d have to go through me.”

Sherlock watches John’s chin lift with this speech, his body language shifting yet again to something proud, something protective, and suddenly Sherlock’s mouth is so dry with want that he can scarcely speak.

“John…”

“What is it?”

“The wine, could you…?”

John passes him the cup and Sherlock drinks until he drains its contents.

He holds out the empty cup, trying not to look desperate. “More, please.”

John gently arches one eyebrow in amusement, but he says nothing as he reaches for the bottle and empties it into the cup.

“That’s the last of it. You should finish it.”

Sherlock does. He drinks it all down and then passes the empty cup back to John, breathless.

“Thank you.”

John smiles at him, both his eyebrows raised slightly, as if to say, ‘it was nothing.’

“No, I don’t mean for the wine,” Sherlock says, leaning forward to place one hand on the mattress between them. “I mean,” Sherlock licks his lips. “Thank you for defending me the way you did.” Sherlock drops his eyes, suddenly self-conscious. “No one has ever done that for me. Defended me like that. People have said a lot of horrible things but no one ever…”

Sherlock is embarrassed to find his own throat growing tight with emotion as he thinks back over all the awful things people have said to him over the years, all of the terrible names he’s been called. They hurt, every one, no matter how hard he pretended he didn’t care, no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that it didn’t affect him. He can still hear his cousins’ mocking voices in his ears as clearly if they were standing before him.
“No one ever told them to stop.”

“Oh, Sherlock…”

John’s hands are in his hair but Sherlock doesn’t remember how they got there. He’s embarrassed to find there are tears running down his cheeks and into his mouth. He wipes at them with the back of his hand, his chest tight with shame.

“Oh, Sherlock, Sherlock…” John is tilting his head so gently. He leans in to kiss one of the tears winding its way past Sherlock’s nose. “If I could go back in time, if I could, I would go back to each and every person who’s ever said anything cruel to you—and I would make them hurt ten times over for the hurt that they’ve caused you.”

The ache of sorrow in John’s voice makes the knot in Sherlock’s throat grow tighter. He feels two more tears slip from his eyes.

“God, how could they—how could anyone intentionally hurt you? My god, Sherlock, look at you.” John’s thumbs smooth over Sherlock’s cheeks, his blue eyes dark on Sherlock’s face. “I would beat each one to a bloody pulp just for thinking unkind things about you. I’d break their bones and drag their severed heads back to you as trophies.”

The image is horrifying, but something about the loving way John says it, as though this promise is the sweetest gesture he could think to make, makes Sherlock laugh—startling himself, and he smiles at John, watery-eyed.

“That’s better,” John says, smiling back at Sherlock, rubbing away a stray tear with his thumb before leaning in to kiss his forehead. John’s mouth on Sherlock’s forehead is so gentle but his voice is fierce. “I won’t let them make you sad, especially if they’re not here for me to hurt them. It isn’t fair.”

John’s hands slide down to Sherlock’s shoulders and then he’s pulling Sherlock in against him, pulling him into his lap.

“They don’t get to hurt you if they’re not here.”

Sherlock laughs again, sniffling, his face pressed in against John’s chest.

John pulls back slightly to look at Sherlock, his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders.

“What I said before—I meant it. If anyone on this ship tries to hurt you—anyone at all—I will not hesitate to kill them.” John slides two fingers under Sherlock’s chin, the delicacy of his touch so at odds with the steel in his voice. It sends a shiver down Sherlock’s spine. John’s rage probably shouldn’t have this effect on him. It does things to Sherlock when John looks at him like that. “Do you understand? You have my protection, no matter what happens.”

Sherlock nods at John. “I know.”

“We’re going to have to be careful in the weeks to come. Especially if you’re right, that the captain is up to something—something that is only just beginning. It means we’ll have to be more watchful than ever.”

Sherlock nods again, his eyes full up with the brightness of John in this moment. In the dim light of Sherlock’s cabin, he seems brighter than he’s ever been. His eyes look liquid in the low light—soft and dark—but each pupil is illuminated by a tiny pinprick of golden flame that seems to burn with the intensity of his feeling, so that Sherlock feels as though he can almost touch the heat between
them with his fingers. The intensity of his whole regard as he studies Sherlock—the combination of iron and heat, of tenderness and rage, the hard line of his jaw in contrast with the liquid darkness of his eyes, the softness of his mouth—it makes Sherlock feel shivery and weak, as though his skin cannot contain all the longing in his body, as though his heart will burst into flame.

It’s almost unbearable—the force of his love for this man. John is like heat—like light—like the heart of a star; he is too good, too bright for Sherlock to contemplate without feeling seared to the core of his being, too much to hold in his mind at once. He should be impossible. No human should be able to have all the qualities that John has—to walk the yardarm with the casual grace of a dancer, to fight three Frenchmen with blood pouring out of his side and emerge victorious, to sing so softly and sweetly even after all the suffering he’s faced, his smile, so lean and bright and full of heat, bringing out the color in his eyes as blue as the ocean’s waves—and yet there he sits, within Sherlock’s reach.

And what’s most impossible of all, Sherlock thinks, feeling stricken, is that he should care for Sherlock the way he does.

Suddenly, it’s imperative to Sherlock that John know how good, how bright, how beautiful he is, that he convey to John just how much he means to him.

His heart is pounding in his chest. He feels hot, light-headed, slightly feverish, and Sherlock registers in some distant part of his brain that this time the wine has most definitely gone to his head. However this does nothing to alter his conviction that John must be made aware of just how much he means to Sherlock.

John must read some of what Sherlock is feeling in his face because Sherlock watches John’s look soften further as he holds Sherlock’s gaze. John’s hand slides back into Sherlock’s curls, the gesture so full of feeling that Sherlock has to shut his eyes.

“My god, Sherlock. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you. You know that, don’t you? Tell me you know that.”

Sherlock’s eyes blink open slowly—he feels as though the room has dropped away beneath them, as though he and John are about to be plunged down into the vastness of the sea—so immense are his feelings in this moment.

“I do,” he says, leaning in, his voice pitched low—it feels warm in his throat, sounds as dark as the blackness in John’s pupils. Sherlock lets his mouth brush soft against John’s jaw. “John. My John.”

John needs to know—he needs to know how much he means to him. Sherlock grips John’s shoulders in his hands, lips traveling over the skin of his throat. His voice is an exhalation of heat. “You’re everything to me.”

Sherlock hears John’s breathing catch as his mouth slides up to the corner of John’s lips.

“John, John, John…” Sherlock strokes John’s shoulders, his thumbs trailing over the ridge of muscle in his biceps. The feel of that hard muscle under Sherlock’s hands makes him shift in John’s lap to make room for his stiffening cock. John must feel it too because the hiss of his breath against Sherlock’s mouth is as sudden, as welcome as the feel of John’s abdomen pressing back into Sherlock’s.

Sherlock readjusts himself in John’s lap, settling his long legs so that they curl around behind John’s waist. Yes, Sherlock thinks. This is good. This is right, as John locks his hands low around Sherlock’s back.
“You’re everything,” Sherlock repeats, tipping his mouth forward into John’s to find the pale pink heat of John’s tongue behind his teeth. Sherlock licks at it, delighted by the spark of feeling when he finds it and it pushes back against him.

They are quiet for several minutes as their mouths are otherwise occupied, the plunge and slide of John’s tongue into Sherlock’s mouth making him gasp with pleasure, opening his mouth wider, angling his jaw to pull John deeper in. He needs John to know how he makes Sherlock feel—like he cannot contain all the joy in his body, all his need for John in his bones and skin—and he tries to make John aware of that in the pressure of his mouth, in the pulse of his tongue against John’s.

“My god,” John says, pulling back for air, pressing his forehead in against Sherlock’s as he fights for breath. “I can’t believe that you have never kissed anyone before two days ago. You’re an expert.” He dips his mouth back in against Sherlock’s and Sherlock mirrors the gesture, swiping out with his tongue to trace John’s lips. “You’re a genius.”

“I’m a fast learner,” Sherlock says, unable to stop himself from smiling at the compliment, and John trails his open lips against Sherlock’s.

“You’re a prodigy,” he breathes as his bottom lip catches against the dip in Sherlock’s top lip.

John’s words of praise light a small fire in the center of Sherlock’s chest, and he can feel the warmth of it creeping all the way out to his fingers and toes. But this is not about Sherlock’s brilliance; it is about John’s.

“No, I just have an excellent teacher,” Sherlock says and then he recaptures John’s mouth with his fully and doesn’t let him speak for several minutes more.

Sherlock’s body feels warm and loose and every second John’s tongue works at him, his body melts a little more, pouring forward into John. He can feel the movements of his own mouth becoming increasingly desperate as John’s hands rub small circles at the base of his spine, thumbs seeking out the notches and smoothing over each one with attentive delight.

Sherlock is almost a head taller than John and although frequently he forgets this is the case—John’s presence is such that any difference in height is minimized in Sherlock’s mind—the difference is noticeable now as Sherlock can feel himself bending down to meet John’s mouth, the long curve of his spine arching under John’s warm hands.

It just makes Sherlock more aware of how remarkable John is—that he can be so small and still so full of strength, so full of brilliance.

“John,” Sherlock says, breaking his mouth away to slide back down John’s throat, hands coming up to hold John’s face, to tip his head back so he has access to the tender underside of John’s jaw, the lovely golden tendons standing out in his neck. Sherlock licks at John’s pulse—feels the heat of it sear him to the center of his bones. “You’re so bright. You’re like sunlight. You’re the sun, John. You’re my sun.”

Sherlock’s legs are hitching tighter around John’s back as he tries to draw John closer in against him, cradling John’s face in his hands. The gesture is successful as Sherlock suddenly feels the heat of John’s erection brush against his own. Sherlock shudders, clenching his knees still tighter against John’s back.

John’s hot mouth presses in against Sherlock’s forehead with a gentle laugh. “I think you might be a little drunk, my love.”
“It doesn’t matter,” Sherlock slurs, his mouth slipping down to the hollow at the base of John’s neck, pressing open-mouthed kisses as he goes. “It’s true, John, everything I said. You’re sunlight. You’re my sunlight.”

John gasps then as Sherlock bites him softly on the side of his throat, Sherlock’s long fingers brushing over John’s chest to find his nipples.

He feels delirious with his need for John, desperate to make John understand. He wants to kiss John everywhere at once but he’s afraid that just kissing him won’t make it clear enough.

“You make everything brighter—you make me better, John.” Sherlock’s mouth is trembling as he kisses the sharp swell of John’s shoulder. “John, John, John—you need to know.”

“Well,” John says, breathless, his warm hands sliding forward to settle on Sherlock’s hips, the touch of his calloused palms rough and yet somehow achingly sweet against Sherlock’s skin. “If I’m the sun, then you’re my moon—” He presses a kiss to Sherlock’s throat. “White and pale and shining.”

“John,” Sherlock cries, pushing his hips forward into John’s, his breath hitching as John’s hands still the movement.

“Wait,” John says against his lips, and then he lifts Sherlock in his lap, pulling his knees up behind Sherlock’s back to cradle Sherlock close to him, dragging their erections into sharp alignment.

Sherlock shudders at the contact and John kisses him, sweetly, on the corner of the mouth, settling Sherlock’s body more firmly against his. “Put your arms around my neck.”

“J- John,” Sherlock gasps as he follows John’s command, linking his arms behind John’s neck, glad to have a direction from John for what to do with his body as the contact of John’s hot and rigid cock against his own has driven every coherent thought from his mind.

He can feel his whole body shivering lightly as John’s hands guide his hips in a slow thrust against him, John’s own hips coming up to meet his; the movement causing their cocks to come together in a long slide of heat.

Sherlock gasps again at the contact, pressing his forehead in against John’s.

“That’s right, my beautiful boy,” John breathes against him, his own voice shaking now from the force of his feelings, from the tremendous effort of keeping his movements controlled. Sherlock wants John to move faster, to thrust against him with abandon until he is crying out from pleasure—but for the moment he is grateful for the chance to let the reality of John holding him here unfold around him, lapping gently at his senses like warm water in a bathing pool. He tries desperately to hang onto each sensation, to embed it forever in his mind so that he might have it always: John’s hands on his hips, John’s strong thighs cradling his back, the corners of his downturned mouth so close to Sherlock’s own, his eyes quickening, quickening in the low light. “You’re my moon—rare, mysterious, only coming out in darkness—with the strength to move the tides.”

John thrusts up again with his hips, making Sherlock hiss and dig his fingers into the back of John’s neck—the slow drag of their cocks together drawing the pleasure out of him like fire from a wick. The leisurely roll feels good, it burns, but it awakens a hunger in Sherlock, wide and deep—so cavernous he fears it will swallow him whole. He needs more of that friction, needs it so badly that he aches in its absence.
Sherlock tries to jerk his hips, to repeat the motion, but John holds him still as he bends to lick a trail up Sherlock’s neck, causing Sherlock to drop his head back and whine deep in the base of his throat.

“People underestimate you,” John says against him, his voice low and dark, his words punctuated by another slow roll of his hips. “But you’re stronger than you let on. You’re stronger than all of them, aren’t you?”

Sherlock whimpers in response, shivering with the need to pump his hips, to thrust forward into John. Words are beyond him now—he can only think in urges—bursting hot and phosphorescent in his mind like the flash that lingers after cannon fire in the dark.

“No one gets to see what I see—the silver at the heart of you, the white fires blazing, bright as starlight, hot as the wrath of every angry god.”

John’s words pour over him like lust itself, warm and caressing. Sherlock is so lost in the needs of his own body, in the feel of John around him, that he can hardly understand what John is saying. But he can feel the heat in John’s voice as clearly as he can feel the pressure of John’s fingers on his hips, the yearning in his tone fanning the flames of Sherlock’s own desire until he’s squirming in John’s grasp, desperate for movement, for friction. But John does not relent.

“My god, you’re beautiful like this,” John says, kissing a drop of sweat trickling down his temple, his tongue coming out to lap at the spot—sending a shudder through Sherlock, making him whine again, long and needy, his hips jerking in John’s grip. “You’re glowing, Sherlock. You’re as radiant as moonlight.”

“J-John, please—” he rasps, his own voice sounding broken, far-away, and his desperation must be palpable in his voice because at last, at last, John’s hands are moving him in a rhythm that isn’t sinfully slow, his own hips rising up to meet Sherlock’s in a burst of friction.

Sherlock cries out in pleasure, letting his head fall back as John begins to thrust up into Sherlock in an even tempo, his hands on Sherlock’s hips no longer holding him back, finally allowing Sherlock to buck forward into John as hard, as quickly as he wants—setting his own pace to match Sherlock’s, and god above does it feel good to finally be able to move.

Sherlock’s legs tighten around John as he thrusts, pulling John’s body in closer against him until he and John are pressed stomach to stomach, his fingers clinging so hard to the back of John’s neck that he fears he may be leaving marks—but that doesn’t stop him.

The pistoning need in his hips is matched thrust for thrust by John, whose forehead is pressing in against his, his own hands slipping in the sweat on Sherlock’s shoulders, the rhythm of their breathing echoing hot and frantic between them.

They’re so close together, tangled arms and legs, that it’s almost as good as being fused into one, but still the need to push harder into John drives Sherlock up against him until his body’s shaking from the effort.

Then John—oh clever, clever, brilliant John—shifts so that he’s leaning back onto his hands, his palms flat behind him on the bed, giving him the leverage he needs to thrust up against Sherlock with more precision, grinding their cocks together between their bellies.

The resulting sensation makes Sherlock’s eyes slide shut with a tremulous moan—the friction is doubled, tripled, by John’s adjustment—the moisture leaking from the heads of both their swollen cocks easing the slide of their hips together.
Now that the angle is right, Sherlock can finally let himself go, his whole body thrusting into John’s, rising and falling in John’s lap, as steady and even as the tide, the sweat running down between their foreheads mingling, their bellies pressed together—warm and slick and filthy.

Sherlock can feel the warm, low pulse of his desire building in him and never has he longed so much for his release, or worked so hard to find it. Its impending presence makes his throat go tight, inexplicably makes tears prickle hot behind his eyes, and he suddenly remembers the whole point of all this was to convey to John his own importance, but Sherlock forgot, he got distracted, and just as he’s opening his mouth to tell John, his orgasm bursts through him—searing and bright and all encompassing.

He jerks forward, hips bucking, knees clenching hard against John’s back, his open mouth pressed, gasping, into John’s, as pleasure shakes through him like a summer storm. He can feel the hot liquid of his release gush out between them, slicking his own belly and chest, can feel John’s hips coming to a halt against his as his whole body stiffens with the force of his orgasm. Gradually, he softens against John, his hips still making little rocking movements of their own accord as the pleasure continues unfurling within him, until it finally leaves him feeling wrung out, shaking, his face pressed in against the curve of John’s throat.

Because John is patient and beautiful and good—and essentially a god in human form—he waits several long minutes for Sherlock to catch his breath and does not stir until Sherlock lifts his flushed face from John’s neck to reach down between them and take the hot, slippery length of his still very hard cock in his hand.

Sherlock is still sitting in John’s lap, John’s legs curled around his sides, and although he’s bleary-eyed and warm, and feeling slightly dizzy from the effects of his orgasm, Sherlock is so inspired by the sight of John’s hand around himself, beginning to stroke, that he reaches down to fold his fingers over John’s.

John licks his lips, his eyes flickering up to catch hold of Sherlock’s. His eyelids are heavy over his eyes, his lashes lustrous in the hazy light of the guttering candle. Somehow he manages to find his voice. It’s heavy and thick, as affecting as the feel of John’s cock under Sherlock’s fingers.

“Sherlock, you don’t have to—”

Sherlock lifts his fingers to John’s lips and leaves them there as the long fingers of his other hand continue to follow the path of John’s—up and down over his swollen cock, up and down, twisting slightly around the head, making John’s lashes slide closed over his eyes with a sharp intake of breath.

Sherlock shifts forward, eager, determined. “Let me,” he says, carefully lifting John’s fingers off himself to replace them fully with his own. “Let me do it, John.”

John lets him.

He sits back with a quiet sigh of acquiescence, leaning his weight back on his palms, lifting his hips up into Sherlock’s hand as Sherlock carefully, oh so carefully, repeats the movements that John started, copying the pressure, the speed of his strokes so that it’s only a moment before John’s mouth is falling open with gasps of pleasure, one of Sherlock’s fingers slipping into his mouth.

John sucks on it hard, and Sherlock speeds up the pace of his stroking, his gaze, unwavering on John’s as he pulls John towards the brink of his orgasm.

“I meant to tell you,” Sherlock says, leaning in closer so he can replace his fingers with his mouth. “John, you…” Sherlock presses his open mouth over John’s, lets his tongue lick into the heat of
John’s panting mouth. “You make my life better, brighter… you’re the sun, John. My sun… I need you to know.”

He pushes his forehead in against John’s, and they’re both panting now as Sherlock strokes the length of John, faster and faster, until he feels the first tremors start to move through John, the smell of his sweat, the ripe heat of his body filling Sherlock’s nostrils, causing him to tighten his calves around John’s back, to break his mouth away so he can lick the sweat off of John’s throat.

“John,” he breathes into John’s hair, rubbing his open lips against it, relishing its softness against his mouth. “You’re so bright. You’re more beautiful than anyone I’ve ever seen. You are strength to me—and light. John, John, John, I need you to know.”

Sherlock feels the muscles tense in John’s thighs, and then his entire body’s tightening, his head tipping back as his orgasm takes him, spurting into Sherlock’s fist.

Sherlock continues to stroke him through it, trembling almost as hard as John, still pressing absent kisses into John’s hair as he listens to the sound of John’s ragged breathing begin to calm.

Sherlock shifts his weight in John’s lap—suddenly aware of just how stiff he is from sitting in the same position, and feels John’s arms come up around him.

Something in the gesture makes the hot tight feeling in Sherlock’s chest burst open within him and before he understands what’s happening, he’s pressing his face into the curve of John’s neck, tears streaming from his eyes.

It takes John a moment to realize that the quiet hitching of Sherlock’s shoulders under his hands are tiny sobs, that the dampness against the side of his neck from Sherlock’s face isn’t just sweat, but as soon as he realizes, his hands slide up to Sherlock’s hair.

“Shh,” he breathes into Sherlock’s ear. “It’s alright.”

Sherlock lifts his head, sucking in a shaky breath of air. He wants to tell John why he’s crying but finds he doesn’t know what to say. He does not have the words.

John pulls Sherlock back against him, bowing his mouth to Sherlock’s hair.

“You’re alright,” John says, his voice low and warm. “You’re alright. It’s just the wine.”

John leans back, shifting Sherlock in his arms, rearranging them so they can lie down together with Sherlock’s head against John’s chest.

He keeps one hand in Sherlock’s hair, smoothing his fingers through the curls, the other rubbing circles into Sherlock’s back.

The gesture is wonderfully soothing and before long Sherlock feels the storm of emotion in his chest begin to loosen its hold on him, his body bending to the weight of his exhaustion. He wriggles tighter against John’s side and closes his eyes even as a few stubborn tears trickle down his nose and onto John’s chest.

John seems to know instinctually what will calm him, and before Sherlock can even think to ask, John starts to sing, soft and low, into the narrow space between their bowed heads, his voice a rich counterpoint to the gentle rhythm of his hands. A shiver runs through Sherlock at the sorrow in the melody, at the lovely, haunting tenor of John’s voice.

He needs to tell John that he was wrong about his tears—that it wasn’t the wine at all, but rather
the immensity of his feelings, the enormity of his love for John, which is as wide as the sky, as vast as the sea they are sailing over, but deeper, deeper—fathomless.

However, before he can lift his head to speak, sleep has crept in to pull him down to darkness, sponging the words from his lips for the second time that night.
The room is warm when Sherlock wakes.

He can feel the drowsy heat of the tropical sun pulsing in the confines of his cabin even before he opens his eyes, and he knows that the sun must have been up for several hours to soak down through the layers of the deck to transform his narrow berth into the veritable sauna that it feels like now.

He opens his eyes and sees that he is alone in bed.

Of course. John will have been up hours ago, would have woken when they rang the bells at dawn, but the practicality of this knowledge does nothing to stop the pang that moves through Sherlock’s chest at his absence, as visceral as a physical pain.

Sherlock sits up, rubbing the heel of one hand in his eye, chasing away the fading remnants of his dreams. They were good dreams. John was with him in some hot and sunny landscape—was it a desert? Sherlock tries to recollect but the images fail to focus, their details bleached away as if by heat.

They were searching for water, Sherlock thinks, and in that instant it occurs to him just how thirsty he actually is.

He leans over for the pitcher on his desk, feeling as he does so how thin his skull feels, how dry his mouth, and sees in the same instant that his water cup is stained dark with wine.

He looks at the empty bottle on his desk and groans.

No wonder he feels as though he’s dying of thirst.

Lucky for him, John was thoughtful enough to fill Sherlock’s pitcher with fresh water before he left. Sherlock fills one cup to the brim, drinks it greedily down, and then instantly fills another.

He has not felt so thirsty since his illness.

He drinks half the pitcher before he feels satisfied, and although it’s late morning and Sherlock
should probably rise and dress, he feels no urgency to seek out the blazing noonday sun, nor to
discover just how badly it might exacerbate the condition of his aching head so he lies back down
against the pillows, drawing his knees up tight against his chest. He shuts his eyes, and lets his
mind drift back over the events of the previous evening.

John in his blue shirt, temples salt-stained, eyes so bright; Sherlock’s nervousness; the kiss as John
leaned in from the chair by Sherlock’s desk; the wine, the taste of it on John’s lips; Sherlock
coming before either of them had even undressed. And then what Sherlock had done after—god
how glad he is now that he dared to try it, the feel of John between his lips, that blood-hot flesh
against his tongue, the noises John made in response.

Sherlock’s stomach flips at the memory and he clenches his knees tighter against his chest,
breathing hard.

His mind seems to speed up, rushing forward over all that came after—waking up beside John’s
naked slumbering body; John’s worry over Mycroft’s letter; his gentle admonition to Sherlock not
to get involved followed by his promise to stand by Sherlock no matter what; and then, and then!
—the reason for his injured face; his fierce protectiveness for Sherlock blazing like a flame in the
darkness of the cabin.

Sherlock trembles thinking of it now, presses a fist against his mouth as though to staunch the tide
of memories, so powerful Sherlock feels as though his head is being pulled down beneath the
waves.

And after, how Sherlock tried to tell John what he means to him, slurring, desperate, his thighs
clenching hard around John’s waist, lips slipping over his throat, hand working the length of him as
though he could draw the life out of him up to the surface through the grip on his hand—god, the
things he said.

He told John he was the sun, *his* sun. Oh god.

Sherlock tucks his burning cheek in against the pillow, feeling hot with shame.

All true and yet all of his words, every one, failing utterly to convey the truth of what John is—
what John means to him.

Thinking on it now, still, Sherlock feels a well of frustration rise within him—frustration and
shame and fondness and lust, and underneath it all, throbbing like the heart of the ocean itself, his
love for John, ever-growing, impossible to represent.

There is so much feeling coursing through his body that Sherlock feels as though he may break
apart. He has never felt so much in all his life and he finds he does not know quite how to manage
it.

His response is to do what he always does with the most important moments of his life—to sort
through every memory, each sensation, to catalogue it, smooth it out, examine it from every angle,
before tucking it away inside his mind in order to preserve it.

It’s something Sherlock has always done since he was small. Important things need to be placed
somewhere no one can touch them or take them away. He learned this from a very young age when
the nurses began destroying all his specimens—when his cousins would sabotage his experiments
just to see him cry and rage, when Mycroft abruptly decided that he had grown up and wanted
nothing to do with Sherlock or the games they played together as boys.
People like to destroy things, to take away what was precious to you. That’s what other people did. So Sherlock learned very quickly that the only way to hold onto anything was to keep it in his own head.

He has always had an exceptional memory but he began to train himself to remember things in a particular way—there were so many things that Sherlock realized he would need a system to keep everything in order, to help him call it up when he needed it.

The catalyst for his development of this system was the death of his father’s hunting dog, the dog his father claimed was his, but who Sherlock knew had always really belonged to him; since the day he stopped the puppy being killed.

They went everywhere together, Sherlock and the dog he came to call Redbeard.

He was the runt of the litter—small, malnourished, always pushed aside at feeding time. When he was still a puppy the kennel master took him out behind the shed to shoot him—“There’s no way he can survive in this pack;” but Sherlock, furious, angry tears streaming down his cheeks, who’d already taken a liking to the undernourished pup, had stood between the trembling dog and the kennel master’s gun. “I won’t let you shoot him. I won’t let you.”

Sherlock had never felt so full of rage—and he had been angry plenty of times in his life. But this rage was different. It was white-hot, blinding. He felt as though he could have walked through fire and emerged unscathed. Let the kennel master shoot him. The bullet would likely pass right through him without leaving a mark.

He scooped the puppy in his arms. “You can’t have him. He’s mine.”

When he learned what was going on, Sherlock’s father tried to intervene, but at that point, Sherlock had hidden himself away with the puppy up in the straw above the barn. Mycroft found him, hours later, curled around the sleeping dog, hair matted, furious tears long since dried on his cheeks, and told him with a weary sigh, “Father says you can keep the beast, but you’re responsible for it. You’ll have to keep it away from the other dogs.”

Redbeard slept in Sherlock’s room from then on.

They were inseparable.

The two of them would wander the woods for hours, crashing through the brush, scaring birds, Sherlock collecting specimens, Redbeard snuffling happily among the roots of trees.

Sherlock would fill his pockets during dinner, with Redbeard lying at his feet. Afterward, when the gentlemen had gone through to smoke, the ladies to their cards, Sherlock would drop from his chair and lie under the table with his head on Redbeard’s belly while the servants did the clearing up, feeding him scraps of bread and mutton that he had hoarded from his own plate. He would laugh when Redbeard’s warm rough tongue licked his face, and bury his face in Redbeard’s soft and pungent smelling fur until one of the servants discovered him there and dragged Sherlock out to box his ears, sending him back to the nursery to await his thrashing.

Redbeard had come into Sherlock’s life just at the time when Mycroft had decided he had outgrown childish things—that he was a man and therefore couldn’t associate with Sherlock anymore. He filled a hole in Sherlock’s tiny miserable life that he hadn’t even known was there.

Those years with Redbeard were the happiest Sherlock had ever known.

But then one day, in the woods, they ventured farther than they’d ever gone before—miles from
the house—and Redbeard vanished from Sherlock’s line of sight. This wasn’t uncommon, they would often separate for a little while, Redbeard pursuing some scent, Sherlock stumbling on a new breed of fungus or some never-before-seen insect, only to come back together again, like the course of a diverted stream. But this time, Redbeard had been gone for so long Sherlock began to worry.

He stayed in the woods until the sky grew dark, breaking through branches, pulling thick hedges apart with his bare hands, his movements growing increasingly frantic as his desperation increased, calling and calling Redbeard’s name until his voice was hoarse from shouting.

He finally found him after the sun had set. The woods were black as pitch, but Sherlock was alerted to his presence by the thin sound of his whimper. He followed it like a thread in the dark to where the dog was lying in the center of a dark copse of trees.

His foot had been caught in a hunting snare. The teeth of the vicious trap were sunk deep into his hind leg. Sherlock tried to get him out but his efforts were useless, fingers slipping in the blood, his own two hands of flesh and bone powerless against the metal jaws of the trap.

Never had he felt so useless as he did that day, unable to do anything against the pain, to help allay the creature’s suffering. There was nothing he could do.

Even if he could somehow remove his leg from the trap, he would never walk again. The wound was too serious.

So the kennel master got to shoot him after all.

No incident in Sherlock’s life was darker than that long walk back through the woods to the house to get help, knowing all the while that Redbeard was in pain, and alone under that dark circle of trees.

He has no memory of the details of that walk—he has erased it completely from his mind.

He does remember returning with his brother and the kennel master, kneeling in the dirt while it happened, his eyes dry and stinging, afraid every moment that he was going to be sick but telling himself fiercely he had to be strong for Redbeard’s sake, Mycroft standing behind him, his posture utterly stiff. He may not have understood Sherlock’s love for the dog but he understood what a loss this was for Sherlock.

Mycroft had helped Sherlock find a place to bury him in the woods outback. He even helped Sherlock dig the hole, didn’t even complain about his clothes getting dirty.

Sherlock didn’t want to leave the place, but Mycroft dragged him home again, too exhausted and numb with grief to put up much of a fight, and helped him up the stairs and into bed.

Sherlock was sick for a long time afterwards. He caught a fever, and couldn’t leave his bed for weeks. There were so many days when he couldn’t find it in himself to exert the strength it took to keep on living. What’s the point? He’d often think, staring up in blank horror at the ceiling. But something in him had refused to stop fighting and he had survived it, although he had a long period of convalescence.

He was too weak to leave his bed for weeks afterward, and that was when he’d started to put together his system for remembering things.

If the only way that he could hang onto Redbeard was in his mind, then so be it.
The structure was based on the layout of the Holmes’ estate, which Sherlock could easily walk through in his mind with his eyes closed. He started out by grouping certain types of memories in particular rooms, organizing them by a complicated schema of logic that made sense only to him. Over the years as he continued to add to it, Sherlock modified the structure in his head—gutted rooms that he’d never liked, replacing their interiors with objects that were important to him.

His father’s study became a space to store his fungi, dark roots breaking up through the floorboards to reveal the rich soil underneath, vines growing up to twine around his father’s desk, erupting from the chimney and crawling up the ceiling to make a dense latticework of leaves that broke the plaster overhead.

The dining room became his menagerie for rare specimens of plant life; the parlor next door housed his collection of animals. His mother’s sitting room became the storehouse for all his knowledge of geography and astronomy; Mycroft’s room his chemical laboratory.

When Redbeard died, he replaced the grand entryway downstairs with Redbeard’s favorite meadow so that Redbeard could run and run through the sunshine all within the structure of Sherlock’s family home.

Space expands in a curious way in the architecture of Sherlock’s mind—the sky opening up in the rafters of the ceiling, sunlight pouring down between the beams; whole forests swaying in the space beneath the main staircase.

He is constantly adapting it, adding to it, making slight modifications as he encounters new information, new memories that he deems important.

He started a room for John the day that he met him, but he’s realizing that he’s going to have to expand into another room at least—if not two—just for John, as he’s quickly running out of space.

When Sherlock opens his eyes again, finally satisfied with the storage of his new memories after shifting a whole portion of now unnecessary clutter out of the old night-nursery to make more room for John, he is relieved to find that his headache is mostly gone.

Sherlock sits up tentatively, realizing as he gradually becomes aware of the presence of his body again just how hungry he is.

It must be only a little past noon; if he hurries, he will still be able to make it to the passenger saloon in time for lunch.

He dresses quickly and perfunctorily, sparing only the briefest of minutes to splash his face with water from his pewter basin. It’s so hot today, he will be sweating again in minutes he has no doubt; so a more thorough wash hardly seems necessary.

As he moves about the room getting dressed, he is surprised to discover several places in his body—low in his abdomen, in the juncture between his hip and thigh—that feel tender and sore.

He flexes his hips experimentally and with the pang of soreness comes a whole host of memories: his thighs clamping tightly around John’s waist as Sherlock rocked into him; Sherlock’s back arched and stomach muscles clenched as he thrust up into John’s fist; Sherlock crouched over John on the bed, his own thighs spreading wide against the mattress.

It appears that John is helping him to develop a whole new regimen of strength training that extends far beyond the realm of simple boxing lessons, and Sherlock finds he cannot stop himself smiling as he exits his cabin and makes his way to the dining room, each step bringing a small
twinge of pain and with it a memory of John against him, so that each ache in Sherlock’s body becomes a silent talisman in honor of John’s presence, a reminder of the fact that John has worked his way deep into Sherlock’s flesh, down into his muscles.

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Lunch is an unremarkable affair, blessedly free of Anderson’s presence, or any of the other petty officers. They are likely all up on deck, occupied with training exercises now that the ship has hit the trade winds. Everyone, it seems, has more leisure time these past few days.

It’s hot in the dining room.

Sherlock eats his soup quickly; too preoccupied by the fierce blaze of his own thoughts to spare much attention for the other passengers whose languid and infrequent conversation echoes the torpor of their movements. It seems the heat has sapped their energy, causing everyone to move at half their normal pace, as though time itself has been slowed; the only energetic presence in the whole room the ceaseless flutter of Miss Goodfellow’s fan over her bosom.

Sherlock’s thoughts are all with John, back in the dim, candlelit glow of his memories from the past two nights. He is only distantly aware of the thick, simpering feeling in the atmosphere of the room, in the way the men’s sleeves cling to their arms and backs, and the sweat stands out on the bare throats of the women.

He spares a smile for Miss Hooper as he rises from his chair, and feels a stab of pity, seeing that she has been seated between Ms. Grimsby, her oppressive, steely-eyed chaperone, and the elderly, and mostly deaf, Mr. Mills. She smiles back at him, mouth hidden by her napkin, her brown eyes full of warmth.

He’d like to ask her whether she’s had a chance to talk to Lieutenant Lestrade since the events of two nights past, but he knows the conversation would be impossible to have in the presence of Ms. Grimsby.

He’d also like to ask Miss Hooper in more detail about the events of that evening, whether she noticed anyone passing the Lieutenant a drink, or even who he had employed in conversation—any number of seemingly insignificant details could hold the key to the identity of Lestrade’s poisoner.

For even if Sherlock is certain now that the Captain is responsible, what’s also certain is that the man wasn’t present at the party, so he must be working with an accomplice.

He’ll have to look for an opportunity in the near future to speak with Miss Hooper when she is alone, but it’s difficult to do so, nearly impossible to catch her in those rare moments when her steps aren’t darkened by the dour shadow of her chaperone.

Sherlock experiences a brief flash of real annoyance at the idiotic tenets which dictate the behavior of young women.

It is well past noon when Sherlock exits the dining room, and the heat below decks has reached an almost unbearable capacity. As he moves through the dark and airless corridors of the lower deck, Sherlock feels the full weight of the mid-afternoon heat suddenly make itself known to him.

He pulls at his neck cloth as he climbs the stairs to the upper decks, desperate for a bit of fresh air, even if it means also welcoming the brutal intensity of the tropical sun.

Sure enough, the force of the sun on his hair and face as he moves from the shadows into the light is every bit as intense as Sherlock imagined it would be, but there is also the ghost of a breeze. It
may be hot, but it lifts the damp hair from Sherlock’s forehead and he closes his eyes at the feel of it, drinking it in.

Sherlock crosses to the portside rail, moving in the direction of the breeze, and stands looking out over the ocean.

The sun may be brutal but the sight of the ocean lying clear and flat under the brilliant blue sky is enough to take Sherlock’s breath away.

He has never seen the sea the color that it is today—it’s a vivid blue-green, so startlingly clear that if Sherlock leans over the rail, it looks as though he can see down for miles, the sunshine where it hits the water cutting arcs of light down through the deepening blue.

The sea is so flat that the sky and sea seem to have become one entity, swelling hot and blue green in opposite directions, the sun glancing off the surface of the water in white shimmers of light far out on the horizon.

One lazy seagull interrupts the endless blue of sea and sky, the crisp white lines of its wings held immobile, unmoving, as it hovers in the ship’s wake.

Sherlock turns back to the deck, eyes scanning the beams above the clean, white shapes of the billowed sails, searching for the lean brown form he knows so well, waiting for a flash of gold hair under the sunlight to catch his eye.

The hot blue brilliance of the day seems to have affected the energy of the crew in a similar fashion to that of the passengers—there is little noticeable activity on the deck. A group of sailors sits at the foot of the mainmast, sewing sails and talking in low voices; a group of midshipmen are finishing their calculations on the quarterdeck in silence; and the lieutenants gathered near them are as quiet as the helmsman at the wheel.

Sherlock’s eyes climb all the way up to the very top of the mainmast where John often sits, but the sailor currently keeping watch is not John; neither are any of the men Sherlock can see in the rigging.

He’s about to approach the group of working sailors to ask them about John’s whereabouts but before he takes a step forward he remembers John’s explanation from last night for how he came by the cut on his face.

Sherlock hesitates, his mind suddenly full of speculation.

John said he didn’t mind that the men were making comments about the two of them together, but that it was their comments about Sherlock in particular that had roused his anger.

What could they have said about him to make John so upset?

A half a dozen unsavory possibilities cross Sherlock’s mind, and although a dark part of him is curious to know, a larger part of him suspects that finding out would lead to nothing good; and he has a suspicion that if he were to approach the group of sailors now asking about John, he would get an earful of some kind or another.

So instead he skirts the group entirely and makes his way around the perimeter of the deck, avoiding the lieutenants and midshipmen as best he can until he reaches the forecastle deck, where he and John often have their boxing lessons.

Bu he finds the forecastle deck abandoned.
With a sigh of disappointment, Sherlock crosses to the foremost point on the ship and leans over the rail above the bowsprit, resigning himself to the fact that John must be busy somewhere below decks.

It’s only as he turns to go that he sees John, previously hidden from view behind the bulk of a cannon. He is lying in the narrow space between the cannon and the foredeck rail, stretched out, with his eyes closed, arms pillowed underneath his head.

Sherlock can see from the gentle rise and fall of his chest that he’s breathing deep and even; is likely asleep.

He’s shirtless, dressed only in his breeches, and Sherlock cannot tell if it’s because he’s been in the water, or if it’s just that hot, but his skin is coated in a fine sheen of moisture that makes the whole of his body glisten in the light of the sun.

John always looks brilliant to Sherlock, but this time, he is actually glittering, the bright glare of the sunlight on his bare limbs and torso drawing the light up out of him in long, gleaming lines, as though the sun is drawn to John in particular, as though it knows how well John’s body will wear its light.

As quietly and cautiously as he is able, Sherlock moves into the space between where John is lying and the railing, sinking to his knees to kneel before John on the sun-warmed boards of the deck.

Sherlock has seen John’s bare torso before, of course. He’s seen John climbing the rigging without a shirt, and working the sails under the glare of the sun, but all those times were before he and John were lovers; and all the times he has seen John without clothing since then, Sherlock has had to make due with the thin light from the candles in his dim cabin.

Seeing John now—stretched out under the sunlight—this is how John is meant to be seen, Sherlock thinks, this is how it should always be.

He can see so much, so much that was invisible to his eyes before, and Sherlock’s gaze moves over John desperately, hungrily, drinking in every detail.

He can see every fine hair on John’s jaw, every bit of stubble where his beard is coming in. Sherlock wants to run his fingers over it, feel the scrape and the burn of it against his mouth.

The light on his hair, down his arms, on the planes of his chest, makes him glow like a god who just stepped out of the surf, makes his skin shine like the sheen on the shell of an oyster.

Every detail he sees brings with it a memory of what it was like to touch that part of John’s body, but now Sherlock finds, he wants more than ever, because John looks different now, is different. He has changed in the eight hours or so since Sherlock last kissed him; his short hair is slicked straight back from his brow, looks stiff from the salt of the waves or from sweat—probably both, the grooves round his mouth are softer in the bright light of day, the lines on his forehead all smoothed away.

He must taste different now, feel different, and Sherlock is filled with an animal need to touch him, to kiss him, to learn how he tastes here, now, in this blaze of sunlight and open sky.

Sherlock wants to lick the salt off of him, taste the shadow at the hinge of his jaw; rub his cheek against the gleam of John’s chest.

Even the hair under his arms catches the light of the sun, seems to glisten. His eyelashes are two fringes of gold. Sherlock wants to brush his mouth against them.
It’s the warm glow of his torso that finally tempts Sherlock to break the spell of John’s slumber. His bare torso is browner than ever and Sherlock can’t resist laying his hands on the swell of his chest, feeling the heat of John’s body in the flat of his palms, the shape of the muscles stretched beneath the skin so smooth, so powerful.

It’s what Sherlock has longed to do so many times when he’s seen John working under the sun, and here he is now, stretched out for Sherlock’s eyes, and for the first time, Sherlock knows his touch will be welcome.

John’s eyes flutter open at the touch of Sherlock’s hands. He looks disoriented briefly as he blinks against the harsh light of the sun, squinting up at Sherlock through the glare.

Sherlock watches the moment of recognition break over his face, watches joy lift the corners of his mouth, making creases around his eyes, and thinks for what must be the thousandth time that John Watson’s smile is the best thing he’ll ever see.

“Hello, Beautiful,” John says, mouth spread wide in a sleepy smile.

Sherlock studies the lovely white of John’s teeth—remembers with sudden visceral clarity running his tongue along the outside of them, against the inside of John’s bottom lip, remembers how shockingly soft it was—and flushes hot at the memory.

“Hello,” Sherlock whispers.

John stretches lazily and Sherlock watches the muscles in his chest pull taut; looks at the hair under John’s arms again with something like hunger. He keeps his hands on John’s chest even as John stretches, feels the flex of the muscles as John re-settles his hands behind his head.

Sherlock looks at John’s nipples, thinks about tasting them.

John’s smile grows wider.

“Like what you see?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer. Instead, he lets his fingers slide down John’s torso, over the sun-warmed grooves of his ribs. His thumbs linger in the hollow of John’s belly, brushing oh so softly at the swell of John’s hips. Sherlock watches with fascination the change that comes over John’s face at his touch. His eyelids look suddenly heavy.

“Come closer, lovely.”

John reaches a hand up to wrap around the back of Sherlock’s neck.

“Why?” Sherlock whispers, suddenly apprehensive that someone might see them, even though he knows they are safely hidden from view by the bulk of the cannon. He cranes his head back to look up at the man on watch in the foretop, but the white curve of the foresail blocks him from Sherlock’s line of sight. They are hidden from view on all sides, shrouded by the canvas of the sails.

“I’d like to kiss you.”

Sherlock feels a shudder go through him at John’s words. The low pulse of his desire, brought to life by his discovery of John’s sleeping form, has been growing steadily with every passing moment and now he can taste it, licking steadily at the back of his throat like wildfire. He lets John pull him down until their mouths are inches apart.
John holds them there just a moment, the sea-sweet curl of John’s breath warm against Sherlock’s mouth as John watches Sherlock watching him, something almost like sorrow in his look. Sherlock studies every sun-bright detail—the way his lovely golden lashes hang so heavy over his slate blue eyes, the crooked slope of his nose that is unlike any nose Sherlock has ever seen, the color of his lips up close, the pale pink of living coral.

The rough pads of John’s fingers rub at his hairline, making him shiver in spite of the heat of the sun, and that is all Sherlock can take—the last thread of his self-restraint dissolves into mist.

He drops his mouth to John’s and fits their mouths together so gently, tongue waiting eagerly against the tip of his teeth for John’s lips to part, inviting him in.

At the feel of John’s mouth yielding beneath his, and the warm lovely heat of John’s tongue in his mouth, Sherlock cries out, low, helpless, full of delight, as everything around him fades beyond his perception—the hard boards under his knees, the sun on his back, the distant roar of the foam against the hull—everything, everything dissolves around him until there is only John’s warm body under his hands, John’s hot, slick tongue in his mouth.

He tastes as good as Sherlock imagined—but better, fuller, more complex. He tastes like sunlight and the spirits he drinks—sweet, but with fire underneath.

The kiss is slow, bone-meltingly deep. John feels even more open and vulnerable than usual, his edges softened by sleep. Something about the curl of John’s tongue in Sherlock’s mouth feels more intimate than ever, as if John is inviting Sherlock not just into his mouth, but into the world in which he was just dreaming.

It’s as if another layer has come down between them, and Sherlock is discovering a whole new side of John—this soft and gentle, sleep-warmed John that stretches out behind cannons to take his rest on the sun-bleached boards of the deck.

John’s sun-warmed skin is hot beneath Sherlock’s palms and for a fleeting moment Sherlock thinks longingly of how it would be to see the whole of John’s naked body under the blue sky and sun, and what it would be like to lie with him in the warm embrace of the open air.

Perhaps John feels the change in Sherlock at the thought because he pulls back slightly, fingers still soft on Sherlock’s neck, his voice breathless.

“How long have you been watching me sleep?”

He’s so close against Sherlock’s mouth that Sherlock can taste the words.

“Not long,” Sherlock says, feeling light-headed. It’s disorienting, coming back to reality so suddenly, back into his awareness of the world outside of John. He concentrates on the gentle rise and fall of John’s chest beneath his palms.

“I like watching you watch me,” John says, dropping his head further to gaze at Sherlock’s face. “The way you look at me, you make me feel… utterly unique.”

“You are,” Sherlock says, aghast that John would consider it otherwise. “There is no one like you on this earth, John Watson.”

John laughs softly. He strokes his hand down Sherlock’s neck. “I’m not sure you’re right.”

The fondness in John’s look is making Sherlock’s throat close up with emotion. “But if I am to you, that’s all that matters.”
The wind snaps in the sail above them.

“I didn’t want to wake you up.” Sherlock says through the tightness in his throat. “I could have watched you sleeping all afternoon. But I’m glad I didn’t. This is better.”

“This is better,” John agrees in a murmur and captures Sherlock’s lips again.

The sea and the sky dissolve again in the presence of John’s mouth on Sherlock’s. His fingers slide up into Sherlock’s hair and Sherlock cannot stop a moan of pleasure escaping from his throat.

Sherlock pulls back in sudden fear, hands on John’s shoulders, eyes watchful.

“It’s alright,” John says, smoothing a hand down Sherlock’s shoulder. “Wind’s coming from the east. It’ll carry the sound right over the water.”

But Sherlock sits back on his heels, too frightened to continue.

John sits up, propping his weight on his elbow, and grins up at Sherlock with one eye shut against the glare of the sun.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“What?” Sherlock asks through numb lips, still too frightened by his outburst to really focus on what John is saying.

“I wasn’t asleep when you came over.” John reaches his hand out to where Sherlock’s fingers are clenched in his lap, callused palm turned upwards. Tentatively, Sherlock slides his fingers into John’s. “I mean I was earlier, but when I heard your footsteps, I was just lying there, letting my thoughts take me where they might.”

“What were you thinking of?”

John looks at him, his eyes so much darker than the bright sky behind him. He rubs his warm thumb over Sherlock’s palm, making Sherlock shiver in response.

John’s expression has turned dreamy, contemplative.

“I was thinking about the little garden I used to keep, back at my father’s house, and how about this time of year, the first spring flowers would be coming up. By early summer, it will be crowded with foxglove and lilacs, narcissus and wood violets, anemones as blue as the sea.”

John’s eyes are trained on Sherlock’s hand, but his gaze is fixed on something only he can see.

His voice is a low murmur; it’s as dreamy as his expression, as steady as the ebb of the surf. His thumb in Sherlock’s palm has not stopped its meditative stroking, and Sherlock finds his breathing growing shallower with each gentle circle traced by John’s thumb.

“It was right beside the woods where the rowan trees stood, and in springtime, the lilac boughs at the entryway would make a little bower, the branches so laden with flowers they hung almost to the ground.”

All of Sherlock’s desire, which had fled in the wake of his fear of them being discovered, has returned tenfold. He’s so aroused by John’s low voice and the steady rhythm of his stroking thumb that he’s shivering now as if he has a fever.

John goes on talking, his gaze transfixed on Sherlock’s hand, his voice full of sorrow.
“The sea is beautiful in its way, but sometimes I find my heart yearning after growing things—
green woods and rich, black soil, solid ground beneath my feet, and for the songs of birds other
than gulls. Sometimes I can’t sleep at night for trying to remember what they sound like.”

The ache in John’s voice is so palpable that for a moment Sherlock considers what it must be like
to spend years away from life on dry land, only going on shore for weeks at a time, to have no
place to call home, other than the length of canvas where you lay your head each night. In a way,
Sherlock now knows what it’s like, having been cast off himself, but it must be different after so
many years away; it must be different if your family never wanted you to leave in the first place.

Sherlock wonders what it must be like to actually miss your family. He thinks of Mycroft and his
stomach twists. Then he thinks of the little unmarked mound of earth beneath the apple tree at the
edge of the woods on the Holmes estate, and feels a wave of sorrow so intense it’s as though no
time has passed at all, as though he’s back on that horrible day, standing by that mound of earth,
hands torn apart from digging, Mycroft standing at his shoulder, telling him in a toneless voice,
“It’s time to go home now, Sherlock,” and how he had turned to Mycroft, voice raw from crying
and rasped, “That’s not my home. Redbeard was my home and now he’s dead.”

As Sherlock struggles to think what to say, John’s eyes flicker back up to Sherlock’s and he laughs
suddenly, self-conscious, sad. The sound of it is like a knife through Sherlock.

“I’m sorry,” he says, pulling his hand out of Sherlock’s and sitting up to lean his back against the
cannon. He drops his head, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck, the gesture distracted, full
of shame. “Listen to me. I sound like an old fishwife sitting on the docks, dreaming of song birds.”

He offers Sherlock a smile but there’s no light in it.

Whatever just happened, Sherlock hates it. Whatever it is inside of John that makes him ashamed
of his feelings, ashamed of his own desires, Sherlock wants to find it and destroy it.

“You didn’t,” Sherlock says haltingly, awkwardly. “You don’t.”

He wants to make John feel better but he doesn’t know what to say.

But John’s sorrowful mood seems to pass as quickly as it came because when he next looks up at
Sherlock, his eyes are full of something dark and eager.

“You know the real reason I was thinking of that lilac bower?”

Sherlock shakes his head.

John leans in, his smile bright and hungry, his voice dropping back to that low and dreamy register.

Sherlock feels his heartbeat start to pick up just from that look in John’s eyes.

“I was thinking how someday, I’d like to take you there, show you every flower, and then lay you
down under those scented boughs.”

Sherlock makes a small shocked sound.
His dramatic reaction only seems to encourage John.

“It’s the perfect place,” John continues, voice lowering with every word, as he leans in closer, his eyes on Sherlock’s mouth. “It’s completely secluded, hidden from sight. In the springtime, the air—it smells like heaven, the ground so soft with flowers. The sunlight coming in through the branches overhead covers everything in a patchwork of light, makes a dappled pattern that’s constantly shifting with the wind—god, what I wouldn’t give to see that play of light on your bare skin.”

This time, Sherlock actually gasps.

“And you could be as loud as you like,” John goes on, smiling, as Sherlock’s cheeks flush dark with heat. “No one would hear you but me.”

“John,” Sherlock says, his voice conspicuously strained. His hands are knotted into fists at his sides. It is taking every ounce of his will power to keep his hands from reaching out and straying over John’s lean hips. He knows that he would not have the ability to stop himself this time.

“Yes, my love?”

“When is it… that is—” Sherlock clears his throat, struggles for control. “How long do you have until you’ve got to go back to work?”

John laughs and leans into Sherlock, all mouth and glittering eyes.

Sherlock goes rigid, feels like he should pull back but fails utterly to do so.

This John is a dangerous John—he is capable of anything. Sherlock can tell this from the look in his eyes, can tell from the wild energy coming off of him like a pulse, infectious, intoxicating. It makes Sherlock want to do mad things as well, like push John against the cannon at his back, and drag his trousers off his hips.

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason in particular, I just… wondered.”

John’s grin is all teeth, he looks like a hungry wolf; but his voice is as sweet as the lightest confection. “Did you have a suggestion for some… activity that I might use to occupy myself during my free hour? Is that it?”

“I…”

John leans over to retrieve his jacket, and slings it over one shoulder before turning back to Sherlock.

“I think I know exactly what you had in mind.”

Sherlock’s heart leaps into his throat. “You—?”

But before he can finish his question, John has taken Sherlock’s hand in his, and is pulling him to his feet.

“Come on!”

Sherlock lets John tug him by the hand, out from the shadow of the cannon, and back across the deck.
Sherlock is so dazzled by the brilliance of the smile that John throws him over his shoulder that it takes him a moment to hear the next thing that comes out of John’s mouth.

At first, he thinks he has misheard him.

Sherlock halts beside the foremast.

“What?”

“I said,” John says, dropping Sherlock’s hand to shrug into his jacket. “I’ve been wondering when you were going to ask me for a tour of the ship.”

“A tour of the—?”

Sherlock looks up in bemused horror but John’s laughing face has already vanished from sight around the foremast.

Sherlock lets out a frustrated breath.

“I’m going to kill him,” he says quietly to himself.

“Hurry up!” John calls from the top of the stairs. “I’ve only got an hour!”

Sherlock drops his shoulders, unclenches both his fists.

“I’m actually going to kill him,” he mutters again, but he’s smiling as he traces John’s footsteps around the foremast to the staircase leading below decks.

Chapter End Notes

A lot has happened in the MONTH (I know, terrible) since I posted the last chapter. I have made a Pinterest board for this story, where I now collect all things historical and nautical that are related to this story. I update it frequently, so be sure to check it out!

I have also made a second playlist for this story full of all kinds of delicious fiddle tunes and sea shanties, so be sure to go and listen to that, too! And here is a link if you missed the first one.

I have to thank you all so much for continuing to be such absolutely delightful, supportive and generous readers. I cannot tell you how much each and every interaction with you makes my heart sing! I feel endlessly lucky to have you all at my side as I continue to navigate the high seas with these two gayest of babies. <3
In spite of Sherlock’s severe disappointment that John hadn’t suggested another *very different* activity to occupy his free hour, there’s something decidedly pleasant about having all of John’s company to himself, and all of John’s attention on him, as he guides Sherlock through the complicated maze of storerooms and narrow passageways, through hatchways and under low-hanging beams into every secret corridor of the ship.

John shows him where the sailors sleep—down in the forecastle, and where they eat—on the lower gun deck; he takes Sherlock past the galley, where they catch a glimpse of John’s friend Stamford, leaning over an enormous boiling pot, his features lost in a swirl of steam.

“My god, it’s hot,” Sherlock says as a fresh wave of sweat breaks out along the back of his neck. The accumulated heat from the giant furnace at Mike’s back and the row of boiling kettles is enough to transform the small space into what Sherlock imagines the lower circles of Hell must feel like. “How does he stand it?”

John shrugs. “It’s better than serving on a naval ship—when Stamford and I were on the *Monarch*, he had to cook for 600 men.”

Sherlock has no response for this—he’s too stunned to know what to say. He follows John wordlessly down the gallery where some of the men from John’s watch are sitting at one of the makeshift tables pulled down between the cannons smoking and playing cards, clearly enjoying their reprieve from the blazing heat of the sun as long as they remain off duty.

Sherlock recognizes Matthews and Patterson and Half Pint Lee, all of whom are engrossed in their game with another sailor whose name Sherlock can’t recall. Sherlock has seen him around on deck—the man is tall, broad-shouldered with a sullen sloping face. The silver-whiskered Burns sits off to one side, mending a jacket, with a needle in his teeth.

“How there, Johnny Boy!” Burns takes the needle out of his mouth and nods first at John, then at Sherlock in greeting. Sherlock is certain he sees something glimmer in the older man’s eyes as his gaze falls on Sherlock, but just as quickly, his eyes slide back to John. “Did you manage to get that nap you were so desperate for?”

“I did, indeed,” John says, grinning. “And a fine nap it was. There’s nothing beats sleeping on deck in the tropical sun.”

“You can keep your tropical sun—I’ll have none of it.” The sullen faced sailor whose name Sherlock can’t remember spits over his shoulder, as if to punctuate his distaste. “Sooner we’re out of the tropics, the better. I feel like a roasting pig on a spit.”

“That’s cause you’ve got such a fair complexion, Stevens,” says Patterson, who’s about John’s age and is as brown as a nut. He grins up at the other sailor. “You burn about as nicely as a roasting pig—all red and crispy.”
The other sailors laugh good-naturedly, except Burns who’s gone back to his sewing, and John, who Sherlock notices has gone very still beside him.

Sherlock glances over at him, curious, and sees that all the humor is gone from his face. The line of his jaw is hard and tense, and although his posture is relaxed, there’s a tension radiating from him that Sherlock recognizes at once as the same quiet, powerful rage that emanated from him last night when he was telling Sherlock the reason for his wounded face.

Sherlock looks again at Stevens who’s clearly not someone who can take a joke. He’s glaring openly at his crewmates, his expression darkening with fury.

“All right, all right,” says Matthews, as he deals out the next hand, his tone light and appeasing. Matthews is older than John and Patterson but certainly younger than Burns. He’s got curly, sandy colored hair, and a good-natured face; Sherlock can tell from one glance at him that he usually occupies the role of peacemaker.

The other men grow serious again as they pick up their cards.

Stevens is the last to do so, as if uncertain he’s willing to stick around for another game, but after a beat, he leans in to scoop up his hand. As he does so, his face, which before was bathed in shadow, is momentarily illuminated by the glow of the lantern, and Sherlock notices for the first time the vivid bruise darkening the left side of his face.

John never identified the names of the men who had been talking about Sherlock—it could be anyone on the crew. Sailors got into skirmishes all the time on big ships like this; the bruise on Stevens’ face could be the result of any number of accidents or incidents from the last twenty-four hours. There is as yet no proof that this man is in anyway connected to what John described yesterday.

However, in spite of all this, Sherlock is certain that the fresh and painful-looking bruise on the glowering man’s face is the result of John Watson’s fist.

As if sensing Sherlock’s eyes on him, Stevens’ eyes flicker up to hold Sherlock’s gaze. There’s something unpleasant in his look that’s more than just passing hostility; there’s something deeper there, something dark and ugly, that makes Sherlock feel pinned, like a specimen from one of his insect collections, and Sherlock is ashamed to find he cannot hold the other man’s gaze. He drops his eyes, feeling strangely unsettled.

“Well, I won’t keep you from your game,” John says. His tone is carefully light and pleasant, but Sherlock can feel the tension still coming off him in waves.

“We’re due back on deck at seven bells,” says Burns, as John turns to go. “We’re painting the bulwarks and the waterways.”

“I’ll be back in time.”

And without another word, John strides back down the deck, Sherlock following closely in his wake.

Sherlock waits until they reach the hatch leading down to the next deck before he leans in to ask John, in a low voice, “Was that—?” but John just shakes his head, the movement so abrupt and definitive that Sherlock closes his mouth without another word.

John’s physical response is answer enough to Sherlock’s question. His body is still thrumming with the same violent repressed energy as he begins to climb down the steps.
As Sherlock follows John down the stairs, he finds that John’s dangerous mood has the same effect on him that it always does: despite the lingering sick feeling left in the wake of Stevens’ gaze, Sherlock finds his arousal returning to him as he watches the neat, angry movements of John’s body as he climbs down into the darkness and is gradually swallowed up by the shadows.

This is lower down in the ship than Sherlock has ever been, and the darkness takes on a different quality as they sink below the waterline.

It’s difficult to see where he is placing his feet—they have no lantern, and just as he’s nearing the bottom, Sherlock misses a step in the dark.

He experiences one moment of real terror as he plummets backward, only to find that his foot was on the last step, and there isn’t far to fall.

John’s hands come up instinctively to steady him. “Careful there!”

Embarrassed by his clumsiness, and by the immediate reaction from his body at the feeling of John’s strong hands at his hips, Sherlock feels his cheeks catch fire.

“I’m fine,” he says, more quickly than he means to.

John drops his hands and steps away and Sherlock instantly regrets his words.

“This is the last part of the tour,” John says, turning away to gesture to the dark space they’ve entered. “Welcome to the orlop deck.”

John’s tone is light, but Sherlock can hear the low pulse of anger in his voice that he is still trying to suppress. It makes Sherlock wonder with renewed interest what it was the other sailor said about him. John had said there were two of them—surely, Stevens was one, and guessing by his sullen interactions with his fellow crewmates, it isn’t difficult to imagine Stevens refusing to stop talking even after a warning from John.

Sherlock tries to picture what it must have looked like, John going up to him to throw the first punch. Stevens is a large man—powerful, his body hardened from years of heavy labor. He is older than John, nearly a head taller. John would look petite standing next to him. But the bruise on Stevens’ face indicates that John hit him hard, and John had said he’d brought his opponent to the floor.

Once again, Sherlock tries to picture this. He’s torn between the dual sensations of relief at not having had to witness the terrifying prospect of John challenging this man, and disappointment that he hasn’t yet had the opportunity to see John’s clearly excellent boxing abilities put to good use.

Sherlock pushes the thought aside and refocuses on John’s voice.

“This is as low as we get. Well, almost as low. You go one lower and you reach the hold, but there’s nothing down there but casks of supplies.”

The darkness around them is absolute. Even so, Sherlock can feel that the space they are in is cavernous. Now that his eyes are beginning to adjust to the dim light, he can make out huge hulking shapes in the darkness.

“This is the cable tier, where we stow all the cables when they’re not in use, and the spare rigging and sails, among other things. Because the cables are wet when they’re brought up, we keep them low in the ship so that they’ll drain right into the bilges.”
The most noticeable thing beside the darkness, Sherlock realizes with John’s words, is the damp. The air is moist and rank with the smell of stagnant water, and the darkness is alive with the sound of its dripping.

“That there, next to the main hatch, that’s the sail room. The sails are kept separate so they won’t get wet. And just beyond it is the well where all the stray water collects—that’s where the water from the cables goes, so we can pump it out—by far the most unpleasant task on this, or any ship.”

Sherlock’s eyes are finally beginning to adjust and now he can make out, quite clearly, that the hulking shapes lining either side of the deck are indeed great masses of coiled cable, stacked higher than John’s head. The cables are so thick around they are almost as wide as Sherlock’s waist.

Sherlock gazes in awe at the vast coils of rope stacked in rows all down the length of the deck. He can just see through the darkness that the space doesn’t extend the full length of the ship—there are doors on either end.

“What’s down there?”

“Through that door there is the cockpit,” John says, pointing to the door at the aft of the ship. “That’s where the purser has his cabin, and the steward. It also houses the captain’s storeroom, and the slop room, as well as the surgeon’s dispensary. Those hatches in the middle, there, lead down to the spirit room and the fish room.”

“Oh. I thought it smelled… rather ripe down here.”

John grins at Sherlock through the darkness. It’s the first time the emotion on his face has looked genuine since their run-in with Stevens. “Just gets riper and riper the further down you get.”

Despite the damp, moist quality of the air, and the fetid smell, Sherlock finds that standing close to John in the dripping darkness is doing nothing to take the edge of his very present arousal.

Although Sherlock knows that there are people just beyond the door at the end of the gallery, and people just above them, something about the impenetrable darkness and the anonymous, towering presence of the massive cables gives Sherlock the impression that they have finally come upon a part of the ship where privacy is a possibility. How easy it would be to melt into the shadows between the giant towers of rope…

“Then at this end,” John points just behind where they are standing. “We have the block room, the pitch room, the boatswain’s store room, the foresail room, the gunner’s store room, and the carpenter’s store room. They’re all locked of course. The warrant officers keep the keys.”

“John…” Sherlock says, trying valiantly to hang onto the words coming out of John’s mouth rather than the fact that in the close darkness he can feel the heat coming off John’s torso as vividly as the heat pouring off the furnace in the galley. “How… how often does anyone come down into the cable tiers?”

“Well, not so often. The purser typically uses the aft hatch to get to and from the cockpit, and the same goes for the steward. It’s probably the carpenter and the boatswain you’d find down here the most, and sometimes the boys running errands for them. But why are you…” John stops and looks at Sherlock, seems to really see him for the first time since they came down the steps. “Oh.”

Sherlock watches the white glimmer of John’s smile grow wider in the darkness as he takes a step nearer Sherlock. “Oh.”

“I just…” Sherlock licks his lips, his eyes on the faint light from the hatchway making golden
stripes across John’s hair as he takes another step closer. Sherlock finds himself dropping back a step for each step John takes nearer to him, leading them deeper into the shadows. “I just wondered whether, for instance, if there were two people on board this ship in need of some privacy—” Sherlock can’t keep the note of naked longing out of his voice. “If this might be a place where they could ah… meet, if they so desired.”

Sherlock’s back has come up against the nearby coil of rope. He halts, shoulders pressing hard into the cables at his back.

John leans in and places his hands on either side of Sherlock’s head to make a cage around him with his body. His face is lost in shadow but Sherlock can feel the steady warmth of his breath against his cheek.

“Just what are you suggesting, Mr. Holmes?”

“Nothing... nothing indecorous, to be sure. Nothing you wouldn’t approve—ah.”

John is so close now his lips are skimming Sherlock’s ear, his nose grazing Sherlock’s cheek, and Sherlock realizes with a sharp kick of desire in his belly that John is inhaling as he goes, that John is smelling him, and whimpers sharply.

“John—” He reaches out in desperation to grab hold of some part of John, and as if by instinct, his hands find John’s lean hips, palms settling against the bare strip of sun-warmed skin between John’s trousers and jacket.

All the breath leaves Sherlock’s lungs at the contact of that warm, soft skin against his palms, at the flex in John’s torso as he shifts forward, mouth sliding into Sherlock’s curls and breathing deeply. There is something possessive in the gesture, something fierce and desperate, as though John needs to claim Sherlock for his own.

One of John’s hands drops from where it was beside Sherlock’s head to take Sherlock by the hip and tug him forward, Sherlock’s boots sliding easily along the floorboards as his groin comes to settle against John’s leg.

Sherlock is already fully erect and he can’t help from thrusting his hips reflexively against the hard muscle of John’s thigh as it settles against him. Even that brief contact makes a long shudder move through him and Sherlock cries out, fingers digging in against John’s hips.

As though in response to the need in Sherlock’s cry, John’s mouth slides down to Sherlock’s neck and he kisses the skin behind Sherlock’s ear, softly, teasingly, so gently Sherlock cannot stand it, making Sherlock shiver harder, and cry out again.

It feels like he’s been aroused for hours, even though it’s only been an hour at most. Ever since he came upon John’s sleeping form on deck, the feeling has never fully gone away, and the smell of John now, the heat of him, so warm against Sherlock in the darkness is almost more than he can take.

John is wearing his jacket but has no shirt on underneath, and Sherlock cannot resist sliding his hands up the hard planes of John’s abdomen to find his nipples, already erect, and brush over them with his thumbs.

John’s gasp in the darkness is like a gift, his hair sliding soft against Sherlock’s cheek as he stiffens in response.

Instead of diminishing John’s brightness, the damp and mildewed darkness creates a backdrop...
against which John’s searing presence shines all the more brilliantly.

*Chiaroscuro*, Sherlock thinks, in a flash of delirious pleasure, picturing a painting in his father’s study—a girl, drenched in candlelight, the soft curve of her cheek so white against the darkness all around her.

John’s hair is still warm from the light of the sun, his torso glowing with heat, and Sherlock can smell the salt on him, the sharp smell of his sweat, and underneath that the smell that is distinctly John’s, that brings with it a host of memories, foremost of which is the memory of Sherlock’s face buried in the hair at the base of John’s cock before he took him in his mouth.

Sherlock gasps at the memory, as John’s nimble fingers reach up to yank the knot free in Sherlock’s neck cloth, pulling the fabric aside so that John’s mouth can continue downward, tongue gliding down the strained tendon standing out in Sherlock’s throat.

The fingers of his other hand card gently through the curls at the back of Sherlock’s neck, and Sherlock cries out at the delicate touch, thrusting with abandon against John’s thigh, desperate for friction, for some relief against the aching pressure in his cock.

To Sherlock’s profound relief, he feels the hand that was holding Sherlock by the hip slide forward to the front of Sherlock’s breeches.

Sherlock can feel John’s smile against his neck as his hand traces the length of Sherlock’s cock through the straining fabric. “My, my, what have we here?”

Sherlock can only whimper in response. He is suddenly immensely grateful for the presence of the massive stack of cables at his back, otherwise there would be nothing holding him up as his legs have long since lost their capacity to stand.

John’s callused palm is dragging far too lightly over Sherlock’s trapped erection—he needs more, he needs *friction*; he needs to feel the rough warmth of John’s fist around his naked flesh. He does not know what he will do if John doesn’t pull apart the fastenings on his trousers and take him in hand.

Sherlock is breathing so hard the sound of his panting is deafeningly loud between them in the dark.

He slides his hands up to grip John by the waist in entreaty, his voice pitifully desperate. “J—John, please—Please, I *can’t*—”

John’s hands come to rest over Sherlock’s own, and he moves his head to press his forehead in against Sherlock’s, kissing him gently on the side of the face. “I’m sorry, love. I’m being cruel. No more teasing.”

Sherlock nods feverishly against John’s forehead in agreement as he feels John’s fingers pulling with exaggerated deftness at the buttons on his trousers—one by one he slides them free, still too slowly for Sherlock’s liking, until Sherlock is shaking with anticipation, hands fisting in the lapels of John’s jacket, his breathing quick and shallow; and then before John’s hand can slide inside, he lifts his hands to Sherlock’s shoulders.

“Wait—before we do, come this way.”

Sherlock can scarcely process what John is saying to him but luckily, he doesn’t have to, as John tugs him gently by the shoulders, pulling him deeper into the shadows, guiding him until they’ve moved around to the back of the tower of cables, now tucked into the space between the cables and
The darkness here is absolute; Sherlock can’t see anything. Even the bright sheen of John’s hair is lost to the shadows and the dripping of the water running down the walls is louder here than ever. A scurrying just beyond the coil of rope alerts Sherlock to the fact that they are not entirely alone in the darkness.

“Just rats,” John says, as though in anticipation of Sherlock’s question. At the moment Sherlock couldn’t care less about their rodent companions—he wouldn’t care if there were a hundred rats down here with them in the dark, as long as John’s hands return to what they were doing.

John’s hands smooth down Sherlock’s arms and he leans in, his voice warm and meditative. How he can sounds so absolutely calm is beyond Sherlock. “It seems a shame to do this when I can’t undress you fully….” Even through the thin material of Sherlock’s shirt, John’s fingers raise goose bumps on his arms. “When I can’t even see you.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Sherlock rasps out.

“It doesn’t seem right.” There is something sorrowful in John’s voice as he goes on speaking. “Me sticking my hand down your trousers in the filthy, rat-infested darkness. You deserve better than this.”

“John.” Sherlock’s voice is strained. “I don’t care about any of that. I only care about you.”

There is something decidedly strange about having a body, being fully aware of it in every other sense, but unable to see it. However, Sherlock finds it only serves to amplify the experience of his other senses.

The small hitch in John’s breathing in response to Sherlock’s words takes on a new meaning—it’s as though Sherlock can feel the sound more than hear it; it makes him slide his hands up John’s shoulders and pull John close against him.

“Yes,” he says in the direction of John’s mouth. “Now come here and kiss me.”

Kissing in such profound darkness, Sherlock discovers, is equally erotic. Every soft press, every shift of John’s warm mouth seems magnified a hundred times its normal intensity; until Sherlock is shivering hard again, pressing his half-opened trousers shamefully in against John’s hip.

John licks at the seam of Sherlock’s lips before pulling back and sliding his hand down to pick up where he left off.

“One day…” he says, as his fingers unfasten the final button. “I’m going to have you in a proper bed, like you deserve. It will be enormous. Feather mattress, wooden-frame.” John’s mouth is warm against Sherlock’s temple as he slides his fingers in. “Pillows up to here.”

Sherlock drops his head back with a long low groan as the heat of John’s fingers curl around him.

John presses a kiss against his temple. “Just you wait.”

Sherlock is practically sobbing by the time John’s fingers start to move. He had great plans—he was going to touch John too, in so many places—push that jacket off his shoulders, put his mouth all over John’s chest, but all he can do is lean his head back against the cables, biting his lip hard to keep from making noise as John strokes him with the perfect tempo, his own breath hot and fast against Sherlock’s ear.
He’s so far gone that it’s only a minute—maybe two—before he feels the beginnings of his orgasm gathering tight at the base of his spine.

His hands are still clutched in the lapels of John’s jacket and he tugs at them now to get John’s attention, because he can barely speak.

“J-John…”

“What is it, love?”

John’s mouth is warm just above his.

“Will you… will you kiss me while you—?”

He doesn’t even need to finish asking; John warm, rough mouth has leaned in to capture his own, and at the feel of John’s tongue pressing in against his, Sherlock’s hips buck forward, and then he’s coming, hard, into John’s hand, crying out into John’s mouth as his orgasm takes hold.

He has to break his mouth away to gasp for air as he shudders his way through it, his body wracked with pleasure, John’s warm hands holding him upright.

“I’ve got you,” he says, pressing a kiss to Sherlock’s hair. “I’ve got you.”

Sherlock sags back against the cables, half-dragging John with him, his hands still limply clasped in the front of John’s jacket, his bones turned to liquid.

“All right?”

The warm murmur of John’s voice is like a light in the dark.

Sherlock nods against him, gasping.

“Feel better?”

Sherlock rubs his open mouth against John’s cheek, delighting in the burn of John’s stubble over his sensitive lips. He shivers at the sensation, wishes now that he could peel the rest of his sticky clothes off and rub the whole of his naked body over John.

“Oh yes, John,” he breathes.

In spite of the fact that he’s leaning half-dressed against a tower of cables in the dripping bowels of a ship, his shirt soaked through with sweat, cheeks flushed as though with fever, Sherlock has never felt better.

He feels as though his veins are full of sunlight.

John’s mouth is pressing kisses to the skin just below his ear; his voice, a warm rush of breath against Sherlock’s ear, is filled with regret. “I hate that I can’t see you.”

Sherlock lifts his chin to give John’s searching mouth more room to kiss.

“You’re always beautiful, but this may be my favorite look on you—the way you look just after I’ve taken you apart.”

There’s something dark, and yearning in John’s voice. It makes Sherlock shiver again, and pull John closer to him by the grip on his jacket, until John is slotted neatly in between Sherlock’s
angled hips.

John takes the invitation and grinds slowly into Sherlock, until Sherlock can feel the long, rigid line of John’s cock through the thin linen of his trousers, pressing in against him.

Sherlock makes a soft noise of pleasure and parts his legs wider to invite John to do it again.

John’s mouth is hot against the skin of Sherlock’s throat—searching, as he rolls his hips against Sherlock.

Sherlock can feel the line of tension in John’s body as he struggles to keep his movements careful and controlled, but Sherlock doesn’t want that. He wants all of John—he wants John to let go completely.

“You don’t have to do that,” he pants. “You don’t have to hold back.” Sherlock’s mouth brushes John’s hairline, hands finally letting go of the front of John’s jacket to slide in against his bare chest, passing so lightly over his nipples. “You can—you can take me anyway you like.”

John bites back a moan, his hips grinding forward again, harder this time.

“Yes,” Sherlock breathes, rubbing his hands down John’s bare sides and then back up to brush his nipples again. “Yes, yes yes.”

“You shouldn’t say that to me.”

“Why not?” He bends his head to lick at the shell of John’s warm ear.

John must have been in the ocean today—he smells like brine, and the waves of his hair, pushed back from his forehead are stiff with salt. Sherlock drags his nose through it, inhaling deeply, as John’s open mouth slips down his throat.

Sherlock can feel John’s lips are trembling.

There’s a note of something almost like pain in John’s voice—something desperate, on the verge of breaking. “You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

A chill ripples through Sherlock at John’s words, makes a low pulse of arousal throb through the base of his cock. “What do you mean?”

“There are things I want to do to you, Sherlock… things… you won’t even believe.” Sherlock lets out a soft cry as John’s teeth graze Sherlock’s neck. “But you’re not—you’re not ready yet, Sherlock.”

“I am.” Sherlock slides his palms over John’s chest, fingers rubbing harder against John’s nipples, eliciting another low groan from deep within John’s throat as he thrusts. “I can take anything you can give me.”

“You can’t,” John pants, rutting hard against Sherlock with his hips. “You’re too—”


John is grinding hard into Sherlock now, the steady rhythm of his thrusts already rousing Sherlock’s desire again. Sherlock can feel John shake his head against him, his mouth warm at the base of Sherlock’s throat. “It takes—preparation. It takes time—”

“I don’t care,” Sherlock breathes.
John is right. Sherlock doesn’t even know what he’s asking for, all he knows is that the smell of John is all around him in the dark, John’s mouth is hot against the thin skin of his throat, and Sherlock is already hard again. He wants all of John, whatever that means, every piece of himself he has to offer.

“John,” Sherlock pushes his hand down between their bodies, traces the length of John’s cock through his trousers, feels John shudder in response and then go utterly still. He pulls at the fastenings with fumbling, inexpert fingers; he has to use both hands to push the material down John’s hips. Sherlock puts his mouth to John’s ear, pitches his voice as velvet deep as it will go. “Just tell me what you want me to do. I’m yours.”

John lets out a hitching, desperate breath at Sherlock’s words, and then everything changes.

John shifts his hands, slides them down Sherlock’s back until he’s gripping Sherlock by his buttocks. He tugs Sherlock hard against him, making Sherlock stumble once before John pulls Sherlock’s leg around him, lifting first one, then the other, until John is holding Sherlock up just by the grip on his arse.

Sherlock gasps in shocked delight. John’s low voice is a growl at his throat. “Hold onto my waist.”

Sherlock does, and is shocked to feel how easily John bears his weight.

He can feel the searing heat of John’s very erect cock pressing hard into his own.

And then he’s thrusting forward into Sherlock, rubbing the naked heat of his cock against Sherlock’s body, harder than he ever has, so hard Sherlock can feel the scratch of the bristled cables against his back as John rocks into him.

He drags his teeth down Sherlock’s neck and then Sherlock gasps again, this time in pain as John’s teeth sink into the skin underneath his ear.

John is biting him—John is biting at his neck.

The realization makes something low and hot burst open in Sherlock’s belly.

He clasps his hands tighter around John’s waist, his gasp of pain transforming into a moan of pleasure as John licks and sucks at the freshly bruised skin. The sweet sensation of John’s warm wet mouth against his skin is shot through with little stars of pain, making the pleasure of it all the more intense.

Sherlock has never felt anything like it—he wants John to do it again, but he can’t find the breath to speak.

John’s fingers are hard on Sherlock’s thighs, the muscles in his biceps straining from the effort of holding him up as he thrusts. Sherlock lets go of John’s waist to slide his hands over the bulge of John’s upper arms, wishing desperately that he’d had the foresight to pull John’s jacket off as soon as they started.

Never has Sherlock been more aware of the raw power in John’s compact form, of the sheer force of his strength as he holds Sherlock up and pistons into him with his hips. He rubs his mouth against John’s bent head, tasting sweat, as each thrust of John’s hips forces Sherlock’s shoulders back against the scratch of the cables. The pain feels good. Sherlock grips onto John harder with his thighs, fingers slipping in the sweat on John’s neck.

The friction of their cocks rubbing together is messy, rough, imprecise—it feels so good. Sherlock
is in awe of the feeling of John so unrestrained against him, but for the first time he finds himself wishing for a way that he and John could somehow get closer together; Sherlock finds himself wanting still more.

He locks his ankles around John’s lower back with a low whine, pushing his body harder into John’s. As if in response John bites down again on Sherlock’s neck, making Sherlock cry out in sharp surprise, which seems to incite John to do it again, and again, sucking and biting and licking until Sherlock is looping his arms around John’s neck, arched his back to press his body closer, baring his throat to John’s greedy mouth with a ragged moan.

“Say it again,” John gasps, his mouth skidding back up Sherlock’s throat to find his swollen lips. He kisses Sherlock, searchingly, something dark and commanding in the thrust of his tongue into Sherlock’s mouth. He bites at the corner of Sherlock’s lips and Sherlock groans, surprising himself. “Say it again.”

Sherlock is so overcome he can’t think what John is asking him. “W—what?”

“I’m—I’m yours,” Sherlock says and he feels John shake against him, fingers clenching hard into Sherlock’s arse as he gives one last thrust and then comes, his face buried hot in Sherlock’s shoulder, Sherlock’s arms clasped round his neck.

At the feel of John’s cock pulsing against his own, Sherlock rocks one final time into John’s warm torso. His whole body tightens—he can feel his toes curling in his boots, shoulder blades flexing against the rope at his back, and then he’s coming too, his head thrown back, a long low cry pulled from his throat.

Sherlock didn’t know it was possible for him to come more than once in such a short space of time but it seems John Watson causes all kinds of inexplicable reactions in his body; the fact that his second orgasm is even more intense than the first is yet another surprise. It seems to last forever, the pleasure spiraling on and on, as he shudders and jerks in the circle of John’s arms, John’s lips still warm at his throat.

When Sherlock’s body finally calms, he’s aware that his legs have slid out of John’s grasp. John is leaning weakly against him, breath still coming hard, one hand braced protectively above Sherlock’s head. If it weren’t for the press of John’s body against him, holding him up, Sherlock is fairly certain he would be sitting on the floor.

They are both shivering, soaked in sweat.

“I’m sorry,” John gasps. “That was—”

Sherlock curls his fingers at the nape of John’s neck, pulling him close. He kisses him, hard, stopping the apology on John’s lips. When he pulls back again they are both breathless.

“Don’t you dare apologize,” Sherlock whispers, his voice simultaneously fierce and full of awe. “That was…” There are no words that can even begin to convey what that was. He struggles for a moment in frustrated silence. “It was indescribable.”

Sherlock’s bones feel like putty. There is a lovely twinge radiating from the skin on his neck. Sherlock puts a hand up to feel at the bruised flesh, curious.

“God, Sherlock—” Sherlock can’t see John’s expression in the dark but he can hear the plaintive note in his voice, the hint of something that sounds almost like shame. “That wasn’t—I’m sorry, I
didn’t mean, I didn’t mean to let myself go like that—I never meant—”
Sherlock lifts his fingers to John’s lips in the darkness. “Shh.”
From far off, they can hear the distant sound of the bell.
“Bloody hell. I’ve got to get up above.”
John steps away from Sherlock to fasten up his trousers.
Sherlock reaches down to do the same, but it takes him twice as long as John. His fingers are slow and unresponsive; all the blood apparently has yet to return from other parts of his body.
He feels dizzy from the darkness and the heat, and the fact that he just came twice in the space of half an hour. When he moves to take a step toward John, Sherlock finds his legs are also not working properly yet, and he stumbles.
John is there to catch him though, his hand fastening around Sherlock’s upper arm. “Woah, woah. Easy there.”
Sherlock holds tight to John’s arm. He’s embarrassed to find his head is reeling.
“Come this way.” John’s voice is gentle as he guides Sherlock toward the pool of light at the base of the ladder where they came down.
“I’ve got to get up top,” he says with a trace of sorrow in his voice.
His face is lost in shadow but Sherlock can see the outlines of everything he isn’t saying in the downturned corners of his mouth.
“I know.”
Sherlock lifts his chin bravely, to show John that it’s alright—he’ll be all right even if John has to go back to work, but the gesture makes a flash of worry flicker through John’s eyes.
He places his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders and pushes him a step backward until Sherlock’s face is bathed in the light from the hatchway up above. Sherlock blinks in the sudden brightness.
John sucks in a sharp breath.
“Jesus, Sherlock.”
He lifts his hands to Sherlock’s jaw, tilting his head back to inspect the bruised skin on his neck.
“I’m sorry.” John’s voice is somber, full of disapproval. “I never meant to be this rough.”
“You don’t need to be sorry.” Sherlock licks his lips. He lifts his chin again, and is careful to meet John’s gaze. “I liked it.”
John’s eyes on his are searching. “You did?”
Something dark and complicated flashes through John’s eyes.
Far above them, the bell has stopped ringing.

John’s fingers are still warm on his jaw. Sherlock lifts his hand to capture John’s fingers in his own. “You should go.”

The uncertainty is plain on John’s face. “I—”

Sherlock squeezes John’s fingers. “Go.”

“Alright, but first, let me…”

John does up the buttons at Sherlock’s throat, retying the cloth around Sherlock’s neck with gentle fingers, and settling it back into place.

He leaves his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders. Even through the dim light, Sherlock can see his blue eyes swimming with concern. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

Sherlock pulls John’s fingers to his mouth and kisses the tips. “Never been better.”

Something in John’s expression shifts at the gesture and then John’s warm palms are sliding down the front of Sherlock’s chest, the quirk of his mouth suddenly playful. “You know… you could come with me if you like.”

Sherlock’s chest expands with hope. “I… could I?”

“I don’t see why not. We’re just painting the deck.” John’s hands continue sliding down Sherlock’s chest, pausing to tug his waistcoat back into place. He leaves his hands on Sherlock’s flanks, eyes flickering back up to Sherlock’s with mischief. “Ever seen a team of sailors painting bulwarks before?”

Sherlock shakes his head.

“It’s quite…” John’s thumbs stroke Sherlock’s sides. “Stimulating.”

Sherlock just came twice in less than half an hour—how, how can John’s low voice, the presence of John’s hands above his hips succeed in flooding him with arousal already again?

“I- I admit I’ve never had the pleasure.”

In the distance, Sherlock can hear someone calling John’s name.

“Well, don’t take my word for it,” John says, sliding his hands reluctantly off Sherlock’s hips before turning with a wink to head up the stairs. “Come and see for yourself.”
Chapter Twenty Three

Chapter Summary

John teaches Sherlock how to paint the deck.

Chapter Notes

I would like to dedicate this chapter to my lovely new friend, idel thoughts, (or truthisademurelady on tumblr), for singing me one of the sea shanties in this chapter at a real-live pub, in front of lots and lots of people! She may be a talented musician and performer, but that is true nerd friendship. <33

May there be many more nautical adventures in our future!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When John and Sherlock emerge back on deck, the late afternoon sun is blazing low and hot in the sky, basking everything in honey-colored light.

The blast of heat that greets them as they step from the shadows is so intense it takes Sherlock’s breath away. The sun has apparently only gathered in strength throughout the afternoon. The closer it gets to the horizon, the hotter it seems to grow. The air feels still and heavy, weighted, shimmering.

The other sailors are assembled in the waist by the starboard rail, some of them already hard at work scraping the last of the old paint off the railing, others gathering brushes, and filling bucket after wooden bucket with paint. Many of them have stripped off their shirts and jackets. They are barefoot, clad only in their linen trousers, their brown torsos gleaming in the golden light as they pass the buckets down the line.

John goes forward to join them but Sherlock hangs back, lingering by the main mast where he can remain partially hidden from view. Even though John’s mess is clearly well aware of the fact that John and Sherlock just vanished for half an hour in the depths of the ship, Sherlock suspects it’s better if he waits before rejoining John—best not to provide them with the opportunity for any immediate associations.

Despite the heat, the sailors appear to be in a jovial mood. They are talking and laughing as they fill the buckets with paint. Sherlock watches MacTavish thump John hard between the shoulder blades as he comes up to take a bucket, sees John grin in response and then say something that makes the larger man throw his head back and howl with laughter.

Sherlock sinks a little deeper behind the stout wooden mast, feeling slightly overwhelmed at the prospect of being immersed in the crowd of laughing, shouting sailors, even if he does know them better by now, even if some of them may genuinely even like him thanks in part to his fiddle playing, but largely due to John’s persistent endorsement of him.
If they like him at all, it’s because John likes him, and they all love John.

It occurs to Sherlock all of a sudden to wonder just how much the sailors know about the particular nature of his relationship with John. He thinks back on the glimmer in Burns’ eyes when he and John encountered the other sailors below deck; remembers his meeting with Ironsides Jake the day after the party, the way the grinning sailor had winked at him, the knowing implication behind his question.

Reflecting on all these knowing looks and glances, it would seem that some of the sailors may be well aware of just how much John likes Sherlock; but at least for Burns and Ironsides, it appears that this knowledge has in no way affected either man’s opinion of Sherlock or John, a fact for which Sherlock is immensely grateful.

Even so, Sherlock cannot stop the tide of embarrassment that steals over him at the thought of anyone knowing what he and John get up into the privacy of his cabin—in the darkness of the secret corners of the ship. Better that that knowledge remains hidden and kept well out of everyone’s thoughts. Sherlock feels his face grow warm, and reaches up to tug his neck cloth more snugly into place, hoping it will hide the worst of the vivid bruises John has left like a necklace around his throat.

In spite of his fear over the marks being seen, knowing they are there fills Sherlock with a lovely shivery feeling of pleasure. Recalling what John said to him just before he came, Sherlock traces his fingers over the wounded skin. *Tell me you’re mine,* John said. Sherlock had never seen this streak of possessive fury in John before. Just the thought of it makes his mouth go dry, makes desire spark through Sherlock like lightning in a heat storm.

Sherlock is pulled from his reverie by the sound of singing. He recognizes the voice of the old sailor who led the first song at the party below decks, the one who has a remarkably sonorous voice in spite of his age.

Leaning around the mast to get a better look, Sherlock sees the old man singing as he paints. Even he has stripped off his shirt in the force of the sun’s rays and Sherlock is surprised to see an intricate tattoo of a rooster, the vibrancy of the ink long since faded, on his wrinkled back.

As Sherlock looks down the line at the bared bodies of the working men, he sees more tattoos than he has ever had occasion to see before, and he’s fascinated by the sheer number of them, and the variety of the images and texts. Some of the meanings are self-evident—such as the dates and initials of important people, like those Sherlock noticed on Old Leroy’s arm—but others are strange to Sherlock. He sees birds and sea-monsters, anchors, ships, and fish, symbols that he knows are full of significance for those who bear them but whose messages remain obscure to him.

There is so much meaning in the life of a sailor that Sherlock doesn’t understand.

Sherlock listens to the words of the old sailor singing, and feels all the more perplexed.

“Help me Bob, I’m Bully in the Alley.”

“Wey hey, Bully in the Alley.”

“Now Sally’s a girl in Shin Bone Alley.”

“Bully down in Shinbone Al.”

The song follows a similar call and response pattern to the ones the sailors sang at the party—the old man sings a line and the other men sing the refrain, everyone joining in together on the chorus.
From what Sherlock can tell the lyrics of the song are part nonsense, part utter filth.

“I waltzed up to the Angel Inn, oh.”

“Wey hey, Bully in the Alley.”

“Kicked down the door and walked right in, oh!”

“Bully down in Shinbone Al.”

“I walked up to the barrel counter.”

“Wey hey, Bully in the Alley.”

“There I met with Greasy Annie.”

“Bully down in Shinbone Al.”

“Greasy Annie’s a slimy whore, oh!”

“Wey hey, Bully in the Alley.”

“Every shellback’s knocked on her door, oh!”

“Bully down in Shinbone Al.”

Sherlock sneaks another look around the main mast. He sees with a fluttering feeling in his chest that John has stripped off his jacket as well, and is kneeling next to a waterway, daubing it with paint. Sherlock can hear John’s voice in the midst of all the others as he sings.

“I bought her rum, and I bought her gin, oh.”

“Wey hey, Bully in the Alley.”

“Bought her wine, both white and red, oh!”

“Bully down in Shinbone Al.”

Sherlock watches John as he works, his eyes attentive to the muscles in John’s back that shift with every stroke of his arm, savoring the opportunity once again to see John’s body in the full light of the afternoon sun, rather than the weak glow from the lantern over Sherlock’s bed. He admires the dimples in John’s lower back, the way the curve of his spine picks up the gleam of the sun, and once again regrets that their time together in the cable tiers was so rushed and frantic. He didn’t have the chance he wanted to really appreciate John’s body under his hands.

“Went and spent up all my tin, oh.”

“Wey hey, Bully in the Alley.”

“Up to bed we then did creep, oh!”

“Bully down in Shinbone Al.”

“We up and tumbled all night long, oh!”

“Wey hey, Bully in the Alley.”
“Dawn did break and the cock did crow, oh!”

“Bully down in Shinbone Al.”

As Sherlock listens to the crude lyrics, he can hear John’s voice distinctly among the others. Something about John’s warm tenor singing those words makes heat creep into his cheeks.

Even though the words are crass, they make Sherlock think of him and John together in his narrow bunk, John’s hands holding him down against the bed, the taste of wine in his mouth as he pushed his tongue between Sherlock’s lips.

John looks up at just that instant and spots Sherlock beside the mast. Catching Sherlock’s eye, he grins, and Sherlock swears by the look in John’s eyes that he knows exactly what Sherlock is thinking.

Sherlock’s blush accordingly, deepens.

“Oye! Laddie!”

Sherlock is startled out of his thoughts by the sound of a loud voice at his elbow. He looks up to see Burns, eying him sternly, the top of his bald head shining in the sunlight.

“If you’re just gonna stand around and watch, then we might as well put you to work.”

Burns thrusts a paintbrush into Sherlock’s hand.

Sherlock looks down at it in shock, realizing too late that he was so caught up in watching John that he neglected to hide himself sufficiently from view. “But I—”

“It’s a simple enough task. If you’re as clever as Johnny says then you should have no trouble. Go on then.”

Burns gives him a little push between the shoulder blades and then Sherlock is stumbling toward the starboard railing, cheeks still blazing with embarrassment.

There is an empty space at the end of the line, next to an enormous sailor with a full beard and lines of chain tattooed around his sizeable middle. He says nothing as Sherlock kneels beside him.

Sherlock eyes the paint bucket and the length of peeling rail before him with something close to terror, but when he turns to dip his brush in the bucket between them, the other man gives Sherlock a silent nod.

Sherlock interprets this as a sign that he too might share the bucket of paint, and he tentatively reaches over to wet his brush.

Just as he’s holding his dripping brush in mid-air, considering how many wrong ways there might be to paint a bulwark, Sherlock hears Burns speaking to someone behind him.

“Found your young man standing over by the mast, Johnny. Thought I might as well put him to work.”

“Good!” Sherlock can hear the sunny approval in John’s voice behind him without even turning to look. “That’s good.”

He pictures John grinning down at him, standing, sun-bronzed and smiling, with his hands on his hips. He feels too self-conscious to turn around and look.
And then to Sherlock’s immense relief, he hears John say: “He might need a bit of a tutorial though. Shall I just…?”

“By all means, Johnny my boy. By all means.”

John drops into a crouch beside Sherlock.

“Hello there, lovely.”

“John,” Sherlock hisses in a panic. “Burns told me to—”

“It’s fine,” John says, and his voice is as warm and reassuring as ever. “Watch, I’ll show you what to do.”

Sherlock looks over at John and even though it’s only been minutes since they parted from one another at the bottom of the stairs, Sherlock feels relief sweep over him at the sight of John’s soft blue eyes looking into his.

In the bright light of the setting sun, his eyes are a more vivid blue than Sherlock has ever seen. They look like crystal.

“Just do what I do.”

John takes his own brush and dips it into the bucket of paint. “You want to start at the top and work your way down—that way you can paint over any drips. You want to do nice, broad, even strokes—like this.”

Sherlock watches John intently for several seconds, and then raises his own dripping brush to the bulwark, copying John’s movements.

John sits back to watch him, and it takes all of Sherlock’s concentration not to turn and simply look at John sitting on his haunches, the casual elegance of his strong body in repose—one arm resting on the top of his thigh, the muscles in his upper arm so prominent even when relaxed.

But it helps to know John’s eyes are on him as he works; it intensifies Sherlock’s need to follow John’s directions all the more precisely. It’s almost as if he can feel the steady presence of John’s eyes on his hand as he moves the brush.

“Good! That’s really good.”

Sherlock can feel himself beaming in the wake of John’s praise. Even if it’s a silly thing for John to commend him for, Sherlock can’t help basking in its presence. John’s approval means everything to him—even over Sherlock’s first paltry efforts at physical labor.

“The tricky part is doing the details round the top—you’ll want to make sure you don’t do too thick a coat, otherwise you’ll clog up the gaps. See here?”

Sherlock leans in to study what John is pointing to.

“It’s difficult to get your brush in between the slats, so make sure you wipe off carefully before doing the first coat.”

Sherlock nods, his concentration sharpening in light of the precise and difficult nature of the task. He dips his brush again, and concentrates on copying John’s strokes exactly.
It doesn’t take long for Sherlock to lose himself completely in the task at hand. He is concentrating so hard on getting it right that the rest of the world recedes to a pleasant blur behind him. He can hear the voices of the men around him as they begin another song, John’s voice clearer than all the others, steady and rich at his side.

He’s working so hard and so intently that he doesn’t realize how hot he has gotten until he feels John’s hand on his shoulder.

“Sherlock.” John’s voice is gentle.

Sherlock glances up; distracted, wiping a trickle of sweat off his cheek with the hand still holding the paintbrush.

“Take your jacket off, love. You’re too hot.”

At John’s words, Sherlock suddenly realizes that the material on his back is soaked through with sweat. It suddenly occurs to him how ridiculous he must look, fully outfitted in jacket and waistcoat in the midst of all the bare-chested sailors. He shrugs out of his jacket, rolls his sleeves up to his elbows, and tugs his neck cloth loose. The relief he feels is immediate. He never realized painting could be so much work.

Remarkably, Sherlock has managed to keep up to speed with the other sailors. He’s just finishing the section in front of him, when there’s a shout from the man at the end of line, and all the sailors cross over to the portside rail to continue working.

The sun has stained the entire sky a deep orange; the ocean beneath is awash in reflected light. The whole horizon looks as though it’s on fire.

As Sherlock crosses the deck, he feels another hand on his arm and looking over he recognizes one of the sailors from the card game earlier, Half Pint Lee, smiling at him with apparent good humor. Sherlock has never noticed before that the man is missing almost all of his teeth.

“Good to have you workin’ with us, Mr. Holmes. There’s nothing beats this tropical heat like a little heavy labor I always say.”

The other man laughs at his own joke, and Sherlock nods in acknowledgment, without knowing what to say.

Luckily, he moves off to refill his bucket before Sherlock has to think of a response.

He crouches down beside John, unfastening the first few buttons on his waistcoat before he returns to work. He catches John looking over at him.

“What?”

John just shakes his head; there’s a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “I never thought I’d see the day. Sherlock Holmes, helping me to paint the decks.”

Sherlock hesitates. “I can stop if it makes you… uncomfortable.”

John’s look sobers suddenly, the line of his mouth going soft. “Why would it make me uncomfortable?”

Sherlock has to look away.
If John goes on looking at him like that then Sherlock will be compelled to kiss him.

“You have paint on your face.”

John reaches over to rub at his cheek and it takes every ounce of Sherlock’s self control to hold himself still, not to turn and push his face into John’s hand like an affectionate kitten.

“You’ve got some on your waistcoat too.” There is dismay in John’s voice, and glancing down, Sherlock sees he’s right.

“It’s fine. It’s just a waistcoat.”

Sherlock turns to wet his brush but something in John’s silence prompts him to look up again. John’s expression is complicated—part awe, part distress—and in that moment Sherlock remembers all over again how different are the worlds that he and John come from.

He looks down at John’s threadbare trousers, sees for the first time the seams that are evidence of where they’ve been mended over and over. He looks at John’s jacket, where it’s folded neatly at his feet, sees where the collar is ringed with salt stains and sweat, the material thin at the elbows, and remembers suddenly with what reverence John folded his scarf and waistcoat the night of the party, how he tried to set them so carefully on Sherlock’s desk, and something hot and painful fills Sherlock’s chest that feels an awful lot like shame.

Sherlock wants to say something to make up for it, to convey to John that if he could, he would give John every worthless costly item in his parent’s vast estate. He thinks of all the fine furniture, the paintings, the porcelain, the silver, his mother’s jewels—how all of it means nothing to him. He wouldn’t bat an eyelash if all of it was taken away; they’re just objects, after all. But suddenly he wonders about the home John grew up in. John said his father was a farmer; if John had worked so hard to become a surgeon, there couldn’t have been much profit in his father’s land. How big was the house he grew up in? Was it drafty in the winters? John had siblings—did they have to share a bed? Did they ever go hungry?

Sherlock thinks back on John’s modest berth under the forecastle, the one canvas bag that contains all of his worldly possessions tucked away under his hammock. How much does John make working on a merchant ship? More than he did when he was in the navy, of that much Sherlock is certain, but it can’t be much.

Sherlock never thinks about money, never thinks about the cost of things, because he’s never had to. But all of a sudden, he finds himself wishing he could help in some way to alleviate John’s extreme poverty. He would give John every item from his parent’s fortune in a heartbeat, if he needed it; every penny of his inheritance, if it would help him.

But as usual, Sherlock doesn’t know how to put any of this into words.

John has returned to painting, unaware of the earth-shattering nature of Sherlock’s realization, and as Sherlock struggles to think what to say, his thoughts are interrupted by the presence of another sailor settling himself beside Sherlock with his bucket.

Sherlock recognizes at once the sinewy, scarred face of Ironsides Jake. He leans over to take Sherlock’s hand and shake it vigorously in greeting.

“Good Evening, Mr. ‘olmes, sir. What a pleasure it is to see you out on such a fine evening, if you don’t mind my saying so. And by Jove, what an evening! What an evening indeed, wouldn’t you agree, Mr. ‘olmes?”
“Please,” Sherlock says as he struggles to reclaim his fingers. “Call me Sherlock.”

“Is this your first time painting a bulwark, Mr. ‘olmes, sir?”

Sherlock nods; he sees John smiling beside him out of the corner of his eye.

“And what a lovely job, you’re doing if I do say so myself. Very nice even strokes you’re doin’ there. Very fine work it is. If you’ve been learnin’ from our Johnny here then you’re learnin’ from the very best. Why, if it weren’t for our John half the crew wouldn’t know stern from stem. I’ll warrant he’s taught most of us a thing or two about most things, even if he was a bit of a greenhorn when he—”

“Oye, Ironsides!” The red-bearded MacTavish leans forward to call down the line. “Put a cork in it! You’ll talk the boy’s ear off.”

“Let’s have another song!” Someone calls.

This time it’s Stapleton who starts singing. His booming baritone reverberates out over the golden water. “All for me grog, me jolly jolly grog!”

“All for me beer and tobacco!”

“For we spent all our tin with the lasses drinkin’ gin.”

“And across the Western ocean we must wander.”

Matthews takes over singing the verse. “Where are me boots? Me noggin, noggin boots. All gone for beer and tobacco! And the heels they are worn out, and the soles are knocked about, and me toes are lookin’ out for better weather!”

“Oh! Well for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog!”

“All for me beer and tobacco!”

Sherlock looks over to see John is smiling as he sings, his head thrown back, his lovely cheeks so prominent as he opens his mouth on the ‘O’, and Sherlock has never felt so in love with John as he does in this moment.

It’s not just the way his blue eyes crinkle at the corners, the way the light of the setting sun catches gold in his hair, the way joy seems to pour out of him as clearly as the music—it’s the fact that he’s looking over at Sherlock as he sings, sharing this with Sherlock, this moment, this joy he has for the world in spite of everything he’s gone through.

Sherlock has never felt like a part of anything before. He’s always been the strange one, the outsider—he’s never been involved in anything larger than himself, but as the sound of the sailors’ voices swell around him, the smell of wet paint filling his nose as the sun turns everything around them to gold, Sherlock feels for the first time like he understands what it is to be part of a group and not be hated.

It isn’t an altogether terrible feeling.

He goes on painting in silence, letting the rhythmic motion of the brush, and the sound of the singing on all sides, soothe him into something almost like contentment.

The only dent in Sherlock’s pleasure comes from the knowledge that two men down the line, on
the other side of Ironsides Jake, looms the dark and unsettling presence of the scowling sailor with the bruise on his face, the one Sherlock is certain felt the effects of John’s fists the other night after talking about Sherlock.

It isn’t that the man has done or said anything to raise Sherlock’s alarm, but there’s something in his presence that rankles Sherlock, like an itch under his skin, something about his mood that acts as a counter to the general good humor of the group of working men.

Sherlock can feel it, like a shadow on the sunny deck, and as the minutes go by he can feel it growing worse.

As the song comes to a close, Sherlock leans over to John, eager to distract himself from the brooding sailor’s presence. “John. That last song—the one you sang before—what does it mean —‘bully in the alley’?”

“Oh, ‘bully’ means drunk. It’s about a sailor who drinks away his pay. Well, drinks and whores away his pay, I should say.” John grins at him. “You’ll find most songs revolve around those two topics.”

Sherlock doesn’t like the way Stevens is watching their conversation from down the line. He can feel the other man’s eyes on him, like a brand on the back of Sherlock’s neck.

“John,” Sherlock begins in an undertone, even though he knows now is not the time to bring it up. “What did—”

“OYE! Johnny! Give us a song!”

A cheer of approval goes up in response to this suggestion.

“How about The Derby Ram?”

“No, no—Whiskey Johnny!”

“Aw, John, sing us a love song!” A young sailor named Talbot calls out. “You’re really best at love songs.”

Patterson cuffs Talbot on the shoulder with a good-natured admonishment. “John is good at every song.”

“Well, if it’s a love song, then let it at least be a dirty one!” yells MacTavish.

John sits back on his haunches, smiling, and the glitter in his eyes makes a chill run down Sherlock’s spine. “I think I may have just the one.”

A ripple of excitement runs down the line in response to this.

“Alright lads—quiet down, quiet down! Let him sing.”

There is some appreciative nudging and tittering as the song begins, which makes Sherlock think it must be a song John has sung before.

Sherlock, of course, has never heard it.

The melody is lilting and complex; somehow both playful and melancholy at once. John continues to paint while he sings, and although the other sailors also continue to work, there is a new quality of intensity to their silence as they listen.
As a sailor was walking one fine summer day,
The squire and the lady were making their way.
And Jack he heard the squire say,
“Tonight with you, love, I mean to lay
With me do me ama, dee me ama, do me ama day.”

“You must tie a string all around your finger,
With the other end of the string hanging out the window,
And I'll slip by and I’ll pull the string,
And you must come down, love, and let me in
With me do me ama, dee me ama, do me ama day.”

Says Jack to himself, “I've a mind to try,
To see if a poor sailor he can't win that prize.”
So he slipped by and he pulled the string
And the lady come down and she let old Jack in
With that do me ama, dee me ama, do me ama day.

Sherlock knows why the sailors love John’s singing best of all. It isn’t just that his voice is lovely
and clear—resonant and full and always perfectly on pitch; he has a way of conveying each
emotional shift in the song purely through his voice, of coloring the notes with the mood of each
moment, making the characters’ feelings come to vivid life.

The smile in John’s voice as he sings ‘and she let old Jack in’ is unmistakable. It makes desire
squirm hot and bright in Sherlock’s belly.

Well the squire came by, he was humming a song,
Thinking to himself how it wouldn't be long.
But when he got there no string he found.
Behold, his hopes was all dashed to the ground
With that do me ama, dee me ama, do me ama day.

Early next morning, it was just getting light,
The lady jumped up in bed in a terrible fright.
For there lay Jack in his stripey shirt,
His hands all covered with tar and dirt
And that do me ama, dee me ama, do me ama day.

“Oh what do you want, you tarry sailor,
Breaking in a lady's bedroom to steal her treasure?”
“Oh no,” says old Jack, “I just pulled that string
And you did come down, love, and let me in
With me do me ama, dee me ama, do me ama day.”

John’s voice as it carries the notes out high over the shimmering water seems to fill Sherlock’s
chest with warmth.

Even though the words are potentially comical, there is something deeply sincere in the cadence of
John’s voice, in the way his mouth curls sorrowfully around the notes. Hearing John sing the word
‘love,’ that endearment that he uses so often with Sherlock makes Sherlock feel like the song
carries a secret meaning just for him.

Once again, the nature of the song reminds Sherlock all too keenly of everything that has
transpired between himself and John, and he feels his cheeks growing flushed with heat.
For once, Sherlock is grateful for the presence of the sweltering sun—if anyone asks, he can simply tell them his cheeks are flushed because of the heat.

*Says Jack to the Lady,* “Oh, forgive me I pray,  
*I'll steal away very quiet at the dawn of the day.*”  
“Oh no,” says the lady, “don't stray too far  
*For I never would part from me jolly Jack Tar  
And that do me ama, dee me ama, do me ama day.*”

The sailors give a triumphant cheer at the end of the song. Half Pint Lee, who’s sitting on the other side of John, leans in and pounds John on the arm in gratitude.

Somebody passes his flask down the line to offer John a congratulatory swig.

John takes it laughing, and after taking a long drink, lifts the flask high in the air to the sound of more cheers.

“You know why he sings it so well, boys?” Matthews hollers as John passes the flask back. “It’s because he’s singin’ from first-hand experience!”

A loud chorus of laughter greets this remark.

“Tha’s right! Judging by the frequency of his amorous encounters, our John’s got quite the ‘do me ama’.”

Sherlock almost drops his paintbrush.

“Oye!” John calls, cuffing Matthews on the shoulder; but he’s laughing as he says it.

Sherlock was so caught up in John’s singing that he only now realizes he’s been painting the same strip of railing for the last three minutes.

He hurries to re-wet his paintbrush, hoping that nobody noticed the obvious longing in his stare or the blaze of heat on his face in the wake of their teasing. He re-focuses on the task at hand, giving all his attention to the smooth application of the paint on the wood before his eyes, willing his thoughts away from John and the twin grooves of his hips, the lean muscles in his thighs, and all that lies underneath the worn hem of those linen trousers.

Sherlock tries to think about cool, clean things—dull things, like the paint going onto the wood, the slight ache in his wrist, but somehow even the rhythm of his paintbrush brings to mind the rhythm of a very different activity, and John’s voice in his ear, urging him on with warm approval, prompting him to stroke faster…

Sherlock is concentrating so hard on not thinking about John’s voice in his ear, John’s warm palms at his hips, that he almost misses the question from Ironsides Jake at his side.

“Oooh, laddie, what happened to your neck there?”

Sherlock freezes mid-paint stroke.

He forgot. Like an idiot, he forgot to keep his neck cloth on; he removed it when he got too hot. Now the evidence of John’s love bites are in full, glaring effect on the pale skin of his throat, laid out for everyone to see.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*
Ironsides Jake is looking at him with friendly curiosity, and when Sherlock doesn’t answer, he leans in amiably and says in a carrying whisper. “I reckon our Johnny has something to do with it, doesn’t he?”

Sherlock clenches his fingers hard around the handle of the brush. He looks over at John in fear, his face on fire.

The expression on John’s face is a mixture of amusement and exasperation, but before he has a chance to answer, a sneering voice interrupts him.

“Oh you bet Watson has something to do with it.”

Sherlock turns at the sound of the voice, and sees Stevens standing just a few paces away, an empty paint bucket in his hand, presumably on his way to refill it. His scowling face is badly sunburned.

In one fluid motion, John rises to his feet and turns to face him.

Stevens sets the empty bucket at his feet as he goes on talking. “You only have to take one look at him to know that Watson’s been all over him. But then who can blame him? Judging by the look of this one, he’s an easy one to bed. Mouth like that—Even I couldn’t refuse.” Sherlock can feel Stevens’ eyes on him as he says the words and his skin prickles with revulsion. “I warrant it wouldn’t take more than one soft look to get him to spread his legs.”

John has gone utterly, terrifyingly still.

Within an instant his whole demeanor has changed, has gone from the casual stance of a man who’s sharing a joke with his friends to that of a soldier alerted to the presence of enemy fire. His muscles are tensed, poised for action, fingers flexing at his sides.

Even in the midst of his panic, Sherlock cannot help but marvel at the presence John commands, how much he can communicate without saying a word, the way danger seems to siphon off of him like heat from an open flame.

The fuse has been lit; it is only a matter of seconds before the explosion follows.

Everyone on the deck can feel it; every head has turned to watch, the men frozen at their work like clockwork figures not yet brought to life.

When John speaks, his voice is cool as ice. “Say that again, Stevens.”

“I said—”

“What’s going on here?”

If Sherlock was certain the situation could not possibly get worse, he realizes now with dawning horror, just how unmistakably wrong he was. Anderson has appeared at the heart of the crowd of sailors, his smug face fixed with a pompous and self-important expression.

“Why aren’t you all working?”

Matthews speaks up from the back of the crowd. “Stevens was causing trouble, sir!”

“Stevens, was it?” Anderson’s dark eyes flicker from the broad shouldered man whose arms are crossed in front of his chest to John, standing opposite, to Sherlock still crouching by the bulwark.
His gaze travels pointedly over Sherlock’s paint-spattered waistcoat and forearms, and then to John’s rigid stance. “It looks to me like the trouble is stemming from the fact that Mr. Holmes here seems to be fraternizing with the crew.”

Sherlock, whose own rage was lying dormant in the presence of the menacing Stevens, feels all of his fury engulf him like a sudden storm at sea. How dare Anderson come and meddle in a situation that has nothing to do with him?

Sherlock rises to his feet and steps up to Anderson, lifting his chin as he does so, summoning every ounce of his own aristocratic imperiousness to combat Anderson’s ridiculous attempt to assert his control. “You can’t tell me what to do. You have no authority over me.”

Anderson smiles and Sherlock doesn’t like one thing about that smile; it makes Anderson’s confidence look unperturbed, makes his eyes glimmer coldly with pleasure. “Oh no? That may be, but it just so happens that I do have authority over Mr. Watson here, as I have been put in command of his entire mess.

John opens his mouth to protest but before he can speak Anderson has whirled around to face him. “I would advise that you think very carefully about your choice of words before speaking to me, sailor. I am now your direct superior.”

John says nothing but the look in his eyes is enough to melt the stanchions on the side of the ship.

Sherlock can see his chest heaving from where he stands.

Burns’ voice cuts through the tension. “Begging your pardon sir, but Lieutenant Moore is our superior officer, as far as we understood.”

“Well, there’s been a change,” snaps Anderson. “I’ve just had a conversation with the Captain, and he has put me in charge of your mess. Any complaints you might have about this decision may be given directly to the Captain.”

Anderson smiles cruelly, well aware that none of them will dare.

“The first new order of business is that your mess is on the night watch. After you’ve finished painting these bulwarks, you’ll be up in the foretop on watch. Then first thing tomorrow I want you down working the pumps. The boatswain’s just been down to look and no one’s pumped the bilge water since before the storm. I want you working double shifts.”

A wave of disapproval ripples through the crowd at this, and Sherlock remembers vividly the cast of John’s face, and his words when he’d told Sherlock that this job was by far the most unpleasant on any ship.

Anderson’s glee seems to grow exponentially in the face of the men’s displeasure.

“And another thing.” He spins around as he goes on talking as though to look into the face of every man on deck. “If I catch Sherlock Holmes speaking to any one of you for any reason that man will be flogged to within an inch of his life, do you understand me?”

The men are doggedly silent. Sherlock can feel their resistance in the air around him as clearly as if they were shouting it.

“I said, do you understand me?”

“Aye, aye, sir.”
“Good. Now get to it. Holmes—I want you off this deck and out of my sight. I’m sick of you meddling in the running of this ship. This isn’t a parlor game for your enjoyment. This is work, and I won’t stand to see you making a mockery of it.”

Sherlock remains frozen where he stands, speechless with disbelief. Behind Anderson, he sees Stevens smirking as he picks up his bucket.

Rage fills Sherlock then, a rage so hot and all-encompassing that for a moment he cannot see the deck before him.

“Holmes! You heard my directive! Get. Out. Of. My. Sight.” Anderson takes a step toward him, putting his sneering face far too close to Sherlock’s own. “I shouldn’t think you’d want to risk putting any of your little sailor friends in danger. Or at least I should hope not. Then again, who knows? Perhaps you’re more self-involved even than I presumed.”

In desperation, Sherlock looks to John.

This cannot be happening—how is it possible that Anderson could suddenly be in charge of the one person he wants to torment most? There must be some mistake.

But when John meets Sherlock’s gaze, he nods curtly, once, as if to say—Do as he says, and this, more than anything that has happened so far, floods Sherlock with despair.

Cheeks still hot with rage, Sherlock drops his head and makes his way toward the gangway at the back of the ship.

Every step he takes away from John feels like a betrayal. He cannot leave John to Anderson’s sadistic devices; he can’t, but the look in John’s eyes brooked no room for argument.

He looks back once when he reaches the top of the steps and sees John, stooping to pick up the empty buckets, Anderson standing behind him, grinning in triumph.

Sherlock descends the stairs with a cold, heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach, and for the first time in a long time, is afraid he might be sick.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for continuing to be the loveliest bunch of readers anyone could ask for.
This story has a long way to go yet, and I can’t tell you what it means to know that you are all still in this with me!

I am sending you all hugs through the magic of ao3. <3 Imagine me hugging you in gratitude, showering you with flower petals and rainbows of nautical gay love.

ETA: If you’d like to hear a version of the song John sings at the end of the chapter (“Do Me Ama”)—you can listen to a very warbly old man version here! :)

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Chapter End Notes
Chapter Twenty Four

Chapter Summary

Sherlock worries.

Chapter Notes

So I realized that once again, I am posting a new chapter on a holiday weekend- this time for Mother's Day! So please think of this as a special gift for all of you remarkable people out there who are brave enough to be moms. Please take this humble gift of gay sailor love as a salute to all that you do. There will never be enough thanks and appreciation for mothers as far as I'm concerned. I am in endless awe of you. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock’s room is dim when he opens the door; the sun’s golden warmth that was so pervasive up on deck has no presence here in the dark corridor off of which his cabin lies. The heat remains—thick and stifling, but all is colorless and grey. The walls of Sherlock’s chamber are bathed in gloom.

Never has the narrow space looked so like a prison as it does to Sherlock now.

He thinks of how the room transforms when John is here with him, the way the candlelight seems to warm and fill the dingy space, how the four rough-hewn walls take on a different quality, become a private sanctuary that could be worlds away from the surrounding chaos of the ship.

As he thinks of this, coupled with the newfound knowledge that John will no longer spend his evenings here with him, Sherlock feels grief drag him down like a weight.

He cannot bring himself to light the lamp.

He falls into the chair beside his desk, pushes his shaking fingers through his hair, and tries to staunch the tide of panicked grief and rage pounding through him so that he can think.

He’s so angry he doesn’t know what to do, but worse even than the rage is the feeling of helplessness, the knowledge that Anderson finally has Sherlock just where he wants him. The look in John’s eyes had communicated everything Sherlock needed to know. Don’t. Just don’t. Anything Sherlock attempts now will only make matters worse.

And the worst part is Sherlock knows John is right.

If Anderson is in control of John’s mess, that means that John now defers to him, and such is the nature of discipline on merchant ships that if Anderson decides that John has done wrong (regardless of whether he has or not) he is subject to Anderson’s word and law. If Sherlock does anything to displease Anderson then Anderson will make John suffer.
From up on deck, he can hear the distant shouts of Anderson yelling orders to the crew.

Sherlock clenches his fists in his hair and stands abruptly.

He begins pacing the narrow space of his cabin, raking his fingers through his hair in agitated fury.

There must be *something* he can do to try and remove Anderson from his position. He’s a terrible midshipman—that much is clear. If only Sherlock can somehow draw attention to this fact then perhaps he can have Anderson stripped of his authority.

The question is—why would Anderson suddenly be put in charge of John’s mess? It doesn’t make sense. The change is so sudden, so arbitrary, so *clearly* a result of Anderson’s own wishes. Anderson would have had to request the change in leadership, he would have had to ask for permission first and the only person on board who has the authority to do so is—

Sherlock halts mid-stride.

The captain.

Anderson would have had to make his appeal directly to the captain for the change in leadership. Even Lestrade doesn’t have the authority to make that kind of change on board a ship this size. The question is *how* did Anderson get the captain to agree to it?

Anderson is just a midshipman, a low-ranking one at that. Even if Anderson was high performing, based on what Sherlock knows of the captain’s temperament, he doesn’t seem the type to grant errant favors to lower-ranking members of his ship.

Besides, Sherlock has seen the interactions between them. Based on what he witnessed during the midshipmen’s noonday reading, the captain considers Anderson a witless and incompetent fool who has no right to set foot on a naval ship, much less ever command one. So how *on earth* did Anderson get the captain to grant his request? What could he have possibly said or done to put himself in the captain’s good favor?

Sherlock tightens his fingers in his hair, tugging in silent frustration.

Thinking of the captain now, it occurs to Sherlock that he hasn’t given any thought to the matter of Lestrade’s poisoning in the last twenty-four hours. He’s been so distracted by thoughts of John that he hasn’t had a thought to spare for the sinister goings on aboard the ship. He feels a small flicker of guilt at this realization.

The question as to why the captain would want to poison his first officer remains unsolved; and although Sherlock is certain there is a connection between the strange circumstances of the former captain’s sudden illness and the incident with Lieutenant Lestrade, he has yet to collect any evidence that would support this connection. Sherlock is no closer to solving the puzzle at hand.

Sherlock stands up and begins pacing again.

To begin with, why would the captain have poisoned the former Captain Adams in the first place? Why would he have been so desperate to take command of this particular voyage?

Sherlock reflects on this, thinking back over his tour with John earlier today around the ship, remembering the casks of goods John had pointed out—the barrels and chests filled with textiles, tobacco, staves and shingles, bars of iron, lead, and tin—goods that will be sold as soon as they
reach the port in Madras.

Suddenly the answer for the captain’s motivation is so obviously apparent that Sherlock is stunned it hasn’t occurred to him before now.

This is a merchant voyage; the ship is stocked with goods to sell in the East Indies. Captains of merchant sailing ships are entitled to a sizeable cut of the profits, and, Sherlock knows, are allowed a certain amount of tonnage on board every vessel for goods intended for their own private ‘indulgence.’

The vessel they are on is a large one by Indiaman standards, which means that the allotted tonnage for this type of investment will be equally large. Thus, the profits from a voyage of this nature could be quite substantial. In light of this information, Captain Robert’s motivation for putting himself in charge of such a potentially profitable voyage is obvious.

What still doesn’t make sense is why he would feel obliged to poison Lieutenant Lestrade halfway through the voyage.

Sherlock thinks back to the night of the party, wishing now that he’d had more presence of mind that evening to be alert for anything that seemed out of the ordinary. He had been so bored and impatient waiting for John that he hadn’t given a second thought to any strange goings on.

He finds himself longing once again for the chance to speak with Miss Hooper, to ask her about her own recollections and observations from that night.

Sherlock sits back down on the edge of his bunk, steepling his fingers underneath his chin as his mind turns over all the relevant details.

He thinks back on the conversation he heard between Ferguson and Knott, the two passengers who quarreled over the captain’s decision to throw the party. The man Ferguson was convinced the captain had ulterior motives for doing so, an assessment with which Sherlock entirely agrees, and a theory which is compounded by the captain’s noticeable absence from the festivities. Why would such a misanthropic man call for a celebration, and then refuse to attend it?

The most likely reason for this is that the captain had other business that he needed to attend that night, business during which he did not wish to be interrupted.

Or perhaps apprehended.

If the party was a cover for some goings on of the captain’s design, then perhaps the reason for Lestrade’s poisoning was simply that the captain desired that his first lieutenant be kept out of the way. Perhaps he was concerned that the party would not be a great enough distraction.

Maybe, in order to be certain, he prescribed the Lieutenant a milder dose of what he’d used on Captain Adams, simply to ensure he wouldn’t come meddling in his private affairs.

*Once a poisoner, always a poisoner,* Sherlock wryly thinks.

What’s still unclear is whether he’d intended to kill Lestrade, or simply put him out of commission for a night to keep him out of the way.

John said that the dose was strong enough to potentially have killed Lestrade if John hadn’t intervened. It could have been a botched job but if Roberts had as much experience with poisoning as Sherlock was certain he did, then it wouldn’t make sense for him to have gotten it wrong.
If he wanted Lestrade dead, then he would certainly be very displeased by now.

Sherlock thinks back to the feeling of the captain’s eyes, heavy and cold, on the back of his neck the morning after the party when he’d gone up to try and speak with the Lieutenant. There was no mistake, he had been looking at Sherlock. He’d never looked at Sherlock like that before, in fact, he’d never given him any notice at all.

It occurs to Sherlock now to wonder, whether the captain’s private business on the night of the party and his desire to keep those affairs hidden, has anything to do with him putting Anderson in charge of John’s mess.

Sherlock did see Anderson the night of the party—Anderson had seen Sherlock with John’s medical bag—had implied that he knew it was John’s.

There’s no way the captain would trust Anderson with any real knowledge of his affairs, but what if Anderson had gone to the captain the night of the party, to complain about seeing Sherlock going down into the forecastle? If Anderson had told the captain he’d seen Sherlock with John’s medical case…

Sherlock feels his stomach fill with cold, prickling dread.

The captain is an intelligent man. Even if his intent had been to put Lestrade out of commission for a few days, he would know that someone had intervened to make him well again. And if Anderson had told the captain about seeing Sherlock, he would know John was involved in the matter.

Sherlock remembers the smirk he’d seen on Anderson’s face the following day. What if he had gone to the captain in an attempt to try and get Sherlock into trouble? Perhaps the captain arranged to put Anderson in charge of John’s mess in order to keep an eye on him.

Sherlock lets out a long breath, dropping his hands into his lap.

So much of this is speculation—too much. He’s letting his mind run away with him. He’s got to stick to the facts. What does he know?

Sherlock goes with sudden purpose towards his desk. He lights the candle without ceremony and then seating himself in the narrow chair, he pulls out the leather-bound book that Mycroft gave him before the voyage, and begins to make a list.

As carefully and methodically as he can, he records the names of all the passengers he knows on board the ship, marks down everything he has observed of them, what he’s heard them say in regards to the captain.

The man must have an accomplice in all this—that much is certain, and although Sherlock is relatively confident that his accomplice is another member of the crew, not a passenger, he writes all of their names down anyway just to be sure.

Once he’s recorded the names of the passengers, he moves onto the crew. In all his idle days sitting on the ship’s deck—especially in the weeks before he began speaking with John—he had plenty of time to observe who was who and what each man’s function is aboard the ship. If he does not know their name, he identifies the man by title. He writes down every crewmember, from quartermaster to caulker to sail master down to the last ship’s boy.

When he’s exhausted his memory bank of information, he looks over the list of names. He feels better having written something down, so that he might begin to piece together some kind of system to ascertain what’s happening. However, it’s infuriating to realize how much he still
doesn’t know.

He needs more information.

Sherlock leans back in his chair, cracking his sore knuckles, as he does, noticing for the first time the smears of drying paint on his forearms and wrists. His sleeves are still rolled up from his work up on deck earlier, and at the sight of the paint on his arms, he is flooded anew with the memory of all that transpired this afternoon—his brief experience of feeling joy at being a part of something larger than himself now feels ridiculous to him, even laughable.

He thinks of the scorn in Anderson’s voice—his accusation that by participating in the sailors’ activities Sherlock was making a mockery of the work they did—and feels the last spark of his joy from the afternoon flicker to darkness.

What a fool he was to think he could be part of a group so completely different from himself, a group that he really knows nothing about and will never fully understand. Although it had never been his intention to make light of their work, maybe Anderson is right, maybe just by trying to participate he was making a mockery of their way of life—he, who knows nothing of the misery and hardship that they daily face, taking up a paintbrush as a means of distracting himself from his own boredom.

All of the warm looks and encouraging words from John’s crewmates now feel entirely undeserved. Sherlock thinks again of the horror in John’s eyes at seeing paint splashed on his fine waistcoat, of his own blithe dismissal of the matter, and feels his cheeks burn with shame.

As Sherlock feels shame make his cheeks grow warm, he realizes that his face feels hotter than it normally does—in fact, the whole of his face and neck and forearms are warm to the touch.

Sherlock stands to peer at himself in the tiny square of glass he uses for a shaving mirror and sees that his face and neck are stained a dull pink. The heat on his skin is the result of sunburn. At this realization, he feels a renewed prickle of shame as he hears the ghost of Anderson’s scornful voice. He can’t even spend two hours up on deck without contracting a sunburn—pathetic.

However, all thoughts of shame over his own—overly delicate constitution evaporate in the wake of the other sight that greets him in the mirror, which is the state of his neck in the aftermath of John Watson’s hungry mouth.

Sherlock feels the dull glow of heat from his sunburn increase with a different kind of warmth altogether at the sight of the livid purple marks all down the sides of his neck. He can feel his own breath growing shallow as he looks at them—the bright color of the blood drawn to the surface of his skin by John’s teeth bringing with it memories of the feel of John’s body so hot and hard against him in the dark, the sweet spike of pain as John’s teeth nipped and pulled at the delicate skin of Sherlock’s throat.

Sherlock tugs the collar of his shirt far down so he can survey the full range of them, lifting a hand to trace his fingers over the sensitive flesh. He shivers at his own touch, feels blood pound unbidden into his cock, as he remembers now, in a flood of heat, what John said to him as he ground against Sherlock’s body with his own.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

John thinks Sherlock doesn’t know what John is capable of, thinks Sherlock isn’t ready, but what John doesn’t realize is that there is a darkness and a wildness at the heart of Sherlock deep enough to match John’s own. Sherlock can feel it like a pull at the very center of his being, can feel how it
has erupted into vivid life in response to the urgent feeling of John’s fingers on his thighs, the dark hunger behind every thrust of John’s hips, the growls pulled low from the base of his throat.

John thinks he doesn’t understand, but really it’s John who has yet to see the darkness at the heart of Sherlock.

It fills him now like an ache, a yawning void that can only be satisfied by the feel of John’s body atop his own, fingers hard on Sherlock’s wrists pinning them to the bed beneath him, the length of his cock rubbing into Sherlock, the scrape, the press of his teeth, his strong hands on Sherlock’s hips, bending him to his will.

He would peel back the skin of his chest if he could, offer his own heart to John as a sacrifice, still beating, if it meant it would help satisfy the need he feels for more of John, for all of him, for their bodies to come together in a frisson of light and heat.

He wants, wants, wants, and each encounter with John only seems to make it worse, until the force of his wanting is almost unbearable. He feels as though he will be devoured by it, as though if he does not sate it, it will consume him.

Sherlock extinguishes his candle in a sudden surge of misery and lies down on his bed, fully clothed, with his hands clenched tight between his thighs.

His swollen cock is throbbing insistently against the front of his trousers, begging for attention, but Sherlock will not touch himself. It doesn’t feel right that John should be up on deck in the darkness, suffering under Anderson’s petty ministrations all because of Sherlock.

Of this fact Sherlock is painfully aware—Anderson wouldn’t spare a glance for John Watson if it weren’t for him. His hatred of John is only by proxy of his true hatred for Sherlock, and his desire to see Sherlock as miserable as possible.

Sherlock rolls over onto his back with a tiny cry of rage, and to his utter disgust, feels tears well hot and bitter at the corners of his eyes and slide down the sides of his face. He wipes them savagely away, disgusted with himself, chest tight with misery, biting his own lips, willing himself to stop feeling sorry for himself when it’s John he should be thinking of, John who needs his help.

He curls over onto his side again; arms clenched tightly around himself, trying to stem the tide of his arousal, his feelings of helplessness, his despair.

As he reflects upon it now, the only minor blessing brought about by Anderson’s interruption, is the fact that it at least prevented John from knocking Stevens clean over the side of the ship. Judging by the look on his face when Anderson appeared, John had every intention of laying into the larger man and not stopping until his opponent was dead, or at the very least, beaten bloody and unconscious beneath his fists.

Sherlock feels something hard and cold solidify inside his chest at the memory of Stevens’ eyes on him while he was speaking, the proprietary look as he’d stood so casually discussing helping himself to Sherlock’s body as though he were a whore up for bid at an auction. There was something chillingly clinical in the tone of his voice, in the blasé assumption of ownership, like Sherlock was a plate of meat presented to him at a tavern for the taking.

The vast, unknowable depths of John’s rage in the wake of the other man’s presence now make more sense to Sherlock. He can only imagine that the comments Stevens made the other day were of a similar nature. He doesn’t like to think how John’s rage will have increased in the aftermath of this new incident. But at least Anderson’s interruption worked as an impediment against John’s
initial fury, which likely would have ended in misery.

There was murder in John’s eyes plain as day, and killing a fellow sailor isn’t a crime Sherlock imagines John would be able to easily escape from, no matter how charming and well loved he may be.

It is in the midst of these dark thoughts that Sherlock succumbs to his exhaustion, falling asleep with his knees pulled up against his chest, hands still clenched between his knees.

***

Sherlock dreams he’s in a boat on dark water—a tiny skiff, big enough only for one or two people. As he rows over the silent sea, the only sound around him is the rhythmic hiss of his oars as they slice into the surface, which is smooth as glass.

He knows he is looking for John.

He rows until he reaches the shore, a line of jagged cliffs looming stark above the water, and there he sees a black dog standing, as though waiting for him.

When he looks up at it, the dog lifts its head and howls, long and loud. It is a mournful sound, full of pain and loneliness. It sends a chill down Sherlock’s spine, raises the hair on the backs of his arms.

He leaves the boat on the beach, scrambles his way up the loose stones and sliding shale of the cliff until he reaches the top of the bluff.

The dog is still there, waiting; long pink tongue dangling out of its black mouth.

He knows he must follow it, even though a sense of doom presides over every step he takes toward the black beast, which sets off at a rapid trot as soon as he starts walking toward it, leading him down to the line of trees at the bottom of the bluff.

As Sherlock draws nearer, he realizes these are the woods that edge the Holmes estate, the woods where he spent the majority of his childhood, wandering through the dense underbrush with Redbeard at his side.

Of course, Sherlock knows they cannot really be the same woods, that the Holmes estate is nowhere near the sea, but Sherlock does not question it as he strides forward into the trees.

It occurs to Sherlock now that the dog in front of him may be Redbeard—it has to be. Redbeard must be leading him to John.

He quickens his footsteps but the dog remains ever out of reach, the ripple in the leaves in front of Sherlock the only sign that the dog is still before him, leading him still deeper into the trees.

The faster Sherlock moves, the faster the dog seems to move ahead of him, until Sherlock is running to keep up.

He runs until he is breathless, his sides aching, and then all at once he stumble into a clearing where he sees a hunched figure bent over something on the ground.

“John?”

Sherlock stumbles, fatigue making him dizzy, hands on his knees as he struggles to catch his
breath.

“John!”

And then the figure rises and turns, and he sees, that it is not John at all but Stevens, wearing John’s mother’s necklace, leering at Sherlock with a sickening grin.


He yells into the darkness but there is no reply.

“JOHN!”

He looks around for Redbeard, desperate, but the dog has vanished without a trace, and now Stevens is crossing the distance between them, eating up the space with long, easy strides, his grin growing wider with every step, until he’s reaching out to grab hold of Sherlock’s wrist and yank Sherlock hard against him.

Sherlock tries to move but he can’t, he’s frozen where he stands; he tries to scream but no sound comes out, he’s helpless as Stevens’ hand comes up to grip his jaw.

He can feel the palm of Stevens’ hand pressing hard against his mouth, can taste the unpleasant clamminess of someone else’s skin, the pressure of it against his teeth, and he’s about to bite down in spite of his revulsion when he wakes with a start, gasping; his forehead drenched in sweat.

He stares in horror through the darkness, blinking hard—his heart pounding in his throat.

In desperation, he reaches out, needs some sign, some confirmation that it wasn’t real, that he’s still in his narrow berth on the ship, not in some dark wood with Stevens’ hand over his mouth, his grip like iron on Sherlock’s wrist.

The coarse blankets underneath his grasping hands confirm that he is indeed in his own room. Over his own gasping breath, he can hear the sea outside—the sound of the sloshing waves against the side of the ship have never been more welcome.

Sherlock lets out a long, shaking breath.

The dream was so vivid.

He unclenches his hands with effort, feels his palms are slippery with sweat.

It felt so real.

Even though he knows now that it was just a nightmare, there is a darkness that sits somewhere heavy in his chest that won’t be moved, an irrational fear that something might have happened to John.

It’s fine, he tells himself. You’ve just seen him a few hours ago. What disaster could possibly have befallen him in that time?

But even as his rational mind tries to convince him everything is fine, he cannot seem to shake the lingering feeling of dread the dream left in its wake, and he’s overcome with the desire to see John.

He sits up, his body, stiff and aching.

It must be getting on close to midnight.
He knows he shouldn’t. If he is seen up on deck with any of the sailors, he will put all of them at risk, but, he thinks wildly, it’s late; Anderson isn’t likely to be on duty. If he is very quiet, perhaps he can catch John coming down from his post without being seen.

Once the idea has taken root in his mind, he cannot shake it. It grows like a weed, overtaking every logical protest.

He doesn’t care to admit to himself that he’s too shaken to go back to sleep; that he cannot bear to sit in the darkness alone with his thoughts.

All he wants is one look at John up in the foretop to assure him that everything’s all right.

Even just to see John from afar, silhouetted against the night sky, will put Sherlock’s heart at ease.

He slips silently from bed, feeling as he does so all the aches and pains from his physical endeavors yesterday, both from painting the deck, and from what took place between him and John down in the shadows in the bottom of the ship.

The ache in his shoulders, the twinge of pain in the juncture of his thigh and hip, feel as sweet to him as any gift because they make him think of John.

Soft as a shadow, Sherlock steals out of his room. He is careful not to let the door creak as he swings it open on its hinges, shutting it behind him with the utmost care.

The corridor is dark—abandoned; moonlight lies in silver streaks across the stairs. Sherlock takes them two by two, avoiding every splash of silver, clinging to the shadows by the rail.

The deck is quiet as Sherlock reaches the last step.

It might as well be a painting, the scene before him is so still, the only movement the occasional flutter of the wind in the rigging, tugging gently at the ropes.

In spite of the darkness, the air feels hot and close—it’s as if the sun is lurking somewhere just out of sight, as though it never left the sky, unwilling to give up its reign to the presence of the moon.

Sherlock moves from the shadow of the gangway to the shadow by the longboats, scanning the deck as he goes for any sign of John.

The moon is almost full; its bright light coats the world in silver, draws the gleaming edge of shining things to life under its touch, makes skeletons among the rigging with a few strokes of its wintry light.

The surface of the sea is calm, almost as flat as the water in Sherlock’s dream. He feels a shiver at the thought, presses closer to the longboat at his back. In the same instant, he sees a figure not far off, standing by the foremast, smoking a pipe.

For two long heartbeats, he cannot make out the other man’s face. Dread stops his throat like an icy fist.

But then the wind changes, dispelling the wreaths of silvery smoke, and Sherlock sees that it is Burns; a clay pipe clenched tight in his blackening teeth, and relief courses through Sherlock, swift and immediate.

Burns is someone he can trust. He will tell Sherlock where he can find John, Sherlock is sure of it.
Sherlock creeps forward on silent feet—still quiet, still careful—not wanting to be recognized by the men at the helm if he can help it.

The moonlight is bright enough that Sherlock can see Burns’ eyes light on him as he approaches, can see the look of mild shock on his face as he recognizes Sherlock.

By the time he’s come to stand by Burns’ side, the other man’s face has settled back into its normally impassive expression, but Sherlock can’t forget his look of startled disbelief that Sherlock would dare to come up on deck so soon after Anderson’s reprimand.

Sherlock’s question about John’s whereabouts withers on his tongue.

All of a sudden, his worry over John feels completely selfish.

Burns moves his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other, looking all the while at Sherlock with a steady gaze.

“Evenin’,” he says at long last.

“Good evening,” Sherlock whispers.

He feels like he can’t look Burns in the eye. What was he thinking? Even by standing here next to him, Sherlock is putting the other man’s life at risk. If Anderson were to catch Burns talking to him —

“What is it, lad?”

Burns’ voice is kinder than Sherlock knows it has any right to be, and the sound of it makes Sherlock shrink inside.

He wants to curl into a ball and drop himself over the side of the ship, but now that he’s come all this way, now that he’s already put the man in danger, he may as well ask what he came to find out. So instead, he forces himself to ask, “Where is John?”

“He’s up in the foretop.”

Sherlock cranes his head to look but all he sees are shadows, moonlight tangled in the rigging.

“He’ll be up there all night.”

As he strains his eyes to see through the darkness, Sherlock feels another wave of shame crash over him at the irrational nature of his fear, the utter futility of his errand.

Even if something had been amiss, what could he have done?

“Go back to sleep, lad.” There is still kindness in Burns’ voice but Sherlock knows a warning when he hears one. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I know,” Sherlock says, his voice smaller than ever.

He is ashamed of himself.

After all the sailors have done for him, he takes the first available opportunity to put all their lives at risk.

He thinks of Burns handing him the paintbrush earlier today, realizes how much that gesture really
meant, and his shame is suddenly so intense he fears that he will drown in it.

He feels like he should explain why he’s here, in order to make clear that this wasn’t just selfishness. Why he is desperate to make this sailor not think the worst of him is a mystery to Sherlock.

He *never* cares what people think—but even as he thinks the words, Sherlock sees through his own thinly-veiled act of self-deception, and knows that his desire to prove himself to this man has everything to do with the kindness in his voice.

“I had a dream that John was in danger, that he was—” Sherlock bites his tongue. It sounds stupid when he says it out loud but he forces himself to go on. “That something bad had happened. I had to check on him, I had to make sure…”

Sherlock looks down at his boots, feeling utterly foolish.

He is startled by the feel of a rough palm gripping his shoulder; Sherlock looks up in surprise.

“You should know John Watson well enough by now to know that one measly, little, snot-nosed midshipman isn’t enough to worry him.”

“I know,” Sherlock says, hanging his head again.

And he does know; or at least, he *thinks* he does.

Somehow, even though he’s seen the fury at the heart of John, all his power, all his rage, it still does nothing to stop the tide of worry Sherlock feels every time he is confronted with danger.

He’s never felt so much worry over one person in his life—it’s exhausting.

Maybe it’s because he’s seen the scars on John’s back, the marks that life has left on him, that cause Sherlock to remember in a sharp, visceral way, like the sting of a whip, that even John Watson is not invulnerable to the blows of the world, that he has felt pain, vast quantities of it, and that every time, it has taken something from him that he cannot get back.

Sherlock thinks of all this and looks up again, straining his eyes through the shadows to see if he can catch a glimpse of John through the rigging—just one flash of moonlight on his hair, that’s all that Sherlock needs.

Burns claps his hand hard on Sherlock’s shoulder, drawing his gaze back down beside him.

“Don’t worry about him, lad. He can look after himself.”

Sherlock nods, his throat still tight with misery.

Burns drops his hand from Sherlock’s shoulder, shifting the stem of his pipe in his teeth, before lowering his voice. “Listen, lad, there’s… something I want to say.”

Sherlock looks up at the tone in his voice, feels dread begin to pound beneath his heart.

“I know that you and Johnny have been… meeting in his time off.” Burns pauses to drag a match to life, the flare of light briefly illuminating the deep grooves in his face, making his features jagged. He shakes the match to darkness, puffs at the stem, and then blows out a curl of smoke. “Things is different now. You’ll want to leave him alone for a bit.”

Even though the night is hot, Sherlock feels his body go cold.
The implication that he would do something foolish enough to put John’s life at risk makes his insides curl up with horror.

“I wouldn’t—”

“I know you wouldn’t. Not on purpose. But it’ll go smoother for everyone if you let him alone for now.”

Sherlock presses his lips together hard, feeling tears prickle the corners of his eyes.

Why on earth hearing Burns say aloud what he already knows should cause him so much grief is a mystery to him.

Sherlock wipes at his eyes with the back of his hand; he doesn’t trust himself to speak without his voice breaking.

“Go back below.” Burns’ voice seems to soften. “I’ll tell John you came by.”

Sherlock nods hard to show he’s understood, and then without another word, he turns and makes his way back across the deck, through the splashes of moonlight that now look to Sherlock like pools of blood, like the ghosts of bloodstains from naval battles long past that only come out in the light of the moon, back through the gangway and down the moon-splattered staircase at the back of the ship.

It’s only after he’s made it to the stifling darkness of his room that he realizes he forgot to say thank you.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I feel unable to fully express my gratitude for all the love and support you have showered me with as I continue to write this story. Your joy in this world that I’ve created means everything to me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.
Chapter Twenty Five

Chapter Summary

Sherlock wrestles with the dark.

Sherlock wakes early the next morning to the thin grey light of dawn suffusing his cabin, the color of a bucket of dingy water tossed out after the washing up. He can hear the faint rushing of the surf against the hull, indicating that the ship has picked up speed since the day before, and is moving at a faster pace.

As he lies staring up at the stained grey ceiling above him, he lets himself imagine for just a moment that the events of the previous afternoon were all a nasty dream, that he will rise and dress and go up top to find John, blue-eyed and smiling, sitting with his crewmates, mending sails, and Sherlock will sit down beside him and John will show him how to make the careful even stitches with the giant needle he holds so deftly in his capable hands.

And then maybe afterwards, when John’s work is done, he will take Sherlock by the hand, and they will go and sit together at the prow of the ship, in the hidden space behind the foremast, with their backs against the cannon and John will tell Sherlock all about the ocean currents, why their speed has picked up in the last few days, how the wind has shifted, changing their course, all the while holding Sherlock’s hand in his, fingers moving over Sherlock’s palm as he talks, the movement soothing and thrilling both at once, until he stops, tells Sherlock that he can’t possibly concentrate with Sherlock looking at him the way he is. “Like what?” Sherlock will ask, and John’s answer will be to pull Sherlock’s mouth to his and kiss him.

But no, it does no good to imagine such things, because the pain of returning to the reality of his situation—of long, dull days made up of endless hours to try and fill, with not even the promise of seeing John at the end of them—the idea of returning to the routine of his life on the ship before he met John is like torture.

The pain in Sherlock’s chest is real; it’s difficult to breathe around it.

How can he face the days at sea without John in them? How can he go back to what life was like before? Thinking back on his life before John is like looking at the sketch an artist makes before a painting. The difference between that life and the one he knows now is like the difference between the monochrome of the initial sketch—everything flat and colorless, shapes and figures just faint suggestions of what is to come—and the brilliant color of the finished painting, executed in hues he didn’t even know existed.

He cannot go back. He cannot bear it.

He rolls over onto his side, pulling his knees in against his chest, teeth clenched tight against the misery.

Of course, he knows he must bear it; he must for no other reason then to get through it until the next time that he can see John.

But how do you know you there will be a next time? says a nasty little voice inside his head.
There will be, he thinks fiercely. There has to be.

You don’t know that, the nasty little voice replies. Anderson may well remain in charge all the way to India and any attempt you make to see John puts his life at risk. How selfish are you, Sherlock Holmes? Would you make him take that kind of risk?

Sherlock shuts his eyes and shakes his head; he wouldn’t, he would never.

Then what was it you were doing last night, brother dear?

That the voice of doubt inside his head carries Mycroft’s scornful intonations comes as no surprise to him. But even with the knowledge that it is his snide older brother’s disapproval he has internalized, the question still fills him with impotent fury, makes his stomach crawl with shame.

What if it hadn’t been Burns on duty? What if it had been another sailor who trusts you less? He could have told Anderson. What do you think would have happened to your precious John then?

“Shut up, shut up, shut up,” Sherlock hisses, putting his hands over his ears, fingers knotted in his hair, as though if he presses hard enough he can push the voice out of his head.

Do you think John would still come to you, murmuring endearments, after he’s been beaten raw by the captain’s whip? Are your embraces so precious to him that they’re worth his weight in spilled blood?

“SHUT UP!”

He doesn’t even realize he has seized the shaving glass beside his bed until he hears the sound of its shattering upon impact with the flimsy cabin wall.

A woman in the next compartment screams and Sherlock hears voices in the corridor lifted in concern.

Let them scream, he thinks savagely. He couldn’t care less if he frightens them, if they think him strange, disturbed.

He knows, with a surety that reaches deep into his bones, how quickly their dislike of him would turn to hatred if they knew the true nature of his relationship with John, how they would cast him out, like one infected with some dark and terrible disease, and if he stayed, how little time would pass before some tragic accident befell him, a fire starting just outside his cabin door perhaps, something jammed before the door to prevent him getting out, how none of them would lift a hand to intervene except to sweep his charred remains away when at last the flames died out.

Yes, he thinks. Let them hate me as much as I hate them.

He hunches back down in bed, chest heaving, willing himself to breathe deeply and slowly, desperate to still the raging of his pounding heart.

His fury with his brother, with Anderson, with himself, is all tangled into one black knot in Sherlock’s chest. His rage is pounding in his temples so hard he cannot see, so he shuts his eyes, squeezes his fists against his chest, and tries to focus on the thin sound of his own shallow breathing.

You will get through this, he tells himself. You will. You must.

It isn’t until several moments have passed that Sherlock realizes he must have cut his hand on the
razor in his glass when he’d thrown it. Blood is trickling slow and warm down through his fingers, staining the yellow of the mattress a dull red.

He looks at it numbly; decides he can’t be bothered to get up to find something to bind it with.

What’s the use in getting up? It isn’t as if he has anywhere to go.

He lies curled in around himself, bleeding fist pressed tight against his heart, heedless of the blood surely ruining his shirt.

Let it be ruined. What does it matter.

A sharp rap at the door rouses Sherlock from his stupor.

“Mr. Homes?” It is the voice of the passenger steward, the man who couldn’t be bothered to notice when Sherlock became too ill to leave his cabin. “Everything all right, sir?”

The ladies must have been upset indeed.

“Go away!” Sherlock yells with all the violence he can muster, wishing suddenly he had another glass to throw against the door to scare the man away. He looks wildly around his room for something else to break, fingers itching to destroy something, to experience the satisfaction of destruction, of taking something whole and shattering it to bits, but there is nothing else that isn’t either indestructible or bolted down. This is a ship’s cabin after all, designed to sustain the impact of the violence of the sea. Sherlock’s own small storm of rage pales vastly in comparison, shrinks to the scale of the moth, beating itself to death against the windowpane.

At this sudden blunt reminder of his own insignificance, Sherlock feels all his anger drain out of him. It leaves him feeling carved out and empty, worse than before; as though his insides have been hollowed out, and only the frail husk of his body remains, limp and meaningless.

His one small consolation is the sound of the steward’s footsteps, retreating in haste from Sherlock’s cabin door.

The breakfast hour comes and goes.

The dull ache of hunger in Sherlock’s gut is easy to ignore. He’s never had much of an appetite and now that misery has returned with such force to his life he finds all thoughts of food make him distantly sick.

He’s so deep in the blank fog of his own wretchedness that when another knock sounds on his cabin door a while later, he almost doesn’t hear it.

At first, he thinks it is the steward come back to bother him.

“Go away,” he snarls, but when the knock comes again, more insistent this time, a voice calls out to him, and it is not the steward’s.

“Mister Holmes!”

Sherlock recognizes the voice at once. It’s Billy.

He’s up and out of bed before he has a chance to think, almost upending the chair at his desk in his haste to reach the door.

When he pulls it open, sure enough, there’s Billy standing, looking somewhat apprehensively up
and down the deserted corridor.

Sherlock doesn’t realize how dreadful he must look—hair wild, bloodstains down the front of the shirt—until he sees Billy’s eyes widen at the sight of him.

“Mister Holmes…” he whispers, voice gone soft with worry. “Are you alright?”

Sherlock glances down at himself, hastens to wrap his bleeding hand in a corner of his shirt to hide it from sight.

“Yes, fine. I’m fine. What is it?”

Billy looks less than convinced but he straightens up at the reminder of his mission, eyes brightening.

“I’ve got something for you, Mister Holmes.”

“You have?” Sherlock asks, utterly shocked.

“I have,” says Billy with unmistakable pride in his voice. “Although…” His eyes dart once again up and down the passage, voice lowering to a dramatic whisper. “I’m not meant to tell you who it’s from.”

Sherlock’s heart is pounding in his throat. He doesn’t dare to hope.

Indeed, he cannot afford to, for the disappointment if he is wrong would be so severe it would surely tear his heart in two. But before he can fully dispel the thought, Billy is thrusting a small, stained, wedge of paper into Sherlock’s hand.

It has been folded neatly into a triangle, so tightly that the person who folded it must have very deft and skillful hands. There are no markings on the outside to designate who it’s for, but Sherlock knows as surely as he knows his own name that that small triangle of paper is meant for him.

“Now take that, and don’t ask me who sent it! For I canna tell you.”

Sherlock is still staring breathlessly at the note in his hand when Billy turns to go, but before he can leave, Sherlock regains enough of his wits to reach out and seize hold of Billy’s arm.

Billy looks at him in mild surprise.

“Tell him thank you,” Sherlock says, hunched over almost double in his gratitude. “Please, will you tell him I said that?”

Half of Billy’s face lifts in a smile—the other half remains resolutely blank.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talkin about, Mister Holmes,” Billy says, before giving Sherlock a wink, and then racing away down the corridor.

Sherlock can scarcely get the door closed behind him his hands are so numb with relief.

He suddenly remembers his bleeding hand, and his agitation with himself and his own stupidity is severe, as he must waste precious seconds tearing off a length of his now ruined shirt to wrap around his palm. The cut is shallow and scarcely bleeding anymore, but Sherlock binds it just to be sure he does not spill a drop of blood onto the triangle of paper.

When his hand has been tended to, he sits down on the edge of his bed, heart pounding somewhere
in the vicinity of his throat, and peels apart the pages of the note with desperate care.

The message isn’t long, but the hand is neat, and if Sherlock hadn’t already known who sent it simply by the appearance of the outside, he would know from the writing, even though he’s never seen it before in his life.

A Message for the Moon:

*Even though the moon may think it doesn’t need to eat, or sleep, in times of difficulty, the sun would like the moon to know that it depends upon the moon’s wellbeing to arrive as it does every morning in the sky with such punctuality. Even when the sun can’t see the moon because circumstances intervene, the sun finds it cannot do its duty if it’s worrying about the moon, wondering whether it’s drinking enough water, whether it’s putting cool compresses on the blisters on its fingers that are surely there from painting yesterday, whether it’s doing everything in its power to maintain the loveliness of its clear and shining light. You know how the sun worries so.*

*Please, my love, eat something. Do your exercises. Keep busy. If not for yourself, then do it for my sake. Do it for me.*

*We will see one another again before too long. You can count on it.*

*With Love From,*

*Your Sun*

Sherlock reads the words so quickly at first that they have no meaning. He has to read the entire message several times—he does not know how many—before the letters take on individual shapes and become recognizable as words.

When he has finished reading it for what must be the hundredth time, he finds his eyes are hot and stinging.

He does not want to stop reading it.

He is holding it so tightly in his hands that he is frightened he will tear it, that the pressure from his palms will make the ink run and dissolve the message. He forces himself to ease his grip, smoothing the paper flat against his thigh.

He runs his fingers down the surface of the page. The writing is neat, but the number of ink drops running along the words lets Sherlock know that the letter was written in haste—and of course it must have been. When John would have the time to write a note like this is a mystery to Sherlock. The paper itself is old, stained, and Sherlock wonders with a kind of quiet amazement how John came by pen and paper at all, whom he had to beg for the use of this minor luxury.

Reluctant as he is to let go of it, Sherlock folds it back up into its tidy triangle and then dropping to his hands and knees, he crawls under his bed to hide it in the safest place he knows.

He tucks it into the velvet lining of his violin case.

Afterward, Sherlock lies on his bed, staring at the same stained ceiling that he has looked at all the long miserable months he has been at sea, but this time, he does not see the buckled wood, the long, grey watermark that looks like a bulging horse’s head, instead he sees the letters of John’s note, as clearly as if they had been traced there onto the ceiling for him to see, and he reads them over and over and over again.

*Your Sun.*
Sherlock closes his eyes, feels his chest grow tight.

Even though he’s heard John say the words ‘my love’ perhaps a dozen times by now, something about seeing those words addressed to him in _ink—in ink_—makes Sherlock feel as though his body is too fragile to contain everything he feels, as though his heart is suddenly too big for his chest.

It’s almost worth the pain of being kept apart from him to have received such a truly astonishing new piece of John, to see the narrow, even letters of John’s neat hand. His writing looks just exactly as it should—it looks like John somehow.

He will never forget a word of that note, even if he lives to be a hundred.

Some soft and cool emotion is flowing through him, filling up the emptiness inside him, making his insides feel less hollow. It isn’t quite relief but it’s calming all the same.

John needs him to keep going. _Do it for me._

The thought is grounding.

Sherlock thinks suddenly of what John is likely doing right now and feels shame wash over him—John is _working_. He probably misses Sherlock too—maybe just as badly—but he doesn’t have time to wallow in his own misery; no, he carries on, because he has to.

If John can get through this, then so can he.

Perhaps most important of all—John says that they will see each other again.

Sherlock clings to this promise, like a drowning man clinging to a piece of wreckage in a storm. If John says it will happen, then surely it will.

Hope flickers back into view and Sherlock seizes hold of it, but gently, carefully so as not to bruise its fragile wings.

He sits up in bed, and as he does, a thought occurs to him.

He was so busy feeling sorry for himself he’d forgotten the promise he’d made the night before to dedicate all his efforts to uncovering what he could about the captain.

The sooner Sherlock is able to deduce what’s going on with the captain, the sooner he will gain the leverage he needs to get Anderson _out_ of his current position of authority over John. In fact, there are a multitude of ways Sherlock may be able to get rid of Anderson—he just needs to figure out the best way to go about it. And the first place to start is gathering as much information as he can about who might be involved.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Sherlock climbs out of bed, and strips off his ruined shirt. He takes the time to wash his face, and shave; he even drags a comb through his ragged curls. He needs to look at least mildly presentable if he plans to dine with the rest of the passengers in the saloon for the midday meal.

And that is precisely what he intends to do because there is one passenger in particular that he needs to make an appointment with, and that is Miss Molly Hooper.

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When Sherlock reaches the dining room, most of the other passengers are already there, leaning
over their plates of mutton and boiled vegetables, deep in conversation.

The heat is just as bad as yesterday but the energy of the group seems livelier somehow—or perhaps, it’s just that today Sherlock is actually giving them his full attention.

To his great relief, Miss Hooper is there, seated as ever in the domineering shadow of her chaperone, Ms. Grimsby. She gives Sherlock a tentative smile as he seats himself at the other end of the table.

Sherlock’s arrival prompts a series of nervous glances and whispers, especially among the female passengers, but the rest of the diners ignore him as usual; his inconsistent comings and goings in the passenger saloon are simply looked upon as yet another manifestation of his anti-social eccentricity.

Sherlock has never been more grateful for their pointed disinterest in him; it gives him the chance to study them all in silence as he picks at his plate of food.

He has little interest in the meal in front of him but he thinks of John’s plea to him to eat something and the thought is enough to force him to grudgingly swallow several bites of food.

Sherlock pushes his plate away, takes a sip of warm wine, and focuses on observing the passengers around him.

There is nothing much of interest for his keen gaze.

Mrs. Whitehall is seated beside her husband, who is deaf in one ear, which is surely the only reason he can tolerate the constant stream of murmured conversation she sends in his direction. The man appears to take no notice; he goes on scraping congealed butter onto his biscuit in cheerful ignorance.

The Damsons sit on the other side of Mr. Whitehall. Mrs. Damson, with her three children clustered round her, ages four, seven, and ten respectively. The littlest one is not well. It’s frequently crying and listless, its color pale and wan. Every time he sees the boy he’s clinging to his mother’s skirts, or being pinched and bullied by his older sisters. Sherlock pities the poor thing. He knows what it is to be strange and unwanted.

Beside the Damsons sits the ever-ebullient Colonel Jackson, whose good mood appears not to have been dampened by the persistent heat. His round red face is shining more than ever. He is speaking energetically to Mr. Stallworthy, a frail, and somewhat lackluster barrister, whose only noteworthy quality as far as Sherlock can tell, appears to be the amount of wine he is able to dribble on his waistcoat during the course of a single meal.

Amesbury, the other dull and snobbish barrister, whose cabin lies directly beside Sherlock’s, sits on Mr. Stallworthy’s other side; he is deep in conversation with Lieutenant Moore, one of the lower-ranking officers who frequently dines with the passengers, unlike the higher-ranking lieutenants who dine separately with the captain in his quarters.

As usual Miss Gibbons is employed in giggling conversation with Miss Long, their beribboned heads bent together in fervent conference over their empty wine glasses, both of their plates of mutton similarly untouched.

Dull, dull, dull, Sherlock thinks, as he looks around. There is nothing of interest for him here.

His gaze alights on Mr. Knott, the beetle-browed gentleman who seemed particularly keen on preventing the other passengers from speaking ill of the captain, wearing the same worn frock coat,
sitting off to the side at the other end of the table, a pair of pince-nez perched on his nose as he studies a paper in his hand.

Sherlock regards him with interest.

The man is severely middle class, likely worked as a… clerk, judging by the arthritic bulge of his knuckles, what looks to be semi-permanent ink stains on his gnarled hands. His clothing is worn, his gaze sharp. He’s a clever one; that much is certain.

Sherlock wonders as he studies him whether he’s simply a shrewd man, who like many of them has heard of the captain’s violently colored past, or whether he knows something more than he should.

The longer Sherlock’s gaze lingers on him though, the more certain he is that the man knows nothing. He’s clearly well read, someone who is aware of his surroundings. He’s old enough to have heard of some of the captain’s nastier dealings during the war. It is likely just his common sense that has led him to regard the captain with such caution.

Sherlock considers going over to speak to him, but upon reflection, concludes it wouldn’t be worth the effort. The man seems to have a vested interest in keeping people from speaking ill of the captain; he surely wouldn’t speak freely of the man himself.

Sherlock’s gaze flickers back to the other end of the table, where Miss Hooper sits, listless before her empty plate, looking as bored as he feels.

Beside her, the indubitable Ms. Grimsby is glaring across the table at the giggling young ladies, as though she may prevent them from further indiscretion simply by the power of her gaze.

Sherlock studies the older woman for a moment more in quiet reflection. There is only one way he is going to be able to speak in private with Miss Hooper, and doing so is going to demand that he summon all of his nonexistent habits of decorum.

It isn’t that Sherlock is ignorant of the customs of polite society; it’s simply that he doesn’t care to abide by them. Thanks to his upbringing, he is intimately aware of all of them, all of the stupid codes and rules that dictate proper behavior, even if he may be hideously out of practice.

Sherlock waits what feels like an interminable amount of time until the last of the meal has been served and all of the plates cleared away, until most of the passengers are lingering over tepid cups of coffee, before standing up and crossing the length of the dining room to stand before Miss Hooper.

“Good afternoon, Madam,” he says, with the customary bow.

Miss Hooper blinks up at him in mild surprise. “G-good afternoon, Mr. Holmes.”

“How are you?” he asks, perhaps a bit abruptly.

“I’m—I’m fine, thank you,” Miss Hooper replies, glancing nervously over at her chaperone.

“Good. That’s very good. I was wondering if…” Sherlock can almost hear the groan of the rusty cogs turning as he struggles to remember the proper way to phrase such a request. “That is, I’d like to ask if I might have the pleasure of your company later on this afternoon perhaps…” Sherlock’s eyes flick to the worn drawstring bag that is perpetually dangling off of Ms. Grimsby’s arm. “Over a game of whist?”

“Oh!” Miss Hooper’s exclamation is a rush of delighted breath. “That would be… yes, I’d like that.
We… that is, Ms. Grimsby and I, often enjoy a game of whist in the afternoons after luncheon, don’t we, Aunt?”

At Miss Hooper’s words, Ms. Grimsby turns the full force of her judgmental gaze onto Sherlock. He can feel her eyes crawling over every inch of him, noting every indication of bad manners and untoward behavior, every suggestion of future scandal.

This process takes almost a full minute. Sherlock isn’t surprised. He is aware there is a great deal of it.

“This… gentleman...” Sherlock can hear the pointed question in her voice as she says the word. Her eyes move over the arch of Sherlock’s forehead to his hair. He is glad he spent the extra moments it took to wet it and comb it this morning. “He would like to play whist with us, would he?”

“Yes, Aunt Gertrude.”

Sherlock feels the older woman’s gaze sharpen. “Any reason for this sudden interest in cards, Mr. …?”

“Holmes, Ma’am, Sherlock Holmes.” Sherlock says with a grave incline of his head. The more matter-of-fact he is with this one, the better. “I’m not much for cards, Ma’am, but I find the dullness of the voyage has gotten the best of me, and was hoping two sensible ladies such as yourselves could teach me what you know.”

Sure enough, Sherlock sees the glint in the old woman’s eye at the mention that he has poor luck with cards.

“Hmmm… well, we’ll need a fourth player if it’s to be whist.”

Sherlock is prepared for this. “Perhaps Ms. Simpson might be persuaded to join us?”

Ms. Simpson is the other old maid on the ship, who keeps mostly to herself, nose buried in her book of psalms. Sherlock knows two things: one, that she is the only other unmarried woman on board the ship of whom Ms. Grimsby doesn’t disapprove, and two, that she never receives social calls of any kind and therefore will not refuse the invitation.

Ms. Grimsby sniffs approvingly. “Yes, I think she might be. Well, in that case, Mr. Holmes, I’m sure we will endeavor to teach you something.”

“Very good, Ma’am. And what time do you usually play?”

“Oh—” Miss Hooper begins eagerly. “We usually play just after lun—”

“Today I think a bit of fresh air will do you well, my dear. We shall take a turn about the deck before our game.”

“Very good, ladies. Shall we say… four o’clock then?”

Ms. Grimsby’s sniff as she turns away is all the answer he can hope to get.

“I am looking forward to it,” Sherlock says with a stiff bow in Miss Hooper’s direction.

As he raises his head, he catches her small grateful smile, and the sight of it is almost enough to inspire a smile of his own in return.
However, he finds he can’t quite manage it.

He leaves the dining room before he can do anything to risk the old woman’s disapproval and her withdrawal of the invitation.

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Two hours later, Sherlock finds himself warding off fits of excruciating boredom as he pretends to let the old woman teach him how to play cards. He plays badly on purpose, knowing that every round she wins will increase her good humor, thereby increasing the chance that she might let Miss Hooper out of her sight for more than a quarter of an hour when the game is done.

Sherlock’s choice of Ms. Simpson as the fourth card player proves to be a flawless one. The older woman is as unlucky with cards as Sherlock is pretending to be, which draws out Ms. Grimsby’s condescending glee in trying to tutor her accordingly. Indeed, it relieves Sherlock of some of the pressure of his own pretense at playing badly—Ms. Simpson is stealing the role he’d intended to play, and as Sherlock is actually quite good at cards, this distraction provides a welcome reprieve.

Much to Sherlock’s relief, the ploy works, and after the third game, the woman is so eager with her winning streak that when Sherlock leans deferentially forward to ask if he might speak with Miss Hooper for a while in private, she readily agrees.

“How did you do that?” Miss Hooper whispers to him in a breathless undertone as soon as the old lady is out of earshot.

He and Miss Hooper have moved to sit by the vast stern window at the back of the room. The sun is hot today and the sun-drenched room would be unbearable if not for the fact that the stern cabin is far enough above the water that the windows can be opened when the weather is fair, to let in a bit of a breeze.

The water today is a brilliant blue, the sun on the sparkling waves so bright it hurts Sherlock’s eyes. He positions himself so he does not have to look at it. It makes him think of John, and the thought is as painful as a wound.

“Oh, it was a simple enough matter. The old woman clearly loves her cards.”

“But how did you know?” Miss Hooper presses, and then something sharper surfaces in her smiling face. “You’ve played whist before. You were shamming.”

Sherlock looks at her, impressed. “How did you know?”

Miss Hooper ducks her head, pushes her fingers together in her lap. “You lost every hand. You did it deliberately.” She darts her eyes back up at him. “You’re cleverer than that. You would’ve gotten the hang of it quicker.”

Sherlock is staring at her, slightly dumb-founded. “How do you know I’m clever?”

“I’ve seen the way you look at people. You’re always… taking information in about them. I can see it in the way you look at them.”

Sherlock’s mouth may well be hanging open but he’s too shocked to bother to close it. How this drab, desperately ordinary girl can know so much about him is absolutely baffling.

“I know because…” She drops her gaze back to her lap again, a smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. “I do it myself. I look at people, notice things about them.” She offers him a nervous smile.
“I have a great deal of idle time on my hands. I get so…” She looks up again, only to look out the window, eyes squinting against the glare of the sun on the waves. Every trace of the thin smile is gone from her face. “Sometimes I think I will go mad from boredom.”

Sherlock cannot speak, he is so stunned to hear another human being saying things that he has thought himself a hundred times—much less a girl—speaking thoughts he has had so often they have become a part of himself.

Miss Hooper’s eyes flicker back towards him, the nervous smile returning to her lips. “I think perhaps it might be the same for you.”

“You’re… you’re quite right. I do feel that way. Almost all of the time. It’s… why I’m here,” Sherlock says, surprising himself. He has not yet told this to anyone, not even John. “It’s because my family couldn’t find any suitable position to occupy me. Everything was too… easy for me. That’s why they sent me away.”

“But you must have had… a wealth of opportunities,” Miss Hooper says, with something like longing in her voice. “You could have gone to school, surely?”

“I did,” Sherlock says, some of his self-consciousness abruptly returning. “The masters were either dull or completely incorrect in their theories, their methods—everything. And they couldn’t stand to be corrected.”

Sherlock hears a muffled sound from Miss Hooper and when he looks at her, he sees that she has put a hand up to cover her mouth because she is laughing. “You told the masters their methods were incorrect?”

Sherlock bristles slightly at this; he sits up straighter on the windowsill, his voice growing colder. “Well, they were.”

“No, please don’t mistake me,” Miss Hooper says, still smiling behind her hand. “I think it’s rather wonderful.”

Sherlock feels some of the tension go out of his shoulders, but still, he doesn’t return her gaze. Of course, she would laugh at him—everyone always does, why should she be any different? He shouldn’t have been so forthcoming. Confiding in other human beings is never worth it; it’s never worth the risk. Sherlock knows this. But the burden of his loneliness is so severe that for a moment Sherlock let himself be fooled into thinking that perhaps there was someone else on board this miserable ship that he could trust.

What a fool he was to think it, even for a moment.

“I’m sorry. I’ve upset you,” Miss Hooper says at once, her voice full of anguish. “Please, please don’t misunderstand my intentions. I didn’t mean to laugh at you.”

Sherlock is inclined to get up and walk right out of the passenger saloon without another word but something about the pitch of longing in Miss Hooper’s voice pulls at him. He recognizes all too well the desperation in her tone, the fear that whatever it is that has temporarily put a stop to the gnawing agony of loneliness and tedium might be taken away again.

He thinks abruptly of John and his throat seizes up.

“‘I’m so sorry,” Miss Hooper says. “Please don’t go.” And then she says, in a much quieter voice that he suspects he isn’t meant to hear. “I’m ever so desperate for a friend.”
Sherlock almost leaves—he does, he almost turns his back on this lonely nervous girl because it’s difficult, this… putting up with other humans, even those he suspects he may have some sort of affinity with. There is clearly some spark of similarity between himself and Miss Hooper, but that doesn’t make it any less difficult to interact with her.

She could be just like all the others. In truth he doesn’t know her well at all, but what stops him from leaving, what keeps him there, is the thought of John, what John would think, if Sherlock left this poor, sad, lonely girl to the dreary company of her domineering chaperone.


There is a slightly awkward pause and Sherlock immediately regrets his decision, considers going back on it, when Miss Hooper says, “I’ve been meaning to thank you for… that night, for coming back to tell me that Lieutenant Lestrade was alright. I was in an agony not knowing. But it would have been worse having to go the whole night with no word. You didn’t have to do that. That was kind of you.”

Sherlock is momentarily startled out of his discomfort by the realization that this is the second time Miss Hooper has told him that he’s done something kind. Sherlock is not aware he has a kind bone in his body.

He’s not sure what to say in response but before he can answer Miss Hooper goes on speaking in a rushed tone, eyes still fixed on her lap. “I… I’m not an idiot, you know. I imagine the reason you wished to speak with me in private is so as to ask me about that night, whether I noticed anything out of the ordinary. In order to figure out what might have happened. And I’m happy to help in anyway I can.” Her eyes flicker briefly up at him. “I know you dislike me, Mr. Holmes, and I’m sorry if I was presumptuous enough to think we might be friends. I just… you must understand how unbearably dull my days are onboard this ship.”

Sherlock’s mouth goes dry with horror. He finds himself stricken once again by the dual shock of Miss Hooper proving far cleverer than he had assumed, and voicing sentiments that he is daily haunted by.

“I don’t dislike you,” he says, much to his own surprise. Upon saying it out loud, he realizes that it’s true. He doesn’t dislike her. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Miss Hooper smiles wanly. It is a sad smile, one that he can see she has worn often in the presence of cruelty. “I don’t mind if you do. Truly. But you must forgive my presumption in thinking otherwise. You can see I’m desperate for something to occupy myself.”

Her eyes dart across the room to where Ms. Grimsby sits, lips pursed in disapproval as she oversees Ms. Simpson’s needlework, keen to point out every flaw.

“I don’t dislike you,” Sherlock stupidly repeats.

Miss Hooper’s gaze flickers back to him.

“I…” Sherlock casts around desperately for the proper thing to say. “It is I who must beg your forgiveness. You may have noticed I am not… the most sociable of men.”

Miss Hooper carefully says nothing.

“People don’t…” Every word feels like a potential disaster, and it’s all Sherlock can do to keep from wincing at each poorly chosen utterance. “People tend not to like me. And so I tend to… avoid people. It’s generally better for everyone that way. But you… you’re different than the rest
of them, I think.”

Miss Hooper studies him quietly, her brown eyes intent.

“‘I can’t… promise to be anyone’s friend,’” Sherlock says honestly. “I’m not sure that I know how but—” He hurries on to assuage the flash of disappointment in Miss Hooper’s eyes. “I’d like to get to know you better… if I may. If you’ll permit me that is.”

It takes everything within him not to shut his eyes in response to his complete failure to make the girl feel better. He shouldn’t have said anything at all. But when he looks up cautiously, he sees that Miss Hooper is smiling—not the sad, defeated smile; nor the nervous one she habitually wears. It is the rare genuine smile he has seen, like the one on her face when she was dancing with Lieutenant Lestrade.

“I can’t say I know much about having friends either,” Miss Hooper says. “I haven’t had so many in my life. So… perhaps we can fail at it together.”

Sherlock feels a flare of some intense emotion at her words, and it takes a moment for him to realize it is part joy and part relief. He is touched by her generosity, and he is startled to find his own throat grown tight with gratitude.

Sherlock looks out over the glare of the ocean; takes a moment to collect himself.

When he looks back at Miss Hooper, she is studying her fingers in her lap, waiting patiently.

“Your… chaperone,” Sherlock asks, desperate to change the subject. “Is she really your aunt?”

“Not technically, no. Not by blood. But she is a family friend.” Miss Hooper purses her lips in a way that reminds Sherlock of the old woman. “I’m… the middle of five sisters. My father thought it best to send me to a position to be a governess for a family that he knows in Calcutta, rather than risk the chances of my finding a husband. It is Ms. Grimsby’s nephew who is the father of the children I will be in charge of.”

Sherlock sees her purse her lips again and feels a flash of sympathy for her. Judging by her looks, she is probably just a few years older than him, somewhere in her early twenties. For women—especially those in poorer families—this is the age where parents begin to worry that the bloom has rubbed off.

Sherlock ponders this. He supposes in some ways it isn’t so different from his own position. His mother had wanted him to marry, but he had succeeded in proving so unsociable that none of the girls in the county would have him. At the time, Sherlock had considered this a triumph. However, that was before his father had told him that he was being shipped off to India.

“Surely that’s… better than being married off to some brute?”

Miss Hooper smiles at him forgivingly, but her eyes are tight. “You misjudge the virtues of my sex, Mr. Holmes. We are considered rather…wanting in certain qualities if we cannot find a husband by my age.”

Not for the first time in his life, Sherlock thanks whatever gods exist for not making him born a woman.

He casts around again in some desperation to change the subject. “You were right though to suspect that I wanted to ask you about the night of the party. Have you…” He knows the question is presumptuous but he’s too curious to stop himself from asking. “Have you had a chance to speak
with Lieutenant Lestrade since then?”

Miss Hooper shakes her head, eyes fixed firmly in her lap. “No. As you can imagine it’s… well, it’s nearly impossible to speak with anyone without my Aunt’s approval.”

Of course. Sherlock had suspected as much.

“Did you—?”

But Sherlock’s words are interrupted by the intrusion of the very woman herself, as if mentioning her had called her up like some malevolent spirit.

“Molly, it’s time we retired before supper. You’ve taken up much too much of this young man’s time already.”

“Yes, Aunt Gertrude.”

Miss Hooper ducks her head deferentially, casting Sherlock an apologetic smile as she rises to her feet.

“It was ever so nice playing cards with you this afternoon, Mr. Holmes.”

Sherlock rises to his feet as Miss Hooper does, bowing his head in acknowledgement, before turning to face Ms. Grimsby’s cold gaze. “Indeed. I was wondering if I might beg your ladies’ patience with me again tomorrow, so that I might have the chance to improve my luck.”

Sherlock is relieved to see the glimmer in Ms. Grimsby’s eye.

“Perhaps,” she says, with her customary sniff as she takes Miss Hooper’s arm. “We will have to wait and see tomorrow. Come along, Molly, dear. Good afternoon, Mr. Holmes.”

“Good afternoon, ladies.”

He bows to them both again, careful to wait to make his own exit from the room until after they have left.

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When Sherlock leaves the dining room to return to his cabin, the sun is just beginning to make its slow descent toward the horizon.

The sight of it through the stern windows, dull gold transforming the curve of the ocean into a haze of light, looks so like the sky did yesterday afternoon when Sherlock was up on deck that it makes his throat ache with sudden tightness. The close darkness of the corridor leading back to his cabin is a relief to him for the sole reason that it doesn’t remind him so keenly of the slow cruelty of the passing hours.

How is it that time can move so differently between one day and the next?

The fact that it has only been a single day since those events—since last he saw John—is inconceivable to him. It feels like an eternity, as though the pall cast over his life at the conclusion of yesterday’s events has always been there, shrouding his days in darkness.

The brief spark ignited by his conversation with Miss Hooper is already fading, like a match that won’t catch, and by the time he reaches the gloom of his cabin, the flicker of brightness has gone out, and sorrow has returned to his chest, heavy as a stone.
He sits before his desk, head in his hands, shoulders bowed as though in defeat.

There are hours yet before the evening meal, an event that Sherlock is only entertaining as a possibility in order to give him something with which to fill the endless span of time between now and bed; but the prospect of it so tedious it barely counts as a distraction in and of itself.

He briefly considers going up on deck to find Lieutenant Lestrade—perhaps he can wrangle the man into telling him more about the captain’s habits in such a way that will not rouse the Lieutenant’s suspicion that Sherlock is continuing to investigate—but then dismisses the idea almost as quickly.

It’s nearly evening now, which means John’s mess will be on duty, and the risk of Sherlock encountering anyone of them in Anderson’s presence is too great.

At the thought of John, Sherlock’s heart gives a painful lurch, and he drops his head into his hands, fingers pulling at his hair.

What is John doing now? Likely making his way up into the rigging to his place in the foretop for his shift on the watch, unless Anderson has assigned him some nastier chore as way of punishment. What’s the worst thing a sailor can be forced to do? Of the endless list of unpleasant duties of which Sherlock is aware he’s certain there are far worse tasks he has no knowledge of.

Before he can stop himself, his mind begins to throttle forward into the endless litany of dreadful things that might be happening to John—of John being forced down into the slimy darkness of the hold to pull rats out of the grain supply with his bare hands; sent down on a rope against the side of the fast-moving ship to scrape barnacles off the hull, the waves tugging at him every move he makes, threatening to pull him off; scrubbing the blood off the floor of the surgery on his hands and knees, while Anderson stands behind him, grinning, tapping a cane against his palm in gleeful warning.

Sherlock’s agile mind can generate horrifying possibilities faster than he can contemplate them—each more frightful than the last—and they keep coming, until he’s pressing his hands in against the sides of his skull, shaking his head, willing them to stop.

If only he could hear from John again, just to know that he’s doing all right, if only he could ask him how—

Sherlock’s hands stiffen in his hair.

Of course.

What an idiot he is.

Suddenly, he is a whirl of movement as he rushes to light the candle at his desk, pulling out pen and ink and paper.

If Billy can bring a note from John, then surely he can just as easily carry one to him.

Sherlock is mortified that the thought hasn’t occurred to him until now.

Finding Billy may prove difficult, but even if it takes a while, Sherlock has to be ready with something to send.

Sherlock sharpens his quill, uncorks the ink, and then sits staring at the blank page before him.
He has no idea what to say.

He isn’t clever with words like John—he can’t make pretty pictures out of air. John has a true gift for poetry. Just remembering some of the things John has said to him brings heat to Sherlock’s cheeks.

There is so much, so much he’d like to say to John but it’s difficult enough for him to say these things to John when they are face to face. Confronted with a blank page Sherlock feels even more afraid that the words will somehow betray him, that they will fall utterly short, or worse, mangle the true meaning of what he wants to say.

He decides to keep it simple.

Dear John,

I have tried my best to do as you asked. I am endeavoring to keep busy though it is difficult. I am eating.

Sherlock looks down at his hands, thinking of John’s note. John’s suspicion had proved absolutely right—his hands are slightly tender from painting yesterday. He rubs his thumb over the bandage on his palm and then writes:

My hands are fine.

Sherlock pauses there. What else can he say? He thinks about including the detail that he spoke with Miss Hooper but then decides against it, as his primary motivation for doing so is best not conveyed in writing. He does not want to mention any hint of his suspicions of the captain in case the letter should fall into the wrong hands.

What else has he done? There is nothing left for him to report.

Sherlock crouches over the page again.

I hope you are well.

I miss you.

Sherlock hesitates again. He thinks about writing, Thank you for your note, and then recoils in horror at how stiff and formal it sounds. He thinks about writing, I was very happy to receive your note, and actually grimaces, because still—still those words do nothing to convey the depths of his joy, his gratitude at receiving the paper that John had pressed words into, thinking of him. The word ‘happy’ sounds like the flattest, most mundane expression of bland contentment, a pale shadow of the explosion of feeling that went off in Sherlock’s chest holding that small, triangle of paper in his hands, when he saw those neat black letters addressed to him.

He sits in an agony of hesitation, the tip of the quill against his bottom lip, searching for some manner of expressing all he felt in that moment. How can he put into words the experience of feeling as though his soul had evacuated his body before John’s letter came, only to have it come flooding back to him again upon its arrival? How can he tell John that his letter saved Sherlock from potentially beating himself to death against the walls of his own cabin in misery?

He decides that he can’t.

He settles for a plea for more such messages, hoping that John will know how much it means to him.
Please write again soon

But looking at it, that sounds greedy and ungrateful, so Sherlock adds a parenthetical

(if you can).

And then signs the letter before he makes it any worse.

Yours,

S.H.

Reading back over it, it sounds dull and flat and toneless, and is hideously short, and Sherlock almost sets the corner of it in the candle flame to burn it up completely, but at the thought of having to do the exercise all over again, he stops himself.

It will have to do for now.

He folds the letter tightly, seals it, and leaves the front blank, the same way John did, in an effort to misdirect any immediate suspicion should something go awry upon delivery, and then heads cautiously out into the corridor in search of Billy before he can change his mind.

To Sherlock’s utter astonishment and relief, he has only made it halfway down the corridor outside his cabin when he sees a slight figure hurrying down the portside gallery with a bucket in each hand.

“Billy!” Sherlock hisses, darting forward under the low-hanging beams that separate the two halves of the ship, careful to keep his voice low so as not to be overheard by anyone in the nearby rooms.

He is doubly fortunate in the fact that there is no one else around—not even Mr. Amesbury, Sherlock’s nosy neighbor who’s so fond of lingering outside his door.

Billy looks up startled. “Mister Holmes!”

Sherlock stops before him, breathless. “I have something for you.”

Billy obligingly sets down both his buckets, offering Sherlock a grin as he does so. “You have good timing, sir. I was only just bringing Miss Sommerset her evening washing water.”

“That’s good,” Sherlock says, before passing the letter into Billy’s hand. He looks the boy carefully in the eye. “You know who it’s for?”

Billy nods solemnly as he tucks the letter deep into the corner of his jacket out of sight.

“Good. Did you—” Sherlock hesitates, not wanting to reveal the full nature of his desperation but simultaneously too desperate to stop himself. “Did you tell him what I said?”

Billy nods, face illuminated by a sudden grin.

“And what did he say?”

“Only he was pleased to hear it, and he hoped he might be hearing more from you before too long.”

All of Sherlock’s bones seem to turn to water in relief.

That means Billy has seen John since last they spoke, it means John is still alive and relatively well
—that Anderson hasn’t yet had cause to chain him up in some dark corner of the ship.

Sherlock has to stop himself from physically grabbing ahold of Billy and asking him every detail about how John looked, how he sounded, what he’s seen John doing in the last twelve hours, but he restrains himself; manages a tight-lipped nod of thanks.

“That’s good.”

Billy has already stooped to pick up his buckets again. “Sorry, sir—I’ve got to get these to Miss Sommerset otherwise she’ll be havin a right fit.”

“Of course.” Sherlock stands aside, embarrassed. “And call me Sherlock.”

“Yes, sir, Sherlock sir,” Billy says, turning to offer Sherlock one last grin before hurrying away down the corridor. “I’m sure I’ll have another message for ya before too long!”

And then he’s gone, up the hatchway to the deck where the roundhouse cabins house the highest-paying passengers.

Sherlock watches him go with a tight feeling in his chest, trying not to think about how long it might be before John has the chance to write to him again.

***

Somehow, Sherlock survives the long, slow crawl of hours until the evening meal.

He changes his shirt again just to give himself something to do, stares at the list of passenger names he made the day before to see if any missing detail occurs to him, but puts it away in exasperation with no new insights to show for it.

Supper is just as tedious as lunch—Sherlock tries as hard as he can to glean something of use from any of the interactions around him, but there is nothing—nothing relevant, nothing of interest on which to sharpen his restless mind, the intellectual fare around him as wanting as the sorry meal in front him.

He knows that this far into the voyage fresh food is sadly lacking, and it’s no fault of the cook who had to prepare it, but Sherlock’s sympathy for John’s friend Stamford does nothing to make the food more appealing.

The meat is tough and dull, the biscuits full of weevils. He chokes down several bites of overcooked potato in a good faith effort to keep his promise to John, but that’s all he can manage before the bland murmur of conversation and the stifling heat of the room make him feel as though he will go mad before the meal is ended.

He’s determined to stay to the meal’s conclusion, so that he might speak with Miss Hooper and her aunt before they retire early, as they always do, before the bottle of port is passed around among the gentlemen.

Sherlock manages to catch them before they leave, suffering through several minutes of Ms. Grimsby’s indictment against the new ladies’ fashion (“These muslin dresses are far too thin. Half the women on this ship may as well be walking around nude as far as I can tell!”), in order to improve his chances of speaking with Miss Hooper in private again tomorrow. It is his only success of the evening, if it even may be counted as such.

Miss Hooper’s small smile of thanks as they bid good night is enough to draw him out of his
misery for the duration of time it takes him to return to his cabin, but as soon as he reaches the grey and creaking confines of the room that he has come to think of as his cell, it takes all of his willpower to keep himself from going up on deck in a fit of reckless yearning so he might catch a glimpse of John.

However, if his memory of Burns’ disapproving look wasn’t enough to keep him confined to his cabin, livid with shame, his own litany of the horrifying punishments that await John if he were to be caught is more than enough to kill the instinct as soon as it comes.

Sherlock strips off his clothes and lies in the darkness, limp with misery, listening to the groan of the hull, the creaking of the ship all around him.

He finds his fingers, as though by instinct, going to catch hold of the locket lying heavy on his breastbone, the locket that John said would act as a token of his love for Sherlock when they are apart.

Never has he been so glad of the somewhat sentimental gesture as he is now. Silly as he knows it is, it’s somehow reassuring to have what he thinks of as a piece of John hanging around his neck, resting with a visceral weight between his collar bones, warm from the heat of his body.

Sherlock has heard stories of lovers who keep locks of one another’s hair in charms like this, worn in rings around their fingers, in bracelets on their wrists, and he’s always found the habit sentimental, distasteful, even mildly revolting, but for the first time in his life, lying on his back in his narrow bunk, the weight of the locket real and heavy in his hand, he understands the desire to have some part of the other person with him that he can touch.

Sherlock rubs the pad of his thumb over the scrollwork on the front, the intricate pattern of the interlocking letters worn smooth by time, and perhaps by John’s fingers repeating the very same gesture that Sherlock is now, and the thought of that, of John’s strong fingers rubbing meditatively where Sherlock’s fingers now rest, the ghost of John’s movement somehow available to him through the warm silver, makes heat fill him as surely, as swiftly as though John were in bed beside him now.

Sherlock rolls over with a muffled groan, pushing the sheet down off his legs.

He knows he told himself he wouldn’t—not with John surely suffering like he is, not with them apart—but Sherlock cannot help himself, his body is like a strip of tallow just waiting for a flame. Once the spark is caught, he can’t dispel it, and the thought of John, lying half-dressed in his hammock on some sweltering summer night with this necklace on his chest, sweat pooling in the grooves of his pectorals, gathering in the sharp line of his abdominal muscles, in the distinct curves of his powerful hips is too much for Sherlock’s vivid imagination. And now that he knows so intimately how each of those places on John’s body feels, now that he has tucked each sensation oh so carefully into the wing in his memory entirely devoted to John, he cannot possibly stop his body’s reaction, blood rushing to fill the flesh between his legs, pulse beating like a dull hammer in the hollow of his throat.

Oh god, oh god, he can’t help himself.

Sherlock pushes a hand down between his legs, gasps in soft surprise to find the head of his cock already swollen and leaking against his wrist.

He rubs his thumb over the head of it, the way John always does, and has to push his arm up above his face to stifle his whimper at the thought.
He thinks about John in bed beside him, John lifting his strong body up over Sherlock’s, holding himself up by his arms, the weight of his groin coming to rest heavy and welcome between Sherlock’s legs, the feel of the length of John against him—blood-hot and hard as steel. He thinks about John, grinning down at Sherlock, eyes glittering in the low light, both soft and bright at once, and how easy it would be for Sherlock to push up with his own hips, push back against John and feel the sweet slide of their erections coming together, how John would moan above him—the sound as low as sin—as he pushed back against Sherlock; how the muscles in John’s arms would stand out as he lowered himself down against Sherlock, asking in a rush of heat against the side of Sherlock’s neck, voice trembling slightly, “How is this? Is it good? Tell me how good it feels, my love.”

And Sherlock would try to answer but realize quickly that he didn’t have the breath to speak so instead he would push up, push up, with his hips again to repeat the sensation of all that hard, hot flesh grinding down against his own, and it wouldn’t be long before the movements turned from the slow heat of their initial desire to the speed of their increasing desperation for one another, in an effort to bring their bodies still closer together, and John’s mouth would find Sherlock’s, his tongue so slick against Sherlock’s own, and Sherlock would wrap his legs around John’s waist as he thrust against him, John, pulling Sherlock’s head back by his hair, his fingers fisting in it to bare Sherlock’s throat to his hungry mouth where he would suck and suck a ring of fresh marks to cover the old.

At the thought of this—John biting at the tender skin of his neck while he thrusts against him—Sherlock rolls over onto his stomach, burying his face in the crook of his arm to smother his moans, thrusting into the circle of his fist once, twice, three times—and then he is spending himself into the sheets, hips bucking, the line of his body gone taut as he comes and comes in a dizzying rush of release, so hard and fast that he wonders for a moment if he actually loses consciousness.

He doesn’t, but when Sherlock lifts his head from his arm, the room is spinning slightly around him, and when he reaches down to drag his shirt back down over his bare arse and roll off the sticky mess beneath him, he realizes that there are bite marks on his arm from his own mouth.

Cheeks warm with shame, Sherlock slips out of bed and wets a cloth in the water from his pewter basin to clean up the worst of the mess. God knows this mattress has seen worse.

By the time he crawls back into bed, he feels less light headed, and as he lies back down, he braces himself for the cold, sick feelings of guilt and regret that are sure to overtake him in the wake of what he’s done.

But to his surprise, he does not feel awash with guilt. On the contrary, his body is quieter now, his head less full of screaming darkness.

His fingers return to hold the locket and he thinks suddenly of the line from John’s note—*Do your exercises*. This was one of John’s directives that Sherlock did not follow, and it occurs to him now that he should have known that John was right, as he always is, in matters of the body. It helped; it helped to quiet Sherlock’s overactive brain.

*Although I don’t think those were the kind of exercises John had in mind.*

Sherlock’s cheeks grow warm again, and then, to his surprise, he finds himself smiling into the pillow.

He will have to tell John when next they meet just what form his exercises took.
He thinks about John grinning in response to Sherlock telling him this, the warm light in his eyes heating slowly to something darker, with more serious intent as John reaches to take Sherlock’s hands in his.

“Oh really?” he might say, “You think they’re more strenuous?”

His mouth smiling as it comes to find Sherlock’s own.

“I guess we’ll just have to see about that.”

Sherlock falls asleep before he can finish the thought, fingers coiled tight around the necklace at his throat.
My weird tendency to post chapters on holidays continues as today is BOTH Father's Day AND the summer solstice! :D So go wear a flower crown, dance around a maypole, tell your dad you love him, and then read some gay historical angst.

*lifts glass of aquavit in celebration*

The following day unfolds in a haze of tedious similarity to the one before—with one glaring exception: Sherlock receives no reply from John.

He wakes early, the pain of realizing that he does not know when he will see John again as sharp and unbearably as it was the day before. The grim prospect of another long dull day with no John to brighten it is almost enough to prevent him from rising from his bed. But lying alone, lost in the dark mire of his thoughts is by far the worse option of the two.

So Sherlock rises; dress and shaves, goes to breakfast, arranges to meet Miss Hooper and her aunt for another round of cards later in the afternoon so that he might catch Miss Hooper alone; but he is foiled in his efforts today.

He sits through two long agonizing games of whist and he is just about to lean in and ask if he and Miss Hooper might take a walk together up on deck when Miss Hooper’s aunt ushers the two of them out of the saloon, insisting that she has a headache and that Molly must attend to her.

Sherlock suspects the real reason for her sudden illness is that the dim-witted Ms. Simpson has found her stroke of luck today and despite Sherlock’s best efforts to continue to play as poorly as possible, he and Ms. Simpson have won the last three hands.

Miss Hooper has just enough time to smile apologetically at Sherlock before she’s hustled out of the room by her aunt, and it takes all of Sherlock’s will power not to lash out and say something needlessly cruel to the older woman still sitting opposite him, smiling benevolently down at the score card. He cannot afford to jeopardize his sole means of accessing Miss Hooper’s company.

“It looks like you and I have found our stride with this game, young man,” she says, beaming all over her wrinkled face.

Sherlock shuts his eyes and keeps them shut until the urge passes.

It is a near thing.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he says, rising from the table abruptly. He leaves the dining room without another word.

Sherlock retires to his room, stripping off his jacket and waistcoat as soon as he’s closed the door behind him. He drops to the floor beside his bed and runs through all of the exercises John taught him, as many times as his body can stand, until the sweat is dripping off his face and onto the floor, until his muscles are trembling and weak with fatigue.
Afterward, he paces the floor of his cabin like a caged tiger, ears alert for any footsteps that pass by his room. Every step he hears makes his heart hammer in anticipation in the hopes that it might be Billy, bringing word from John.

He does not want to leave his room for fear that Billy might come when he is gone. Based on the sincerity with which he conducts each errand, Sherlock is certain that Billy would not let the note out of his keeping for anything less than entrusting it into Sherlock’s hands himself, and he cannot risk the chance of missing him.

But after what feels like an unbearable amount of time with no sign of him, Sherlock gives up waiting. He cannot stand to stay confined to his room for one minute more, or else he actually will go mad.

Still afraid to risk showing his face up on deck, Sherlock wanders the corridors of the passengers’ quarters in the hopes that he will run into Billy performing some errand for one of the passengers, so that he might ask after John. Even if Billy doesn’t have a reply from him, Sherlock can at least ask if Billy has seen John since last they spoke.

But here, too, Sherlock is disappointed.

He finds no sign of Billy, or any members of the crew for that matter. The only people he sees are the Damson children, playing a noisy game in the hallway outside of their room. He can hear Mrs. Damson from within, her voice raised in what is clearly an argument with her husband.

Over the sound of her voice, Sherlock can hear the thin reedy sound of the youngest child, crying.

Sherlock continues his way down the corridor, feeling oddly unsettled by the sound.

All of the voices he overhears appear to be quarreling or complaining. It is as hot today as the day before and the day before that. The tedium of the voyage appears to be affecting them all.

At this realization, Sherlock finds his thoughts, as they always do, turning to John, wondering what it is he might be doing at this very moment, wondering how he might be faring in the heat.

Sherlock knows John is working through the nights, on watch up in the foretop, but he also knows that Anderson told John’s mess they would be working the pumps down in the bilge, the one task that John said is most hated by all sailors. Sherlock never had a chance to ask him why.

Of all the unpleasant tasks he’s seen John Watson engaged in around the ship (and there are many), Sherlock has never heard him complain about any of them. For John to acknowledge openly that this task is despised by those in his profession means that it must be miserable indeed.

Sherlock wonders if he is down there now and the sudden impulse to make his way directly to that part of the ship is so strong Sherlock experiences it like a physical twitch. His whole body jumps as he restrains his instinctive reaction to turn back toward the stairs.

He has to clench his hands into fists at his sides and will his body to stay still.

As soon as Sherlock feels he is fully in control of himself again, he turns back around, intending to make his way back to his cabin before he is seized by another rash desire. However, he has only gone one or two steps before he hears the sound of hushed voices engaged in intense conversation emanating directly from the room beside him.

If he’s not mistaken, then he is standing outside of the cabin occupied by Mr. Knott.
It’s clear from the volume of speech that the occupied parties are trying to keep their voices low, so as not to be overheard, but both voices keep rising and falling, apparently unable to stop themselves from speaking too loudly.

Sherlock stands very still and listens.

“—told you very distinctly not to——”

“—come to you if it weren’t——my discretion——”

“——know my feelings on the matter——”

“—if I’m right——our mutual advantage——”

Sherlock hears a muffled thump which can only be the sound of a fist coming down hard on a table.

“——listened to a word I’ve said! ——you no sense?”

“——you can’t possibly——”

“——dammit, man!”

There is a sudden scraping of furniture and then the sound of loud footsteps approaching the door.

Sherlock scuttles backwards and ducks out of sight behind the thick beam that bisects this section of the ship. It’s one of the rare times he’s thankful for his narrow frame because it means he can tuck himself fairly easily out of view when he needs to. He pulls his elbows in against his sides, listening hard.

Sherlock hears the door open and then at full volume now, the sound of Mr. Knott’s voice, clearly furious, the edge of anger in his voice restrained, but only barely.

“—not going to have this conversation again!”

The other man does not respond and at the sound of his footsteps hurrying away, Sherlock leans forward just in time to catch sight of the retreating back of Mr. Ferguson.

How interesting.

The door of Mr. Knott’s cabin closes with a sharp click and Sherlock waits a full minute before retreating from his hiding place and proceeding down the corridor.

All thoughts of finding Billy are momentarily driven from Sherlock’s brain as he makes his way back down the passage to his own cabin, his mind sparking with questions about the conversation he just overheard.

Ever since the tense moment that Sherlock witnessed between the two men at dinner the day before the party, he has wondered as to the precise nature of their relationship. They are clearly well acquainted—their rapport is such that it seems as though they may have known one another before the voyage.

But what’s most interesting to Sherlock is the fact that Knott seems to know more about the captain’s business than anyone else on the ship. Even though he has no proof that the conversation he just overheard has anything to do with the captain, Sherlock has a sneaking suspicion that that is precisely what the men were quarreling about.
It seems Ferguson has some awareness of his business as well, although how much of it is real knowledge and how much of it suspicion, at this point is impossible for Sherlock to ascertain.

Sherlock knows less about Ferguson than he knows about Knott (which is also frustratingly little). From what Sherlock has observed of him, George Ferguson is middle-aged, and middle-class, with no real distinguishing traits or features. Indeed, he seems to be one of those men who is severely middling in all pursuits he undertakes. He has a restless, almost ceaseless nervous energy about him. Sherlock has often seen him pacing the deck alone in the evenings, the brim of his hat tipped low over his eyes.

He dresses well, almost too well for someone of his background, with a self-consciousness that leads Sherlock to believe he comes from one of those families that has only recently pulled itself out of poverty in the last few generations.

Although Sherlock is not certain as to the nature of his profession, he suspects the man is a banker, perhaps a creditor, someone who deals intimately with money in a way that those in the landed gentry would find distasteful.

Indeed, Sherlock has seen the way the more well born passengers give Ferguson a wide berth, the way they slide their eyes away in barely concealed embarrassment whenever he speaks. The man is habitually alone, his long thin eyebrows pulled together in a consternated expression, nervous hands always moving, lighting on the chain of his pocket watch, over the buttons of his waistcoat, never resting.

Sherlock wonders now whether all that restless energy is just a result of the man’s disposition, or whether it has some darker source. What business does the man have in India? And what is the nature of the request he clearly just put to Knott that he denied?

Sherlock is so lost in his own musings that he almost walks directly into Colonel Jackson who is making his way down the corridor towards Sherlock.

“Woah, watch out there, my boy!”

The man seizes Sherlock by the shoulders to stop Sherlock barreling straight into him.

“You want to be careful,” the Colonel says, dropping his hands from Sherlock’s shoulders to pat his own sizeable midsection. “Such is the power of this lusty old frame that I could do some serious damage to a slight young thing like you without intending to!”

Sherlock looks up, startled, and stammers an apology.

“No hard feelings, of course.” The ebullient older man gives him a vigorous clap on the shoulder. The blow is so strong that it sends Sherlock a lurching step forward.

The other man chuckles loudly. “See, what did I tell you?”

Sherlock takes another step beyond his reach, just to be safe, and is about to continue his way down the hall when he realizes the Colonel is still speaking to him.

“How are you faring? I don’t know about you but these last few days—all this calm weather—it’s been deadly dull for my taste. I’m about ready to beat my brains out on the walls of my cabin. Either that or my dear Tabitha may do it for me!” He gives another loud chuckle and Sherlock stares hard at the floor between them, uncertain of how he’s supposed to react to this remark. “Give me another storm at sea any day rather than this blasted calm!”
Sherlock is struggling to determine just what it is the other man wants from him, when he realizes, in a rare moment of insight that the Colonel is making an effort to be kind to him.

As soon as he realizes this, Sherlock tries a smile, but he knows it is a botched attempt by the somewhat uncertain expression it prompts in the other man’s face.

“Well, I don’t mean to keep you. But I saw you looking awfully bored the other night at dinner and I couldn’t help but empathize. If I were a young lad on a voyage like this, I’d be absolutely mad from boredom by now.” The Colonel leans in suddenly in a conspiratorial manner. “You know, I’ve got a lovely pair of dueling pistols with me that are simply gathering dust in my cabin. If you ever want to take a turn firing shots off the back of the ship—” The colonel laughs again at Sherlock’s stunned expression and claps him hard on the shoulder one final time before moving away down the corridor. “You just let me know!”

Sherlock is so stunned by this interaction that he is left standing in the middle of the corridor for a good minute after the Colonel’s departure.

Much as he is always suspicious of anyone who appears to treat him with good intentions, as far as Sherlock can tell, the Colonel’s sentiments were genuine, and it seems that he really had simply stopped to talk with Sherlock to see how he was getting on.

Sherlock returns to his room, turning over the Colonel’s offer in his mind.

It has been a long time since he used a firearm of any kind. He and Mycroft, of course, both learned to shoot when they were boys. Sherlock always liked shooting—the level of concentration it took to aim exactly right, the precision, the mechanics of it. He liked the kickback of the gun after the shot had fired, the smell of the powder, the sting of the smoke in his nostrils.

He stopped liking it so much when his father took them out to start shooting living creatures. Then Sherlock gave it up, although he missed the unique pleasure of having something that he was better at than Mycroft. Sherlock made sure to lord that fact over Mycroft as often as he could.

At the thought of Mycroft, Sherlock feels his mood souring again, and by the time he reaches the confines of his room, his despair has returned to him in full-force.

Sherlock stretches out on his bunk on top of the blankets. He can feel the ache beginning to make itself known in his shoulders and in the muscles of his arms from the rigor of his exercises earlier. The pain in his body makes him think of John (the last time he felt such keen aches and pains they were the result of an entirely different sort of physical exertion), and the corresponding throb of longing, worry, and lust it sends through him makes him draw his knees up to his chest, coiling into a tight ball of misery.

Against his better judgment, he lets himself consider the question that has been gnawing at the back of his brain all day.

Why hasn’t John written back by now?

*It’s because he’s busy*, he tries to tell himself. *Think how difficult it must be for him to even get ahold of pen and paper, much less take the time to sit down and compose a response.*

Sherlock knows this is the most likely reason, and he tries to convince himself that it’s true, tries as hard as he can to ignore the teeming list of other possibilities his mind continues to offer up of what might be preventing John from sending word to Sherlock, tries resolutely not to consider the worst possibility of all which is that Anderson somehow intercepted John’s reply and that John is unable
to write a response because he is chained up somewhere in the bottom of the ship.

As this thought occurs to him, another worse possibility follows in its wake.

What if John never received his note at all because Billy was caught before he could deliver it? They would know the note was for John because Sherlock had addressed it to him, had written it in plain script at the top of the page.

Sherlock clenches his fists at his sides in mute frustration with his own stupidity, feels pain lance through the wound on his palm.

*Stupid, stupid Sherlock.*

Why didn’t he think of that when he’d written back to John?

It was because he had been too preoccupied with worrying about what to write—it had never occurred to him to take that kind of precaution.

He grits his teeth, stomach roiling with self-hatred. For one wild, irrational moment, he wishes he could go back in time and change it, scrub out the names he’d written on the page, so clearly implicating him and John, so thoroughly damning them if discovered.

What would they do to John if they caught him sending messages to Sherlock?

Sherlock feels cold sweat prickle at his palms. He does not like to think.

Surely, if John had been found out, the commotion such a crime would arouse would have reached Sherlock by this point. Surely, the whole ship would be discussing it by now.

The only thing that keeps Sherlock from dissolving into complete panic is the bitter realization that if Anderson were to bring John any extra measure of pain he would want Sherlock to know about it, would want Sherlock there to experience it firsthand. Such is the nature of Anderson’s cruelty; he would want Sherlock involved as much as possible.

No, if they had been found out, Sherlock would know about it. Of that much he is certain.

He finds his fingers moving, as they always do these days, to the locket lying warm against his throat. He rubs his fingers over the letters, missing John so badly he finds himself wishing in a fit of reckless rage that he could cut his heart out of his chest rather than have to be subjected to this constant tide of misery.

Hours still remain until the evening meal and suddenly Sherlock cannot stand the prospect of trying to come up with yet another way to while away the time only to spend another long and tedious evening in the company of dull strangers who have *nothing* of interest to say to Sherlock, and nothing of any use to help him in his frankly pitiful attempts to discover anything whatsoever about the captain’s intentions on this voyage.

Even the prospect of going to dine to see if he can observe anything of import in the interactions between Mr. Ferguson and Mr. Knott does nothing to rouse his spirits.

He has absolutely no proof whatsoever that the conversation he overheard has anything to do with the captain—they could simply be old friends, squabbling about a risky business venture, or a previous gambling debt.

*You know there was more to it than that,* says a tiny voice inside Sherlock’s head, but he ignores it,
rolling petulantly over onto his back to stare at the stained ceiling above him.

No, I don’t, he thinks sullenly.

Yes, you do. Come on now, I know you’re cleverer than that, and so do you. You’re onto something here.

It takes Sherlock a moment to realize who the voice in his head reminds him of. The voice is gentle, reassuring; too fond to be really frustrated, but with a note of steel underneath it that brooks no argument.

The voice sounds just like John’s.

At this realization a pang goes through Sherlock.

But even if he is right, even if the two men had been quarreling about the captain, what use is there in staring at the pair of them over a plate of overdone mutton? They’re not likely to say anything of any real interest to one another in the company of all the other passengers.

Yes, but you could keep an eye on them; see if Ferguson tries to arrange another meeting.

Sherlock grudgingly reflects on this.

Based on the little that he overheard, it appears as though this is not the first time Ferguson has approached Knott about this particular proposition. It seems unlikely that he would let the matter rest so easily. Ferguson does not seem the type to let a thing go.

Sherlock lets out the longest, most reluctant sigh he can manage.

Fine, he thinks, to the John in his head, only slightly snappish. I’ll go to dinner. Even though it’s going to be a completely useless endeavor.

In answer, the John in Sherlock’s head smiles, blue eyes sparking.

Well, we’ll just have to see about that, won’t we?

***

Sherlock keeps his word to the John inside his head, only mildly troubled by the realization that he hasn’t even been apart from John for two full days and he’s already internalized John into a walking, talking part of his inner landscape.

It cannot be a good sign.

But whether or not it is, Sherlock will take John’s voice any day over that of his smug and domineering older brother. If only Sherlock could hear nothing but John’s voice in his head and banish Mycroft’s forever, what a miracle that would be.

Much to his disappointment, however, the evening meal proves to be just as uneventful as Sherlock predicted.

Mr. Knott is present, but he is quieter than ever; he speaks with no one, working through his soup and plate of boiled meat with steady industry before pushing back his chair and excusing himself from the meal before the plates have even been cleared away.

Mr. Ferguson is noticeably absent, which in itself may be of interest, but Sherlock is not sure how
to proceed with this information, other than going and lurking conspicuously outside of the other man’s rooms to see if he is within them.

He’s half-tempted to follow Mr. Knott. It’s mildly suspicious that the man would leave the meal early; but again, Sherlock does not know how to do so without being completely obvious.

Miss Hooper and her aunt are also missing from the meal, as well as a handful of other passengers, and Sherlock suspects the heat has made many of them unwilling to venture out. It is typical for the ladies to dine in their rooms when they are feeling indisposed, and the ongoing heat has made the number of faces around the dining table dwindle every evening.

Sherlock does not linger at the table. As soon as he has eaten all he can (which isn’t much—the few bites he manages to choke down are all a result of the disapproval he imagines in the eyes of the John inside his head), Sherlock exits the dining room and makes his way down the corridor that runs the length of the portside of the ship until he reaches the cabin which he knows belongs to Mr. Ferguson.

Sherlock pauses outside the door, listening hard, straining his ears through the raucous sound of Miss Gibbons chattering energetically with someone in the cabin next door.

No sound emerges from Mr. Ferguson’s cabin; and no light can be seen shining through the crack in the door.

He may well be asleep, but Sherlock thinks the possibility unlikely. He is not the type to retire early.

Perhaps he is taking one of his evening strolls up on deck, as Sherlock has often seen him do; or perhaps he isn’t. Perhaps he is elsewhere, pursuing whatever plan of action it was that Mr. Knott refused to undertake with him. But what plan of action could anyone possibly undertake on board a ship halfway across the Atlantic?

Sherlock glances toward the staircase leading to the upper decks with undisguised longing.

It would do much to confirm or deny his suspicions about Ferguson’s activities if Sherlock could simply ascertain whether or not he was up on deck.

If he is, then Sherlock will know that the man simply skipped supper because he was hot, or perhaps had too much on his mind, in which case Sherlock will know that nothing out of the ordinary is taking place.

But if he isn’t up on deck...

Well. There are few places on a ship at this time of night where a passenger might be if he is not in his rooms.

If he is not up on deck then Sherlock will know that Ferguson is involved in some other manner of business, and it is as good a confirmation of Sherlock’s suspicions as he can hope to get.

Sherlock turns toward the stairs with purpose, telling himself sternly that his decision to go up on deck now that night has fallen has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that he knows John will be up in his post in the foretop.

It doesn’t, Sherlock repeats to himself, as if repeating it will make it true.

He is not going to linger—he is simply going to take one turn around the deck to see who is there,
and then he will return to his room.

Or so he tells himself.

When Sherlock reaches the top step, he cannot help but pause a moment to drink in a deep lungful of the evening air—it isn’t necessarily cool, and it’s still thick and muggy, but it is a hundred times better than the stuffy air below decks.

Sherlock hasn’t even realized that part of the manic, itching feeling in his brain isn’t simply the result of boredom, or even missing John, part of is due to the fact that he hasn’t seen the sky in the last twenty-four hours.

Sherlock looks up at it now and sees that the first few stars are beginning to emerge.

As his gaze drops back to the deck around him, he cannot help it if his eyes trail over the rigging and the masts and the billowed shapes of the sails—can he?

And if his eyes fall particularly on the foremost mast—where he knows John keeps his post—well, there’s nothing wrong with looking is there?

He stands for a long moment—perhaps longer than strictly necessary—and studies the tangle of ropes and sails lifting slightly with the movement of the ship, but it is with a sinking feeling in his chest that he must acknowledge at last that he cannot see anyone in the post at the top of the foremast.

He turns, tasting the bitterness of his disappointment as distinctly as if he’s taken a bite of something rotten, and it is only then, when he feels his hopes deflate around him, that he realizes just how much he had been counting on catching a glimpse of John up there against the night sky.

Sherlock takes a brief turn around the perimeter of the ship, making note of the pair of men on watch, the other two standing at the helm. He is relieved to see no sign of Anderson or Stevens, or even Burns for that matter—Sherlock’s guilt if he had run into the older sailor would have been too much to bear.

He is on his way back towards the quarterdeck when, to Sherlock’s further disappointment, he sees the bent form of Mr. Ferguson making his way down the starboard side of the ship, hat pulled low over his eyes. The man is alone, clearly out taking the evening air.

So not engaged in any suspicious activities below decks, then.

Like so many of the passengers, the man was probably too hot to sit in the close air of the passenger saloon for the evening meal. Either that, or he did not want to face the friend with whom he had so recently quarreled. He probably wished to take a walk to clear the unpleasant interaction from his mind.

Either way, both explanations are completely banal, and any effort at attempting to ascertain the man’s purpose by conversing with him is rendered impossible by Mr. Ferguson’s sudden decision to return to the gangway at the back of the ship and disappear again below decks.

Sherlock briefly considers following him in order to see if he returns directly to his cabin, but he feels all his interest in the manner leach out of him, like the last trickle of blood from an expiring corpse.

It is now glaringly apparent to Sherlock just how flimsy of an excuse it was he told himself to get up on deck in order to see John, and he turns to make his way back to the gangway, his head heavy
with defeat.

He is halfway across the deck, just passing under the shadow of the longboats, when he hears something that causes him to stop abruptly in his tracks.

It is the sound of someone singing, someone up in the foretop, singing to the stars.

Sherlock whips his head up to look toward the very top mast and although he still cannot make out the shape of the man who’s singing, he knows at once, who it is.

He would know that voice anywhere—even if he heard it on a crowded street, or through the din of a mighty storm, Sherlock would know that voice if he heard it, especially if he heard it singing.

He stands absolutely still and listens.

I am a sailor brisk and bold
That oft have sailed the ocean.
I’ve travelled the country far and near
For honor and promotion.
Me shipmates all, I bid you adieu;
I may no longer go along with you.
I’ll travel the country through and through
And they’ll call me the rambling sailor.

Although he is singing softly, the night is calm enough that the song drifts easily down from up high to where Sherlock is standing, stock-still, on the deck below, his heart in his mouth, his throat so tight with longing it’s as if someone has a fist wrapped around his windpipe.

Sherlock can scarcely breathe.

And if you want to know my name,
My name it is Young Johnson.
I’ve got a commission from the King
To court all girls is handsome.
With my false heart and flattering tongue
I’ll court them all both old and young;
I’ll court them all but I’ll marry none
And they call me the rambling sailor.

That voice, that voice, oh god, it’s almost as good as seeing John’s smile light up his face, to hear that lovely voice singing so lightly, so sweetly, the sound of it carried to him on the night breeze.

As is always the case when John sings, there is so much feeling in every note, every word, that what would otherwise be a simple song, a silly song, is full of nuance and depth.

The range of emotion in John’s voice is all the more powerful to Sherlock for the fact that this time, he cannot see John’s face as he sings—he can only hear him—and still, still he can make out the mischievous lilt in John’s voice—can almost see the quirk of his mouth as he smiles, when he sings about courting every girl—and Sherlock’s heart drops into his knees at the promise in John’s voice, the sheer bravado.

Well first I come to Plymouth town
And there were lasses many.
I boldly stepped unto a one
To court her for her money.
Says I, “My dear, be of good cheer,
I will not leave you, do not fear.
I’ll travel the country far and near
And they call me the rambling sailor.”

Why John singing about courting every girl he meets should have such a profound effect on Sherlock is a mystery to him until he realizes that what he hears in John’s voice is the same as what he sees when John looks at him before he kisses Sherlock, when John leans in with intention sparking in his eyes, his smile lean and hunger-bright.

And next I come to Portsmouth town
And there was lasses plenty.
I boldly stepped unto a one
To court her for her beauty.
Says I, “My dear, what do you choose
Here’s ale and a wine and a rum punch too.
Besides a pair of silk satin shoes
If you travel with the rambling sailor.”

But as much as John infuses the song with playfulness and levity, there is an equal amount of melancholy—no, Sherlock corrects himself. It isn’t simply melancholy. It’s that quality that John has, that sincerity, that depth of feeling in his eyes, in his voice, that radiates from his whole being when he tells Sherlock that he loves him, that he will do anything to keep him safe.

It isn’t fair; it isn’t right that Sherlock cannot even see John and he should have this sort of effect on him.

He is shivering all over, he feels light-headed, dizzy.

His entire body aches with want.

He leans into the wind, as if, in doing so, he can wrap the song around himself and it will feel as real to him as the presence of John’s strong arms.

And then I rose up with the dawn
Just as the day was peeping.
On tiptoe down the stairs I went
And I left my love a-sleeping.
And if she waits until I come
She may lie there till the day of her doom;
I’ll court some other girl in her room
And they’ll call me the rambling sailor.

It’s over far too quickly and Sherlock stands, ears straining to catch another note—another word from that golden voice pouring down to him from the sky above, as if the stars themselves had opened their throats and begun singing.

For a moment the only sound he hears is that of the wind moving through the sails.

But then, from where he’s standing, he hears the murmur of voices in conversation, and although he cannot make out what they’re saying, he realizes that John is not alone up in his perch; there must be another man on watch beside him.
The sound of John’s low laughter suddenly rings out from up above—soft, but resonant enough to echo over the surface of the water, and the sound of it is like a knife in Sherlock’s heart.

He turns abruptly to make his way toward the stairs at the back of the ship.

He cannot trust himself to stand here another moment without calling out to John in desperation, or doing something even more stupid and reckless, like attempting to climb the tangle of rigging himself just to get to him.

It’s a miracle he doesn’t trip going down the stairs in the darkness—he has no light, and even if he had, he scarcely sees the world in front of him, everything around him is a blur; his chest tight with emotion, a distant roaring in his ears.

When he reaches his room, he latches the door behind himself, and stands for he does not know how long with his forehead pressed against the door, his breathing shallow and erratic, waiting for the feeling to subside—the compulsion to tear back up the stairs and cry out to John through the darkness, to pull John down from his post and into his arms, just so he can feel John’s body under his hands, feel his heart beat, alive and steady beneath his palms.

He should feel better; he should feel reassured—having gotten such an unexpected piece of John cast down to him on the wind.

If John is singing that means he is alive and well, Sherlock should feel happy, he should feel relieved.

Instead, he feels worse.

Being in John’s presence—and yet so far from it—reminds Sherlock of everything he misses about John, so that the longing that had settled to a dull ache within him feels as though it’s been torn open again, like a wound that was partially healed.

It’s like sitting a starving man down in front of a banquet and then leading him away before he can begin eating, Sherlock thinks desperately, pressing his cheek against the cool wood of the door, feeling mad, feverish.

He can feel sweat crawling down the back of his neck and Sherlock does not know whether it is simply the heat of the tropical night or the fury of his emotions that is causing his body to feel as though it is lit up by a small furnace.

In a sudden burst of movement, Sherlock crosses the room to his bed, pulling off his jacket as he goes, tugging his neck cloth free in several sharp, frustrated jerks.

He strips himself of every last item of clothing, even the linen shirt he usually wears to sleep in, until he’s lying, fitful and naked in his narrow bunk, one arm thrown over his eyes, his chest rising and falling in desperation as he tries uselessly to quell the storm of emotions that feels as though it is assaulting him from all sides.

His longing is unbearable—it’s like a physical sickness, and he does not know what to do to make it stop.

Within minutes he can feel his limbs are coated slick with sweat, his curls sticking damp to the nape of his neck, and he begins to suspect it isn’t the heat at all, it’s simply the fire at the heart of Sherlock that is burning him up, his desire for John that burns brighter and brighter in his absence, until Sherlock fears it will consume him.
He slides his uninjured hand down over his belly, fingers tangling in the hair at his groin before he reaches to take himself in hand.

He needs something to make it stop—anything to distract himself from the fever in his brain, the longing that is devouring him from the inside out.

It comes as no surprise to him that he is already half-hard, and it takes only two rough strokes to make him fully erect.

The sweat on his palm helps slick his movements, and Sherlock pushes his head back onto the pillow, and thrusts up into his own fist, stretching his long body out as far as it will go, feeling the ache in every sore muscle as he does so, the pull, the tightness of it.

He thinks about John, watching him, kneeling beside him as he touches himself, pupils blown wide with arousal, one hot palm on Sherlock’s belly, feeling the fever in Sherlock’s body as he strokes.

“Look at you, you beauty. Show me how you’ve been missing me—show me what you’re feeling.”

Sherlock whimpers, quickening the pace of his strokes, imagining John’s calloused fingers sliding down to curl in the hair at the base of his cock, John’s hot mouth coming down to place a kiss against the corner of Sherlock’s parted lips.

“That’s right. Breathe for me, my beauty. Slowly now—in and out. Breathe through it.”

Sherlock makes a choked sound then, and he bites down hard on his lip to quell the keening cry that’s building in the base of his throat as he imagines John’s fingers coming to wrap around his own, guiding his strokes, his palm caressing the sensitive head of Sherlock’s cock.

Sherlock makes another stifled sound, hips stuttering upward.

“Come for me now, love. It’s alright. I’ve got you. Let it all out.”

And then Sherlock’s body is arching hard off the bed, head tipped back, hand tightening around the base of his cock as he comes, the finger of his other hand biting crescent moons into the soft skin of his upper thigh.

His hips jerk one final time and then he goes limp, his own breathing harsh and loud in his ears, the ghostly John of his imaginings suddenly, resolutely absent.

Sherlock wipes his sticky hand on the sheet, uses the corner of it to clean the rest of the mess off his belly and waits for the feeling of calm to settle over him, for the sensation of relief to quiet the frenzy of his pounding heart, but it does not come.

The hideous, clawing, wanting feeling is still there, but now he feels hollow too, as though someone has taken a surgical implement and scraped out his insides, leaving him aching and empty and lonelier than ever.

He cannot seem to summon up his ghostly John again. He reaches for him through the dark, for the imagined touch of his arms pulling Sherlock close, for some murmured word of assurance, but he finds nothing. Only silence.

Sherlock draws his sticky knees up against his chest, his torso vibrating with unhappiness, throat suddenly tight with misery.

The John of his imaginings suddenly feels completely alien from the real John who he heard
singing up in the foremast, singing about going from girl to girl, laughing with his messmate. That
John sounded so easy and carefree; didn’t sound as if he was missing Sherlock at all.

And then a horrifying thought occurs to Sherlock, comes creeping toward him through the
darkness like some pale, unwanted, nocturnal creature—what if the reason John hasn’t written back
by now is because he’s decided Sherlock isn’t worth the trouble? Or worse still, what if he never
considered Sherlock worth the trouble at all?

It’s been so long since he’s seen the real John, what if the John of his imaginings is just that—a
figment of his imagination?

No, Sherlock thinks, clamping his fingers over his ears. Shut up, shut up.

For one brief horrible moment, he wishes he could cut out the part of himself that feels so much for
John, like a wounded animal desperate to chew off the injured part of its body rather than continue
suffering.

He never should have gone up on deck—what a stupid, stupid idea.

The worst part is, even through the haze of his misery, he knows, if given the chance to go back,
he would do nothing differently. He would suffer an infinity of agony if it meant being able to hear
John’s voice again.

At that thought, into his head, unbidden, comes the voice of his brother, come the words he spoke
to Sherlock all those years ago when Sherlock stood over that red mound of earth, silently begging
every deity he’d ever heard of to take his own life in exchange for the one that had been lost.

I’ll do anything, Sherlock had pleaded with the air around him, with the grass shivering at his feet,
with the wind in the leaves above his head. Anything at all.

Mycroft’s voice had cut through Sherlock’s silent, desperate pleas, his words so matter of fact; his
voice cold and clean, like the incision of a very sharp blade.

All lives end. All hearts are broken. Caring is not an advantage, Sherlock.

Oh, how he had hated Mycroft in that moment. How useless were those words to him then, when it
was too late?

But he hadn’t listened, hadn’t taken his advice to heart after all. He had failed to learn his lesson.

And look where he had ended up.

Sherlock can see now that in his own cold, cruel way, it was Mycroft’s attempt to protect him, to
safeguard him against the pain of heartbreak, of loss, of feeling too much—a tendency that
Sherlock has always been especially vulnerable to, much as he pretends otherwise.

For the first time in Sherlock’s life he wonders if his brother wasn’t right after all.

Chapter End Notes

I don't even know how to thank you guys properly anymore, you're all so endlessly
wonderful. I don't deserve you!
So in lieu of thanks, I'll offer you some links.

Here is a link to the song John sings in this chapter sung by (you guessed it!) a warbly-voiced old man! So you know, imagine that melody, but with John's voice instead. :)

Here is a link to the first playlist of sailorlock music I made, and here is a link the second one. Here is a link to the pinterest board I made for this story which I try to frequently add to (mostly pictures of ships and Regency clothing and also the amazing fanart you guys continue to astound me with).

And for those of you interested in hearing my decidedly unprofessional but enthusiastic attempts at reading the first chapter of this story to you all (I one day would LOVE to do a podfic of the whole thing, once I learn how to do it properly), you can listen to it here!

Ok, I think that's all for now. Thanks for sticking with me on the long haul- the next chapter should be out MUCH MUCH SOONER as I am now enjoying a small break from school and already have a good chunk of the next part written.

Until then, I am sending you all lots of sea and summery love! <3
Chapter Twenty Seven

Chapter Summary

The plot thickens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherlock dreams of strange, dark music.

He dreams it wakens him from sleep; that he rises from his bed to follow the sound of it up through the darkness and into the moonlight on the deck of the ship.

The sound of it is low and resonant, the melody complicated, haunting, full of sadness.

At first Sherlock thinks it might be John singing but there is an otherworldly quality to the sound, a strangeness to the way the music seems to crawl inside his bones and pull at him, seems to be telling him something in a language he does not understand.

Despite the fact that it is night, the upper deck is strangely illuminated, its wooden surface polished smooth and gleaming, painted bone white in the light of the moon. The deck is cold under his bare feet, so cold it burns him. It feels like walking over ice, as if he’s walking on the surface of the moon itself.

He stands at the prow of the ship and looks down into the water.

The sirens have come out of the sea; it is they who are singing to him, and now that he is standing near to them, he can make out the words of their song.

“Come with us,” they sing in their lovely heavy voices.

Sherlock can see their white arms lifted to him, their fins flashing silver in the darkness; he can see where their long hair is threaded with pearls.

They are loveliness itself.

“Come with us, come with us.”

But Sherlock knows that if he does he will not come out of the water.

“Come with us,” they plead, their long hair mingling with the waves.

“I cannot,” Sherlock says, his fists going white-knuckled where he clutches the railing.

They churn beneath him in the water, tossing their fins.

“We know who your heart belongs to, Sherlock Holmes. We know you love the blue-eyed sailor.”

“Come with us.”
The spray from their splashing is laced with starlight.

“Come with us, come with us.”

The sea seems to ripple and bend around them, as their cries grow more urgent.

“If you come with us, we can save him,” they say to him.

“Save him from what?” Sherlock asks, surging forward in desperation.

Now there is sorrow in the song, so sharp that Sherlock feels it pierce his heart.

“If you do not come with us, we cannot save him.”

“Save him from what?” Sherlock cries, leaning over the railing so far he is one minute from plunging into the water. “Please!”

But they only laugh at him and then swim away. “Too late, Sherlock Holmes, too late, too late. You’ve lost your chance.”

The wake in the ocean they leave behind them shines like the trail of a dying star.

***

After this, Sherlock’s sleep is fitful, restless.

He wakes often in the night, ears attuned to the slightest sound outside his room, in the hopes it might be Billy bringing him word from John at last.

But every time he wakes, sitting upright in bed, heart pounding in his chest, straining his ears through the darkness, the only sound he hears is the monotonous creaking and groaning of the ship, the sound of the ship’s bell far up on deck, ringing out the hour.

He dreams he hears a knock against his door.

He bolts upright in the watercolor grey of early dawn, slips out of bed and crosses the room, dressed in nothing but the grimy sheet from his bed, certain that the sound he heard was real.

But when he opens the door it is onto an empty corridor.

Sherlock’s heart sinks into his belly.

The demon that plagued him in the dark last night crouches over him again.

It seems to wear his brother’s face.

Don’t you think, Brother Dear, it’s best to give up hoping for something that you know will not come to pass? Put all this behind you. Spare yourself the pain.

Sherlock ignores it, crossing back to his bed and tossing aside his sheet.

Has it ever occurred to you that he hasn’t written back because he doesn’t want to?

“If that’s true then how do you explain the note he sent me?” Sherlock hisses under his breath, desperate to silence the condescending voice inside his head.

He shuts his eyes and pictures John’s message, every word so familiar to him, so dear. He watches
himself trace the signature in his mind.

The Mycroft in his head sniffs dismissively.

*Is there really anything in it that contains proof of his feelings for you? He’s simply begging you to take care of yourself. I believe that’s what we call pity, not love, Brother Mine.*

Furious, terrified, Sherlock drops to his knees and crawls under his bed to drag out his violin case, fingers shaking as he flips open the clasps.

“You’re wrong,” he whispers savagely, under his breath. “You’re wrong, you’re wrong, you’re wrong.”

He pulls out the note; fingers trembling as he smooths it out and lets his eyes trail over the message again.

It is exactly as he remembers it.

He touches his fingertips to the words ‘my love’ as though his physical acknowledgment of the endearment will convince the Mycroft in his head.

The nasty voice is frustratingly silent—similar to the real Mycroft, Sherlock suspects this silence is meant to make a point of its own.

Absurdly, Sherlock feels tears burn the corners of his eyes.

He blinks them away, his mouth set.

“He called me ‘my love’,” he says to no one, “There,” he says, stabbing his finger against the words. “He wrote ‘with love.’ To me. The letter is addressed to me.”

*Ah, but the letter isn’t addressed to you, is it?*

Sherlock’s rage at this provocation is so severe he almost tears the letter under his hands.

He resists the urge to smash the nearest thing at hand against the wall of his cabin, which happens to be his violin—but only barely.

Instead, he leans forward on his hands and knees, pressing his forehead to the floor between his spread palms as if in supplication.

“Leave me alone, Mycroft,” he says through gritted teeth.

*Please,* he adds as a desperate afterthought.

Mercifully, this seems to have the desired effect.

Sherlock’s head is momentarily silent.

He pushes himself stiffly to his knees, realizing only now that he has been crouched naked, on all fours, on the floor of his cabin, arguing with someone who isn’t there.

Sherlock secures his violin again beneath his bed, but he doesn’t put the note back.

He keeps it, folded against his palm, as though he needs the physical weight of it to convince himself that it exists.
There’s no point trying to go back to sleep so Sherlock washes and dresses, feeling the sticky heat of the tropical day already settling itself over his skin like an unwanted embrace.

When he’s finished dressing, Sherlock tucks the note into the breast pocket of his waistcoat, the sharp edge of its folded corner a reassuring pressure against his chest.

He makes his way to breakfast, feeling over-sensitive and raw, all his senses sharp with worry from his strange and eerily vivid dreams.

*John is fine,* he tells himself. *I have proof that he is fine from just last night. Not twelve hours ago I heard that he was alive and well.*

He ignores the sting this thought sends through him.

Dreams are meaningless, just the heightened imaginings of his overactive brain.

At least, this is what he tells himself as he sits down to breakfast.

However, luck is with him in some small way this morning as Sherlock looks up from a half-hearted bite of porridge to see Miss Molly Hooper sitting down beside him with a smile on her face.

It’s one of her genuine smiles, broad and beaming; it makes her look ten years younger than she normally does, and it takes Sherlock only a moment to ascertain the reason for it.

“Good morning, Mr. Holmes,” Miss Hooper says, her smile growing more radiant as she settles her napkin into her lap.

“Where is your aunt?” Sherlock asks, so stunned by the old woman’s absence that he realizes he’s holding his spoon frozen comically in mid-air partway to his mouth.

Seeing the girl without her looming chaperone strikes such a difference in her demeanor it’s as though the sun has come out at last from behind a bank of sullen clouds.

“She is currently indisposed,” Miss Hooper says, managing to look only marginally less delighted than she did a moment before. It clearly requires great effort on her part. “She is still suffering from the headache she contracted yesterday afternoon. It’s the heat I expect.”

Although something about the quirk of Miss Hooper’s mouth tells Sherlock that she suspects the heat has nothing to do with it.

“The good news is,” Miss Hooper says as she pours herself a cup of the weak coffee that they serve at breakfast. “I believe Aunt Gertrude will not feel ready to return to general society until at least this afternoon, which means I may spend the morning however I choose.”

She beams at him again over the rim of her coffee cup and Sherlock finds himself staring back at her in blank surprise. Miss Hooper’s sudden freedom is so unprecedented Sherlock can scarcely believe it’s true.

“So what shall we do this morning, Mr. Holmes? I am entirely at your disposal.”

Even in the presence of Miss Hooper’s sunny mood, it’s difficult for Sherlock to formulate the appropriate response. He feels so alienated from her joy that speaking with her is like talking to someone standing a very long distance away.
“I’m afraid I do not know,” Sherlock manages at long last.

Miss Hooper suggests that they go for a walk up on deck after breakfast and Sherlock find himself nodding in mute agreement, swallowing down the lump of pain this suggestion brings suddenly into his throat.

There is no practical reason for Sherlock to avoid the upper deck during daylight hours; John’s mess will not be on duty, which means that Sherlock will not be putting any of their lives at risk, but still he almost turns the invitation down.

The thought of even standing where he did last night, hearing John’s voice carried down to him on the wind, fills Sherlock with a storm of conflicting emotions.

However, his terror at the prospect of being left alone again with his own thoughts is so real that he finds he cannot bring himself to say no. He also doesn’t think he could live with himself if he refused Miss Hooper this one chance at real company in her aunt’s absence.

Miss Hooper’s good humor does not dissipate as they leave the breakfast table. She keeps up a steady stream of cheery conversation as they make their way out of the passenger saloon, Sherlock offering one-word responses when he can.

For better or worse, she does not seem to notice Sherlock’s dismal mood. Or if she does, she does not comment on it, for which Sherlock is grateful. He does not know what he would say if she were to ask him the cause of it.

They stop by Miss Hooper’s rooms so that she can fetch her parasol and to Sherlock’s great surprise she re-emerges with another item, which she hands to him.

It is a wide-brimmed straw hat with a black band.

“Take this,” she says with a smile. “It will help keep the sun off of your face and it’s ever so much cooler than your usual hat.”

Sherlock tries to refuse but she presses it into his hands. “I insist. My uncle gave it to me when we left Portsmouth. He was so afraid of the tropical sun he gave it to me even when I reminded him it was a man’s hat. He’s a bit of an eccentric fellow.” Miss Hooper’s mouth softens at some memory, before she looks up again at Sherlock. “Please. You will be doing me a service if you take it. I assure you, I have no need of it.”

Sherlock takes it with a stammered word of thanks.

It is indeed a great deal cooler than Sherlock’s regular hat, the brim considerably wider so as to provider greater shade, and Sherlock is doubly grateful as they emerge from the gangway into the blazing heat of the sun on deck—not only for the hat itself, but also that Miss Hooper has enough tact not to mention the reason for it, which is surely the sunburn still glaringly evident on Sherlock’s tender cheeks.

The heat has not dissipated since they crossed the equator; if anything it has grown stronger as the ship has headed further south, and today is no exception.

The sky is a blinding blue above them, the sun a brilliant blaze of white as it climbs towards its zenith.

Sherlock resolutely avoids looking up at the sails and the rigging.
He knows, without having to look, that none of the sailors climbing up the shrouds, hanging from the yardarms, stationed in the fighting top, are John—and he cannot bear the cruel trick of seeing the flash of a sun-browned leg or shoulder and mistaking it for John.

However, even if he avoids turning his gaze aloft, Sherlock cannot stop the throb of despair that moves through him at the sight of the sun shining off the newly painted railings and bulwarks, bringing with it the memory of the last time he saw John, his laughing face, and the fondness in his gaze as he looked over at Sherlock.

He has not been up on deck in daylight since then, and looking around him now, it seems the crew has been hard at work, applying fresh paint to every inch of the deck. It gleams especially brightly today under the force of the morning sun.

Sherlock is so deep in his sudden fit of melancholy that he completely forgets he is with Miss Hooper, and it takes him a moment to realize that she has grown quiet beside him.

He glances over at her and sees a touch of sadness in her own face as she looks out over the water.

He feels compelled to apologize.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” he starts. “I’m not a very good companion today, I’m afraid.”

Miss Hooper offers him a smile. “Don’t be silly. You’re a marvelous companion.” She hesitates a moment then goes on to add. “Although that may be due to the fact that my standards for acceptable company are relatively low.”

Sherlock glances down at her, one eyebrow raised in quizzical amusement, to see Miss Hooper’s face immobilized with horror.

“I’m so sorry. That wasn’t—I didn’t mean…”

Sherlock’s mouth ticks up at the corner. “So essentially I’m a first rate companion simply for the fact that I’m not your Aunt?”

Miss Hooper laughs in obvious relief that Sherlock is not offended. “Yes. Yes, I would say that’s about the whole of it.”

They’ve come to a halt by the portside railing and Miss Hooper turns to rest her elbow on the rail, squinting out over the water and chewing on her bottom lip, as though deliberating.

She seems to make up her mind and takes a breath, careful not to look at Sherlock as she speaks.

“You do seem… preoccupied of late. Is there… is there something in particular that’s troubling you?”

Sherlock feels his heart constrict as he thinks of John and all his worry seems to pour over him anew.

For one desperate moment he thinks of telling Miss Hooper everything—about his fear and his misery and his longing, of his love for John and his terror at what might be happening to him at any given moment, his hatred of Anderson and what he’s done, his utter despair at being rendered so helpless to intervene—but even as he thinks it, he knows that he cannot.

It’s too much—too much that Sherlock does not know how to put into words—and much as he wants to trust her, he finds he still does not trust her enough to tell her the innermost secrets of his
He purses his lips together as he tries to think how to respond but before he has a chance to she intervenes.

“It’s all right if you’d rather not say,” she says in a rush. “I completely understand.”

Sherlock looks at her again and remembers suddenly the way he’s seen her look at Lieutenant Lestrade, how much it reminds him of the way John looks at him, and he realizes that she may well understand, even more than he knows.

This realization doesn’t change the fact that Sherlock still cannot bring himself to talk about it, but there is some comfort in the knowledge that he is perhaps not quite as isolated in his feelings as he previously thought.

“Well then, since we finally have the opportunity to speak together in private,” Miss Hooper continues, somewhat tentatively. “I thought I might tell you about what I remember from... from that night.” She pauses to glance around them quickly before lowering her voice. “The night of the party.”

Sherlock’s head flies up with sudden interest—of course, that had been the initial reason for his meeting with Miss Hooper.

“Yes,” he says, leaning marginally closer and still facing Miss Hooper, but letting his eyes circle the perimeter of his peripheral vision to ascertain that they are well out of anyone’s earshot.

Miss Hooper keeps her voice low, her parasol spinning at a leisurely pace against her shoulder. “Do you think it’s alright if we speak about it here?”

Sherlock nods cautiously, his eyes trained on the two officers on watch standing by the helm. “As long as we keep our voices down and our eyes alert for any unwanted participants, I don’t see why not.”

On the opposite side of the deck, the elderly Mr. and Mrs. Whitehall are taking the air, but they are a fair distance off and unlikely to come where Sherlock and Miss Hooper are standing, partially concealed by the shadow of the mizzenmast.

“I wanted to ask you,” Miss Hooper begins, voice still somewhat tentative. “What was it that made the Lieutenant so ill? Were you able to determine that it was...?”

Sherlock nods in answer to her unfinished thought.

“My—My friend, John Watson—” Sherlock forces himself to keep speaking through the sudden tightness in his throat. “He’s the one I went to that evening for help. He worked as a surgeon during his time in the navy. It was he who saved the Lieutenant’s life, and who confirmed to me that it was indeed poison that made the Lieutenant so ill, so suddenly.”

Miss Hooper’s face is grim, but she continues to twirl her parasol slowly at her shoulder, so as to give the impression that she and Sherlock are speaking of trivial matters.

She is indeed cleverer than he gave her credit for.

“Do you have any idea who might be responsible?”

Sherlock’s eyes perform another careful sweep of the surrounding deck before answering. “I’ve
spoken with Lestrade since then and he is unwilling to investigate the matter further for fear of negative repercussions. As you can imagine, he feels compelled to dissuade my further involvement as he fears in doing so I put my own life at risk.”

Miss Hooper nods again, her eyes shining slightly, no doubt in recognition of the valor of the Lieutenant’s sentiments in this regard.

Sherlock feels a twinge of sudden worry that Miss Hooper will be equally unwilling to speak with him now that she has learned of the Lieutenant’s wishes in the matter.

“I hope you understand that my unwillingness to respect his wishes is entirely a result of my desire to identify the culprit, so as to prevent further harm being done.”

Miss Hooper nods marginally again, lips pursed together, and Sherlock feels compelled to add a final clarification.

“I tell you this not to make you feel guilty for disregarding his wishes but to impress upon you just how important it is that you help me reconstruct a picture of what happened that night, as I am unable to ask the Lieutenant himself at this time.”

“I understand,” she says in a rush. “I’d like to do whatever I can to help.”

“Good, that’s good.” Sherlock takes a deep breath. “It is John’s belief that the dose was not intended to be lethal—he thinks the fatal amount was the result of sloppy workmanship; however, I have since come to believe otherwise, based on my suspicions as to the identity of the culprit.”

Miss Hooper leans in closer, her eyes stretched wide. “So you do have an idea about who’s responsible.”

Sherlock hesitates briefly, before deciding that to voice his suspicions aloud to Miss Hooper at this point will only serve to put the girl in danger. It would do more harm than good.

“None yet that I feel confident voicing aloud…”

Sherlock sees the flash of disappointment on her face.

“But that may change depending on what new information comes to light. Based on the speed with which he contracted symptoms, it is most likely that the Lieutenant imbibed whatever it was that made him ill sometime in the course of that evening. Did he eat or drink anything while the two of you were together?”

Miss Hooper shakes her head. “No. We danced two dances together and just as the third one was beginning I started to notice that something was wrong. He was clearly in pain and then very rapidly he lost all ability to even stand upright. That was when I found you.”

“What about before that? Did you happen to see him over the course of the evening before you danced together?”

Miss Hooper’s words are measured, careful. “I’ve been going over every detail of that night since it happened, in the hopes that some piece of what I saw might be helpful, and earlier in the evening, I did see the Lieutenant speaking with a group of officers, and a few passengers as well, when a steward brought over a tray of drinks.”

“What kind of drinks?”
“They were just glasses filled with punch.”

“Did Lestrade take one?”

“I saw him holding a glass a little later on, so he must have done.”

“Which steward was it who brought the tray? Was it Jameson?”

Miss Hooper shakes her head. “No, it wasn’t Jameson. I’ve never seen him before but some of the officers seemed to recognize him.”

“Which ones?”

“Lieutenant Deverall and Lieutenant Dimmock were the only two officers present when the drink tray was brought over. I only remember because Lieutenant Deverall made a joke about the fact that the man must be thrilled for the chance to leave the captain’s quarters, he keeps him so busy. So he must be the captain’s steward.”

Sherlock’s soft intake of breath makes Miss Hooper lift her head to look at him.

“Yes,” Sherlock says, more to himself than for Miss Hooper’s benefit. “Of course.”

If the captain weren’t in attendance that night, he would have needed someone to administer the poison on his behalf. Sherlock suspected he had at least one individual who he trusted enough to do his bidding; it makes perfect sense that one of these individuals would be his own steward.

The man would have had to know who the poison was intended for so as not to deliver the wrong glass to the wrong individual. Otherwise, the results could be disaster—

Sherlock’s head whips up with a sudden realization.

“You said Lieutenant Deverall and Lieutenant Dimmock were the only two officers present when the steward brought the drinks over—is that true? Or was Lieutenant Lestrade with them as well?”

Miss Hooper furrows her brow. “No,” she says slowly, as if discovering the significance of the words even as she speaks them. “No, you’re right. He wasn’t there when the steward brought the drinks over. It was only later that I saw him with a glass in his hand. I remember because he saw me looking at him across the room,” she says, her cheeks filling with color. “Just after taking a drink.”

“Who else was present in that group when the steward brought the drinks?”

Miss Hooper seems slightly taken aback by the intensity in Sherlock’s demeanor.

“I believe it was Lieutenants Deverall and Dimmock…”

No, no. Sherlock internally crosses them off the list of possibilities. Both officers are lower ranking than Lieutenant Lestrade. There would be no reason for the captain to have any interest in them.

“Colonel Jackson was with them, as well as that dour gentleman. The one who always wears the same grey frock coat… oh, I cannot think of his name.”

And there it is.

Sherlock can feel the satisfaction of the missing piece of information clicking into place as clearly as though it was a mechanism that had been missing a part. Sherlock almost smiles.
“His name is Mr. Knott.”

“Yes, that’s it! He left the party early, I recall, not long after the man came by with the tray of drinks. I saw him leave the dining room just before you and I started dancing.”

That’s it then. The poison was never intended for Lieutenant Lestrade. Somehow he must have gotten Knott’s glass by mistake. Or maybe it wasn’t a mistake at all…

Sherlock seizes Miss Hooper by the shoulders, completely forgetting any attempt at discretion in the excitement of his discovery.

“Did the steward stay long after he had delivered the drinks? Did each man take a glass?”

Miss Hooper stammers slightly in surprise. “I… I don’t recall. I don’t think he stayed long. I don’t remember him lingering anyway.”

The steward must have delivered the proper glass to Mr. Knott—surely the captain wouldn’t have an idiot in his employ. So how then, had the man managed to swap glasses with Lieutenant Lestrade?

Sherlock glances longingly up at the quarterdeck, wishing that he could simply ask the Lieutenant himself what happened.

But in some ways, it doesn’t matter. Sherlock is certain now that he knows whom the poison was meant for.

“Have you… discovered anything useful?” Miss Hooper asks, clearly puzzled over Sherlock’s response and dying to know more.

“Mmm.”

Sherlock’s mind is already worrying over the next set of questions that have arisen as a result of this new information. Why on earth would the captain have cause to poison Mr. Knott? And what does that have to do, if anything, with the proposition put to him by Mr. Ferguson?

Sherlock is so lost in the whirlwind of his thoughts that he almost forgets about Miss Hooper entirely.

“Mr. Holmes?”

Sherlock glances down to see a somewhat frustrated expression on her face. “I said, I think I’d better be getting back. Although my Aunt is indisposed, I wouldn’t put it past her to send out search parties for me if I’m missing for too long. That is… unless there’s anything more you’d like to tell me?”

Her gaze is hopeful and Sherlock feels a flash of something almost like guilt move through him before he says, “Ah… no. Thank you. That was most… enlightening. But I think it’s best if I keep my suspicions to myself for now, just for… for your own safety.”

This time, Sherlock does not miss the disappointment in her eyes. He has hurt her by refusing to confide in her—he can see it, clear as day—but he does not know what he could possibly say to make it better.

“Well,” she says, her tone suddenly brisk. “I really ought to be getting back.”
The smile she offers him before she drops into her curtsy is genuine but it is tinged now with sadness.

“I’m so glad I could be of some help.”

Sherlock nods briefly and he’s about to turn back toward the horizon to continue thinking when he realizes that she is probably expecting him to walk her back to her cabin.

“May I… escort you back?”

“No, no, it’s best if I return on my own anyway. That way I won’t have to deal with any unnecessary questions.”

She smiles again, but it is one of her thin smiles. It makes her look brittle somehow and Sherlock is flooded suddenly with regret that he cannot be more of the companion that he knows she needs.

“Good day to you, Mr. Holmes.”

And then with another brief curtsy, she has turned to make her way back toward the stairs.

Sherlock watches her leave feeling as though he has failed in some immense capacity.

Worse than that though is the very real awareness that he will probably do it again.

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Sherlock spends the rest of the morning staring out over the ocean, puzzling over the matter of Mr. Knott.

However, he has no great revelations and by the time he heads down below again for the midday meal, he realizes just how grateful he is for Miss Hooper’s gift to him of the straw hat as he has been out in the sun longer than he realized, so long that there is a fresh strip of burned skin along each wrist where his sleeves were pulled up as he leaned over the railing.

It takes a long time for his eyes to adjust to the dim light down below and as a result, Sherlock is more than a little caught off guard when a slight figure, hurrying down the corridor, runs directly into him.

Sherlock is holding his hat in his hand, and he almost drops it upon impact.

“Mister Holmes!” The hurrying figure gasps, and at the sound of his voice, Sherlock’s feels his heart turn over in his chest.

He does drop his hat then, in order to seize the boy by the arms.

“Billy!”

“I’ve something for you,” he cries, squirming slightly in Sherlock’s grip. “I’ve been lookin’ for you everywhere!”

Sherlock lets go of him immediately, blinking hard in an effort to clear his sun-starred eyes.

He drops down to one knee as Billy fishes through his coat pockets, partly to be on level with the boy, but mostly because his knees have turned to water.

“Oh Billy…” He does not even bother to hide the relief in his voice. “I cannot tell you how glad I
am to see you.”

Sherlock blinks hard again, terrified for one real moment that he is hallucinating—that the Billy he sees before him is just an apparition conjured by his sun-addled brain.

“There you are!” Billy thrusts something into his hands, and Sherlock feels his fingers close around a square of paper without really seeing it. “I was told the nature of its contents were sensitive and needed to be delivered with utmost urgency!”

Sherlock curls his fingers so tightly around the paper in his hands that he feels the wound in his palm throb.

“What else did he say?” His voice is a dry croak.

He shouldn’t be asking Billy this, kneeling in the middle of the corridor like a lovesick fool for anyone to see. But Sherlock doesn’t care. He couldn’t stop himself from acting this way even if he wanted to.

Besides, Sherlock reasons with himself. They’re all at luncheon anyway.

“He did tell me…” Billy glances up and down the corridor before stepping in close to Sherlock, his voice a cautious whisper. “He told me one word to tell you.”

“What was it?” Sherlock asks, feeling like his whole body has turned to crystal, and that the next words out of Billy’s mouth may well shatter him to pieces.

“He said to tell you, ‘Soon.’”

Sherlock is aware that he makes some kind of noise—that the noise must sound as though he is in pain—because the next thing he knows, Billy is holding him by the shoulders, asking him in a worried voice, “Are you alright, Mister Sherlock, sir? Mister Holmes?”

Sherlock tries to nod in answer; feels his own hands lift Billy’s off his shoulders as he struggles to rise to his feet.

“I’m fine,” he hears himself saying, although his voice sounds far away. “Perfectly fine.”

Billy does not seem to want to leave him in this state. “You sure?”

Sherlock nods again, and goes on nodding. “Yes,” he says. “Yes, I’m sure.”

He is standing now, and before Billy can walk away, Sherlock regains enough of his wits to ask him, “When can I find you? To give you my response? In an hour, where will you be?”

Billy’s look is apologetic. “I’m not rightly sure, Mister Sherlock, sir. It depends on a number of things.”

Sherlock feels a stab of panic at the realization that he might not be able to find Billy again today to deliver his response. He tugs at his neck cloth in agitation, fingers stilling as he’s struck with a sudden thought.

“Just a moment.” He reaches up with shaking fingers and pulls loose the cloth around his neck, folding it hurriedly, before pressing it into Billy’s hand. “Will you give him this?”

Billy looks slightly puzzled but he takes the folded length of cloth and tucks it dutifully out of sight into the pocket of his jacket.
“I will, sir.”

“Thank you,” Sherlock says, going weak with relief all over again that the boy didn’t question him over the gesture. Maybe he thinks it’s a hidden message of some kind, rather than the blatant expression of sentimentality that it is. “I’m sorry I’ve taken up so much of your time. I’m sure you have lots to do.”

Billy nods tightly, and moves to turn away, but before he does, he looks up at Sherlock, his young face very serious.

“What is it?” Sherlock asks.

“He misses you, sir,” Billy says, matter-of-factly. “He tries very hard to hide it but… I can see it in his face.”

Before Sherlock has a chance to fully process this, Billy is off and running again down the corridor, calling back over his shoulder. “I’ll try and find you later, if I can!”

And then he’s gone, retreating down the staircase at the end of the corridor and out of sight.

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Sherlock is not entirely sure how he gets himself back to his room.

Thankfully, he doesn’t have far to go; he was halfway down the corridor to his own cabin when Billy caught up with him, but he has no memory at all of how he came to be sitting on the edge of the bunk in his room, a piece of paper clutched so tightly in his hand that when at last he loosens his grip and looks down, he sees that the edges of it have left deep creases in the skin of his palm.

He looks at the paper in his hand and is not sure entirely how to proceed.

He wants to open it, of course he does; more than anything he wants to read what’s written there, but once he’s peeled the edges of the paper apart and read the words, it will be over, and he will be left waiting again, not knowing when next he will hear from John.

It’s irrational, he knows. But it seems that much of his rational behavior has fled in the wake of his acquaintance with John Watson. Indeed, Sherlock scarcely recognizes himself anymore. He seems to spend the majority of his waking hours on his hands and knees, pleading with imaginary deities and reasoning with voices in his own head.

Although to be fair, that isn’t drastically different from his experiences before.

Part of the reason his cousins accused him so often of being some kind of fey creature was largely due to cruelty, but also due in part to Sherlock’s tendency to dwell almost entirely in his own head, and to speak to those who did not appear to be really there.

He would often talk to himself rather than to those around him so lacking in anything worthwhile to say.

No, this isn’t a new development, even if it has been occurring more and more frequently in his time away from John, mostly because John is such a worthwhile companion that the hole left by his absence is an impossible one to fill.

Everything in his life now that John is in it is just… more.
Sherlock looks again at the paper in his hand, and feels his desire get the best of him. He cannot bear to open it, but he also cannot bear not to open it. This second desire is by the far the stronger of the two.

This still does not prevent him from pausing when he’s pulled apart the first fold, setting the half-opened paper down on the corner of the mattress, and walking around the room three times in an agitated circle with his hands pressed against his mouth.

He stands for a moment with his back against the door, looking at it from across the room in agitated uncertainty.

Then all at once, he crosses the room in two great strides and pulls the pages fully apart before he can stop himself.

Sherlock flattens the paper against his thigh and reads:

To My Moon,

How is it that a piece of paper with just a few lines of script can change the whole experience of a man? How is it that some ink marks on a page can make his whole body feel light? Can make his chest grow tight, his breathing funny? Make him want to sing?

Sherlock shut his eyes. Yes. That is how it feels. Leave it to John to know precisely how to put it into words.

Would you laugh at me if I told you that when I held that paper in my hands I had the most overwhelming urge to press it to my chest? To place my lips against it as if in doing so I might find you there—the ghost of your scent—as though the paper somehow held an imprint of you that I could touch?

No, Sherlock thinks, fingers clenched hard against his mouth as he reads, shaking his head. No, John, I would not laugh.

I could do none of these things when first I read your message, as there were too many people around, but know that later, when I am alone in my hammock, I will do just as I described if in some small way it will bring me closer to you.

Sherlock presses his fingers so hard against his mouth he fears his teeth will break the skin. He forces himself to stop reading, to shut his eyes, in order to let the force of this sentiment wash over him.

When he begins reading again, his eyes are wet.

I think of you constantly. You are there in everything I do. No matter the task, I manage to find some trace of you in it, and then I find the work goes quickly. I complete jobs without noticing I have finished them. Everyone is amazed by my industriousness. They have no idea that every task I finish, I finish faster thanks to you.

I watched the moon all last night and thought of you. No one ever seems to notice how glorious it is, how powerful. Did you know that it is the moon that causes the ocean’s tides? It is the moon that controls the movement of this vast and fearsome body of water that we are all subject to. And yet still they underestimate it. We are all of us, I think, at its mercy, and still, no one ever suspects the moon.
I’m sure you know this, my brilliant, my beautiful creature. I’m sure there are so many things that you know that I do not, so many things you could teach me.

Sherlock shakes his head; feels tears sting the corners of his eyes.

“No,” he whispers. “No, John. You are wrong.”

There are so many things I want to ask you, my love. So much I still don’t know about you, so many questions I would ask if you were here beside me. I hope one day I will have the chance to learn the answers to them all. Is it strange to say that even though we have only been apart for two days now it feels like a lifetime? It feels that way to me.

I am worrying about you. How are you filling your hours? How are you managing to keep that great brain of yours occupied? Tell me of your days, your nights, your thoughts, what you are dreaming of, how you lie when you sleep, anything, anything, my love, to give me a picture of how you spent the hours since last we spoke, to help me fill the absence, the silence that you left, the hole in my heart that every day grows larger being distant from your side.

Please. Write to me. I miss you so sometimes I fear my heart will break from wanting you.

With Love From,

Your Sun

Reaching the end of the note feels like strolling off a cliff into thin air. As if Sherlock had been walking along on an ordinary path only to look down all of a sudden and find that there is nothing anymore under his feet.

The vertigo he experiences, the plummeting sensation of dropping off into nothingness is only made better by returning to the beginning of the note and starting over again. The words are like lifelines to him, as long as he is reading them he is safe from the yawning void of emptiness that awaits him at its end.

He keeps this up for he does not know how long, until he has memorized every word of it, and long after that, until his eyes are dry and stinging and no longer threatening to overrun with tears.

At last, Sherlock lowers the paper, folds it up tightly into its original shape before tucking it into his breast pocket beside John’s first note. He is reassured by the presence of them both against his pounding heart.

Now that the sense of vertigo is beginning to recede, Sherlock is left with a feeling of awed disbelief at the evidence of how much John feels for him.

John’s first note was lovely, sweet even, full of tenderness, but there was an evenness to the sentiment expressed within. It felt calm, instilled with the faith that all would be right with the world again soon. Reading it was like seeing one of John’s reassuring smiles.

But this—this is something else entirely.

There is a hunger, a desperation welling up between the words in this letter that reminds Sherlock of the way John sometimes looks right before he throws a punch, the line of his jaw defined, the muscles in his shoulders tensed for action; it reminds Sherlock of the way John’s kisses felt when they were down in the orlop deck, a need behind them that Sherlock sensed John had been holding himself back from expressing, an urgency in the press of his fingers on Sherlock’s thighs where he held him up.
It is as though John’s control has slipped—as though whatever it was that was holding him back in the first message has finally snapped and he cannot stop the feelings pouring out of him, raw and enormous, almost incomprehensible to him in their depth.

Sherlock understands this perfectly. It is precisely how he has been feeling, torn open by his longing, terrified by the power of it, the immensity, afraid every moment that it will swallow him up completely; but to know now that John, too, is affected by the same feelings, to see evidence of it in the small, even letters of John’s neat hand—it makes Sherlock feel as though he’s falling and flying simultaneously.

Even John’s script looks more agitated this time—the letters are not so neat, the drips of ink between the words almost as frequent as the words themselves. Where did John even sit to write this? He has no desk. Did he do it at the board pulled down between the cannons during dinner, with his messmates laughing and drinking around him?

Sherlock feels a throb go through him at the thought of John, desperate for a moment of privacy in all those shouting, cursing, talking men. It never occurred to him to think that John would lack for privacy—he’s such a sociable man, always ready with an easy smile and a laugh; he clearly enjoys the company of others—but everyone needs privacy sometimes, even John.

Sherlock thinks suddenly of the space below the foredeck where John and the other sailors sleep. In the day time, most of the hammocks are strung up and stowed away to make space for other activities, but at night, the lines of hammocks are crowded so close together there is scarce enough room between them for the men to climb in and out.

As much as Sherlock despairs over the grey and cramped confines of his own cabin, the paper thinness of the walls, at least he has four walls to keep out some of the noise, the faces of the other passengers. John has no such luxury. As far as Sherlock can tell there is never a moment in John’s day, waking or sleeping, when he is by himself.

All this time, Sherlock has envied John, has imagined boredom is a thing that John has never known, that he never has a chance to miss Sherlock because he’s kept so busy, thanks to the constant presence of his companions he is never subject to the misery of his own longing, never made a prisoner of his own unhappy thoughts.

However, Sherlock is finally beginning to understand in a real way, the unique hell of John’s experience—overworked, and under slept, always in the company of others; his own days and hours are not even his own.

Sherlock has been so caught up in the drama of his own suffering that he hasn’t really considered what this must be like for John.

If John were really suffering, how awful would it be for him to have to constantly try and act otherwise?

He thinks suddenly of Billy’s last words to him. ‘He tries very hard to hide it but... I can see it in his face.’

How much must John be missing Sherlock if even Billy can see evidence of it behind John’s sunny smiles?

With a tense feeling in his stomach, Sherlock thinks back to the song he heard John singing last night on deck. From afar, it seemed to Sherlock that nothing at all was wrong, that John was as jovial and light-hearted as ever, but John has the double burden of feeling what he’s feeling and
also being charged with hiding it.

Thinking back over the extreme brevity of his first note, Sherlock feels guilt pool sharply in his chest. How disappointing it must have been for John to get that folded paper out of Billy’s hands, to wait and wait until he had a moment to himself, only to see once he’d opened it, how short it was, just a handful of lines; it would have taken him no more than a few seconds to read the entirety of the message.

And yet, he had written Sherlock back, almost an entire page, far more than Sherlock deserved after what he’d sent.

Even the letter-writing between them, it seems, bears witness to John’s endless patience, his generosity, his willingness to put Sherlock first.

Sherlock stands with a sudden determined movement and makes his way over to his desk.

His heart is pounding hard in the column of his throat, his cheeks burning with the force of his disappointment in himself.

I will make it up to you, John, he thinks, as he tugs the ink well toward him. I will give you something worth your while.

But to his endless frustration, it turns out that Sherlock’s desire to write a proper response to John makes it no easier to summon the words he needs.

He is careful this time not to use either his or John’s names.

Somehow this makes the composition of the message all the more difficult for him. When John calls him his Moon, it feels poetic, meaningful. Somehow when Sherlock addresses John as ‘Sun,’ it makes him feel foolish, makes him squirm in his chair in self-conscious embarrassment.

But he copies John’s address, tries not to let his own embarrassment lead to his making the same mistake again.

A Message for the Sun,

I am trying, as per your instructions, to make it through each day without you. Knowing that you are faced with a similar burden, that you bear it bravely in the face of far greater challenges than I, makes it easier, but still I find it difficult. I have no way with words like you do. I cannot easily express the things I feel; no matter how strongly I feel them. Indeed, it seems the stronger the feeling, the more difficult it is for me to express it.

Sherlock sits back from the paper to read over what he has written. The paragraph that cost him what feels like a titanic amount of effort is no more than a few lines; conveys next to nothing.

Sherlock scrubs a hand over his face in frustration, before hunching back over the page again.

I have been meeting with Miss Hooper in an effort to pass the time. She is more tolerable company than I previously believed. I will tell you of the nature of our conversations when next we meet.

What else? What else can he tell John that will give him a sense of the texture of his days?

Sherlock thinks about his dream from the previous night, the thin, eerie sound of the sirens’ singing; he thinks about the silver of the moonlight where it caught in their swirling hair, how it seemed to move with a life of its own.
The dream had been so vivid. He still cannot shake the feeling of it, as though someone is standing just beyond the corner of his vision but when he turns his eyes to look he finds nothing there.

He cannot tell John about it; John will worry if Sherlock tells him he is dreaming of faeries luring him into the sea.

What else is there to tell?

Sherlock has done nothing in the last two days save for mope and wander the corridors of the ship thinking of John.

At this realization, Sherlock is overwhelmed once again by the pitiful nature of his current existence.

Then he remembers fleetingly of his imagined conversation with the John in his head two nights ago, and feels his cheeks grow warm. He wouldn’t dare to write it, but he needs to give John something else and he cannot think of anything else to say.

*I have been doing my—*

Sherlock hesitates; he does not know what he can say that will be delicate enough to be discreet but meaningful enough that John will understand.

He worries his quill against the corner of his lip, and then writes:

—*doing my exercises, although perhaps not precisely the kind you had in mind. It's something else you taught me in this last week particularly. I endeavored to practice on my own and the results would have been completely disappointing had I not thought of you during the proceedings. It helped immensely to think of you—*

Now Sherlock’s face is flaming red. He can feel his blush even underneath his sunburn, but he re-wets his pen and carries on writing.

—*although I wished you could have been with me to help. I find it goes so much better when you are there. This is true of every task I’ve undertaken by your side, but this activity especially is greatly improved by your presence.*

Sherlock wonders if human skin can actually catch fire.

He hastens to end the letter before he can regret it more than he already does.

*I miss you more than I can say. Please—*

Sherlock hesitates here again. Surely the one word message passed on from Billy can only mean one thing—that John is working to come up with a way for the two of them to meet, that there may be some opportunity that will shortly present itself. Perhaps some new information came to light just before he passed the message onto Billy.

Still, he does not want to ask for something John cannot give. He knows him too well. John will not want to disappoint him.

Sherlock chews his lip, caught in indecision.

He lowers his head.

*Please tell me if there is anything I might to do to make it possible for us to see each other. I will do*
anything. Just tell me what I need to do.

I await your next letter anxiously.

Your,

Moon

He feels foolish signing the letter that way but he knows it would pose too great a risk for him to sign with his initials.

It’s not as long as Sherlock would like but he folds it and seals it before he can deliberate further. If he hurries, there’s a chance he just might be able to catch Billy before the afternoon is over, and he wants to get his response to John as soon as possible.

He begins his search by combing the corridors of the passenger cabins but he finds no trace of Billy there. The midday meal is over and judging by the lazy hum infiltrating the passageway the majority of the passengers have returned to their rooms and are warding off the worst of the late afternoon heat in the darkness of their respective cabins.

Next he heads up on deck, but here, too, he is disappointed.

Other than the sailors up in the rigging and those doing work on deck, the only other men around are a team of lieutenants deep in conversation at the helm.

Sherlock circles the perimeter of the deck once to be sure, looking in every tucked away corner (Billy is frequently doing jobs in places where no one else fits), and even down over the sides of the ship, but he finds no sign of the small, brown-haired boy.

Sherlock pauses by the main mast, worrying at his lip as he decides what to do next, feeling frustration rising in him.

He does not want to give up so soon but he’s now searched all the areas onboard which he knows he has free access to—going down below decks through the main hatch or the fore hatch brings Sherlock to somewhat forbidden territory—these are the parts of the ship that he has only visited while in John’s company.

Although, now that he thinks about it, the upper and lower gun decks in the middle of the ship are by no means prohibited to him. It’s simply that passengers have no reason to spend anytime in these parts of the ship. The forecastle and all the spaces below deck at the front of the ship are exclusively the sailors’ domain, but if Sherlock sticks to the middle of the ship, then he certainly isn’t breaking any rules.

Sherlock casts his eyes toward the stairs leading down into the main hatch. He’s gone down this way before—when Lieutenant Lestrade wished to speak with him in private, he had taken Sherlock down these stairs to stand in the shadow of the bulwarks between the cannons on the gun deck.

There’s a chance that Billy might be performing some errand or another down on one of these decks.

This makes Sherlock’s mind up.

Even if Billy isn’t down there now, at least Sherlock will have the satisfaction of knowing he looked everywhere he could. Besides, he cannot bear the thought of returning to his room again only to be subject to another endless round of waiting. Sherlock is sick of waiting.
He descends into the darkness with more caution than is probably necessary, pausing at the bottom of the stairs as he waits for his eyes to adjust.

From where he’s standing facing the front of the ship, he can see the bulk of the galley further down the deck, can hear the clatter of ironware and the hiss of steam where John’s friend Stamford is likely busy preparing the sailors’ evening meal.

As his eyes begin to register the shapes around him, Sherlock sees a group of sailors sitting and playing cards at a table halfway down on the starboard side of the ship—and another group, closer to him, talking and drinking on the larboard side. He recognizes some of the sailors but none of them are part of John’s mess.

One of the sailors sitting further down lifts his head to look Sherlock’s way and before the other man can complete the gesture, Sherlock takes two hasty steps backwards, melting into the shadows between the bulwarks on the sides of the ship.

It hadn’t occurred to Sherlock to think what he would say if he encountered anyone who wasn’t Billy on his search below decks, and it suddenly feels crucial that he have an explanation ready on hand, to account for his presence in this part of the ship.

It’s one thing to see sailors up on deck where passengers often spend their time, but it’s another matter entirely to be wandering the ship without a purpose.

Sherlock’s heart is pounding hard. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.

Even if he doesn’t see any members of John’s mess, he isn’t likely to be welcome if he’s seen creeping around where he doesn’t belong. Some of them may have taken a liking to him thanks to John’s laudatory speech the night of the party, but he imagines not all of them are so easily taken in.

And then an even more unpleasant thought occurs to him—how much do the other sailors know about Anderson’s decision to become their new mess officer? If Anderson is behaving anything like Sherlock imagines he is in order to make John’s life a living misery, the other men in John’s company must be getting the same treatment.

How many of them are aware that the blame for their newfound suffering can be placed squarely on Sherlock’s shoulders? And how many of them wouldn’t love the chance to distribute a little bit of justice if given the opportunity?

Sherlock shuts his eyes briefly in the darkness, regretting the stupidity of his rash decision.

“Did you see that?”

“What?”

Sherlock can’t see the men from where he’s hiding now but he can hear their voices clearly enough.

“Thought I saw somebody at the bottom of the stairs.”

“That’s because you’ve had too much grog, Dimwit. It’ll make ya see all kinds of lovely apparitions.”

“Oye! Knock it off!”
Sherlock hears laughter followed by the sounds of a brief scuffle.

“It looked like that dark-haired passenger Watson’s so fond of.”

“The pretty one with the violin?”

“That’s it.”

“Haven’t seen much of him around—used to follow Watson around like he was his bleedin’ shadow.”

“I heard they had a falling out.”

“Naww, didn’t you hear? It’s Anderson in charge of Watson’s mess now. He made some kind of prohibition against ‘im—said if he caught the lad talking to any of the sailors they’d get the strap.”

“Well, I bet Watson’s relieved to be rid of him.”

“I don’t know… I wouldn’t say no for a turn to plough that one’s backside. He might not be a lass but if you take him from behind what with those pretty curls it’d be easy enough to imagine otherwise.”

The men laugh in response to this.

Sherlock’s cheeks burn in the darkness, horror rolling through him, making him feel suddenly sick.

“Well, we’ll all have a chance soon enough for some finer company.”

“That’s right—if the captain doesn’t break the ship in two tryin’ to get us there.”

“Break us in two more like.”

“Why’s he so eager to make port, d’you reckon?”

“Who knows. Captains all make seedy deals—this one’s seedy as they come, worse maybe. There was bad talk of him when we left Portsmouth. You heard some of it. Probably he’s got some smuggling on the side. You know how they get when they’ve got hot stuff in the hold. Antsy to get rid of it.”

“Either way, Watson’s lad is gonna be in fer a nasty shock when we reach port. You know Watson—he’s got girls in every harbor round the globe. I reckon Rio’s no different.”

“Maybe you can warm his bed, Sawyer, in ole Johnny’s absence.”

The men guffaw again and Sherlock doesn’t care if he’s seen at this point, he cannot stand to listen to another word. He feels hot all over; his skin too tight—his ears are full of a buzzing sound. He makes to bolt for the ladder when he hears the sound of voices coming up from down below.

He freezes in his hiding place in order to wait for them to pass.

Two sailors emerge at the top of the stairs from the deck below—one a lean and sinewy sailor whose name Sherlock does not know; his dingy hair is tied into a tail at the back of his neck, and he’s missing the front row of his teeth, gums stained black from chewing tobacco.

The other sailor, Sherlock sees with dawning horror, is Stevens.
Sherlock leans as far back as he can into the dark alcove, hunching his body hard against the beams at his back. Never has he been so grateful for the lack of light below decks. The shadows where he’s crouched are profound; however, it wouldn’t stop someone from seeing him if they turned their gaze in his direction and really looked.

To Sherlock’s immense relief, the two sailors do not linger at the top of the stairs.

The sailors seated nearby call out in greeting.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in.”

Stevens and the other sailor leave Sherlock’s line of sight—he can hear their footsteps as they approach the table where their mates are sitting.

“Thought you were meant to be workin’ the pumps until eight bells.”

Sherlock hears Stevens’ rough-voiced reply as he takes a seat among them. “We was but thanks to our dear Midshipman Anderson we got relieved early. Watson’s team’s workin’ double again today.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

Sherlock hears the sounds of pewter cups clinking together, but another sailor speaks over the congratulatory chuckling.

“I don’t like it. It ain’t right makin’ them work double shifts all because of some passenger interferin’. It ain’t their fault if he’s always hanging around.”

“Whatever the reason, looks like Anderson’s set on punishin’ John Watson, and that means punishin’ the whole mess along with him.”

“It ain’t right.” Sherlock can hear the man’s disapproval clear in his voice; can picture him shaking his head. “I don’t like it.”

“Well, it did stop him from hangin’ around all the time, didn’t it?”

“Don’t be so sure. Simpson here says he thought he saw someone come down the stairs earlier looked just like ‘im.”

“Is that so?” The query comes from Stevens.

Sherlock’s heart is pounding so hard in his throat he is certain they will hear it halfway down the deck.

*Please.*

He does not even know whose mercy he is begging for but Sherlock’s mind resounds with one single request.

“When was that then?”

*Please no.*

“Oh, just before you come up.”

Sherlock hears the scrape of a bench being pushed back as one of the sailors rises to his feet, then
the sound of footsteps, slow and deliberate, making their way back toward the stairs.

No. No no no no.

Shoulders still pressed against the wood at his back, Sherlock slides until his knees hit the floor, and then he turns, shrinking his body down as small as it will go in order to hide himself from view.

“Just at the bottom of the stairs, you said?”

Nonononono.

“Yeah, just there.”

The footsteps pause directly in front of Sherlock.

Sherlock does not move; he does not breathe. His face is turned away, pressed in against the damp and splintered wood. He’s wearing a dark jacket. Maybe Stevens has bad eyes, maybe he won’t see him, maybe if he is lucky—

“Well, well, well. Look what we have here.”

And then there’s a hand fisting roughly in the back of Sherlock’s jacket hauling him to his feet, dragging him out into the light.

“Looks like I found a rat.”

Chapter End Notes

I am very, very sorry to do this to you all, but sometimes an author just has to exercise their right to use a good-old fashioned cliffhanger.

If it’s any consolation to you, I can tell you that I have the bulk of the next chapter already written, so it shouldn’t be more than a week before I post the next part.

Additional thanks this chapter to the lovely hightimeswithhiddles, for the detail of Sherlock sending his neck cloth to John. I had originally planned something like that but with John sending an item of clothing to Sherlock, but she posted a gorgeous little OFD head canon on tumblr of sailor John in his bunk, clutching Sherlock’s neck scarf while they are apart, and I couldn’t get the image out of my head. So thank you very much for letting me use it. ☺

Oh, also, the hat that Molly gives to Sherlock in this chapter was purely a result of me one day, out of nowhere, picturing tiny OFD Sherlock walking the decks wearing one of these and I just couldn’t get the image out of my head.

Oh! And one final thing! I had a lot of fun last night drawing Sherlock the way he would have looked just before he left for the voyage in this story, before he met John, and he came out looking absolutely filled with the purest, petal rage. You can see him here.

Thank you for being the best set of readers any writer could ever ask for. You all fill
my life with joy.
Chapter Twenty Eight

Chapter Summary

"A calm sea does not a skilled sailor make."

Chapter Notes

Warnings this chapter for threats of sexual violence (but nothing more graphic than what you've seen so far).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For a few terrifying heartbeats, Sherlock is completely immobilized by fear.

But as he feels Stevens’ fist close around the back of his neck, panic explodes within him, shocking him back to life, and then he’s thrashing as hard as he can to free himself from Steven’s grasp.

However, before Sherlock has a chance to lash out with his fists, Stevens has seized Sherlock’s arms with his free hand and pinned them against his back.

It’s alarming how easily he manages this; how futile are Sherlock’s struggles to twist free of his grip.

It is in this undignified position that Stevens half-carries, half-drags Sherlock toward the table where the other sailors sit.

“Seems like someone’s been spyin’ on us, lads.”

“I was not spying!” Sherlock gasps, his fury rising momentarily to blot out his fear.

“Oh, were you not? Hidin’ in a dark corner, listenin’ to other folks’ conversations? Sounds a lot like spyn’ to me.”

Sherlock tries again to break free of Stevens’ hold on him to absolutely no avail.

“Let go of me!”

“You know you’re not supposed to be talkin’ to sailors.” Stevens says, his fist tightening alarmingly on the back of Sherlock’s neck. “So what are you doin’ down here, little rat?”

“Let go of me,” Sherlock snarls, refusing to be intimidated by this man’s show of brute strength, no matter how terrified he feels, how easily he knows Stevens could snap his neck.

“Oye, Stevens, put him down. I’m sure the lad meant no harm.”

Stevens lets go of the back of Sherlock’s jacket, and Sherlock staggers away from him, red-faced, stumbling.
He only just manages to right himself before falling over.

But before he can completely clear the other man’s reach, Stevens crowds in close, and it’s only now that Sherlock realizes just how tall he is.

Sherlock himself is quite tall but the sullen-faced sailor seems to tower over him, his dark brows pulled together in a sneer as he lowers his face down close to Sherlock’s.

“You tryin’ to get your sailor friends in trouble, is that it? You want to see them get the strap?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer; he yanks his jacket back into place, all too aware of the tiny folded square of paper in his waistcoat pocket just above his pounding heart.

“Oh was you here spyin’ on somebody else’s behalf? The captain perhaps?”

Sherlock refuses to respond; he’s concentrating on edging his way backward toward the stairs but he spares a brief moment to thank whatever deities might be listening that Stevens is apparently far stupider than he even looks.

Unfortunately, stupid as he may be, Stevens is surprisingly quick despite his size, and it’s only a matter of two deft movements before Stevens is standing between Sherlock and the stairs, effectively blocking his path.

Sherlock pushes his shoulders back and lifts his chin, his fury making him reckless.

“Let me by.”

“I don’t think I will until you tell us what you was doin’ skulkin’ back there like a filthy rat.”

The other sailors are watching this exchange with mild curiosity; they’re probably as eager as Stevens is to learn what Sherlock was doing in this part of the ship.

“I don’t have to tell you anything,” Sherlock snaps.

It’s amazing how much less frightened he feels now that Stevens’ meaty fist is no longer wrapped around the back of his neck.

At the sight of Stevens looming over him, tensing his thickly muscled arms in threat, Sherlock feels fury lance through him.

Sherlock *hates* stupid people, but what he hates infinitely more are stupid people who think they can use violence to get what they want.

And then, Sherlock does something that in retrospect, he realizes was maybe ill advised.

Sherlock pushes his shoulders back again to raise himself up to his full height, leveling Stevens with the coldest look he can manage.

“If you endeavored to use more than a *fraction* of your already severely limited intelligence then you might be able to work it out for yourself. Then again, I’ve known invertebrates that are cleverer then you so perhaps that’s a bit of a stretch.”

Stevens’ fist flies out and wraps around Sherlock’s throat.

One of the sailors sitting and watching the exchange calls out in alarm. “Stevens!”
Sherlock reaches up to try and tug the other man’s hand away but his efforts are as ineffectual as if he were a fly circling Stevens’ head.

The other man’s forearm is as thick as Sherlock’s neck. His grip is so strong Sherlock can feel the blood beating under the clench of Stevens’ fingers, and Sherlock feels a flare of real fear flicker through him as his airways begin to constrict.

“You wanna watch what comes out of that pretty mouth of yours,” Stevens sneers, face twisted with vicious intent. “I’d hate to have to ruin it.”

Sherlock cannot draw in air; his fingers pull at Stevens arm to no avail.

“Stevens, put the boy down for God’s sake! He can’t well answer you with your fist around his throat.”

With a curl of his lip, Stevens releases him and Sherlock falls to the ground with all the elegance of a sack of flour.

Stevens bends low over him, his voice hard with malice. “My patience is about used up, so unless you want me to tell our friend the Midshipman about seeing you down here, I suggest you tell me what it was you were up to.”

Sherlock scrambles to his feet, still struggling to catch his breath.

He glares hard at Stevens, one hand on his bruised throat.

It takes all of his willpower not to deliver a cutting follow-up to his previous attack on Stevens’ intelligence.

Sherlock bites his tongue.

“I was just… looking for someone, that’s all.”

Stevens drops his face down low into Sherlock’s face, forcing him to take a step backwards. “And who was it you was lookin’ for?”

“Aww, lay off him Stevens, he was obviously just lookin’ for Watson.”

“Is that so?”

Stevens’ eyes flicker back and forth between Sherlock’s own before crawling down the length of his body in a decidedly proprietary way.

Sherlock watches the corner of his lip curl up in sudden interest and feels revulsion fill him.

“Gettin’ lonely are you?”

Sherlock takes another step backward in the direction of the stairs.

“You know you don’t need John Watson for that,” Stevens says, the cold look in his eyes glittering with sudden malicious humor. Then he raises his voice so the others can hear. “I’m sure any number of us would be happy to help you out there, wouldn’t we lads?”

Some of the men snicker and Sherlock feels his face go pale with fury.

“I know exactly what you need,” Stevens says, hand dropping between his legs in a sudden
unbelievably crass gesture.

Sherlock looks away in horror.

“A good hard fuck would take the wind right outta yer sails. It’d keep that pretty mouth of yours shut for a while too, I reckon.”

Sherlock hears the sound of laughter; feels his cheeks grow splotchy with a mixture of embarrassment and rage, and before Stevens can say another word, Sherlock is darting around him and bolting for the stairs.

To his profound relief, Stevens does not follow him, but Sherlock hears the sound of his voice calling after Sherlock.

“That’s right, run away, little rat! I’ll let you go this time but if I catch you skulking down here again….”

Stevens must make some accompanying lewd gesture because Sherlock hears another roar of laughter in response and he almost trips in his haste to make it up the stairs.

He does not stop to look back, does not stop running until he’s made his way back across the upper deck and down the stairs again into the passengers’ quarters.

***

Sherlock does not know how long he spends in his room, pacing back and forth over the narrow space between his bed and the wall, his entire body shaking with rage and some other emotion that he refuses to examine properly, some dark and squirming feeling that he is afraid to pull out into the light for fear of what it will reveal to him.

He cannot decide whom he’s more furious with—himself for being stupid enough to stroll into territory where he’s so decidedly unwelcome in broad daylight, or Stevens for finding him, for tormenting him like an insect he found under a rock that he plans to crush.

But what is perhaps more infuriating to him than anything else is the undeniable reality of his own helplessness, his total inability to defend himself against someone larger than himself.

Sherlock hates feeling helpless, feeling weak. He’s spent half his life feeling this way, but never has he felt more stripped of all agency than with Stevens’ fist wrapped around his throat.

It was brutally clear to him in that moment how powerless he was to stop Stevens from crushing all the air from his lungs with one clench of his fingers.

Sherlock runs his fingers over his sore windpipe, halting momentarilly in his panicked pacing as a frightening thought occurs to him.

He hopes that the grip of the other man’s hand will not leave a bruise because if it does, how on earth is he going to explain it to John? He cannot tell John what happened, what Stevens did, for if he does, Sherlock knows that John’s rage will be beyond imagining.

At the thought of John, Sherlock feels his knees give out beneath him.

He drops down onto the edge of his bed, his mind awash with a sudden storm of worry.

There were maybe half a dozen sailors present when Stevens dragged Sherlock out of his hiding
place—how many of them would be willing to tell Anderson what they had seen? Or even if they
don’t tell the midshipman directly, Sherlock knows sailors and their love of gossip—word will
have gotten around the whole ship by now that Sherlock Holmes was caught creeping on the gun
deck and was knocked around by Stevens like a mouse discovered by a cat.

He didn’t actually speak to any members of John’s mess—Stevens is part of the same watch but
he’s on a different mess which means he’s under the command of a different midshipman—so
**technically** Sherlock did not break Anderson’s rule. But would that matter to Anderson if he heard
that Sherlock had been found down on the gun deck presumably looking for John?

And worse still, even if Anderson doesn’t do anything about it, there’s likely no way now to stop
John from hearing that Stevens was the one who found Sherlock.

What will John do when he finds out? Will he be able to stop himself from beating Stevens to a
bloody pulp, as Sherlock knows he will want to do, as soon as he learns what happened?

He thinks of John’s words to him, all those nights ago—in a time that now feels like another life—
when John told Sherlock the reason for the cut on his cheek, when he’d said to Sherlock with fire
in his eyes that he would kill any man who dared to cause Sherlock harm.

John already has a vendetta against Stevens for the things he’s said—how will he be able to
contain his rage when he hears that Stevens threatened Sherlock, this time not just verbally but
physically as well?

Sherlock drags his fingers through his hair, teeth clenched in agitation.

*Why?* why had he let himself go down into that part of the ship? Of all of the ill-advised decisions
Sherlock has made in his life, this one may well have been the worst.

It occurs to Sherlock only now how purposeless the whole endeavor was. His sole reason for doing
so was to find Billy, in order to give Billy his note—and he failed in this errand, miserably.

Remembering it now, Sherlock groans as he pulls the folded paper out from his jacket pocket.

All that risk had been for nothing.

He cradles his head in his hands, the folded message still clenched beneath his fingers, and against
his better judgment he lets his mind probe down into the deepest, darkest worry that has arisen in
wake of the incident with Stevens.

Now that his rage has finally begun to cool, Sherlock realizes that what’s left behind is a vast, ugly
quantity of fear. Discovering it now is not unlike sifting through the wreckage of a fire once the
flames have died down, or peeling back the lacerated skin of a fresh wound to examine the depth
of the cut underneath.

His inability to defend himself has shaken Sherlock to the core. What’s to stop Stevens—or any
number of disgruntled sailors who probably feel personally inconvenienced thanks to Sherlock’s
behavior—from approaching him and beating him bloody beneath their fists. Or worse…

Here Sherlock’s mind resists.

No. He will not think on Stevens’ final threats, on the lewd curl to his mouth as his eyes traced the
length of Sherlock’s frame, on the conversation he overheard before Stevens and his companion
joined the group, the flippant way they’d talked about bedding Sherlock like some two-bit whore
lifting her skirt in an alleyway.
No, thinking about it won’t do him any good. It will only make him feel more afraid, and Sherlock
certainly doesn’t need to feel any more afraid than he already is.

What he needs is to do something about it, to make sure he can prevent it from happening next
time. He needs to be able to fight back.

Sherlock thinks longingly of his boxing lessons with John; on just how long it’s been since they
had a chance to practice. He’s been getting better, John has said so, but he’s still nowhere near
ready to hold his own in a fight.

In lieu of a fighting lesson with John, Sherlock does the next best thing.

He spends the remainder of the afternoon running through his strength-training exercises, teeth
gritted hard against the pain as he pushes himself harder than he has ever dared to.

Every time he considers stopping, he thinks of the threat in Stevens’ eyes as he stared Sherlock
down, and then it’s easy to redouble his efforts, to work through the pain until his body simply
refuses to cooperate anymore.

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Sherlock is so worn out from his exhaustive regimen of exercises that he almost does not go to
dinner. His body is so sore that lifting himself off the bed seems an insurmountable feat and he’s
half-tempted to simply fall asleep with his clothes on where he lies, splayed out on top of his dingy
blankets, one arm dangling over the side of the mattress.

However, it is his worry over John that finally drives him from the bed, and into fresh clothes.

If any incident has transpired between John and Stevens, or even Anderson and the rest of John’s
mess, Sherlock is sure that the passengers will have heard about it by now and the supper table
will be alight with gossip.

Still, getting into his clothes and washing his face, simple as those tasks may be in theory, prove a
challenge as every move Sherlock makes sends pain jarring through his over-taxed muscles.

There is a chance he may have overdone it this time.

His neck is throbbing on top of everything else and to Sherlock’s dismay, when he goes to inspect it
in the mirror above his desk, he discovers that the bruises left by Stevens’ fist are impossible to
ignore.

There are several dark and cruel-looking indents standing out with glaring vividness against the
pale skin of Sherlock’s throat, obscuring the fading marks left there by John’s mouth what now
feels like a lifetime ago.

Sherlock feels a surge of some painful emotion move through him at the thought and he wraps the
clean neck cloth around his throat so he does not have to look at it.

Thank god for high-collars and cravats.

Sherlock does not know what he would do otherwise.

Supper is a dull affair, but to Sherlock’s profound relief, he hears no news of further incidents
onboard the ship. All the talk that evening is of the banking crisis back in London that erupted
when the ship left England’s shores. They have of course had no news on further developments
since the ship left Portsmouth so all the talk is nothing more than speculation.

Sherlock does not pay attention to it; his thoughts are elsewhere, although he does observe that George Ferguson is a spirited participant in this debate. He sits on the opposite end of the table from Mr. Knott and the two men do not even acknowledge each other. Mr. Knott eats his meal without comment, once again leaving the table before the port is served.

Miss Hooper is present, and it seems Aunt Gertrude has recovered from her ailments because she is back at the girl’s side.

Sherlock is so pre-occupied by his own dark thoughts that he scarcely remembers to nod hello to her before the evening is out, and he feels a twinge of guilt at the sorrow he sees in the corners of her smile.

*You are responsible for that,* says a nasty little voice in Sherlock’s head, but he ignores it. There are greater causes for Sherlock’s guilt right now that soon push his concern for the girl out of his thoughts.

When Sherlock returns to his room at last, he’s so stiff he barely makes it down the corridor to his cabin door without dropping to his knees and crawling the rest of the way.

Getting undressed proves a thousand times more painful than getting dressed as his muscles have had time to grow stiff and each one seems to scream in protest as Sherlock pulls his jacket off his shoulders and slides his arms out of the sleeves.

He’s halfway through pulling off his cravat when a knock sounds on Sherlock’s door.

He freezes, fingers at his throat, a thousand terrible possibilities flooding his mind as he considers who could be at the door.

Is it Anderson come to tell him that John has been clapped in irons for what Sherlock did? Is it Stevens come to deliver what he promised?

Sherlock feels his stomach go cold with dread but then he hears a familiar voice call out to him.

“Mister Holmes? Are you in there, Sherlock sir?”

“Billy!”

He’s gasping the boy’s name in relief before he’s even opened the door, his half-undone cravat dangling forgotten at his throat.

Did he imagine the trace of urgency he heard in Billy’s voice?

But when he opens the door, he sees that Billy’s face is creased with a worried, somewhat desperate look.

“Mister Holmes!” he cries, relief flooding his face at the sight of Sherlock opening the door. “Oh, I’m ever so glad to see you’re alright. Mister—” And then the boy drops his voice, glancing nervously up and down the hall before he continues speaking.

“Come in, come in,” Sherlock whispers, not bothering to wait for a response before pulling the boy in by his sleeve, away from any prying eyes. “We can speak more freely in here with the door closed.”
Billy nods, taking off his cap as he crosses the threshold of Sherlock’s cabin and clutching it between his hands.

Sherlock gives one last cursory glance out into the corridor to make sure no one saw the boy’s approach before shutting the door behind him.

“Now what is it? What’s the matter?”

“Mister Watson sent me, sir. He wanted to make sure that you were all right after… He heard about what happened with Stevens, sir.”

A ripple of fear goes through Sherlock and he suddenly remembers his half-undone cravat. He hurries to retie it before Billy’s eyes can detect the livid marks left by Stevens’ fingers and report them back to John.

Sherlock drops down to one knee in order to be eye-level with the boy. “What did he say, Billy? When he found out? Was he angry?”

Billy nods slowly, eyes wide. “I’ve never seen him so angry, sir. He went all still and cold but I could see fire in his eyes.”

Sherlock feels his stomach turn over. It is exactly as he feared then.

Sherlock grabs Billy by the shoulders in sudden desperation. “Did he hurt Stevens, Billy? What did he do?”

But Billy shakes his head. “No, sir. He came and found me, told me to go to you at once and find out how you were. He told me I wasn’t to let anything stop me. He told me even if I met the hounds of hell on my way that I had better leap right over them rather than stop me coming to ask after you.”

All at once Sherlock is glad he is kneeling on the floor; this proves to be the best position to assume when receiving news from Billy.

“Did he really?” Sherlock asks, voice gone frail.

“He did, sir.” Billy adjusts his grip on his cap somewhat self-consciously. “And then he told me…”

Billy fidgets again, clearly embarrassed by the next piece of information he’s meant to relay.

“What is it?” Sherlock asks, eyes refocusing on the boy’s face, as if he can guess John’s message just by looking at him.

“And then he told me to stay right by you until you wrote back a proper response.”

Sherlock feels his own cheeks go pink.

He reaches into his pocket to pull out the response he wrote earlier.

“Well, you’re in luck because I’ve already got a response written.”

Sherlock passes it into the boy’s hand and Billy tucks it away into his jacket.

“I was…” Sherlock drops his head, embarrassed, even to tell Billy the cause of his reckless decision earlier. “I was coming to find you when I ran into Stevens. I wanted to give you my
response so you didn’t have to come looking for me.”

Billy nods, but the gesture is hesitant, as if he’s not certain what sort of response he’s meant to give to this information.

“Will you tell, John,” Sherlock reaches up to seize hold of Billy’s shoulders again. “Tell him I’m sorry I did what I did. Tell him I was looking for you—that I know it was a stupid thing to do—and I’m sorry. But more than anything, remember to tell him, from me, not to do anything reckless in turn. Tell him I’m fine, all right? You tell him I am absolutely fine. Stevens barely laid a finger on me. All right?”

Billy nods, fervently, and then squirms again. “You… you sure you don’t want to write all that down?”

Sherlock shakes his head. “It’s better if I don’t write this part down. I’d rather you get the message to him right away. Besides. I trust you’ll remember it. Just tell him I’m perfectly fine, and I’m sorry for what I did. And whatever he does, tell him not to seek revenge on my behalf. I can take care of myself,” Sherlock finishes, somewhat lamely, knowing that this is the furthest possible sentiment from the truth, that John will see through it in a heartbeat. But he has to try.

“Have you got all that?”

Billy nods again, more certain this time. “Yes, sir.”

“Good,” Sherlock says, rising to his feet, signaling the end of the conversation. He reaches for the door handle and then hesitates, turning to Billy. “Oh, and one more thing. Tell him I miss him. That, more than anything—make sure you tell him that.”

“I will, sir,” Billy says, somber as ever. “He…” Billy fidgets again, as though deciding whether or not to say what he clearly wants to. “He misses you too, sir. I think it’s making him a bit mad.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Oh, just…” Billy tugs at the cap in his hands. “I heard them talkin’ sir. They’re trying to figure out a way to get him to come to you.”

“Who is?” Sherlock’s heartbeat is suddenly pounding violently in the base of his throat. “Who did you hear talking? Who’s trying to figure that out?”

“Some of the sailors, sir. Members of John’s mess. They’re tryin’ to figure out the best time to do it. I expect…” Billy stuffs his hat back onto his head with sudden purpose, jutting out his chin. “I expect I’ll be bringing word with the details soon.”

Sherlock’s knees feel weak all over again, and he wishes suddenly, that there was something he could do for the boy to repay him for all that he’s done.

“Thank God for you, Billy. I don’t know how I can thank you for what you’re doing.”

Billy looks self-conscious again. “There’s no need for that, sir. I’m only doin’ me job.”

Sherlock does not argue with the boy; he can tell his displays of gratitude make him profoundly uncomfortable, but as he opens the door and sends Billy on his way again, watching him disappear up the staircase at the end of the corridor, Sherlock makes a promise to himself that he will make it up to the boy, somehow, someday, when he can, for Sherlock knows as well as Billy does, much as he doesn’t care to admit it, that he is doing far more than that.
Sherlock’s sleep that night is threaded with nightmares again—hot flashes of awful scenarios that break up and drift away from him whenever he wakes in a cold sweat, his body rigid with fear.

Mercifully, he does not remember them after he wakes, each terrible scene transforming into the next before he can grab hold of it and try and think of how to stop it from happening.

Each time he wakes from a new nightmare, it takes him longer to fall back asleep, until finally, in the grey oblivion that signals that dawn is not far off, Sherlock slips back into sleep and has a nightmare that he does not forget.

He is searching for John.

At first, it seems as though he is looking onboard the ship, climbing up the gangways and descending down into the darkness to parts of the ship he has never dared venture before.

It is much like Sherlock’s search from the previous day, except in the dream the ship keeps on going, down and down and down, the number of decks seemingly infinite. Every time Sherlock reaches the bottom of one staircase, he discovers another, and another one below that.

He finally gives up going down and decides to explore the length of the deck he is currently on.

When he does so, space on the ship transforms again so that it seems as if Sherlock is walking through the rooms of some abandoned house or tavern, the corridors between each empty room stretching on and on.

He sees tables and chairs, bedsteads and sofas. He even walks through a fully furnished living room, but nowhere in any of these rooms does he find a trace of other people.

Sometimes it seems as if someone has just left in a hurry—indicated by a chair pulled out from the table, a mug abandoned here, a still smoking pipe over there—but never does he see another human being.

He calls John’s name, as if speaking it will someone make John appear before him.

But he meets no one, his own voice echoing strangely back to him in the silence of each empty room.

And then, at the end of yet another long corridor, he finally hears the sounds of people—two people, to be precise, talking in low voices, murmuring to one another.

Sherlock quickens his step, eagerness making his pulse jump.

“John?”

In the center of a sparsely furnished room, he finds John, seated in a chair with a girl on his lap, his arms around her waist.

Sherlock halts in the doorway and stares.

She is small, delicate; her body looks so slender under John’s strong arm. The sleeve of his shirt is rolled up to reveal the bronze skin of his forearm and Sherlock can see the muscles standing out in his arm, the fine hairs on it that are gold from the sun, even from where he stands.

The girl is turned away from him so Sherlock cannot see her face but he can see that her hair
gold, the same gold color as John's, in fact, but full of curls—springy, perfect, bouncy curls all bunched and pinned up at the nape of her neck.

*No one has hair as perfect as that,* Sherlock thinks in horrified disbelief. *She must have curled it herself.*

They look good together. Her coloring is the same as John's—they look like they belong together, the curve of John's arm around her waist seems to complement her somehow, as though it was created to encircle her there.

They look natural, sweet.

At this realization Sherlock feels a throb of pain go through him.

Her face is turned toward John and although Sherlock cannot see her face he can see John's expression as he looks at her and the look on John's face is one of unmistakable adoration.

John puts his mouth to her ear, says something in a low voice that Sherlock cannot hear, and he watches her whole body convulse with giggles.

John smiles at her in a way that makes Sherlock feel sick.

He wants to turn around and leave. He does not know how much longer he can stand to see them together, but he has been searching for John for so long and John is speaking to him now.

Or at first Sherlock thinks he is, but just as quickly he realizes that John isn't speaking to him at all. He's speaking to her, but this time in a carrying voice so Sherlock can hear.

He looks at Sherlock while he speaks.

"I guess he found us at last. I knew I couldn't hide forever but I was hoping he would give up the search. It would be much easier on him if he just left well alone. Do you know why?"

John’s eyes flicker back to the girl in his lap. He reaches up to touch her cheek, so fleetingly, so tenderly that Sherlock flinches just watching it.

Sherlock watches the curls bounce as she shakes her golden head.

John's voice is full of suppressed humor, but there is a self-conscious quality to it as well, as though he's embarrassed on Sherlock's behalf.

His voice drops to a stage whisper. "He thinks that I'm in love with him."

John’s gaze shifts back to Sherlock now and Sherlock searches his eyes, desperate for some trace, some hint of the affection he’s certain he’s seen there on multiple occasions.

“It isn’t his fault,” John goes on, continuing to look at him. “It's because no one’s ever treated him well before. You see, he mistook my kindness for something more.”

At this Sherlock interjects; his voice choked, indignant. He cannot stop himself from speaking, from rushing to his own defense.

"But you said—you made it clear to me that this was different."

John turns his gaze upon Sherlock again and this is worse than anything that has come before, this is the worst of all because Sherlock can see now that John's kind blue eyes are full of pity.
“No, Sherlock. I never told you that. You just inferred. You wanted so badly for it to be true that you invented it.” Sherlock can hear that horrible gentle note of pity in his voice. It's like a knife flaying open Sherlock's chest. “You made it up.”

No.

No, it can't be true. Sherlock remembers—John *said*, he had said—there were so many times when he had made it clear—hadn’t he?

But now that Sherlock tries to remember a time when John said as much, he finds he can’t.

His chest fills with panic.

Did John ever say any of it?

Now he isn't sure.

John has gone back to murmuring to the girl on his lap, his voice so sweet and low, only for her, and Sherlock knows that John will not speak to him again.

He watches John’s fingers, the way he holds them so lightly at the nape of her fragile neck, his thumb threading through the curls, the motion of it so filled with tenderness.

Sherlock watches it and feels as though someone has pulled his entrails out straight through his stomach, and with that thought, he wakes to the dim grey light of morning filling the space of his cabin.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to the lovely thescienceofvariation for sharing with me the fortune cookie she received while waiting for this chapter and thus providing me with the inspiration for the chapter summary. :)

Thank you for reading, my nautical darlings! Next chapter is largely written so do not fret too much at the conclusion of this one- you have much to look forward to, I promise! Hang in there!
Chapter Twenty Nine

Chapter Summary

Sherlock makes a mistake.

Chapter Notes

Warning this chapter for brief mention of period-typical racism/ignorant attitudes about non-European culture.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock does not sleep again after his dream.

He cannot bear to lie still and be witness to the horrors his mind constructed, which are now seared into his brain—the image of John’s arms around the golden-headed girl, his mouth at her ear murmuring so sweetly, his fingers so gentle in her hair.

It is difficult to force himself to rise from bed and through the motions of another dreary morning that he does not want to face; to drag his aching body into wakefulness so that he might once again confront the onslaught of misery that the day brings.

Just like the day before, he tries to tell himself that the dream he had was just a dream, nothing more, but the feeling of this one—sour, lingering, like the stink of a decaying corpse that Sherlock can’t remove—proves more difficult to shake even than the one from the night before.

It seems to poison every thought that comes into Sherlock’s brain. Even though he knows, he knows that John’s feelings for him are real, his memory of the dream makes him question, fills him with doubt.

What if John’s worry over Sherlock’s wellbeing was simply motivated by concern, nothing more than that?

Sherlock reads over the letter John sent yesterday before he goes to breakfast as if to say to himself: See. There. Proof. Indisputable.

But still the worry persists, and the nasty little voice that sounds so much like Sherlock’s brother’s, asks: Even if he says he loves you now, what about what the sailors said? What about when the ship reaches port, and all the girls are competing for John’s affections—all those pretty, supple, doe-eyed creatures, with big, brown eyes and bouncing curls, tipping themselves into John’s waiting arms—will he still love you then?

Even when he manages to ignore his worry over John’s affections, as he makes his way to breakfast his every other thought is worry over what may be happening to John since Billy brought word from him the previous night.
It’s worse now, worse since the incident with Stevens because Sherlock knows John. He knows that it will demand all of John’s will power not to bash Stevens’ head in; that the knowledge that Stevens got away with what he did with no repercussions will wear on him, worse than any physical torment, slowly driving him mad.

The only scrap of hope Sherlock can cling to is the knowledge from Billy that John’s men are working to find a way to bring them together.

Sherlock is shocked by this information but he does not doubt the truth of it for a second. Billy is privy to more interactions on this ship than anyone else, and he’s clearly a favorite of John’s men; he also strikes Sherlock as someone who is wholly committed to the truth. He would have no reason to lie to Sherlock about something like that.

But still the knowledge shocks him. Sherlock knows John’s mess in particular is fond of him but to learn that they are willing to take such a risk to bring John happiness—

He must be suffering a good deal for them to consider it worth such a risk.

The mood at breakfast is subdued once again due to the ever-present heat, and Sherlock is so distracted by his own thoughts that it’s halfway through the meal before he thinks to approach Miss Hooper and her aunt, to see if he might steal Miss Hooper away for another walk up on deck.

The more he thinks about the disappointment he saw clear on Miss Hooper’s face when he refused to enlighten her about his revelations, the more badly he feels, and he is determined to make it up to her today, if only to distract himself from his own ever-present worries.

“Miss Hooper, Ms. Grimsby,” he says, bowing to them both, more deeply than he would usually dare to before straightening up and trying to arrange his face into a becoming expression as he faces Ms. Grimsby. “I was wondering, Madame, if I might have the pleasure of escorting your niece this morning for a brisk stroll on the deck after breakfast.”

But to Sherlock’s disappointment he can see Ms. Grimsby’s disapproval written clear on her face before he has even finished voicing his proposition.

“Certainly not! It’s far too hot this morning. Molly will remain indoors with me and we will work on her cross-stitch.”

Sherlock’s eyes stray to Miss Hooper’s face to gage her reaction and he sees the brief flash of disappointment before it’s shuttered away under her usual impassive smile.

“Perhaps, another time, Mr. Holmes.”

“What about…. a game of whist, this afternoon? Somewhere cool perhaps?”

“Out of the question, I’m afraid. We’ve already accepted an invitation for tea with Mrs. Whitehall this afternoon, haven’t we Molly dear?”

Sherlock wonders briefly if he’s being purposefully shunned on Miss Hooper’s behalf due to his behavior yesterday but he can see by the faint furrow of frustration etched between Miss Hooper’s slender brows that the decision has nothing to do with her.

“Ah, well. Another time then.” Sherlock bows again. “Good day to you ladies.”

“Good day, Mr. Holmes,” Miss Hooper murmurs with a sad smile.
Ms. Grimsby merely sniffs at him before turning away.

Sherlock leaves the breakfast table irritated by the reappearance of Miss Hooper’s melancholy smile, furious with himself that he did not take greater advantage of the time he had with her yesterday. He should have stopped to consider the fact that an opportunity such as it was would not arise often. And now the poor girl is trapped in her aunt’s dull company again.

He decides to head up on deck in spite of the absence of his companion. He stops to fetch the straw hat from his room, feeling another pang of guilt as he takes the gift from Miss Hooper in hand.

Sherlock tries to quell his feelings of guilt by telling himself that the girl’s troubles are not his problems—that he has enough on his mind to worry about without adding the woes of an unfortunate governess—but the sentiment rings hollow, even inside his own head.

Most of the passengers are still in the saloon finishing breakfast when Sherlock reaches the upper deck, but the scene that greets Sherlock as he reaches the top of the stairs is a flurry of activity.

The day is hot—it may be the hottest day they’ve seen so far—and when Sherlock emerges from the shadows into the sunlight of the ship’s waist, stepping into it its glare is like walking into an oven.

It is only a matter of seconds before sweat is beading on his temples, his brow, trickling down the back of his neck, and Sherlock is more grateful than ever for Miss Hooper’s practical gift to him.

The boatswain is standing yelling orders to a team of sailors aloft in the rigging and the midshipmen are busy running drills under the longboats.

It is evident from a single glance that the heat is taking its toll on all of them—the faces of the midshipmen above their uniforms are red and streaming with sweat; the sailors have removed their shirts and Sherlock can see their bare arms and torsos are gleaming with exertion.

Over the sound of the boatswain’s orders, Sherlock can hear an argument taking place up on the quarterdeck.

Trying as much as possible to appear as though he is simply out to take the air (and not sidling purposefully closer), Sherlock makes his way toward the back of the ship in the direction of the raised voices.

He pauses by the starboard railing as soon as he is within earshot.

“—I told you, Deverall, it isn’t good enough! He wants us making seven knots.”

Sherlock can see out of the corner of his eye that the two men engaged in this quarrel are Lieutenant Deverall and the ship’s master, Mr. Graves.

Deverall, Sherlock knows, is next in command after Lieutenant Lestrade. He often sees the two men walking together or deep in conversation at the helm. He’s younger than Lestrade, remarkably young for occupying such a high position in the navy but Sherlock has heard that he distinguished himself in battle against the French early in his career. That, and as far as Sherlock can tell, he comes from the sort of family that seems to draw naval commissions out of thin air with the same kind of ease that they draw bank notes from their vault.

“Well, you’ll have to tell him it’s not possible,” says Deverall with barely concealed exasperation. “You know as well as I do that this ship is as slow and unmaneuverable as any on the ocean. She can carry a great deal of cargo but she certainly cannot make that kind of speed, especially not in
this weather. The best we can hope for is five knots and that’s only if we really push it.”

The tone of the other man’s voice darkens considerably. “Then you had better, as you say, ‘push it,’ Lieutenant. I don’t think I need to tell you that risking the captain’s displeasure in this matter is extremely ill-advised.”

“No, you don’t need to tell me that,” the other man says, frustration still clear in his voice. “But we’re doing everything we can! I don’t see how he thinks it’s possible to—”

“Would you like me to relay these concerns to the captain?”

There is a grudging silence.

Sherlock stares hard at the shimmer of white on the horizon as he waits for the other man’s reply.

“No, sir. I do not.”

“Very good. Then I expect you will do everything in your power to meet the captain’s demands.”

Mr. Graves turns to make his way toward the gangway leading off the quarterdeck when Lieutenant Deverall speaks again.

“I simply don’t understand why it’s so important that we make port in Rio by next week.”

Mr. Graves hesitates before responding and Sherlock wonders if the other man has pushed his luck too far.

The shipmaster’s response is clipped. “Fortunately for you, Lieutenant, you don’t have to understand the captain’s orders, you merely have to follow them.”

And without another word the man leaves the quarterdeck.

Sherlock pulls the brim of his straw hat low over his eyes as the shipmaster passes him and disappears into the hatch down below. He knows it is ill advised to be caught listening in on any conversation that involves directives from the captain but he can scarcely contain his curiosity over what he just overheard.

In the aftermath of his brush with danger yesterday, and his subsequent terror and worry over John, Sherlock completely forgot about the detail in the sailors’ conversation that had most grabbed his interest. The sailors had mentioned that the ship was going to make port in Rio, but Sherlock had no idea they were so close to the South American city.

Even if the ship cannot make the captain’s desired speed, it sounds as if they will reach the city within a fortnight, certainly, if not sooner.

He knew the ship would be making stops in a handful of port cities en route to India but he’s been so caught up in the misery of his separation from John that Sherlock has not given a second thought to the ship’s progress. If they are a week out from making port in South America—

Sherlock can feel his heartbeat pounding hard against his breast as the impact of this news sinks in.

He is not certain whether this information fills him with excitement or dread.

Depending on how long the ship makes port, it could mean an opportunity to actually leave the ship.
When they stopped in Madeira all those weeks ago, Sherlock had been so preoccupied with hating everything about the voyage, he had not accompanied the small band of passengers who’d made the trip to shore.

Some had gone on sightseeing excursions, and others came ashore exclusively so they might dine at the homes of local dignitaries and pay social calls.

Sherlock had chosen to stay onboard the ship largely because he did not wish to be in the company of the other passengers for any duration that the various activities required, but looking back now, he realizes that some part of his decision was also motivated by the fact that he did not want to miss any opportunity to spend observing the actions of the blue-eyed sailor.

This was long before their first conversation, but at that point, Sherlock had already taken to watching John whenever he was at work on deck.

Reflecting back on this, Sherlock is momentarily stricken by the intensity of his feelings, even then.

To his great disappointment, he had not seen much of John over those few days, and now he wonders if it wasn’t because the sailors too had been able to spend some time ashore.

Sherlock has no idea how long they will spend in the South American port but he imagines it will be a day or two at least—enough time to reload supplies, and perhaps even trade some of the cargo onboard.

If they remain for any length of time, the odds are high that not only passengers, but also, some of the crew will have the chance to come ashore.

In the wake of this thought, Sherlock cannot stop the memory of the conversation he overhead yesterday from streaming into his mind.

He does not want to think about what the sailor said, about the chances of what might happen if John is able to leave the ship—what that might mean for Sherlock.

“You know Watson—he’s got girls linin’ the docks at every port around the globe.”

Sherlock thinks of the John from his dream, his eyes full of pity as he looked at Sherlock over the shoulder of the golden-haired girl, the way his arms seemed to rest so naturally around her slender waist, seemed to indicate that they were made for one another.

Sherlock shakes his head in frustration, as if in doing so, he can chase the unwanted thoughts from his mind.

It was just a dream.

John has told Sherlock he’s had other lovers, it’s true, but just because he has, that doesn’t mean he’s going to simply drop Sherlock at the first available opportunity.

Or does it? Can you really be so sure of that?

The nasty little voice that Sherlock has worked so hard to suppress all morning reasserts itself with alarming ease.

*What if John prefers the company of women? What if, like the sailors said, you’re only occupying a temporary role, filling a need that can’t be met otherwise in the absence of fairer company?*
When faced with the choice between you and all the lovely girls of Rio de Janeiro what do you think John will choose?

Sherlock tightens his hands on the railing in desperation.

No, it isn’t true. John said—he told Sherlock—

But as always the nasty voice has a retort before Sherlock can even finish his defense.

When has John ever assured you that his feelings for you will last beyond the duration of this voyage? What do you think will happen when the ship reaches India? John will simply disembark with you?

Sherlock shakes his head violently again. No. Not now, not here—please.

He’s a sailor. The man is unfaithful by nature. You think he will change that part of himself for you? Think again, Brother Mine.

“No!”

Sherlock slams his fists down hard against the railing of the deck and it is only when he has spoken aloud does he remember that he is in the presence of others who may be watching his strange behavior and growing alarmed.

Sherlock looks up, his awareness of his surroundings returning sharply, and sees, to his dismay, his snobbish neighbor, Amesbury, watching him from a little ways down the deck, eyebrows drawn together in concern.

Without acknowledging the other man, Sherlock pulls the brim of his hat down low over his eyes and makes his way toward the gangway as promptly as he can.

He doesn’t care what Amesbury thinks of him—the man is petty, dull, and utterly without merit in any way—but still, Sherlock cannot stop the shame that heats his cheeks as he descends again below decks.

It’s getting worse.

The pressure of the condescending voice inside his head is getting more and more difficult to resist.

Sherlock halts briefly at the bottom of the first flight of stairs, feeling the oppressive quality of the air, even one deck below, thicken and intensify like a physical presence against his skin.

If nothing else, at least the ship’s stop in Rio will provide an opportunity to escape the hellish confines of this abysmal ship. Even if it is only for a half a day, Sherlock will welcome it. The prospect of feeling solid earth beneath his feet again is almost enough to distract him from the cruel presence of his hateful thoughts.

Sherlock pauses again at the bottom of the second flight of stairs, lifting his hat to wipe away the sweat accumulating on his forehead, and freezes with his arm against his brow.

Over the sound of the creaking hull and the ever-present trickle of water running down the sides of the ship, Sherlock can hear the distant repetitive clanking of what he knows are the ship’s pumps —somewhere beyond the partition that separates the passenger’s cabins from the rest of the deck —but in and amongst all the other sounds, today, right now, he can distinctly hear the sounds of singing.
“In South Australia, I was born.”

“Heave away, haul away!”

“In South Australia round Cape Horn.”

“We’re bound for South Australia!”

“Haul away you rolling kings!”

“Heave away, haul away!”

“Heave away, oh hear me sing we’re bound for South Australia!”

It is the type of call and response song that Sherlock has heard the sailors sing while they are working—similar to the songs they sang when Sherlock helped them paint the deck—one man leads the song calling out the verses, and the rest of the men join in on the chorus.

The voices are muffled by the partition that stands between the passengers’ quarters and the rest of the deck, but Sherlock can make out the words just fine, and he can hear, with a shock that goes through him like a bolt of lightning, that the clear, fair voice leading all the others, is John’s.

“As I walked out one morning fair.”

“Heave away, haul away!”

“‘Twas there I met Miss Nancy Blair.”

“We’re bound for South Australia!”

Underneath the sound of their singing, Sherlock can hear the rhythmic clanking of the pumps, and it’s evident that the beat of the song helps keep the rhythm of the men’s work, helps set the pace as they push the heavy metal cranks up and down in synchronization.

“Haul away you rolling kings!”

“Heave away, haul away!”

“Heave away, oh hear me sing we’re bound for South Australia!”

Sherlock has never seen the pumps in action, but he has seen the handles for the contraption, located just aft of the main hatchway on the lower gun deck—and he can imagine now the team of men, their bodies straining as they push and lift—push and lift again—to drive the excess water from the ship’s hold.

He knows how brutal this particular task is—knows how John and all those in his profession loathe it—and he cannot imagine how difficult the work must be on a day as hot and humid as this.

“There ain’t but one thing grieves me mind.”

“Heave away, haul away!”

“But to leave Miss Nancy Blair behind.”

“We’re bound for South Australia!”
Sherlock finds himself standing in front of the wall separating him from the sound of the monotonous clanking, the rise and fall of the men’s voices, and reflects with astonishment that he never put two and two together.

Although he’s heard the sound of the pumps on and off over the past few days, he’s never heard the men singing while they worked, and therefore, he never realized how close he actually was to them.

All this time John has been working the pumps he has been on the same deck as Sherlock’s own cabin, several hundred feet away, hidden from Sherlock’s view by a flimsy wooden barrier.

Sherlock presses his forehead to the thin wood partition, feels rage blooming hot and bright inside him, building until he can feel it like a physical weight against his skull, seeking an outlet.

One flimsy wall stands between him and John—that’s it. One wall and a mere hundred feet the only physical barrier between them and yet… and yet—

Sherlock curls his hands into fists against the wall in helpless frustration.

What makes the matter even worse is the fact that there is a door, just on the other side of the staircase, leading into the other half of the deck.

Sherlock has seen it—has passed it many times—the wood is scuffed, the handle warped from years of water damage, the hinges stained with rust—but he’s never paid much attention to it. Why would he?

Now it seems to exist solely to torture him.

There is nothing stopping him from walking past the stairs, opening the door, and proceeding directly through it.

Nothing except the only thing on earth that could stay Sherlock’s hand, which is the promise of John Watson’s suffering if he were to do so.

The situation is so absurd it’s almost comical.

“And when we wallop around Cape Horn.”

“Heave away, haul away!”

“You’ll wish to God you’d never been born.”

“We’re bound for South Australia!”

The only scrap of relief Sherlock can find in the midst of his agonized frustration is the fact that if John is singing—if Sherlock can hear him singing, his voice so golden and clear in the midst of all the others—it means he is alive and in relatively good health. It means he has not yet succumbed to his wish to seek revenge on Sherlock’s behalf, and for this, Sherlock is grateful.

He will take what he can get.

Sherlock stands with his palms pressed against the wooden wall and listens to the men finish their song, as if in touching the barrier that stands between them he will have access to some visceral part of John—as though he can absorb John’s voice as it passes through the wall between them.

He hears them start up another song and for one long moment he considers standing there all
afternoon, leaning against the partition as he listens, as though that will somehow bring him closer to John, but just as he decides that this is a reasonable thing to do, Sherlock hears the sound of footsteps coming down the gangway from above, and he thinks fleetingly of Amesbury—of the questions he will ask if he sees Sherlock standing there with his hands against the wall, as though he is feeling for its pulse—and realizes just as quickly that he cannot face another passenger right now; he cannot be held responsible for what he might say or do.

It is therefore with great reluctance that Sherlock turns and heads in the direction of his own cabin, every step he takes away from the sound of John’s voice increasing the pain in his heart.

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When Sherlock returns to his cabin, he can feel even from below decks, that the sun has reached its pinnacle in the cloudless sky and is sending the force of its baking rays down through the layers of the ship, the heat soaking into the worm-eaten wood until it feels like they are all trapped on a floating oven suspended in the middle of the Atlantic.

Sherlock peels off his sweat-soaked clothing and lies motionless on his bunk, the sweat trickling down his temples in spite of the fact that he isn’t moving at all, trying not to think about how John must be suffering working in this weather, straining his ears to see if he can still hear the sound of the sailors’ singing from down the passageway over the usual noise of the ship.

He cannot really but if he keeps his eyes closed and concentrates very hard then he can relive every song he’s ever heard John Watson sing in his presence and that is almost good enough.

It is in this manner that Sherlock whiles away the remaining hours until the midday meal.

It’s so hot he considers not going at all, but after what he overheard about the ship’s upcoming stop in Rio, he is curious to see if the other passengers are in possession of more information than he is about what will happen when the ship reaches port.

Everyone at luncheon looks as miserable and hot as ever, but there are more passengers present than Sherlock has seen in several days. He suspects that boredom is the sole motivating factor for driving them out of their cabins; it isn’t as though the dining room is any cooler.

In spite of the fact that the large stern windows at the back of the room are opened to let in a breeze, there is hardly any air to speak of today, and it seems the open windows only serve to let in more of the thick, oppressive tropical heat.

Sherlock lets his attention jump here and there around the spatter of conversations, waiting to see if anyone will discuss the ship’s upcoming stop in the port city, but to his frustration, no one does.

He is always reluctant to raise his voice to the general population but Sherlock is so desperate for information that today he makes an exception.

“I hear we’re approaching our next port, that we may be arriving as early as next week. Has… anyone ever been to Rio de Janeiro?”

There is the usual period of stunned silence that occurs after any of Sherlock’s remarks and for a moment Sherlock wonders if they’ll all just ignore him and proceed with their individual conversations, but then to Sherlock’s profound relief, Colonel Jackson speaks up.

“Never been to Rio, but so long as it isn’t as blasted hot as this bloody ship, I’ll be delighted to see it.”
“Here, here!”

Several voices murmur their assent, and Sherlock can feel that the awkwardness incited by his remark has dissipated thanks to the Colonel’s cheery response.

“Will there be monkeys there?” breathes Miss Gibbons with excitement.

“And little men with funny hats?” adds Miss Long with equal fervor.

Miss Gibbons lets out a terrified squeal. “Oooh! Will there be jungle savages?”

“It sounds like you’re thinking of Bath in the off-season, my dears,” says Colonel Jackson with a wink in the girls’ direction. “Not South America.”

They both dissolve into giggles.

“I shouldn’t think we’ll reach Rio for another week and a half though—not on a ship of this size and speed.”

“You’d be surprised,” says Ferguson from the other end of the table, and several heads turn in his direction. “Word onboard is that the captain’s doing all he can to make port by the end of next week.”

Sherlock watches Mr. Knott’s reaction to this remark and sure enough, sees the older man’s face sour with displeasure.

“And how, pray tell, are you in possession of this information?”

“Anyone with a pair of eyes would be aware of it. Haven’t you seen the activity on deck? The captain’s been working the men to the bone to try and get maximum speed. Surely you’ve heard the noise from the pumps?”

“Oh, that terrible clanking night and day, night and day!” Mrs. Whitehall all but wails. “Why it’s hideous! It keeps me up half the night. Henry never hears it of course.”

Mr. Whitehall smiles beside his wife in benevolent ignorance as he finishes his soup.

Sherlock feels a sudden stab of fury at the woman’s complaint, at her utter disregard for the actual suffering of the men doing the work.

“Usually they only pump this much if there’s a bad leak—or after taking in a lot of water from a storm. It might be that we suffered some damage from the storm a few weeks back and have been retaining water, but this much pumping? It’s clearly an effort to make the ship go faster.”

“Do—you think we have a leak?”

“By no means. Ships are always taking in water. That’s why the operation of the pumps is a necessary duty. But this much pumping in weather this fair is excessive. I think the captain is desperate for anything that will give him the speed he desires.”

“But why would the captain be so concerned with our speed?”

Ferguson shrugs darkly before draining his wine glass. “Who can say? Perhaps we’re running low on provisions.”

The way he says it makes it clear that he suspects another reason.
“I wasn’t aware you knew so much about seafaring, Ferguson,” Mr. Knott says, with a flicker of something close to mockery in his voice.

Ferguson shrugs again. “It isn’t as though there is much else to pay attention to. I might as well learn something during this interminable voyage.”

Miss Goodfellow presses her napkin nervously to her lips several times before speaking up. “I for one cannot wait for an opportunity to leave the vessel, for however brief a time. Do you think—”

And now she addresses her question to Colonel Jackson, as all the ladies seem to do when they are in want of reassurance. “Will we stay long at the port in Rio? Will we have a chance to leave the ship?”

Miss Gibbons and Miss Long both lean eagerly forward.

“Are there shops there?”

“Will there be officers?”

Both girls giggle again.

“I’m afraid I don’t know for certain how long we will make port,” responds the Colonel. “But it will certainly be for at least a day, if not two or three. And as for whether we will be allowed to disembark, I should think it is highly likely. The ship will have much business to attend to and therefore there should be plenty of time for a few sight-seeing ventures, I should think!”

This sends the pair of girls into hushed and fervent discussion and Sherlock takes advantage of the momentary lapse in conversation to speak up again.

“Does the crew get a chance to leave the ship when we are in port?”

“Well that all depends,” booms McKinley unexpectedly.

Like Colonel Jackson and his wife, McKinley is one of the wealthier passengers who occupies the roundhouse cabins on the upper decks. He is a man heavily invested in the idea of his own self-importance. Sherlock does not like him one bit.

“On what?” asks Bailey, the young man who is just a few years older than Sherlock and has the unfortunate habit of always putting his foot in his mouth.

If he weren’t so desperately unlikable, Sherlock might feel sorry for him.

“On whether they’ll be shipping the whores directly out to the boat!”

McKinley slaps the table to punctuate his own joke, chuckling heartily, and some of the men join the laughter, with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Mrs. Whitehall gasps in horror.

Miss Goodfellow purses her lips so hard they vanish entirely from sight.

“They do that sometimes—bring ‘em straight onto the ship.” McKinley goes on with hearty enthusiasm. “That way they risk no chance of the men deserting. But seeing as this is a merchant voyage, I imagine the boys will have a little more leeway.”

“Is this really necessary?”
“Come now—it’s just the stuff of life! Think about how desperate those men must be after so many months at sea all cooped up together like a barrel of rats.”

Ms. Grimsby is glaring daggers in Mr. McKinley’s direction.

“He’s right!” adds Mr. Summersby. “They’ve got to keep them regularly whored and liquored otherwise they’d have a mutiny on their hands!”

“That or a whole different range of unspeakable acts,” McKinley adds with a dark look before refilling his glass. “If you get my meaning.”

To his horror, Sherlock feels his own cheeks grow warm at this remark and he stares hard at the plate in front of him without really seeing it.

Ms. Grimsby pushes back her chair with a flourish. “Come, Molly. We cannot be expected to remain in such company. Heavens! You’d think we were dining with the sailors themselves.”

Colonel Jackson rises from his chair to offer his arm to Miss Hooper’s aunt—ever the gentleman. “Allow me to escort you back to your rooms, Madame.”

“Thank you, Colonel,” she sniffs as she takes his arm. “It’s nice to see that some of the gentlemen on board this ship retain their manners! Come along, Molly.”

The Damson family also takes this opportunity to exit the dining room, Mrs. Damson holding her hands over her older daughter’s ears with undisguised horror.

Miss Goodfellow clears her throat audibly, clearly desperate to change the topic of conversation. “I did hear—speaking of mutiny, that is—I did hear that there was some kind of fracas amongst the crew.”

Sherlock feels the color in his cheeks intensify, his thoughts immediately jumping to his run-in with Stevens yesterday. How could she know?

“When was that?” queries McKinley with evident curiosity.

*Please don’t let her mention me, please don’t let her mention me, please don’t let her—*

“Oh, just this afternoon. It was right before luncheon. There was a great commotion. Two of the sailors got into some kind of scrap. Didn’t you hear it?”

In a single instant, Sherlock feels all of the warmth drain out of his face.

Surely, she can’t mean—

He just heard John singing. Just a few hours ago—he was fine. He was fine. Sherlock knows this.

But the singing had stopped by the time Sherlock left for dinner. He knows because he remembers listening for it when he left his cabin.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know the details,” Miss Goodfellow says, preening a bit now that she has everyone’s attention, clearly enjoying the fact that all the eyes at the table are trained on her. “But there was quite a commotion, I can tell you. Mrs. Jackson and I were just returning from a promenade up on deck—we were about to head down when we heard the officers dragging some fellow up from
below. He looked *mad* with rage, I can tell you.”

Sherlock’s heart is pounding so hard in his throat he is certain it will burst.

*No. It cannot be.*

*Please no.*

“Apparently, he was involved in some kind of brawl down below. He’d taken a swing at a fellow crewmate, and his opponent must have given as good as he got, for this man’s face was positively covered in blood.”

Miss Gibbons and Miss Long both gasp in simultaneous horror.

Sherlock’s entire body has turned to ice. He is listening so hard he is scarcely breathing, terror twisting its fist around his guts with savage force.

*It cannot be John, it cannot be…*

“What happened then?” Miss Gibbons squeaks.

Miss Goodfellow seems to puff up even more in the wake of the other girls’ interest—she is clearly at the bottom of their feminine pecking order and finally, she has something that they do not, which must give her endless satisfaction.

“Well, one of the lieutenants came forward and there was a great deal of shouting and conversation. Then the poor fellow was taken back below—presumably to receive his punishment, whatever that may be. I didn’t hear what they were going to do to him but you could tell it was severe by the looks on everyone’s faces. I don’t like to think how they punish sailors in a world as brutal as this.” She gives a little mock shudder of horror. “May God have mercy on his soul.”

Sherlock pushes back his chair.

His heart is pounding so hard in his ears he cannot hear over the sound of it.

Without saying a word to any of them, he rises from the table.

He does not run; he walks out of the dining room, but his steps are measured and deliberate.

His perception has shrunk to the size of a pin.

One single purpose occupies his mind—to find out what has happened to John Watson.

He does not know that it was John. It could be any sailor, exhausted and overworked, driven half-mad by the heat. Tempers are running short among the men; Sherlock knows this. It could be any one of them.

He cannot allow himself to panic yet, not until he has confirmed what he has heard with his own eyes.

Still, he cannot stop his mind from considering the worst.

What will they do to him? How do they punish a sailor for striking a fellow crewmate?

Sherlock knows the punishment for striking a superior officer and he wills his mind away from the possibility.
No, he will not think of it.

But with every step he takes, he seems to hear the sound of it echoing beneath his boots.


The consequences do not matter now. If John has already been taken below then Sherlock’s actions no longer pose a risk.

He keeps on walking until he reaches the door that separates the passengers’ quarters from the rest of the deck, the door that he looked at so longingly earlier today, and without pausing once to consider what he’s about to do, he opens it, and walks through.

***

Sherlock is careful to close the door behind him, his movements slow and cautious. He may be desperate to find out what has happened to John but he has enough of his wits still about him to know that he does not want to be caught before he has discovered anything.

The first thing he notices is the heat, which is somehow more oppressive in this close and darkened space—the second thing he notices is the stink.

Sherlock is not certain where it’s coming from, or how a smell can be so much stronger on one side of a flimsy wooden partition, but it is.

It smells like rot, like death, like the smell of the ocean if you stripped back its skin to reveal all the decaying life forms underneath.

Sherlock has to reach an arm up to cover his nose and mouth in a futile effort to keep out the stench.

Through the darkness, not fifty feet from where he stands, he can make out the figures of the men working the pumps. It seems they have not stopped since Sherlock heard them at it earlier and his eyes flicker over the figures bent over their work to see if it is indeed John’s mess.

With something like relief, Sherlock recognizes Matthews, Patterson, Burns, Half-Pint Lee, Ironsides Jake, Stapleton, and Banana Bill.

They are still here. If they are still here then it would have been nearly impossible for John to get away to fight with Stevens in the last few hours; he wouldn’t leave his post. If they are still here, then John should be here with them too.

But no matter how many times his eyes jump over them and back again, Sherlock sees that John is not among them.

Terror tightens Sherlock’s throat as firmly as Steven’s fist around his neck the day before.

It cannot be. It cannot have been John who Miss Goodfellow’s story was about.

Perhaps he just stepped away for a moment; perhaps he is outside of Sherlock’s line of sight.

He has to be sure.

Sticking to the shadows that run along the sides of the ship, Sherlock moves through the deep patches of darkness between the bulwarks, beyond the reach of the few swinging lanterns that illuminate the men at work.
They look tired—Sherlock can see that, even from a distance. Their bodies move stiffly and with great difficulty; their faces are haggard with exhaustion.

In the strange half-light of the shuttered lanterns, their movements look curiously slow, heavy, as though the entire scene before Sherlock was taking place underwater.

Or perhaps that’s simply how Sherlock feels watching them, perhaps it’s his own shock making it feel as if time has slowed to a steady drip, as every step he takes, it becomes clearer and clearer to him that John is nowhere to be found.

As he creeps closer, the unpleasant smell increases, and all at once it occurs to Sherlock that what he’s smelling is the water they are pumping out of the hold, ripe with the uniquely fetid stench that comes from water sitting for months in the bottom of a wooden ship.

He has now reached the end of the pumps, and he hesitates here, deep in the shadows, one arm still raised to cover his mouth, his eyes straining desperately through the darkness for any sign of John, unwilling to accept the reality of what every detail seems to present to him.

John Watson is not here.

Sherlock fights the panic rising up in him; he can feel himself struggling against it like a living thing. He needs to keep ahold of himself for John—he will be no help to him if he goes to pieces.

But he does not know where to look next. Where do they take sailors to punish them below decks?

He feels like he is going to be sick.

Sherlock grasps at the bulwark beside him as he tries to keep his panic at bay, as he tries to clear his head and think.

From up on deck, Sherlock hears the sound of the ship’s bell ringing out the hour.

Something like a collective groan of relief moves through the men. It is not expressed as sound but movement. Almost in unison, the motion of their bodies comes to a halt.

Burns is the first to step away from his post.

“Alright lads. That’s us finished then.”

He sounds as weary as he looks.

Sherlock is just considering stepping out of his hiding place and appealing to the older sailor. He does not know what to do and he is so desperate for any kind of advice or help that he almost breaks his prohibition not to talk to any of them, further endangering their livelihood, but just before he does, a sound from further down the deck draws Sherlock’s head up like a hare at the sound of a snapping twig.

A sailor is making his way down the deck from the fore hatch, his tread heavy with weariness.

Due to the patches of darkness between the lanterns, Sherlock cannot make out his face, but he can see that the man’s trousers are soaked to the knees with filthy water, his kerchief knotted over his nose and mouth in an effort to keep out the stink.

He has clearly just come from the hold.

And then he is speaking, and at the sound of his voice Sherlock’s vision goes white.
“We’re holding steady at ten inches,” he says as he approaches the other men. “That should keep him happy for the time being, at least.”

“Well-done,” Burns says, laying a hand on John’s shoulder briefly before turning back to the other men. “Well done today, all of you. Now for the love of god let’s get off this stinking deck and back up to where the air is fresh.”

The men are so tired they scarcely respond. Most of them have already begun moving toward the hatch with the kind of numb weariness that only comes from the most intense physical labor.

Sherlock recalls seeing farmhands returning from the fields at dusk during the harvest season moving in a similar manner, as though their bodies were no longer their own.

Sherlock watches the men shuffle past him, his own body scarcely within the grasp of his awareness. He cannot feel the bulwark where he grips it beneath his fingers; it is currently the only thing holding him upright.

He feels like he might be floating.

*John is all right. It wasn’t him. He is alive and well and not about to be hanged for beating another man to death.*

John is the last of them to move toward the stairs and for one horrible moment Sherlock is paralyzed with indecision. He cannot call out to John; he knows, he *knows* he mustn’t speak to him; after the relief of finding out that John is safe, how can he dare to risk John’s wellbeing again?

But even if he wanted to, Sherlock cannot stop himself from saying John’s name, not so loudly that the others will hear, but loud enough that he hopes to *god* John will hear him and stop where he stands.

He watches John’s body go still.

Sherlock waits, heart pounding like a war drum in his ears.

It takes him so long to turn around that for a second Sherlock thinks maybe he didn’t hear him. Maybe he stopped for a different reason; maybe he’s just too tired to walk up yet another flight of stairs.

But then he is turning, his eyes searching the shadows between the bulwarks where Sherlock stands.

By now, most of the men have disappeared up the stairs. They are all of them apparently too tired to notice John’s absence.

It is only then, when he is certain that they are completely alone, that Sherlock steps out into the light.

“John,” he says again, his voice full of disbelief at the fact that John is here—*here*—standing in front of him at last, and he watches as John reaches up to pull the kerchief down from his nose and mouth, watches as John’s face goes blank with shock.

“Sherlock?”

Now that he is no longer standing in the shadows Sherlock can finally see John’s face and what he sees there makes his heart constrict in his breast.
He looks exhausted—more tired than Sherlock has ever seen him. All the lines seem to have re-emerged around his eyes and mouth, and deepened in the time since Sherlock saw him last.

His golden hair is lying flat against his forehead. It looks dull in the dim lighting and Sherlock can see it is dark with sweat.

There are dark sweat stains under his arms, and the portion of his throat and chest that Sherlock can see at the open collar of his shirt is glistening with sweat.

Sherlock watches something hot and full of joy flare briefly in John’s eyes to replace the look of shock, but just as quickly as it comes, it vanishes again, to be replaced by exhaustion—and then fear.

Before Sherlock can say another word, John is grabbing him by the shoulders and crowding him back into the narrow space between the bulwarks so they are the both of them cloaked in shadow.

Sherlock has never been more grateful for John’s firm grip on his shoulders. It is the only thing at present keeping Sherlock from sliding to the floor. His knees are buckling, his body going weak with relief.

John is here. John’s hands are on my shoulders. John isn’t about to be hanged.

He is sorry for the shadows they are standing in because it makes John’s face more difficult to see, and Sherlock needs to see him, needs to keep looking at him to be sure that he is real.

But the warmth of John’s hands gripping his shoulders, that is real, as is the sound of John’s breathing, low and shallow in the air between them.

“What are you doing here?”

His voice is soft but Sherlock can hear the fear welling dark between the words.

“I had to see you,” Sherlock breathes, feeling guilt start to trickle in now alongside the relief. He is speaking so quickly he can scarcely get the words out in the right order; they all seem to be tumbling out of him without his control. “They said—one of the passengers at dinner—she said there was a man caught fighting below decks, that he was going to be punished for his infraction—that they took him down below, and I thought—oh god, John, I thought—”

Sherlock feels John’s hands squeeze his shoulders hard to reassure him.

“Shh. It’s all right. I’m all right, but we can’t—”

John turns to glance over his shoulder, letting go of Sherlock’s shoulders as he does. He turns back to look at Sherlock but Sherlock cannot see his face through the darkness.

His voice is low and dark with worry.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

Sherlock feels a renewed surge of panic at the loss of contact between them, and a fresh wave of shame that he would dare put John’s life at risk in speaking to him.

“I know. I’m sorry—I didn’t—” He’s distinctly aware that he’s babbling again but he cannot seem to stop the words from spilling out. “I wasn’t going to say anything, I was just going to leave but I couldn’t, John, I couldn’t help it—when I saw you there I couldn’t stop myself—”
John’s hands come up to grasp his shoulders again and Sherlock nearly chokes on his own relief.

“I know,” John says. His voice is thin with exhaustion.

Sherlock’s eyes are finally beginning to adjust to the shadows and at the expression he sees on John’s face, all his breath leaves him.

He looks so tired.

His features are carved deep with sorrow, making him look infinitely older than he normally does. All of the light that usually illuminates his face, that seems to pour out of him as effortlessly as breath, is absent. It’s like the spark in him has gone dark, like all the life in him has been snuffed out.

Sherlock hates it; he hates seeing him like this.

He wants to pull John towards him and kiss it away—all of his suffering, all of his weariness. He wants to somehow give him back his light.

But he is paralyzed by guilt, by fear, by a thousand other complicated emotions that he knows would be smoothed away if he could just find it within himself to be brave enough to show John how he’s been missing him instead of trying to tell him.

“I miss you,” he finally says, his own voice so strangled with longing it’s scarcely recognizable to him as his own.

“I know,” John says again, his voice so full of sorrow it makes Sherlock’s chest ache. “Oh god, I know.”

And there it is—that thread of vulnerability, that longing that cuts so deep Sherlock can feel it down to the center of his bones—and whatever it was that was standing there between them, keeping them apart, dissolves in a single instant.

Sherlock does not know which of them moves first—it seems to be a mutual effort, an eerily synchronized coming together, both of them surging forward until their hands find some part of the other to grasp, their mouths meeting almost seamlessly, Sherlock bending his body down to bring himself closer to John, one of John’s hands still on his shoulder, the other sliding in around his waist, fingers fistling in the material of Sherlock’s waistcoat.

John tastes like sweat and darkness—fury and pain.

The stink of the bilge water on his soaked trousers is ripe in Sherlock’s nostrils, as is the sharp scent of a body that has been working constantly without stop—but all of it is as sweet to Sherlock as honey, as cream, as lilacs—because it helps to recreate a picture of what John has been experiencing in their time apart; because all of it is part of John.

The taste of John, the smell of him is like a tonic curing all of Sherlock’s ailments—he cannot get enough.

His mouth is opening over John’s and he feels John’s lips part beneath his own, hears John make a strangled noise deep in the base of his throat, fingers tightening around Sherlock’s waist as Sherlock pushes a leg between John’s, his own hands sliding down over the hard muscles in John’s back, feeling all the places where John’s shirt is soaked with sweat.

His body craves contact with every piece of John that he can reach and the sensation of finally
being near to him again, of finally having John under his hands—it makes him dizzy and maybe he
lurches just a little bit to the side because John is breaking their kiss, his hands coming up again to
grip Sherlock by the shoulders, pressing his forehead in against Sherlock’s chin as he struggles to
draw deep breaths.

“God, Sherlock—”

Sherlock doesn’t let him finish. He’s reached down to take John’s face in his hands so he can kiss
him again, more softly this time, reveling in the feel of that mouth under his own—all his—his
thumbs stroking over the hinge of John’s jaw.

His own pulse seems to resound with the rhythm of his relief, seems to sing to him: Alive, Alive,
Alive.

“Sherlock!”

John pulls away again, hands on Sherlock’s shoulders.

Sherlock lets his own hands drop to John’s shoulders so he can feel the rise and fall of his chest as
he draws each breath.

“We can’t—”

The regret in John’s voice is as visceral as ground glass in a wound.

Sherlock winces at the sound of it.

“I have to get back before they miss me. Anderson is on duty. He’ll be looking for me.”

Sherlock nods, unable to speak around the lump of sorrow in his throat.

“I’m sorry,” John says, his hand coming up to stroke down Sherlock’s cheek, voice catching as he
speaks, the sorrow there, so clear, is like a knife in Sherlock’s gut. “God I’ve missed you, you
beautiful thing.”

It takes all of Sherlock’s willpower not to lean in and kiss him again.

But he can hear the sound of footsteps now—clearly above their heads—the sounds of muffled
voices raised in conversation.

Sherlock doesn’t want to ask the question that’s pressing hard against the back of his mouth for
fear of what the answer will be, but he cannot stop himself.

“When will I see you again?”

John’s eyes flicker upward briefly as the voices above them grow suddenly in volume before
sliding back down to Sherlock’s face.

“There’s a plan in the works…” John licks his lips and Sherlock’s belly flip-flops at the sight.
“Tomorrow morning—I get off watch at six bells. I have four hours until I have to be back at the
pumps. I can come to you then.”

Sherlock’s heart swells in his chest.

It seems too good to be true.
“Anderson’s off duty then, so we shouldn’t have any trouble from that quarter. I’ll have Billy send word if I can—to confirm. The lads are going to help us out.”

The sound of footsteps overhead grows louder and then a voice calls from the fore hatch down the deck, from the top of the stairs.

“Oye! Johnny Boy? You all right?”

“I’ve got to go,” John breathes, squeezing Sherlock’s fingers hard between his own.

“Coming!” he yells, and then he’s pulling his hands out of Sherlock’s and stepping out of the alcove, but Sherlock cannot bear to see him go, not without one more kiss.

“John!” he whispers hoarsely, reaching out to grab John’s shoulder and then he’s pulling John’s body towards his own, kissing him one last time.

He can taste the sorrow in the corners of John’s mouth.

And then he’s stepping back, breaking the kiss, dropping his hands from John’s shoulders with reluctance.

“Go,” he says.

John nods at him through the darkness, the gesture sharp and curt, and Sherlock can see with it, John tucking all of his sorrow away again out of sight.

“Until tomorrow.”

And then he’s gone, moving down the deck toward the stairs with swift and measured steps, the line of his shoulders military straight, like he’s marching into battle, like he’s marching to his death.

Chapter End Notes

If you’d like to hear a version of the song John and his men sing in this chapter while working the pumps, here is a link to the song!

Sadly, this last month’s trend of me being able to post a chapter almost every week is at an end. I will be traveling to Sweden next week to participate in a three-week long intensive language program and I’m not sure how much time I will have to write/what kind of access I will have to the internet. I will definitely write as much as I can and hopefully I’ll be able to post a chapter before the program is over, but I just want to give you all a head’s up that it may be anywhere from two weeks to another month before the next chapter.

Thank you for continuing to be the best readers any writer could ever hope to have. And as always, please let me know what you thought of this chapter, if you can. :)
Chapter Thirty

Chapter Summary

Sherlock exercises his patience.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The walk back to Sherlock’s cabin is like a dream.

Later, thinking back, Sherlock will have no memory of how he made his way down the length of the gun deck and through the door to the passengers’ quarters without being seen.

Time moves strangely—it seems to pass without his notice—until Sherlock finds himself once again in the shuttered grey light of his cabin, hands clutched white-knuckled to the edge of his bunk.

He has no awareness of the world around him—every beat of his heart, every pulse of blood through his veins, every part of his waking mind is back in that alcove with John’s mouth on his, John’s hand on the small of his back, pulling him closer, John’s strong thigh pushing between his.

Sherlock sits on the edge of his bed, eyes shut tight, not moving, scarcely breathing, trying as hard as possible to ignore the details of his current physical reality so that he may better focus on the memory of the sensations that are so recent in his mind.

They are still so vivid—John’s lips opening beneath his, the heat of his mouth, the desperate press of his fingers on Sherlock’s arms—but with every passing second their newness recedes from him, starts to grow dimmer, and Sherlock cannot let that happen, cannot let them fade. It’s imperative that he remembers every bit of the experience, every taste and touch and smell of John, so that he can save each memory, so that he can come back to them when he needs them.

It was so little but he has had nothing for so long that to Sherlock now it’s like a feast of sensation and it takes him longer than usual to tuck each part of it so carefully away inside his mind.

He does not know how much time has passed when he opens his eyes again, allowing the details of his environment to bleed back into his awareness.

He feels faint—insubstantial—as though he left a part of himself back in that alcove, as if he poured something vital into John through the touch of his mouth and now he finds he does not know how to function without it.

A crack in the ceiling of his cabin is wide enough to let in a single beam of silvery light. Sherlock has observed that it is brightest in late afternoons. If he holds his hand just right, he can catch it on his fingers.

He does so now, turns his hand slowly, watches it ripple over his knuckles, the palm of his hand like a living thing as his mind resounds with a single thought.

John is alive.
He can feel it in his body like a pulse as he says it to himself, over and over, desperate to confirm its truth, as if in somehow feeling its contours and edges in his mind he will know it to be true.

John is coming to him tomorrow morning.

This second statement is less certain—more dangerous to believe.

Sherlock wants so badly, needs so badly to believe it’s true, but John only has so much control over the situation. There are so many things that could still go wrong.

If he expects him, if he expects John, and he does not come, the disappointment will surely kill him.

But try as he might, Sherlock finds that no amount of pragmatic caution can take away the expectation that John will be coming here, to him, in a matter of hours.

John said he would come at six bells. In layman’s terms, this means four hours after midnight.

Sherlock looks around himself in sudden agitation as it occurs to him he has no idea what time it is.

He remembers hearing the bells that made Burns announce the end of the sailors’ shift but Sherlock cannot recall now how many had rung out.

He left the afternoon meal midway through to go looking for John, and despite the fact that the time before his brief meeting with John, and after, feels like the difference between night and day, it can’t have been more than half an hour since Sherlock left the passenger saloon.

Sherlock calculates rapidly and feels his spirits sink.

It is sometime just after half past four in the afternoon, which makes it a little less than twelve hours until John gets off his shift.

Sherlock draws in a slow deep breath and holds it in his lungs for as long as he can manage before letting it out.

Twelve hours.

That’s no time at all compared to the days it’s been since he and John have seen each other.

That’s nothing, Sherlock tries to tell himself.

But somehow the prospect of those twelve long hours that he now must try to fill is more daunting than any of the separation they have so far faced.

Sherlock’s eyes crawl over the space of his narrow grey cabin in desperation, noticing for the first time how filthy the room is, the articles of clothing strewn about, the shattered fragments from the glass he’d thrown against the wall and never bothered to pick up.

He thinks about John, trapped for hours in the stinking darkness at the pumps, the length of fabric knotted around his nose and mouth to keep out the stench, how desperate he must be to spend some time above deck in the open air, and Sherlock wishes suddenly that John didn’t have to meet him in this fetid place.

If only there were a window he could open to let some in some light, some air—to chase the scent of mildew from the rotting wood. He wishes there was something he could do to make the dingy space more appealing.
With a burst of sudden energy, he springs off the bed and begins picking up the items that lie in
disarray around his room, and putting them back in their proper place.

There isn’t much to put away so it doesn’t take him very long—the most time-consuming task is
picking up the shards of glass scattered over the floor.

They seem to have gotten into every crack and corner. He’s almost certain he has found them all
but then horrifying visions of John slicing his foot open on an undiscovered shard makes Sherlock
shove aside the case that stands at the foot of his bed just to be sure he hasn’t missed a stray
fragment.

Sure enough, glass has somehow gotten underneath and Sherlock stoops down to pick it up when
he freezes halfway to his knees.

There, in the wall at the foot of his bed where his case was standing, is a hole two feet wide and
almost as high, leading directly into the cabin next to Sherlock’s.

Sherlock stands, immobile, for several heartbeats staring at it in shock.

He has not moved that case since the day the porter deposited it at the foot of his bed at the
beginning of the journey so Sherlock never noticed this blatant structural anomaly.

He knew the ship was old and falling apart but this—this is a new low.

Sweeping the broken glass aside, Sherlock drops down on his belly to peer cautiously through.

It’s dark in the cabin next to Sherlock’s, darker than his own dim room and he realizes, after
shimmying partway forward to stick his head and shoulders through, that it’s because the hole in
the wall leads directly under the bed of the cabin’s occupant.

Sherlock crawls backward, and after picking up the last shards of glass, shoves the case back into
place against the wall, where it obscures entirely the hole between the cabins.

Not for the first time, Sherlock thanks what little luck he has that the occupant of the cabin next to
his is the elderly Ms. Simpson. He has long suspected that her partial deafness is one of the main
reasons why his and John’s nocturnal activities have not yet roused any unwanted suspicion.

Between her and Sherlock’s other neighbor, Amesbury, who is a mercifully heavy sleeper
(Sherlock has heard his snores through the thin partition of the wall on many a sleepless night),
Sherlock feels he owes a great debt to whichever deity it is that looks after lovers on board
merchant ships.

Sherlock ties the glass shards into a handkerchief, and feeling emboldened by his own
industriousness, leaves his room to go in search of the steward to see if he can’t convince the man
to get him a bucket of water to wash down the floors in his room.

Pitiful as his efforts may be, it helps to have a task before him—any task—to take his mind off the
slowly crawling hours between now and the time when John finishes his shift.

However, Sherlock’s attempts to get the steward to give him what he wants are completely
ineffectual.

He should have known better. The man doesn’t like Sherlock—he never has—and he should have
guessed from the way his sly, sloping face twisted up in obvious dislike at Sherlock’s approach
that the man wouldn’t deign to give him the time of day much less grant him a favor.
He seems to resent Sherlock for the mere fact that he’s required to wait on him, as if he cannot stomach the fact that Sherlock is in a class above his own. His disdain is always present, simmering just under the surface of his smug expression; every servile gesture he makes underscored with blatant mockery.

“You want a bucket of hot water?” the man sneers before laughing openly at Sherlock’s request. “Well, I’d like a pair of gold cufflinks and a marriage to the Queen of Sheba but that doesn’t mean it’s going to happen, does it?”

Sherlock can feel rage tightening his throat. It takes all of his will power not to say something nasty in exchange.

He clenches his fingers at his sides and forces himself to speak in a cool and even tone. “What about a bucket of cold water then?”

The steward makes an unpleasant snorting sound, which Sherlock deduces is another expression of the inherently comic nature of his request.

“If you want a bucket of cold water then you’ll have to haul it up from the sea yourself. Otherwise, you’ll wait until tomorrow when it comes like it always does before breakfast.”

Sherlock shut his eyes.

The fact that this weasel of a man is what stands between Sherlock and giving John a decent place to spend his rare free time makes him want to hit the man right between the eyes. But it won’t do him any good to make more of an enemy of this man than he already is. He wills himself to count slowly backwards from ten.

“Now if you’re done asking me pointless questions, I’ll be getting back to my duties, sir.”

Sherlock returns to his room in dismal spirits. It’s only now that his request has been refused that he realizes how badly he could use a bucket of clean water—not only to wash some of the filth off his floors but to wash himself.

He finds himself thinking longingly back to the bucket of hot water John brought him after his illness—god, what a luxurious experience that had been.

Sherlock knows that hot water on a ship like this is perhaps the most rare and sought after commodity there is. He should have known asking the steward for such an extravagant request would be met with laughter and disdain, but god, what he wouldn’t give to be able to wash himself properly again.

Every passenger gets a portion of fresh water to wash with every morning; but the cold water that Sherlock splashes on his hands and face before breakfast just isn’t the same. And it’s been so oppressively hot that Sherlock feels stickier and filthier than he’s felt in days.

The worst part is his next ration of fresh water won’t be coming to him until tomorrow morning, after John arrives. It seems that cleanliness is something he will just have to abandon in his current circumstances.

Sherlock lies back on his bunk with a sigh.

He’s just given up all hope of ever feeling clean again when a knock sounds at his door.

When Sherlock opens the door he is delighted to find Billy, standing with two buckets in hand, his
face shining with eagerness.

“Mr. Sherlock, sir!” Billy gasps. “I’ve got news.”

The boy has scarcely finished speaking before Sherlock is ushering him inside so he can close the door behind him. “What is it?”

Now that they are out of sight of any prying eyes, Sherlock can see Billy’s barely suppressed excitement increase exponentially in volume.

He sets down the buckets he’s carrying and Sherlock eyes them with undisguised greed.

“I’ve come to tell you,” Billy says, his voice just above a whisper but shaking with excitement. “That the plan is going forward. He’ll come to you tomorrow morning when he gets off watch at six bells.”

It’s as if a wave has pulled him under. All Sherlock can hear for several long seconds is the roar of his own heartbeat in his ears.

*Tomorrow morning.*

Sherlock nods to show he’s understood.

“We’re going to keep a look out,” Billy says, the note of pride unmistakable in his voice, lifting his chin. “To make sure no one sees.”

Once again, Sherlock is overcome by the lengths John’s men are willing to go to bring him some measure of happiness. The fact that they are not only supportive of John breaking Anderson’s interdiction, but that they are offering to help make sure it is successful is beyond Sherlock’s comprehension.

The risk they are taking by letting this happen is immense. If John is caught, they will all suffer the consequences.

“And everyone’s agreed to this plan?” Sherlock asks, full of sudden doubt.

“Of course,” Billy says proudly. “It was their idea in the first place. When they first sat him down to tell him the plan, John wouldn’t hear any of it. He said it was too much for them to offer, that he could never ask that of them. And then Burns says, ‘It’s a good thing you’re not askin’ then, cause our minds are made up.’ They insist. They wouldn’t let him leave the table until he agreed.”

Something in Sherlock’s chest tightens painfully at the realization that if John’s men are this desperate to help—if they are willing to take this big of a risk on his behalf—John’s misery must be profound indeed if he is failing this badly to hide it.

“I was the one who pointed out that this time would be best because Andersen isn’t on duty,” Billy adds, looking so full of pride now that Sherlock is afraid he may burst. “They said I could help keep a look out.”

“That’s…” Sherlock is shaking his head, completely at a loss for how he can begin to convey his gratitude to this boy he barely knows, once again. What has he ever done to deserve so much unwarranted kindness on his behalf?

Nothing; Sherlock has never done anything to deserve this.
And then he reminds himself that they are not doing it for him, but for John, and that helps somewhat to alleviate the crushing feeling of debt that he will never be able to repay.

Billy is reaching for his buckets again, clearly eager to be on his way, and at the sight of them, Sherlock feels a brief twist of self-hatred at the fact that he’s actually going to ask Billy for something else, on top of everything he’s already done, but he cannot stop himself.

“Billy, there’s…” Sherlock hesitates as Billy looks up at him, his expression open and earnest. “There’s one more thing I want to ask you, that you might be able to help me with.”

“Anything, sir!” Billy says cheerfully, clearly still buoyant from the force of his excitement over telling Sherlock this good news.

“That water…” Sherlock says, gesturing to the buckets. “I’m assuming you’re bringing it to Miss Sommerset?”

Billy nods. “That’s right.”

“I was wondering… what are the chances of you bringing me an extra bucket of water this evening?”

Billy’s brow furrows momentarily as he considers the question. “Well… might be a bit difficult but… if I can catch Mr. Stamford before the dinner is served…”

Of course! Stamford is a friend of John’s. That must be how John was able to get the hot water after Sherlock was sick.

“Billy,” Sherlock says with sudden renewed urgency. “Tell Mr. Stamford that it's for me—John’s friend—Sherlock Holmes. Tell him it’s a special favor for me, and if he can spare it, tell him I’ll pay him back in triple—when I can. Will you tell him that?”

Billy brightens up at this request. “Sure thing, Mr. Sherlock, sir! If I tell him it’s for John Watson…” Billy smiles up at Sherlock. “I think he’ll be able to manage it.”

For what feels like the umpteenth time in the last four days, Sherlock feels like picking Billy up and shaking him with gratitude.

He refrains. Instead, he picks up the buckets and hands them to Billy, offering him what might be the first genuine smile he’s managed in days.

“Thank you, Billy.” He moves towards the door. “As usual, I am at a loss for how to repay you for all you’ve done.”

Billy readjusts the buckets in his hands. “Well, don’t thank me just yet, Mr. Holmes. Wait until I’ve brought you what you asked for, at least!”

Sherlock nods solemnly in agreement. “Certainly. Consider my gratitude deferred until delivery.”

Billy’s expression soberes as Sherlock pushes open the door. “If I don’t make it back to the galley before the dinner rush, it might not be possible. But I’ll do my best.”

Sherlock bows his head briefly in assent. “I’m sure your best will be more than sufficient.”

Billy nods to him with a determined look on his face before turning and making off down the corridor.
Sherlock shuts the door behind him, his smile still lifting the corners of his mouth.

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Sure enough, Billy’s best turns out to be more than enough, as to Sherlock’s inexpressible delight, Billy returns three quarters of an hour later, lugging an enormous bucket of water.

The water, although not steaming hot, is still warm from when Stamford heated it.

Billy is breathless with apologies, “I’m sorry, Mr. Holmes, sir. It was meant to be hot—it was hot when I got it but then I got held up.”

Sherlock refuses to hear any of this. Even a bucket of ice water would have been cause for joy—but this, clean and still slightly warm—it’s seconds before Sherlock can even attempt to stammer out a thank you.

Instead, he manages a deep nod of thanks, which Billy shrugs off, promising to return when he can to collect the bucket, and then Sherlock is left blissfully alone with his bucket of warm water and a closed door.

He still has the enormous cake of soap that John brought him all those weeks ago and he pulls it out now with something close to glee. He decides to wash himself first, and then use the remaining water to scrub some of the filth off the floors.

Sherlock has never been one to have religious experiences, or encounters with the divine, but the sensation he has when peeling off his sticky, sweat-soaked clothing, and kneeling, nude, beside the bucket, before submerging his hands into the warm water, can be qualified as nothing less than holy.

He washes his hair first—scrubbing soap into his tangled curls, sighing with pleasure as he massages his scalp, before working the knots out with his fingers, water running down the lengths of his arms to drip in splotches on the filthy floor.

He lathers the cake of soap between his hands and scrubs himself all over, thinking as he does, with satisfaction of all the weeks of sweat and grime and salt that he is washing himself clean of.

If he cannot provide John with a pleasant space to be in during his brief window of freedom, at least he can make himself as appealing as possible.

This thought makes Sherlock’s cheeks fill with a dull heat and he scrapes the soap extra hard against his thighs to quell the corresponding warmth between his legs. Now is not the time.

He tries not to think too hard about how he’s also washing off the unwelcome touch of Steven’s hands on his shoulders—around his throat—and finds himself wishing for one impossible moment that he could somehow scrub away the faint bruises that still linger on the skin of his neck so that he could erase every trace of the incident.

The soap is coarse and unforgiving—it stings, leaves a burning trail of red on Sherlock’s pale skin in its wake—but the sensation is deeply satisfying.

After he is done, his skin is raw and pink and tingling; it feels as though he has peeled away an older layer of skin to emerge clean and fresh and wholly new.

He uses the remainder of the now cool water to wash the floors of his room. He wishes desperately that there was some way to get fresh linens for his bed, but he might as well wish for the moon.
The chances of that are infinitely more likely.

He settles for turning the mattress over and shaking out the pillows.

It’s not much but it’s better than it was, certainly.

When Sherlock is done cleaning everything he can possibly think of, perhaps two hours have elapsed. He throws himself down on his bed and shuts his eyes.

Ten hours. Ten hours still remain between now and the time when John gets off his second shift.

Sherlock rolls over and moans into his pillow.

This is it. This is what will kill him in the end—after everything they’ve been through, these ten interminable hours are actually going to be the death of him.

Never has time felt so cruelly stagnant as it does now.

Even the unappealing prospect of the evening meal is still two hours away.

So Sherlock does the only thing he can do to pass the time—he retreats inside his own mind.

Perhaps in the time it takes him to relive every memory that he has of John, it will be time for the real John to enter his life again.

Sherlock shuts his eyes.

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He does not mean to sleep.

It must be a combination of the heat and the fact that he is worn out from worrying, the anxiety of waiting stretching him too thin, like a cord pulled taut, ready to snap at any moment.

That, and he finds he cannot concentrate.

He tries to lie still, to focus on his memories of John, but his mind this evening is undisciplined. It’s restless, roving out beyond his control, his thoughts un-policed, leaping in a thousand panicked directions.

His mind keeps circling endlessly back to his interaction with John from this afternoon, the way the weariness in him seemed to have blotted out the light, as though the darkness in his face was welling up from somewhere deep inside of him.

Instead of reliving his good memories of John, Sherlock fixates on this.

And he worries.

He worries that the sailors won’t go through with it, that they’ll decide it’s too risky at the last minute, that one of them will finally voice their fears and the others, forced to see discretion, will agree it isn’t worth it.

Worse still, he worries that they will go through with it, but that something will go wrong, that they’ll be caught, that Anderson will sense that something is up, that he’ll post guards the others don’t know about who will catch John in the act—one hand on Sherlock’s door, the ghost of a smile still on his mouth.
He worries Stevens will catch wind of the plot, that he’ll alert Anderson, or even worse—that he’ll lie in wait until John is on his way and then bring Anderson to Sherlock’s room when he knows that John is there.

But somehow (horribly), the very worst of all these possibilities is not that John will come to harm, but that John will not want to come at all.

Maybe John himself will determine that he cannot ask this kind of sacrifice from his men, that a few embraces with Sherlock in the squalor of his dismal cabin is not worth the devastation it may bring to the lives of an entire group of men.

And Sherlock cannot help but agree. He isn’t worth it. He isn’t worth all this trouble, all this potential suffering. He should be reasonable about this—he should stop the ridiculous plan before it starts, save them all the trouble.

And here, boiling at the center of his thoughts (as it always is) he finds the heart of the problem—himself.

He should be able to survive four days without seeing John Watson. After all, he’s lived nearly eighteen years of his life without any of this and somehow he’s managed just fine. He should be able to do it now with no trouble.

But somehow he finds he cannot manage it. And even if he could, he doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to be reasonable. He doesn’t want John to do the right thing, the nobler thing, and give up his chance of seeing Sherlock.

He’s always been a creature ruled by selfishness. He knows as much from the way his family’s always talked about him, “only ever thinks about himself” they’d say behind their hands when he burned down the library, when he refused to attend his mother’s dinner parties, when he’d disappointed his father by refusing a career in law—and this is no different.

Even if he knows that John coming to see him poses an enormous risk—that it could cost him his life—Sherlock’s selfish desire to see him, to touch him, overshadows this simple, brutal fact.

The thought of it makes him sick; but it does nothing to change the way he feels.

He wants John. He misses him so badly that four days without seeing him, without hearing his voice, without a touch from his hand, however fleeting, makes Sherlock feel as though a part of himself has begun to dissolve, to float away.

Without John, it’s like a part of himself is dying.

And much as he wants to say that his desire to see John is purely motivated by the need to bring him joy, to make him happy again (and it is, in part—it is), so much of it is motivated by his own need to feel the touch of John’s hand, to see the smile on his face, that look in his eyes that is only for Sherlock, the low breaking pull of John’s voice in his ear when Sherlock touches him, which sounds like the tide, which sounds like the root of desire itself.

All of these petty, human needs are devouring him; they’re eating him up from the inside so that Sherlock is ashamed to admit how much he’s struggling in the wake of their absence.

He should be able to survive just fine without them—he’s never had any of this before in all his life, and he was fine before that, so why is it so different now?

Were you fine though? asks a voice in Sherlock’s head, a voice he’s never heard before—a gentler
voice, so unlike most of the voices that speak to Sherlock. Or were you missing something all that time that you didn’t even know you were missing?

Somewhere in the midst of trying to find an answer to this question, Sherlock finds his thoughts blurring into dreams.

His dreams are just as anxious as his waking thoughts.

Every creak of the ship around him, every footfall in the corridor outside transforms in his mind to someone bringing news of John, bringing word that the plan fell through, that Anderson found him and strung him up by his wrists, had him beaten until he lost consciousness.

He dreams that Billy comes to bring him the news, wringing his cap between his hands, his face running with tears. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Holmes. I tried to stop him but I couldn’t—I couldn’t. There was nothing I could do.”

Sherlock, stricken silent with horror, is frozen where he stands. He cannot speak, he cannot move. He cannot even see Billy standing before him he is so blinded by the sickening tide of his own guilt.

He dreams that Billy leaves, distraught, and Burns comes to take his place, his weather-roughened features set into a mask of stone.

This encounter is by far the worse of the two.

Burns does not say anything. He merely looks at Sherlock—cold disapproval carved into every line of his face—and he does not have to speak because the words are there as clearly as if he had said them aloud: “How could you? How could you let this happen to him? What did I tell you? I warned you about this but you didn’t listen. No, your own selfish desires were more important than his wellbeing. This is your fault entirely—and yours alone.”

Sherlock wakes in a cold sweat, his guilt like a vice tightening his chest, and the sensation of his own self-hatred is so sharp, so real, it’s minutes before he can calm down enough to convince himself that it was only a dream.

He digs his knuckles into his eyes as if in doing so he can chase away the image of the look of disappointment on Burns’ face.

It was only a dream—not a premonition.

Even so, Sherlock is half-tempted to go find Billy and tell him to call the plan off.

Sherlock climbs out of bed, rubs his palms over his face in agitation as he begins to pace the narrow distance between the wall and his bed.

No, it’s too late for that now.

Judging by the quality of the light in Sherlock’s room it’s somewhere just past seven in the evening, almost time for the evening meal. Billy will be busy helping with the preparations and the upper deck will be crawling with midshipmen. There’s no way Sherlock can communicate with anyone on John’s mess without being caught. He will just have to wait and trust that everything goes off without a hitch.

Sherlock has never been good at waiting.
He sits back down on the edge of his bed and blows out a long breath.

Eight hours still remain between now and the time when John gets off his shift.

Sherlock rubs his hands back over his face.

If he survives the next eight hours, it will be a miracle.

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He goes to dinner just to give himself something to do.

Nothing noteworthy occurs.

He returns to his room. He lies on his bed and tries not to think about John’s work-worn face lost to darkness as he bends over the pumps, the monotonous rhythm of the continual movement up and down wearing away his energy, his brightness, his very life, as he forces his body to work and to work and to keep on working.

He tries not to think about the stench of the bilge water that John is immersed in and the closeness of the air, how difficult it must be for him to breathe in the warm, fetid darkness; how his back and shoulders must ache from the ongoing labor, how his mind must be screaming for something to occupy itself with.

Maybe it isn’t like that for John. Maybe because he’s used to it, it isn’t so bad.

But much as he wants to believe this is true, Sherlock’s encounter with John earlier tells him otherwise.

He’s clearly miserable and all Sherlock can do is think about how miserable he is and wish, pointlessly, that there was something he could do to stop it.

He tries to sleep again to pass the time but finds that sleep is beyond him. The tension of waiting is too much. What if he fails to wake when John comes to his door? It is not a risk he is willing to take.

As a last resort, he finds himself turning to the only thing that has a chance of bringing him some comfort. Even holding it in his hands is sometimes enough to quiet the chaos in his mind.

He falls to his knees beside his bed, groping in the darkness until his hands find the contours of the case, easing loose the straps and drawing it towards him with infinite tenderness.

When he pulls the instrument out and sets it on his knees, he feels some of the tightness in his chest ease slightly. He runs his palm down the curve of the waist, eyes following the movement of his fingers, the familiar sensation bringing warmth to some deep, cold part of him, long untouched.

He hasn’t played since the night of the sailor’s party almost a week ago, and the realization brings with it a sweet rush of memories from that evening, of the way it felt to play so fully and so freely, with so much joy in the company of others; of John’s face watching him, beaming, from across the room.

But just as quickly in the wake of all that sweetness comes a rush of bitterness.

Sherlock didn’t know, before that evening, the joy that can come from playing with other musicians. Until that evening he had considered making music a resolutely singular activity.
Thinking back, it’s clear to him how different the experience was, how much it was transformed by the presence of those people around him, how his playing was enriched and enlivened by the other musicians.

He does not know now if he will ever get that chance again.

This realization hurts more than he would have thought possible.

Sherlock lifts the instrument to his shoulder, settles it beneath his chin.

He wishes so desperately that he could play. It would not absolve him of his misery entirely but it would at least take away some of the ache, help soothe the jagged, grating edge of his anxiety.

So he does the next best thing—he goes through the composition he wrote for John without actually playing, placing his fingers on the strings, miming the movement of his bow with an empty hand, imagining he is bringing each note to life, hearing the melody in his mind almost as clearly as if he were really playing it.

The specter of the unheard music hovers in the air around him like a ghost.

It is almost enough.

He works through the whole piece—twice, before he puts the instrument away, fingers warm and burning; his head full of minor technical adjustments, his heart full to bursting with feeling for John.

There are several small changes that he does not want to forget, so he rushes to his desk, the pen clumsy in fingers still numb from playing, and he spills the ink.

In his haste, he overturns the bottle. He manages to right it before the whole of it spills out but the damage has been done.

He watches in mute horror as a black stain spreads in seconds to obscure half the page, dripping down over the surface of his desk and onto his chair.

All that time spent making careful edits to the fourth movement—gone with one careless gesture.

In a fit of juvenile fury, he shoves the ruined pages to the floor.

He only barely manages to restrain himself from flinging the inkpot against the wall of his cabin.

What’s the point? He’ll never have the chance to play what he’s written for John anyway, so why bother?

He buries his head in his hands, smearing ink on his cheek in the process, slumping forward over his desk in defeat.

This is where Sherlock sits, doubled up with misery, listening to the steady drip—drip of the ink from his desk onto the floor until his hands stop shaking, until he feels his fury congealing into a cold knot inside his chest.

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Afterward, he will never be able to say how he spent those last few hours—he has no memory of this span of time.
But somehow, by some miracle of the gods, one by one, the hours pass him by, until Sherlock is pacing the length of his room like a caged animal, anxiety pounding through him with every beat of his heart, listening, waiting for the sound of the ship’s bell to ring out four times.

Back and forth he paces the length of his narrow room, back and forth.

It seems that’s all he’s been doing for the past eight hours, walking and waiting. Some part of him is surprised that he hasn’t worn a trough in the floorboards from the number of times he’s walked back and forth.

Any minute now, it should be any minute now. He knows by the light—thin and insubstantial and grey—that it is time. Where is that damned bell?

He’s rubbing the ring finger of his left hand against his thumb—a nervous gesture that he usually isn’t conscious of—but Sherlock forces himself to pay attention to every detail of his surroundings rather than think about John bent over the pumps, his back and arms aching, reaching up to wipe the sweat off his brow with one arm, the sweat running dark into the kerchief over his mouth as he strains his ears for the sound of the bell.

When it comes at last, Sherlock freezes where he stands, presses his fingers to his mouth and holds them there, rigid as a statue until the fourth stroke rings out.

Sherlock closes his eyes.

It will take several minutes for John to leave his station—for the men to be sure that everything is in place, so that no one will see John as he makes his way to Sherlock’s room.

Sherlock can see it all so clearly in his mind’s eye.

They will head up the ladder as they usually do, toward the tables on the deck above where they often spend some part of their free shift before retiring to the hammocks hanging in the bow of the ship.

Their tread will be heavy with weariness, but this morning there will be a watchfulness about them that if you knew enough to look for, you would be able to observe in their body language, in the careful way they hold their heads; in the lull in their conversation, which is usually boisterous at the end of a shift.

But no one would suspect it unless they knew to look.

These men are fatigued beyond imagining. This is their fourth day in a row of working a double shift at the pumps. The casual onlooker would put their reticence down to exhaustion.

They will disperse before they reach the customary tables. One of them will head towards the hammocks, under the pretense that he has gone to fetch something from his ditty bag—his pipe perhaps (Sherlock imagines that it’s Stapleton)—it is he who will tap Billy on the shoulder, lightly, just once to rouse him from slumber, to alert him that the time has come.

Billy will slip from his bunk and make his way through the shadows at the edge of the ship, careful to remain unseen.

He does not need the light to find his way.

He is nimble as anything; knows every inch of this ship with his hands and feet, every uneven bulkhead, every splinter. Down he will go—careful to skip over the creaking step, to dodge the
low-hanging bulkhead at the top of the stairs on the upper deck—and down again, until he reaches
the cockpit where the midshipmen sleep.

There he will creep through the room, past the sleeping figures of the men, quieter than any
shadow, to be sure that Mr. Anderson is where they left him, facedown in a pool of spilled ale on
the mess table, sound asleep.

Stevens is a trickier matter—if they are lucky, he, too, will be sound asleep in his hammock under
the forecastle, snoring lightly beside his messmates.

Sherlock chooses to imagine that this is how they find him (he cannot bear it otherwise), and that
John’s men settle themselves at a table partway down the deck, in the glow of lantern light, where
they can see the shadows of the swaying hammocks; where they can watch who comes and goes.

Normally, they’d use this time to sleep, crawling, half-blinded with fatigue into their respective
hammocks. But not tonight.

Half Pint Lee takes up a deck of cards and deals, the tattered cards as soft as tallow in his work-
worn hands.

Matthews fills their mugs with ale—all but one sailor—who sits, waiting, at the end of the bench,
his body tense, eyes watchful, filthy kerchief still around his neck.

He is waiting for Billy to bring the sign that all is clear.

He doesn’t have to wait long, for Billy is swift, and it’s only a matter of minutes before he’s back
on the upper deck, sliding to a halt in the pool of lantern light to give John the signal, one quick
jerk of his nut-brown head.

John licks his lips, wipes a hand over his brow, and as casually as anything, he rises from the
bench. No one remarks upon his going; they are too intent on their cards. Only one grinning face
looks up to follow his passage into the shadows of the gangway, which earns him a jab in the ribs
from the whiskered frowning sailor at his side.

“My move, Ironsides.”

And then their voices are lost to John as he reaches the darkness at the bottom of the stairs, his
heartbeat roaring in his ears, drowning out the sound.

Down the corridor he will walk, softly—so softly—as carefully as he has ever dared to step,
listening all the while for any stray movement, any sound of alarm, every muscle in his body
tensed, poised for action, until he comes to a halt outside Sherlock’s door.

And now, now—he will lift his knuckles to the door—uncertain of how hard he dares to knock.
Sherlock should go to the door, should open it before he even has a chance to doubt, to spare him
the anxiety, but he finds he cannot move, he is frozen where he stands in the center of the room,
his heart pounding so hard in his chest he fears it will shatter his breastbone.

His eyes are still shut, fingers curled against his mouth—he can feel the sweat, slippery on his
palms, making the half-healed cut on his right hand sting—and then…

_Taptap._

The lightest rap of knuckles on his door—twice, in quick succession.
Sherlock turns; he moves to the door. He cannot breathe, he cannot think, he does not dare to dream that the person on the other side of the door is anyone but—

Sherlock pulls the door wide.

There stands John Watson, his grey outline nearly indistinguishable from the grey murk of the hallway; filthy, exhausted, the shadows on his face carved from weariness itself until his eyes meet Sherlock’s, and all at once the shadows are dispersing, and there is light pouring out of his face brighter than any sunrise.

Sherlock’s shoulder hits the doorframe.

The line of John’s white teeth are brilliant in the shadows.

“Well,” he says, and just the sound of his voice—that voice—god how Sherlock has dreamt of it—hoarse and low and full of want—makes Sherlock’s knees buckle. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

Chapter End Notes

I am sorry, my lovely readers, that it has been SO ABYSMALLY LONG between updates! But life has been very busy—and will continue to be so—until the end of this year. I will be spending the next month (starting next week) taking my TERRIFYING PhD qualifying exams which will keep me very busy, and sadly, will prevent me from writing (at all??/ at least as much as I'd like) for the next month. But if all goes well, I will be back after that, with a VENGEANCE!

Don’t you worry, there is lotssssssss more of this story to tell, so sit tight, I will be back to more regularly scheduled updates very soon!

Thanks for sticking with me for this long (especially through this past long spell between updates), and for loving this story as much as you do. You all mean the world to me. <3
Chapter Thirty One

Chapter Summary

Sherlock has a transformative experience.

Chapter Notes

For intensitycity.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At four o’clock in the morning, in springtime in the South Atlantic, the sun has not yet risen.

However, the sky will have lightened to a hazy grey on the horizon, and if you were to stand on the upper decks, you would be able to make out the first pale glimmer of daylight in the east where the sky meets the sea.

This haze of first light has not yet filtered down through the ship to reach Sherlock’s cabin but there is a different quality to the darkness at this hour—the shadows are paler, less substantial—and if you look carefully through the dark, if you let your eyes adjust, you will realize that you can just make out the edges of things.

It is into this grey oblivion that Sherlock pulls John—out of the murk of the corridor and into his arms.

Not bothering to speak, or to even look to make sure the coast is clear, just blindly reaching, seizing hold of John’s arms and pulling, until John is safely over the threshold of the door, warm and firm in the circle of Sherlock’s arms—a living, breathing body—alive and whole and here.

He knows that he should speak, that he should tell John he’s glad to see him, should let him sit down, allow him to catch his breath, to clean his face—ask him if he’d like a drink—but Sherlock finds that once he’s pulled John to him—he cannot let him go.

Sherlock wraps his arms around John’s waist, bending his face low until his lips brush John’s hair, inhaling deeply, recognizing the scent of John from yesterday—the slightly sour smell of his sweat, the rank stench of the bilge water still hovering about him; but underneath the unpleasant odor of exhaustion and overwork, Sherlock can still detect the scent that he recognizes as uniquely John’s and he pushes his nose deeper in against his damp hair and pulls the smell of John into his lungs.

He’s desperate for it; he cannot get enough.

“Sherlock…” John’s voice is soft in his ear, something there that’s almost vulnerable, so different from the rough but musical quality of a moment before; what Sherlock hears now sounds infinitely breakable.

He barely registers John’s arms coming up to hold him by the shoulders. He curls his own fingers
hard into the rough material of John’s shirt, feels where it is soaked with sweat at the small of his 
back, where the fabric is worn thin along the curve of his spine—holds tighter—feels something 
rising in his chest like a sob, like a gasp of relief, but he holds it in, pulls John closer against him.

“That’s alright.”

It’s all so unbelievable to him—that John is here now in his arms, his voice going faint as Sherlock 
drags his mouth up over John’s hairline to his forehead, hands tightening on Sherlock’s shoulder 
blades as if he too is seized with the same sudden disbelief that any of this is really happening.

The sound of John’s voice in Sherlock’s ear only makes Sherlock hold on tighter, makes Sherlock 
pull John closer against him, desperately cataloguing every detail of sensation that’s available to 
him—the dull thudding of his heart where it’s pressed against Sherlock’s chest, the rough scrape of 
his unshaven cheek against Sherlock’s neck, the warmth of his fingers on Sherlock’s arm.

He realizes he’s listing them in his mind—each living detail of John—cataloguing them, as if 
repeating them to himself will somehow make them more real, as though naming them will offer 
him the final irrefutable proof that John is really here—that he is not just a figment of his 
imagination.

“Hey. Sherlock…” It’s only when Sherlock feels the soft exhalation of John’s breath against his 
shoulder that he realizes just how tightly he’s holding onto him.

“Hey…” He feels John’s hands stroke up his arms. “That’s alright. I’m here, yeah? I’m not going 
anywhere.”

Sherlock nods, mouth still pressed against John’s hair. He tries to loosen his grip on John’s arms 
but he finds that he can’t; he’s not willing to let go.

John’s hands smooth down Sherlock’s back. “I’m right here.”

His throat is uncomfortably tight. This is stupid. Why should he feel sad now that John is here?

It doesn’t make any sense.

Stupid, stupid.

Get ahold of yourself.

“That’s alright.”

John’s hands are rubbing soothing circles up and down the length of Sherlock’s back. He 
concentrates on the movement—tries to ground his teeming thoughts in that soothing repetitive 
motion. But still his thoughts hum like a swarm of bees, listing every inch of John that he can 
reach: John’s hair against my lip, John’s knee against my shin, the toe of John’s right foot between 
my own.

“I’m here,” John says again, a trace of disbelief still evident in his voice, as if he’s saying it to 
convince himself as much as Sherlock. “I’m really here.”

But still Sherlock cannot trust his senses—he has been waiting for so long, has imagined this very 
scenario so many times he is afraid that he is dreaming, that this is all a hallucination—that his 
longing for John has finally driven him mad.

He needs some proof; some confirmation to convince him this is real.
Sherlock pulls back just enough to give himself room to speak but he does not relinquish his grip on John’s waist.

“John?” He hears his own voice break.

“Yes, my love?”

Sherlock’s fingers are crawling up the notches in John’s spine, each one a reassurance to his terrified brain that John’s presence is not merely a piece of his imagination come to life.

But still he doubts.

His voice is a low rush of urgency. “Tell me something you’ve never told me before.”

John’s startled breath of laughter against Sherlock’s chest is almost all the confirmation he needs. He’d forgotten—how could he have forgotten?—how breathless, how lovely is John’s laughter. It soothes the ache in Sherlock like a balm.

John pulls back slightly, looking up at him.

Sherlock can see the grey outline of John’s cheek curve upward in a smile. “I was five years old the first time I kissed a girl.”

Sherlock goes rigid against him.

“…Fifteen the first time I kissed a lad. I was drunk as Judas, but my god, I never knew kissing could be like that.”

Sherlock’s anxiety is returning to him as quickly as it fled, making him stiff as a poker in John’s arms. Why is John telling him this?

John’s hands slide down to rest in the small of Sherlock’s back.

“Since then I’ve kissed more lads and ladies than I can count, but do you know…?” John asks, leaning in against Sherlock, his tone teasing, voice lilting—bright as a spray of sea foam on a rising wave.

Sherlock can feel himself responding to it, body going pliant in John’s arms. Keep talking, John. Don’t ever stop.

John lifts one hand to lightly take hold of Sherlock’s chin.

He tips Sherlock’s face up, drawing Sherlock’s eyes to his. Through the gloom, Sherlock can see John’s eyes are as dark as the sea on a moonless night.

“Do you know that of all the kisses I have had—none of them—not one… has ever affected me like the ones I’ve had with you?”

Sherlock feels the warmth starting somewhere in the base of his spine. It travels up into his belly—up, up, and then down the lengths of his arms until he feels it blooming in his hands, singing along the half-healed cut on his palm, making the tips of his fingers, raw from playing earlier, tingle pleasantly with warmth, until he’s going soft with the sensation of all that warmth, as if some of John’s golden light has been siphoned directly into his veins and now he’s melting, his body unable to withstand its force, dissolving into one bright shimmer of heat.

All this and John hasn’t even kissed him yet.
His mind—in all its wild imaginings—could not invent a sentiment that is so distinctly John.

John is still watching him, his eyes on Sherlock’s face, fingers gently cupping the curve of his jaw.

Sherlock looks at him, unable to speak.

He can see something in John’s face changing, shifting, even in the dim light.

“My god…” John’s voice is a low exhalation of disbelief. There is a note of wonder in it, but also—something very close to pain. “My god, I’ve missed you.”

Sherlock can feel it—the disbelief—in John’s hands too, in the touch of his fingers on Sherlock’s cheek.

Sherlock makes a choked sound in the base of his throat—half longing, half joy—and John’s fingers begin to glide upwards, towards the hinge of his jaw.

“My god how I’ve missed you.”

Sherlock tips his head back, extending his neck, and he hears the sound of John’s breathing change—quicking infinitesimally—as the callouses on the pads of his roughened fingers drag over the soft skin of Sherlock’s throat.

“Will you think I’m completely mad if I tell you that these four days have been the longest of my life? Four days!” John laughs but the sound of it is utterly without humor; it is a breathless, desperate sound, like a man drawing in his first lungful of air after almost drowning. “God, Sherlock…”

Sherlock tries to reassure him but he cannot find his voice. He wants to say to John—so many things—but he does not have the breath.

“Four days…” John blows out a long breath, as if to calm himself.

His eyes on Sherlock’s face are shining even through the dim light.

“Do you know?” John asks, voice shifting again, dropping to a lower register that makes Sherlock’s toes curl in his boots, as his fingers slide up to settle in Sherlock’s curls. “Do you know what kept me going these past few days? What saw me through all the mindless work, the tedium of those long hours—do you know, Sherlock?”

Sherlock can only shake his head between John’s gentle fingers; his voice has long since left him.

“This. You. Knowing that I just had to make it through until I could see you again—and then, as soon as I did, I knew I would be well again.”

Sherlock’s throat is so tight it aches.

Leave it to John, it is always the way, that John is able to voice so eloquently the mangled thoughts that crowd in an incoherent cluster in Sherlock’s head—his heart.

“The memory of your body under me—your mouth against my mouth—that is what got me through.”

John leans in to replace his fingers with his mouth. At the touch of John’s lips against the underside of his jaw, Sherlock makes another sound deep in his throat, this time, a whimpering sound.
John’s mouth slides down the curve of Sherlock’s jaw, lips barely touching, his nose skimming the soft line of Sherlock’s throat.

“John—” is all he manages, voice cracking.

“I know,” John says into Sherlock’s skin. “I know.”

And then Sherlock cannot bear it anymore; he is reaching down to take John’s face in his hands and pulling John’s mouth up to his.

Sherlock kisses him as though it is the first and last time they will ever kiss, his heart hammering against his ribs so hard he is worried it will pound straight through his chest.

John’s lips against his are thin and chapped, but oh, how sweet they are to Sherlock when they part against his! When the warm pressure of John’s tongue pushes at the seam of his lips, and then his mouth is full of John, his fingers curling in Sherlock’s hair, the taste of the sea there in the reaches of his kiss, and Sherlock can feel his smile as it lifts his cheeks.

“God, Sherlock.”

It is John who breaks the kiss, pressing his forehead to Sherlock’s cheek and inhaling deeply as if to steady himself. Sherlock can feel his hands trembling where they hold his curls.

Sherlock finds John’s mouth again, kissing him more softly this time, hands sliding up John’s back to his shoulder blades to pull John closer in against him.

“I missed you,” he says against John’s mouth, so softly he isn’t sure if John will hear. But he knows that he does when he feels John go still against him. “I missed you so much I thought I was dying.”

John’s answering laugh is the sweetest thing Sherlock has heard in days.

“Oh, my darling.”

And then Sherlock’s cheeks are warm with pleasure because John has never called him his darling before.

There is such tenderness, such gentle fondness in the way he says the word that Sherlock feels his heart swell in response.

He leans down into John again, pressing his mouth against John’s, as if he can taste the laughter lingering there and draw it into himself to soothe the desperation throbbing in his chest. He needs to convey to John just how much he missed him; he needs to convey how badly he wants him now —and if he cannot do it with words, then he can at least try to show him in another way.

He kisses every part of John that he can reach—tiny, desperate kisses—along his jaw, his cheek, the corner of his mouth, his broad palms spread against the small of John’s back to hold John close against him.

John’s hands are still in Sherlock’s hair, fingers threaded through his curls; Sherlock can feel them tense in response as his mouth drops to the skin beneath John’s ear. He lets his mouth linger there, kisses him more slowly, mouth opening and then exhaling so John can feel the warmth of his breath.

He listens to John’s breathing change in response, grow more shallow, feels John curl his fingers
against his scalp, and the long line of pleasure that ripples down Sherlock’s spine in response to that slightest gesture causes his desire to leap up in him anew, causes him to momentarily forget his sorrow in the sudden blaze of his wanting John.

Sherlock’s kisses change from sweet and desperate to slow and wet and open-mouthed.

He no longer needs to think about which action he is going to perform next, his body, for once, is ahead of his brain; it’s making all the decisions for him.

He licks a trail up the curve of John’s ear, and then back down, pausing to tug John’s earlobe gently between his teeth, reveling in the tiny gasp he hears John make when he does so.

How can an ear be so erotic? How can it produce such desire in Sherlock? He does not know, but he could spend all day kissing John’s ears, lavishing attention on the skin around them, and just underneath, at the base of his jaw.

But there are other places on John’s body that he wants to taste—that he has dreamed of tasting, over and over again in the span of the last four days.

He finds his desire split between the twin poles of urgency and indulgence. Much as he wants to spend hours kissing each part of John, the reality of their situation and the limited nature of their time together still beats in the back of Sherlock’s brain, driving him onward.

He licks his way down John’s neck, delighting in the strong curve of the muscles there, the way the tendon stands out as John lifts his chin to give Sherlock more room, fingers still scraping gentle circles into Sherlock’s scalp, sending little ripples of pleasure over Sherlock’s skin.

John tastes of sweat and bitterness and Sherlock revels in it, much as it reminds him, with a clenching misery, of the horror of John’s last few days.

He is still wearing his working clothes: his dark blue jacket, worn thin from years of sweat and seawater, his threadbare linen shirt beneath, and the filthy kerchief around his neck.

Sherlock reaches to untie it with a sudden spike of savage fury, fingers shaking as he struggles to unloose the knot.

Sherlock hates it—hates how it brings back the memory of John’s eyes above the material, shuttered dark with misery, how it hid his laughing mouth.

He yanks the knot loose and then tosses it aside with perhaps more force than strictly necessary, eliciting a ripple of breathless laughter from John’s torso.

“I would say there’s no rush, but…”

John’s words are soft, his voice shallow with arousal, and they can both feel—Sherlock can sense it in John’s body as clearly as though it were his own, in the tightening of the muscles in his chest beneath Sherlock’s hands—as soon as John finishes speaking how quickly the humor of John’s sentiment dies, as the reality of their situation once again makes itself known.

The realization doubles Sherlock’s urgency and arousal both, and he drops his mouth to John’s, sliding his tongue in between John’s lips without waiting for an invitation, his own stomach pooling with sudden warmth at the low, animalistic sound the gesture pulls from John’s throat.

John’s hands slide from Sherlock’s curls down to begin tugging at the material of Sherlock’s neck cloth, and it is a testimony to John’s skill that he can execute this gesture so seamlessly with his
mouth still on Sherlock’s, his own tongue sliding in against Sherlock’s as he pulls the fabric loose without finesse and lets it fall beside them to the floor.

And then John’s fingers are snaking in against the delicate skin of Sherlock’s throat, moving so gently down the sides of his neck and into the dip between his collarbones.

John breaks the kiss to drag his nose down the curve of Sherlock’s neck, replacing his fingers with his mouth, his voice a low rush of longing against the skin of Sherlock’s throat.

“God, Sherlock…”

He holds his mouth there, reverently, hands on Sherlock’s shoulders as he inhales deeply. Sherlock can hear the weight of emotion in his voice. His breathing is unsteady.

“God, I missed the smell of you.”

Sherlock tips his head back, his own hands stilling on John’s chest. The sensation of John breathing him in, as though he is trying to somehow pull Sherlock deep inside his lungs, is so affecting, he can feel all the heat in his body drawn in a single heartbeat, down between his legs.

“When you sent me…”

John’s mouth is trailing slowly down the length of Sherlock’s throat. Sherlock can feel him pause and lick his lips against him.

“When Billy gave me your neck cloth, do you know… do you know what I did?”

The pattern of John’s breathing against his neck is making the flesh tingle all down his arms. Sherlock’s jacket and shirt feel too heavy against his skin; he wants to take them off but he does not want to disrupt the presence of John’s mouth.

Sherlock shakes his head.

John lets out a long breath against him, his hands sliding down beneath Sherlock’s jacket to hold him by the hips and drag Sherlock half a footstep closer against him, until his hips are flush with Sherlock’s thigh. Sherlock’s sharp intake of breath is followed by a low moan at the feeling of John’s erection—hot and insistent against him.

The ease with which John moves him closer makes Sherlock think back to the last time they were together, down in the shadows of the orlop deck, and how easily John lifted Sherlock in his arms, the bulge of the muscles in his biceps under Sherlock’s hands.

Sherlock’s own trousers are uncomfortably tight with the force of his erection, his breathing fast and shallow as John’s mouth slides up to Sherlock’s ear, his voice warm and heavy as his hand begins to pull loose the fabric of Sherlock’s shirt from underneath his waistcoat, John’s fingers sliding in against the bare flesh of his hip.

Sherlock gasps at the contact.

“I took it with me to my hammock, and I touched myself in the darkness, thinking of you, Sherlock… breathing in your scent. I held it against my mouth and I imagined you were there beside me, pushing into my hand, making the sweet noises that you make…”

Sherlock does not let him finish. Using his grip on the front of John’s shirt, he drags John’s mouth up to his own, pushing his hips forward into John’s as he does so, his own voice a low whimper
caught in his throat as John slides his other hand around to grip Sherlock by the arse.

“John—”

Sherlock pulls his mouth away only so that he can slide a hand down between them and spread his palm over the bulge in John’s breeches.

The length of John is hot and hard against his hand—even through the thin material—and Sherlock makes up his mind; he does not want any more fabric between them.

He’s not as skilled as John is at removing other people’s clothing; he needs to duck his head and peer down to find the fastenings to John’s breeches.

But John’s hands appear beside his own to help, and the feel of John’s calloused palms closing over the backs of his hands to guide him only makes Sherlock’s hands tremble harder with arousal.

John’s breath is hot against Sherlock’s neck as he pulls the last button free and then he lifts his hands away in surrender, leaving Sherlock to the rest.

Sherlock reaches down, and at the feel of John’s warm bare flesh under his palm, he cannot help himself; his eyes slide closed, his breath a low sigh of pleasure.

“Jesus, Sherlock—”

He feels John’s body tense, stomach muscles tightening against Sherlock’s forearm, and oh god, it’s too good—it’s too much—the length of John in his hand again at last, the skipping of his breath against Sherlock’s bared throat at the sensation of Sherlock touching him.

“John…” he purrs, oozing forward, all his bones turned to liquid at the heat of John in his palm, the iron-velvet feel of him.

Now it’s his turn to shift John backwards—two, three steps—until John’s shoulder blades hit the wall of Sherlock’s cabin.

He bends low to kiss John’s ear again, aware suddenly of his own great height as he must stoop to do so, his body folding around John’s like the petals of a flower. He wants to touch as much of John as he can reach, wants to feel John’s skin against his skin but he’s too focused on the feel of John’s swollen cock in his fist to pause what he is doing and remove any more clothing.

Instead, he shifts his fingers around the heat of John in his hand, reveling in how much he can feel—the subtle ripple of the raised veins against his palm, the beat of John’s pulse under his fingertips keeping steady time—and Sherlock thinks dreamily how John’s body is like a gorgeous instrument, how intricate, how finely made, and of the sounds that he can pull from John if he touches him in the right way.

John makes a bitten-off, gasping sound, and Sherlock looks up at him in alarm.

“What is it?” Sherlock asks, withdrawing slightly.

John’s head is tipped back against the wall; his eyes are shut. The light in Sherlock’s cabin is still dim but he can make out the gleam of sweat along John’s collarbones, his bared throat. Sherlock wants to lick them both.

“The way you’re touching me…”
John swallows hard. Sherlock watches the muscles in his throat contract; feels his mouth water.

John opens his eyes.

“It’s like… you’re memorizing me.”

Sherlock tilts his head and studies John, who’s breathing hard, his lashes low and heavy over his eyes, the collar of his shirt pulled wide to reveal the hard line of his pectorals.

Sherlock realizes that John—oh, clever John—is exactly right. In some subconscious way that’s exactly what’s he doing. He wants to memorize every inch of John to have with him always—especially this part of him.

“Does that bother you?” Sherlock’s voice is soft with fear. He’s always worried that John will finally see him for who he really is and utterly lose interest. Each moment that John spends with him of his own volition is a shock to Sherlock—he can scarcely believe that John wants to be here, doing these things with him—he never expects it to last.

John exhales an indignant breath, reaching forward to hook his hands in the front of Sherlock’s waistcoat and drag him back into place between his thighs.

Sherlock lets himself be dragged, heart skipping in his chest.

“Quite the opposite in fact.” John’s voice is so breathless he can scarcely get the words out. “It’s making it very, very hard for me to control myself.”

Sherlock’s own breathing goes shallow at John’s words; he refocuses on the movement of his fingers along the length of John’s cock. He allows the tips of his fingers to brush over the slit, which is already slick with moisture, his movements as careful as a scientist handling a rare specimen.

And that’s just what John is, Sherlock thinks, his thoughts blurring delirious again from the sensory overload of John’s vulnerable heat in his palm—he’s like the tender green plants Sherlock would collect sometimes in the woods behind the Holmes estate, brushing them so carefully between his finger and thumb as he studied the curl of the stalk, the pattern on the leaves.

He wishes now suddenly that the light in his cabin wasn’t so dim so that he could see John properly while he touched him; watch how his beautiful flesh would react to each new caress.

He listens to John’s gasps in response—the sounds so soft and almost… delicate—and Sherlock smiles as he tucks his head back in against John’s throat, inhaling the sharp scent of John’s sweat as he circles the head of John’s cock with his fingers, pulling back the skin to touch more of this most sensitive part of him.

John’s hands have shifted to grip Sherlock by the upper arms, his head tipping further back against the wall, eyes sliding shut again.

“Don’t… whatever it is you’re doing—don’t stop,” John slurs, his voice thick with pleasure, his grip on Sherlock’s arms slackening momentarily as Sherlock readjusts his grip.

Sherlock presses a kiss to John’s throat and then—he can’t help himself—he licks at the sweat gathering there and this time, John groans, long and low.

“All right all right I have a request,” John stammers, sounding drunk. “Keep doing what you’re doing but give me—” John shifts his hips, pushing them into Sherlock’s hand. “Give me more
force. I can’t—I can’t take much more of this.”

Sherlock acquiesces, swirling his palm over the moisture at the tip of John’s leaking cock with more pressure. John makes a sound Sherlock has never heard from him before.

“Jesus Christ—”

Sherlock uses the slickness now coating his palm to ease the friction of his fingers as they stroke down the blood-bright heat of John. He is rewarded with another low groan from John, followed by a string of curses.

“I never knew you were such a pious man,” Sherlock says against the side of John’s neck with a smile.

“I never was…” John manages, his voice breathless, but somehow also slow and heavy, the sound of it like honey pouring off a spoon, shot through with sunlight. “Not until I met you… you and your impossible hands...”

Sherlock tightens his grip and feels John’s fingers dig hard into his shoulders in response, hears his breath become a low hiss. He swirls his thumb once again over the sensitive head of his cock and listens with pleasure to the sudden, high-pitched sound it pulls from him.

“It’s like a song, Sherlock thinks, like playing a symphony—the range of beautiful and delicate sounds John can make, each movement of Sherlock’s fingers eliciting a new discovery.

He concentrates on the sound of John’s breathing in order to find the right rhythm, adjusts his grip and the tempo of his strokes accordingly, as he works to put himself in synch with John’s body. It’s vital that he get this right, that he gives John the most amount of pleasure he can, in order to make up for all the sorrow and hardship of his last few days.

It’s difficult, though, to focus, to not be completely undone by the experience of touching John Watson like this, of having access to this most intimate part of him.

The thick heat of John against his palm, the friction on his own fingers as they stroke, are as arousing to Sherlock as though they were around his own now full and throbbing cock.

How can touching John here affect him so much? When he hasn’t even touched himself?

But instead of being distracted by his own arousal, he finds that if he follows it—like a thread to guide him in the dark—it takes him exactly where he needs to go. It’s like the experience of writing music; allowing himself to move without fear from note to note.

He presses his hips forward against John’s waist, reaching around with his free hand to pull John’s shirt loose so he can slide his hand in against the skin, up, up along his spine, over the muscles in his back, needing to touch more of him, needing to feel the effect of his own body against John’s in every part of him he can reach.

Sherlock presses as he drags his hand upward, registering the change in John’s breathing at the movement, the clench of his fingers against Sherlock’s shoulders.

He can feel the tension in John’s back beneath his palm, the strength in John’s muscular frame held in check, the potential energy in his shoulders and back so powerful it’s like a humming under Sherlock’s hand.

Once again, Sherlock is struck by the contrasts that define this man, the darkness and the light that
exist within him simultaneously, that complement each other so perfectly; and once again, he is awed by the fact that he is allowed to see John like this, touch him like this, that John wants this with him.

The realization is as staggering now as it was the first time and Sherlock feels warmth suffuse him as fully and cleanly as stepping into a sunbeam.

*He wants this from me—he likes me touching him like this.*

John’s breathing is growing increasingly ragged, the grip of his fingers on Sherlock’s shoulders tightening, and Sherlock knows that John is close. He leans back slightly to look down at John’s face and what he sees there makes the warmth inside him blaze up into an inferno of heat.

John’s eyes are closed, lips parted, the grooves in his forehead thick lines of shadow, the fringe of his eyelashes dark streaks of gold against his paler cheeks.

Seeing him like this brings to mind the sight of him in the shadow of the pumps: face creased with grime, his eyes twin pools of sorrow, and the contrast between the John of then, and now, makes Sherlock’s chest feel as though it is suddenly too small for his heart.

Looking at John like this, feeling him now, under his hand, Sherlock can hear the movement that he wrote for John as clearly as though he were playing it—but there is a new addition, a complicated sequence of notes that burns through Sherlock like a light.

John’s fingers are lifting suddenly to his hair and Sherlock realizes that his hand has stopped moving.

John is saying something to him but Sherlock cannot hear.

There are ripples in Sherlock's mind—waves of white. Light and music curl around one another within him until he cannot tell one from the other—light and music, music and light. His hand must have started moving again because he can feel John's fingers tightening in his curls.

The bright feeling that this causes makes the music swell within him and he can feel the color of John’s hair—its golden warmth—the blue that is the color of his eyes.

He presses his mouth in against the damp silk of John’s hair, breathing, breathing him in, one hand between John’s shoulder blades, pulling John to him, the other warm around the length of John, re-establishing the rhythm that made John’s breath go faint.

He cannot distinguish one sense from the other—everything is bright, bright, blurring together: John's hot gasps against him, the feel of his hair under Sherlock’s lips, his fingers in Sherlock’s curls, the urgency of his breath.

Sherlock is adrift in feeling, fingers swaying; plucking notes from the air like chords of light.

John is speaking again, and Sherlock struggles to hear.

"Oh, my own, my beautiful boy—my pearl."

That is the shade, Sherlock thinks, mind sparkling with the pleasure of it. That is how it feels to touch John here, to bring him this feeling—the blushing sheen on the inside of a shell, flash of white where it curves.

Now there is a new color added to the others, to John’s blue and John’s gold—
Dark waves, bright sky.

And then John is coming, hips jerking forward into Sherlock’s hand, singing out his pleasure in a low, sweet cry in Sherlock’s ear, and all of Sherlock’s nerves are sizzling, his mind alive with music, behind his eyes an endless blaze of white, white, white.

Chapter End Notes

I'M BACK, GUYS!!!!! The gay babies have missed you, and so have I!

It is with great relief and elation that I can now report that I PASSED MY PHD EXAMS and life has gone back to a more manageable speed, which means much, much more time for writing about these darling petals.

More of this very soon. :))
Chapter Thirty Two

Chapter Summary

Sherlock voices his fears.

Chapter Notes

Warnings this chapter: Brief mention of wartime violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is John’s voice speaking to him that pulls him back to earth—no, not earth, Sherlock blearily thinks, as he registers John’s arms around him, holding him up—back to the worm-eaten wood of the ship, his dark bunk. He wonders briefly what it will feel like to walk on solid earth again, without the constant lurching, the sickening swell that’s always trying to throw him off his feet.

He feels a rush of something like shame at the realization that John is the only thing keeping him upright at the moment.

John is the one who just came, in a sweet burst against Sherlock’s wrist—Sherlock can still feel the warm liquid on his arm, fights the impulse to lick it—if his bones didn’t all feel like water he would raise that arm to his mouth to find out how it tastes.

He should be supporting John, stroking his hair, murmuring endearments as he recovers from the paroxysm that just shook him, not the other way around, John’s arms under his shoulders as he guides him toward the bed, his worried voice saying Sherlock’s name.

It’s not even that he came—not, at least, in the traditional way. He’s still rock hard against John’s hip.

John settles himself beside Sherlock on the edge of his bunk.

“Sherlock? Sherlock, love, look at me.”

With effort, Sherlock lifts his head.

John’s forehead is creased with concern and Sherlock feels his shame increase. He didn’t want this. He wanted the opposite of this; he wanted to finally bring John some measure of peace; not scare him half to death by somehow ascending to another level of consciousness.

“Are you all right?”

Sherlock nods. His mind feels slightly numb at the edges, still sizzling. The colors have receded but the memory of them lingers: pale ghosts behind Sherlock’s eyes.

The melody is still there too, fainter now, but Sherlock knows he will be able to find it when he needs it, each note seared into his mind as though by fire.
John’s concerned eyes are still on his face, searching. He reaches up a hand to touch Sherlock, gently, on his cheek. Sherlock feels warmth rise to the skin beneath John’s fingers.

“What happened?” Sherlock leans into John’s touch. “You seemed to go away for a minute there. You sure you’re all right?”

Sherlock nods again, shifts his weight so that John does not have to keep supporting him.

He does not know how to begin to convey to John what he just experienced—he’s not sure he understands it himself.

All he knows is that the experience he just had was overwhelming to say the least, but not bad in any way—good, it was wholly and thoroughly good, and very much to do with John.

He wants to take every part of what he just felt and tuck it carefully away inside himself, in the suite of rooms now devoted to John, to be sure that he does not lose a moment of it, but he refocuses on the John in front of him, the living, breathing John whose eyes are filled with worry, who’s still waiting for his explanation.

He struggles to think what to say to help diminish the concern in John’s dark blue gaze.

“I’m fine. I was… it was you. Touching you like that made me…” Sherlock searches for a word—any word—that might express what John does to him, how he changes everything, but he finds none that will suffice. He blows out a hard breath, frustrated. He sees the worry in John’s gaze increase alarmingly. “It was good,” he hurries on to say. “It was very, very good.”

John still looks doubtful. He leaves his fingers on Sherlock’s jaw.

“Well… that’s good. I’m glad.”

Sherlock can feel heat rising to his cheeks as the nature of John’s gaze shifts subtly, a lazy grin pulling at the corner of his lips.

“It was good for me, too.”

John’s touch on Sherlock’s face softens, his thumb sliding down to trace the corner of Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock shivers in response, his body leaning, as though of its own accord, to press forward into John.

“I think maybe it’s time…” John leans in to press a kiss to Sherlock’s jaw—so soft, it pulls a whimper from him. When John leans back, Sherlock follows him like a tree branch in the wind. “I think maybe it’s time for me to return the favor.”

Sherlock can only sigh in response as John’s mouth lifts from Sherlock’s jaw, his hand, moving now—warm, down Sherlock’s neck—over his collarbones, and sliding in under the fabric of his shirt.

Sherlock can feel, with vivid clarity, the texture on the surface of John’s palms, every callous, every bump and scar. His nerves are still singing from the experience of touching John, his awareness sharpened, so that even just the gentle progress of John’s hand over his chest makes his breathing quicken and go shallow.

John must hear it because he pauses; lifts his hand away to brush the curls from Sherlock’s forehead.
“You just tell me if it becomes too much, all right?”

Sherlock says nothing; eyes squeezed shut, as he concentrates on the soothing sweep of John’s fingers over his forehead.

“Sherlock? You must tell me.”

Sherlock nods, the echo of John’s words drawing up to the surface the memory of the first time they did this, how gentle John was, how aware of his every fear and insecurity. John is so good to him, so good at taking care of him. He only wishes he could do the same for John. Sherlock fights the wave of guilt that threatens at this thought, at the bitter realization that in fact he does the opposite for John, habitually makes his life worse.

John waits for him, humming softly, his fingers continuing to push the hair back off his forehead.

It feels so good—in spite of the clamor of his own distracting thoughts, Sherlock can feel himself calming, can feel his heart rate slowing to a steadier rhythm, the tension in his body receding.

“There’s no rush, love. There’s never any rush.”

But John’s words, although Sherlock knows they are meant to reassure him, have the opposite effect. With a jolt, Sherlock remembers the limited nature of their time together. He wonders, with a feeling close to panic, how much time has already elapsed? Half-an hour? Three quarters? More?

He opens his eyes, and reaching up, he takes the hand that is stroking his curls and brings it to his mouth. John looks at him, questioning, but beneath the gentle question Sherlock can see the hunger in his gaze.

The light in his cabin is brighter now; bright enough that Sherlock can see the dark circles of exhaustion underneath John’s eyes, the lines around his mouth.

Once again, he is seized with the desire to bring John some measure of peace, of comfort, in the limited time he can.

“I thought about you… a lot, you know. Over the past four days. Your letters, they—”

Sherlock licks his lips, eyes lowering as he is overcome with shyness at his own words.

“They saved me.” Sherlock swallows, nervously. “Without them, I’m not sure I would have…” He shakes his head.

John’s fingers find his chin and lift Sherlock’s gaze up to meet his own.

Sherlock sees his pupils, black as ink, have almost entirely eclipsed the blue in his eyes.

His voice is so soft he wonders if John can hear it. “Thank you for sending them.”

He is still holding John’s hand, lightly, in his own, and at his words, John readjusts his grip and squeezes Sherlock’s fingers.

“I only wish I could have written more, done more…” The sorrow in his voice cuts at Sherlock. “But that was all I had time for.”

Sherlock is not sure what compels him to say what he does next, whether it’s the intimacy of the semi-darkness, the reassuring grip of John’s fingers, or the force of John’s gentle gaze on his, drawing the words up out of him.
“I never had a chance to tell you…” Sherlock begins, realizing now just how much there is to say to John, how much he’s been thinking over the last few days but hasn’t been able to say. He swallows hard. He’s loath to broach the subject now but it’s imperative to him that John knows. “I never had a chance to apologize for… what I did.”

Sherlock has to drop his eyes again; he cannot bear to look at John while saying this for fear of what he’ll see in John’s eyes.

“For making all your lives so miserable.”

“Sherlock, love, what are you talking about?”

It’s like a compulsion that he cannot stop, the dark words welling up out of him without his control. “I was worried that you wouldn’t want to come. After what happened.”

John’s fingers find Sherlock’s jaw again, drawing his gaze up to his. His voice is full of gentle disapproval. “What nonsense is this?”

“It’s my fault. All of it!” Sherlock draws an uneven breath. “It’s my fault that Anderson is in charge of your mess. I never should have been with you up on deck. He never would have had cause to punish you if I hadn’t been there. It’s my fault you all have to work double shifts. He’s punishing all of you on my behalf. It’s me he wants to make miserable. You’re all suffering because of me and none of this would have happened if I hadn’t—”

“Sherlock.” John’s voice is as hard as iron.

Sherlock looks up at him.

“No more of this.” John shakes his head. Sherlock can sense the first few ripples of rage already building in the air between them. “The only person who is responsible for Anderson’s…” John hesitates, as if struggling to find a word that will convey all of his revulsion. “…idiocy is himself—not you. Do you hear me? This is not—nor could it ever be—in any way, your fault. Do not make yourself responsible for this. I won’t stand for it.”

“But your messmates! They must think—”

“They think Anderson is a festering tosspot, which is exactly what he is. And they know you’re just as free of blame as I do.”

“But—”

“It was their doing that brought me here tonight—did you know that?”

Sherlock nods with reluctance. “Billy told me.”

“Then you’ll also know that this was entirely their idea. I never would have dreamed of asking for their help in this—much as I might have wanted it,” John adds with a twinge of regret in his voice. “But they wouldn’t take no for an answer. They were determined that we get the chance to see each other. They’re keeping watch right now, to make sure the wrong people don’t find out.”

This information would be utterly baffling to Sherlock if not for the fact that he knows the real reason behind their dedication. It’s because they would do anything for John Watson. He understands the conviction because he feels exactly the same.

This knowledge still doesn’t change the fact that Sherlock knows their lives are all worse off
because of him, but he can tell that John will not tolerate another mention of it.

But it seems once Sherlock has shared his first dark, troubling preoccupation, he cannot stop himself from telling John the rest.

“I heard you…” Sherlock looks down at his hands. He’s too embarrassed to look John in the eye while he says it. “Singing up on deck. And I was worried…” Sherlock’s throat threatens to seize up but he forces himself to continue. “I was worried you didn’t want me anymore”—Sherlock feels John shift against him in protest, but he rushes on to finish before John can start speaking. “That you’d realized I wasn’t worth the risk. I thought that the song was a message for me.”

Now that he’s said it out loud Sherlock realizes just how ridiculous it sounds. But he has to say it—otherwise the sour fear of his own doubt, which seems to live inside him always, cramping his stomach into knots, will never leave him. Better just to get it over with—to give John the chance to get out now, if he wants to.

John’s voice is soft with shock. “Why would you think that? It’s just an old sailing song. It’s a favorite with the lads. I never meant it as a message for you. I didn’t even know you were up on deck that night.”

“I thought—I thought maybe it was your way of telling me it was time for you to move on. That maybe… you were just a little bit relieved that we didn’t have to see each other anymore.”

Sherlock goes on before John can interrupt, voice tight with misery.

“I heard some of the sailors talking the day I was trying to find Billy, to bring you my letter—and they were all saying.” Sherlock draws a sharp breath. “They were saying when the ship gets to Rio you’d have your pick of the women there… That once the ship makes port you won’t want anything to do with me. And I don’t blame them for thinking so!” Sherlock hurries on, heedless of how pathetic he sounds. Now that he’s started speaking he can’t seem to stop. “Because it doesn’t make sense, John! It doesn’t make sense that someone like you would be willing to risk everything to be with someone like me.”

Sherlock has pulled his hands out of John’s grip and he looks down at them now, clenched in agitation between them, his prominent knuckles white from the strain.

“Oh, Sherlock.” To his surprise, John’s voice, when he speaks, is full of sorrow. “You beautiful, brilliant, foolish thing.”

Sherlock risks a look up at him and he sees John’s face is full of a bone-deep weariness. Just seeing it makes Sherlock feel tired.

“What will it take? To convince you how much you mean to me?”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say. He feels a fresh wave of guilt wash over him at the realization that he’s just wasted more of their time together by giving voice to his petty, self-indulgent fears, when it’s John, John who has really been suffering.

As usual, it seems the only occupation he’s suited for is feeling sorry for himself.

Sherlock should be focusing on how to make John feel better in the limited time they have together, not giving John more reasons to stay far, far away from him by revealing just how broken he is—how wrong. But he cannot help himself.

As difficult as it is to reveal these parts of himself to John, somehow it’s worse not to tell him the
truth, to not show him all the ugly, jagged cracks within himself. It would feel like a lie, like a betrayal if he didn’t show John who he really is, and he can’t do that, not to John Watson, whose every breath is like a gift from the gods themselves, whose every step through the world makes it better, brighter, just from coming into contact with him.

Sherlock cannot live with himself if he does not show John the whole truth about himself, however ugly, however undeserving of John’s sunny regard.

John must sense some of the nature of Sherlock’s feelings; either that, or he just registers his stiffness, the sudden rigid quality of his posture, and perhaps he knows Sherlock well enough by now to know that when he holds himself like this it’s indicative of his self-hatred.

Whatever the reason, John reaches out to take Sherlock’s hand, and begins, very slowly, to rub his fingers over Sherlock’s knuckles.

Sherlock looks at him and sees that even though John’s eyes are on their joined fingers, his gaze is far away.

“I was so angry when I heard about Stevens. About what he did.”

Sherlock can hear the rage in John’s voice, making it difficult for him to speak.

“I was so angry.”

Sherlock waits, eyes on John, lost in the feeling of John’s fingers rubbing back and forth over his own, back and forth.

“I would have killed him. If the others hadn’t stopped me.” John shuts his eyes briefly. “I was so worried that he’d hurt you.”

“He didn’t—” Sherlock feels the lie stick in his throat. “I’m fine.”

“It’s lucky he didn’t.” John opens his eyes again with a long breath. “Otherwise, he would be dead.”

Sherlock remembers with fear the fading bruises like a collar around his neck, and is suddenly, savagely grateful for the semi-darkness of his cabin.

John’s gaze is back on Sherlock’s hand, his thumb still rubbing over his knuckles.

Sherlock can feel that John isn’t done speaking; that he has something important to say. There’s a change in his energy, a grave quality that Sherlock can feel in the air between them, similar to the way he can feel the electric shimmer of John’s rage. But this feeling is quieter, deeper, like an enormous body of water that Sherlock cannot see the bottom of; that’s still on the surface, but very much alive underneath.

When John begins speaking again his voice is slow and measured, his tone deliberate, as though he’s given every word a great deal of thought. He keeps his eyes on Sherlock’s fingers while he talks.

“‘You seem to have this notion in your head that I’m better off without you. That you aren’t good enough for me.’” Sherlock can hear the disbelief in John’s voice even as he says the words—the undercurrent of dark humor—and when Sherlock looks at John, sure enough his lips are lifting wryly at one corner.
John goes on speaking in that same slow, careful way.

“I’ve seen a lot of horror in my life—a lot of death, a lot of bloodshed. I’ve seen men flay each other to ribbons with bayonets; lose hands, eyes, legs from the blasts of cannons—bodies torn apart by shrapnel. I’ve seen an entire fleet of ships go up in flames—watched men leap burning from the decks to drown in the water below. I’ve seen men wasted by hunger and illness; men beaten to death for an offense as small as falling asleep on duty.”

John pauses, and Sherlock waits for him to continue, his heartbeat like a piston in his throat.

“But I’ve seen a fair amount of beauty too. I’ve seen impossible things—birds that swim like fish through the ocean, fish with horns on their heads and spikes on their fins, some as big as men. I’ve seen mist hanging over the water like a net made of liquid, each drop of water caught in its midst shining like a jewel. I’ve seen the sky up north where it’s so cold the stars seem to freeze where they hang in the darkness, sheets of ice as big as houses underneath the rising moon.”

“I’ve seen water so blue it hurts your eyes to look at it, and just under the surface, coral reefs stretching as far as the eye can see, in every color you can imagine and some you didn’t know existed—yellows and purples, blues and greens—and the fish that swim between them,” John shakes his head. “There’s nothing like it anywhere in the world.”

“I never dreamed I’d see such things on God’s green earth, and afterwards, I never thought any sight in my life could be more remarkable to me than all the wonders I’ve seen in my time at sea. Until one day, on a seemingly unremarkable voyage to the East Indies, just after the ship left Portsmouth, I’m up on deck, coil of rope in my hand, and I feel someone watching me. I turn to look and there’s a pair of blue eyes, so bright, so piercing, all I could think was how those eyes were the same color as that water in the South Pacific, how I never thought I’d see that blue anywhere outside that island, but there you were, watching me, your gaze so curious, so intense—it was like a light going through me—and in that moment I realized, that up until that point, I still had yet to the see the most beautiful sight on this earth.”

John’s eyes lift to Sherlock’s.

“It was you, Sherlock. It’s still you.” John’s mouth is soft but his eyes are full of fire. “And that isn’t going to change.”

There is a pressure in Sherlock’s chest like a dam that’s going to burst.

He watches the line of John’s mouth go hard again.

“Now, of course, it isn’t only up to me. If it so happens that you don’t want my company… so be it. I’ll accept it and move on. That choice is always yours to make. But there is no way—” and here John’s voice becomes a growl, his eyes flickering up to Sherlock’s like twin licks of flame. “—that you get to decide, on my behalf, whether I should stay. That is my decision and mine alone. Nobody gets to make that decision for me. Not even you. Do you understand?”

Sherlock nods; stunned.

“You’re welcome to tell me whatever you like about yourself, however dark or unpleasant or shameful you think it may be, even if you think it will convince me to drop you and run for the hills at the first chance I get, but I’m the one who gets to decide if I stay or go, alright? Are we clear on that?”

Sherlock nods again.
“Good.” John’s shoulders seem to settle. “I’m glad.”

As the air around John begins to cool again, Sherlock feels a bit like he has just come into contact with a wild fire and narrowly missed being singed alive; however, his reaction at this realization, rather than relief, probably shouldn’t be elation, and it certainly shouldn’t be arousal: a pleasant tingling sensation originating at the base of his spine and radiating outward over the expanse of his skin, leaving every inch of him hot and tight and aching.

“There’s no one in the world like you, Sherlock. Nobody.” John’s mouth has gone soft again as he reaches for Sherlock’s fingers. “And I’ll be damned if I don’t try with every breath in my body to help you see that.”

The note of steel in John’s voice as he says this makes the hot feeling in Sherlock’s chest leap higher, and he can feel a blush climbing up his throat.

John lifts Sherlock’s knuckles to his mouth, his voice a warm murmur against Sherlock’s skin. “You’re everything to me, Sherlock Holmes. And even if it takes a lifetime to prove that to you, I won’t stop trying. Not until you know.”

John kisses Sherlock’s fingers, turning Sherlock’s hand over to kiss the skin on the inside of Sherlock’s wrist, finding as he does so, the half-healed cut on Sherlock’s palm.

John smoothes his thumb just under it. “What’s this?”

It takes a moment for Sherlock to find his voice. He shakes his head, embarrassed. “It’s nothing. I was… angry. I broke my shaving glass.”

John says nothing in response to this but Sherlock can see the worry etched deep between his brows.

He’s ashamed now, thinking back on his childish outburst, his fury; of how he wiled away the hours like a wilting lily while John was busy keeping the ship afloat, quite literally.

“It was… difficult,” Sherlock says, embarrassed, but unable to keep the words from spilling out, unable to stop his voice from shrinking in spite of his best efforts. “I had… a hard time. Being apart from you.”

He can feel the force of John’s sorrow as he brings his mouth to Sherlock’s palm and presses a kiss to the wounded skin.

“I’m sorry that I left you alone,” John says and his voice is a river of heat over Sherlock’s upturned wrist. “Will you let me make it up to you?” He presses a kiss against the thin skin and it’s as though the heat from John’s mouth has been siphoned directly into Sherlock’s veins. “Will you?”

Sherlock can only gasp in response and nod his head.

His arousal had flagged in the wake of their conversation but he can feel it returning now at the bare need in John’s voice, the tender press of his mouth.

“Let me make it up to you. You’re not alone anymore. I’m here now. I’m here.”

John pushes the sleeve of Sherlock’s shirt up to his elbow so that he may kiss his way up the inside of Sherlock’s arm, following the pale blue lines of Sherlock’s veins until he reaches the skin of Sherlock’s inner elbow.
The kisses are warm and slow and wet and by the time John’s mouth reaches the folded sleeve of his shirt, Sherlock is shivering hard despite the heat of the room.

John straightens up then, and leans in to kiss the side of Sherlock’s neck, fingers alighting on the buttons of his waistcoat.

John’s voice is a warm rush against Sherlock’s skin. “Can I take this off?”

Sherlock’s response is equally rushed. “Yes. God—yes.”

His fingers join John’s to make short work of the buttons—so many buttons, too many—but they are all undone at long last and John is pushing the garment off his shoulders to drop onto the bed behind him in a puddle of expensive silk.

“And this?” John asks, voice low and heavy as his hands slide down Sherlock’s ribs to his hips to reach for the hem of his shirt.

“Yes,” Sherlock gasps, breathless, lifting his arms to make it easier for John.

“Good,” John says, and Sherlock hears something in his voice give way as he pulls the shirt over Sherlock’s head. “Because I need this. I need you right now.”

At the change in John’s voice, Sherlock feels heat burst open in his chest. He can feel his arousal now, beating in him like a pulse.

John’s hands smooth down the planes of Sherlock’s chest, thumbs brushing Sherlock’s nipples, making him gasp and sit up a little straighter on the bed, parting his thighs to make room for the growing bulge between his legs.

John kisses the flushed skin of his throat, hands sliding down over Sherlock’s ribs, the heat of his rough palms creating a lovely friction.

“God, I missed you, Sherlock Holmes.” John murmurs, mouth sliding warm down Sherlock’s sternum, lips tracing the chain of his mother’s locket. He kisses the place where it rests in the hollow of Sherlock’s breastbone. “There is no one—there is nothing more beautiful than you on this earth.”

Sherlock’s breath is hitching, his hands hovering in the air above John’s head, uncertain where to let them rest as John’s lips trace the curve of his pectoral.

“I... I took a bath for you,” Sherlock says, struggling to get the words out as John’s lips glide just under his nipple. “I asked Stamford to give me water. I told Billy to tell him it was a favor for John Watson’s friend. I never would have asked but I wanted—”

Sherlock catches his breath as John’s mouth closes around his nipple. He feels John’s tongue lap over it and completely loses his train of thought.

John’s palms are stroking up Sherlock’s sides, the thumb of his right hand brushing over Sherlock’s other nipple as he gives the one currently in his mouth another leisurely lick.

“What did you want, my love?” John asks, drawing back slightly to look up at Sherlock. His breath against Sherlock’s now very erect nipple makes Sherlock’s mind go blank again.

“I wanted...”
John presses a kiss to his ribs, as if he can’t help himself. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry you have to spend your... your free hour in my squalid...” Sherlock stops to catch his breath again as John's mouth begins to press slow, open-mouthed kisses to the skin stretched under his ribs. “In my squalid cabin,” Sherlock gasps.

John leans back to look up at Sherlock, his hands stilling where they rest on Sherlock’s flanks. His eyes are glittering in the grey light. “I don’t have to spend my time here, Sherlock—”

Before John can finish the sentence Sherlock feels his stomach flutter at the hard edge in John’s voice, feels something in him shrink with the awareness that he’s upsetting John again.

John must see the change in Sherlock’s face because all at once his voice is softening, his palms smoothing up Sherlock’s thighs with utmost tenderness. “No more of that, remember? I'm here because I want to be here.”

Sherlock nods to show he’s understood, unable to speak around the sudden pressure in his throat.

John dips his head again to press a kiss to Sherlock's belly. “Being here with you is all I've wanted in the last four days. I could hardly think through the wanting.”

Sherlock is still holding his hands uncertainly by his sides, overwhelmed by how many places on John he still wants to touch.

“Put your hands in my hair,” John murmurs, reaching up to take Sherlock’s restless hands and settling them there.

Sherlock clenches the fine white gold strands between his fingers and sighs. It feels like spun silk.

Softly, so softly John is kissing the skin below Sherlock’s ribs, as though with each kiss he wants to tell Sherlock how much he feels for him, how much he wants this; his mouth descending inch by breath-taking inch toward Sherlock's groin.

Sherlock closes his eyes in an effort to ignore all of the distracting, self-conscious thoughts clamoring in his brain; tries to concentrate instead on the feeling of John’s mouth against him, John’s palms hot on his thighs.

Sherlock shifts his hips against the bed. “What I wanted to say was—since you have to be here with me in this unpleasant place, the least I could do was... What I mean is...” Sherlock licks dry lips. “I wanted to be clean for you.”

John groans from where his mouth is pressed against the skin of Sherlock’s belly, the warmth of the exhalation sending a frisson of heat over his bare skin.

He sits back to look at Sherlock. The blue of his eyes is the color of the sky at first light on a winter morning. He reaches out a hand to settle in Sherlock’s curls. “You absolute beauty.”

Sherlock’s response to the touch of John’s hand in his hair is immediate. He feels warmth flood him, spine curving as he arches back into John’s embrace.

He presses a kiss to the flushed skin of Sherlock’s throat. “Do you know how I dreamed of the scent of you? The taste of you?"

John’s hands have returned to Sherlock’s thighs, his warm mouth opening now against the pulse at the base of Sherlock’s throat, dragging down, down, down.
“It’s all I thought about those long hours at the pumps—the curve of your neck, the taste of your lips, the smell of your curls. Do you know how good you smell, Sherlock?”

Sherlock shakes his head, arching up into the warm press of John’s mouth, his hands gripping John’s shoulders as his mouth slides down over the skin of Sherlock’s ribs towards his belly.

“You smell like everything good in the world. Like sweet grass; new flowers; like sunlight through the trees late on a summer evening.”

Sherlock can feel himself blushing at John’s words. The things John is saying… they should sound completely inane, but coming from John’s mouth, in his low voice, deep in his throat, slightly rough—it turns Sherlock’s bones to jelly, makes him squirm against the mattress in an unconscious effort to find some relief for the throbbing heat between his legs.

“You’re my rose, evening blooming, soft petals opening only to me.”

John’s mouth has reached the waist of Sherlock’s trousers, his hands sliding up Sherlock’s thighs to hover over the buttons. Sherlock leans back to place his hands behind him on the bed, lifting his hips slightly to give John the space he needs to pull the fastenings apart.

But, maddeningly, John’s hands are moving again, back down Sherlock’s thighs towards his knees, and John is sitting up, lifting his mouth away from Sherlock’s belly.

Sherlock is about to voice his displeasure at this sudden turn of events, thighs tensing under the dragging heat of John’s palms, cock pulsing against the confines of his trousers, but his protest dies in his throat as he watches John slide off the bed and onto his knees between Sherlock’s spread legs, his lips lifting in a wicked smile.

“Have to take your boots off first, don’t I?”

John presses a kiss to the inside of one trembling knee, and Sherlock only just stops himself from making a completely embarrassing noise by biting his lip.

“I don’t want a scrap of clothing on you,” John says, kissing Sherlock’s other knee so softly that Sherlock has to bite his lip again. “I need to see all of you, every lovely inch, my rosebud, my moonbeam, my evening flower.”

Sherlock’s face is so hot from John’s words that he has to hide it behind his hands.

John does not seem to notice; he’s too intent on tugging off Sherlock’s boots, and setting them aside.

“Much better,” he murmurs once he’s finished, stroking Sherlock’s calves, running his hands back up Sherlock’s thighs.

He makes a low noise of pleasure as his hands move over the soft material of Sherlock’s trousers.

“You know, I’ve always been a fan of these buckskin trousers of yours. Not least because of the way they feel…”

John’s hands are traveling up and up, thumbs just tracing the grooves of Sherlock’s pelvis.

Sherlock makes a whimpering sound.

“But mostly because of the way they fit you, so snug…” John’s thumbs are dragging over the
bulge of Sherlock’s trapped cock, and Sherlock cannot stand it anymore. He presses his hips up into John’s hands, dropping his hands back behind him on the bed with a strangled sound.

“John.”

“Yes, yes, yes, you’re right. It’s time, isn’t it?” John says with pity in his voice, but his thumb is still moving so lightly, so delicately over the outline of Sherlock’s cock. “You’ve been so patient and good.”

Sherlock makes another strangled sound. He can feel the flush that’s spread from his throat down to his chest radiating heat. He can’t remember the last time he was this aroused. If John doesn’t touch his cock soon—no—right now, he might actually die.

“John,” he pleads, not bothering to hide the need in his voice as John’s thumb begins to apply more pressure.

“Look at you,” John says as his fingers begin to work at the buttons, the naked desire in his voice affecting Sherlock almost as much as the presence of the heel of John’s hand which has finally, finally begun stroking Sherlock in earnest through his trousers. The friction of the soft material under John’s rough palm is almost more than Sherlock can bear.

He makes a low noise of relief, knees jerking reflexively at the first brush of John’s fingers against his bare cock.

“John, please.”

“Easy, easy, easy.” John’s voice is a sigh, gentle enough to accompany the soft movement of his hands, as they start to ease the material down Sherlock’s hips.

“Lift your hips for me now.”

Sherlock does as John says, leaning his weight back on his elbows to give him more leverage.

“There’s a good lad.”

Sherlock can feel himself warming at the note of approval in John’s voice, at the almost palpable presence of John’s gaze. He tips his head back in pleasure at the sensation of the snug material sliding down his thighs.

John is right—these trousers are the tightest Sherlock owns; he knows how flattering they are. He chose them deliberately. Although Sherlock may be nowhere near as well endowed as John Watson, he knows how to display the assets he does possess to their best advantage.

But for that very reason they are awfully… restrictive, and between his erection and the heat of the tropical morning, the relief he feels at finally being free of them is profound.

The light in Sherlock’s cabin is still thin and grey, but it’s bright enough that Sherlock can see the hunger in John’s gaze as he pulls the trousers down Sherlock’s calves and tosses them away.

Sherlock watches John through lowered lashes, feeling none of the shyness he felt the first time John undressed him (was it really just a week ago? It feels like another century); instead, he can feel his arousal growing under the weight of John’s eyes, with the awareness that he is now completely nude in front of John, thighs spread apart in offering under John’s warm palms.

Even though the sun has scarcely risen, the thick weight of the tropical heat that has been with
them these last weeks is as palpable as ever and it’s hot enough that Sherlock can see the fine sheen of sweat on his own chest, can feel it beading his hairline, the skin of his upper lip.

He can hear John’s breathing, low and rapid, growing shallower at the sight of Sherlock stretched out before him, his eyes moving over Sherlock’s narrow hips, the dramatic curves of his ribs, the flushed head of his cock glistening where it rests against his belly.

“My god, look at you.”

Sherlock thinks about John calling him a flower, how those words should embarrass him, but instead, he feels the truth of them now: he can feel himself blooming under John’s gaze, his body opening to invite him in, like a flower in the presence of the sun.

“You told me…” John says, settling his hands on Sherlock’s knees, thumbs stroking gently at the skin of Sherlock’s inner thighs, making him shiver and fight the impulse to buck his hips. His eyes are grave where he looks up at Sherlock. “In your letter, you said you did a different kind of exercise... that you wished I could have been there to assist you. Is that true?”

John bends to press a kiss to Sherlock’s hip, and this time, Sherlock cannot stop his hips from jerking in response, a low whimper issuing from his throat.

John straightens up; licks his lips. “Will you show me? What you did?” The hunger in his voice is unmistakable. “How you touched yourself when you thought of me?”

Sherlock’s response to John’s request is a low groan—even the suggestion of it makes his cock twitch against his belly, makes his fingers clench at the sheets under him.

He cannot find the words to respond so he nods again, fingers creeping over his own hip to take himself in hand.

Sherlock is suddenly immensely grateful for John’s request. The longing in John’s eyes, in the pitch of his voice alone would be enough to make Sherlock want to touch himself, but to know that John wants this, John wants to see him take himself in hand—it makes the heat bloom in Sherlock’s cheeks, even as the arousal in him sharpens to an almost unbearable pitch.

Normally he would feel too self-conscious to do what John asked, but not now, with John’s eyes on him like this, warm and dark, his hands sliding up Sherlock’s thighs to frame his hips as Sherlock begins to stroke, almost weeping from relief at the direct contact, finally, after what feels like an eternity of waiting.

The touch of his own hand after so long with no contact is so intense that Sherlock lets his head drop back, his eyes sliding shut, hips lifting slightly off the bed to meet each stroke of his hand in an effort to provide more friction.

Even as he does so, he feels John’s mouth descend to press a kiss to the skin of his inner thigh, warm and open-mouthed and wet; and then he feels John’s voice murmuring against the skin of his thigh, his voice reverent and low.

“You’re so beautiful like this—so unbelievably beautiful.”

Another wet and sliding kiss; Sherlock’s fingers tighten around himself. He can feel John’s warm and rapid breath against him as his mouth slides further up Sherlock’s thigh, fingers curling in the hair at Sherlock’s groin as they move closer, and Sherlock nearly chokes on his own startled, indrawn breath.
“I can’t believe I get to see you like this. How lucky am I? How lucky how lucky…”

John’s question becomes a warm chant against Sherlock’s skin, pausing only in his questioning to suck the softest kiss into the tender place right at the juncture of Sherlock’s thigh and buttocks; his fingers so close to the base of Sherlock’s cock that their fingers meet on Sherlock’s every downward stroke.

Sherlock whimpers, biting his lip, his other hand fistling in the sheets.

“John,” he gasps, needing more of John somehow, but not knowing what or where or how—just more—his mind beginning to blur into one long cry of need.

John’s mouth is traveling upward, along the crease of Sherlock’s hip, and he is speaking again, a different quality to his voice, incantatory, almost like a song, and then Sherlock realizes he is quoting poetry.

“ ‘Though absent long, these forms of beauty have not been to me, as is a landscape to a blind man’s eye: But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din of towns and cities, I have owed to them, in hours of weariness, sensations sweet, felt in the blood, and felt along the heart, and passing even into my purer mind with tranquil restoration: —feelings too of unremembered pleasure...’ ”

He wants to ask John, who or what, but before he can begin to summon the breath for his question he feels John’s warm hands closing over his own, gently lifting his hand away, and then Sherlock’s mind dissolves into a black sparking canvas of pleasure as he feels John’s mouth move in to replace his hands, lips opening and sliding down around the head of Sherlock’s cock in one long reverent stroke.

Sherlock cries out, both hands now clenching desperately in the sheets as he fights with his body not to give into the rising pleasure within him; he doesn’t want it to be over yet—not now that his universe has narrowed to the sensations of John’s warm wet mouth around him, encompassing him, John’s clever tongue curling around the underside of his cock even as his mouth slides further down.

It’s so good—it feels so good—and just when Sherlock is certain that nothing could ever feel better than this, John’s hands are taking Sherlock by the hips to drag him further down the bed, pulling his body closer, and then, one by one, John is lifting Sherlock’s legs to drape them over his shoulders, his hands sliding down to grip Sherlock’s arse and slowly knead the muscled flesh.

Sherlock cries out again, hitching himself up on his elbows and opening his eyes to look down at the sight of John, golden head bent over Sherlock’s cock, Sherlock’s legs around his shoulders, the muscles in his arms standing out as he massages Sherlock’s arse.

Sherlock wants to burn the image into his memory so that he never forgets the magnificence of John Watson in this moment, but then John’s mouth is moving slowly back up the length of his cock, creating lovely suction, and then John’s tongue is licking at the slit in the head and Sherlock cannot remain upright.

He collapses back against the bed, knees tightening against John’s shoulders as John swallows Sherlock down again, hips bucking shamelessly up into John’s mouth, seeking more heat, more warmth.

“I’m sorry,” he slurs, one arm thrown over his eyes to hide the burning flush on his cheeks, ashamed of how wantonly he’s thrusting up against John, how hard he’s gripping him with his legs. He has become a creature of pure need. He can feel his heartbeat in every inch of his cock, so
heavy in John’s mouth.

But John, lovely John, does not seem to mind.

In answer, he swallows down another inch of Sherlock, tongue stroking every bit of Sherlock he can reach, fingers slipping in the crease of Sherlock’s buttocks as he hauls Sherlock’s body closer up against his mouth.

He begins to bob his head in a steady rhythm, sliding his mouth up and down, creating the perfect amount of slick wet friction. Finally, finally, it’s just the right amount of speed, of pressure.

He digs his heels in against John’s back, thighs clenching to keep from rocking his hips up into John’s mouth. It takes every ounce of self-control he has to keep his hips still but he does not want to choke John, not with Sherlock so deep in his mouth.

He can feel the sweat pouring down his torso from the effort; damp curls clinging to his cheeks.

John must sense his struggle from the tension in his body because suddenly his hands on Sherlock’s arse are pushing gently, coaxing his hips to thrust in the same rhythm as the movement of his mouth.

Sherlock does not need any more encouragement. He lets himself go, thrusting up as deeply as he can into the welcome wet heat of John’s mouth. The resulting sensation is so intense Sherlock feels the pleasure in him cresting like a wave.

“Heart—John!” he gasps in warning, and then John’s hand is reaching up to take hold of his where it’s grasping at the sheets, tangling their fingers together as Sherlock’s pleasure bursts open within him like a flood, coursing outward from the center of his body in wave after shuddering wave.

Distantly, he can hear his own incoherent sounds of pleasure, his cries alarming even to his own ears, nearly sobbing in his relief.

Time becomes strange—seems to splinter and dissolve for an indeterminable period as he sinks back into the heat of his trembling body, and down against the sweat-soaked sheets.

He registers John, gently arranging him so that he’s no longer dangling off the bed, and then pulling off the remainder of his own clothing, before crawling in alongside Sherlock and gathering him in his arms, turning to face him and placing a kiss on each of his flushed cheeks.

Sherlock feels sleepy and heavy and sticky with sweat.

He tries to open his mouth to tell John how glorious that was, but his tongue feels as heavy and sleepy as the rest of him.

John reaches up to smooth his curls off of his damp forehead.

“Don’t worry, love. I know.”

Even though Sherlock’s body is flushed and sticky, it does not change his desire to be as close to John as possible. He pushes his face into John’s hand, wriggling his hips until his torso is slotted in against John’s.

John has his arm around Sherlock’s waist. “I’m glad it was so good.”

Sherlock tucks his face into the space between John’s chin and shoulder and inhales deeply, before
nodding in agreement.

John pushes the curls off his forehead again, slow and meditative, his fingers stroking Sherlock’s scalp.

Sherlock hums in pleasure.

He wants to tell John that it wasn’t just good—it was the best it’s ever been, that John is a god among men, that he deserves sonnets, laurel crowns, whole nations bowing down to him in reverence, but with every stroke of John’s fingers the words become harder to form.

The feeling of John’s chest against his is so good, so right, Sherlock feels like his whole body is humming in contentment.

He can feel John’s heartbeat, slow and steady against his own, and for the first time in days, he feels all his worries and anxieties, all his fears melt away, like snow vanishing in the first warm rain. In their place he finds a bone-deep weariness settling over him.

Sleep pulls at him, warm and seductive, the rhythmic sweep of John’s fingers coaxing him towards dreams.

There are still so many things he needs to ask John—so many things to say—but it’s so difficult to think right now, to speak. Sherlock will lift his head in just a moment. He’ll sit up, so he can keep looking at John, so he can take his hands in his and kiss him, ask him what the poem was that he recited earlier, tell him how incredible he is.

Just one more minute, though, of this bliss, this loveliness, the pounding of John’s heartbeat so strong against his own.

Just one more minute, Sherlock thinks, and promptly falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

The poem John is reciting from is, of course, William Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798." And yes, of course, sailor John has long passages of Wordsworth memorized. More on this in future chapters... I hope the ghost of Wordsworth will forgive me.

Thank you, as ever, for your patience between updates. This term has been much busier than I anticipated, but things are nowhere near as crazy as they were last fall, so hopefully there will be more OFD again very soon.

If you'd like to learn more about the breeches Sherlock is wearing in this chapter that drive John to such distraction, this is an excellent place to do so, and if you'd just like a visual, here is what Sherlock was wearing. :)

Also! I have since created a THIRD playlist of music that inspires me while writing about these nautical petals, so please do check it out, here!
Chapter Thirty Three

Chapter Summary

How Three Continents Watson got his name.

Sherlock wakes, with a start, to daylight hot and bright on his eyelids.

It’s as bright as it ever gets in his dim cabin and his first terrified thought upon feeling John’s arms still around him is that they’ve overslept—that John has missed the call of the bells and he is late to his shift—that they are looking for him now, tearing the ship apart in their fury. Maybe Anderson is on his way right now to Sherlock’s cabin, to throw open the door and haul John from the bed.

Sherlock looks at the flimsy door of his cabin, straining his ears for the sound of approaching footsteps over the pounding of his own panicked heartbeat.

But all he hears is the familiar creak and slosh of the *Galatea* swaying on the waves, the distant drip of water running down the sides of the ship—and softer than that, the sounds of John’s breathing behind him, low and even.

Sherlock lowers his head back down against the pillow, and then turns in John’s arms so that he might look at the other man while he sleeps.

His expression is serious; his lips are slightly parted, one deep groove between his eyebrows giving the impression that something is troubling him, as if there’s some problem he’s yet to work out, some enemy still to fight. His head is tilted on the pillow, his chin tipped up, so it looks like he’s offering a challenge to the world even in his dreams.

His arms are still around Sherlock, loose but protective, and even in slumber, the muscles in his arms and shoulders are sharply defined, the downy hair covering his forearms bright gold from so many hours spent in the sun.

It’s hotter in Sherlock’s cabin now that it’s fully daylight, hotter than it was before—too hot, for them to be lying comfortably so close together. Sherlock can see the sheen of sweat on John’s forehead, glistening on his arms, but instead of the heat making him look splotchy and flustered like it does to Sherlock, it seems to suit him, drawing out the dark gold color of his skin, making him shine.

John glows, even while he sleeps, Sherlock thinks, amazed.

It’s as if the force of this realization is so affecting that John can feel Sherlock’s wonder beside him. His eyes flutter open and he looks up at Sherlock and smiles.

It is a wide, slow, sleepy smile that makes Sherlock think of a lion stretching awake under the savannah sun. John’s grip shifts around Sherlock, tightens pleasantly.

“Well, hello there.”

Sherlock watches, amazed, as John seems to grow brighter upon waking. He yawns enormously, rolling his hips into Sherlock’s as he stretches, the muscles in his chest expanding as he lifts his
arms briefly above his head.

Sherlock is so affected by this phenomenon of John Watson waking up that he almost forgets to answer.

“Hello.”

John settles his arms back around Sherlock, his hands slipping down to rest in the groove of Sherlock’s lower back. “I thought I felt those blue eyes watching me.”

Sherlock wriggles his hips in closer against John’s thigh, his body responding with eagerness to the realization that he’s lying curled against John without a stitch of clothing on.

The unpleasant heat does nothing to deter his body’s interest. “I’m sorry if I woke you,” he says, embarrassed to find his voice already quite breathless.

John’s hands slide lower to cup the curves of Sherlock’s arse. He leans in until his mouth is almost against Sherlock’s, lips curving upward in a smile. “There is no lovelier sight on this earth to wake up to.”

And then he kisses Sherlock, warm mouth slightly sour from sleeping, his calloused hands gently kneading Sherlock’s arse.

Sherlock is delighted to find John’s body responding just as eagerly to the knowledge that neither of them are wearing any clothing, and as John pulls Sherlock’s hips in against his own, Sherlock feels the unmistakable heat of John’s erection.

Sherlock rolls his hips instinctively, dragging his own swelling cock against John’s, biting back the whimper in his throat at the sensation it creates.

It’s only a matter of seconds before he, too, is fully erect, and lifting himself up on his elbows to support his weight as he positions himself over John.

John’s hands on Sherlock’s arse are encouraging as Sherlock moves over him, his mouth back against Sherlock’s, deepening the kiss, as his thighs slide down around John.

Sherlock settles his weight against John, his thighs splayed out lewdly on either side of John’s hips as he crouches over him to return the kiss.

John’s hands have moved from Sherlock’s arse to slide up the length of his back with gentle pressure, the pads of his fingers trailing over the notches in Sherlock’s spine up to the nape of his neck, before settling in Sherlock’s hair, making him moan into the kiss.

Once again, Sherlock finds himself in that sweet place where thought is preceded by action, that rare state of being when his body decides what to do before he has a chance to deliberate.

His tongue is deep in John Watson’s mouth, his hands clasping the muscles in John’s biceps, hips willing him to thrust against the heavy line of John’s erection, when it suddenly occurs to him that he never ascertained what time it is and whether John needs to be back on deck.

It takes all of his willpower to pull his mouth off of John’s and sit up.

John looks up at him in mild surprise, his hands smoothing down Sherlock’s sides as he fights to catch his breath. “What is it?”
It turns out that sitting up was perhaps not the most advisable course of action as now Sherlock has an even better view of John’s golden torso stretched out beneath him. The muscles in his abdomen are contracting slightly with each of his quickened breaths, his nipples are erect, and flushed to a dark gold.

Sherlock licks his lips and forces himself to look up at John’s face. “What time is it? Are you… should we…. do we have time?”

He hates himself for stopping this, for even raising the possibility of John leaving him, but the risk of John’s punishment if he is late now is too great and Sherlock cannot bear the thought of being responsible for John’s suffering.

Sherlock watches John’s expression soften visibly. His hand slides up into Sherlock’s curls, drawing him down for a kiss. “Oh, you lovely thing.”

Sherlock’s sense of urgency melts away in the presence of John’s warm mouth against his. He cannot bring himself to end the kiss.

They part after several minutes, and Sherlock looks down at John, breathless.

“If there’s one talent I’ve learned doing this work it’s knowing precisely when a four hour shift is up. It’s in my body, you see. Every minute that passes, I feel it.” He taps his own chest, smiling wryly up at Sherlock. “If you opened me up, you’d likely find an hour glass full of sand in place of a heart.”

Sherlock knows it’s meant to be a joke but something about the remark makes sorrow open in him like a wound.

He resists a childish urge to tell John that that’s not true—he has felt John’s heartbeat against his own; he loves the sensation because whenever he feels it, it confirms that John is real and alive and here beside him.

The idea of John’s heart being replaced with a piece of the ship fills Sherlock with unspeakable dread. There is too much truth in it.

‘They don’t own you,’ he wants to say.

But he keeps silent because he knows, in some horrible way, that he’s wrong, even as the thought fills him with rage—quiet, white, and hot.

John reaches up to push a curl off of Sherlock’s forehead.

“We have exactly thirty five minutes before I need to be back up on deck, and I intend to put every one of those minutes to good use now.”

Sherlock feels his rage replaced by sudden guilt at John’s words.

He never meant to fall asleep—and now he’s wasted the majority of their time together. Thirty-five minutes? His chest tightens with self-hatred. When every minute that they have together is precious—as rare as fresh air below the decks of this rotting ship—how could he have let himself fall asleep?

He opens his mouth to tell John how sorry he is but before he can speak John has placed a finger on his lips.
“Don’t,” John says, and shakes his head. “I needed to sleep as well as you did—much more, in fact. It’s a good thing you fell asleep first, otherwise I’m not sure I would’ve been able to make myself sleep in your presence. I needed those two hours though.” John’s hands slide down Sherlock’s waist to settle on his hips. “And now, I need you, in my hand again, to get me through until we can see each other next.” His eyes lift to Sherlock’s. “If you’ll oblige me, that is. Only if you’re willing.”

Sherlock feels another wave of emotion crash over his head and threaten to drag him under at the realization that he does not know when he and John will see each other again.

He has to ask; he has to know in the time they have left, how long will they have to wait.

“When will that be?”

John reaches to take Sherlock’s hands in his, his eyes going dark before he lifts them up to Sherlock’s again. “The truth is I don’t know.”

The dark wave breaks, and Sherlock feels the world begin to tilt around him.

“But—” John squeezes Sherlock’s hands in his. “The odds are good that if we could pull it off this time—during this window I mean, before the first dog watch when the officers are sleeping—we’ll probably be able to manage it again.”

Sherlock’s heart is pounding. He’s holding so tight to John’s hands his own fingers are going white. “So—twenty four hours? Until we see see each other again?”

He needs to know; he needs to know how long he will have to wait, to mentally prepare himself for the long, blank stretch of time.

Just the thought of it makes him feel sick.

“I don’t know, my love. Maybe.” He can hear the regret in John’s voice that he cannot give a more reassuring answer. “It all depends if the men are willing to keep watch again, like they did tonight. It’s a big favor to ask them…”

A spike of irrational anger fills Sherlock; he knows he should be grateful for the sacrifice John’s men have made—are making at this very moment—and he is, but more potent than his gratitude is his desperate need for them to do it again, whatever the cost may be.

He cannot bear the thought of another four days (or worse—longer) before he sees John again. He does not know how he’ll survive.

But he forces himself to nod in acknowledgment of John’s words, and swallows hard, looking down.

And then another, more ominous thought occurs to him.

He looks up to see John watching him, blue eyes dark with concern.

“John, what’s going to happen when the ship reaches Rio? What we talked about earlier… some of the passengers were saying…” Sherlock swallows hard again. He feels suddenly too exposed sitting where he is astride John’s hips.

He shifts his weight and slides off, until he’s lying on his back beside John.
He goes on talking, looking up at the ceiling above him. He cannot bring himself to look at John’s face.

“They said when the ship reaches port, they’ll bring... women on board for the men.” Sherlock feels bile rising in the back of his throat but he forces himself to keep speaking. He has to know; much better to know now, than be surprised when the time comes. “Will they? And... will you...?”

Sherlock can’t bear to finish his own question.

He knows what John told him earlier—how desperate he is to make Sherlock aware of what he means to him, and he’s ashamed even now to ask it, to make plain his fear—but John never said, he never actually said he wouldn’t, and Sherlock’s doubt wears at him, dark and persistent, wriggling like a worm right through his heart.

All this time they have been in one another’s company, it’s been like a spell, a dream, some completely different reality—the spark between them—the light—like nothing Sherlock has ever experienced, but he knows things are different at sea. The same rules don’t apply, and he cannot take the risk of assuming it will be the same on shore; he cannot. The disappointment would surely kill him.

He stares hard at the dark stain in the wood above his bed. His throat feels too tight.

“Sherlock...” He feels John turn on his side next to him, and reach for his hand. Sherlock lets John take it but he continues staring at the ceiling. “Sherlock, love, look at me.”

Reluctantly, Sherlock drags his eyes down to John’s face.

“There’s something you should know about me. I’m not one of those sailors who enjoys the company of men only as a substitute for the company of women. To be sure, I have enjoyed the company of both men and women. I won’t lie to you. I’ve enjoyed both in good measure. There’s a reason I have a certain... reputation among the crew.” Here, Sherlock watches, fascinated, as John seems to grow... could it be? Embarrassed? “Especially in my younger days, I was known to enjoy the company of a great deal of partners... of every variety.”

John’s discomfort is now apparent. It’s such a rare sight, to see John looking not... absolutely confident, that Sherlock almost forgets his own self-conscious fears.

“But. All that is to say, when I choose to go to bed with someone, I mean it. It’s never as a substitute. And what’s more...” And here John takes a deep breath, and Sherlock realizes he has no idea what John is going to say. “It’s different with you, Sherlock. I’ve had... well, you know about Mary. She was more of a dream than she ever was a real presence in my life but... there’s only been one other person who’s ever made me feel the way I do with you. He taught me... a great deal about myself during a very difficult time in my life.”

There’s an expression on John’s face that Sherlock has never seen before—a deep sorrow, and something else, that Sherlock cannot name.

He feels his heart begin to harden into a small, cold lump of jealousy.

“But he’s gone now. And that’s a different story for another day. The point is,” John looks at Sherlock and Sherlock forces himself to hold John’s gaze, despite the fact that he feels like he’s just swallowed a bucket of pitch. “The point is... everything about what I have with you is different. Sherlock, you make me feel... things I’ve never felt before. You remember what I said...
this morning? You’re like no one else I’ve ever met before on this earth, and I intend to take advantage of every opportunity we have to spend together.”

John holds Sherlock’s gaze another moment longer, his thumb stroking absently over the backs of Sherlock’s knuckles.

“Alright?”

Sherlock nods, and watches John expression shift again, this time back to one of concern.

“I’m not sure what will happen when we reach Rio. To be honest, none of us have any idea even how long we’ll be in port. Probably two days at most. And yes, it’s true that frequently women are sent out to the ship. Sometimes, a select number of men are allowed to come on shore once the unloading and re-stocking is done. It all depends on what the captain decides. But under the rule of this captain, it’s impossible to say what he will and won’t allow. None of us have any idea what to expect.”

“But what you should know,” and here again, John squeezes Sherlock’s hand hard in his, “is that no matter what happens, my priority will be you. If we’re lucky enough….” And here there is a longing in John’s eyes bright enough to light the blue the color of a summer sky. “I’ll have some time off—a few hours maybe, and if we can get past that beef-head Anderson, perhaps we’ll have some extra time together. But no one, Sherlock Holmes, is going to have access to my private company, save you, all right?”

Sherlock nods again, feeling warmth begin to trickle in around the cold feeling in his chest as John leans in to kiss the downturned corner of his lips.

“Now, come here, and let me kiss you.”

Sherlock struggles to ignore the small dark knot of suspicion lodged between his ribs, but he finds, to his immense relief, that the magic of John Watson’s mouth does wonders to make him forget its presence.

It does not take long for John to kiss Sherlock’s frowning lips apart, until he is licking into Sherlock’s mouth, his hand reaching down between them to coax Sherlock’s erection back to life, cupping his bullocks in his hand, and massaging them lightly, making Sherlock gasp and part his thighs to give John better access.

“What would you like?” John breathes into his mouth. “Tell me what you want, my beauty, and I’ll give it to you. We don’t have too much time, but lucky for you I’ve a great deal of practice giving pleasure in a short space of time.”

The comment makes Sherlock’s jealousy flare up, hot and bright again, but the grin on John’s face as he says it is so absolutely, heart-stoppingly gorgeous that Sherlock forgets the feeling as quickly as it comes, his body arching up into John’s hands almost of its own volition.

“Would you like me to do what I did for you this morning?”

John is crouching between his parted thighs, his hands hot on Sherlock’s flanks.

“Or would you like something else?”

Sherlock’s mind is swimming with possibilities, he hardly knows what he wants—everything John has ever done with him has been so good. But at John’s question, a tiny, tiny flicker of a thought surfaces in Sherlock’s mind. But it’s so uncertain, so… potentially shameful that Sherlock does not
know how to ask it, or even if he can.

He does not even know if it truly exists as an act, whether it’s actually possible, but he has heard….

He can feel his cheeks growing hot even as he thinks it, and John, oh observant John, he must notice, because now he’s leaning down to kiss Sherlock’s cheeks, hands sliding up to Sherlock’s hips with curiosity.

“What is it? Tell me.”

Sherlock stretches in John’s embrace, bites his lip in uncertainty. He is not even sure how to ask.

“John…” he begins. His voice is the size of a dewdrop on a blade of grass.

“Yes, my love?”

“There’s something…” He stops talking abruptly.

John kisses him again, his hand now stroking Sherlock’s hip. The gesture is maddening—it feels so good. Sherlock pushes up into the warmth of John’s palms.

“I’m sorry, love. I hate to rush you, but we don’t have much time.”

This makes Sherlock’s mind up. His question comes out in one embarrassed rush. “Is it true that when two men lie together there’s a way for them to—?”

He stops again. He cannot bring himself to say it.

John waits patiently for him to finish, eyebrows lifted gently in query.

“For one of them to…” Sherlock shuts his eyes. “To… to enter the other like a man does a woman?”

John’s hands on his hips stop moving. He hears the sound of John’s soft indrawn breath and terror fills his chest. Oh god, what if he’s gone too far?

He’s too afraid to open his eyes.

Is it possible he’s offended John with his question? Sherlock has only ever heard this act described in the most vulgar terms possible—only ever heard it characterized as crass, vile, an affront to common decency—its implication an insult to whoever dares invoke it. What if John is disgusted by the suggestion? What if he’s upset that Sherlock would even consider him capable of such an act?

Sherlock’s own breathing begins to quicken in panic.

And then, he feels John kiss so softly, each of his trembling eyelids.

Sherlock opens his eyes to find John looking at him with unbelievable tenderness. When he speaks, his voice is low and full of heat. “Yes, it is.”

There is something else there; too, in the depths of his eyes—glimmering hard and bright—a hunger Sherlock recognizes.

At the sight of it, Sherlock feels arousal blossom in him like a coil of heat. He shifts his thighs against the bed, his erection aching. His mouth is suddenly completely dry. “Tell me...”
John leans down to frame Sherlock with his arms, lips brushing Sherlock’s ear as he speaks. His voice is like warm honey. “Would you like me to tell you how it’s done?”

Sherlock nods, beyond speech, as John’s body settles down against his, slowly, slowly, one hand sliding with intention down Sherlock’s hip.

“It takes a great deal of practice to do it well, so that both partners feel pleasure. But when it’s done right…” Sherlock’s hip twitches as John’s fingers slide past his cock. “Oh, Sherlock. It’s so good.”


John has taken him in hand. His fingers on Sherlock’s cock are moving his foreskin gently, slipping in the moisture at the head. But his other hand keeps moving, down, under Sherlock’s bullocks which are drawn up tight against him, and down further still, to the crease of Sherlock’s buttocks.

Sherlock shivers at John’s touch, curious. He stretches his thighs further apart to give John’s inquisitive finger more room, emboldened by the suggestion. He sits up slightly on his elbows to look at John.

“Here? Is this where…?”

John nods, his eyes dark on Sherlock’s. He pushes his finger gently into the heat, and Sherlock’s mouth drops open at the sensation, at how shockingly intimate it is to feel John’s finger touching him there; inside of him, if only slightly.

He feels his cheeks flush warm, partly from embarrassment, but partly with pleasure. John’s gaze on his own is intent; the hard, bright look in his eyes growing brighter the longer he looks at Sherlock.

“Here, yes.”

Sherlock is somewhat incredulous; it’s exactly as he’s heard, then. It seems impossible, and yet, and yet—

“And it feels good?” he asks, breathless, impatient for John’s finger to move again, to push deeper; so he might experience more of this curious sensation. “For the person being entered, it’s… pleasurable?”

“Yes.” John’s voice is breathless now.

“But how is it possible?” He can feel how tightly his body is gripping John’s finger, and John has not pushed it farther than the first knuckle. How could he possibly take more than just one finger? Much less something much, much thicker…

Sherlock’s flush deepens at the thought; he feels a corresponding spark of heat low in his belly at the suggestion of John pushing into him here, entering his body; as he tries to imagine how it would feel to have John inside of him, to be penetrated by the full, hard length of his cock.

“It takes time, and a great deal of patience, until it feels comfortable, until you’ll be able to take… all of me. But if it’s something you’d like to try—”

John’s hand rolls over his cock in a leisurely stroke and Sherlock moans, pushing his hips to pull John’s finger further in. He hears John’s soft gasp in surprise.
“Yes, yes, yes,” Sherlock chants, rolling his hips to try and take John’s finger deeper, the sensation still strange, but not unpleasant; the thought of John inside him making his arousal crackle silver at the edges. “Yes, I want it.”

John is stammering now, his hand slipping from Sherlock’s cock to still him by the hips. “We can’t—not now, there isn’t time, but…” John’s hand returns to Sherlock’s cock. “If it’s something you’d like, then yes, I’ll help you get there…. I’ll teach you how to make it good.”

Sherlock is thrusting his hips now in time with John’s strokes, his arousal building with shocking speed in what feels like rivulets of white flame sparking under his ribs and spreading rapidly downward.

“Teach me, John,” he says, his head tipping back on the pillow, thighs spreading to take more of John inside of him, feeling lightheaded at the thought of John penetrating him, even if only in this small way.

John’s finger is still in him, embedded up to the second knuckle. The feeling of it is strange—complicated—it feels like an inversion of sorts, like Sherlock’s body isn’t sure what to make of it, but the thought—just the thought of John pushing into him at this place, of his own body pulling John closer in, is enough to make Sherlock slide his palms down to the small of John’s back to urge John’s body tighter against him.

He can feel John’s erection, heavy and leaking against his hip where John’s body is pressed against his and he reaches down to take it in his hand, wanting to return the pleasure that John is giving to him.

His own stroking on John’s cock is sloppy, unpracticed, but he tries to keep up with John’s rhythm around him, the pattern of John’s ragged breath against his cheek.

John’s lips brush Sherlock’s temple as he leans in closer to speak. “Would you like a bit more?”

Sherlock nods, breathless, turning to catch John’s mouth with his, desperate to convey how this feels to him but knowing he cannot do so with words. So he kisses John instead, pushing his tongue in past John’s lips, sinking into the heat of John’s mouth, groaning low in his throat as John’s tongue pushes back against his, mimicking the slide of his finger deeper into Sherlock.

Sherlock’s hips still briefly at the added pressure, and John immediately pauses, too, his body going taut as a bow string.

“Is it alright?”

Sherlock nods, looking down at John’s arm where it’s curled between his legs—the way the light catches on the planes of his forearm, the swell of his bicep—and feels a shudder of arousal pull at him at the sight.

“Yes,” Sherlock says, to ensure that John starts moving again. “I want more. Give me more.”

John laughs lightly against him, leaning in to press a kiss to Sherlock’s sweaty cheek. “Easy there, love. We have to go slowly. Remember what I said? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You could never hurt me,” Sherlock says, moving his hands from John’s cock back around to grab him by the arse, not really conscious of what he’s saying, distracted by the feeling of the twin curves of muscle under his hands. God, it makes him want; the sensation of John’s powerful body crouched above him, curving in against him, it makes him ache with wanting.
“That’s where you’re wrong, my love.” Gently, so gently, John drags his mouth up Sherlock’s cheek to kiss him on the temple. “I could hurt you more easily than you know. And I don’t want that.” His voice softening as he moves to kiss Sherlock between the eyes. “Never that.”

Sherlock feels a thrill move through him at John’s words; it reminds him of how he felt when John lifted him in the darkness of the cable tiers—it’s not the suggestion that John could hurt him, but rather the knowledge that John is capable of so much that he cannot even imagine; it’s the suggestion of the raw power contained in this man kneeling so carefully between his thighs, held in check only by his will.

As usual, it is this contrast at the heart of John—shimmering like a living flame, equal parts light and darkness—that moves Sherlock so.

John’s grip on Sherlock’s cock changes, turns slower, more attentive, and the change in tempo is suddenly agonizing to Sherlock, when what he wants all of a sudden is speed and fury, the feeling of John lifting him, maneuvering him, dragging their bodies into alignment.

His arousal crests in a sudden unbearable pitch, and he draws his knees up until his feet are flat against the mattress, opening his body to John in an unabashedly obscene gesture, forcing John to sit back slightly so as not to lose his purchase on both parts of Sherlock.

He sits up, hauling his weight up to his elbows, following John as though there’s an invisible cord between them, the line of his body mirroring John’s.

He reaches to pull John back in against him, straining forward in an effort to reach some part of John and convey his need, his mouth bumping John’s clavicle, lips skimming over the hollow of John’s gleaming throat—his movements greedy and desperate—tasting sweat and the taste that is uniquely John.

He feels John’s grip around him falter at the change of position, the only thing that keeps him from falling forward the clench of his abdominal muscles, his impeccable balance.

“Please—” Sherlock breathes into him, mouth slipping against John’s jaw. “Just a little bit more. I want to imagine—imagine that it’s you inside me.”

Sherlock feels the change in John at his words; feels the shudder that moves through him like thunder.

John drops his head to catch Sherlock’s eyes with his. A shock of his white blond hair has fallen forward over his forehead; Sherlock can see where it’s beginning to curl with sweat.

“Is that what you’re imagining?”

Sherlock nods, breathless, all too aware of the shallow rise and fall of his own chest, how slick it is with sweat. He feels a drop creep down his abdomen.

“Please.”

It turns out Sherlock doesn’t need to ask twice; Sherlock follows the hard gleam in his eyes, watching as John shifts to kneeling between Sherlock’s spread thighs, awed by the sudden furious concentration on John’s face as he readjusts his grip on Sherlock’s erection, palming over the moisture leaking from the tip, causing Sherlock to whimper and briefly shut his eyes at the overwhelming sensation.

The sound of voices in the corridor abruptly causes both men to freeze; Sherlock bites hard at his
bottom lip to stop the whine in his throat.

John lifts a finger to his lips, his eyes on Sherlock’s, round with caution, bluer than he’s ever seen them.

For minutes now, he has all but forgotten about the existence of the outside world; lost in the dream of solitude enacted by the four grey walls of his cabin, the imagined intimacy that it’s only him and John, that there’s no one else to bother them on this rotting bulk of a ship.

All it takes is one sound from outside, one intrusion to shatter the illusion of their privacy.

Sherlock watches, his eyes on John’s, waiting for a sign to move again. He listens as the clatter of footsteps and conversing voices make their way to the stairs: passengers on their way to breakfast.

It’s one more reminder that the time they have before John must return to his post is rapidly running out. Sherlock pictures the hourglass, the steady rush of the grains of sand like a quickening in his heart.

But somehow, it does nothing to diminish the intensity of his arousal, and as soon as the voices pass, the sound of footsteps fading from the stairs, his fingers tighten on John’s arms, and like a statue returning to life, John moves again, his chest animated by the sudden exhalation of his breath, his palm circling once more over the head of Sherlock’s cock.

And then, without warning, he pulls his finger free from Sherlock’s body.

Sherlock has to bite his lip again to stop his cry of protest, but his disapproval is short-lived as John takes hold of Sherlock now with both hands, one hand grasping the root of his cock and stroking roughly, the palm of his other hand swirling over the leaking tip.

It’s so good; it feels so good, that for a moment all Sherlock can do is drop his head back in a fit of incoherent ecstasy. Just to have John touching him like this—all encompassing—it feels like John is holding his heart in his hands. Sherlock can feel the callouses on John’s palms against the sensitive head of his cock, the rough pads of his fingers as he strokes, and it’s so good he forgets his desire to have John back inside him.

John concentrates for several blissful moments only on Sherlock’s swollen cock, rolling it expertly between his palms, and it’s only when he draws one hand away and places it again at the entrance to Sherlock’s body that Sherlock realizes he was using the moisture from Sherlock’s weeping erection to coat his fingers.

This time, when John’s slick finger presses at the ring of muscle it gives more easily and the slide of it, the sudden intrusion of John back into this intimate place makes Sherlock catch his breath.

“Alright?” John asks, crouching low, his voice all gravel—all sex—that forelock of white-blonde hair hanging down into his eyes—and all Sherlock can do is nod mutely, biting back the whimper that’s threatening to break free from his throat at the sight of John like this before him, his hands at the two most vulnerable points of Sherlock’s body.

He reaches his arms up to loop them around John’s neck, and tries to convey with his eyes what he does not have the breath to say.

John presses his forehead against Sherlock’s and the spark he sees in John’s eyes in response makes Sherlock gasp again.

“Good,” John says, one corner of his mouth lifting in that expression that usually makes Sherlock’s
knees go weak when he is standing. Even lying down, Sherlock can feel the corresponding flutter in his belly at the sight of it.

His hand is still moving in a steady rhythm on Sherlock’s cock, and Sherlock experiences a twinge of sadness at the dawning awareness that he isn’t going to last much longer, not with his body pinned at these two places by John Watson’s expert hands. He tightens his arms around John’s neck; feeling like his grip around John is the only thing keeping him from floating away on an ocean of bliss.

John’s mouth tips forward, seeking his, and Sherlock opens to him without question, pushing his hips up into John’s hand as John’s tongue slips in past his lips.

Sherlock is melting—warm, carried away on a rising wave of pleasure—when he feels John’s finger move inside him, pushing deeper and then curling slightly, and the place he finds makes Sherlock cry out suddenly, digging his heels hard into the mattress.

John stops Sherlock’s mouth with his, drinking down the sound, curling his finger again and moving it now against the same place.

A burst of feeling moves through Sherlock—it’s like an explosion—stars bursting white behind his eyes, but it’s different than what he feels when his body has reached the peak of its pleasure. It’s like all his capacity for feeling concentrated into one place deep inside of him, and John is touching it now, stroking it softly.

John’s hand is only fisted loosely now around Sherlock’s cock; he’s focusing all his efforts on touching this place inside of Sherlock, making Sherlock’s breath catch with the pleasure of it, his fingers tightening against John’s neck.

Sherlock arches his back sharply in response, mouth slipping open over John’s, incredulous. “What—?”

Even this close, Sherlock can see the pleased glimmer in John’s eyes. John’s hoarse whisper is warm against Sherlock’s mouth. “Does it feel good?”

Sherlock nods frantically, fingers slipping in the sweat at the nape of John’s neck. “Y-yes. But what is that? How are you—?”

Sherlock’s curiosity over this remarkable new knowledge about his body is almost enough to distract him from the feeling of it—his mind filling suddenly with the pages of his father’s anatomy books, searching for the source—but then John, grinning, leans in to kiss him again, renewing his stroking inside Sherlock, and his mind dissolves once more into a shower of white sparks.

This is it—Sherlock can feel the tightening at the center of himself that tells him his release is not far off, and he wants—before it’s over—he wants to give John some of the immense pleasure that John is giving to him.

He releases his purchase around John’s neck, hauling himself up to a sitting position in an effort to bring himself closer to John, and finds to his astounded delight that the shift in his posture only makes the angle of John’s finger inside him deeper and for a moment, he loses all focus again, gripping hard onto John’s biceps as he tries to keep himself from coming.

John’s stroking stops immediately. “Is it alright? Did I hurt you?”

Sherlock grits his teeth, shakes his head.
“What is it?”

He slides his fingers down over the muscles in John’s arms, distracted. “I want—to touch you while you’re touching me—”

He can feel John’s grin when he leans in to kiss him again, can hear the tremor in his voice as he shifts his knees on the bed to inch closer to Sherlock. “Be my guest.”

Sherlock lets his hand slide over the hard planes in John’s chest on its way down, brushing over his nipples with light fingertips, and then, it’s his turn to smile as he feels the shiver that moves through John at the fleeting touch. He spreads his palm as his hand travels down John’s stomach, spares just a moment to marvel at the iron feel of John’s abdominal muscles, tensed as they are to keep his body in position, leaning forward between Sherlock’s thighs.

But because they are out of time—in every sense of the word—he does not linger long before reaching to take John’s cock into his hand, his breathing going shallow at the feel of it, so hard and slick beneath his fingers.

“How should I… ?” he asks as his hand begins to move, “Is that—?”

John’s answer is a sigh of pleasure. “Yes. You can hold it tighter, and stroke a little harder if you—yes—just like that.”

He tries hard to remember—through the fog of his own feeling—what he did earlier this morning that seemed to bring John so much pleasure; and finds to his great delight that once again, if he does not think so much, if he concentrates on the feeling of John under his hand, focuses on the shifting expressions on his face, he can find his way there.

He watches as John’s eyes slide closed at his touch. “Oh, Sherlock…”

He continues stroking, the rhythm of his movements faltering only slightly as John resumes his own attention to Sherlock’s cock and the place inside him.

It feels so good—John touching him there—and somehow, impossibly, it continues to feel better the more his stroking increases, the white feeling under Sherlock’s ribs, deep in his belly, growing brighter with every stroke. The change in Sherlock’s position makes it easier to rock his hips down into John’s hand, and he does so, feeling with a gasp how much it makes his pleasure grow.

His grip really does falter around John then, his free hand coming up once again to grasp John’s arm. He can’t maintain it—he knows. Between John’s hands on him—in him—John’s dripping cock clenched in his fist—it’s too much for him to sustain.

As if that wasn’t enough, now John’s mouth is back against his ear, his voice like rough silk. “You’re so gorgeous like this—so, so gorgeous. Can I tell you though—how gorgeous you’ll look when it’s me entering you like this? When I’ve got you beneath me—or above me—your legs around my waist?”

Sherlock’s answer is a low whine.

Distantly, he feels John’s hand leave his cock to wrap around his own fingers, which have completely lost their rhythm, and help him guide his strokes around John’s cock.

Sherlock can feel the movement of John’s arm as he increases the speed of both their hands.

“Do you feel this, Sherlock? Just imagine—how much more intense it will be, how it will feel to
have me inside you. God, Sherlock, I can’t wait to feel that—to feel you.”

The tightening of the muscle in John’s arm beneath his fingers, the knowledge that John is using both their hands to bring him pleasure, all while imagining his cock inside of Sherlock—it’s that, and John’s voice that finally pushes him over the edge.

Sherlock’s pleasure hits him with the force of a tidal wave.

He must be crying out because suddenly John’s fingers are slipping hard over his mouth, and John is shushing him, kissing him by his ear, one finger still deep inside Sherlock, the absence of his other hand doing nothing to lessen the effect of all that pleasure breaking open inside of him.

Sherlock can feel his body contracting around John’s finger and the sensation only adds to the force of his release, his torso curling, heels slipping on the mattress as his body draws in against the force of it.

It’s more intense than anything he’s ever felt before with John, the white hot feeling at the center of his body blooming outward, the pleasure unfolding on and on within him like a dying star.

The hand that was covering his mouth slips around to hold him between his shoulder blades, John’s voice still warm against his ear, murmuring encouragements.

“I’ve got you—I’ve got you now.”

Sherlock is clutching John by the shoulders—so hard he must be leaving bruises; his eyes squeezed shut, mouth still open and gasping as the waves of pleasure finally begin to recede.

Gently, John pulls his finger free, and Sherlock feels the last of the tension leave his body.

He presses his damp face in against John’s neck, breathing hard, his body trembling lightly, the only thing he can hear for several moments the roaring of his own blood in his ears.

He feels John press a kiss to his matted curls. “How are you, lovely?”

It takes him a few seconds to realize that John’s cock is still painfully hard against him; he can feel the heat of it pressing into his stomach.

Sherlock shifts in John’s arms, dragging his mouth deliberately up the side of John’s neck.

He can feel the tension in John’s body under his lips; can feel how the presence of his open mouth against John’s pounding pulse makes his breathing catch.

“John,” he murmurs, his voice warm and full of affection.

John’s hands slide up over Sherlock’s shoulder blades in response, head tilting back slightly to make room for Sherlock’s mouth.

“Yes, my love?”

“That was…” Sherlock opens his mouth against the underside of John’s throat, before licking a stripe up his jaw. “That was the best thing you’ve ever done to me.”

Sherlock can feel John’s chuckle in response, low in his throat, his voice just that much more breathless than it was before. “You say that every time.”

Sherlock’s hands are reaching between them again. “I want to make you feel that good, John.”
“You did, you d-do.”

Sherlock’s hands have started to move—slowly, too slowly probably, but he’s savoring the feel of John—all that hard heat against his palms; he hears the break in John’s voice as they do, feels John’s fingers stiffen on his back.

“Oh god, Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s mouth, creeping back up the side of John’s neck; licking the skin just under his ear.

“Is it alright?” he breathe, stroking faster now, pulling harder in the way he knows John likes, pressing a wet, open-mouthed kiss just under John’s ear. “Tell me what to do.”

“Like that—just like that. Keep—just keep doing what you’re doing.”

Sherlock sits up on his knees to get a better angle, concentrating hard; he listens to the sound of John’s breathing, feels the pressure in John’s thigh where it’s pressed against him, the tension in his fingers on Sherlock’s back.

“Oh that’s… oh, Sherlock.”

Sherlock grins against him, sitting back now to watch John’s expression; to see his head tip back, mouth open, dark lashes spread gold against his cheeks as Sherlock works his cock, one of his hands sliding down beneath to cup his bullocks, fingers slipping against the crease of his arse.

And then a thought occurs to him; Sherlock leans back in against John’s ear, his voice heavy and soft. Maybe now is not the right time to ask, but his curiosity is too much. “Have you ever?” he asks, fingers pushing lower into the heat as he increases the speed of his strokes.

John nods, gasping, his hands sliding up into Sherlock’s curls to grip at the wet silk mass lying heavy on Sherlock’s neck.

“And did it feel—good?” Sherlock asks, as his fingers find the place on John’s body, his touch inquisitive.

“Oh god—yes,” John manages to gasp out, fingers clenching now in Sherlock’s curls. “Oh god, your hands…” His voice going faint as Sherlock presses gently with just one finger. “Please will you—”

He doesn’t need to finish his request. Sherlock is already pushing in against the ring of muscle, filled with elation, fascinated; his every sense blown wide at the feeling of the heat, the give of it, the knowledge that this is John John John.

It only takes one finger.

John’s fingers clench hard in Sherlock’s curls; his body bending almost double over Sherlock’s hand, the muscles in his arse tensing, sending a thrill through Sherlock, and then warmth is spilling over Sherlock’s fingers in two hot spurts, and suddenly, Sherlock is filled with the desire to taste John again—now, when he can—who knows how long it will be again?—and he’s diving down to wrap his lips around the head of John’s cock, one finger still inside him, in the hopes that there is more to come…

“Jesus God in Heaven.”

John’s hands are still in his curls, pulling now, and Sherlock sucks at the warm wet crown of
John’s cock in his mouth and is delighted when another gush of bitter fluid comes out to coat his
tongue. He licks at it, feeling every fiber of his being thrill with how much of John Watson he is
experiencing right now.

*I’m tasting him; I’m tasting him. His cock is in my mouth. I have a finger in his arse, and his cock
is in my mouth.*

Never in his life has Sherlock been as happy as he is in this moment.

His whole body must be glowing.

“Oh my god.”

John’s voice is ragged, his fingers finally relaxing in Sherlock’s curls, before reaching to smooth
the hair off his forehead.

“Jesus, Sherlock.”

He feels John’s thighs tense against him as Sherlock gives one more lick around the head of John’s
cock, reluctant to pull off. He doesn’t want to think how much time must have passed, how little
time they have left…

“Come here.”

John’s hands in Sherlock’s hair are guiding him back up to eye-level with John.

He holds Sherlock there, hands soft on the curves of his skull, his eyes gentle, full of amazement,
before pulling Sherlock in for a kiss.

Sherlock is hesitant—his mouth still full of the taste of John’s release—but this does not seem to
bother John in the slightest; he kisses Sherlock with his warm, wet mouth open, soft and
appreciative, tongue coming out to curl around Sherlock’s.

The kiss is long enough to soothe the first throb of Sherlock’s anxiety over the time; how little of it
must be left to them.

It’s difficult to feel anxious for very long, with his whole body singing from the taste, the feel of
John; the sound of his gasps of pleasure still lingering in Sherlock’s ears.

When John pulls back, the look of amazement has not dimmed. If anything, it’s gotten brighter.

“You gorgeous, impossible creature.”

He smooths his thumbs over the bones just behind Sherlock’s ears.

“How am I supposed to leave you again?”

Sherlock feels the golden light that’s shimmering all through him go dark at John’s words.

“How much time do we have left?” he asks, mouth dry with sudden dread.

“None,” John says, leaning in to press one last kiss between Sherlock’s eyes. “I’ve got to go.”

And then everything is moving far too quickly.

Before Sherlock can accept what’s happening, John has risen from the bed, and is bending to
retrieve his clothes—his warm thigh no longer pressing into Sherlock’s, his hands, gone from Sherlock’s hair.

When Sherlock looks up, John has already donned his trousers and his threadbare shirt; he’s pulling on his faded blue jacket when they hear the sound of the bell.

Sherlock has never seen anyone dress so fast.

John crosses the room and takes Sherlock’s face in his hands one more time—the gesture filled with tenderness, but rushed, unsteady—before kissing him. It’s over far too quickly, his mouth leaving Sherlock’s before Sherlock has a chance to savor the impression of John’s now dry lips against his.

“Goodbye, beauty.”

For one horrible moment, Sherlock wonders if he’s going to let John leave.

He thinks about clamping his hands around John’s wrists, flinging his whole body around him to prevent him going through that flimsy door and back to the grinding work that awaits him. He realizes though, in the split second it takes to have the thought, that nothing he ever attempted could physically prevent John from leaving.

Sherlock sags under his hands.

“I’ll send word through Billy as soon as I can.”

And before Sherlock can respond—can even think what he wants to say in reply—John is gone, the door closing without a sound behind him.
Chapter Thirty Four

Chapter Summary

Sherlock Holmes: Gay Teen Detective

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes a minute, maybe two, before the full effect of John’s absence hits him.

When it does, it takes Sherlock’s breath away.

He feels panic fill him, swift and irrational—like a sudden storm in summer—and there’s nothing he can do to stop it; it’s as powerful and inexorable as the current of the ocean dragging him down.

He lies on the bed, twisted on his side in the tangle of sheets, trying to take deep breaths, uncertain how to stop the tide of darkness that’s swimming up before his eyes.

John is gone; John is gone again and he is alone.

He is alone.

The thought bores a hole through him, leaving a void for all the other nasty thoughts that are usually there—that John’s presence manages to magically keep at bay—to come creeping back in.

The first unpleasant thought to make itself known is what will happen to John now that he has left Sherlock’s side.

Surely, surely John will be late getting to his post—the last stroke of the bell had already rung out before he’d left the room.

What would Anderson do to John for showing up late? If he found out the sailor had been visiting Sherlock? Would he come to check on Sherlock—to see what sort of state he might be in?

Sherlock rolls over, his heart pounding hard against his ribs.

The possibility fills him with terror.

He waits until the feeling passes, eyes screwed shut, counting every heartbeat that shudders through his temples. He will not be ruled by terror, especially not over irrational fears involving Anderson.

But are they irrational? a tiny voice whispers.

He can feel arriving on the heels of his abating terror, a rush of aching loneliness, of purposelessness, now that John has gone.

The shock of his absence is so profound—so visceral, to Sherlock it’s like moving from the heat of a summer day into the frigid darkness of a winter night. It’s like the shock of that first stinging breath when stepping out into the bitter cold after sitting for hours in front of the fire.
His body recoils at the sensation, and he tries to steel himself against it, waiting for his senses to adjust.

Panic flutters at the edge of his mind, like a moth around a flame, disrupting the clarity of the light, making it flicker in and out, so that he’s not certain whether he will succumb to it entirely.

He lies there, teeth gritted, feeling as though he is about to die, and all because John Watson is no longer at his side.

He manages to keep himself from tilting completely into the stream of panic, but it is a near thing, and his temples are damp with sweat by the time he’s able to open his eyes again. He has a sudden image of himself, as he must have looked in the storm, white-knuckled, gripping his bunk to keep from being thrown by the heave of the ship over and onto the floor and the sliding sick beneath him—it feels much like that now, trying to hang onto himself, to keep from tipping over into total despair.

Pathetic.

This time the voice sounds a great deal like the voice of his older brother.

And into his mind, unbidden, comes the image of Mycroft, stepping carefully around the debris of Sherlock’s thoughts with a disapproving look on his face, his well-shined boots gleaming in the wreckage.

Really, Sherlock. All this because of the sailor lad? How long are you going to keep carrying on like this?

Sherlock snarls at him and rolls over on his side, refusing to answer.

I warned you about this, Sherlock. What did I tell you? Don’t get involved. But did you listen? No. After all, what do I know? I’m only your older brother, who has your best interest at heart.

“When did you ever have my best interest at heart,” Sherlock whispers savagely into the pillow, his voice curling with derision around the words.

Mycroft carries on, undeterred.

What’s the purpose of all this… Sherlock can see him gesturing with distaste at the mess around him. …feeling?

Sherlock can picture him, studying the end of his cane in a disinterested manner, as if checking for any trace of filth.

You always did feel too much, didn’t you, Sherlock? But honestly if you’re going to go to pieces like this, it could at least be over something worthwhile.

Sherlock doesn’t give him the satisfaction of responding.

At least the dog *died*.

As usual, Mycroft goes too far.

Sherlock bolts upright with a shout of rage. “LEAVE ME ALONE!”

He doesn’t care if his stupid neighbor does think he’s mad; he cannot stand another moment of Mycroft’s judgment.
He looks wildly around the room, chest heaving, waiting to see if Mycroft is truly gone.

After a beat of silence, Sherlock slumps back down in the tangled sheets, his fingers knotted with frustration in his hair.

It isn’t fair. He’s tried and tried to excise Mycroft permanently from his thoughts but there must be some childish part of him still clinging on to him, unable to fully let go of the older brother who was his primary companion for so many years.

As if some naïve part of him actually does believe Mycroft still has his best interest at heart.

He should know better by now.

Never had it been clearer to him how little Mycroft really cared than on the day that Mycroft stood without a word beside that carriage in the rain and let it drive away.

The fact that that knowledge still stings only makes Sherlock angrier yet.

Who cares what Mycroft thinks? He’s wrong.

Still—infuriatingly—he feels the need to defend himself, to justify his behavior to the judgmental phantom of his older brother.

It wouldn’t be so hard to tolerate John’s absence, or the fear of harm befalling him, if there was just something Sherlock could do.

It’s his helplessness that’s so infuriating, that leaves him feeling so useless.

The realization hits him like a slap in the face.

It’s the idleness that’s killing him, that’s slowly driving him mad. If only, if only he had something to occupy his mind, some task, some puzzle to work out, some—

Sherlock drops his hands from his hair; sits up straighter on the bed.

It’s been days since he thought about the unresolved matter of Lieutenant Lestrade’s poisoning. That is what he should be focusing his attention on. He still has yet to determine the captain’s motivation for trying to poison Mr. Knott. If Sherlock could simply find the older man and speak with him…

Sherlock tosses back the sheets and scrambles out of bed.

He rises to dress, pulling on the same clothes he wore yesterday, not bothering to shave or wash his face, his movements hastened by his sudden desperation to escape his dingy cabin. The prospect of searching for answers has given him purpose, and he finds that he cannot bear the sight of the grey walls around him another minute.

In the back of his mind, he hears the prohibition set to him by the Lieutenant not to get involved—echoing the same warning that Mycroft gave him in that damned unhelpful letter—but somehow both of these warnings just make Sherlock more keen on investigating. He’s sick of people telling him to stay in his place, to stay out of it. What good has that done him so far?

Besides, he thinks to himself, with a grim kind of resolution as he finishes tying on his neck scarf, it isn’t as if John has time to luxuriate in his feelings over missing Sherlock. No, he’s already returned to work, and is likely starting another shift at the pumps if he hasn’t already begun.
Keeping himself from going to pieces in John’s absence is the least he can do in the time that they are apart. He needs to be stronger—he can be, he will be—for John’s sake, if nothing else, and if doing that means turning his attention to the nearest puzzle at hand, then that’s what he will do.

It isn’t until he’s stepped out into the corridor and noticed the train of passengers traipsing past him up the stairs that he realizes it’s still the breakfast hour—the others are making their way to the dining room.

Sherlock falls into line behind them, not from any desire for their company, or from any want of food, but with the thought that maybe if Mr. Knott is present at the morning meal, Sherlock can attempt to strike up a conversation with him.

It’s not a very robust plan, but under the circumstances it’s the best he can come up with.

But Mr. Knott is nowhere to be seen at breakfast.

Sherlock eats his porridge without seeing it, his brain kicked suddenly to action as he thinks back over what he’s ascertained so far, desperate for something, anything to occupy his mind other than the pull of his longing for John, or the ongoing, persistent drone of his brother’s disdain.

What seems more and more apparent to Sherlock is that there must be a correlation between the two events—the attempted poisoning and the captain’s obsession with getting to Rio—but what is the connection? What could possibly link the captain’s desire to kill one of his passengers with his need to get to the South American port city on time?

Everyone seems to agree that his maniacal need for haste is unprecedented and unnecessary for a merchant ship of their size and cargo, even considering his eccentricities as a captain, of which there are evidently many.

Sherlock’s thoughts creep back over the conversation he overheard between the sailors, the evening he went looking for John. “Something hot in the hold” they had said, it was clearly a reference to smuggling.

Sherlock knows it’s relatively common for captains of merchant voyages to be a bit light-fingered with the goods, or to add their own special inventory to whatever is on board in order to make an additional profit once they reach India. Every captain earns a commission for the goods bought and sold during a voyage—even Sherlock knows that much—so it would come as no surprise to learn that Captain Roberts had a nice side business going.

Perhaps this is the reason for his desperation to reach Rio, perhaps there is some illicit cargo that he needs to unload in the port city; perhaps whoever is buying is only going to be there for a limited window of time.

Still, how this connects to Lestrade’s poisoning, Sherlock can’t work out.

What does he know so far? He knows the captain tried to poison Mr. Knott the night of the party, and that somehow, whether by accident or by design, Lestrade ended up with Mr. Knott’s poisoned glass of punch and nearly paid for the mistake with his life.

He knows that four days after the party, Knott and Ferguson quarreled, over a matter that sounded to Sherlock as though Ferguson was making a proposition, which Knott vehemently refused.

He remembers also, how the night before the party, Ferguson tried to claim that the captain had ulterior motives for planning the festivities, and how insistently Knott attempted to quiet Ferguson in the midst of his vague accusations. It therefore seems likely that Knott is in possession of some
knowledge about the captain that he does not wish to disclose, and Ferguson is hell-bent on uncovering what that is.

Perhaps then, the motivation for the captain’s attempt on Knott’s life was because he, too, came to realize that Knott was in possession of some information about his person that he did not want disclosed.

But why risk doing away with the man when he did, in the middle of the voyage? Murder at sea is a perilous business. Had the captain been successful at his attempt on Knott’s life, what explanation would have been given for his death? Surely, the ship’s surgeon would have been forced to admit that the man was poisoned, and then there would have been an investigation into the matter. Why take a man’s life a week out from the nearest port? If accusations had been made he would have had nowhere to escape.

Could this be the explanation for the captain’s desperate desire to reach Rio by the end of the week? Did he fear discovery?

But as soon as the thought enters Sherlock’s mind, he dismisses it as implausible.

As far as the captain is concerned he has no reason to fear suspicion since he failed in his attempt. The only person he might have reason to suspect is Lestrade, for being the accidental victim caught in the crossfire, and it’s unclear at this point whether the captain ever found out that Lestrade fell ill at all that evening. If he did, Lestrade didn’t mention it to Sherlock the day after.

Sherlock can only hope that Lestrade was wise enough to keep his and John’s intervention that evening a secret. Aside from Sherlock’s unfortunate encounter with Anderson, he didn’t think anyone else had paid much notice to Lestrade suddenly falling ill, and if they had, they probably would have assumed the lieutenant had simply had too much to drink.

And there, Sherlock realizes in a moment of clarity, was the brilliance of the crime.

Had Knott been found dead the night of the party, the first assumption would have been not that he was poisoned, but that the man had drunk himself to death. The symptoms of the two ailments were, after all, largely identical. The ship’s surgeon might not have been able to tell the difference.

Neat, Sherlock thinks with a combination of dawning admiration and a cold kind of dread, Very neat, indeed.

The other factor working in the man’s favor, of course, is that he is the captain of the ship; to accuse him of any crime, however small, is akin to treason, and that, as Sherlock knows all too well, is a hanging offense.

So what is this vital information that Knott is in possession of? It must be vital indeed if the captain is willing to risk murder in order to suppress it. And if Knott is the one in possession of it, why is Ferguson propositioning him, and not the other way around?

Frustrated, Sherlock sets down his spoon, abandoning his half-eaten porridge.

He needs more information.

His thoughts are interrupted by the sound of a chair scraping back from the table, and he looks up to see George Ferguson rising from his chair.

“Leaving so soon, George?”
Colonel Jackson, as ever in mysteriously high good spirits, seems to be the only one to take note of Ferguson’s departure.

Sherlock wishes, too late, that he had been paying closer attention to the murmur of conversation around the breakfast table. Colonel Jackson’s question seems to imply that he and Ferguson had been engaged in a conversation which the other man cut short.

“Well, do consider my invitation. I’m going to be airing out those pistols up on deck just before luncheon if you care to join!”

Sherlock almost rolls his eyes—apparently Sherlock isn’t the only one Colonel Jackson has propositioned with his dueling pistols.

“Thank you, but I have some business to attend to this morning of a rather urgent nature. I’m afraid it can’t wait.”

“Suit yourself!”

Sherlock watches Ferguson make his way toward the door and considers his options quickly—as much as the other man seems eager to speak openly about the captain’s suspicious behavior, Sherlock can’t imagine he’d be willing to confide in Sherlock about the nature of his proposition to Mr. Knott.

Still, anything he can learn about the other man and his business in the East Indies is better than the little to nothing he has to work with right now.

Sherlock pushes his chair back from the table and follows Ferguson out of the dining room.

The man is walking quickly and Sherlock has to hasten his stride to catch up.

“Good morning,” Sherlock calls out, in what he hopes is a pleasantly neutral tone as he approaches.

The other man turns to look at Sherlock and Sherlock feels panic rise in him at the cold, disinterested expression on his face. His eyes flicker up and down Sherlock briefly, as if trying to ascertain the reason for Sherlock’s sudden attempt to engage him in conversation.

“Is it?”

Whatever he finds in his assessment of Sherlock he seems to determine it isn’t worth his interest as he continues on his way down the passageway without stopping to wait for a response.

Sherlock hurries after him, undeterred.

He needs some kind of premise to speak with the man, otherwise he’ll find himself disappointed before he’s even started; Sherlock scans his brain for some excuse to occupy the man’s company, mind flickering over the details he’s catalogued of the other man’s appearance, the tobacco stains he’s seen on Ferguson’s fingers.

“Ahh… so sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you happen to have any tobacco you could spare.”

For a second, Sherlock thinks Ferguson will ignore him entirely and continue on his way down the hall, but then he stops, and when he turns to look Sherlock over again there is begrudging understanding on his face.
“So you’re desperate for a smoke, is that it?”

Sherlock feels his cheeks color despite his best efforts to the contrary but then realizes that the look of embarrassment lends credit to his position—let Ferguson believe he’s simply a naïve youth who’s used up his precious stash of tobacco.

Sherlock nods.

In truth, it has been ages since Sherlock enjoyed a bit of tobacco. It’s a habit his father considers nasty and vile, suitable only for the lower classes. Sherlock had taken to it during his short time in University and in his rage and boredom the summer after he’d been sent home he’d continued, mostly just to spite his father.

Now that the opportunity is at hand, Sherlock realizes, he wouldn’t mind a smoke.

“I shouldn’t give it to you. You should have planned accordingly, not smoked it all at once. You know what the steward charges for tobacco on this voyage? I should ask for payment in kind.”

Ferguson eyes him shrewdly for a moment, and in the cold assessment of his gaze over Sherlock’s person, Sherlock can see the businessman in him.

But he must decide that Sherlock has nothing that is of interest to him, and perhaps he is as bored as Sherlock is, for after another minute of eying Sherlock where he stands, the other man gives a gruff sort of nod and gestures Sherlock to follow him.

“All right, come with me. I might have a little I can spare.”

Sherlock follows the man to the door of his cabin, where he instructs Sherlock to wait in the corridor while he ducks into his room to fetch the tobacco.

Ferguson’s demand that Sherlock wait outside is not suspicious in and of itself, but something about his manner seems overly guarded to Sherlock, and he tries, as best he can to peer around the door that Ferguson has left ajar to see if he can make out anything of interest.

The room appears to be organized in a nearly identical fashion to Sherlock’s own cabin, with the desk situated just beside the door.

From where he’s standing in the corridor, Sherlock can just make out a sheaf of papers in a leather folio on the desk. The papers are in disarray, and it looks as though the cover of the folio was folded rather hastily over to conceal them.

Sherlock can hear Ferguson rummaging in a trunk just on the other side of the wall. He takes a cautious step closer to see if he can get a better look at the contents of the papers.

It looks like a list of some kind, like an inventory of goods.

Sherlock leans forward as far as he can, straining his eyes. He’s not close enough to make out any of the actual items, if only he could—

Ferguson’s footsteps cause Sherlock to take two hasty steps backwards. He folds his hands behind his back, adopting an innocent posture.

Ferguson re-emerges with the tobacco in hand and he’s just about to hand it off to Sherlock, signaling the end of their brief meeting, when Sherlock opens his mouth, feigning embarrassment.
“The thing is I’ve actually… mislaid my pipe, as well. If it isn’t too inconvenient, I was wondering if I might… borrow one of yours. Just for one smoke?”

The other man stares at Sherlock; at first with bewilderment, and then, with dawning irritation.

Sherlock tries to arrange his features into an expression which he hopes conveys equal amounts of contrition and desperation.

Whatever the reason, it works, and Ferguson vanishes once more from sight, grumbling loudly; leaving the door wide open behind him.

This time, Sherlock doesn’t waste the opportunity; he lunges forward and snatches the corner of the paper with the inventoried items from the leather folio as quickly as he dares without upsetting the rest of the items on the desk.

He stuffs the paper into the front of his jacket and returns to where he was standing, just as Ferguson re-appears again, now with a clay pipe in hand.

Sherlock’s heart is pounding hard against his ribs—what has he just done? And more imperative, what if Ferguson notices?

But the man appears to notice nothing is amiss. He pulls the door shut behind him and gestures gruffly towards the hatch leading to the upper decks.

“Come on then—I’m not going to let you smoke this out of my sight, in case you get any ideas about running off with it.”

Sherlock’s heart pounds harder in his breast; he’s stricken with the sudden, irrational fear that Ferguson will be able to make out the outline of the stolen paper under his jacket.

But Ferguson doesn’t give him a second glance as he makes his way toward the staircase.

Sherlock follows without a word, and as the first surge of his panic starts to subside, he feels the familiar rush of elation move in to take its place.

After all, this isn’t the first time Sherlock has taken someone else’s things without their notice.

He used to nick things from the other students in University when they made him angry. Just small things: papers, keepsakes. In fact, he’d gotten quite good at it in the brief time that he was there. Not once did anyone ever suspect him. He’d always given the items back eventually, secretly returning them to the precise location where he’d found them. It was somehow more satisfying for the lost item to reappear, weeks later, in the place where it should have been all along, the result of which was to make the offending person suspect that they were going mad.

The only item he never returned was Sebastian Wilkes’s pocket watch. The other boy had been so horrible to Sherlock it was the least he could do to throw it in the Thames.

The memory of his past misdemeanors is reassuring, and Sherlock takes a deep breath as they emerge into the sunlight, calming himself. He needs to keep his wits about him, especially if he wants to get any kind of useful information out of Ferguson in the time he has in the other man’s company.

The day is as hot as the many that have come before, but the winds have picked up, which helps to alleviate some of the sun’s unrelenting presence.
There is a bustle of activity on the deck, the officer on duty yelling orders to the men on the lines as they hurry back and forth to get the sails in place.

He cannot help himself; Sherlock’s glance leaps from sailor to sailor just to be sure, just so that he can be absolutely sure, that none of them is John.

But he must be back at his post at the pumps for Sherlock does not see him anywhere on deck, nor does he recognize any other members of John’s mess.

Sherlock’s heart sinks, and he fights down a wave of sorrow; internally shaking himself. He needs to focus on the task at hand.

Ferguson leads them to an unoccupied corner of the busy deck, and with Sherlock standing awkwardly at his side, he packs the bowl of the pipe with tobacco for Sherlock, not looking at him.

Sherlock swallows down his nervousness, and attempts to affect the tone of someone who’s trying to fill the awkward silence, rather than glean information.

“So… what is it that takes you to the East Indies?”

Ferguson’s thin fingers are busy with the pipe. For a moment, he appears to ignore Sherlock’s question. He hands Sherlock the pipe with the same irritated expression.

“I suppose you need a light as well?”

Sherlock takes the pipe and nods.

Ferguson grunts in affirmation and lights it for him, and as Sherlock takes the first puff of tobacco, he remembers all at once, how much he misses smoking.

He lets out a long plume of smoke, watches it evaporate in the humid air, and feels some of his nervousness abate.

Ferguson is silent beside him, packing a second pipe with tobacco for himself. He lights it and takes a long, deep drag.

Sherlock is just beginning to think Ferguson will ignore his question completely when he replies, words lost in a cloud of smoke.

“What is it that takes anyone to the God forsaken place? Business.”

Sherlock nods in hopes that the other man will go on, and takes another drag on the pipe.

“I work for a firm in London—formerly Denniston, Harris, and Cooper; now, Denniston, Harris, and Ferguson; I’m a new partner.”

Sherlock can hear the minor swell of pride in Ferguson’s voice that he imagines the other man could not suppress no matter how he tried.

“We’re setting up a branch in Calcutta.”

Sherlock is silent again, in the hopes that Ferguson will continue speaking. He’s relying on that powerful combination of factors that so often guarantees a stranger will confide in you if you only remain quiet long enough—boredom and self-interest.

Sure enough, Ferguson continues.
“They were looking for somebody with real grit to set up the chapter in the East. Said I was the perfect man for the job.”

Sherlock can tell he’s trying to brag about the opportunity, but there’s something in Ferguson’s voice that rings false, that makes Sherlock suspect that Ferguson had no interest in coming to India at all, and it isn’t just the aura of bitterness that Ferguson seems to carry around with him wherever he goes, that resentment that seems to hang around people of Ferguson’s class—like polish worn off a cheap replica of a counterfeit good.

“What sort of business do you specialize in?”

“Contract law mostly, financial transactions.” Ferguson lets out another long exhalation of smoke, and then adds, again with that unmistakable note of pride in his voice, “We do business with some of the wealthiest families in the county.”

It’s like an arrow pointing to Ferguson’s class, his boasting about the wealth of his clients. People from Sherlock’s background never spoke about anything so crass as finance; Sherlock pictures his brother’s reaction to the conversation, the way his bland expression would seem to grow brittle at the edges, the slight downturned corners of his disapproving mouth tensing with displeasure.

And now it’s clearer to Sherlock than ever that whatever the particulars are of Ferguson’s meddling in Knott’s business, his motivations are clearly financial.

Here is someone who’s worked his way up from little-to-nothing, has been relatively successful so far in doing so, and then for whatever reason, his law firm decides to send him to the Far East. It could well be, as Ferguson insists, that they believe he is the right man for a difficult job, but it may also be, that, similar to Sherlock’s own reason for being here, they simply wanted to be rid of him.

“How long have you been with this particular firm?”

“Just under a year now.”

“And… there’s a great deal of business to be done in India, I imagine?”

“The East is the future, whether we care to acknowledge it or not.”

That bitterness is back in his voice, and Sherlock is certain then, that the decision to leave England was not Ferguson’s own.

Ferguson has leaned forward to rest his elbows on the railing, his gaze on the water contemplative and far away.

Sherlock is not certain whether it’s the tobacco that’s loosening some of Ferguson’s reserve, or simply boredom, but whatever the reason, Sherlock takes the opportunity to ask another question.

“What happened to your former partner?”

“Passed away, poor fellow,” Ferguson says without a hint of pity in his voice, puffing steadily at his pipe. “It was before my time at the firm. There was some unpleasant business about it. It seems the chap was in perfectly good health; was taken suddenly ill, and died without a hint of warning in the middle of the night. Well, you know how that goes. There was some upset about it, apparently, rumors that somebody had done him in—”

Sherlock tilts his head with interest, taking several short puffs at his own pipe, trying not to appear
too interested despite the fact that his heart is suddenly racing again.

“—but ultimately nothing came of it. You know how it is these days, with the papers dying for any little thing to blow up into a scandal. Poison, they were saying. They liked the tragic angle of it, no doubt. He left behind a wife, and two little ones. He was a younger fellow—that was what made it so strange. The wife came forward to give a testimony. Said he was fine in the evening when he went to bed, and the next thing she knows, she wakes up to find him stone cold beside her. Chilling stuff, I grant you. They were singing broadsides about it in the streets. ‘Poisoner on the Prowl.’

Well, of course the papers loved it. They were on about it for weeks, but like I said, nothing came of it. A man can drop dead at the slightest thing, after all, can’t he? If an oyster disagrees with him, for instance.” Ferguson takes a final drag on his pipe. “It doesn’t take much.”

“No,” Sherlock agrees, shaking his head, after letting out a long breath of smoke. “It certainly doesn’t.”

He pauses before asking his next question, feigning disinterest, trying to make it sound as if he’s only asking to be polite.

“So… they never found out how he died?”

Ferguson shakes his head. “You know how people are—one day it was all anyone could talk about, and the next, they’d moved onto something else.”

“Did the police ever get involved?”

“Far as I know, they never found anything.”

“It seems strange that the local magistrate didn’t follow through. Was there an inquest?”

Ferguson’s eyes slide suddenly over to look Sherlock up and down. “You know how people are—one day it was all anyone could talk about, and the next, they’d moved onto something else.”

“No,” Sherlock says quickly, looking down, hoping the sudden heat in his cheeks isn’t as obvious as it feels.

“Like I said, it was before my time. If you really want to know about all that business, you should ask my associate. He was there when it happened. Of course,” and here Ferguson smiles grimly, “He doesn’t like to talk about it.

“Your associate?” Sherlock asks, although he’s certain he already knows to whom Ferguson is referring.

“Our clerk, John Knott. Clever chap—don’t let that grey, worn-out look fool you. He’s as clever as they come. But a right stubborn bastard he is too.”

Ferguson straightens up as he finishes speaking, having finished his pipe. The openness of his manner seems to dissolve as quickly as the vanishing smoke in the air around them.

“If you’re quite finished then, I’ll have that back.”

Sherlock, upon realizing that he too has smoked the last of his pipe is disappointed on two accounts, both on finishing the tobacco, and that the conversation should come to end just when it was starting to get interesting.

Reluctantly, Sherlock hands back the pipe.
Ferguson takes it, that grim smile returning to his face as he does so.

“Yes, go ahead and ask John Knott as many questions as you like. See how far you get.”

He turns to walk away, and Sherlock, remembering the square of paper tucked in his breast pocket, calls after him, attempting once again to affect the tone of someone young and impossibly naïve.

“I’ll see you at dinner then… Thank you for the smoke!”

Ferguson waves a hand in the air by his ear as if batting a fly; he doesn’t turn around.

Sherlock waits until Ferguson has disappeared into the shadow of the hatch before starting after him. He’s desperate to look at the contents of the paper in his pocket but he doesn’t dare to do so out in the open. The only place with any modicum of privacy on this ship is his cabin.

He makes his way below decks as quick as he can without running. At this point, he’s got nothing but luck to keep Ferguson from noticing what he’s taken, and in Sherlock’s experience, that never lasts long.

When the door is safely closed behind him, and Sherlock reaches into his jacket to pull out the document, it takes only him a moment to understand what he’s looking at.

It’s the ship’s manifest: the inventory of the ship’s cargo—every crate, barrel, and parcel must be accounted for here, down to the exact weight and quantity.

What’s more, it’s clearly not a copy. This paper bears the signature of the harbormaster from the dockyard in Portsmouth, along with his seal.

How did Ferguson get his hands on this?

It doesn’t take any great knowledge to know that the captain of this ship would not disclose any information about the voyage or the contents of the hold to anyone outside of his command, which indicates that the only possible explanation for how it got into Ferguson’s possession is that he stole it.

Sherlock is almost impressed.

Or he would be if it weren’t such a spectacularly stupid idea.

He is impressed at least by Ferguson’s bravado, if not his intelligence.

Stealing an item like this from the captain of this voyage amounts to as good as a death sentence.

Was this what Ferguson and Knott were quarreling about then? Was Ferguson inviting Knott to participate in his hair-brained scheme of stealing from the captain?

It’s no wonder Knott wanted no part in the plan.

He suspected Ferguson had been up to something but this is far more ambitious than Sherlock had guessed.

The fact that Ferguson went out of his way to get a hold of this document can only mean one thing: he wants to know what the ship is carrying. And although Sherlock cannot be certain of his motivation, if Sherlock had to hazard a guess it would be to say that perhaps Ferguson, like so many members of the crew, suspects the captain is smuggling.
His acquisition of the manifest then would likely be to ascertain whether the items in the hold match what’s listed on the inventory.

Sherlock tucks the paper back in his jacket pocket, crossing to the door.

He doesn’t have much time if he wants to get the paper back to Ferguson before he notices it’s missing; by all accounts, he may have already noticed. He could be making his way to Sherlock’s room right now in a suspicious rage.

Sherlock is careful to check the corridor before leaving his room. As soon as he’s ascertained that there is no sign of any belligerent lawyers approaching, he slips out the door, and makes his way to the hatch leading to the lower decks.

Lucky for Sherlock, he knows exactly where the ship’s goods are stored thanks to his detailed tour of the ship with John.

At the thought of John, Sherlock feels his heartbeat speed up. He’s just passing the partition now, on the other side of which he knows very well John is standing, manning the pumps.

He can hear the monotonous clank of the chain as the men work, but today there is no singing. It takes all his willpower not to head straight through the door that Sherlock walked through yesterday, and find John.

Instead, he continues on down the stairs leading to the orlop deck, down into the darkness where John took him no more than a week ago.

Sherlock suppresses a shudder at the memory of John pushing him back into the shadows, his mouth hot on Sherlock’s, his hands firm on Sherlock’s shoulders, the scrape of the rope against his shoulder blades as John’s body ground into his.

But even with the heat of the memories comes a twinge of sorrow as the nasty voice inside Sherlock seems to prick at him; asks, *What if that’s the end of that? What if you never feel John’s embraces again? This is all you’ll have now—nothing but your memories of him to keep you company. Can you feel the shadow of his arms around you? Will that be enough for you? From now on, that may be all you’re going to get.*

Sherlock stiffens his spine in response, freezing where he stands by one of the towering coils of rope, waiting for the feeling of hollowness to lessen, for the ache—as though his insides have been scooped out—to subside.

He cannot afford to be paralyzed by fear and sorrow—not now, when every minute counts.

He breathes shallowly through his nostrils for several seconds, concentrating on the swinging spots of lantern light sliding over the wooden floor of the deck until the feeling passes.

He reaches up to unhook one of the lanterns—he will need it in order to see into the shadowy corners where the barrels and crates are stacked.

*Just concentrate on the task at hand.*

As he lifts the lantern above his head, casting its golden light into the shadows between the cables, he is struck by just how much *stuff* is stacked and piled around him. He had been able to discern only the dim outlines of objects during his visit here with John—and then, of course, his attention had been decidedly focused on other matters. He hadn’t given the boxes and barrels a second glance.
But now that he’s looking, he cannot help but be amazed by the sheer quantity of items wedged between the cables.

Most of the space is filled by wooden casks, stacked one on top of the other. They’re enormous: four feet tall and three feet in diameter—large enough to hide a man if he climbed inside. But there are also trunks and barrels, boxes and bins, and all manner of assorted storage containers, stacked haphazardly in every corner.

It’s clear enough after several moments of observation which of these contain the food stores for the voyage—the congregation of rats around the bottom would be evidence enough, but it’s also obvious thanks to the presence of several leaking sacks of flour slouched nearby, as well as the large bins where Sherlock knows they store dried goods.

He can also make out, relatively easily, which portion of the deck is reserved for the passengers’ trunks. They are stacked precariously in a far corner of the deck, wedged between two giant lengths of cable.

Sherlock notices, with a certain amount of quiet glee, that a trunk stamped with the name G. Grimsby has slid out of its rope fastenings and is laying on its side in a pool of fetid water.

He walks the length of the deck, eyes flickering over the silhouetted objects in the gloom, until he reaches the door that John told him leads to the cockpit, the other side of which lies the purser’s cabin and the steward’s, as well as the captain’s storeroom, the slop room and the surgeon’s dispensary.

Those rooms hold little interest for Sherlock as he knows that none of these rooms are large enough to hold the tradable cargo, rather they will be filled with tools and equipment to ensure the smooth running of the ship, clothing for the sailors and a hundred other small items—axes, hammers, chisels, saws, plugs and harnesses, lamp oil, paper and linen, soap and extra candles.

No, there’s nothing of interest to him beyond the door, and it’s a good thing too, for he knows these rooms are only accessible via a set of keys that are in the possession of the steward and the ship’s master.

He concentrates instead on the casks stacked between the cables in the waist of the ship—here, he knows, are the items that the ship is taking to trade or sell in the markets of Madras.

He walks back down the length of the deck until he reaches them, and setting the lantern at his feet, he crouches down beside it to study the paper in his hand.

The items listed are typical of those brought from England to the east: woolen cloth and assorted fancy goods manufactured in English factories: sword blades, mirrors, iron, bars of lead and tin.

The list is long and now that Sherlock is crouched in the darkness, surrounded by the labyrinth of barrels, casks, and chests, he realizes with a sinking feeling how ill-conceived this plan of his to double-check the inventory, actually is.

Even if he could see all the containers (which is frankly impossible what with the lack of proper light and the manner in which things are stored), there’s no way for him to actually ascertain what’s in half of them, since he lacks the proper tools to get them open.

Suddenly, the sheer bravado of his plan is revealed for what it actually is—a fool’s errand. He’d been so caught up in the thrill of the theft, so desperate to do something rather than just sit around pining for John, that he hadn’t taken a moment to consider whether the plan was actually worth
executing.

Why on earth had he assumed that this is what Ferguson had intended to do with the manifest?

Unless the man was a complete idiot (like, Sherlock noted bitterly, himself), he would know that he couldn’t single handedly account for all the items on the manifest.

No, what Ferguson probably plans to do (and what, Sherlock realizes now, with deepening irritation, is the **obvious** thing to do), is wait until the ship makes port in Rio to see if any items listed on the manifest get taken off the ship. The tradable goods are destined for the markets in the East—their stop in Rio is simply a matter of restocking necessary supplies for the passengers and the crew. But if the captain were being light-fingered with the goods, Rio would be the place to do his selling, rather than Madras.

Or perhaps, Ferguson never intended to check the inventory at all; perhaps he is confident enough in his assessment that the captain is smuggling to blackmail the man with the document alone.

That would be a bold move indeed, but from everything Sherlock has observed about Ferguson, he wouldn’t be surprised to see him take that kind of a risk.

The question is **when** would he want to confront the captain? If he has even a shred of intelligence he will wait until they’ve made port in Rio to make his threats, in case things go sour. Or will he wait until the end of the voyage? That would be the wiser choice.

But how long has he had the document in his possession? And perhaps the most pressing question of all: Has the captain noticed it’s gone missing?

And then—it’s like a match being illuminated, suddenly flooding Sherlock’s mind with light—he lowers the lantern in his hand with a gasp.

Was this the motivation for the captain’s attempt on Knott’s life? Had he mistakenly identified the wrong man as the culprit?

But how would he have known? And why would he have assumed the guilty party was the unassuming Mr. Knott?

Sherlock’s mind is racing now, the lantern dangling forgotten in his hand.

When had he overhead the row between Knott and Ferguson?

The party had been on a Friday; he’d overheard the conversation several days after. When was that?

All the days without John seem to blend together in Sherlock’s mind—a meaningless blur of waiting.

Sunday was the day Anderson had been put in charge of John’s mess. Sherlock had stumbled upon their conversation that first time he’d gone looking for Billy to get an answer from John—it would have been Tuesday.

Could it be possible that Ferguson already had the manifest in his possession then? Or was that what he had been propositioning Knott about—asking for his help to steal it?

If that was true then that couldn’t have been the captain’s motivation for poisoning Knott…
Sherlock is so deep in contemplation that it takes him several seconds to become aware of a sound getting steadily louder in the creaking darkness overhead.

Sherlock freezes, his heartbeat roaring in his ears.

It is the sound of footsteps drawing near the hatch.

Sherlock waits; immobilized, mentally urging the footsteps to continue onward.

_Don’t come below. Don’t come below._

But now there are voices clearly audible, and Sherlock can hear their footsteps begin their descent down the wooden stairs.

He turns frantically, looking for a means of escape.

There’s nowhere for him to go; the other hatch is beyond the locked door at Sherlock’s back; and Sherlock realizes, too late, that he is trapped.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry for the cliff-hanger, my beautiful sea urchins, but please know that the next chapter is like, basically done, so you will not, will not, have to wait so long between updates as the last time, I PROMISE YOU!

Thanks for sticking with this story- I appreciate your support more than you know. You guys keep me going. <33
Chapter Thirty Five

Chapter Summary

In which Sherlock continues to Get Up To No Good.

Chapter Notes

Warnings this chapter for brief depiction of physical violence.

Special thanks this chapter to idel thoughts (a.k.a. truthisademurelady) for hanging out with me while I worked on this chapter and offering invaluable suggestions. I miss you, and all our awesome co-writing adventures!! OFD Lestrade sends his particular love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock wastes several valuable seconds standing immobilized like a wild animal staring down the barrel of a hunter’s rifle waiting for his inevitable doom.

Do something! Quick! his brain urges his useless limbs.

But then self-preservation kicks in and Sherlock is extinguishing the lantern in his hand in one terrified gust of breath and retreating deep into the shadows between the towering barrels.

For once, Sherlock is grateful for his scrawny frame since it means he is able to worm his way through the narrow chasm between the giant casks all the way back until he reaches the rank and slippery sides of the ship.

Of course, it also means that if they find him, he is properly trapped, but Sherlock tries not to think about that.

The air is foul and damp and the barrels on either side of Sherlock’s shoulders are slick with moisture. It’s as if he’s plunged straight into the ship’s stinking entrails.

He has a sudden image of the Galatea as some ancient, slow-moving aquatic beast like the ones he’s seen in the drawings from his father’s library, her bulging sides encrusted with barnacles, her long curving tail trailing plumes of sea weed.

He draws his elbows in closer and tries not to breathe too deeply.

He can see nothing from his hiding place between the barrels, but he can hear footsteps drawing nearer, and the two men’s voices are easy to make out.

“Bloody useless if you ask me, coming down here every two hours. What does he expect us to find?”

“Dunno. I don’t make the orders, do I?”
They are two sailors Sherlock has seen around the ship—not members of John’s mess, either of them, but the first sailor’s voice he recognizes as one of those from the group that witnessed Stevens’ discovery of him that day on the gun deck when he’d gone looking for John.

Sawyer is his name; he is the sailor who was so vocal about his desire to take Sherlock to his bed. There’s a dull sickness in Sherlock’s belly at the sound of the man’s voice. He recoils further into the pungent shadows.

“Something’s got a bee in his bonnet. He’s been shifty since this voyage began but it’s got worse this week, have you noticed? Makes you wonder what he’s up to.”

“I think you’d do better if you stopped askin’ so many questions. Askin’ questions leads to nothing but a licking.”

“Well, sometimes I wonder if a good licking would be better than putting up with all His Majesty’s paranoid fancies.”

So the captain has noticed the manifest is missing. Sherlock reflects on this piece of information with interest. Why else would he be sending sailors down to check the cargo every two hours?

He must be assuming whoever took it would do exactly what Sherlock has just done: go snooping to see if what’s listed on the inventory matches what’s down in the hold.

“Oye!”

Sherlock hears the shuffle of footsteps come to a halt not ten feet from where he’s hiding.

“You keep your mutinous mouth shut when I’m in your company, ya hear? You may not value your own worthless hide but I just so happen to want to see out this voyage in one piece so do us a favor and SHUT IT.”

There’s a brief scuffle in which Sherlock assumes the verbal threat is made more potent by an accompanying physical one. He watches the pool of their lantern light ripple over the barrels that mark the entrance to his hiding place.

Sherlock holds his breath.

“LAY OFF!”

The light slides suddenly away, and more shuffled footsteps tell Sherlock that the two have broken apart.

“I’m done with this nonsense!” says the offended party, “This is ridiculous—there’s clearly no one down here anyway! I’m going back up.”

“Suit yourself. You’re entitled to the full measure of his disapproval when you show up again so soon. Me, I’m gonna keep looking.”

Sherlock listens to the retreating footsteps of the mutinous sailor as he makes his way back toward the gangway. He silently curses the one remaining for his commitment to the task at hand, leaning as far back as he can manage into the slimy bulwark at his back in order to avoid detection.

This far down in the ship, the water running down the sides is almost continuous, resulting in a slick buildup of algae and various other varieties of rank-smelling slime. Sherlock is pressed so
close against the damp wood he can feel it dripping in his hair and he shudders in response, wondering how this same atmosphere could have been so appealing to him the last time he was here, solely because of John’s presence.

The moist, pungent smell is so potent Sherlock cannot stop himself from gagging. He hurriedly lifts his sleeve to cover his mouth but he’s too late.

With a nauseating plunge of dread, he watches the beam of the lantern light swing back around toward his hiding place.

“Who’s there?” the sailor calls out, lifting his lantern higher, the pool of yellow light falling not two inches from the toe of Sherlock’s boot.

Sherlock holds himself absolutely still, not daring to breathe, furiously willing his body not to betray him with any other involuntary act.

He can hear the unmistakable skitterings and scratchings of his unseen vermin companions in the dark and closing his eyes, he offers a silent prayer that they might take the blame for his actions.

“If you’re in there, show yourself!”

Still Sherlock does not move, ignoring the steady drip of rank water down the back of his neck, uncomfortably aware of the fact that one of the rats is currently making its way over the top of his boot.

The fact that Sherlock is covered in ship’s slime and rats is a new low, even for him, and to Sherlock’s horror this realization conjures up the apparition of his brother, his face a mixture of condescension and smug delight.

If Mycroft could see him now he would have a field day.

He pictures Mycroft’s gaze flickering disdainfully over the vermin cavorting at his feet.

*Still running with the same company, I see?*

Sherlock’s rage is visceral and instantaneous.

With a calculated flick of his foot, he flings the rat from off his boot and directly toward the disapproving figure of his brother.

Much to Sherlock’s delight, the pathway of the airborne rodent takes him right to the feet of the watchful sailor.

The resulting string of curses that follows tells Sherlock that the man’s encounter with the projectile rat has eclipsed his desire to continue searching in this particular corner of the ship.

In fact, the flying vermin seems to have completely dissuaded him from continuing his search.

Sherlock can hear him muttering angrily to himself as he makes his way back toward the gangway.

“Sawyer was right. Bloody pointless coming down here every two hours, hunting for shadows… There’s nothin’ but rats…”

As soon as he hears the sound of the man’s footsteps crossing the deck over his head, Sherlock squirms free of his hiding place, dislodging a whole party of inquiring rats as he goes.
He scarcely notices; he’s so focused the implications of what he’s just overheard.

The presence of the two sailors confirms that the captain knows the manifest is missing, it also confirms that he does not yet know the identity of the thief.

What it unfortunately does not prove is that the captain is smuggling—he could simply be desperate to catch the perpetrator. Knowing his penchant for poisoning, he doesn’t seem the sort of man to let a misdemeanor go unpunished, no matter how wrong footed.

Brushing the slime off his shirtsleeves, Sherlock hooks the lantern back up where he found it, and hurries toward the gangway.

He’s got to get the manifest back to Ferguson as quickly as possible, if he wants to avoid a lot of uncomfortable questions.

If he’s lucky, the man will not yet have noticed that it’s gone missing.

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But as Sherlock rounds the corner to Ferguson’s room, and hears the sound of raised voices, it’s clear that his luck for the day has run out.

He doubles back and ducks just out of sight around the corner, listening hard.

“—should have known you would go behind my back. I made you an offer that you refused. How dare you try to get the advantage over me?”

“What advantage? You’re raving, man!”

“I’m not stupid, Knott. I know you took it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Let me by!”

“You know perfectly well what I’m talking about.” Ferguson lowers his voice several degrees but not low enough that Sherlock can’t hear his next words. “The document,” he hisses. “The document I described to you in confidence. It’s gone missing and you’re the only one who knows I have it. Where is it?”

“I wouldn’t know, would I? I’ve told you I want no part in it! And if you had any sense at all, you’d steer well clear of it yourself! Otherwise you’re going to end up dead!”

“Oh, making threats now, are you?”

“It’s not my threats you should be worried about, you halfwit!”

Sherlock risks a glance around the corner to see just how far past Ferguson’s room the men are standing. They are about fifty feet further down the corridor, and it’s clear by their position that Ferguson accosted Knott coming out of his room—they are standing just in front of it.

Ferguson’s back is to Sherlock but he can see Knott’s face clearly. He’s never seen the man looks so enraged.

Ferguson takes a step closer to Knott, his posture threatening and full of ill intent.

“Dammit, it’s been six hours—if I don’t get it back where it belongs, then I really might end up dead.”
“This is precisely why you should have listened to me. You never should have taken it in the first place.”

“I KNEW IT!” Ferguson roars, slamming his fist against the wall behind Knott’s head. He seizes the other man by his collar. “You took it from me to teach me some kind of lesson, didn’t you?” He shakes him roughly to try to force an answer. “DIDN’T YOU?”

Knott seems remarkably unrattled for the violence of the altercation. “You can rough house me as much as you like, Ferguson. It isn’t going to produce your precious manifest. And I suggest you keep your voice down, unless you want to draw more attention to yourself.”

Sherlock ducks back out of sight, heart pounding hard against his ribs.

There’s no way he can make it back into Ferguson’s rooms without being seen—not now.

Six hours, Ferguson said. That means he’s only had the manifest in his possession since the morning—and he clearly hadn’t intended to keep it. What a fool the man is. If he wasn’t planning to keep it to blackmail the captain then he should have made a copy immediately, and returned it right away.

Oh.

Oh.

Suddenly, the reason for Ferguson’s reluctance to speak with Sherlock this morning is abundantly clear. He obviously had things to do, and Sherlock interrupted him before he could complete the task.

It’s your fault now that he’s in this mess.

Sherlock bristles at his own twinge of guilt.

It isn’t my fault that the man was too stupid to make a copy immediately. I’ve only had it for less than an hour—he clearly had hours before that to get it back to the captain.

But he cannot shake the feeling that he is partly responsible for the man’s crisis. He hears Knott’s voice again, clearly exasperated but trying to speak reasonably.

“Use your head, man. If the thing is gone it means you can’t be accused of having taken it. Somebody’s done you a colossal favor. You’re off the hook, and whichever poor sod has it in his possession is now the guilty party. Take it as a sign to stop meddling where you don’t belong.”

This is obviously not what Ferguson wants to hear but the peak of his anger seems to have passed.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute, that boy…”

Sherlock can almost hear the cogs turning in Ferguson’s brain as he thinks back over the events of the morning. Sherlock retreats deeper into the shadows.

“That ruddy boy was in my room this morning!”

“Ferguson—”

“He took the damn thing to play some kind of trick on me! I knew he was up to something!”
“Ferguson! Get ahold of yourself! You want to think before making reckless accusations—unless you want to alert the whole ship of your business. What if the boy didn’t take it? Do you want him to know what you’ve done?”

“Oh, he took it alright. And when I find him I’m going to wring his scrawny neck."

Sherlock does not wait to hear if Knott has a response to this. He scrambles toward the staircase at his back, all momentary guilt that he experienced on Ferguson’s behalf evaporating as quickly as it came.

Sherlock’s room is one deck below Ferguson’s, so Sherlock takes the staircase going up in the hopes that this will give him something of a head start.

He emerges into the sunlight, blinking hard, his mind reeling as he tries to come up with a plan.

His primary objective is to get rid of the manifest as fast as humanly possible—but what to do with it?

He cannot risk going back down to Ferguson’s room, not with Knott likely loitering in the hallway nearby, and it will only take Ferguson a matter of minutes to discover that his room is empty.

Sherlock glances toward the quarterdeck and is surprised to see the captain deep in conversation with Lieutenant Lestrade. It’s been so long since Sherlock has actually seen the man he risks a moment to take in the details of the scene before him. Sherlock cannot make out the faces of either the captain or the Lieutenant as their backs are turned to him but he can see Lieutenant Deverall standing a few faces behind them, arms crossed behind his back, his expression grave, and Lieutenant Dimmock stands at Deverall’s side, his anxiety palpable in the drawn lines of his face.

So the captain must be airing his grievances regarding the matter of his stolen property. It looks like Lestrade is getting the worst of it.

Either that or something else has them all on edge.

There’s no sign of the two sailors who have just been searching the hold. And this realization, combined with the captain’s presence on the quarterdeck, gives Sherlock an idea.

He double checks to be sure that no one up on the quarterdeck is taking any notice of where he’s standing by the capstan down below, and then, assuming every iota of confidence he possesses, Sherlock strides past the sailor at the helm and through the door under the quarterdeck leading to the captain’s quarters.

Luckily, Sherlock knows exactly where to go thanks to the festivities last week, and after heading through one set of doors he comes upon another door leading to the captain’s private cabin, in front of which stands the man Sherlock knows to be the captain’s steward.

“Excuse me,” Sherlock says, allowing the status he’s accrued from years of time spent among the obnoxiously wealthy to exude from every pore. His tone is somehow bland and domineering at once. “I’ve come to report a disturbance I just witnessed among the crew.”

The steward looks ready to roll his eyes but manages to prevent himself from doing so, only just.

“Well, it isn’t me you’ll be wanting to talk to about that. It’s one of the lieutenants.”

Sherlock’s chest swells with indignation, as if the man has offended him by the very suggestion.
“I’ve just tried speaking with them, but they’re all engaged at the moment in conversation with the captain. And I know he wouldn’t like to be disturbed.”

Sherlock watches the irritation on the man’s face war with his resignation. “What’s the nature of the offense?”

Sherlock puffs himself up like an offended peacock. “I witnessed two sailors engaged in decidedly illicit activities while I was making my way through the upper gun deck.”

This time the man actually does roll his eyes. “You aren’t allowed on the gun deck, mate, you’re a passenger.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrow viciously. “How dare you speak to me like that? I’m not your mate, and I’ll have you know my father is a viscount. I can go wherever I like!”

“I don’t care who your father is, you’re onboard a ship now, and you’ll follow her rules!” The steward jabs his finger in the air in the direction of Sherlock’s chest.

“Fine then,” Sherlock snaps. “I suppose you’re not interested in the fact that this illicit activity involved the exchange of contraband goods that I can only assume they’d pilfered from the hold. Unless, sailors on this voyage are encouraged to make a profit on coral and ivory?”

The man’s face clouds with sudden anger. “They what?”

“And I guess you wouldn’t want to know that they’re down there right now getting a nice stockpile of the goods. I believe Sawyer and his companion will make quite a profit.”

“Down where right now?”

“In the hold.”

“Bloody hell, I’m gonna kill them—”

The man does not spare a second glance for Sherlock. He shoves past him and is out running into the sunlight of the ship’s waist.

Sherlock smiles briefly to himself, checks the corridor quickly to make sure no one is in sight, and then pulls open the door to the captain’s study.

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He’s not sure exactly what he expected to find but after his first glance around the impeccably tidy, austere space, it strikes him that the character of the room matches the character of the man who resides there.

For a captain’s great room, the space is positively Spartan.

There are no extravagant decorations or embellishments, no luxurious furniture or fanciful items; nothing to give any hint of the individual who occupies the space. Like the captain himself there is a blank quality to the assembled objects, giving the impression that there is something there underneath the surface, something more that is invisible to the naked eye, but that remains expertly hidden.

Despite the size of the room (it’s larger by half than almost any other space on the ship), the cheerfully white-washed walls, and the sunlight pouring in through the generous stern windows,
the room has a bare and hostile feeling that makes Sherlock instantly aware of his presence as an intruder.

He hovers for a moment by the door to get his bearings, eyes roving carefully over every object in the room. He wants to be certain he leaves it exactly as he found it. This is a room in which everything has its place, whose proprietor will know immediately if anything is out of order.

Apart from the lack of ornamentation, the room is typical of a captain’s cabin. There is a table by the stern windows where the captain dines with the higher-ranking officers, the surface of which is currently covered by maps and nautical charts, as well as a corked glass decanter of port and several glasses.

The center of the room is dominated by an enormous desk, on which stands the various tools of the captain’s trade: a compass, a sextant, a marine chronometer for keeping time, along with several items whose purposes are unknown to Sherlock.

Sherlock approaches the desk, suddenly painfully aware of the slime still coating his shirtsleeves, and probably trailing from his boots—this was not the ideal time to come stealthily search the captain’s rooms, but he’ll have to make due.

He has no idea how long the captain will be engaged in conversation up on deck; he could return at any moment, so he has to be quick.

Assuming that the captain keeps his logbook and all his important papers in one of the many gleaming drawers in the vast polished desk, Sherlock tries the first one, but finds it locked.

He slides an inquiring hand along the underside of the desk just to be sure but finds no trace of a key. No surprise there. A man as paranoid as the captain would keep his keys on his person at all times.

He tries the second drawer, and this time, he is in luck.

It slides open with ease, and to Sherlock’s delight the first thing he sees inside is a leather folio of papers much like the one he spied this morning on Ferguson’s desk.

Sherlock pulls it out and flips through the first few pages, his eyes rapidly scanning the lines of ink.

It takes him only a moment to realize that the documents in his hands are the inventories of the passengers and crew onboard. Perfect.

He’s just sliding the manifest in behind the other two documents when the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside causes him to freeze where he stands.

For the second time that day he is caught like a rabbit in the presence of the hounds.

Once again, he finds himself utterly incapable of movement.

He watches in paralyzed horror as the knob on the door begins to turn.

The sight of it turning breaks his spell. Sherlock throws the folio of papers back into the drawer and slams it shut; then dropping to his knees, he crawls under the enormous desk just as the door swings wide.

From where he’s crouched, he watches a pair of polished black boots approach the desk.
His heart is pounding so loudly he’s certain the sound will give him away.

The boots come to a halt in front of Sherlock. He holds his breath.

He hears the sounds of someone rifling through papers, and then a sigh—a distinctly familiar sigh. It is the sigh of a man whose patience has been tried and tried again, a man who’s thoroughly exhausted by his daily trials onboard the *Galatea*.

Sherlock almost knocks his head against the top of the desk in his eagerness to stand.

“Lieutenant!”

Perhaps surprise was not the best tactic.

Lestrade drops the sheaf of papers in his hand with a loud string of curses.

“You’re just the man I wanted to see!”

Lestrade stares at him with his mouth hanging open, as if he cannot fathom Sherlock’s presence in this place.

“Don’t worry I was just on my way out.”

“Sherlock, what in god’s name—”

He’s interrupted by the sound of voices in the corridor outside. It’s Deverall and Dimmock engaged in what sounds like a heated argument.

Sherlock glances towards the door, which is standing partially ajar. “I was wondering if you might ah… help me exit this room without being seen? If it’s not too much trouble.”

Lestrade shakes his head in disbelief.

“What the hell are you doing in here?” His voice is an incredulous whisper. “I could have you thrown in irons just for being here, Sherlock!”

“Nothing.” Sherlock clasps his hands behind his back in what he hopes is a convincingly innocent gesture. “Just… got lost on my way back to my room. Won’t happen again.”

“It had bloody well not!”

“Oye, Lestrade!” Deverall’s shout comes from just outside the door. “What’s taking you so long? You know we don’t like to keep certain people waiting…”

“Coming!”

Lestrade leans forward, his voice low and fierce. “I’m going to go deal with these two, but as soon as I leave this room you’d better beat it, and you better not be seen by anyone while you do, otherwise it’s my head on the line, do you hear me?”

Sherlock nods, trying to look properly chastened and failing.

Lestrade jabs an accusing finger at him. “This had better not be what I think it is, because I wouldn’t like to think you’re going back on your word.”

Sherlock opens his mouth to protest that he never made any such promise but Lestrade interrupts
him before he can respond.

“No, you know what?” Lestrade wipes a hand over his face in a long-suffering gesture. “Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. We’re going to pretend this never happened. We never had this conversation.”

When he looks at Sherlock again, it appears as though he’s aged considerably in the time it took him to pass his hand over his face. He leans back over the desk at Sherlock, his expression hardening.

“But if I catch you anywhere near this part of the ship again, I swear to god, Sherlock Holmes, I will throw you in the brig myself.”

With a final furious shake of his head, he turns to go.

Sherlock stops him.

“Lieutenant…”

Lestrade stares at him with disbelieving fury.

“Your papers.”

Sherlock hands him the documents he dropped upon seeing Sherlock, and he cannot stop himself from smiling just the tiniest triumphant smile as Lestrade turns, still shaking his head, and makes his way out the door.

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Sherlock manages to successfully exit the captain’s cabin without incident.

It’s a different matter entirely when he returns below deck to find a fuming George Ferguson pacing the corridor outside Sherlock’s room.

He pauses momentarily, debating whether he should turn back in an effort to avoid the encounter.

But he decides against it, knowing full well that to do so would only be to delay the inevitable—Ferguson is not giving up until he confronts Sherlock, that much is clear. And as Sherlock no longer has the manifest in his possession, there’s no way Ferguson can prove that he took it.

No, if he does not deal with this now, Ferguson will only grow angrier with every passing minute.

However, as he spies Sherlock coming down the corridor, Sherlock does not at all like the way he points his finger at Sherlock’s chest as he approaches, or the threatening manner in which he says, “You!”

“Good afternoon,” Sherlock begins charitably.

Ferguson wastes no time with pleasantries.

“Don’t ‘good afternoon’ me you thieving cockroach. What have you done with it?”

Sherlock decides quickly that the best approach is one of complete and utter naivety.

“Done with what? Your pipe?” He allows a single furrow of perplexity to appear between his eyebrows. “Why, I gave it back to you!”
“Don’t play games with me, boy. The paper! The paper that you stole from my room this morning when I leant you my pipe—where is it?”

Sherlock adopts a look of baffled innocence. “I’m sorry I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

With a growl of displeasure, Ferguson looms closer, clearly attempting to intimidate the truth out of Sherlock with the threat of violence.

Sherlock is taller than Ferguson by about six inches, but Sherlock decides it’s in his best interest to at least pretend to look intimidated if it will help the man to calm down.

His expression of feigned terror must be somewhat effective because he watches Ferguson draw a deep breath and visibly try to calm himself.

“Look, I don’t know why you took it—maybe you thought it would be funny—I really don’t care—but the document you took is important, and I need it back. Just give it back to me, and we can forget this ever happened, alright?”

Sherlock glances up and down the hall in the hopes of someone interrupting. But it’s the dinner hour—nobody else is around. They’re all upstairs in the saloon.

“I’m sorry old man, I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Perhaps it’s a result of the sheer bravado oozing out of him after his numerous successful escapes from danger already today that he cannot keep a certain degree of smugness from creeping into his voice; or perhaps his acting skills aren’t quite as convincing as he thinks.

Whatever the reason, at Sherlock’s words, the forced calm in Ferguson’s demeanor flickers and then vanishes abruptly like a candle going out.

“You filthy liar.” He spits the words like a curse.

With far more speed than Sherlock imagined possible, Ferguson springs forward and seizes Sherlock by the collar.

Sherlock is so shocked by this sudden breach of personal space that for a moment he cannot speak at all. The threat of violence is one thing, but this? He never would have expected it from someone of Ferguson’s class. Even as he thinks it though he realizes how stupid he has been—Ferguson is a member of the rising middle class, who knows how rough his origins were? How often he may have resorted to violence to solve his problems?

He should have seen this coming.

It takes him several seconds to catch his breath and by the time he has, Ferguson is already half-dragging Sherlock’s jacket off his shoulders with a vicious gesture to begin frantically searching through his pockets.

“Let go of me!”

Sherlock twists as hard as he can to break free of the other man’s grip but Ferguson is stronger than he looks and he does not relinquish his hold on the back of Sherlock’s neck.

“I don’t have your bloody paper!”

He tears the jacket the rest of the way off Sherlock’s shoulders, and then, finding its pockets
empty, tosses it to the floor.

“You’re a liar. I know you took it.”

Ferguson releases his hold on the back of Sherlock’s neck to grip him instead by the arm, his expression furious, his fingers digging into Sherlock’s arm hard enough to bruise.

It’s then, that Sherlock remembers, in a throb of panic, the notes tucked into his waistcoat pocket—his notes from John. If Ferguson finds them…

“HELP!” he yells at full volume, in the desperate hope that someone will hear him shouting and come to his aid. It’s not difficult to inject his voice with real fear. “Help! I’m being accosted by a mad man!”

“How dare you?” Ferguson snarls, his hands scrabbling for purchase on the front of Sherlock’s chest.

And then it’s as if John is speaking to him, suddenly, from inside his own head. What did I teach you about self-defense?

Oh.

Oh yes, of course.

No point in wasting all those hours of tedious strength training exercises.

Twisting his body sharply in order to get Ferguson behind him, Sherlock slides a half step backwards, and then rams his elbow as hard as possible into Ferguson’s ribs.

The maneuver is effective in that it momentarily breaks Ferguson’s hold on Sherlock’s arm.

However, it has the unfortunate side effect of quadrupling the other man’s already manic rage.

With a grunt of fury, he slams his fist into the side of Sherlock’s face in retaliation.

The blow is so strong it knocks Sherlock off his feet. He falls hard into the corridor wall, tasting blood, his vision momentarily disoriented as he struggles to keep from falling to the floor.

He’s still struggling to right himself when Ferguson seizes hold of his arm again.

“FERGUSON!”

There’s a shout from down the corridor, followed by the sound of running footsteps.

Sherlock looks up in desperation to see the furious face of Mr. Knott. He’s staring at Ferguson in undisguised horror.

“What the devil are you doing?”

“You know perfectly well what I’m doing!” Ferguson shouts. His voice has an edge of hysteria. “This boy stole something from me this morning, and now I’m simply taking back what’s mine. I’ll search his room next if I have to—I know he has it!”

“Ferguson! Have you completely lost your mind? Let go of the boy!”

But Ferguson doesn’t let go. He clings to Sherlock’s arm, the hysteria in his voice increasing.
“He stole from me! I know he did! He took it, he took it, and I’m going to get it back!”

“He didn’t steal it from you,” Knott snaps.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I did.”

Ferguson stares at Knott in stunned silence.

Sherlock takes the opportunity to yank his arm out of Ferguson’s grip.

“You…?”

Knott appears to look resigned, and Sherlock is impressed by how convincing it seems, knowing full well that Knott is lying through his teeth.

“It’s just as you said this morning. I took it from you to teach you a lesson; to remind you not to take things that don’t belong to you.” Knott looks pointedly at Sherlock as he says this, as if trying to remind Ferguson that they have an audience. “Bit hypocritical, isn’t it? Calling this lad a thief.”

Ferguson is still staring at Knott in utter shock, but now there’s a note of anger creeping back into his countenance. “How dare you?”

“How dare I what? Save your skin? I don’t know why I bother if this is the kind of gratitude I’m going to receive.”

Ferguson’s face is ugly with fury. “You had no right! That’s information I told to you in confidence—”

“I had every right,” Knott growls. “I put it back where it belongs. It’s for your own good, Ferguson. You’re in over your head!” Knott’s gaze returns to Sherlock. “Now if you don’t mind I’d prefer not to say anymore in present company.”

Ferguson takes a loaded step forward, his expression deranged. “Don’t think this means I’m giving up. I’ll find another way, and this time, I’m not giving you any of the details.”

Knott makes a dismissive gesture. “As I told you from the beginning, that’s how I would prefer it.”

Ferguson begins to walk away but Knott stops him. “Aren’t you going to apologize to the boy?”

Ferguson gives Sherlock a look of pure hatred. “I still think he’s a liar.” He jabs an accusing finger at Sherlock. “You stay out of my way for the rest of the voyage! I don’t want you coming me near me, do you hear?”

Sherlock doesn’t reply, and without another word, Ferguson retreats down the hallway, and disappears up the stairs.

Sherlock stoops to pick up his jacket.

“Are you alright?”

Sherlock straightens up and looks at the other man.

He doesn’t know what to make of the fact that this stranger just went out of his way to protect him.
“Yes. I…” Sherlock fiddles with the jacket in his hands. “Thank you for—”

“What did you do with it?”

Sherlock hesitates, unsettled by the sudden directness of the question.

Knott is studying Sherlock with a sharp, discerning gaze. There’s no trace of the bland, unassuming figure that fades into the background of every room he’s in. His eyes on Sherlock are full of intelligence.

There seems no point in pretending now.

Sherlock meets his gaze. “I put it back in the captain’s desk.”

Surprise ripples through Knott’s expression—he didn’t expect that. Sherlock sees he is impressed.

“Did he see you?”

“No.”

“Good.” Knott studies him a moment longer, his expression intent. “I’m not going to ask you why you took that paper, or why you gave it back, but I want you to know that I don’t condone stealing, and if you have any sense at all, you will keep your distance from George Ferguson. He’s a greedy, reckless man, and at the rate he’s going, I will be very surprised if he makes it through this voyage alive.”

Now it’s Sherlock’s turn to be stunned, although he does his best to hide his reaction.

He knew John Knott was a serious man, even dour at times, but the conviction with which he pronounces this prediction seems grim even for him.

He really seems to believe it.

Knott goes on.

“In spite of your cavalier attitude regarding the personal possessions of others, you seem like an intelligent person, so it should come as no surprise to you when I say that the captain of this ship is a dangerous man. I’m going to give you the same advice I gave my reckless colleague—do not cross this man. Better yet, stay as far away from him as you can manage, unless you want to end up dead. Because you will end up dead. Promise me, you’ll steer clear of him.”

Sherlock shakes his head. “I can’t promise you that.”

Knott’s expression darkens. “Then you’re as stupid as my associate.”

He takes a step back from Sherlock, looking him over as if seeing him for the first time and noticing all his flaws—the grime on his jacket, his split lip, his filthy hair.

“You just remember then that the next time you’re in trouble, you’re on your own.”

Knott turns to walk away, and Sherlock calls after him.

“Ferguson told me what happened at your law firm back in London. He told me one of the partners died suddenly under mysterious circumstances. He said the newspapers were calling it murder, saying he’d been poisoned. He was poisoned, wasn’t he?”
Knott stops walking abruptly.

Sherlock licks the blood off his lip; takes a deep breath. “He was poisoned by someone on board this ship.”

Knott strides the two steps back to Sherlock’s side, his face carefully blank. However, his voice, when he speaks is full of barely disguised fury.

“I don’t know how you came into possession of this information, or why you seem to think any of this is your business, but if you have even a shred of intelligence you will stay out of it.” The man is so furious he is shaking. “Didn’t you hear anything I just told you?” His voice is incredulous. “Do you have a death wish?”

Sherlock says nothing, and then, keeping his voice very low, he says: “He tried to poison you, too, didn’t he? The night of the party—it was you he was after, but something went wrong.”

Knott stares at Sherlock, his face going white. He takes a step backward, shaking his head.

“You knew what he did to your associate at the firm, didn’t you? You knew it was him. And he must have recognized you at some point during the voyage. He had no idea you were going to be on this ship, and you didn’t know it was him, either, until you saw his face.”

Knott is now walking backwards away from Sherlock, his face as white as a sheet. He keeps shaking his head.

“He’s afraid you’ll tell, isn’t he? Once we reach India. That you’ll send word back to the firm that you know he’s here. But you wouldn’t tell, would you? You had the chance back in England, but you said nothing—why?”

“Why do you think?” Knott snaps, finally succumbing to the relentless stream of Sherlock’s questions. “Because I know exactly what would happen to me if I did.”

“Why did he murder your colleague? What did he know? And how did you find out?”

But Knott has gone back to shaking his head. His face looks suddenly shrunken by his fear, like a death mask.

“If you think I’m going to tell you anything, then you’re far stupider than you pretend to be.”

Sherlock recoils slightly. He hates it when they insult his intelligence. “If I’m so stupid then how did I work all of that out?”

“I don’t know!” Knott hisses. “Nor do I want to find out. It seems you share the same desire for self-destruction as my ill-advised colleague. Well, unlike the pair of you, I happen to value my life, so if you don’t mind, you will keep these—these aberrations to yourself! Unless, you want me dead as well?”

Sherlock shakes his head. “I don’t want that, I simply want to know—”

“WELL I’M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU!”

Knott’s face is puce with rage.

Persistent though he may be, Sherlock recognizes when the time has come for retreat.

He drops back a step, raising his hands up in surrender. “Fine. Fine.”
“Just stay out of it.”

And with a final searing glare, Knott turns and retreats down the corridor.

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Sherlock returns to his room, uncertain whether to feel relieved that he managed to escape yet another close brush with danger, or disappointed that he’d come so close to finding out more and been met with such resounding defeat.

At least he got a confirmation in the form of Knott’s reaction to his guess about the captain. He was right—it was Knott the captain attempted to poison, because he must have known what the captain did to Ferguson’s former partner.

But why had Knott been privy to this information? And what was the motivation for the murder of Knott’s associate? What business did the dead man have with the captain?

Sherlock is certain that Knott knows more than he is letting on—in fact, based on his reaction Sherlock would venture to guess that he knows a great deal more. However, he will have to do some serious strategizing to come up with some way to convince Knott to talk to him again. The man has clearly terrorized himself into a state of absolute silence.

Although, perhaps it’s more accurate to say that it’s the captain who’s terrorized the man into his current state; after all, he has already made an attempt on Knott’s life once. There’s nothing to stop him trying again as soon as he gets a chance.

Sherlock paces the length of his room, full of nervous energy. His whole body still feels like it’s vibrating from his confrontation with Ferguson and he’s bursting to tell someone about his discovery.

He needs to tell somebody what he’s found out, somebody who will understand the implications of what all this means, somebody who won’t just tell him to keep away, to stay out of it. That seems to be the theme of the day—people telling Sherlock to ‘stay out of it,’ as if he’s a spoiled child who’s stumbled on something dangerous that he doesn’t understand.

Sherlock snorts with derision at the utter shortsightedness of this. He understands full well the danger of the situation, what he can’t work out is why no one else seems to take it seriously enough to try and get to the bottom of it.

He can’t believe how desperate everybody is to just stick their heads in the sand and pretend like nothing incriminating is going on, when it’s obviously much more dangerous to ignore the current situation.

For example, if the captain really is a confirmed murderer (which he clearly is), then it probably isn’t such a good idea for him to remain in command of the ship. And the only way to remove him from his position is to prove it.

But in order to do that, Sherlock needs more information.

Sherlock runs a hand through his grimy hair, frustrated.

If only there was someone he could talk to, someone who would actually listen—it would be so much easier to attempt to come up with the next step if only…

All at once Sherlock feels his excitement drain out of him, replaced instead by a sinking
disappointment.

…if only he could talk to John.

John is the only one who would understand the gravity of this information, who would take Sherlock seriously enough to believe what he told him.

Maybe if he could get a message to him, perhaps if he could find Billy…

But the futility of this plan makes itself known before Sherlock can even finish the thought. He’s now been told to stay out of trouble by nearly half the population of the ship, if he goes looking for Billy he’s bound to run into some of them.

He’s so thoroughly sick of being treated like an insolent child—it’s insufferable!

Sherlock kicks the corner of his bed in frustration, before collapsing onto it with his head in his hands.

It’s useless; there’s nothing for it but to wait.

He wishes now that he hadn’t smoked that pipe with Ferguson earlier; he’s itching for a smoke.

He rakes his fingers through his hair in agitation until it’s standing on end. It’s stiff with grime and salt-water, and it’s only then that Sherlock recalls just how filthy he still is from his adventures below deck.

Normally, he wouldn’t give a rat’s arse what his hair looked like but suddenly it occurs to him that John may well be planning to visit him tonight. What if John comes in the early hours of the morning again and finds Sherlock smelling like the rotting water in the bottom of the ship?

Even though the chances of this happening are slim at best, the mere possibility causes Sherlock to rise from the bed, fill his washstand with tepid water, and make a valiant attempt at washing the grime out of his hair.

He deems the endeavor at least partially successful, and feels better once he has stripped off his filthy shirt and banished it to a far corner of the room where its offensive odor is only mildly detectable.

The heat of the afternoon is at its worst and he opts not to put a new shirt on but instead stretches out on his bunk wearing nothing but his breeches, feeling for the first time today how exhausted he is from his sleepless night of waiting for John.

He’s comforted by the absurdly superstitious thought that if he is still at least partially filthy then John probably will come in the early hours of the morning before Sherlock’s clean water has arrived. He arrives at this conclusion using the same logic that dictates that it is only when one has not remembered their umbrella that it rains.

The fact that he’s entertaining such superstitious nonsense is surely a sign that boredom has begun to atrophy his mind, a realization which under normal circumstances would be horrifying to Sherlock, but for some reason, at the moment (probably as a result of his extreme fatigue) is strangely soothing.

It’s the last thought Sherlock has before dropping off to sleep.
Hellooo from Paris! :) I am hoping updates will be more frequent now that I am happily settled into my new Parisian home but I feel like every time I promise that the reverse happens. But either way, there will be more soon! Thank you as always for continuing to read this absurd monstrosity of a story, I cannot convey how grateful I am for each and every one of you. Truly. <3
Chapter Thirty Six

Chapter Notes

Warnings this chapter for description of a severe physical injury. Also, for general angst.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock receives no word from John that evening.

Nor any word from him the following day.

He pushes the fear down in his mind, reminds himself that John is working all the time, that Billy, too, is overrun with work. The probability of John having the time to write a note, and then Billy finding the time to deliver it, is low.

He must be patient.

He knows this, logically, rationally.

And yet the fear still runs like a dark current through his heart. It is there, always, beating in his blood, shadowing his every thought.

The absurdity of being trapped on this ship with the one person he wants to see but denied the chance of seeing him—it plagues Sherlock like a sickness. The frustration he experiences is visceral, it produces an itching in his fingers, makes him pull his hair, and grind his teeth.

He paces the creaking floorboards of his cabin endlessly; stricken with the realization that this voyage could well be the only time he and John are given together in this lifetime.

If this is true then they are wasting it.

And Sherlock cannot bear the thought.

He has his mind made up—whatever happens at the end of this voyage, whatever he has to do to stay with John, he will do it. John has to stay with him in India; he has to. Either that, or Sherlock will travel back to England with John. He’ll simply tell the men working in the Bombay office that Sherlock Holmes was lost at sea. They can send word back to his family. “Drowned,” he’ll tell them. “In a storm. He was thrown overboard.”

Or maybe he’ll give himself a more heroic death.

“The ship was taken by the French, and Sherlock was slain, defending the ship. Yes, it turns out he was quite handy with a sword but a Frenchman got him in the end. He fought bravely until his dying breath.”

But perhaps it was better to stick with something more plausible.

Let them think he died of poor nourishment, from the miserable conditions on this worthless ship. His family deserves to suffer after how they’ve treated him; they should be filled with regret that
they ever dared send him away.

He thinks about Mycroft hearing the news, tries to picture his smug face, the usual blandness disturbed by shock, as he struggles to choose which emotion is appropriate to express, before settling on a look of somber regret.

But Sherlock knows them too well. They won’t feel sorry. The news, Sherlock knows, will bring relief.

“We did what we could for the boy,” they’ll say. “It’s a shame—a true shame, but it couldn’t be helped. He was destined for a bad end, that one, make no mistake.”

Deep in his heart, he knows, this is why they sent him away. To be rid of him. Dead or alive, as long as they are free of him, for them, the result is the same.

The thought is oddly freeing.

The prospect of never having to see any of their disappointed faces again, to be confronted with their disapproval, their regret at having brought Sherlock into the world—it offers its own kind of relief.

He whiles away his hours with thoughts like these.

He also spends a great deal of mental energy concocting scenarios in which he and John can finally be alone together. Sometimes he pictures them together in John’s lilac bower, hidden by a screen of the heavy, scented blossoms, stretched out, naked, their bare skin dotted here and there with falling petals, the sun and shadows on their bodies making lattice-works of light.

He imagines John bending over him, smiling, the sun behind his head making a crown of golden light.

“Look at you, my beauty,” he’ll say. “We made it, we’re finally here,” and he’ll kiss the skin beneath each fallen petal until Sherlock’s breathing becomes shallow and desperate, until he pulls John’s mouth up to his and begs him to make love to him.

Sometimes, he pictures them together in a boat on a wide, wide sea. Neither of them are wearing clothes (for what need have they of clothes, alone, together in the tropical heat?), and John is sun-bronzed and smiling, teaching Sherlock how to fish, the muscles in his body lean and shining, as he shows Sherlock how to cast the net, where to place his feet when hauling in the catch.

Perhaps they will live on an island that is theirs alone, and John will teach him how to open coconuts and drink their milk, how to clean the fish they catch and cook them over an open fire. At night, Sherlock will play his violin for John and watch his face, lit by the warmth of the dying flames, grow more and more tender.

They’ll sleep together on the sand, under a canopy of stars.

“My moon, my moon, my moon,” John will say to him, his body against Sherlock’s like a light in the dark, his voice murmuring in time to the beat of the pounding waves.

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To keep himself occupied, Sherlock prowls the ship, looking for any sign of activity from the captain, from Ferguson, or Mr. Knott.
But all is quiet on that front; since the splendid row on Friday night, everyone appears to be keeping a low profile. Perhaps Ferguson has finally taken Knott’s advice to heart.

Meanwhile, the pace of the ship does not falter. They seem to be making their way to Rio at breakneck speed, at least, as far as the Galatea is concerned.

Sherlock hears the murmuring of dissent growing from the crew with every passing hour.

Even when he does not hear them complaining, it’s easy to tell just by a look at their faces that the mood of the crew has soured. They all wear a sullen, dark, exhausted look, their movements weary; their expressions cloudy. They all walk with the same broken, exhausted gait that Sherlock saw the day John’s mess was leaving their shift at the pumps.

And though he’s careful to keep his movements far from the gun deck and the pumps, there’s always a half-formed hope in Sherlock’s heart that one of these days when he’s turning a corner, he’ll just accidentally cross paths with John.

But it never happens; and although it’s probably for the best, the absence, the lack of him, wears on Sherlock like an old shoe on a blister. His whole body seems to ache with wanting.

And then on Saturday evening, just when Sherlock’s patience is about to break (has it really only been two days since John came to see him? Not even two days?), he wakes from a fitful doze to the sound of a knock on his cabin door.

He had not intended to fall asleep but the day is as hot as it was the day before and in the sweltering heat of the afternoon, it’s all he can do to keep himself from dropping off, the relentless rocking of the ship carrying him away into dark dreams.

He opens the door to find Billy, looking tense and wary, his brown eyes round and watchful above his sunken cheeks. It strikes Sherlock in that moment how hollowed out the boy looks, like a bar of soap that has been pared down to its last recognizable fragment. The stress of the last few days has clearly taken its toll on him as well, and not for the first time, Sherlock wishes he could get the boy off this ship, feed him several proper meals, and let him sleep.

“Evening Mr. Holmes, sir. I’ve a message for you.”

Sherlock stands aside to let the boy into his room but Billy shakes his head.

“I haven’t much time, sir.”

“Sherlock,” Sherlock says reflexively.

“Mr. Sherlock, sir.” Billy glances down the corridor then lowers voice. “He’ll come tomorrow morning. Same time, same place.”

Sherlock’s heart performs a complicated lurching motion in his chest.

For about half a minute he cannot speak he’s so overwhelmed with gratitude, but Billy is clearly waiting for an answer so he says softly: “Tell him I’ll be ready.”

Billy jams his cap back on his head, nodding. “I’ll tell him.”

As he turns to go, however, it occurs to Sherlock that there’s something in his demeanor more than just nervousness; not once in their encounter has Billy met Sherlock’s gaze.
Sherlock feels the warmth blooming in his chest go cold.

He grabs for Billy’s arm, his voice rigid with sudden fear. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

But Billy only shakes his head. He squirms in Sherlock’s grasp. “I can’t, Sherlock, sir. I’ve got to go.”

“Billy, is there something…”

Billy looks up at him then, and his gaze is pleading. “Please, Sherlock, sir. Don’t ask me.”

Sherlock lets him go and falls back a step, his mind wiped utterly blank by fear.

Billy lingers a moment more, his expression agonized, and then says: “He’ll be here. Tomorrow morning. You can ask him then.” He shakes his head again. “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go.”

And then he’s off down the corridor before Sherlock can ask him anything else.

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The next eight hours are difficult.

Sherlock paces the floor of his room, trying not to think about the infinite number of horrible things that might have gone wrong in the two days since he saw John, torturing himself over the meaning of Billy’s words.

He tries to reassure himself that nothing can be so bad if John is coming to see him tomorrow morning; if John is able to come, then everything must be fine, surely, surely.

Perhaps there isn’t anything wrong at all. Billy looked exhausted; he’s overworked—the whole crew is suffering from excess labor. Perhaps that’s all it was, the boy’s exhaustion making him too tired to meet Sherlock’s eye.

But Sherlock cannot forget his words. ‘Don’t ask me,’ he had said.

Why? Why? Why would he say that if there were nothing wrong? Don’t ask him what?

When he’s not pacing his room, Sherlock sits on the edge of his bed, his posture rigid with agonized regret that he didn’t run after the boy, that he hadn’t simply grabbed hold of him and refused to let go until he told Sherlock what was wrong.

It would have been cruel to treat him so but surely it would have been worth it to know the truth about the situation, surely anything is better than the situation he’s in now, with nothing but the seed of his worry to keep him company, growing every moment into a darker, more tangled manifestation of his terror until it feels as if there’s no oxygen left in the crowded room, as though Sherlock is being crushed beneath the force of the thick, choking branches.

He falls asleep waiting, slumped partially upright on the edge of his bed, and he dreams he is lost in a dark forest, looking for John. He is struggling to make his way forward but the undergrowth is so thick he can scarcely move at all. Branches scrape against his arms and face, pull at his clothing, until he realizes he is completely stuck, trapped in a snarl of interlocking branches. He tries to move and finds that vines have encircled his wrists, his waist, they’ve pinned his legs. He calls John’s name but the sound is smothered by a root coiling into his mouth.

He wakes with a jolt to find himself still upright on his bed, cold sweat prickling his forehead, his
rolled up shirtsleeves sticking to his arms with perspiration.

He wipes his face with the back of his hand and rises to pour himself a glass of water, hoping it will wash the taste of dread from his mouth.

He’s trying to judge by the thinness of the darkness in his room how soon it might be until daybreak when he hears the sound of the bells from overhead.

Sherlock freezes with the glass in his hand, fear unspooling in his belly like the root he swallowed in his dream.

*It will be all right. He’ll be here any minute and everything will be fine. As soon as he is here, you’ll see—everything is fine.*

This is what he tells himself, but he doesn’t believe a word of it.

It takes longer than Sherlock expects for the knock to sound at his door, and perhaps it is just his worry that has worn him raw as a length of old rope, but when the knock comes, Sherlock thinks that he can hear something wrong in the sound.

He opens the door, with his heart in his mouth, and there is John standing before him, but Sherlock can tell immediately that something is wrong, very wrong, and it is not just the fact that John’s face is lost in shadow.

Sherlock wants to reach out to him, to grab him and pull him into his arms like he did last time, without thinking, but there is something in John’s posture that tells him this would be a bad idea, that this would be the wrong thing to do.

So instead, Sherlock stands awkwardly, terrified and frozen, with the door hanging open for all the dangers of the ship to come crowding in.

It’s awful; he does not know what to do, what to say, it feels as though he is paralyzed by the wrongness of the moment. It’s as though because he did not reach for John instinctively he does not have any idea how to act.

The moment seems to stretch on and on, until finally John’s voice breaks the silence.

“May I come in?”

John’s voice—oh god, the wrongness has invaded John’s voice too. He sounds stiff, uncomfortably formal and anxious—but it’s more than that. There is a darkness in John’s voice that Sherlock does not understand, but he does not know what else to do so he nods and stands back, pulling the door wide in an unspoken entreaty inviting John in.

John crosses over the threshold but it’s so dim in the early dawn light that Sherlock still cannot get a proper look at his face.

Sherlock closes the door behind him but the wrongness continues as John stands a few feet away from Sherlock, his head bowed—everything in his body language communicating distance, as if it’s shouting at Sherlock, *Keep away from me!*

His posture is military formal, stiff.

Sherlock stands opposite him, still paralyzed with uncertainty and terror, and waits.
“I can’t stay long. I wouldn’t have come at all, but I didn’t want to keep you waiting and wondering… not after Billy’s message yesterday. I should never have sent him but I thought—”

John abruptly stops speaking, the aborted sentence full of unspoken emotion.

Sherlock’s mind is reeling—everything is happening too quickly—he cannot keep up with the words coming out of John’s mouth. *I can’t stay long* he’d just said. Why, why would he say that? It doesn’t make sense.

Sherlock can hear John trying to keep himself together, to keep that calm, cold mask in place, and he does not understand. Why is he doing this? What is he trying to hide?

John straightens the line of his shoulders; and still, Sherlock cannot see his face.

He’s about to go on speaking but Sherlock interrupts him, unable to bear the darkness a moment longer, but also, filled with the sudden conviction that he does not want to hear what John has to say.

“Let me light the lamp. I can’t see you.”

Sherlock moves to the desk before John can protest, his fingers shaking so badly it takes him two—three times before the flame catches.

John stands behind him in the dark, his posture still so stiff and formal—all wrong.

“You shouldn’t waste the candle. It will be light soon.” The unspoken remainder of his sentence seems to hang in the air, as if he cannot bear to repeat it, and even though he hasn’t said it it’s as clear to both of them as if he had.

*And I cannot stay long.*

Sherlock hates that unspoken sentence. Perhaps it’s the reason for the bite in his voice when he answers. “Well, then I’ll blow it out.”

He turns back around to face John, half-dreading what he will find, and he was right to be afraid, for the sight of him is worse than anything Sherlock could have imagined.

He’s seen John look exhausted before, he’s seen what hard work can do to someone even as strong and resilient as John Watson. He’ll never forget the sight of John when he found him at the pumps, the way the weariness had carved lines into his face that were not there before, the way all the light inside of him seemed to have gone out, but what he sees before him now is something else entirely.

John looks broken.

It’s the only word that Sherlock can think to describe what he sees, and now the reason for the wrongness of John’s whole being is made suddenly, painfully clear.

He looks worse than exhausted; he looks… defeated, somehow, as though the very vitality that usually keeps him going, that source of his continual strength has been savagely cut off.

The way he holds himself so carefully upright somehow only exaggerates the force of the weariness pulling at him. Sherlock can see the weight of his exhaustion in every line of his body, dragging him down against his every effort.

It’s awful seeing John like this and Sherlock wishes now that he had respected John’s wishes and
kept from lighting the lamp. To see John like this… he’s afraid he can’t keep the look of horror from his face, but for the moment at least, John appears too weary to notice.

He still has not met Sherlock’s gaze.

“Like I said, I can’t stay long. I only came here to tell you that I can’t… stay with you this morning.”

Sherlock fears he knows the reason why—the evidence is clear before his eyes. John is so worn down he probably just wants to sleep in his hammock in peace—but still he cannot stop himself from asking, he needs to hear John say it himself, whatever the reason is he needs to know for certain, because there’s a horrible voice inside Sherlock wondering if the reason isn’t something else, something worse; that the reason John doesn’t want to stay is simply because John has grown tired of him.

“Why not?”

The question seems to hang unwanted in the air between them. He knows he’s broken some unspoken rule by asking it, that John does not want to explain—everything in his posture communicates this to Sherlock, but he cannot let John leave like this; he cannot.

Still, John will not meet his eyes.

“I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you.” The quality of wrongness in John’s voice is growing worse. He hasn’t answered Sherlock’s question. The rigid line of his shoulders appears to be growing stiffer by the minute. And now he’s moving toward the door.

But Sherlock cannot let him leave, not like this; he cannot understand what’s happening. It’s as if he’s in a nightmare from which he has not yet woken.

“John—”

Sherlock reaches out for him, instinctively as breathing, and is horrified to see John flinch away from his touch.

It’s only because of John’s reaction that Sherlock notices for the first time that the reason for the strangeness in John’s posture is because of the stiff way he is holding his arms, as though to keep them away from his body.

“John…” There is a note of raw fear, unmistakable in Sherlock’s voice. “What’s wrong with your hands?”

He should respect the tension in John’s body, all the warning signs that tell him not to touch, but he cannot stop himself from reaching out and taking hold of John’s wrist so that he might look at one of his hands.

John tries to pull his hand out of Sherlock’s grip but it’s too late—he’s turned John’s hand over in his and what he sees makes him gasp in astonishment.

The entire underside of John’s hand—his palm, his fingers—is a mass of open welts.

John pulls his hand out of Sherlock’s grasp and there is anger emanating from him now—fierce and hot as a living flame.

Sherlock is too horrified to know what to say.
John’s voice is flat and hard. “I didn’t want you to have to see that.”

Sherlock knows, without having to look, that John’s other hand is in the same condition as the one he has seen—the skin almost completely torn away—and he cannot get the image out of his mind, cannot imagine the pain John must be in right now.

He can feel that now would be the time to say something comforting, something soothing, but he has no idea what to say, the horror is crowding out every thought, the horror that someone could do this to John, could hurt him like this—it’s monstrous.

And what’s worse still: he can see John growing uncomfortable at the horror on his face.

“I’m going to go now. I can’t—we can’t—do anything.” John’s voice is brittle with frustration and disappointment. There’s another emotion too that at first Sherlock cannot identify because he’s so unused to hearing it in John’s voice. It’s self-hatred. “I can’t touch you, Sherlock, so it’s pointless.”

At John’s words Sherlock is horrified all over again, but this time for an entirely different reason. Is that really what John thinks? That all he cares about is the sex? That if John cannot touch him then Sherlock would not want his company?

He’s sick at the thought.

But once again he cannot think how to put his horror into words.

The silence stretches on—worse than before, and Sherlock knows he needs to say something, anything to put John’s mind at ease, to convince John to stay, to tell him that John means more to him than what he can give to Sherlock with his hands—but it’s all too much, he cannot think where to start or how he could possibly use words to convey all that he is feeling.

“Look, I’m going to go. I’m in no fit state for anyone to be with.”

John offers him a grim smile before moving for the door, and it’s awful, it’s worse than John not smiling to see this ghost of a true smile on his lips.

“John—”

Something in his voice must call John back because he turns, one hand on the doorknob, and in the soft light of the candle Sherlock can see for the first time the mask John has put in place fall away, and at the naked longing in his face something in Sherlock’s chest breaks open.

“Please, stay.”

And with those two simple words, everything changes.

He sees the breaking in John too—he watches as a rush of grief pours over John’s features like water, washing away the hard and brittle quality that seemed so strange and foreign on his face, leaving in its place an immense sorrow and an even greater relief—and Sherlock knows now that he has asked, John cannot walk away.

The spell of painful awkwardness, of strangeness, that seemed to create between them a distance that could not be breached vanishes in an instant, and Sherlock feels once again the familiar pull between their bodies, as if he is drawn towards John through some force that is greater than himself.

He crosses the distance between them and without thinking, pulls John into his arms, bending his
long torso to bury his face in John’s neck.

“John,” he says, relief coursing through him so swiftly it makes him feel light-headed; the scent of John, the feel of his skin under Sherlock’s lips making his knees go weak.

“John,” he says again, more softly still, leaning back to trace the corners of John’s sorrowful mouth with his thumbs before kissing him, his movements full of reflexive tenderness, but at the touch of his lips on John’s, he feels fear flutter at his breastbone because John is not moving underneath his touch; he is as still and motionless as though he were carved from stone.

Sherlock begins to pull back, uncertain, terrified, but just as he does, John makes a sound low in his throat, desperate, full of sorrow, and reaches to pull Sherlock back against him.

He kisses Sherlock hard, the stubble on his jaw scraping Sherlock’s cheek, his arms circling Sherlock’s waist. The kiss goes on for so long that Sherlock forgets to breathe—he clutches at John’s shoulders, dizzy with relief, unsteady, grateful for an anchor.

When John finally breaks the kiss, he leans his forehead against Sherlock’s cheek, and closes his eyes, his breathing rapid. His hands are trembling where they lay, palms upward, against Sherlock’s chest.

His eyes are still closed, his breath pouring warm and rough into the hollow of Sherlock’s neck.

“My god, Sherlock, the hell I’ve been through...”

Sherlock waits; listening, his own breathing fast and shallow, his arms slung low around John’s waist.

The fact that John would say this—John who works harder than anyone Sherlock has ever met in his life and never complains—sends another jagged jolt of fear through Sherlock.

What could they have possibly done to him to make him say this now? Nearly every aspect of John’s daily life seems like hell to Sherlock; he cannot imagine what John must have endured to finally describe it as such.

But John does not say anymore; instead, he lifts his mouth again to Sherlock’s and kisses Sherlock, more slowly this time, as though he is reminding himself to savor the moment, to appreciate this opportunity as rare and precious as it is. Sherlock can feel the effort it takes him to do this, can feel the piston of his heart hammering hard against Sherlock’s breast, wanting to drive him onward at a faster pace.

Sherlock feels the same pull at the center of himself, torn between his greed for John’s embrace and his desire to savor every sensation, every touch, every shift of John’s body against his. He parts his lips under John’s to invite him in and John responds in kind, his tongue finding Sherlock’s and sending a ripple of pleasure low through Sherlock’s belly.

But even in the midst of his pleasure, there is a dark note of worry humming deep within him at the pain that’s still emanating from John, the little hints of wrongness that remind Sherlock that he is not himself.

John tastes like fear and sorrow—Sherlock can feel his lips trembling between kisses, his palms still curled, unmoving against Sherlock’s chest—but he can also feel the tension in John’s jawline that has yet to unlock, and there is a desperation to his movements that makes Sherlock aware of a long-simmering rage that has yet to find an outlet.
Sherlock wants to ask him what happened but he knows now is not the time, John needs this; he needs the touch of Sherlock’s hands, his mouth, to help ease his suffering, to help make him forget.

John shifts so that his arms are once again around Sherlock’s waist, in an effort to pull Sherlock closer against him, and he succeeds, in spite of the fact that he cannot use his hands, his palms turned awkwardly to prevent them from touching Sherlock’s back.

At the realization that John cannot even hold him properly, Sherlock feels sorrow slice through him like a knife.

It isn’t right—that someone could do this to John, that someone could hurt him in this way.

All at once, Sherlock is filled with the desire to make John see this, to convey in some way his sorrow that this happened, but also, to take away his suffering in any way he can.

He wants to do something—anything he can to help take John’s mind off the pain.

It’s much easier now that he has his hands against John’s skin; with the feeling of John’s warm body against his, he doesn’t need to think about what to do, he lets that living spark that exists between them guide him onward.

He presses a kiss to the side of John’s neck, feeling the beat of John’s pulse against his lips—so solid and steady—and he feels again that deep throb of relief, the sense that rightness that has been restored to the world now that John is here with him, in his arms once more.

“John,” Sherlock says again, the joy in his voice vibrating underneath the word like a song.

It’s as if he’s unable to say anything else, as if all other words are meaningless in comparison with this one.

“John, John…”

He kisses his way up John’s neck—small, desperate, reverent kisses—until he comes to the base of John’s ear where he pauses to press a lingering kiss just behind, between his hairline and the back of his ear, where he knows John likes to be kissed, and he listens with delight to the small, sharp intake of John’s breath as he touches the place with his tongue.

He wants to go slowly, wants to take John’s pleasure and spool it out long and easy like John does for him, like a strand of honey, shining and golden, as it falls from the spoon.

But at odds with that desire is his desperation to make John feel better as quickly as possible, along with his need to show John how much he cares for him, to make John see that John’s suffering is his own, that he will not tolerate people treating John this way—it isn’t right.

If he cannot speak the words, he will show John with his hands, with the touch of his mouth what he wants John to know.

“John,” Sherlock says again, his lips brushing John’s neck as he speaks, sliding up to press a kiss to John’s ear.

“John, John, John…” He’s chanting his name like a litany, like a prayer, as if just speaking John’s name gives him strength.

He reaches around behind John to pull his shirt out of his trousers, tugging the sweat-soaked material away from his skin so he can run his hands up over the broad planes of muscle in John’s
back—so he can touch with no fabric between them.

He rubs his long fingers over the muscles, kneading slightly, in an effort to smooth out the tension and the ache that he knows must be there.

John’s sigh in response sounds almost like an emission of pain but Sherlock knows better, he knows from the way John’s head tips back at the gesture how welcome he finds it, his eyes closing in relief.

He kisses the line of John’s bared throat, tasting sorrow and sweat, the acrid taste of overwork, of suffering—hoping that the gliding touch of his mouth will temper the bitterness slightly, will help John to forget.

*Forget,* his hands say as they move up the back of John’s neck into his hair, nails scraping lightly to pull another gasp from John’s mouth. *I’m here now. It’s over.*

*Forget, forget, forget.*

He tugs the hem of John’s shirt down where it hangs low at his neck to kiss the swell of his pectorals, allowing his parted lips to brush teasingly lightly over first one nipple, and then the other, savoring the stuttered breath that John lets out in response and the sudden tightening of his grip around Sherlock.

He does this several times, letting his mouth linger over the place where he can feel John’s heartbeat, fast but steady, underneath his lips, before he returns his attention to John’s nipple, this time opening his mouth against the sensitive flesh and licking a lazy circle around the circumference.

John moans above him, and Sherlock moves to repeat the gesture, pulling John’s shirt low so that he can lick at his exposed nipple without impediment.

He makes his movements purposefully lewd— sloppy and wet—his other hand clutching hard at John’s hip as he feels his own arousal unfurling warm and slow within him; the action of licking John here making him almost as aroused as John, he suspects.

He can feel the press of his own desire hard against the front of his breeches, and suddenly frustrated by the presence of so many clothes still between them, he straightens up to pull John’s shirt over his head.

John lifts his arms above him to help Sherlock in his efforts, and Sherlock is careful when pulling at John’s sleeves not to let the fabric touch his hands.

In the flickering light of the candle, he can see that John is flushed and breathless, the color high in his cheeks. Sherlock takes a moment to study the beauty of his bare torso, the rapid rise and fall of the muscles in his stomach and chest, the way the light turns the flush in his cheeks and throat from gold to auburn.

Sherlock reaches out to run his hands from John’s hips up to his shoulders, his touch slow and reverent, stricken breathless himself at the sight of John’s body, which seems only to grow more impossibly beautiful every time he sees it.

“Oh, John…” he breathes, the wonder clear in his voice, and John lifts his arms to give Sherlock more room to touch, his breathing quickening at the careful progress of Sherlock’s hands.

Sherlock’s hands slide up, and then back down again, and now he’s bending to follow his fingers
with his mouth, kissing the sheen of gold on the curves of John’s pectorals, the grooves between
his stomach muscles, the sharp line down the center of his abdomen until he reaches the hollow of
his belly button and dips his tongue in, fingers moving as he does so to pull loose the fastenings on
John’s trousers.

John’s breathing is unsteady above him, his hands still held aloft at his sides in an almost helpless
gesture as Sherlock tugs his trousers down his hips.

He can already see the sizeable bulge of John’s erection straining against the fabric and Sherlock’s
mouth is watering in anticipation as he watches it spring free.

He moans at the sight of it, his fingers shaking with eagerness as he drags John’s trousers down his
thighs and then stoops to pull the garment off each one of John’s feet until John is standing—
finally—completely naked in front of him.

Sherlock kneels before him. The gesture is almost automatic, his desire to prostrate himself before
John’s magnificence causing him to act before he can even question his reason for doing so; and
now, on his knees before John, he feels with a profundity that reaches deep into his bones the
appropriateness of the gesture, how the reverence in the pose, the worshipful quality makes John’s
god-like status all the more apparent. He bows low for one silent moment, before straightening up
to slide his hands with a low hiss of pleasure over the sharp angles of John’s hips and down over
the bulging muscles in his thighs.

He can feel John’s thighs shuddering under his hands and it strikes Sherlock suddenly how
vulnerable John is in this moment, that this is the most vulnerable John has ever been in his
presence. The realization gives him a feeling of profound responsibility.

How many times has John taken him so carefully in his hands and brought Sherlock the most
intense pleasure? How many times has he given himself over to Sherlock so selflessly, so
completely?

He still isn’t quite sure what he’s ever done to merit the attention of someone like John, much less
be deserving of such profound tenderness, but now, it’s his turn to do the same for John.

It’s the very least he can do.

He knows exactly what he wants to do, what he wants to give to John, if he can.

He pauses only a moment to think back over everything John has taught him; about what he
remembers of John’s reactions the first time he did this, and finds that even the memory of the act
is enough to make a pang of desire move through him, sharp and searing.

His eyes flicker briefly up at John, to take in once more the sight of his body licked gold by the
light of the candle, the grooves of his muscles lying deep in shadow, the subtle movement of his
chest hitching with his breath, before his eyes come to rest on the lovely curve of John’s cock
where it meets his thigh, the head of it flushed and swollen.

Sherlock can feel his mouth pool with saliva at the sight of it, and for a moment he’s overcome
with the desire to take it directly into his mouth, to swallow John down as deep as he can manage
until his mouth is full with the taste, the feeling, the sensation of John, but he stops himself—this
isn’t about what he wants, this about giving John the most exquisite pleasure he can manage.

So instead, he takes a calming breath, and then leans forward to press a kiss to the place where
John’s thigh meets his hip, letting his tongue trace a long line from there to the golden hair at the
base of John’s cock, inhaling sharply at the scent of him, his hands circling around to squeeze the powerful muscles in John’s arse.

John gasps above him, still holding his hands helplessly aloft in what looks almost like a gesture of surrender, as though inviting Sherlock without speaking to do anything he’d like, anything at all.

Sherlock takes the invitation, greedy now with the taste of John under his tongue. He runs his hands down the backs of John’s thighs while his mouth moves up the length of John’s cock, barely touching, savoring the feel of the velvet heat of John’s erection against his lips, the sensation sending little white sparks of pleasure through him, skipping down his spine.

He pauses with his closed lips against the head of John’s cock, and wrapping his fingers around the base of it to guide his movements, he rubs his closed lips over the slit at the tip, feeling the moisture there—the telltale sign of John’s arousal—and he moans low in his throat at the sensation of it against his sensitive lips.

He hears John swear above him and then feels his weight shift as John falls hard into the wall at his back.

“Jesus, Sherlock—”

This emission prompts Sherlock to open his mouth—finally—and swirl his tongue liberally over the head of John’s cock, feeling his own arousal bloom within him at the taste of John, the slippery wet heat of the fluid leaking from the tip.

John makes a strangled noise above him and Sherlock takes this as encouragement, opening his mouth wide to take John fully into his mouth. He can feel John’s pulse beating hot against his tongue, and the feeling of his mouth sliding down over the heat of John is so deliciously right that he allows himself a little moan of pleasure at the fact that he is allowed to do this, with John.

He feels John’s hips jerk in response, and curious, Sherlock moans again, deeper this time—longer—and Sherlock is delighted to hear John’s corresponding hiss of pleasure at the sound.

Not for the first time, Sherlock finds himself wishing in that moment that he could write poetry, that he could paint, that he could find some medium to express the glory of what it’s like to feel John in this way, the glittering brilliance of him filling Sherlock up until his chest feels tight, as though sunlight is pouring through his veins.

He moves his mouth lower, drinking John down like nectar, allowing himself to moan freely now at the pleasure of it—deep in his throat—his fingers massaging the length of John’s cock that he cannot reach with his mouth. He still cannot take as much of him as he would like, so he makes up for it with the adulating sweep of his tongue, hollowing his cheeks slightly to give John more contact, more of the warm, wet suction that he now knows feels like heaven itself.

He winds his free hand around the back of John’s thigh, stroking at the strong curves of John’s buttocks, kneading at the hard muscle—the feel of it under his fingers making his own erection throb where it’s still trapped against his breeches.

Touching John here has such an effect on him, it makes Sherlock open his mouth wider, take John a little deeper, relishing the press of John’s slick heat against the back of his tongue, making Sherlock hum in gratitude, and tuck his body up closer against John, pressing himself against the side of John’s bare thigh, feeling the faint tremor in his muscles as his pleasure mounts.

It feels so good to be touching John like this that Sherlock has to struggle to focus on the clarity of
his movements—to not lose himself in the blissful slide of his mouth against John, his own hips bowing towards John, seeking friction.

With every curl of his tongue, with every press of his fingers he wants to erase every instance of pain, so that John will know only sweetness, only light, only this.

He can feel from the tension in John’s thighs that it will not take much to give him his release; he is already close, stretched to the limit, his breathing labored, his shoulders arching hard against the wall at his back, and for a moment, Sherlock wonders at the fact that he has not felt John’s fingers in his hair. Typically, he cannot restrain himself from touching Sherlock’s curls, and Sherlock finds himself longing suddenly for the reassuring presence of that contact with John, encouraging him.

But as soon as Sherlock has the thought, he realizes with a sharp swoop of horror, that of course John cannot touch his curls—it would cause him too much pain to do so.

It’s a sign of his own absorption in the task at hand that Sherlock could forget this simple, painful fact, and the realization causes him to briefly lose his focus. He pulls back to catch his breath, looking up at John as he does so to re-orient himself.

However, what he sees when he looks up at John makes worry flood his chest.

The expression on John’s face is a complicated mixture of emotions. The desire on his face is plain—his eyes are shuttered, his lips parted, the flush of his arousal standing out in ruddy patches in his cheeks.

But there, underneath his pleasure, Sherlock can see something darker too: there is sorrow there, written into the lines around his mouth, between his eyes, hidden in the recesses of his face.

Sherlock shifts his hands around to hold John by the hips, smoothing his thumbs over the twin curves in a distracted gesture.

He doesn’t want to ruin the moment but he’s worried now by what he sees, he has to ask, to be sure. He licks his lips, eyes searching John’s. “Is it alright?”

John’s eyes, finding his, now fill with a worry of their own at the concern he must see in Sherlock’s face.

“God, yes…”

John’s voice is hoarse, and it strikes Sherlock as he hears it how quiet John has been. It’s only now, hearing him speak, that Sherlock realizes how unusual it is. Usually he keeps up a steady stream of praise, of encouragement; it isn’t like him to be so silent, and the realization makes Sherlock’s heart constrict sharply in his chest.

He’s so lost in his own worried thoughts that he doesn’t realize his gaze has dropped to the floor until he feels the touch of John’s fingers on his cheek, stroking so lightly, drawing his gaze back up to John’s.

Even through the shadows, Sherlock can see the longing in John’s eyes, the ache of his wanting an almost physical presence.

“Don’t stop… please.”

As if the longing in his eyes wasn’t enough, the naked need in John’s voice is like a set of hooks in his heart pulling at Sherlock: he could not ignore the plea if he wanted to.
Sherlock nods up at him, swallowing down his worries. This is about John—giving him what he needs, and it’s never been clearer than it is in this moment how badly John needs him to keep going.

He slides his hands once down John’s flanks in what he hopes is a soothing gesture, re-focusing on the feeling of John’s body, hot and wanting, under his hands, licking his lips, and leaning in to take John back into his mouth, remembering as he does so, all of a sudden, the way it affected John last time when he looked up at him as he did this.

Sherlock lifts his eyes to John’s, letting his teeth graze his bottom lip in an exaggerated gesture as their eyes lock, knowing John’s particular fondness for the plumpness of his bottom lip, how he likes to tease it with his own teeth, his tongue. He runs his tongue over it again, making it slick with saliva, exaggerating how swollen it is, all the while holding John’s gaze through lashes grown heavy with his own arousal.

The effect this has on John is lovely to witness—Sherlock watches the slow bloom of John’s arousal grow to eclipse the sorrow in his eyes—the rapid contractions of his chest increasing as his breath comes quicker and quicker.

He licks his own lips, unconsciously mirroring Sherlock’s gesture, his fingers brushing Sherlock’s cheek again, stroking down over the curve of his jaw to settle underneath his chin.

“My god, Sherlock, your mouth…”

Sherlock runs his tongue all around the circumference of his mouth, relishing the tingling in his lips this causes, his desire returning swiftly as he thinks about the heat of John against his lips, his hands sliding back around to grip John’s arse, before opening his mouth as wide as it will go to take John back into his mouth.

John’s fingers are still on Sherlock’s chin and it feels right—it feels better—to have this contact with John, to experience the slight increase in pressure in his grip as Sherlock’s mouth stretches around him.

He ignores the small pang of sorrow that moves through him at the sight of John’s other hand, curled into the air at his side, clearly longing to touch Sherlock in some way but resisting.

Instead, he focuses on John’s expression, continuing to hold John’s gaze as his mouth sinks down, appreciating perhaps more than he ever has before the expressive quality of John’s face—the way he can see the pleasure move through his features, erasing the lines of sorrow and worry as suddenly and effortlessly as the wind smoothing out the ripples in the surface of the sea. He watches his eyelashes flutter down over the blue in his eyes, his mouth opening in a silent exclamation of pleasure, and Sherlock can feel directly the effect the sight of John like this has on his own desire.

His erection is throbbing where it’s trapped against his breeches and as Sherlock’s mouth opens wider, his tongue beginning to stroke the slippery head of John’s cock in a regular rhythm, the moan that John gives out as a result, and then the stuttered sound of the breath that escapes him as Sherlock hollows his cheeks to suck, is too much for Sherlock. The gesture is instinctive—he does not think, only reacts—lifting a hand away from John to reach down and touch himself through the fabric of his breeches.

The touch of his own hand—even through the fabric—is such a profound relief that he moans around John, causing John to gasp with pleasure and fall hard into the wall at his back.
Regaining awareness of his movements, Sherlock pulls off briefly to apologize and return his other hand to John. “I’m sorry,” he gasps, “It’s just so—you’re so…” He does not finish this sentiment, choosing instead to convey to John without words just what he does to Sherlock, licking a long greedy stripe up the length of his cock, before taking the whole of it back into his mouth.

John’s breath is a long hiss of pleasure, his other hand now balled into a fist at the wall at his back. His chest is heaving, his lashes heavy from where he looks down at Sherlock.

It takes him a moment to find the breath to speak.

“Did you…? Was it to touch y-yourself?”

Sherlock has never heard John stammer in his life, and he lifts his head, pausing to look up at John, before nodding slowly.

“Jesus.” John scrubs the side of his hand down his face in an almost agonized gesture. “God, please, Sherlock don’t stop. You touching yourself while you s-suck me off—”

Sherlock can see the shudder that moves John in response. He feels a corresponding thrill of pleasure at the expression John uses—*suck him off*—the absolutely filthy sound of it makes a ripple of heat move through Sherlock, makes his fingers twitch with longing to touch himself again.

John shakes his head. His voice when he speaks is actually faint. “It’s too much.”

Sherlock hesitates briefly.

“I mean that in a good way. It’s good, Sherlock. It’s…”

John’s fingers stroke back up his cheek, the backs of his knuckles caressing the corner of Sherlock’s now swollen lips.

“It’s very, very good.”

Sherlock turns his face briefly into the touch of John’s hand, pressing a kiss to his knuckles, letting his breath come out in a long sigh as he pulls back, eyes flickering up to John’s to offer him a small smile.

John’s fingers move up to tuck a curl behind Sherlock’s ear; he shivers at the gentleness in John’s touch, closing his eyes briefly.

“You should take those trousers off,” John’s voice is rough and low, his tone pointedly casual, but when Sherlock looks back up at him he can see the longing sparking now like fire in John’s eyes.

“Alright,” Sherlock replies, his voice just barely above a whisper.

He reaches down to pull the fastenings apart, careful to keep his eyes all the while on John’s, feeling as he does so the weighted eroticism of the moment as John watches him push the fabric down his hips to reveal his own achingly full erection, relishing the sharp intake of John’s breath at the sight, the look of pure wonder in his eyes.

Sherlock can feel himself blushing in response, the heat climbing up his throat like wildfire. The fact that John can look at him this way… he’ll never understand it.

“You beauty…”
John’s voice is as reverent as his gaze; Sherlock can feel the caress in his words almost as plainly as though his hands were on Sherlock’s skin.

“Your shirt,” John says, and Sherlock can hear that he means his tone to be light and teasing, but the longing in his voice is too apparent; Sherlock can hear the need underneath his words, almost desperate. “I don’t think you need it anymore, do you?”

Sherlock shakes his head, feeling suddenly the way he’s only felt now a handful of times in his life, thanks to John Watson. Something about John’s gaze on him in this way transforms into a vain creature, lusciously aware of his own allure. It makes him feel giddy, light-headed, his skin tingling all over, as though John’s eyes on him have a physical effect, as though they can incite pleasure in him just from looking. It makes his movements drawn-out and decadent: he reaches for the hem of his shirt with slow intention, lifting it over his head in one long, liquid movement and dropping it to the floor beside him, shaking his head again as he does so to draw attention to his curls, feeling shockingly sinful on his knees before John dressed in nothing but a pair of breeches pushed halfway down his thighs. Something about the fact that this garment is still on him makes the whole scene feel lewder than ever.

Sherlock bites his lip with intention before raising his eyes again to John.

The expression on John’s face is transformed, the hunger in his eyes like two low fires burning.

“Will you…” John licks his lips, his lashes heavy. Sherlock can see his body trembling faintly.

“Touch yourself for me, now?”

Sherlock is only too happy to oblige.

Again, it’s shocking to discover the manner of his own movements—normally he would simply reach to take himself in hand, but something about the presence of John’s heated gaze causes him to spread one hand and run the palm of it slowly over his own chest, rubbing against his nipples which have long been erect and begging for attention, making him gasp at the sensation of finally touching them. He watches John’s eyelashes flutter in response to this, and then allows his hand to keep moving down over his ribs and the sharp curve of his hip before finally wrapping his fingers around himself.

It feels so good, he cannot help from closing his eyes at the touch of his own hand, and he can hear the hiss of John’s breath at the sight of him biting hard at his own lips as his hand begins to stroke.

“Jesus, Sherlock.”

He forces his eyes open and sees John is rigid with the force of his longing, his back sharply bowed, shoulders digging hard into the wall behind him. Both his hands are curled into fists at his sides, his breath coming in shallow bursts, but the thing that draws Sherlock’s eyes to a shuddering halt is the sight of his impossibly swollen cock where it’s straining up against his stomach, the head of it flushed and leaking copiously.

Sherlock sighs at the sight of it, shifting forward on his knees with that same anomalous grace that seems is only ever granted to him in John’s presence, and without pausing, he takes John back into his mouth, humming softly with gratitude at the heavy weight of that blood-hot flesh as it meets his tongue.

The heat, the hardness, the slickness of it in Sherlock’s mouth feels so good that he finds his hand is moving instinctively again to his own cock, tightening his fist around himself and moving it in a long slow stroke that makes him moan around John’s cock even as he takes it further down, saliva
running out of the corners of his mouth.

But the time for slow and deliberate is past—the need that’s clenched tight at the root of Sherlock’s cock must be nothing in comparison to what John is feeling, who’s had Sherlock lapping at his erection for what must feel like eons now.

Sherlock can feel the tremor in John’s thighs against him, and he knows it’s time to finally give John some relief.

Hollowing his cheeks and spreading his lips flat to be sure he does not touch John with his teeth, Sherlock begins to bob his head in the same rhythmic motion that last time gave him such great success. John’s groan in response and the sudden appearance of his fingers—barely touching—but still, there, in Sherlock’s curls, gives Sherlock confidence, and he reaches around with the hand not on his own cock to take John’s bullocks in his hand.

John moans at this, fingers tightening in Sherlock’s curls, and Sherlock sucks harder, working to keep his movements steady, searching for just the right amount of friction that will finally push John over the edge.

He hums as he sucks, now aware of the effect this has on John, pulling off momentarily to lick wetly and messily all over the dripping head of John’s cock, feeling absolutely wanton as he does so, looking up into John’s eyes, and without thinking, his hand begins to speed up on his own cock, making his eyelashes flutter half-closed in response.

“Fuck, Sherlock, don’t stop, I can’t—”

Sherlock dives back down, grinning now around John’s cock, thrilled by the vulgarity of John’s language—he’s never heard him talk so filthily in his presence, and it’s something about that unguarded quality to John that permits him to talk this way now, Sherlock is certain of it.

He keeps stroking John’s balls as he sucks—careful not to pull too hard, but knowing John always likes it slightly rougher than he ever thinks he would, his own hand on his cock speeding up again in response to the sounds John is making above him—helpless, breathless, little panting sounds, mixed with noises of encouragement.

“Yes, Sherlock, god—yes, just...god in heaven...your fucking mouth!”

And Sherlock is so glad John is talking again, he seems to be coming back to himself, as if with every lick and stroke of Sherlock’s tongue, Sherlock can feel John growing brighter, like the gold that’s hidden at the center of him is finally being drawn back to the surface; and this knowledge fills Sherlock with a corresponding light, makes him feel shimmering and powerful, the faintest imitation of what he imagines it must feel like to be John, and this feeling makes him focus with even more intention on the task at hand.

He’s moaning low and continuously now as he bobs his head around John’s cock, feeling sweat begin to dampen the curls at the back of his neck from the effort, his own fingers on his cock slick with the moisture of his own arousal, pumping desperately, hips rocking up to meet his hand—it feels so good to be touching himself while doing this to John, he’s almost dizzy from the force of his pleasure—and then, an ingenious idea occurs to Sherlock.

Not stopping the movements of his mouth, he slides the hand that was caressing John’s balls back into the heat between John’s legs, lightly, so lightly stroking the crease between John’s buttocks before pushing in gently to find the entrance to his body.
“Oh *fuck*, Sherlock—*yes.*”

The force of John’s reaction is so strong that Sherlock would be worried if it weren’t for the fact that his mouth is on John’s cock and he can feel the shaking in John’s thighs that signals the approach of his release.

“Please, Sherlock…”

He’s almost sobbing in his need, his whole body shaking now; Sherlock has never heard him like this. Dutifully, he pushes his finger farther in, searching for that place that John found inside him the last time they were together that made him feel like he’d seen beyond space and time, but before he can even find it, John’s body is going rigid against him as the momentum of his pleasure crests at last, driving his hips with one final thrust closer to Sherlock’s mouth.

Sherlock has to pull back a little to keep from choking but he manages to keep his mouth around John as the first wave of his release bursts warm and bitter from the tip of his cock; Sherlock loves the feeling of this—John spilling into Sherlock’s mouth—it’s so deeply intimate and visceral, it appeals to some base, primal part of Sherlock, the idea that he’s tasting John, that he’s taking a part of John into himself.

Sherlock swallows it down greedily, his own hand speeding up on his cock as he feels another burst of warm fluid coat his tongue, one finger still buried deep between John’s legs, where he can feel John’s body, warm and tight and shuddering around his finger as his pleasure moves through him.

All of these factors combined push Sherlock over the edge, and his orgasm takes him by surprise, slamming into him with sudden brutal force.

He drives his cock into his fist hard, one last time, his hips jerking forward into his hand, as pleasures bursts through him, immense and overpowering, and he moans once more around John’s now-softening cock as the waves of feeling overtake him, dragging him down, down into a land of pure, unadulterated bliss.

**Chapter End Notes**

Thank you for reading, and as always, for sticking with this story as it continues to unfold. The next chapter will pick up immediately where this one leaves off (and it’s mostly already written), so stay tuned for more soon! <3
Somehow in the midst of Sherlock’s hazy state of blissful half-awareness, he manages to rearrange his hands so that he’s holding John now by the hips, as much to steady himself as in an effort to support John.

But however helpful his intentions, the presence of Sherlock’s hands on John’s hips have little effect; and it takes Sherlock a moment to realize that the sensation of being dragged downward is not simply an internal reaction; as he comes back to himself, he realizes that he and John are slowly sliding together towards the floor.

John has his shoulders still pressed hard against the wall behind him, but his knees have finally given out, and he’s sinking, slowly, Sherlock’s hold on his hips doing nothing to stop his downward motion.

Sherlock follows him down, his own legs no longer in possession of the ability to hold him upright, and he sinks to the ground beside John, his own breath still coming somewhat fast, his thoughts slow and muggy from the effects of his orgasm.

He glances over at John, the suggestion that they make an effort to move toward the bed dying half-formed on his lips as he takes in the exhausted line of John’s body; he can see the outline of his shoulders still trembling slightly where they’re pressed against the wall.

Sherlock realizes—too late—that performing this particular act on John while requiring him to remain standing throughout was a supremely terrible idea; he did not properly think that through.

John’s knees are pulled in against his chest, his elbows resting on his knees, and for a moment, fear beats hot and tight in Sherlock’s throat because John’s wounded hands are covering his face and Sherlock cannot see his expression.

“John,” he begins, tentative, one hand hovering over John’s bare knee, afraid to touch.

John glances up at him, lowering his hands, and suddenly the fear in Sherlock’s throat is choking him because he can see plainly that John’s face is running with tears.

“Forgive me,” he says, and his voice is worse than all the darkness Sherlock has seen in him today because it sounds utterly wrecked, and what’s worse, full of shame.

“Forgive me, love,” he repeats, the endearment at the end of the phrase making Sherlock’s heart twist sharply in his chest. He wipes at his streaming eyes, seemingly unable to stop the flood of tears from coming.

He tips his head back against the wall and shuts his eyes, and in the growing daylight that’s begun
to steal in through the cracks in the walls, the tear tracks on his cheeks shine silver.

Sherlock sits beside him, rigid with uncertainty, feeling completely helpless.

“John,” he whispers, his voice sounding absurdly fragile, and Sherlock hates it—he hates himself for not being able to do more, to make whatever it is that’s making John feel this way stop.

He wants so badly to take John’s hand in his, to offer him comfort at least in some small way, but even this small gesture is denied him.

Instead he sits rigidly with his hands clenched at his sides, aching with the wrongness of not touching John, but too afraid to reach out to him and somehow make it worse.

John swallows, eyes still closed, and Sherlock watches the movement of his throat, the way the tears have begun to snake their way down his neck, glittering in the half-light when he moves, and Sherlock finds himself stricken with the beauty of the man before him, stunned that even here, now, in this moment of supreme sorrow John can look so heart-breakingly beautiful.

John opens his eyes and offers Sherlock a watery smile. “You should probably put that candle out, I reckon we’ll need it badly on some night in the future. Wouldn’t want to waste it.”

Sherlock finds himself nodding and rising to his feet to take John’s advice, relieved that John has given him a directive, awash in a tentative hope at hearing John allude to future nights they will spend together.

He blows out the candle and returns to crouch awkwardly beside John, fingers clenched into a fist against his thigh.

John is still sitting with his back against the wall. In the rising daylight, Sherlock can see the exhaustion on John’s face plainly again, the deep circles under his eyes like bruises.

The tears are still creeping down his cheeks but more slowly now.

Looking down to see Sherlock’s fist where it’s lying on his thigh, John slides his own hand forward and brushes the back of his hand against Sherlock’s, curling their fingers together. If the gesture pains him, John does not give any sign of it.

John looks down, studying their interlocking hands. His voice is soft. “Thank you for what you did… for what you gave to me just now. I needed that.” He looks up at Sherlock and his eyes are shining, the blue in his irises curiously magnified from the presence of his unshed tears. “I needed you, Sherlock. You helped bring me back to myself.”

He lifts a hand again to brush the backs of his knuckles down Sherlock’s cheek; the gesture so imbued with tenderness it makes Sherlock’s heart throb in his breast. Sherlock shivers at the light touch, amazed at how it can affect him.

“You beautiful, impossible thing.”

Sherlock is stricken silent, awed by the fact that John is thanking him for precisely what he’d hoped to do; he almost can’t believe what John is saying.

John lets out a long, shuddery breath, his eyes returning to their hands. “I’m sorry for reacting like this. Please don’t take it the wrong way.” His eyes flicker back up to Sherlock’s, beseeching. “It was just… a lot to take after what I’ve been through. I didn’t know it would affect me so… I would have warned you had I known but… I didn’t realize.”
Sherlock is overwhelmed once again with the desire to ask John precisely what it is that happened, what could have caused such a change in him, because it’s not just the injured state of his hands, it’s something deeper, something darker that’s gotten to the heart of him.

But he does not want to push John if he’s not ready to talk about it.

“You don’t need to thank me,” he says awkwardly. “It was my pleasure,” he adds, pulling his fingers half out of John’s to rub the backs of their knuckles gently together.

“Quite literally,” John says, and it takes Sherlock a second to realize John is teasing him; he looks up, confused, and then seeing the glint of humor in John’s eye, he finds his lips curling unconsciously into a smile.

“Well, yes…” he says, blushing hard in spite of himself, and John’s answering laugh of delight is so welcome to his ears that Sherlock finds the smile on his lips transforming to a grin, and he looks up at John, beaming, to find John looking at him with such utter fondness that he’s already instinctively leaning in towards John to kiss him before he realizes what he’s doing.

“Come here, you beautiful thing.”

John leans in to meet him, sliding one hand around the back of Sherlock’s neck, and Sherlock wastes only half a second of worry for the fact that John now seems to be blatantly ignoring the injuries on his hands in favor of touching him, before the thought dissolves in the presence of John’s soft mouth on his, John’s tongue slipping sweetly in past the seam of his lips.

He loses himself in the experience of kissing John for several blissful seconds, John’s mouth moving unhurriedly against his, his fingers slipping up to tangle in Sherlock’s curls, causing Sherlock to sigh softly into his mouth.

He feels John’s grin against him even as he feels the dampness of John’s cheek brush his own, the taste of salt on his lips vivid from the presence of John’s tears.

“John,” he says, pulling back, reluctant to interrupt the kiss, but increasingly distracted by the ache in his knees from kneeling on the hard floorboards. “Don’t you think… that is… shouldn’t we move to the bed?”

John’s answering laugh is so joyful, so reminiscent of his usual buoyant spirit that Sherlock feels his mouth breaking into a grin again.

John sits back, shaking his head. “I guess you’re probably right. There’s no reason we need to be sitting on the floor, is there?”

Sherlock rises stiffly to his feet, and offers John a hand, who takes it, gratefully.

Sherlock does not miss the flash of pain on his features as he climbs to his feet, but he chooses not to acknowledge it, feeling compelled instead to apologize for his poor-decision making earlier.

“I’m sorry I started all that while you were standing up. I mean… I’m sorry I didn’t move us to the bed before… before I did that,” he finishes self-consciously.

John crawls onto Sherlock’s bed first, unable to stop a tiny groan from escaping his lips as the mattress sinks under him, tugging the thin sheet up over his legs before reaching out an arm for Sherlock, holding the corner open for him.

They don’t really need the sheet, it’s so hot, but Sherlock likes the idea of them both being under it
together, however flimsy a barrier between them and the outside world he will welcome it, and he
crawls in gratefully beside John, settling in the crook of his arm, burrowing the long line of his
naked body into John’s side without thinking.

John’s arm comes up around Sherlock’s shoulders, pulling him in close against his side. He presses
a kiss to the top of Sherlock’s curls.

“Never apologize for what you just did for me—not under any circumstances.”

“Yes, but—”

“Shh.” John presses a finger to Sherlock’s lips. “I won’t hear of it.”

Sherlock smiles again, squirming closer in against John’s side; luxuriating in the feeling of the
lines of John’s lean muscled body against his own. He allows himself a moment of pure, self-
indulgent happiness over the fact that he is lying, once again, in John Watson’s arms. He shuts his
eyes and lets out a happy sigh.

“How are you, my beauty?” John murmurs into the top of his curls, his voice so fond, so full of
affection that Sherlock cannot stop himself smiling into the side of John’s neck. He feels suddenly
as though happiness is pouring out of him—just being in John’s presence has such a strong effect
on him. He feels giddy.

“I’m very well now, thank you,” he says happily into the side of John’s neck. “Thanks to you.”

“Mmm,” John hums in approval at his answer, fingers trailing distractedly up and down Sherlock’s
hip beneath the sheets, making him wriggle contentedly closer in against John’s side. “Good, that’s
very good.”

He likes the fact that John is asking how he is, as though they’ve just begun their encounter, as if
they never had that horrible, awkward beginning where John said he wasn’t going to stay.

Remembering it now though, introduces a dark thread of worry into Sherlock’s thoughts again;
he’s dying to know what happened to John, but he’s still too terrified to ask, unwilling to make
John talk about anything he’s uncomfortable with.

They are both silent for several seconds, and Sherlock does not know how, but it seems as though
John knows suddenly what he’s thinking; he can feel the mood shift between them, darkening
slightly, sobering.

John’s fingers continue their gentle pattern up and down Sherlock’s hip.

Finally, Sherlock cannot stand it anymore, if John does not want to answer, he does not have to, but
he has to at least ask.

“John,” he begins, and he knows that John is aware of precisely what he is going to ask. Still, his
voice is thick with uncertainty. “What happened?”

John is silent for a long time, his fingers continuing their rhythm over Sherlock’s skin. He suspects
the gesture might be as soothing to John as it is to him and he is grateful for it.

Sherlock waits, listening to the familiar creaking of the ship around them, the distant sound of
voices from the adjoining cabins as the other passengers begin to wake up. He can hear the wail of
the Damson baby from the deck above.
He isn’t sure that John is going to answer after all when he shifts slightly in Sherlock’s arms, and begins speaking.

“I heard your cry for help on Friday afternoon. I was working at the pumps.”

John’s voice is very even, rubbed clean of emotion, but when Sherlock hears his words, he goes cold all over.

“My shift was almost done. I could have waited, but when I heard you, I thought—”

John’s body is utterly still against Sherlock’s, his hand no longer moving in the same soothing pattern over Sherlock’s skin.

“Well, I thought the worst.”

Sherlock’s thoughts are moving a mile a minute; he’s picturing suddenly the location of his run-in with Ferguson, just a handful of feet away from the partition that divides the two halves of the deck. John would have been able to hear Sherlock’s cry for help as clearly as if they were standing in the same room.

Sherlock feels cold sweat break out on his forehead, all along his spine.

He’d never dreamed that John would hear him, he was just so desperate in that moment; he hadn’t thought… well, the truth was he hadn’t been thinking at all.

“I left my post. Burns tried to stop me leaving but I was…”

There is a moment of pointed silence in which Sherlock can hear the ghost of John’s anger filling up the space between them, the presence of it searing, white-hot.

“I wasn’t in a state to be reasoned with.”

John shifts his arms around Sherlock—he can feel the tension in John’s body that even just the memory of the incident is inciting in him.

“I was about to walk through that door when Anderson came down.”

The sheer hatred in John’s voice is so intense it makes the hair stand up on the back of Sherlock’s neck; there is fury, unmistakable now, boiling up, seething from underneath his words.

The air feels heavy with it.

“He saw that I had left my post. He made me work an extra shift because of it.”

John’s words are flat and clipped, but Sherlock can hear, in the spaces between the words, his fury gaping, raw and vivid as an open wound.

Sherlock is rigid with horror against John, his mind heaving with the implications of all the things John isn’t saying.

“So that’s… how many shifts did he make you work?”

“Three.”

Sherlock knows the rhythm of the sailors’ work well by now; he knows that John, just like all the members of his mess, works four hours on, four hours off, always alternating work with rest.
Working an extra shift doesn’t just mean an extra four hours of work—it means three shifts in a row. It means twelve hours of uninterrupted work.

Sherlock is speechless with horror. How John had even managed to do this is impossible to understand; Sherlock calculates rapidly in his head—John would have had to work straight through from Friday at noon until midnight that day. It’s no wonder Sherlock didn’t hear from him for two whole days.

Sherlock almost doesn’t ask his next question; he’s so certain that he knows the answer, but he cannot help himself.

“Did he… he didn’t make you work the pumps the whole time?”

John’s doesn’t answer at first; at least not directly, and then Sherlock feels his head jerk against him slightly in a nod.

“That’s why my hands are…” John stops speaking abruptly. “I should have taken the time to bandage them up before I came. I’m sorry. I didn’t think I would be staying though, I just… I was just so desperate to see you that I… I didn’t think.”

Sherlock’s tongue feels frozen to the roof of his mouth; how John can possibly be apologizing to him right now is beyond his capacity to understand. He wants to reassure John, but he’s so sick with his own guilt that he cannot think what to say.

The fact that Anderson could do this to John, punish him so severely for so small a transgression in what’s obviously just an effort to get at Sherlock, to make Sherlock suffer because he clearly knows that the surest way to do that is by hurting John… it makes him physically sick.

Sherlock is so lost in his own miserable thoughts that he’s surprised when John starts speaking again, his voice deceptively quiet.

“I’m so angry, Sherlock.”

Something in his tone has shifted subtly, and Sherlock holds himself very still, listening, waiting for John to go on.

“I can take a lot. I’ve a high tolerance for unpleasantness of all kinds, and normally it doesn’t get to me. Petty simpletons like Anderson trying to drag other people down to their level—it’s easy to rise above people who stoop that low, who spend all their time down in the muck. But when people like that—” John’s throat closes up. Sherlock can hear the effort it takes him to continue speaking; hears the thin exhalation of his breath before he goes on. “When people like that try and keep me from you…”

Once again, John’s silence is more expressive than any words he might choose. His anger seems to fill the space between them.

“It makes me angry in a way that’s… difficult to control.”

Sherlock is silent, picturing how John must have looked in that moment when Anderson stopped him going through that door, how the fury would have built in him like a tempest, the rage pouring off of him in waves.

“What did you—?” Sherlock swallows hard, dreading the answer. “What did you say to him?”

“I didn’t say anything.” John’s voice is like a sheet of tempered steel. “He asked me why I’d left
my post and when I didn’t answer, he told me I’d earned myself another shift.”

Even though he wasn’t there to witness it, Sherlock can clearly imagine how John would have looked in that moment, how cold and still he would have gone; how underneath that veneer of deadly calm, his fury would be blazing like a sheet of fire, the force of it shimmering, white-hot, its presence so intense it would have seemed to suck all the heat from the room, until there was nothing but a vacuum left behind it, folding in on itself like a collapsing star.

“It took everything I had in me not to go through that damned door in spite of that fuckwit Anderson standing there.” John’s voice is scraped raw with fury. “The only thing that stopped me was the thought of what he might try to do to you if I did.”

Thinking about it now, Sherlock cannot actually understand how John managed to keep himself from going through the door, or worse, killing Anderson on the spot.

“When I heard you call for help…” Sherlock can hear the pain in John’s voice at the memory and the sound of it is as visceral as a punch to Sherlock’s gut. “I thought… when I couldn’t go to you —” His voice clenches up and Sherlock feels horror flood his lungs—thick and black as pitch—stopping his breath. “I was so worried, Sherlock. I had to wait until the end of that shift to find out what happened. Burns sent Billy to look in on you for me, so I knew you were fine, but those four hours—” John’s voice is ragged. “They were hell.”

The room seems to swim before Sherlock’s eyes; the implications of his responsibility for what has happened made suddenly, horribly, startlingly clear. He is grateful that he is lying down because otherwise he is certain he would be falling now. He cannot breathe—he is drowning, slipping down a long black tunnel of guilt.

It’s his fault—his fault that John was made to suffer—that John’s hands are destroyed, wounded beyond recognition. If he hadn’t cried out, if he hadn’t called for help—if he hadn’t taken the stupid paper from Ferguson in the first place—none of this would have ever happened.

Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut, unaware that his fingers are clenching hard against John’s back as he struggles to regain his breath.

John shifts up in bed, pulling back to look at Sherlock in sudden concern.

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock tries to answer, but he cannot breathe—he’s still falling downward into himself, into the choking black swamp of his own guilt.

*Your fault—it’s your fault*, the voices hiss inside his head, and Sherlock cannot bear it. He puts his hands up over his ears in an effort to block them out, but he cannot this time because everything they’re saying is true. It’s all his fault.

“Sherlock!” John sits up now, in alarm, his hands gentle on Sherlock’s arms as he looks down into Sherlock’s face, and it’s only the awareness that John is touching him again with his wounded hands that helps bring Sherlock back to himself.

He gasps, the sudden return of his breath hurting his lungs.

John’s eyes on him are full of real fear. “What is it? What’s the matter?”

He’s not sure he would be able to answer if it wasn’t for the stricken look in John’s eyes; the sight of that sudden, visceral terror is almost as bad as what John has just recounted to Sherlock, and
Sherlock cannot bear to be responsible for more of John’s suffering.

“It’s my fault!” he chokes out. “You never would have left your post if I hadn’t called for help, and I wasn’t even in danger,” he gasps, shuddering now, unable to catch his breath. “Not really. It was just bloody Ferguson trying to get his bloody paper back and I was terrified—” Sherlock takes another scraping, desperate breath. It’s like he’s forgotten how to breathe properly. “I was terrified he’d find the notes from you—it was stupid of me, but I—I panicked. He didn’t even hit me that hard…”

Sherlock feels John go still against him, the worry on his face suddenly supplanted by a look of deadly calm.

“Who hit you?”

Too late, Sherlock realizes what he has said; what he promised himself he would not reveal to John.

He’s so upset; he isn’t thinking clearly.

“I don’t—it wasn’t—”

“Who hit you, Sherlock?” The note of tempered steel is back in John’s voice; it makes a chill run down Sherlock’s spine.

“Ferguson… George Ferguson. I took something from his room earlier that day, and he guessed I’d taken it—he was trying to get it back, but I didn’t have it anymore.” Sherlock is distinctly aware that he’s rambling, frantic as he tries to explain. “But I was afraid he’d find my notes from you, I keep them in my waistcoat pocket, and he was so angry… I was afraid he’d find them, and so I—I hit him first. I used the move you showed me, I used my elbow, and it worked, but it only made him more furious and he hit me…”

“Where did he hit you?”

John’s voice is gentle now, even if his eyes are still full of flame. Sherlock can see John’s eyes scouring his face for any sign of a mark.

“On the cheek—I’m fine though, it was nothing.”

Sherlock pointedly neglects to tell John that the blow was so hard it knocked him off his feet and into the wall.

John takes Sherlock’s face between his hands, his touch so gentle it makes Sherlock ache. He watches John’s eyes find the faint bruise on his cheek, knowing that the only reason he hadn’t seen it before is because of the dim quality of the light, and his own profound exhaustion. He’s suddenly fiercely glad that John cannot see the deeper cut on the inside of his mouth.

He watches the fury ripple through John’s face, disturbing the veneer of deadly calm.

It makes fear clench hard in Sherlock’s gut.

“Please John, it’s nothing. If anything I deserved it…” Sherlock rushes to continue speaking at the flash of rage this prompts on John’s face. “The thing is… I did take something from his room. I just didn’t have it anymore at that point.”

“What did you take from him?” Sherlock can hear the fury held tight in John’s voice; he can hear
the effort it takes John to keep it at bay.

“I… he had a copy of the ship’s manifest. I heard him arguing with another passenger last week, and I suspected it had something to do with Lestrade’s poisoning, so I—I went to talk to him, and when I did, I saw it in his room, and I took it. I thought maybe the reason the captain has been so eager to get to port is because he’s smuggling, I thought maybe I could use the manifest to prove it…”

The words are tumbling out in a jumbled mess; it’s the opposite of what he’d hoped when he’d imagined telling it to John, there’s no glory in it now. Sherlock feels shame pinch him as he explains the reasons behind his actions; they feel foolish, childish—knowing the consequences of his actions now, Sherlock wishes he could take it all back. None of it is worth John having to suffer like he did.

“But it was a stupid idea—” The hatred in his voice is fierce. “I went down to the hold and as soon as I got there I realized there was no way I could make an inventory of all the goods down there.” The more he goes on talking, the stupider he feels. He feels shriveled up with shame. “So I returned the manifest to the captain’s cabin.”

Sherlock sees John’s face go still with shock.

“You went into the captain’s cabin?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, his voice now tight with misery, and just the slightest hint of defensiveness. “He didn’t see me. I got rid of the steward first. And then Lieutenant Lestrade came in and found me. He wasn’t pleased.”

John lets out a low whistle. His voice is soft. “I can imagine not.”

“It would all have been fine, but then Ferguson was waiting for me when I came back to my room, and by then he’d figured out that I was the one who’d taken the manifest from him, and that’s… that’s when you heard me.” Sherlock’s voice is wretched with self-hatred. “That’s why I called for help.”

John is quiet, studying him without a trace of judgment on his face.

But it doesn’t matter; Sherlock knows how deeply he is to blame, and he can feel the sharp twisting sickness of his guilt again, rising up inside his chest, choking him.

“If I had known you would hear me… if I had imagined for one second that you would hear me and try to come to my aid—I never would have called for help, John. I never would have.”

He’s shaking his head now to underscore his words; desperate to make John understand how much he wishes he could undo his actions, if only he could.

“Sherlock… how can you possibly feel responsible for what happened? No,” he says, cutting off Sherlock’s protest. “No, listen to me.”

John’s hands are still so gentle on his face; but it only makes Sherlock feel worse because he doesn’t deserve John’s tenderness, the understanding in his eyes; he doesn’t deserve it.

“I don’t care what you took from that odious man, he had no right—” And here John’s voice quivers with fury. Sherlock watches him visibly calm himself. “He had no right to touch you. The fact that he dared to lay a finger on you… it makes me want to break every bone in his body.”
Sherlock stares hard at the ceiling, trying not to be affected by John’s words.

“But that’s beside the point. The point is—” John’s thumbs smooth over Sherlock’s cheeks to draw his eyes back up to his face. “The point is you are not responsible for what happened to me, that git Anderson is.”

Sherlock cannot help himself. He interrupts John, desperate. “But what he did to you—the only reason he punished you at all is because of me.”

“Sherlock!” John’s voice is military sharp.

Sherlock recoils at it in spite of himself.

“God, I’m sorry, love—” The sudden agony in John’s voices tears at Sherlock. “I’m sorry, but you have to stop taking responsibility for the things that Anderson does. We talked about this, remember?”

John’s voice is desperate, pleading, and suddenly, Sherlock feels tears stinging at the corners of his eyes. The last thing he wants to do is make John look like that.

He nods, and feels the tears spill down his cheeks.

John smoothes them away with his thumbs. “Oh god, Sherlock, please don’t cry. It isn’t—it’s just—” John’s voice is agonized. “You’ve got to stop doing this. It isn’t your fault, all right? There’s something wrong with him. I don’t know why he’s taking it out on you—he’s jealous of you, I think, insecure. But it isn’t your fault. Do you understand me?”

Sherlock nods again, not really believing John, but knowing that to voice otherwise will only make John more upset, and he’s got to stop doing that. He needs John to feel better, not worse.

The tears are streaming freely down his cheeks now, soaking the pillow under him. He blinks hard, willing them away, furious.

“Oh, Sherlock, love, come here.”

Sherlock lets himself be pulled gently upright and into John’s arms.

“Come here, lovely.”

He pushes his face into John’s neck, knowing that he doesn’t deserve the embrace, but wanting it so badly he doesn’t protest. He can feel his tears trickling down John’s neck.

John holds him; smoothing the sides of his hands down the expanse of Sherlock’s back, his voice low and soothing.

“It isn’t your fault,” he says, pressing a kiss into Sherlock’s hair. “None of it, do you hear me? There’s no reason for you to feel guilty.”

Sherlock clings to John, painfully aware of the fact that John is comforting him again—John, when he’s the one who so desperately needs comfort.

Sherlock rears back in John’s grasp to look at him. “I’m sorry, John,” he says.

The sorrow in John’s eyes at his words causes a fresh wave of tears to spill from his eyes, and Sherlock scrubs at them with the back of his fist, willing them to stop.
“There’s no need to be sorry, my darling.” John reaches up a hand to push the damp curls out of Sherlock’s eyes with the backs of his fingers. “Please, please don’t be sad on my account. Please. I’m here now—it’s all right.” He offers Sherlock the shadow of a grin. “It will take a lot more than one double shift to break me, don’t you worry.”

“But your hands… how will you…” Sherlock hates himself for saying it, but he can’t help it. “You have to go back to work again in three hours, how will you manage it?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll get the ship’s surgeon to help me bandage them—and my first shift is on the watch, then I’m off again. I won’t be back at the pumps until the afternoon. Believe me, I’ve suffered much worse than this before. It’s nothing.”

And Sherlock knows, absurdly, that John is telling him the truth. That it isn’t the physical suffering that got to him so badly—although of course that’s part of it. Now he knows that what almost broke John’s spirit was the not doing—the fact that he had to prevent himself from acting to come to Sherlock’s aid. That combined with having to do what Anderson said—how it would have grated on him, all through the long hours of work, Sherlock knows too well.

John is holding Sherlock lightly by the shoulders, studying his face.

“So did you really use that elbow block I taught you?” He asks, with one eyebrow raised inquisitively.

Sherlock nods, wiping at his last remaining tears.

John grins at him, fully, the corners of his mouth lifting with pride. “That’s good. I’ll have to show you a few more defensive moves the next time I get the chance.”

The words hang in the air between them, heavy with the implication that neither of them knows when that chance might be.

“I did learn one thing after my encounter with Ferguson.”

John’s expression sobered again immediately at the mention of the man’s name. “And what was that?”

Sherlock shifts uncomfortably in John’s arms, his skin still crawling with guilt, but knowing that he will regret it later if he does not say; the information is too important to keep from John.

“It wasn’t Lestrade the captain meant to poison—it was another passenger, John Knott. He’s a clerk at the law firm where Ferguson works. One of the partners died suddenly before Ferguson came to work there—the rumor was that he was poisoned. Ferguson filled his vacancy.”

Sherlock watches John’s eyebrows lift in surprise at this information. “And you think Ferguson is responsible?”

“I don’t think so exactly, but I think he’s going through the motions of keeping a lid on something. Not the original passenger, but someone who had dealings with the firm. Perhaps it was a partner who died. Ferguson is just using the cover story of ‘poisoning’ to keep things quiet.”

Sherlock nods, understanding.

“Not at all.” Sherlock shakes his head. “In fact, he knows frustratingly little about it. No, the man who’s in possession of all the information is Knott. He was there when it happened, which is precisely why the captain made an attempt on his life. The captain must have recognized him at some point during the voyage, and I can only imagine the two of them came face to face in the captain’s dealings with his firm, otherwise he would have no reason to try and take the man’s life. My guess is he forced Knott to strike some kind of deal with him, promising that he wouldn’t say a word, which I’m sure he agreed to. But recognizing him now, on this ship… well, I think his paranoia is getting the best of him.”
John’s eyes are widening in shock.

“So you’re saying… it was the captain who poisoned Knott’s associate?”

Sherlock nods.

“But how can you be sure?”

“I revealed my suspicions to Mr. Knott, and his reaction all but confirmed it.”

John lets out a low breath.

“But why on earth did he kill this man?”

“I don’t know yet. And it’s infuriating because Knott clearly knows a lot more than he is willing to share—he’s understandably frightened, but,” and here Sherlock makes a frustrated noise and looks pleadingly up at John, “But I’m certain that whatever the cause of this initial poisoning it has something to do with the captain’s desperation to reach the port in Rio in good time. I’m certain of it, John.”

John is studying Sherlock quietly; he doesn’t speak for several moments.

“That may well be, but Sherlock…” He pauses again to draw a deep breath, his gaze returning to Sherlock’s face as he goes on speaking. “I know you want answers, and you’re probably right that the captain’s motivations are tied to his actions in the past but… my god, Sherlock, the man is dangerous, to say the least.”

Sherlock feels a low squirming of disappointment deep in his gut; he knows exactly what John is about to say—it’s the same thing everyone has been telling him for the last twenty four hours: Stay out of it. He knows it’s absurd to be angry with John for telling him to keep his distance, especially in light of the disastrous events that transpired as a result of Sherlock’s investigating Friday afternoon but… still, it’s frustrating that even John doesn’t want to help him get to the bottom of it.

“It would be bad enough now that we know for certain he’s a murderer, but Sherlock—”

John’s hands come up to grip Sherlock’s shoulders, hard, and it’s a sign of the gravity of John’s words that he does not seem to notice the pain the gesture must surely cause him.

“His power on this voyage is absolute. It’s… a disturbing reality of life at sea. Think of this ship as his kingdom, we are all his subjects. It’s an absolute monarchy, Sherlock, and I don’t—” John licks his lips, his eyes flashing bright with sudden pain. “I don’t know what I would do with myself if some harm befell you because of all this.”

Sherlock squirms under John’s gaze, torn between wanting to promise John that he’ll stay out of it —reassure him that he’ll keep a safe distance—while knowing full well that such a promise is impossible for him to make, even to John.

“I know he’s dangerous but…” Sherlock’s eyes on John’s are pleading. “But surely it’s more dangerous to sit by and do nothing?”

John lets out a long breath, dropping his hands from Sherlock’s shoulders. “I don’t know, Sherlock.” It’s as if all the weariness has returned suddenly to his body; he looks wrung out, exhausted. “I don’t know if it is.”

John leans back against the pillows, as if he’s lost the ability to remain sitting upright, his eyes
closing briefly, and at the sight of him, looking so obliterated by weariness, Sherlock cannot help but think that this isn’t the normal John talking—if John wasn’t so completely sapped of energy and strength, Sherlock had a feeling John would be promising to join in the fight with him, asking what he could do to help.

But in light of what’s been happening to him, how could he possibly offer that to Sherlock? At this point, he’s simply trying to survive.

The realization makes the familiar throb of guilt churn in Sherlock’s belly, but this time, there’s a deeper emotion—a darker one. He feels anger burning, low and fierce, starting somewhere below his sternum and spreading out to every corner of his body, until he’s almost vibrating with the force of it.

John is right—this suffering is Anderson’s doing really; he is the cause of it. Sherlock knows he is at fault too, but if Anderson weren’t around to make John’s life a living hell, then none of this would have happened, John wouldn’t be lying here, half-dead from overwork because of one man’s petty grudge.

Sherlock feels overcome with the force of his anger, and he knows in that moment, that he has to do something to make it right. He cannot simply sit by and watch John continue to suffer like this, knowing that he is partly responsible. No, he has to fix this.

Sherlock is so caught up in the torrent of his own thoughts that it takes him a moment to notice that John’s eyes have opened again; he’s looking up at Sherlock, his expression imploring.

“Lie down with me?” he asks, the request so soft, so heart-breakingly simple that Sherlock cannot possibly refuse.

He crawls willingly into John’s outstretched arms, settling his cheek against John’s shoulder and letting out a tiny sigh as he feels John’s arms come up around him, one hand reaching up to push the hair back gently from his forehead.

John’s voice is a low murmur against his hair.

“I’m sorry—I know we should talk about this more I’m just… I’m so tired, Sherlock. Forgive me.”

Sherlock feels his heart twist for the second time in the space of so many hours that John should be asking his forgiveness, when it so clearly should be the other way around.

“You don’t need my forgiveness, John.” Sherlock swallows hard around the sudden pain in his throat. “I’m the one who should be apologizing to you.”

John’s hand smoothes over Sherlock’s forehead again in a quelling gesture, his other hand coming up to tangle loosely in Sherlock’s curls. “Shh. None of that. You’re perfect.” Sherlock feels John’s lips press a kiss to the top of his head. “Absolutely perfect.”

Sherlock presses his cheek in hard against John’s chest, burrowing closer with his hips, trying to silence all the clamoring hateful thoughts in his mind, forcing himself to focus instead on the fact that for now, John is here with him, in his arms; he tries with all his might to hold onto that one beautiful, impossible fact.

He closes his eyes, concentrating on the feeling of the gentle rise and fall of John’s chest beneath his, the feeling of his fingers curled so lovingly in Sherlock’s hair, wondering, not for the first time, how on earth he ever found this man who seems to love him so simply and so completely.
He will never understand it.

It hasn’t even been a minute before Sherlock feels John’s hands fall still against him, the slow and even rhythm of his breathing telling Sherlock that John has fallen fast asleep.

Sherlock holds on tighter, losing himself in that gentle, quiet sound, in the warmth emanating from John’s strong torso; and lying quiet in the half-light while John sleeps, Sherlock starts to piece together his plan.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, for reading, and for your unflagging support. Hearing from you all brings me so much joy. <33

More coming very soon! Things are going to get exciting in the next chapter, oh yes, just you wait... :))

And in the meantime... MAY THE GAY GODS GRANT US ALL STRENGTH AS WE PREPARE FOR THE EMOTIONAL ONSLAUGHT THAT WILL BE SEASON FOUR! *makes complicated gay blessing* In the name of the petal, the rainbow, and the gayness of the ocean...
Chapter Thirty Eight

Chapter Summary

Sherlock puts his plan into action.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John sleeps for the remainder of their time together.

Even if Sherlock wanted to, he would not dare to wake him. But Sherlock has no desire to disturb his slumber, no desire to rob John of this brief chance to rest. His sleep is so deep he does not move, and neither does Sherlock; even when the whole of his left arm eventually goes numb from where it’s curled under John’s neck.

Despite the minor discomfort of his position and the fact that it’s really too hot for them both to be laying together under one sheet, Sherlock finds himself more at peace than he’s felt in days. The rhythm of John’s sleeping body against him is like a balm to his soul. He likes being curled in close to John like this, their two bodies tangled together as though there’s no separation between them. And whether it’s simply the effect of being in John’s presence—as if he’s somehow absorbing his strength by proxy—or whether it’s the result of his own resolve to end John’s suffering, by the time John stirs against him several hours later, Sherlock feels himself filled with a strange, deep confidence over the decision he has made.

True to John’s word, his body seems to know the rhythm of those four hours better than any timepiece Sherlock has ever encountered; he wakes with a small jolt as though he has been startled out of sleep by some sound, but there is nothing other than the usual groaning and creaking of the hull around them to disturb his slumber.

Sherlock listens to the sudden acceleration of John’s heart under his ear, his chest expanding against Sherlock as he draws in a deep breath and then lets it out in a sigh.

He lifts his arm off of Sherlock, rubbing a hand over his face.

“Christ, it’s already bloody time, isn’t it?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer but he tightens his arms around John’s waist, and John chuckles, the sound low and pleasantly rough.

“I know… I feel exactly the same.”

He reaches down to push Sherlock’s curls out of his eyes, peering down to find his face. “How are you, my love?”

Sherlock arches his neck to look up at John; distressed to see that John looks as exhausted now as he did when he arrived four hours ago. “I’m glad you slept.”

He sees a pang of sorrow in John’s face at his words.
“I’m sorry. I wish I hadn’t spent our time together sleeping but I—”

Sherlock lifts a finger and presses it gently against John’s lips. He shakes his head.

“Alright,” John says, and Sherlock is pleased to see the small smile that pulls up one corner of his mouth. He takes Sherlock’s finger in his hand, and kisses his knuckles. “No excuses, then.”

John lowers Sherlock’s hand in his and moves to sit up with reluctance. He sighs again and Sherlock sees the exhaustion on his face deepening.

“Do you really have to go?” Sherlock whispers, knowing it’s an idiotic question; knowing full well that John has no choice, that now, more than ever, it’s imperative that he get to his post on time so as not to risk invoking Anderson’s wrath so soon again.

Sherlock feels the anger that has taken root somewhere deep inside him begin to grow, begin to spread all through him, slow and murderous as poison.

John bends to press a kiss to Sherlock’s cheek. “I’ve never wanted to show up for a shift less, I can tell you that much. But that doesn’t change the fact that I’ve got to go.”

Sherlock watches helplessly as John gently extricates himself from Sherlock’s arms and makes his way out of the bed.

His movements are slower this time as he dresses; Sherlock can tell by watching him how stiff he must be, how sore. He moves as if his body is brittle, as if he’s lost all of the liquid vibrancy and strength that usually animates his movements, that Sherlock usually marvels at, that makes it seem like the most basic actions he completes are a beautifully choreographed dance.

When he gets to the fastenings on his trousers, his injured hands fumbling stiffly over the buttons, Sherlock sits up in bed without thinking and reaches for him. “Let me help you.”

John does not protest; he lifts his hands away as Sherlock leans in to do up the buttons with an aching kind of tenderness, his movements careful and deliberate. He presses a kiss to John’s bare hip before leaning back, unable to help himself.

“Thank you,” John breathes, stooping with his shirt in his hands to drop a kiss to Sherlock’s cheek.

He moves to pull away but Sherlock catches hold of his wrist. “John…”

“What is it, my beauty?”

Sherlock opens his mouth, his desire to tell John that he is going to resolve everything, that he is going to fix this, half-formed on his lips. He wants to tell John so badly that he is going to make this stop, as soon as he can.

But he closes his mouth before he can get the words out, realizing too late that of course he cannot tell John. If he told John what he was going to do, John would only worry; or worse, try to stop him.

So Sherlock closes his mouth, dropping his eyes from John’s to shake his head. “Nothing. I just… I wish you didn’t have to go.”

“I know,” John says, and the sorrow in his voice is like the twist of a knife in Sherlock’s belly.

John finishes dressing in silence, and then, all too soon he’s standing with his hand on the
doorknob, his blue eyes full of regret.

“Until the next time then.”

But Sherlock cannot let John leave like this, not with so much sorrow still in his face, his voice.

Sherlock rises from the bed and crossing the two steps to the door, he pulls John into his arms and kisses him.

If he cannot tell John about this plan, he can at least try and reassure him in a different way, with the touch of his mouth on John’s. So into the kiss he pours his reassurance, his promise that he is going to make it up to John, he is going to fix this, no matter what it takes. For once in his life, he tries to make it so that he is the one giving John strength, instead of the other way around.

John’s arm come up around him, his body rising to meet Sherlock’s as naturally as the sun meeting the horizon every morning when it wakes, and Sherlock lifts his hands from John’s hips to frame his face, deepening the kiss.

From overhead, they hear the sound of the bell begin its clanging, monotonous call to duty.

John stiffens in his arms and pulls away with a muttered curse. “Bloody hell.”

Sherlock steps back to let him go, but at the sound of that horrible bell, at the immediate physical reaction it provokes in John, he feels the inferno of rage inside himself harden into a fury like nothing he has ever known, a fury so intense it feels as though it will burn him from the inside out.

Sherlock wonders fleetingly if this is what it feels like to be John Watson.

He can feel the resolution it provokes in him as clearly as though the message was inscribed upon his heart.

He will free John from the tyranny of that awful bell if he has to die trying.

John kisses him once more on the cheek with a whispered goodbye, and then he is gone, and Sherlock is left to the grey stillness of his cabin.

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The first thing Sherlock does, as soon as he receives his bucket of fresh water, is to wash and shave.

He does so meticulously, with greater care than he has taken in weeks. Something about the ritual helps to put him in the frame of mind he will need to undergo the task before him.

He chooses his waistcoat, his jacket, even his neck cloth with somber attention, knowing that in order to be taken seriously he will have to look the part of the viscount’s son. For once in his life, he is grateful for the fine clothes his birth and his position have entitled him to.

He studies himself in the cracked glass that serves as his mirror, and although he still does not like what he sees—the angular lines of his cheekbones and jaw too severe, his pale face beneath his dark hair floating in the grey light like a specter—he can appreciate the look of resolution he finds there, the hard line of his jaw lending a decided air of determination; and he decides that he is as ready as he’ll ever be.

As he leaves his cabin and makes his way to the upper deck, his heart pounding slightly faster than
usual in his chest, he knows that he may have to wait to put his plan in action depending on a number of factors that he has no control over; but Sherlock’s mind is made up, if he has to wait, he will, for as long as it takes.

However, luck is with him, for when he reaches the upper deck he sees Lestrade and Deverall standing together on the quarterdeck talking with the boatswain. They do not notice Sherlock as he makes his way through the door behind the helm towards the captain’s quarters.

Sherlock’s luck continues as he reaches the door to the captain’s quarters and finds, instead of the captain’s steward, a bored-looking midshipman who Sherlock knows is called Hopkins, leaning against the door and fiddling with a paring knife.

He’s younger than Sherlock, and although he’s something of a novice, he’s cleverer than most of the other midshipman, outshining them in almost every capacity. For this reason, he’s something of a favorite of Lieutenant Deverall’s. Sherlock knows he’s also one of the midshipmen who is particularly vocal about pointing out Anderson’s shortcomings. His bored gaze slides over Sherlock and he straightens up at Sherlock’s approach, tucking the knife away out of sight.

“What do you want?” he asks, narrowing his eyes at Sherlock.

Sherlock, who is delighted not to have to be confronted with the man he so obviously lied to yesterday about the illegal dealings going on below deck, is swept up in a newfound wave of confidence. He lifts his chin.

“Sherlock Holmes to speak with the captain.”

Hopkins’ pale blue eyes narrow further. “About what?”

Sherlock attempts the look he has so often seen on Mycroft’s face when people ask him questions he considers absolutely beneath him. “That happens to be none of your concern.”

Hopkins crosses his arms over his chest in a supremely irritating attempt at conveying his superiority. “Oh yeah? Well, it just so happens to be my concern since I’m the one who lets you in or not.”

Sherlock sighs, and then tilts his head, as he studies the young man before him.

It takes him four, maybe five seconds, to settle on the detail that he knows will be his most effective bargaining chip.

Sherlock smiles briefly before leaning into Hopkins and saying, in a soft voice: “If you don’t let me in, I’ll tell Lieutenant Deverall that you’ve been pinching his snuff, and I don’t think he would be very happy about it, do you?”

Sherlock watches with satisfaction as a series of emotions flicker over Hopkins’ face in rapid succession—astonishment, disbelief, and finally anger.

“How did you—? I didn’t—I never—”

“Please don’t waste my time denying it. It’s perfectly obvious. Your fingers are covered with it, and that particular brand is unique in color, I’d recognize it anywhere. The only other person on board who uses the stuff is Lieutenant Deverall, and I know for a fact that someone’s been stealing it from him—he was complaining about it just the other day.”

The boy’s face has turned puce in anger. “How do you know I don’t have my own store?”
Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Oh please. They only sell it in the Virgin Islands, and I know this is your first voyage. Besides, no midshipman could ever afford it.”

Hopkins’ face goes from a violent shade of scarlet to white.

“Fine,” he spits. “I’ll tell the captain you’re here, but that doesn’t mean he’ll want to see you.”

Sherlock reaches to remove an invisible speck of dust from his sleeve with a bored expression. “Tell him I have some information that I think will be of interest to him.”

Hopkins vanishes for several moments, closing the door behind him with a resounding snap.

Sherlock does not have to wait long at all before Hopkins is slinking back around the door with a sullen, belligerent expression. He looks like a dog that’s been thoroughly whipped.

“He says he’ll see you,” he mutters furiously, standing aside to let Sherlock through.

“Thank you, Hopkins,” Sherlock says, patting the boy condescendingly on the shoulder as he walks past. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

As hard as he tries to feel nothing but sheer confidence and self-possession as he walks through the door, Sherlock cannot stop the low hum of nervous tension building in him at the reality that he is at last going to come fact to face with this man.

Still, all things considered, he should probably feel more frightened than he does.

He squares his shoulders, lifting his chin in an unconscious attempt to make himself feel less intimidated, and steps into the room.

The captain is standing at the desk in the center of the room (the very desk, in fact, that Sherlock hid beneath yesterday when he returned the manifest), his attention focused on a series of maps and nautical charts spread out before him.

At his elbow is a heavy leather-bound volume, opened to a page of miniscule calculations and annotations, which Sherlock can only assume is the captain’s log.

The sound of Hopkins pulling the door closed behind him does nothing to break the captain’s concentration, and as he makes no attempt to acknowledge Sherlock’s presence, Sherlock takes the time to study the man up close in a way he has not had the opportunity to do so before.

He’s shorter than Sherlock realized. Now, standing near to him it’s clear that if he were to straighten up, the top of his head would come only to the level of Sherlock’s eyes. Something about his presence on the quarterdeck always seems to add several inches to his height.

It’s difficult to tell his precise age—he’s clearly well along in years, but now, studying him up close, Sherlock begins to suspect that he’s actually younger than he appears, likely somewhere in his mid-fifties rather than his sixties, in spite of what his appearance might suggest. He was quite a young man when he distinguished himself during the war against America, and that was only twenty odd years ago. The severity of his limp adds to this impression of old age, as much as his weathered face and his grey hair, which is liberally streaked with white.

But in spite of these tell tale signs, there is an energy about him that defies any outward marks of aging; a vitality that’s plainly visible in the wiry strength of his frame, in the straight line of his spine and the hard set of his shoulders.
As he looks him over, Sherlock cannot help but think, with a certain fascinated awe: so this is what a murderer looks like.

How disappointing, but ultimately unsurprising, that he is utterly indistinguishable in every way from every respectable British gentlemen Sherlock has ever laid eyes on; he looks precisely like the sort of men that Mycroft spends his days with arguing over tax law.

But then again, Sherlock concedes wryly, it makes a certain kind of sense that the face of the British Empire is no different than the face of a man who goes around murdering people in cold-blood; it’s no different really, what he does, from the business of Mycroft’s associates, it’s just a bit more straightforward the way he does it.

However, what strikes Sherlock most, in studying this man, is that the longer Sherlock looks at him, the more he is overcome with the unnerving sensation that he cannot glean any kind of information from him at all.

Other than his age (which in and of itself is more difficult for Sherlock to determine than usual) and the source of his injury (which Sherlock heard about before ever laying eyes on the man), there is absolutely nothing that Sherlock can determine about who this man is as a person, where he comes from, what he values in his life, what motivates his actions, or what his intentions might be for the future.

It’s like trying to read a sheet of parchment that is utterly, frustratingly blank.

Sherlock is struck with the same impression he felt upon first entering this room when confronted with the reality that it gave no sense at all of the man who occupied it.

It’s especially unsettling because Sherlock is used to being able to determine, at least a handful of small details about a person’s character, their habits, their likes and dislikes, incidents from their past, just by looking at them. It’s second nature to him now to make a small catalogue of these details in his mind, every time he meets someone. He’ll file them away if the person is important enough, or simply discard them when he’s through if they’re not.

As the seconds creep by and still the captain does not look up from the paper he is studying on the desk before him, Sherlock feels his unease increasing.

It’s obvious that the purpose of this behavior is to make Sherlock feel deliberately uncomfortable. It’s the sort of petty display of power Sherlock is accustomed to, having spent so many years of his life with Mycroft as a brother. Still, Sherlock finds himself, to his own frustration, succumbing to its effects. It’s difficult not to feel awkward and ill at ease while standing alone with another person in a room who completely fails to acknowledge your presence.

And then, before Sherlock can think what to say to interrupt the long silence, the captain is speaking, his eyes still focused on the chart in front of him.

“As wonderful as it is to feel one has an audience while one works…” A pair of sharp blue eyes flickers up at Sherlock and he feels himself pierced by the sudden intensity of the man’s gaze. “I’d prefer not to have you lingering in my cabin all day, Mr. Holmes. So why don’t we get straight to it. I’m assuming you have some complaint to lodge, as passengers of your background generally do…. so what is it? Not enough hot water? Too much dry mutton? Your neighbors keep you up at night? What is it?”

Sherlock lifts his shoulders, irritated at the assumption that he would complain to the captain over such petty matters, at the same time well aware of the fact that all the things the captain mentioned...
have indeed been sources of vexation for Sherlock.

He decides to ignore the question entirely and get straight to the point.

“I’ve come to discuss the behavior of one of your midshipman—Phillip Anderson is his name. It is my belief that he is ill-suited for duty and should be removed from his position at once.”

Irritatingly, the captain’s gaze has returned to his papers. He picks up a pen and scrawls something in the book at his elbow.

Sherlock waits. He knows exactly the kind of game the man is playing. He’s trying to make Sherlock feel as small and powerless as possible, hoping that Sherlock will lose his nerve and continue talking just to try and fill the silence. But two can play at this game, and Sherlock is very good at waiting.

Finally, after a minute or two in which the captain has said nothing at all; he picks up his pen again, and after making another mark in the book beside him, he says, without looking up, “Tell me, Mr. Holmes—do you have much experience with life at sea?”

He sets down his pen and looks up at Sherlock expectantly.

Sherlock shakes his head. “This is my first voyage.”

The captain looks at Sherlock with a small, ill-fitting smile on his lips; an expression on his face of exaggerated mock puzzlement. “I’m curious then, as to why you think your opinion on this matter has any relevance whatsoever.”

Sherlock feels a dull flush of embarrassment warm his cheeks.

The captain spreads his hands in a gesture of magnanimous indulgence. “By all means, enlighten me.”

Sherlock does not let his embarrassment get the better of him; he takes a deep breath. “Phillip Anderson has been severely mistreating the men under his command, and as the captain of this ship I assumed that it would be in your best interest that all members of your crew continue to be fully functioning.”

“I see.”

The captain’s gaze flickers downward briefly, as though he’s sparing Sherlock the embarrassment of having to be examined too closely in this shameful moment.

“Do you know, Mr. Holmes, how it is that we punish men at sea?”

Sherlock says nothing.

“We tie them to the gratings and beat them until they listen to reason. Do you know why it is that we do this, Mr. Holmes?”

Again, Sherlock does not respond.

“It’s because in the royal navy, just as onboard a merchant ship, the key to a successful voyage is discipline. Where there is no discipline there is chaos. Pain and hardship are as vital for the smooth running of a ship as food and water—perhaps more so. Of course,” he looks up at Sherlock, smiling the same mocking smile as before, “I wouldn’t expect you to understand any of this,
coming as you do from such… privileged circumstances.”

The mockery in his voice is unmistakable, as is the implication that Sherlock’s upbringing has made him foolish and weak, completely unprepared for a life at sea with all the various hardships it brings.

Sherlock feels the flush of anger in his cheeks intensify.

“I have just one more question for you, Mr. Holmes. Do you know the punishment for any man on board—passenger or crewman—for questioning the captain’s orders?”

This time, Sherlock shakes his head.

The captain’s smile widens. “Death, Mr. Holmes. The punishment is death. Take care to remember it, in the day’s ahead. Now, if you would do me the kindness of removing yourself from my presence as quickly as possible, I would be much obliged. I do have a ship to run.”

And without another word, the captain returns his attention to the papers on his desk.

Sherlock knows full well that he has been dismissed, but he was prepared for this. He knew the captain would have no interest in granting him his demand, not without something else to interest him in exchange.

Sherlock draws a deep breath.

“There’s something else.”

In spite of his best efforts to remain calm, he feels a hot flash of fear fill his chest, like a warning sign from his body that this is his last chance to reconsider, that if he turns back now, no harm will come to him.

Sherlock lifts his chin.

“I am in possession of some information that I think you would be interested in hearing. If you remove Anderson from his position… I’ll tell you what I know.”

Sherlock can feel the temperature in the room change as surely as if the sun pouring in through the stern windows had suddenly been swallowed up by clouds.

The captain’s voice is deadly calm.

“And what does it pertain to, this information that you think I would be so interested in hearing?”

Sherlock’s heart is pounding so loudly he can hear the blood roaring in his ears.

“I know who stole the manifest from your cabin.”

Sherlock watches the man before him go absolutely still. It’s an unnerving experience, like watching a snake before it’s about to strike. He looks up at Sherlock and something about the razor sharp quality of his gaze makes Sherlock feel suddenly as though the man can see straight through him.

Sherlock wonders for one wild second if he made the wrong decision.

And then, before either of them can speak again, there’s a sharp rap on the cabin door.
The captain doesn’t move, nor does he look towards the door.

“Come!”

A breathless, yet triumphant looking Lieutenant Deverall rushes into the room. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Captain, but you said to come at once. We’ve done it, sir. The *Galatea*’s making seven knots!”

Whatever the captain’s genuine reaction to this news is impossible to make out, but he turns to the lieutenant and says: “Well, finally some good news, Lieutenant. I’m pleased to hear it.”

“Yes sir, we’ve got a strong north east wind helping us along, but I reckon she’ll hold steady at this pace until the morning at least.”

“Good. Let’s be sure to keep it that way, Lieutenant.”

“Sir—if I might make a conjecture…?”

“You may.”

“If we can hold this pace, we’ll be sure to make port by Wednesday, sir. Maybe even Tuesday if the wind stays with us.”

“Indeed, we may,” the captain replies; his face still impassive. He looks down for a moment at one of his charts, as though considering. “Tell the men that if we keep this speed up until eight bells, we will splice the main brace this evening.”

“Sir?”

The meaning of this nautical expression is lost on Sherlock but evidently it’s enough to completely shock Lieutenant Deverall. The man’s mouth is hanging open.

“Let it serve as an incentive to keep them from slacking. You may tell them, Lieutenant, that this will be their reward. But remember if and—only if our speed holds, will I grant them this privilege, is that understood?”

Deverall nods sincerely. “Yes, sir. I’ll tell them, sir.” Sherlock watches a look of uncertainty pass over the lieutenant’s face, and then he says, with some degree of hesitation: “And thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Deverall. Remember—seven knots by eight bells, or I’ll cut the rum rations instead of doubling them. You have my word on that.”

Deverall nods again, and turns to go, glancing for the first time at Sherlock standing opposite the captain’s desk with some curiosity.

“Oh, and one more thing, Lieutenant.”

Deverall pauses.

“Tell Midshipman Anderson to come and see me when he’s finished his shift.”

Deverall hesitates, presumably hoping the captain will say more on the matter, but if so, he’s disappointed.

The captain has taken a seat at his desk, his attention now on the ledger at his elbow.
“That will be all, Lieutenant.”

Deverall nods, and with a final curious glance at Sherlock, leaves the room.

Sherlock stands, fully aware that the next move is the captain’s to make.

Again, the man makes Sherlock wait; the only sound in the room for several seconds is the scratching of the captain’s pen.

At last, he sets down the writing implement and looks up at Sherlock, setting his elbows on the edge of his desk and folding his fingers together in front of him.

He studies Sherlock over his hands with that same unnervingly scrutinizing gaze, and once again, Sherlock is filled with the uncomfortable sensation that the captain can see inside his head, as though he can look straight through his skin and see every movement of Sherlock’s inner world, including every capillary and vein, the transparent beating of Sherlock’s heart.

He wonders, fleetingly, if this is how people feel when he looks at them.

“As admirable as your fledgling attempts at blackmailing may be, I have no interest in your proposition—”

Sherlock opens his mouth to protest, but the captain raises an imperious hand to silence him.

“As I said—no interest. However, you are, as it turns out, quite correct in your assessment that Phillip Anderson is the most incompetent midshipman to ever set foot on board a ship. He’s a disgrace to the uniform he wears, and indeed, it is my belief that our progress on this voyage would be much improved by Mr. Anderson’s prompt removal from this vessel.”

Sherlock waits, his heart in his mouth.

“I will remove Midshipman Anderson from his current position as the head of this mess of sailors, but I ask you one thing in return.”

Sherlock looks at him, feeling fear, cold and irrational, begin to fill him.

“Tell me, what is the name of the sailor you’ve grown so attached to?”

Sherlock feels his blood turn to ice in his veins.

“I… I don’t—”

“For half a minute, Sherlock is frozen, completely uncertain as to how he should respond. He feels stripped raw, exposed—it’s as if all his paranoid fears from a moment ago have come true. He fights to keep his expression cool, impassive, but he’s certain that the captain can see every
trace of the terror that’s pounding through him right now, shaking him to the core.

How could he know? How could he know about John?

“Surely, it’s a simple enough question to answer.”

And then, without feeling like he has really consented to doing so, Sherlock finds himself answering, as though the words are being pulled out of him by iron tongs. “John. His name is John Watson.”

“There, now—that wasn’t so hard was it?” The captain smiles up at Sherlock, and Sherlock knows in that moment, with a certainty he cannot explain, that he has just lost something of great value to him.

“You may have your wish, Mr. Holmes. Anderson will not only be removed from his current position, he’ll be permanently demoted—relieved of his duties as midshipman. It seems I owe you a debt of thanks—you’ve finally given me the excuse I need to punish the lad.” The captain smiles up at Sherlock again, and it is that same predatory smile that makes Sherlock feel as though his insides have turned to lead. “I’ll be sure he knows just who to thank for that. You may go now, Mr. Holmes. I trust you can see yourself out.”

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Sherlock leaves the captain’s cabin in a state of shock.

He makes his way back to his own room without really seeing the ship around him. Closing the door behind him, he goes to sit on the edge of his bunk, trying in vain to sort of what just happened.

He’s distantly aware that he should be experiencing some sense of triumph and relief; after all, he got what he wanted.

And yet, Sherlock is certain that whatever battle just took place inside that room, he definitively lost.

It doesn’t make sense—any of it.

Never in a hundred years did he expect the captain to simply give him what he asked for; not without listening first to the information Sherlock was prepared to offer him. It was no small thing, what Sherlock had been prepared to do—giving up Ferguson’s name. Indeed, it was nothing short of a death sentence for the man.

Sherlock had thought it over long and hard; as despicable as it was to betray a man like that, it was the only way he could think of to get the captain to give him what he wanted; it was the only means he had to ensure the protection of John and his men.

It couldn’t continue—Anderson’s treatment of them; Sherlock couldn’t stand by and let it happen anymore; he had been prepared to make it right, no matter the cost, even if it meant offering up another man’s life.

But the fact that the captain hadn’t been interested in hearing it… it didn’t make sense.

It’s possible that he could have suspected Sherlock was simply bluffing, if not for the fact that Sherlock told him that he knew the manifest had been taken; information that proved Sherlock knew, at the very least, that the document had gone missing.
Perhaps the captain suspected that it was Sherlock himself who had taken the document, and even if he had given someone else’s name, his offering of the information was as good as a confession.

This possibility makes fear congeal into a hard knot in Sherlock’s stomach.

But surely, no man would be stupid enough to come forward with this information if he were the guilty party.

No, what seems more likely is that their entire exchange, indeed every decision that the captain had made, had been in an effort to display his power over Sherlock.

If he had been willing to listen to the information Sherlock was prepared to offer, it would have signaled that he had a need for the information that Sherlock was in possession of, which would have meant that Sherlock had some power over him, however small. His refusal to hear what Sherlock had to say was as good as a refusal to acknowledge that Sherlock had any value in his eyes at all.

His last-minute decision to give Sherlock what he asked for was clearly an attempt to demonstrate that he can do whatever he wants, at any point in time; it’s a blatant reminder to Sherlock that the man’s power on board the ship is absolute.

This information in and of itself poses no problem for Sherlock; he can take it in his stride—even the captain’s threat that he is surely going to tell Anderson who is responsible for his dramatic change in status isn’t a cause for too much concern (after all, finally stripped of his power, what harm can Anderson possibly do?)—no, what’s bothering Sherlock, if he’s honest with himself, is the feeling that something has been taken from him that he cannot get back.

He feels much the same way he did during his very first trip to London, when after leaving a crowded stall Mycroft had commanded him to check his pockets. Sure enough a pickpocket had made off with Sherlock’s wallet. He had never even felt someone touch his coat. The thought that someone had been there—someone’s fingers had been against his ribs without him noticing had given him a chill.

The feeling now is much the same, except that the creeping sensation of absence, of having been made vulnerable without even being aware of precisely how, or at what cost, goes deeper—right into his very bones.

Sherlock cannot shake the memory of the unnervingly discerning presence of the captain’s eyes when he finally looked at Sherlock; whatever it was he saw, Sherlock is certain that he saw too much.

And now he knows about John.

This piece of information, above all else, is what makes the fear stick to the insides of Sherlock’s ribs, making him feel vaguely sick.

It’s quite possible that he already knew, that the demand for this piece of information, like all his other actions, was merely a power play—to show that he could get out of Sherlock anything that he wanted.

After all, the nature of John and Sherlock’s relationship isn’t exactly a secret anymore on board the ship, at least not to the members of John’s mess. Anderson is certainly aware of it; and it’s very possible that Anderson had complained to the captain about the two of them in the aftermath of Lestrade’s poisoning, that it was for this very reason that the captain had agreed to put Anderson in
charge of John’s men.

The captain’s motivations in this, as in all matters, are utterly opaque to Sherlock.

But for all that he may not know, Sherlock is certain of one thing, and that is that he should not have told that man John’s name.

More than anything, he wishes he could go back to that moment and take back what he said, refuse to answer. But then, if he had refused, wouldn’t the captain have gone back on his decision about Anderson?

Sherlock lowers his head into his hands, pressing hard against his skull, willing the torrent of panic in his breast to calm.

Maybe he has made a grave mistake, but for now, all that matters is that Anderson will be removed from his position.

Lifting his head, Sherlock glances at the hazy beams of daylight slanting into his room. It must be almost noon, which means John will be switching from his position in the foretop down to working the pumps very soon. The captain told Deverall to instruct Anderson to come see him at the end of his shift—when would that be? The midshipman’s watch usually follows that of his mess, which means Anderson will be done working when John finishes his shift at the pumps at eight bells.

Eight bells—which is also when the captain will supposedly grant the men a reprieve from their hard work if the ship continues at its current speed.

What was the expression the captain had used? Splice the main brace.

Sherlock isn’t certain exactly what the activity entails other than an extra ration of grog for the sailors. He could go and ask Lestrade, but doing so would involve a conversation in which Sherlock would have to explain how he’d come to be in possession of the information, which, he reluctantly determines, is probably best to avoid.

Sighing, he stretches himself out on his bunk with his hands behind his head.

It seems as though the only thing left to do now is to wait.

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As usual, Sherlock doesn’t intend to fall asleep, but his sleepless night at John’s side gets the better of him, and he finds himself waking four hours later to the familiar clanging of the bell.

He bolts upright in his bunk, mentally counting the strokes as he scrambles out of bed and towards his boots.

Sure enough, the count stops at the stroke of eight.

His boots are on and he’s out the door seconds after the bell has stopped ringing.

He wants to be there when the news is announced that Anderson has been stripped of his position; after the price he paid for this small victory he’s determined to be there to witness it.

Sherlock takes the stairs two at a time to make his way to the upper deck, and it seems that perhaps Deverall has issued his report to the captain somewhat early because there is already a substantial crowd gathered in the ship’s waist by the time Sherlock arrives.
One of the lieutenants must have sent word around that there was going to be an announcement—there are more passengers present on deck than Sherlock has seen since the start of the voyage.

There is a general aura of expectancy in the air—but clearly the announcement hasn’t been made yet because there’s no celebratory feeling to the gathering at all. The men look as grey and worn-down as ever before, and the handful of passengers Sherlock can see look equally weary and put-upon by the heat; Sherlock recognizes Emma Gibbons and Henrietta Long by the torpid flutter of their fans.

In fact, there are so many people present on deck that Sherlock has to squeeze his way through the crowd to find an empty spot to stand in. He searches in vain for any members of John’s mess but it seems they’ve yet to make their appearance.

There’s no sign yet of the lieutenants either—save for Lieutenant Dimmock who looks half-asleep at his post by the helm.

Anderson is missing as well; he’s not standing with the other midshipmen who are gathered by the capstan.

Sherlock’s anxious train of thought is interrupted by the presence of someone’s hand cuffing him good-naturedly (and rather forcefully) on the shoulder.

Sherlock looks up to see Colonel Jackson beside him, as high-spirited and ebullient as ever; the man is practically bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Afternoon, neighbor! Quite a bit of excitement we’ve got here, eh?”

Sherlock nods without comment, wishing suddenly that he hadn’t chosen this particular corner of the deck to stand in.

“So do you believe the rumors?” Colonel Jackson leans in conspiratorially before asking in a stagey whisper, “You think the man himself is actually going to make an appearance?”

Sherlock looks at the Colonel in some puzzlement.

“Why the captain, my boy! The captain! That’s why we’re all crowded here together like too many pigs in a pen—he’s supposed to make some kind of announcement! But seeing as he hasn’t spoken one word to any of us since the start of this voyage, I can’t imagine why he’d change his habits now.”

Sherlock says nothing; a palpable ripple of anticipation is moving through the crowd as Lieutenant Lestrade and Lieutenant Deverall have appeared from underneath the quarterdeck, followed unmistakably by the captain.

The crowd shifts imperceptibly as passengers and crewmembers alike duck their heads together in murmured speculation at the sight of their evasive captain. Sherlock rakes his eyes over the sea of faces to try and find any member of John’s mess, but they must all be below decks because there’s still no sign of any of them.

He does notice, as the crowd inches closer to where the captain has come to stand in front of the helm, the face of Molly Hooper just across the deck; she catches his eye and waves briefly from where she’s standing beside the domineering silhouette of Ms. Grimsby.

Sherlock smiles back at her; sees Ms. Grimsby eying him crossly and winks, then watches with satisfaction as Molly endeavors without success to hide her laughing mouth behind her hand.
Then all at once a hush falls over the crowd; the captain has lifted his hand for their attention.

The expression on the captain’s face is as severe as ever; if Sherlock had to guess his next words he would not expect them to be at all congratulatory.

“Some good news at last,” he begins in a carrying voice.

“You wouldn’t know it by the looks of him,” Sherlock hears someone whisper in the crowd behind him, followed by the sounds of a stifled giggle, and then fervent shushing.

“I am happy to report that we are finally making our desired speed. If all goes well we shall reach the port of Rio de Janeiro in two days time.”

This proclamation evokes a murmur of excitement.

The captain lifts his hand again for silence, his scowl deepening; the crowd quiets again to a hush.

His next words are clearly intended for the crew as he directs his gaze to the sailors standing at the forefront of the crowd, and those hanging from the rigging above, his pale eyes narrowed to two dark slits against the glare of the sun.

“The lieutenants have assured me that you all have been working hard—I expect you to continue to do so to keep this pace up.”

The sailors are motionless they are listening so intently; the only movement among them is the slight flutter of their clothing as the wind moves over the deck. They may as well be a crowd of statues.

“But… seeing as we are now ahead of schedule, I believe you’ve all earned yourselves a brief respite.” The captain’s narrowed eyes travel over the faces of the assembled men, and then, to Sherlock’s utter shock, his face breaks into a smile, his voice rising to a shout with his final words. “To reward you for your hard work, this evening we will splice the main brace!”

At these words a roar of praise erupts from the crew.

“A tot of rum will be given to every crewman—and to every passenger, too!”

Another wild cheer bursts forth at this, as well as a wave of astonished gasps and exclamations—judging by the looks on the other passengers’ faces, there is no precedent for this behavior.

Beside Sherlock, Colonel Jackson lets out a celebratory whoop.

He claps Sherlock so hard on the back he almost staggers into the gratings leading down to the main hatch. “Well, I’ll be damned! Sounds like there’ll be a hell of a party on this ship tonight! About time, too!”

Every inch of the deck, as well as the ropes and lines above it, seems suddenly to be alive with shouting, hollering men, clambering down in their eagerness to line up for their extra portion of rum. Sherlock can see John’s friend Stamford ducking out of sight through the forehatch, presumably to go fetch the rations, but still, there is no sign of John’s mess, or of Anderson for that matter.

Sherlock stands on his tiptoes, straining his eyes in the sea of faces to make out any of the eight men, getting desperate now. They couldn’t all still be below deck, the bell had finished ringing minutes ago—surely the captain had spoken with Anderson by now, surely they must have heard
the news, hadn’t they?

Unless the captain changed his mind…

Unless none of it was real…

Sherlock is filled suddenly with a horrible, insidious doubt.

Maybe it had all been a ploy to get Sherlock to tell the captain what he wanted to hear, maybe he’d never intended to remove Anderson from his position; perhaps, it had simply been an attempt to discover Sherlock’s weakness, to find out what Sherlock valued most.

Maybe Anderson was still below decks with John’s mess, punishing them right now. Or worse, John was being singled out for punishment. Maybe the captain had already had him locked up in some dark, rat-infested corner of the ship, awaiting something much, much worse.

Oh god, how could he have been so stupid…

And then, over the dull roar of the crowd, Sherlock hears a young, familiar voice calling his name. He looks up to see Billy hanging off the rigging by the foremast, waving his cap frantically in his hand to get Sherlock’s attention.

His face is vibrant with joy.

“Mr. Sherlock Holmes, sir! Mr. Watson sent me to tell you directly—he’s on his way—him and his men! They’re coming to thank you! They just heard the news—I’m the one who told them!” he says, his face beaming with pride. “But is it really true, sir—that it’s all thanks to you? Is it true Mr. Holmes sir, is it?”

Sherlock looks up at Billy and feels as though a set of chains has been lifted off his heart.

He doesn’t even care that several curious faces are studying him in response to Billy’s words, that some of the midshipmen are looking at him with narrowed eyes from where they’re standing by the forehatch, a crowd of female passengers peering at him curiously over the tops of their fans; none of that matters now, because all of a sudden, there coming through the crowd, is John Watson, eyes blazing, his face shining like the light of the sun itself is pouring out of him, and behind him in a great, cheering shouting mass are the other seven members of his mess, whooping and hollering in celebration.

Before Sherlock can take another step, he’s been engulfed by the tiny mob. All of them are speaking at once, shouting his name, a sea of arms are reaching out to him to shake him by the hand, half a dozen hands are pounding him on the back, someone is fondly and enthusiastically scrubbing their fist into his hair, but all of it, fades to a background hum as John comes to a halt before him, his blue eyes full of gleaming light, the golden brilliance of the afternoon sun reflecting off his hair, and it’s as if all the gold has been restored to him at once, he finally looks like himself again; his face illuminated by a dozen different emotions—pride, gratitude, incredulity, relief—joy.

He seizes Sherlock by the shoulders, and Sherlock can see from how close he’s standing that his eyes are radiant with unshed tears.

“You did it—you mad, fucking bastard—” He’s shaking Sherlock by the shoulders, half-laughing, shaking his head in disbelief. “I’m afraid to ask how, but you did it. You did it, you brilliant beautiful thing.”
And then, John is taking Sherlock’s face between his bandaged hands and kissing him, there, in front of everyone on that deck, and Sherlock doesn’t care if the captain himself can see them, because John is kissing him in the sunlight—out in the open air, under the wide blue sky—his mouth warm and alive and bright against his, hot tears spilling down his cheeks into the kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading. I decided to post this chapter today, not only because we all need some relief after season four (good GOD), but also because it just so happens that I am an American citizen and what happened in the US today fills me with a lot of fear and anger and dread, and I think the best response I have in the wake of what is happening is to: 1) Be gayer than ever, and 2) Make as much art as possible. These are my goals, always, but I consider them amplified in the next four years.

I am sending sparkly nautical hugs to all of you right now and feeling so, so fortunate (perhaps more so than ever before...) to be a part of this fandom with all of you. You all are more beautiful than you can possibly know.

<3
Chapter Thirty Nine

Chapter Summary

Splicing the main brace.

Chapter Notes

Warnings this chapter for a brief scene of violence and threatening language.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John breaks the kiss and pulls back grinning, looking at Sherlock with such transcendent happiness and relief that it takes everything in Sherlock to keep from kissing him again.

John’s men let out a roar of approval and perhaps no one saw them after all, other than the members of John’s mess, because they’ve crowded in so tightly around them it’s like being surrounded by a human shield, a human shield that’s suddenly sprouted arms to pound both of them on the back in furious triumph.

The happiness on John’s face is infectious and Sherlock finds himself grinning back at him, grinning, indeed, at all the cheering faces gathered in around them. Banana Bill, Patterson, Stapleton, and Half-Pint Lee are all hooting furiously in celebration, Ironsides Jake appears to be wiping real tears from his eyes, and even Burns is looking less stern than Sherlock has ever seen him; the man is practically radiating warmth.

In fact, Sherlock is fairly certain he hears the older man mutter under his breath with a certain degree of fondness, “About bloody time.”

And then they’re all back to trying to shake Sherlock’s hand again.

“Well done, lad, well bloody done,” Stapleton is saying, green eyes crinkled almost shut with joy as he shakes Sherlock’s hand with vigor. “I thought we’d never be rid of that stinking dung heap. We certainly owe you one.”

“It was nothing, really. You don’t need to—” Sherlock starts to say but they won’t let him get a word in edgewise.

“My sincerest thanks, Mr. Holmes, sir,” Half-Pint Lee intones, practically bowing over Sherlock’s hand.

“You saved our asses—quite literally,” adds Patterson, stepping in to take Sherlock’s hand next.

Ironsides Jake, who is apparently too overcome to speak, shakes Sherlock’s hand so hard he nearly takes his arm off.

All the while, John is standing just behind the half-circle of congratulatory men, his arms crossed over his chest, looking at Sherlock like he can’t believe the sight of him, his face lit up with pride,
and just when Sherlock thinks his own face can’t possibly get more red, Matthews calls out:

“LET’S HEAR THREE CHEERS FOR MR. SHERLOCK HOLMES! Hip hip—”

“HUZZAH!”

“Hip hip!”

“HUZZAH!”

“HIP HIP!”

“HUZZAH!”

Half a dozen seamen’s caps are thrown into the air.

“Come on, lads, let’s get this boy a drink!”

And then the men are pouring back in around Sherlock, someone slinging an arm around Sherlock’s shoulders to steer him towards the main mast.

Before he quite realizes what’s happening, Sherlock finds himself being borne along by the will of the crowd towards the barrel of rum where Stamford is dutifully doling out each man’s share with a good-natured smile on his round, pink face.

“Evening, Mr. Holmes.”

“Give this man a hearty portion, Mr. Stamford, don’t skimp now! He’s earned it!”

Patterson leans in to whisper in the cook’s ear: “Go on man, give him a double, we won’t tell.”

Stamford says nothing in response to his, but he winks at Sherlock when he hands over the mug, and unwilling to disappoint the sea of expectant faces circling him, Sherlock takes the mug, raises it to his lips and does his best to swallow as much of it as he can in one go.

An enormous cheer erupts in response to this, even if Sherlock only manages about a quarter of what’s in the mug before he’s coughing at the fiery burn of the strong liquor as it makes its way down his throat.

Thankfully, John is there all of a sudden, slipping an arm around Sherlock’s waist, his gentle voice low in Sherlock’s ear.

“Alright?”

Sherlock looks up to see John watching him, blues eyes bright with fondness.

Sherlock nods, breathless, lips still stinging from the taste of the rum and he watches John’s eyes drop to his mouth as he licks his lips.

To Sherlock’s great relief, the members of John’s mess are now preoccupied with receiving their own rations and he has momentarily ceased to be the focus of their attention.

John is shaking his head at Sherlock again, his eyes on Sherlock now full of amazement. “I can’t believe you managed it. How did you do it, Sherlock?”

Sherlock starts to answer—he wants to tell John about his meeting with the captain, about the risk
he’s taken in doing so, to warn him that he’s afraid all might not be right—but John looks so happy right now, so relieved, that he cannot bring himself to darken the good mood just yet.

Later, he’ll tell John later.

“Oye, lads get over here! Burns is about to make a toast!”

Still feeling somewhat breathless, Sherlock lets John pull him along by the hand, following the other members of John’s mess until they’ve found a slightly less-crowded corner of the deck, out of the way of the people queuing for their rum.

The men stand in a loose semi-circle, looking towards Burns, who has lifted his mug, his grey eyes glimmering as he looks around at them all.

“I’d like to raise a glass to Mr. Sherlock Holmes who, through some mysterious means that I understand as nothing short of miraculous, has finally freed us from the tyranny of that odious boil, Anderson. Here’s to Mr. Holmes—may he live long and prosperous and may he achieve whatever it is his heart most desires.”

These last words he utters with the subtlest wink in Sherlock’s direction.

Sherlock feels his cheeks burn red.

“TO MR. SHERLOCK HOLMES!”

All the men raise their glasses, including John, who looks pointedly at Sherlock as he raises his mug to his mouth and drinks.

Sherlock drinks too, this time managing not to cough as he swallows down the remainder of the fiery liquid in his cup.

Then they’re all pounding him on the shoulders again, with another loud round of cheering.

The alcohol is strong and Sherlock can feel it almost immediately going to his head, but so what if he gets a little drunk?

The sun blazing down lends a celebratory air to the crowded deck. It’s remarkable how the world can transform so utterly in such a short span of time; instead of feeling oppressive as it did in the moments before the captain’s announcement, the sun now feels as though it’s joining in their festivities, as though it’s congratulating them all, lending a glittering, golden cast to the activities on the upper deck.

Sherlock glances over at John beside him, who’s laughing at something Matthews has said, and seeing him like this, the open, easy quality of his posture, all the lines of grief gone from his face, Sherlock feels a joy fill him, so fierce and so profound, he’s not sure his body can contain it.

And then, just when Sherlock thinks he can’t possibly feel any happier than he does in this moment, over the clamor of the voices in the crowd, Sherlock hears the bright sound of a penny whistle.

Another roar of excitement erupts from John’s men.

“It’s Aidan! Come on lads, let’s get closer for a proper listen.”

“And here’s Fionn coming with his drum!”
“Oye!” Somebody shouts in Sherlock’s direction, “Tell Mr. Watson’s young man to go and fetch his fiddle!”

The excitement on Sherlock’s face must be plain because John laughs with pure joy at the sight of it.

“Go on then,” he says, gesturing with his head towards the aft hatch. “I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

Sherlock does not need to be told twice.

He descends below decks in such a fever of excitement he barely sees the steps in front of him, making his way to his cabin as fast as he is able, until he’s lying on his belly on the floor of his room, unfastening the straps that keep the case securely fastened beneath his bed.

Part of his excitement is simply a result of his joy over the success of helping John and his men; part of it is surely the alcohol, but most of this giddy feeling that Sherlock is now experiencing is just the pure excitement of having the chance to play his instrument again.

It’s been just over a week since the party below decks when Sherlock was last able to play, when he felt like his entire world was turned upside down by the revelation that there was a different kind of music that was available to him, a completely different style of playing; that he could play *with* other people and experience that same otherworldly feeling that he’s previously felt only when playing by himself.

He remembers just flashes of that sensation—of what it had been like to play that music in the company of those other musicians—that soaring, open, weightless feeling—and realizes now how badly he has missed it; how desperately he wants to have that experience again.

He really believed, after Anderson had taken control of John’s mess, that that was the end of it—that the night of the party had been his one and only opportunity to take part in something like that.

And now that the opportunity is suddenly here before him again, he can scarcely believe his good luck, can scarcely contain his excitement over the prospect of it.

He makes his way back down the hallway toward the stairs, violin clutched tightly in his arms, and he’s so eager to get back above deck that he’s scarcely looking where he’s going. It’s no wonder that he fails to see the figure standing in the shadows at the bottom of the stairs, until that person is upon him, seizing him by the collar of his jacket and throwing him hard into the wall.

Sherlock, shocked, breathless, still cradling his violin to his chest, is so stunned it takes him a second to make out the figure in the darkness before him.

At first he thinks it's Ferguson come back for a proper revenge, but then with a plunging feeling of horror, he sees that the pale face contorted before him in the dark is Anderson's.

“You…you…”

Anderson's face is so close to Sherlock’s his putrid breath seems to fill Sherlock's mouth.

Sherlock turns his face away in disgust.

“You bootlicking, little traitor! How dare you?” he spits. His face is twisted, his lips shaking. “How *dare* you?”
Sherlock has never seen Anderson look so furious before. He does not look like himself; his face is distorted, his features rigid with hatred.

As much as he dislikes Anderson, he’s never struck Sherlock as a very intimidating person, but something about him in this moment is different—unbalanced, unhinged. Something in his manner makes fear awake in Sherlock, makes him freeze instinctively like a rabbit caught in the jaws of a wolf.

“You’re going to pay for this, Holmes—do you hear me?” Anderson’s grip tightens on Sherlock’s collar, pulling the fabric taut against Sherlock’s throat, choking him. He presses his face in close to Sherlock’s, teeth bared in a white smear of fury; his voice sickeningly soft. “I’ve said it before but this time I mean it. It’s not a game anymore, Sherlock. This time, you’ve gone too far. And this time, you’re going to pay for it.”

He’s too close—the promise in his voice horrifying in its intimacy.

In desperation, Sherlock tries to slide backwards down the wall but Anderson’s grip on his jacket is unbreakable, and the sudden movement only makes the pressure on his throat increase.

He tries in vain to conjure up a defensive technique that will enable him to break Anderson’s grip but absurdly, he’s worried about doing anything that might damage his violin, which is still cradled like an ineffectual shield against his chest.

“You think you’re safe because you’ve got your precious sailor friends to protect you, but they can’t be with you all the time, can they? Like now for instance. Where is your precious John Watson when you need him, hmm? Where is he?”

Anderson yanks viciously on Sherlock’s jacket, dragging him up the wall, further restricting Sherlock’s ability to breathe, and for the first time Sherlock feels a flood of true panic overtake him. He’s going to have to drop his violin.

He’s just considering the most effective way to do this, when to Sherlock’s immense relief, someone rounds the corner of the corridor and halts at the sight of Sherlock pinioned by Anderson against the wall.

Sherlock is further delighted to see that it’s not just anyone, but Colonel Jackson carrying his dueling pistols, one in each hand.

“What’s all this, then?”

Eying the pistols with a certain degree of apprehension (or perhaps he is merely deterred by the Colonel’s intimidating presence in and of itself), Anderson hastily steps back, releasing his hold on Sherlock.

He declines to acknowledge the Colonel, but he turns instead to Sherlock, features still twisted in a sneer of pure hatred.

“Lucky for you—saved in the nick of time. You won’t be so lucky next time. I’m going to make sure of it.”

And before Sherlock can answer, he’s vanished through the doorway beyond the stairs, slamming it hard behind him.

“What an extraordinarily unpleasant fellow!” Colonel Jackson remarks with genuine astonishment as he approaches Sherlock. “Are you alright, my boy?”
Sherlock pushes himself off from the wall at his back, shifting his violin case so that he’s holding it in one hand.

“I’m fine,” he says.

“He doesn’t seem to have partaken in the festive mood,” the Colonel says looking bemusedly at the doorway Anderson has disappeared through. “A pity, but I suppose that just means more grog for the rest of us, eh lad?”

He claps Sherlock hard between the shoulders again, and this time, Sherlock is so grateful for the booming man’s appearance and inadvertent rescue that he doesn’t even mind.

“Let’s get up top before they drink all the rum without us!”

Sherlock nods, and still clutching his violin tightly in his hand, hurries up the staircase after the Colonel, back towards the sunlight and the distant sounds of celebration.

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Re-emerging into the blazing sunlight of the upper deck, Sherlock almost collides with the Colonel when he comes to a sudden halt in front of him and turns to Sherlock with an eager grin, brandishing the pistols in his hands.

“Care for a go, lad? I’m going to be firing these off the back of the ship!”

Sherlock considers this. The prospect of combining firearms with hard liquor seems somewhat ill advised.

“A tempting offer. But I’m afraid I have to decline.”

“Are you sure? With sniveling creatures like that midshipman leaping out at you from the shadows, might not be a bad idea to be prepared!”

The Colonel brandishes one pistol in the air, waggling his eyebrows with intention.

Sherlock takes a step backward, shaking his head. “Thank you, Colonel, as I said the offer is very tempting but I really must—”

Colonel Jackson follows the direction of Sherlock’s eyes, which are already scanning the crowd for John.

“Ah, but of course, your sailor friend! How could I forget?”

The Colonel claps Sherlock heartily on the shoulder for what feels like the hundredth time that day, and then to Sherlock’s utter horror, he winks.

“Better hurry along now! I’m sure he’s waiting for you!”

Without any idea how to respond to this—Sherlock flees.

Luckily, the crowd of people on deck is so thick that Sherlock need take only two steps in the opposite direction before he is swallowed up by the throng, effectively vanishing from the Colonel’s sight.

He wasn’t aware that knowledge about his and John’s friendship had spread so far as to reach someone like Colonel Jackson, and now Sherlock wonders, cheeks burning hotly, just how many
people on board are aware of his close relationship with John.

After how much time they’ve spent together on a ship this small, he supposes it can’t be too much of a secret, at least not to those passengers who are frequently up on deck.

Perhaps then, Sherlock giving John’s name to the captain wasn’t such a huge slip up after all.

But somehow, the nagging feeling in Sherlock’s gut tells him otherwise.

As Sherlock pushes his way through the crowd back to John, he’s stunned to see that even though he’s only been gone a few minutes the festivities around him are already in full swing.

There’s still a small line of sailors waiting for their portion of rum by the mainmast (Stamford, red-faced and smiling, still dutifully doling them out), but most of the crew, and a good number of the passengers, seem to be already holding tin-mugs full of the strong liquor, talking and laughing as they squint into the bright afternoon sunlight, the dull roar of their voices rising around Sherlock like a living sea.

He’s never seen so many people on deck all at once, and in spite of the sweltering presence of the mid-afternoon sun, everyone seems to be in high spirits as they toast the captain’s good news.

The mass of people is so thick Sherlock takes a moment to climb up on top of an upturned barrel to catch his breath, and take in the sprawling crowd around him.

It’s just after four o’clock in the afternoon and it’s the time of day Sherlock knows the sailors call the dog watch, which is half the length of a sailor’s normal shift. There are two dog watches, both two hours, that take place from four to eight o’clock—the shifts are shorter than normal because this is the time of day when the watch turns over, and it gives the sailors a chance to eat their evening meal. It’s also the time of day for members of the crew to take a break from work, for those who are not on watch to sit up top and smoke a pipe, or play a game of cards.

The captain’s choice to splice the main brace now makes sense because it means all the men will have a chance to enjoy the extra rations without disrupting their work.

Even so, Sherlock has rarely seen this many members of the crew up on deck and not working all at once. There are still a handful of men up in the rigging, but the majority of the crew are all splayed out in the sunlight, shouting and drinking and smoking; and what’s more bizarre still is the number of passengers also present on the sunny deck.

Sherlock scans the crowd—certainly not all the passengers are present.

The Damson family must have beat a hasty retreat as soon as the captain finished speaking and Sherlock notices that many of the elderly passengers are absent, such as Mr. and Mrs. Whitehall, and Sherlock’s next-door neighbor and erstwhile whist-playing companion, Ms. Simpson.

But the majority of the other passengers are remarkably all in attendance. They’re gathered in small clusters, scattered here and there across the deck, clearly endeavoring to keep their distance from any members of the crew—but the ship is only so big—and with so many people on deck at once there’s only so much space for them all to occupy.

Sherlock is amused to see Colonel Jackson’s wife, arm in arm with Molly’s aunt, clutching their parasols and looking on in horror as a bare-chested sailor beside them spits gobs of tobacco into a bucket at his feet.

The gloomy Mr. Summersby is standing by himself several feet away, watching with disapproval
as a dark-skinned sailor with gold rings in his ears works at a carving of a large-breasted mermaid,
whistling sweetly all the while.

It seems that the officers have been given a bit of a break as well because Sherlock spies
Lieutenants Moore and Dimmock drinking together by the main mast, their jackets off and their
shirt-sleeves rolled up, seemingly trying their best to ignore the loud and pointed giggling issuing
from the two young ladies standing across from them, their heads tucked behind their fans.

Interestingly, there’s no trace of either Mr. Ferguson or Mr. Knott, and Sherlock experiences the
briefest tug of interest wondering what they might be up to. With everyone preoccupied on deck,
now would be the perfect time to do a bit more investigating, especially into the matter of Mr.
Knott… but even as he thinks it he hears the sound of Aidan’s pipe, sharp and sweet and lilting,
rising suddenly over the noise of the crowd, and looking towards the sound, he spies John and his
men huddled with a number of other sailors by the foremast.

He scrambles off the barrel and this time, uses his violin case as a mini battering ram to push his
way through the crowd. It’s surprisingly effective.

As he makes his way through the crush of people toward the rising music, Sherlock does his best
to shake off the lingering feeling of dread incited by his run-in with Anderson.

Menacing as his words might be, there’s nothing Anderson can do to Sherlock now. He’s
powerless; and Sherlock concentrates on the simple reassuring fact, pushing the creeping darkness
away to focus instead on the sunny deck before him.

He won’t let Anderson ruin his joy right now; not when he’s worked so hard to find it. Not when
he owes it to John—this moment of brightness, of levity.

But there must be some trace of his encounter in his face because when at last he makes his way to
John’s side—John, smiling, reaching a hand out to him in invitation as soon as he sees Sherlock—
John notices at once.

“What is it?” he asks, pulling Sherlock against him by the hand, the bandages on his palm as they
slide against Sherlock’s, filling Sherlock with a sharp spike of guilt.

“Nothing,” Sherlock says, shaking his head, finding it easy to smile as soon as he lifts his eyes to
John’s and sees the blue there as hot and fierce as the open sky above them. “It’s nothing.”

John continues to study Sherlock for a moment, searching Sherlock’s eyes with his, curling his
other hand around the one he’s holding so that he’s covering Sherlock’s hands in both of his, as if
protecting him instinctively. “You’re sure?”

Sherlock nods, holding John’s gaze. “I promise. Except… I think Colonel Jackson might know that
we’re… involved.” Sherlock makes a face of disgust. “He winked at me.”

There’s a pause in which John stares at Sherlock with a blank expression. And then he throws his
head back and laughs and laughs, still holding Sherlock’s hand between his own.

He laughs until there are tears running from his eyes. He’s still laughing when Half Pint Lee
ambles up to them and noticing the violin case in Sherlock’s hand gives a mighty shout.

“OYE LADS! Look who’s gone and got his fiddle!”

Before Sherlock can protest, the sailor has seized Sherlock by the arm and is dragging him into the
middle of the crowd where Fionn, Aidan, and Old Leroy are sitting on a collection of up-turned
buckets with their instruments on their knees.

“It’s good to see you again,” Aidan says to Sherlock with a grin, and at the sight of the other man’s smile, genuine and full of joy, Sherlock feels something inside of his chest become suddenly weightless.

Sherlock lifts his case onto his knees, grinning.

“What shall we play?”

“I’ve a little something in mind,” says Fionn with a gleam in his eye as he raises the stick of his drum in one hand. “Shall I get us started?”

Aidan inclines his head, and in response Fionn takes up his drum and beats out what must be a familiar rhythm because Old Leroy gives a shout of joy and lifts up his mouth organ and begins to play in time.

Sherlock is grateful that they don’t wait for him to tune this time—he’d rather not have the attention fixed on him while he warms his instrument back to life under his hands, and the fast-paced song that the three musicians start to play gives him a chance to pull his violin out of his case and worry his fingers over the strings, checking the pegs, adjusting the bridge, and plucking out a few soft notes to be sure the instrument’s in tune.

By the time he’s ready, the others have started up a different tune, and Sherlock does not wait to be asked, he simply joins in. Just like the last time, he finds that even though he does not know the tune, it isn’t difficult for him to pick it up as they play, working his own notes into the music around him, the sound of his instrument like a single thread woven into a much larger tapestry.

He’s so happy to be playing again that he feels none of the anxiety that he felt the last time—and maybe it’s the alcohol in his blood calming his nerves, or maybe it’s the fact that he’s done this before, he knows these musicians, this crowd of cheering sailors gathered around—but whatever the reason, Sherlock feels almost immediately that same transcendent feeling overtake him—that warm, vibrant sensation in his chest quickening and spreading down through his limbs into the tips of his fingers until he feels that there’s no separation between him and his instrument, between himself and the music that’s pouring out of him.

It’s a different experience altogether playing this music up on deck, out in the sunlight, in the open air, under the achingly blue swell of the sky, their notes punctuated occasionally by the snap of the sails, the ripple of voices all around them not quite loud enough to drown out the sound of the waves below rushing against the sides of the ship.

Sherlock has always loved playing out of doors—ever since he first learned to play, he would sneak off to the woods where he could play to the trees, to the thin sliver of the rising moon.

And he finds that playing here, under the open sky, surrounded by the ocean on all sides, the sunlight sharp in his eyes, drawing a shimmer of gold out on the surface of the water, nowhere has ever seemed more appropriate for this kind of music.

One song ends and another begins and Sherlock barely has time to take off his jacket and roll his shirtsleeves up before they’re racing off again—this tune, much faster, bolder—the rhythm infectious, moving like quicksilver through Sherlock’s veins.

It’s so alive this music—so full of fire and light.

It burns through Sherlock as though the music were a spark and he a lick of flame.
The pounding of Fionn’s drum is like the pounding of his beating heart as he looks up at John, watching him, and sees that there is fire too, burning low in John’s gaze.

He finds that as he plays he can finally give voice to everything he has been feeling over the last week—his sorrow, his terror, his longing for John, his relief at being beside him again—it all comes streaming out of Sherlock, down through his fingers and into the strings, in the dance of his bow up and down.

Their music begins to draw a small crowd and the longer they play, the more people shuffle closer in to listen—both crew and passengers alike—some sailors climbing up the rigging and hanging from the rat lines above to get a better view—until it feels like half the ship is crowded in around them, stamping their feet and clapping their hands along to the infectious rhythm.

Sherlock catches sight of Lieutenant Dimmock in the crowd, his mouth open in an ‘O’ of astonishment, Lieutenant Deverall at his side, eyebrows raised in mild amusement as he raises his mug to his mouth; Sherlock can even make out Colonel Jackson at the back of the group, clapping his enormous hands above his head.

But even the sight of all those faces watching him doesn’t bother Sherlock now. He’s too deep in the music; he’s no longer sitting on the deck, instead he’s floating somewhere above himself while his fingers fly over the strings, barely noticing the sweat creeping into his eyes, the sting of the sun as it burns his cheeks.

If Sherlock thought the last time was magnificent, he does not know how to categorize what he’s experiencing now. There is nothing like it—playing on the open ocean, the blue sky stretched above them, the clap of hands, the stomp of feet resonating through his very bones into the center of his chest, blue and gold making a web of color around them.

Sherlock closes his eyes and when he does, the glitter of the sun on his eyelids seems to draw the melody out of him, until every piece of this experience clicks into place, aligning like the edges of a beautifully complex puzzle, until even the tilt, the sway of the ship under their feet seems to join their rhythm.

Sherlock is filled suddenly with the certainty that everything in his life, every bit of suffering has been worth it, if it enabled him to arrive here at this moment and experience this transcendence, this bliss.

The song ends and they’ve been playing long enough now that Sherlock finds he is uncomfortably hot, sweat streaming down his temples and his back from the force of the afternoon sun. He pauses a moment, laying his instrument on his knees and lifting his chin, so that he can pull the knot loose in his neck cloth and tug the fabric free. The feeling of relief as he pulls the fabric from his throat is palpable, and he shuts his eyes momentarily, savoring the sensation of the breeze fluttering over the deck and his now bare skin.

Opening his eyes, he catches John watching him from where he’s standing at the front of the crowd, and feels a different kind of heat entirely fill him at what he sees in John’s gaze.

John’s stance is casual, arms crossed loosely over his chest, but his posture belies a tension that Sherlock knows has everything to do with the fact that he just removed the fabric from around his throat, baring his long neck.

Suddenly, instead of the breeze moving over him, it’s as if he can feel the touch of John’s mouth on his skin—every memory of John’s fingers, his lips—illuminating each place on his body that’s exposed to the sun.
John smiles at Sherlock then, slow and simmering, and Sherlock feels a flush climb up his throat and into his cheeks at the promise in that smile, the hint of what’s awaiting him as soon as he and John can be alone again.

The pull in John’s smile, the low light in his eyes, is almost enough to convince Sherlock to set his instrument down and disappear with John into the crowd, but just then, Aidan turns to him.

“Would you like to choose the next song, lad? Anything you like—you start and we’ll follow.”

Sherlock hesitates, a sudden pressure filling him as the eyes of the other musicians rest on him expectantly.

“I…”

He grips the neck of his violin hard, panicking.

And then it comes to him.

“All right. But—I’m going to need some help from someone.”

Sherlock’s eyes fall on John, his cheeks burning scarlet before he can even open his mouth.

Luckily, John understands, striding forward with a grin until he comes to stand beside the other musicians, prompting a wild cheer to erupt from the assembled crowd.

John sketches a mock-bow, which earns him several wolf-whistles, before bringing his heels sharply together and standing military-proud, chin lifted attentively in Sherlock’s direction.

The sight of John looking at him like that, gold hair pushed back from his forehead, forearms tucked behind his back, a sly grin curling his lips—it’s almost enough to make Sherlock completely lose his focus.

He doesn’t know why it’s never occurred to him before—a duet between him and John. Sherlock’s heart beats quicker at the prospect. He has no idea what to play but if John starts singing he knows he’ll be able to play along.

He leans in towards John and is grateful when John bends down until his ear is close to Sherlock’s mouth.

“What I should play?” he breathes.

John turns his head to answer, the low rush of his voice in Sherlock’s ear shockingly intimate.

“‘As I roved out.’” And then when Sherlock hesitates: “Don’t worry, they know it.”

Nodding, Sherlock straightens up and tells the name of the song to Aidan.

“If you start us out—I’ll join in as soon as I’ve got the tune.”

Aidan nods, grinning, and lifts his pipe to his lips. As soon as he plays the first few notes, the chorus of sailors lets out a raucous cheer.

Sherlock waits for Aidan to play the melody through before he joins in—he wants to be sure he gets it right.

Aidan plays the melody twice through. It’s a simple tune and Sherlock is about to lift his
instrument back beneath his chin to start playing when John steps forward beside him.

His posture has shifted yet again—now to a stance that is utterly relaxed, nonchalant even—his hands in his pockets, his head tipped back slightly as he looks around at them all, as if he isn’t about to steal the breath from all of their lungs with the beauty of his voice.

Sherlock is frozen, watching him, transfixed, and it isn’t until John opens his mouth and begins to sing that Sherlock realizes that the entire group of listeners has fallen similarly quiet in anticipation.

This—from the shouting, laughing, drinking crowd—is no small thing.

For the length of a single heartbeat there is only the fluttering sound of Aidan’s whistle and the rush of the sea below.

And then John’s voice—low and smooth and easy—takes up the melody.

Who are you, me pretty fair maid?
And who are you, me honey?
Who are you, me pretty fairy maid?
And who are you, me honey?
She answered me quite modestly,
‘I am me mother’s darling.’

With me too-ry-ah
Fol-de-diddle-dah
Day-re fol-de-diddle
Dai-rie-oh

‘Oh, will you come to me mother’s house
When the moon is shining clearly?
Will you come to me mother’s house
When the moon is shining clearly?
I’ll open the door and I’ll let you know in
And devil the one will hear us,’

With me too-ry-ah
Fol-de-diddle-dah
Day-re fol-de-diddle
Dai-rie-oh

It takes Sherlock two whole verses before he remembers that he’s supposed to be playing along; and it’s only when John throws a glance his way, one eyebrow arched slyly in question, that Sherlock remembers.

But even though it was his idea, and he wants to play along so badly, he does, he finds that he cannot break his focus on John to even lift his instrument.

It isn’t his fault—he can’t help himself.

As is always the case when John sings, Sherlock finds he is utterly transfixed, not just by John’s voice, but by the way he’s able to embody the song he’s singing. It isn’t just his voice—it’s in his face, his look—his entire being seems to carry the feeling of the song, seems to transport both himself and his listener to the moment, the mood that his words describe.

It’s so effective in this case, that Sherlock finds himself overcome by a wave of jealousy for the
fictional girl in the song.

So I went to her house in the middle of the night
When the moon was shining clearly,
Oh, I went to her house in the middle of the night
When the moon was shining clearly.
She opened the door and she let me in
And devil the one did hear us,

With me too-ry-ah
Fol-de-diddle-dah
Me Day-re fol-de-diddle
Dai-rie-oh

The joy in John’s voice is impossible to miss, but so is a certain mischievous delight that’s evident not only in the way he carries the notes, but also in the way he smiles as he sings. It’s as if he’s winking to the audience, inviting them into this intimate scene he’s describing, as if he’s both showing off and also slightly overcome by his good fortune.

She took me horse by the bridle and the bit
And led him to the stable,
Oh, she took me horse by the bridle and the bit
And she led him to the stable,
Saying ‘There’s plenty of oats for a soldier’s horse
To eat it if he’s able.’

With me too-ry-ah
Fol-de-diddle-dah
Day-re fol-de-diddle
Dai-rie-oh

And she took me by the lily-white hand
And she led me to the table.
Oh, she took me by the lily-white hand
And she led me to the table.
Saying ‘There’s plenty of wine for a soldier boy
So drink it if you’re able.’

With me too-ry-ah
Fol-de-diddle-dah
Day-re fol-de-diddle
Dai-rie-oh

That sly wink in John’s voice, the seductive nature of the scene he’s describing—it’s too much for Sherlock. Now, instead of jealousy, all he can think about is how much the song reminds him of every intimate moment he’s shared with John.

Every detail seems to resonate with one from Sherlock’s memory: John taking him by the hand and leading him to the stairs that first night, the kiss on Sherlock’s hand that made him feel as though his whole world was coming apart, the wine John brought to his room, how John had tasted of it when they kissed, how John’s hand felt sliding up his thigh, the feeling of John’s tongue in his mouth, the weight of him bending over Sherlock on the bed, the muscles in his arms as he lifted Sherlock up…
Then I got up and I made the bed,
And I made it nice and easy.
Then I got up and I made the bed,
And I made it nice and easy.
Then I got up and I laid her down
Saying “Lassie, are you able?”

With me too-ry-ah
Fol-de-diddle-dah
Day-re fol-de-diddle
Dai-rie-oh

Sherlock can no longer keep looking at John; he’s dropped his eyes to the deck in front of him, clutching the neck of his violin for dear life. He knows he’s supposed to be playing along but he can’t—he just can’t.

He can feel the heat rising in his face—can feel it climbing down his throat and chest and he hopes that no one is looking at him, that everyone is too focused on John to notice that Sherlock is turning scarlet before their eyes.

Although Sherlock knows it isn’t true, it feels as if John is singing only for him, like the words are meant for Sherlock’s ears alone, as if John is telling him, both with the words and through the playful, yearning cadence of his voice: ‘I chose this song because it reminds me of you, because it makes me think of us.’

There we lay to the break of day
And neither the one did hear us.
Oh and there we lay to the break of day
And neither the one did hear us.
Then I arose and put on my clothes,
Saying ‘Darling, I must leave you.’

The sorrow in John’s voice as he sings the last line is so clear, so sharp, it’s like a blade at Sherlock’s throat. He can hear in that moment the echo of every time John has said those words to him.

His eyes flicker up to John, but John isn’t looking at him, his gaze is fixed somewhere far above the heads of his spellbound audience, and Sherlock realizes that singing for John is no different than playing for him; he is in another world right now, transported to the place where his voice has carried him.

And when will you return again?
And when will we get married?
When will you return again?
And when will we get married?
When broken shells make Christmas bells,
We might well get married.

With me too-ry-ah
Fol-de-diddle-dah
Day-re fol-de-diddle
Dai-rie-oh

There is a single beat of silence after John stops singing, Aidan’s pipe dropping off as soon as John
finishes the last note, and Sherlock realizes that the last line of the song is meant to be a joke, a reference to the soldier’s inconstancy; his answer to the girl’s question is a clever way of saying ‘Never.’ But the way John sings it, so full sorrow, of longing, it’s clear that his alliances are with the girl, and this final turn seems to catch the audience by the heart strings, just as much as it does Sherlock.

But then John tips his head up, flashing a smile at them all, and the audience dissolves into furious cheering.

“Well done, Johnny Boy!”

“Let’s have another!”

“Bravo!”

Sherlock is grateful that the audience was too caught up in John’s performance to notice or remember that he was supposed to be playing along. Everyone’s attention is firmly fixed on John, who seems to be waiting patiently for the applause to die down, but it only gets louder as he stands there, grinning, until he’s forced to duck his head and bow, which only makes the cheers grow louder.

Because this time, it isn’t only the usual group of sailors who know and love John’s singing; this time, John has just sung for half the ship—the officers and passengers who have clearly never heard John sing are obviously newly enamored of John and his abilities.

As his eyes comb over the sea of faces before them, Sherlock is distressed to see several of the female passengers—both young and old—bowing their heads together in fervent whispered conversation, their eyes on John, their cheeks as flushed as Sherlock’s own.

Jealousy flares in Sherlock’s breast—hot and searing—at the sight of Emma Gibbons and Henrietta Long, batting their eyelashes in John’s direction over their fluttering fans.

He remembers how they laughed at McKinley’s comments on the nature of the sailors’ celebration and feels rage fill him. *How dare they look at John like that now?*

Sherlock catches sight of Colonel Jackson standing just behind them, clapping louder than anyone else.

Over the roar of the crowd, Sherlock can hear him, leaning into Lieutenant Deverall to say in a carrying voice, “I say, that sailor lad can sing!”

In fact, Sherlock is so engrossed in his assessment of the assembled crowd that it takes him a moment to notice John standing at his elbow, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Hey.”

Sherlock looks up at him, startled.

John drops into a crouch beside him, his voice low enough that it cannot be heard over the din of the crowd by anyone other than Sherlock.

“What happened? I thought you were going to play with me.”

Sherlock is relieved to see that there’s no anger in John’s face, only a slow smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, as if he can’t help but smiling just looking at Sherlock.
“I…” Sherlock clenches his fingers around the neck of his violin, feeling ashamed. “I’m sorry. I got… distracted.”

“Oh?”

He risks another glance at John and his stomach turns over at the look in John’s eyes.

“Distracted by what exactly?”

Sherlock shifts on his stool. When he answers, he finds himself suddenly breathless. “By you, obviously.”

He looks up to see the smile on John’s face broadening to a grin. “Is that so?”

The teasing promise in John’s voice is too much.

Sherlock nods, dropping his gaze, unable to keep looking at John like that in front of all these people.

“But I’d like to try again,” he says to his knees.

“Good,” John says, offering Sherlock a final blinding smile before straightening up. “I think I know just the song.”

Chapter End Notes

If you’d like to hear a version of the songs John sings in this chapter, you may do so here.

Thanks for reading lovelies!
Chapter Forty

Chapter Summary

In which the main brace continues to be spliced; Molly Hooper has her moment, and Sherlock is an extremely aroused and belligerently drunk gay baby.

Chapter Notes

I’m very happy to be posting this chapter on my BIRTHDAY! Think of it as a birthday gift from me to all of you—because I enjoy so much the delight you take in this world I’ve created. Nothing could bring me greater joy than knowing all of you are spending time with John and Sherlock onboard the Galatea today. :)) Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Fionn! I’ve got a good one for you.”

John shouts the name of the song to the drummer, and the crowd immediately quiets as John walks back to where he was standing, just a few steps in front of Sherlock and the other two musicians.

Fionn starts them off, and Aidan joins in with the melody not long after. They play it once through, and this time Sherlock directs all of his attention to the music, his focus absolute. He’s determined to begin playing as soon as John starts to sing.

This one is as easy for him as the last (they are all relatively simple musically), even if the tempo is slightly quicker, the melody more upbeat.

It’s faster, livelier, full of a pulling, dragging rhythm that seems to beat in tune with Sherlock’s pulse. He watches John react to the music even before he has started singing, his body instinctively taking on the tempo. He begins to move in time with the melody, swaying slightly from side to side, tapping out a rhythm with the flat of his hand against his thigh.

And suddenly, watching John respond to the music with his whole body, it occurs to Sherlock that he does not have to strictly play the melody—of course; he can improvise.

He shuts his eyes, and he does not think, rather he lets the music into him, lets it move through him and direct his fingers on the strings. He doesn’t question it, he simply plays, his violin like a voice joining in a conversation, speaking to the sound of Aidan’s pipe, to Fionn’s drum, and when John’s voice joins in and starts to sing the melody, they are all working together, as naturally as breathing.

_A maid going to Comber her markets to learn,_
_To sell for her mammy three hanks of fine yarn,_
_She met with a young man along the highway,_
_And that was to cause her dally and stray._

_Sit down beside me I mean you no harm_
Sit down beside me this new tune to learn
Here is three guineas your mammy to pay
So lay by your yarn till the next market day

This time, Sherlock only half-listens to the words; instead, he is focused on the sound of John’s voice rather than what he’s saying, the rises and falls, the rhythm that he carries like a banner for Sherlock to follow, like white fabric rippling against the blue of the sky.

It makes Sherlock think of sunlight in the way John always does, but it’s like discovering a new element of John as he weaves his own notes around the warm cadence of John’s voice, and it’s like dancing, no—it’s like kissing John, like when they move together in bed—John’s bright presence inspiring him to respond with a light that he did not even know he had.

They sat down together the grass it was green
The day was the fairest that ever was seen
The look in your eye would lead angels astray
So lay by your yarn till the next market day

Sherlock is so deep in the music now he does not realize that he has opened his eyes until he sees John looking back at him as he sings, and the line about the angels is so like something John would say to Sherlock that he is not surprised at all when at those words, John looks at him and winks.

This time, instead of being distracted by the feelings this unleashes inside of him, he pours into his playing—the joy fluttering somewhere underneath his ribs transforming into the slide of his fingers up and down the neck of his violin, the grip on his bow as light as the sensation that now is lifting him up as the music flows out of him.

Sit down beside me I mean you no harm
Sit down beside me this new tune to learn
Here is three guineas your mammy to pay
So lay by your yarn till the next market day

Playing with John is much like the way Sherlock feels about John in his life, he lets John’s voice take the lead and serve as his inspiration, his voice providing the structure that Sherlock works around, Sherlock’s playing echoing the melody but offering its own take on the sequence of notes.

As Sherlock listens to the words in the refrain, it strikes him that this song too, reminds him of his relationship with John; it’s almost exactly what John said to Sherlock on the day that they met, when he asked Sherlock to take a seat beside him, to teach him how he wound the rope, and the gentleness in John’s voice, but also the eagerness is still there as he sings, just as Sherlock remembers.

The maid she went home and the words that he said
The song that he sang her still rang in her head
She said I’ll go find him by land or by sea
Till he learns me the tune called The Next Market Day

Oh, sit down beside me I mean you no harm
Sit down beside me this new tune to learn
Here is three guineas your mammy to pay
So lay by your yarn till the next market day

There is a pause in John’s singing and Aidan plays a small fluttering solo on his whistle for the length of one of the verses. Sherlock continues playing along with him, until John’s voice joins
back in, sweet and rich.

A maid going to Comber her markets to learn,
To sell for her mammy three hanks of fine yarn,
She met with a young man along the highway,
And that was to cause her dally and stray.

Sit down beside me I mean you no harm
Sit down beside me this new tune to learn
Here is three guineas your mammy to pay
So lay by your yarn till the next market day

Oh, sit down beside me I mean you no harm
Sit down beside me this new tune to learn
Here is three guineas your mammy to pay
So lay by your yarn till the next market day

And then—later, Sherlock will not be able to explain how it happened so fluidly without prior discussion—he knows it’s his turn to play, just him and Fionn still keeping time with his drum. He knows John has finished singing and Sherlock does not need to think, what follows is instinctive; he simply lets the music speak through him, a melody pouring out of him that contains all of the sweetness, all of the joy he felt this afternoon when he saw John coming towards him through the crowd.

He does not know how long he plays, all he knows is that the music that comes out of him is the direct expression of how he feels when he listens to John sing—this melody as close as he can get to articulating that tender, aching feeling deep at the center of himself when John looks at him, when John says his name.

It’s only when he finishes that he realizes he has closed his eyes; only when he lowers his instrument from beneath his chin as though waking from a trance, does he open them to see the ring of astonished faces around him—one long beat of shimmering silence stretching on unbroken before the crowd erupts into thunderous applause.

The sound of it in Sherlock’s ears is deafening; in the time that he was playing he’d forgotten all about the crowd of people watching them. In spite of their very noticeable presence, he’d somehow managed to find his way to that pure and private place that is only available to him while making music.

Returning now to the reality of all these shouting, cheering people—so many eyes fixed on him—is overwhelming to say the least.

He stands frozen as the cheering grows louder, at a loss for what to do, for how to react, when he feels a hand wrap around his own where it’s holding the neck of his violin and relief floods through him as he realizes John has come to stand beside him, pulling Sherlock with him into a bow.

The roar of the crowd intensifies and Sherlock feels warmth fill his cheeks as it dawns on him that they are cheering for him, for his playing, as much as they are cheering for Aidan, and Fionn, and John.

The other two musicians come to stand beside them and they all bow together, grinning, jubilant, the afternoon sun warm on their faces, and Sherlock feels a sudden searing joy move through him, a feeling of pride like he has never experienced before to be standing up there beside them.
He wants to keep playing, that warm bright energy inside of him has only increased as the afternoon has gone on, but the crowd has surged forward now to offer individual words of praise, pressing drinks into the hands of the musicians in thanks.

Sherlock sees Fionn accept a cup with a grateful nod, and someone on the other side of him is offering one to John. Sherlock takes the opportunity to slip back towards the upturned bucket where he sat and slide his violin back inside its case, heart pounding in his throat as he crouches down to do up the clasps.

Maybe it’s for the best that he takes a break from playing—he’s so full up with emotions—so many of them, so intense—he isn’t sure he could manage any more than this.

He straightens up, intending to make his way back toward John, only to find himself face to face with a beaming Colonel Jackson who seizes him by the hand and begins pumping it up and down to match his words of praise.

“A marvelous performance! You’ve got quite a talent there, lad—quite a remarkable talent! And your sailor friend too, by Jove—what a voice!”

Sherlock nods his head in thanks, attempting to back away through the crowd but it takes him a good two minutes before he can extricate his hand; and as soon as he turns around to look for John, he’s met with another obstacle, this time in the form of two fans fluttering over the two heaving bosoms of Miss Gibbons and Miss Long.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Holmes,” Miss Gibbons says in what Sherlock considers to be an unnecessarily breathy voice. “That was quite an extraordinary performance you just gave.”

“Most extraordinary,” Miss Long echoes, leaning in toward Sherlock to reveal a plunging neckline. “We never knew you were such an artist.”

“Yes! If we had known—”

But what they would have done if they had known is never revealed because at this moment, to Sherlock’s great relief, John appears at Sherlock’s elbow, his warm hand sliding in around Sherlock’s upper arm.

“Good evening, ladies,” he says, his sunny voice warm as the late afternoon light pooling on the deck around them.

“Good evening,” they breathe in unison, the movement of their fans increasing suddenly, no doubt at the sight of John, who’s looking more magnificent than ever in the golden glow of the sinking sun. This light suits him, as if only now at the close of day, does the sun reveal its true kinship with him, drawing out the shimmer of gold along his arms, at the skin of his throat, picking out the finer strands of gold in his pale hair.

Standing this close to him now, Sherlock feels all his arousal from the past few hours at the sight of John singing, at the sound of his voice, return to him at once.

The force of it is shocking even to him.

“I’m so sorry but I’m going to have to rob you of your companion. I need him for some very urgent business.”

“Oh, by all means,” Miss Long says, eyeing John’s hand where it’s wrapped around Sherlock’s upper arm. “Don’t let us keep you.”
But Miss Gibbons isn’t so accommodating. “I don’t believe we’ve yet had the pleasure of being introduced, Mr. …?”

“Watson,” John says, the magnitude of his smile increasing by several degrees as he puts out his hand and takes the gloved one offered to him by Miss Gibbons. “John Watson. And the pleasure is all mine, ma’am.”

“You have a lovely singing voice, Mr. Watson. I do hope we get the chance to hear you sing again sometime.”

“I’m sure you will,” John says politely. And then with another deferential nod of his head: “If you’ll excuse us, ladies.”

But as they’re turning to go, Miss Gibbons speaks up again.

“Forgive me for asking but I must admit, I’m most curious—what business is it you must attend to that’s so urgent, Mr. Watson? Isn’t this an evening for celebration?”

It’s only because John’s hand is still resting above Sherlock’s elbow that he feels the slight tension in his grip at her question.

John smiles politely.

“That it may be, miss, but a ship like this doesn’t run itself, no matter how celebratory the occasion.”

“Heavens,” Miss Gibbons says, her blue eyes round with feigned surprise. “I’d no idea Mr. Holmes was at all acquainted with the running of the ship. Is his presence really necessary?”

Sherlock, who has never liked Emma Gibbons one jot, feels his dislike of her swell rapidly into an inferno of pure hatred.

“I assure you, ma’am, there’s absolutely no one else so well equipped for this particular job. In fact, I’d say his knowledge in this matter is insurmountable.”

There is just the slightest emphasis in John’s pronunciation on the word ‘mount’ and Sherlock feels his cheeks flame red. He has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

“Well, in that case,” Miss Gibbons smiles at them coldly, “I guess we really shouldn’t keep you.”

They turn to go but before they can make their escape, Miss Gibbons reaches out a hand to press Sherlock’s arm briefly. “If anything should go wrong with the ship in future,” she says with a nasty smile, “I guess I’ll know who to blame.”

The touch of her hand on his wrist feels like the sting of some venomous insect but before Sherlock can recoil, John is pulling him away, steering them at a rapid pace towards the hatch by the helm.

“Jesus, are they always like that?” John asks in an undertone that only Sherlock can hear as he leads them away across the deck. “I thought we’d never be free of them.”

Sherlock is about to answer when he’s interrupted by a voice behind them calling his name.

He turns to look and sees the overbearing figure of George McKinley, coming towards them, a tankard of ale in one hand and a wide smile on his face.

Sherlock feels distaste uncurl sharply within him; of all the passengers he dislikes on board this
ship (and there are many) McKinley is by far his least favorite.

He’s never given Sherlock so much as the time of day before but now he’s walking up to him as though they were lifelong friends.

“Sherlock, my boy!” he says, clapping Sherlock on the shoulder. “What an exquisite performance. Where did you learn to play like that? I have some friends who are great music lovers—they absolutely must hear you play.”

He places a solicitous hand on Sherlock’s arm.

“I was wondering if you might consider doing a private concert for us in the Indies. What’s your final destination in the colonies? Bombay? In any case, it will be easy to arrange a visit. You must come stay with us at our estate in Calcutta. My wife would be happy to have you. Tell me, did you—?”

He turns suddenly, acknowledging John for the first time, almost as an afterthought, as if John were a sentient piece of the ship. “If you’ll excuse us.”

And then, without giving John a chance to respond, he’s leading Sherlock away with a hand on his arm, steering him towards a group of well-dressed passengers hanging back from the general fracas unfolding at the front of the ship.

Sherlock recognizes his hateful neighbor Amesbury, along with several of the other wealthier passengers whose names Sherlock does not care to remember, but who all occupy rooms in the expensive roundhouse cabins at the back of the ship.

“There are some people I’d like to introduce you to…”

Sherlock is so shocked by what just transpired that it takes him a moment to react.

What just happened? Why on earth would John let Sherlock be pulled away from his side by the likes of George McKinley?

Sherlock turns to look back and sees that John has rejoined the raucous group of sailors gathered by the foremast; he’s accepting a drink from a grinning Ironsides Jake.

“I must say, it’s a bit distasteful the way some people are treating this as an opportunity to mingle with the crew.” McKinley pronounces the word as if it leaves a bad taste in his mouth, his gaze lingering pointedly on the figure of Colonel Jackson who appears to be engaged in a vigorous drinking contest with some members of John’s mess. “You must have felt quite desperate for musical companionship in order to stoop to playing with this lot.”

Sherlock abruptly stops walking.

The rage that was delayed in the wake of his surprise at John’s disappearance suddenly hits him in full force.

“I beg your pardon,” Sherlock says coldly, pulling his arm out of the other man’s grasp. “I find the current company isn’t much to my taste. Indeed, I much prefer the company of those members of the ship who you find so beneath you.”

And then without another word, Sherlock turns and makes his way back across the deck to the shouting, drinking, laughing mass of men.
He’s happy to rejoin the rowdy group of sailors, who have struck up a drinking song that Colonel Jackson is loudly trying to join in (even though he clearly does not know the words), but is distressed to realize that he has lost sight of John in the chaos of the laughing, shouting crowd.

Sherlock’s distracted search is interrupted by an enthusiastic Patterson who, catching sight of Sherlock, comes up to him and immediately pushes a full glass into his free hand.

At Sherlock’s somewhat startled look, Patterson laughs.

“Didn’t you hear? The Colonel’s opened up a cask of his private store of spirits—and there’s more drink for everyone!”

Sherlock takes it, eyes still searching the crowd for John. He places his violin case at his feet, so he can hold his drink with both hands, and then settles himself against the sun-warmed railing to watch the madness unfold.

It’s true that the different sections of the ship, briefly mingling during the musical performance, have now gone back to their self-segregating natural order, with a few exceptions. Sherlock sees Charles Bailey, the young passenger who’s about Sherlock’s age who has the unfortunate habit of always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, sitting and drinking with Colonel Jackson and the others. The boy looks like he’s already had far too much to drink.

On the other side of the deck, Sherlock catches sight of a miserable-looking Molly Hooper, still trapped at her aunt’s side, who is deep in conversation with Colonel Jackson’s wife; the two women look positively bursting with disapproval. They are standing over by where Sherlock abandoned McKinley—clearly they all share the belief that this classless mingling is doing far more damage than good.

The lieutenants are standing between the two groups and Sherlock sees that Miss Gibbons and Miss Long have wasted no time in striking up a conversation with the handsome, smiling Lieutenant Deverall, and the considerably more nervous-looking Lieutenant Dimmock.

Emma Gibbons is leaning in so close to Deverall that she’s practically in his lap, but her companion is making far less headway with the palpably sweating Dimmock. He keeps nervously glancing over to the quarterdeck where Lieutenant Lestrade is standing with Mr. Graves, the shipmaster; both men are watching the proceedings on deck with what looks like varying degrees of concern.

Graves has his arms crossed over his chest, his expression severe. It’s clear from his stance what his opinion is of the captain’s somewhat unorthodox command. Lestrade, less openly disapproving, looks as exasperated as Sherlock has ever seen him, his uniform is slightly rumpled, one of the silver buttons on his jacket is done up askew. The man does not look like he has ever fully recovered from the poisoning and Sherlock’s gaze lingers on him a moment longer with concern.

Although the midshipmen have clearly been given permission to drink, it’s evident that both Lestrade and the shipmaster are not partaking in the festivities. Looking at Lestrade (and how badly he could use a drink), Sherlock wonders if the decision was the captain’s or the lieutenant’s himself.

Sherlock sees the lieutenant’s eyes linger on where Miss Hooper stands beside her aunt, watches Graves lean in to murmur something in Lestrade’s ear and notices that it takes the other man a moment to react. Not for the first time, he sees a flicker of something deeply familiar in the lieutenant’s gaze and feels a corresponding pang of sympathy in his breast. As difficult as it is for
he and John to find time alone together, he imagines that for the lieutenant and Miss Hooper is must be nearly impossible.

Thinking of John again, Sherlock lifts his mug to his mouth, still struggling to understand why John would leave him like that, wishing very badly now that they had made it to the aft hatch before that hateful man had caught up with them.

He swallows his drink down in two long burning mouthfuls.

Sherlock looks back at Molly, sees the misery plain on her face, and makes a decision.

Pushing himself off of the railing, Sherlock sets his empty mug beside his violin case, pauses a moment to push the instrument more securely behind a coil of rope, then makes his way through the crush of people to where Miss Hooper is standing like a wilted flower at her aunt’s elbow.

Ms. Grimsby is in the middle of a long tirade, apparently detailing one of her more triumphant moments back in London society.

“And I said to him—”

Without a word to any of them, Sherlock places a hand on Molly’s arm and leans forward to whisper in her ear. “Come with me, I have something to show you.”

Molly looks at him, startled, and then, seeing the look in Sherlock’s eye, smiles in spite of herself. But then her eyes are darting back to her aunt at her side and she shakes her head.

“I—I can’t,” she whispers, ducking her head in close to his ear so her voice won’t be heard by the others. “I’m not meant to leave my aunt’s side. I’m sorry.”

Sherlock tugs at her, insistent. “It will only take a moment—then you can come right back.”

Molly looks tempted; she bites her lip and takes a step backwards.

But now the crowd of upper class passengers has taken note of Sherlock. George McKinley is glaring at Sherlock openly from where he stands on the other side of Colonel Jackson’s wife.

Edward Summersby levels Sherlock with a look of deep affront. “I beg your pardon, young man. What on earth do you think you’re doing?”

Sherlock straightens up and glares back at Mr. Summersby. “I’m taking Miss Hooper to where her company will actually be appreciated. Don’t worry, I’ll bring her back perfectly in tact.”

Ms. Grimsby draws herself up in horror. “You will do no such thing! I will not have Molly mixing with such low-life’s and ruffians. I shouldn’t like to think what sort of filthy ideas they might put in her head, what a nasty, corrupting—”

Feeling Molly stiffen beside him at her aunt’s words, Sherlock lets go of her arm with reluctance; perhaps he’s gone too far. The last thing he wants is to make Molly suffer more than she already has.

But to his great surprise, Molly seizes hold of Sherlock’s arm and turns to face her aunt, two spots of color high on her cheeks.

“No, Aunt, you’re wrong. You may be my chaperone on this voyage but you cannot control everything I do. I’m sick and tired of it! Besides, this is absolutely absurd—what difference does a
few feet make? We’re all standing on the same deck! And I am not so fragile, or so innocent that I
can’t handle seeing a few sailors in their cups. Now, I am going to go over there, and I’m going to
enjoy myself, and nothing terrible at all is going to happen! And there’s nothing you can do to stop
me!”

The expression on Ms. Grimsby’s face is one Sherlock will treasure until the end of his days.

Indeed, the looks on all their faces—they remind Sherlock of a ring of fish on a fishmonger’s table,
mouths gaping, eyes wide with shock. He imagines none of them have ever heard Miss Hooper
speak so many words together, much less words of this nature.

Before any of them can respond, Molly turns sharply on her heel, and marches with purpose to the
other side of the deck, pulling Sherlock with her by her grip on his arm.

Sherlock does not say anything until they reach the revelers on the other side of the main mast and
have been swallowed up by the boisterous crowd. He looks over at her and cannot keep the smile
from off his face.

“Well done, you.”

Molly looks back at him, eyes shining, cheeks still flushed with anger, but catching his eye and
seeing the humor there, her mouth breaks suddenly into a smile, and Sherlock thinks, not for the
first time, how different she looks when she smiles, how it transforms her from a plain, forgettable
girl with faded brown features to someone vibrant and clever and full of life.

He’s sad to realize how rarely he’s seen her smile.

“I don’t know quite what came over me,” she says, looking almost as shocked as the others now
that she’s thinking back. “I’m surely going to regret it later… but oh, it was worth it, wasn’t it? Just
to see the looks on their faces!”

And then she’s laughing, the sound musical and full of light and Sherlock feels his own smile
growing irrepressibly wider.

“To be honest, I think it’s been building for a while… all that. I guess it was only a matter of time
before it all came out. But I’ve you to thank for giving me the incentive to say anything at all.”

She looks over at him, sobering briefly, her eyes still shining. “Thank you for that. I can’t think
how I might repay you.”

Sherlock shakes his head. “Think nothing of it. It was selfish really,” he ducks his head, suddenly
self-conscious in the face of Molly’s bright, open regard. “I couldn’t bear to see you looking so
miserable.”

“Well,” she says, reaching out briefly and pressing his hand. “Thank you, all the same. Now what
was it you wanted to show me?”

“Ah, that.” Sherlock looks up at her, with a glint of mischief in his eye. “Come with me, I think
you’re going to like it.”

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It’s only the matter of a few minutes’ work to lead Molly to the abandoned space behind the
foremast, where mercifully, no drunken individuals have yet set up camp—everyone is eagerly
crowded around the fore hatch where Colonel Jackson is challenging members of the crew to an
arm-wrestling match (he appears to be losing quite stupendously, but doing so in good spirits; the sound of his hearty laughter each time someone pins his arm echoing over the gold-stained ocean around them); and just a few minutes more to make his way up to the quarterdeck and report to Lieutenant Lestrade that there’s some trouble brewing that needs his immediate attention.

Sighing in a long-suffering sort of way, the Lieutenant follows Sherlock, through the crowd of shouting sailors to the somewhat secluded space behind the foremast, where Sherlock leaves him as soon as his eyes have alighted on Miss Hooper, who is sitting on an upturned crate by the railing, looking out over the golden water, her face quite pretty in profile, cheeks still flushed from her act of defiance, a few strands of brown hair blowing softly across her rosy cheeks.

Sherlock does not even bother to pretend that he’s mistaken, he simply retreats as quickly as he is able—staying only long enough to see Molly turn and catch sight of Lestrade, her round mouth falling open in shock at the sight of him—before making his way back to the spot against the railing where he left his violin.

He picks up his empty mug, and holding it absently between his fingers, he lets his eyes scan the crowd before him for a sign of John.

Now that he’s sitting still again he realizes just how much he has had to drink.

He’s a little bit dizzy, still full up with the warm bright feeling of the music, and John, and the sunlight spilling over the deck, warm on his hair and the bare skin of his throat, and Sherlock shuts his eyes, tipping his head back slightly, feeling the sun slide down his neck, drinking in the feeling of it, the buzz of the crowd fading in his ears to be replaced only by the roar of the surf below.

He’s so lost in the sensation of the sun on his throat and the memories it conjures up of John’s sunwarmed, sliding mouth that it takes him a moment to register that someone has settled beside him on the railing.

He’s still turning the cup meditatively between his fingers, and if he hadn’t already guessed who it was that had come to rest beside him, he knows as soon as they reach out to take the empty cup out of his hands; at the touch of those fingers against his own, Sherlock feels a jolt go through him like a shock of lightning.

And then John’s mouth is at his ear, his voice warm and low, causing a shiver to unfurl deliciously down Sherlock’s spine in spite of the heat.

“Hello there, beautiful.”

Sherlock hums his greeting—the depth of the sound emanating from his chest surprising even him.

He doesn’t open his eyes; instead, he reaches out for the hand that he knows is hovering just beside his own, feels John shift the empty mug to his other hand to let him take it.

He hears the gentle intake of John’s breath as he laces their fingers together, the intensity of the contact shocking even through the bandage on John’s palm, and Sherlock feels something in his chest catch fire.

He rubs his thumb over the back of John’s hand, following the curve of his knuckles, registering the faintly raised line of flesh that indicates a scar between the first and second knuckles on his index finger, feeling how rough the skin is there, how warm, as though John himself is full of sunlight—greedily taking in every scrap of information that this minimal contact gives him.

Desperate for more, Sherlock presses his palm tight against John’s until he can feel the throb of
John’s pulse in the hollow of his hand. It’s like feeling the living heart of a flame. He’s overcome with the desire to put his mouth against it.

He can hear John’s breathing growing unsteady beside him.

It makes Sherlock want to pull John to him by the grip on his hand, draw John’s mouth up to his own to taste the sun-warm sweetness of him.

“You’re drunk, aren’t you?”

Sherlock can hear the smile in John’s voice.

Sherlock wonders how this particular smile would taste—it sounds soft but full of hidden corners where mischief lurks. It makes Sherlock think of the way John’s mouth feels buried in his neck—sweet and dangerous.

He opens his eyes to see that sure enough, John is smiling at him, low and burnished in the golden light, and it must be the alcohol that files away all his self-control, that makes the first thing out of his mouth, the question: “Why did you leave me?”

He watches John’s smile vanish and instantly regrets his choice of words.

John leans away from him, his hand sliding out of Sherlock’s, his gaze falling to the cup in his hands, and as much as Sherlock wants John back against him, he realizes suddenly how angry he is that John left him, that he abandoned Sherlock to the shallow flatteries of George McKinley. He had no trouble at all helping defend Sherlock against the unwanted advances of Miss Gibbons and Miss Long, so why was George McKinley any different?

Sherlock wants to know the reason why.

“I thought…” John shrugs, looking uncomfortable. “He seemed important… I thought maybe you’d want to talk to him.”

“George McKinley?” Sherlock all but snarls, feeling his rage leap up inside of him, poisonous, irrational—impossible to control now that he’s let it out. “Why would you think that?”

“Well, because… he’s…” John shrugs again, looking helpless. “He’s one of your people.”

Sherlock cannot keep the horror and the fury from his voice. He is aghast at the implications of what John is saying. “You think I’m like him?”

There is confusion on John’s face, soft and slightly wounded. “No, I just thought… look, they’re your people, and I know you’ve felt ostracized by them in the past, so I thought if you had the chance—”

“What?” Sherlock interrupts him, his voice full of savage intention. “That if I had the chance I’d want to become a soulless, groveling monster to make myself appealing to the likes of him?”

Sherlock hates the look on John’s face at his words, but he can’t stop himself. Does John really think that he’s no different from them?

The idea is too horrifying to consider.

“No! Listen, Sherlock…” John takes a deep breath. “Those people… I’m not comfortable around them… they’re clearly not comfortable around me, and if you had the chance to—to finally be
accepted by them, well, I wasn’t going to stand in the way of that!”

Sherlock struggles to calm his rage. He tries to listen to what John is really saying to him, rather than what he is hearing.

It isn’t easy.

His mind is full of a thousand nasty, clamoring voices telling him that John would be relieved to have Sherlock taken off his hands; that of course he would seize on any opportunity to be rid of him.

“Those people I don’t… I don’t understand how they work, but if that man was offering something of value to you, I didn’t want to be the reason you couldn’t get it.”

John seems to be shrinking in the presence of Sherlock’s silence; Sherlock hates it. But he hates just as much the idea that John would think that he has anything in common with the likes of George McKinley.

“You didn’t have to leave them, you know,” John adds quietly. “Not on my behalf.”

Sherlock bristles at this; feels his rage snap back to life. “I didn’t leave them on your behalf! I left because they’re despicable! I hate them! I have nothing to say to any of them!”

“But they’re your—”

“Will you stop saying that? They’re not! They’re not!” Sherlock turns sharply to look at John, suddenly vicious in his anger, in his desperation to make John understand. “I don’t have any ‘people’—I never have! And I don’t want them either!”

It’s only when he sees the startled look on John’s face that he realizes what John is trying to tell him; that as far as John is concerned he is one of them. Not because of how he acts, but simply by virtue of the fact that he was born into their world—a distinction which makes all the difference to someone like John, who will never have access to that world, no matter how badly he might wish it.

Sherlock might turn his nose up at it, but even his refusal of it is a luxury John can never afford.

Sherlock realizes with a horrible sinking feeling that John is only trying to make possible for him an opportunity that John himself will never have.

All at once, Sherlock feels the anger drain out of him.

It’s stupid to let his temper flare up at John; John who has done nothing wrong, who only has his best interest at heart. It’s not only stupid; it’s cruel.

He takes a deep breath, inhaling sharply through his nostrils, regretting for the first time that afternoon all the alcohol he’s drunk.

“I’m not… like them,” he offers, begrudgingly. “I never have been. They’ve always made me feel like an outsider because… I am. I’m nothing like them. They know that, as well as I do. You’re not wrong about that. The difference is I don’t want to be like them, John. They’re awful.”

John is silent for a moment, digesting this.

“And it makes me…” Sherlock forces himself to go on speaking, much as it pains him to do so. “It
makes me sick to think that you see me as one of them."

“I’m sorry,” John says, his blue eyes on Sherlock full of regret. “I never meant for you to think that. The truth is, sometimes I get a bit…” John hesitates, and then the rest of the sentence comes out rushed, self-conscious in a way that Sherlock rarely witnesses in John. “Well… intimidated by people like that. It’s one thing if someone’s just being an arsehole—that I have no trouble dealing with. But people like that… who wear their money like that, like it’s a suit of armor, who lord it over you, I find that…” John’s words are suddenly brittle. “I find it difficult.”

Sherlock thinks about what John is saying, and then tries to imagine how it must have felt for John in that moment, being treated like a piece of furniture—worse, like he didn’t exist—and Sherlock feels a rush of shame replace his anger.

“I’m sorry,” John says, his eyes soft on Sherlock’s. “Forgive me?”

Sherlock looks up at John, stung by the repentant look on John’s face, overwhelmed by the realization that he is the one who should probably be apologizing.

“There is nothing to forgive,” he says, and he hopes that there is enough conviction in his tone that John will believe him.

But that seems to settle it.

John nods at him, his expression sober, but relieved.

“I think,” he adds, feeling suddenly very sheepish. “I think you may be right that I am a bit…” He swallows, watching John’s smile return to his face in a sudden rush of light. “Drunk.”

John reaches for his hand again, and Sherlock lets him take it.

Seeing John’s face lit up with that smile is like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. Sherlock basks in it.

John looks down at their joined hands for a moment, before looking up at Sherlock, his expression serious again.

“I saw what you did for Miss Hooper, you know. I was coming over here to tell you, that was… good.”

Sherlock, suddenly treated to the warm approval in John’s voice, in his look, feels his cheeks blush hot with pride.

Now it’s his turn to drop his eyes. “It was nothing.”

“No, Sherlock, that was really good.”

Sherlock feels his blush deepen. He keeps his eyes fixed on his boots. “They’ll probably only get a few minutes together alone, but I thought, well… I thought about how I would have felt if it were you and me and I knew—” Sherlock looks up at John, knowing John will understand. “I knew a few minutes is far better than nothing.”

Looking at John then, seeing the evening breeze lifting John’s hair, the open look on his deeply-sun tanned face, even in the wake of their difficult conversation, so full of light, so different than it’s looked in the past week, a joy grips Sherlock, fierce and quiet, so intense it’s almost painful.
He can also see mirrored in John’s eyes, what he is certain is there in his own expression, a simmering look, dark and full of longing. At the look that moves between them, Sherlock straightens up without thinking; watches John do the same beside him.

It’s as if they decide together—they do not need to say a word—it’s certain, suddenly clear in that moment that neither of them can wait any longer.

John starts walking first, and Sherlock waits only a moment before he bends to take his violin case in hand, and follows after, watching the bright beacon of John’s hair moving through the crowd, just to where the people start to thin, the only men not drinking, the sullen mid-shipmen meant to be on patrol, the buckles on their wide-brimmed hats glinting in the light of the setting sun.

They meet in the cool shadow of the longboat, Sherlock’s hand sliding in hot against John’s, the shock of their palms coming together again sending a visceral spark through Sherlock, and it takes all of his self-control and more, to keep from bending his mouth to John’s right there and tasting the sunset color of his smile up here on the open deck.

But they’ve already done far too much of that today, and there are too many eyes watching them, so instead Sherlock lets John lead him by the hand toward the gangway at the back of the ship at last, his eyes on Sherlock as he looks back so dark they’re almost black, full of a fierce and desperate hunger.

They descend like two stars into the darkness, one bright head and one dark, the only sign of their urgency the increasing speed of their footsteps on the stairs, until the gleam of sunlight on both their heads is swallowed up by shadows.

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like to hear a version of the song John and Sherlock play together in this chapter, I have posted a link on my tumblr, here! (If you listen carefully, you can even hear Sherlock's violin solo at the end! :D)
Chapter Forty One

Chapter Summary

Sherlock will never be able to look at his desk the same way again.

Sherlock lets John pull him along by the hand and maybe it’s the drink or maybe it’s the music—Sherlock cannot say except that he’s certain in this moment that he’s never felt quite so desperate to be alone with John. He can feel his heart pounding in the press of their hands, his pulse hot and insistent against John’s, as if his very life force is reaching out for John’s, blood calling out to blood.

The journey to his cabin feels long, every step an eternity between now and when he can finally put his mouth on John’s, can hold John in his arms; and if not for the tension in John’s grip on his hand, Sherlock would wonder if John’s desperation was as great as his own.

The sounds of the party have faded above them, replaced by the familiar sloshing sound of water rushing against the sides of the ship, the creaking of the beams overhead, and Sherlock is suddenly grateful for the persistent darkness below deck because it means that no one can see them now, no more eyes following them, whispering, watching—Sherlock feels the blissful anonymity of it cloak them like a blanket.

He must have had quite a lot to drink after all because he feels… it takes him a moment to pinpoint the sensation; he feels like he does only after he’s been in bed with John: warm and loose and uninhibited—lips tingling, every inch of skin overly aware, sensitive, open, all of the tension he usually holds in his body melted away somewhere and left behind him.

It’s the drink he knows, but also the music, which is still glowing somewhere inside him, warming him, filling him with light the same way John does; and he knows that it’s also the magic of him and John making music together. Just thinking back to it, the way John’s voice wound full and rich and golden around the sliding notes of Sherlock’s violin makes his breath come quicker, makes his ribcage feel as though it’s full of fire.

He concentrates briefly on the darkness around them, struggling to calm his racing heart; at this rate, it will be over for him before they’ve even begun.

Sherlock studies the ceiling, swallowing hard.

It feels as if they’re swimming through the dark, the light from the running water making waving patterns on the exposed beams overhead, the sound of rushing water all around them so insistent that if Sherlock were to close his eyes he could imagine that they’ve sunk beneath the sea, and now it’s just him and John on this ghostly underwater ship.

The thought of solitude is a blissful one. Sherlock might not even mind being on a ship, if it were just him and John—free to go wherever they pleased, to do as they liked with no one to bother them, no one to tell them what to do. There would be no more need to hide, to keep quiet, always clinging to the shadows.

Their kiss this afternoon had been so charged and brief that Sherlock hadn’t had a chance to enjoy
the prospect of kissing John out of doors in the sunlight and the open air, but god, how different it would be, to have that freedom to touch each other whenever, wherever—without fear of risk.

He almost can’t imagine it.

Sherlock lets his mind wander briefly back to that afternoon when he found John sleeping up on deck, the way his bare body looked in sunlight, how Sherlock had longed to lay his hands on him then, to taste the drying beads of water on the undersides of his arms, the taut skin of his belly—how might it feel to take John in his mouth with the warm sun pouring down over them both.

Sherlock can feel the blush creeping down his throat to his chest just at the thought and he’s hot, too hot—he needs John—now—this instant, and to his immense relief, he sees that they have at last reached the door of his cabin.

John hesitates before the door and Sherlock wonders why he’s stopped only to realize that John is waiting for him to open it, being polite—he thinks—and the deference of the gesture touches Sherlock, even if he finds it completely unnecessary.

He has to let go of John’s hand to open the door (his other hand is still holding his violin), and even the brief release of contact sends a pang through Sherlock.

He crosses to his desk, intending to light the lamp, but before he can begin his search for the matches he feels John come up behind him and his body reacts without thinking, going absolutely still, every nerve attentive to John’s presence.

In a single smooth motion, John’s hand comes to rest on Sherlock’s where it’s still holding his violin, at the same time that John places his lips—so lightly—at the nape of Sherlock’s neck. His fingers rest gently over Sherlock’s for a moment, asking permission, and Sherlock lets John’s fingers move in to replace his own, to take the instrument from his hand and set it carefully beside Sherlock’s desk, where it will be safe from harm.

The touch of John’s mouth at the edge of his hairline is like the setting of a lit match to a heap of dry kindling, and Sherlock turns in John’s arms, the stillness that came over him vanishing in an instant, his search for the matches completely forgotten.

John is there to meet him when he turns, hands closing on Sherlock’s upper arms with a desperation that Sherlock can feel in every line of his body where it touches John’s, and when their mouths come together, Sherlock makes a sound against John’s mouth that’s half cry of relief, half sob of pleasure.

John seems to catch himself at the sound and his mouth gentles against Sherlock’s, slowing the kiss to something soft and infinitely tender.

It’s lovely—it is, but in this moment Sherlock cannot handle soft and slow—he needs speed and heat and pressure. After watching John all afternoon and aching for him, this slow exploratory kissing isn’t enough. There’s a fire burning in him, and he wants more, he needs more, so Sherlock opens his mouth against John’s, pushing his tongue into John’s mouth, his hands moving between them, slipping under the worn material of John’s shirt to feel the heat of John’s bare chest against his palms.

The gesture sends a shudder through John, and Sherlock feels, rather than hears John’s low moan in response. The taste of it is heavy in his mouth.

He deepens the kiss, thumbs finding John’s nipples, a thrill moving through him as he feels them
harden under his fingers; feels John’s hands tighten on his arms.

“Jesus, Sherlock.”

John breaks the kiss to look at him—but they cannot see each other through the dark. Sherlock can feel the unsteady rush of John’s breath against his face, feels his bandaged hands move up to cup the back of Sherlock’s neck.

He can feel the power of John’s gaze even if he cannot see it. He imagines it looks like sudden storm clouds sweeping over a summer’s day: bright gold burnished dark at the edges.

“You cannot know how badly I want you right now.”

John’s hands sweep forward to cup Sherlock’s face, the gesture filled with tenderness, but something else, a tension, a longing that Sherlock can feel is the same tension that has him holding himself absolutely still right now, listening so hard to John’s words that he is practically vibrating with the force of his concentration. “I’ve been waiting all afternoon to get you alone.”

One of John’s thumbs brushes down over the corner of Sherlock’s lips.

“I had half a mind to spirit you away as soon as I saw you, keep you all to myself...”

Sherlock shivers at the rough edge in John’s voice, the hint of possessiveness.

“But then when I saw how eager you were to play, how eager the others were to hear you... I realized that would be selfish.”

Sherlock can hear the fond smile in John’s voice even through the dark, but he can also hear the way his lips twist a bit around the words, as though he is ashamed that he tried to keep Sherlock to himself, and Sherlock is about to protest, about to insist that he’d rather spend a hundred lifetimes alone with John than have five minutes with anyone else in the world, much less anyone onboard this ridiculous ship, but then he remembers how excited he was to play, how it felt to see Aidan smile at him as though they were old friends, and for just a moment, he wonders if that isn’t entirely true.

“But then watching you play... I forgot what it does to me.” John’s voice is filled with longing; Sherlock can hear the ache in it, can hear the effort it takes him to swallow and go on speaking. “You can’t imagine what you looked like... God, Sherlock.”

Sherlock shuts his eyes.

“It’s like you go somewhere else, to a different world entirely, and watching you, standing there, it’s like you’re the link between us and this other place, like somehow you’re standing in both worlds at once, ours and theirs—and I can see that other world in you, even if I can’t see it myself. I can see it through you, in the joy that’s pouring out of you... ”

He can feel John’s hands trembling against his face.

“God I sound mad, don’t I?” He hears John laugh breathlessly, the sound soft and full of disbelief.

Sherlock shakes his head between John’s hands. “You don’t.”

There’s more he wants to say, to tell John, with amazement that what John is describing—that is exactly how it feels when he plays, as though he’s standing in another world, a though he has access to another realm of existence, as though there’s some great power moving through him,
greater than himself; the fact that John can see that, can put that feeling into words… it’s remarkable to him.

Sherlock shakes his head again, full of wonder.

He wants to tell John, but his feelings are too immense; there’s so much feeling in his chest that his voice feels caught in his throat.

John’s hands move gently against him.

“‘It’s like… you’re lit up, and even though I can’t see the source of that light, when you play, Sherlock, everyone can see it too. It’s breathtaking, Sherlock. You’re breathtaking.’”

He feels pinned by his emotions, caught, trembling and fragile beneath the immensity of all that he wants, as though if he makes the wrong move, says the wrong thing, the shimmering dreamlike quality of it all—the perfection of it—John’s voice so full of awe, John’s hands so sweetly cupping his face—will shatter, and be lost.

He thinks, ‘You’re the light. It’s you.’

Sherlock hears John draw a steadying breath, his thumb trailing over Sherlock’s lips again.

“Sometimes I’m half afraid I dreamed you up, that I’m going to wake one day to discover this was all just one long lovely dream… that none of it was real, because how could it be?”

John’s voice is low and murmuring as he repeats the words, the tips of his fingers caressing Sherlock’s cheek as though he can scarcely trust what he is feeling.

“How could it be?”

There is something too much like sorrow in John’s voice and Sherlock suddenly cannot bear the sound of it. Reaching up, he covers John’s hands with his own to reassure him that he is real, that this is not a dream.

He turns his mouth in against one of John’s hands and kisses the bandage over his palm, hoping that the gesture will mean something to John even if he cannot feel it.

“I’m real,” he says, his voice a low rush against John’s hand. “And this is no dream.”

John makes a desperate sound, as though all the air has left his lungs, and then his hands are shifting against Sherlock again, filled with sudden need.

“Will you let me—”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, without hesitating, his own voice rough suddenly, stumbling in his eagerness, in his desperation to convey his consent to whatever John is asking. “Anything, John—it’s yours. Take it. You don’t need to ask.”

And then, before Sherlock has time to doubt whether John will believe him, John is surging forward, thumb stroking again over the corner of Sherlock’s lips to coax them apart, still cupping Sherlock’s face with one hand as he kisses him, his mouth hot and pliant as it opens against Sherlock’s, kissing him with an insistence and an urgency that finally matches the fire raging in Sherlock’s chest.

Finally, finally—Sherlock could almost weep with relief at the sensation that he can finally touch
John the way he has wanted to all afternoon, to feel John touching him with the same insistence, 
the same searing need.

Sherlock opens his mouth wider to John, melting under the force of the kiss, his hands finding 
John’s shoulders and using his purchase there to tug John half a step closer to him, until John is 
slotted in neatly between Sherlock’s parted legs, until the lines of John’s body are flush with his 
own.

John tastes like the liquor he has been drinking—sweet and full of fire.

Sherlock moans into the kiss, pushing his hips in against John’s, shivering with pleasure when his 
thigh brushes the hard heat of John’s erection. He rubs deliberately against it, fingers sweeping 
again over John’s nipples as he does so, savoring the flexing muscles of John’s pectorals against his 
hands at his touch, the way his mouth slides hungrily against Sherlock’s in response.

Feeling bold, he pulls back slightly from the kiss so he can bite at John’s bottom lip, rubbing hard 
against John’s nipples as he does so, savoring the desperate sound it pulls from John, the 
involuntary press of his hips forward into Sherlock’s.

Sherlock repeats the gesture, his thumbs circling now, rubbing at John with one tensed thigh, and 
this time, John breaks away from Sherlock’s mouth with a breathless smile.

Sherlock is filled again with the desire to bite at John’s mouth.

“You lovely wicked creature…” John’s hands are on his face again, thumbs stroking his cheeks, 
his forehead tipping in against Sherlock’s before he kisses him, and says, in a voice that makes 
Sherlock’s belly pool with sudden heat, “I’m going to devour you.”

And then John’s hands are grasping Sherlock by the arms again, and he’s walking them backwards 
until Sherlock’s back comes up against the door, his mouth dropping to Sherlock’s throat, fingers 
pushing the collar of Sherlock’s shirt apart so he can kiss the heated skin there in long, wet sliding 
kisses.

Sherlock gasps as though he’s been burned—so sensitive is he to the touch of John’s warm wet 
open mouth.

John kisses his way up to Sherlock’s ear, catching Sherlock’s earlobe briefly between his teeth and 
making Sherlock gasp again.

“You neck, Sherlock, my god… I’ve been dying to kiss you here all afternoon… your neck has 
been driving me to distraction.”

John’s palms are spread flat against the door on either side of his head making a cage out of his 
body around Sherlock and oh, that is Sherlock’s favorite—he shivers with delight, his own hands 
reaching out to grab John by the waist and pull him closer.

It feels so good, so right to have John’s body pressed close against him like this, the smell of John, 
the heat of him overwhelming Sherlock’s senses; the rough scrape of his stubbled chin in contrast 
to the sliding sweetness of his mouth makes something wild surface in Sherlock like he has never 
felt—he wants everything from John, all at once; his desire so intense it feels as though his body 
cannot contain it.

Thankfully, neither of them is wearing too much in the way of clothing, as the intensity of the sun 
on the upper deck long since caused them to remove their jackets—there are only shirts and 
trousers to deal with (well, and boots and waistcoats…). Even so, the frustration of having any
barrier between his own skin and John’s is enough to make Sherlock slightly frantic.

He fists his hands in the coarse fabric of John’s shirt, pulling it free from his trousers, reaching desperately to get his hands against the warm sliding muscles of John’s bare back.

He hauls the shirt up off John’s shoulders and over his head, John growling in frustration at having to separate from Sherlock for even a moment, and the sound does something to Sherlock—he can feel the effect of it low in his belly—and suddenly it’s all he can do to continue standing upright as John’s mouth slides down the front of his chest, fingers moving like quicksilver over the buttons of his waistcoat, pulling them apart and pushing the fabric off of Sherlock’s shoulders.

Normally, John is so delicate, so careful with Sherlock’s clothes—folding them with quiet reverence in his fingers. Not so now: something has come over John, like a storm crackling on the edges of his gaze, and Sherlock suspects it is the same wild feeling that is battering against the insides of his own ribs, that is filling him with the urge to push John down against the bed, the wall, the door—anything, and grind against him.

He lets the material fall to the ground and then his mouth is back at Sherlock’s throat, warm in the dip between his collarbones, before sliding down—just the slightest hint of teeth as he drags the fabric away from Sherlock’s chest to mouth at one nipple, making Sherlock gasp and bite his lip—his other hand tugging apart the fastenings on Sherlock’s trousers, knuckles brushing the bare heat of Sherlock’s erection teasingly, once, before he lifts his hand away.

Even that brief touch of John’s fingers against him is enough to make Sherlock cry out, knocking back against the door hard with his elbows.

John kisses him quiet, crowding him back against the door, his sweet mouth hot against Sherlock’s own. He lifts his fingers to tangle briefly in Sherlock’s curls.

“Shh. I know. It seems unfair, but I want you completely naked before I begin.” John kisses him again, warm tongue pushing into Sherlock’s mouth, the fingers of his other hand straying to the bare skin at Sherlock’s hip, making him moan and thrust forward against John’s thigh. When John finally pulls back, he’s breathless; fingers coiled tight in Sherlock’s curls. “I need all of you available to me.”

Sherlock shivers at John’s words, the aching feeling of need at the center of himself tightening unbearably as John’s mouth leaves his, but then easing slightly as he feels John’s hands reaching for the hem of Sherlock’s shirt and dragging it off over his head.

Then they are standing, shirtless, breathing hard together in the dark, and Sherlock is momentarily grateful for the fact that they did not stop to light the candles because he is certain that if he could see John now, the rise and fall of the muscles in his heaving chest, the hard gleaming lines of him, the storm-dark flashing of his eyes—he would not be able to go on standing.

And then John is sinking to his knees, his mouth against Sherlock’s body again as he drags Sherlock’s trousers down his thighs, leaving a trail of burning kisses on the skin of Sherlock’s belly as he pushes the material down.

“You don’t know Sherlock—you can’t know—the jealousy in me.”

John’s mouth is warm against Sherlock’s hip, and Sherlock lifts his hands to settle them in John’s hair, lost in the sensation of John’s mouth and hands against him, his breath a long sigh of contentment.
It takes him a moment to actually register what John is saying.

“Sometimes I think it’s better you didn’t know… but I’ll tell you tonight; I’ll tell you what I was thinking.”

Hearing his words, it occurs to Sherlock for the first time that afternoon, that John might also be just a little bit drunk.

“I was jealous of everyone watching you play—” The soft movement of his lips against Sherlock as he speaks makes a thrill run through Sherlock. He obediently lifts first one foot and then the other as John pulls his boots and trousers off. “I was so jealous. Because I knew in that moment they were finally seeing you as I see you—how brilliant, how absolutely beautiful you are—and I realized then, that any of them could take you away from me.”

Now Sherlock is standing completely nude above John, but his arousal is forgotten in the shock of John’s words.

For a moment, he cannot speak—he’s so upset by the implications of what John is saying.

How could John think—how could he even suggest—that Sherlock could ever want anyone but him?

John is still kneeling at his feet and although Sherlock cannot see his expression in the dark, he knows that the look on John’s face is a melancholy one.

Sherlock reaches down, seizing John by the shoulders, shaking his head, half-infuriated, half-distraught.

“No,” Sherlock says, and he’s still shaking his head, fingers closing hard on John’s arms. “No, they couldn’t. No one ever could.”

John tips his head up then and Sherlock can feel that there is still something mournful in his look, but his hands are on Sherlock’s body again and then his mouth, kissing his way back up Sherlock’s torso—one lingering kiss at his hip, another at his waist— trailing just the tips of his fingers up Sherlock’s sides, something reverent, desperately tender in the slide of his lips.

Sherlock’s fingers find John’s hair again, pushing through the warm golden strands, trying to convey his own conviction, his own overwhelming feeling for John in just the touch of his hands, because he’s never been good with words. They turn against him, always.

But he tries now, for John’s sake—because he needs John to understand.

“They couldn’t take me away from you because none of them matter, John.” Sherlock’s voice is fierce, breaking, almost crackling with urgency—his fingers tightening in John’s hair. “There isn’t anyone but you. There never will be. It’s only you. John. Look at me—John.”

John tilts his face up to Sherlock’s in the dark, and even if he can’t really see him, Sherlock looks at him as he says the words that he remembers had such a profound effect on John before, down in the cable tiers.

“I’m yours.”

Sherlock hears the sharp intake of his breath in response, feels the way his body changes against Sherlock, and then he’s lifting himself up on his toes to kiss Sherlock’s mouth, his arms slung low around Sherlock’s naked waist, his own clothed hips crushing in against Sherlock’s as he kisses
him and kisses him, until Sherlock is breathless and trembling, tilting into the wall at his back, 
knees struggling to support his weight.

John pulls back, arms still locked around Sherlock’s waist, and leans his forehead in against the 
edge of Sherlock’s jaw, his breath a warm, unsteady rush against Sherlock’s neck.

He stays there for several long moments, inhaling deeply.

His voice, when he speaks at last, is heavy with emotion.

“I don’t know when I’ve ever wanted you so badly.”

At the sound of those words, the rough, uneven pitch of his voice—like a man walking on a wire 
suspended over dark water, only managing to stay upright by the sheer strength of his will— 
Sherlock feels his stomach flip dramatically with arousal, as if the ship has taken a sudden plunge 
through the waves.

John lifts his head to press a kiss to the hinge of Sherlock’s jaw, his palms sliding down the curve 
of Sherlock’s lower back to cup his arse, and at his touch, Sherlock cannot help himself, he presses 
himself back into John’s hands, the movement shameless, lewd—but Sherlock doesn’t care; he’s 
too full of desire right now to think, to do anything other than act, to rub the length of his naked 
body against John’s.

“John…” His own voice is almost unrecognizable to him; it’s so breathless with want; desperate, 
begging… “Please.”

He doesn’t even know what he’s asking for, but thank god John seems to understand, because 
suddenly he’s reaching down, lifting Sherlock by the grip on his arse, and carrying him (so easily, 
as though he weighed nothing at all) to the desk beside his bed.

Sherlock experiences a half-second of shocked indignation at the thought of his bare arse on the 
surface of his desk, but then all other thoughts are obliterated from his mind by the presence of 
John’s mouth returning to Sherlock’s chest and licking—warm and wet over each of his nipples— 
before sucking the peaked flesh hard into his mouth.

Sherlock gasps, his knees coming up automatically, his legs winding around John’s waist, his 
mouth falling open in a silent ‘O’ of pleasure.

John kisses his way down Sherlock’s belly, his mouth hot and sucking—fiercer now than it was 
before, as though he wants to lay claim to Sherlock by the touch of his mouth—biting soft pink 
blossoms into Sherlock’s white skin, leaving a trail of flushed marks that make Sherlock shake and 
grip hard against the edge of the desk.

All the while, his hands are stroking at Sherlock’s thighs, thumbs teasing the crease of Sherlock’s 
groin, almost touching but never close enough, until Sherlock is spreading his thighs, arching his 
back in an effort to press himself closer to John’s hands, feeling utterly wanton, but too desperate 
for John’s touch to care.

“John—” He’s gasping, barely able to get enough breath to speak. “Pl—please!”

John’s smile is hot against his hip. “I love it when you beg. There’s no sweeter sound on earth.”

Sherlock feels his erection throb at the low pitch of John’s voice, at how near it is to his straining 
cock. He feels John’s mouth slide lower, his warm lips now ghosting the crease of Sherlock’s 
thigh. Sherlock’s hips buck shamelessly in response.
“J-John…”

His fingers thread briefly through the hair at the base of Sherlock’s cock, his nose pressed to the skin of Sherlock’s belly as he inhales the scent of him, and Sherlock shudders at how close he is, knees clenching at John’s sides.

“Please, John—!”

He’s really begging now—the thought that John likes it makes it easier, means he doesn’t have to fight to hide the edge of pleading desperation in his voice.

“What is it you want, my love? Ask me, and I’ll give it to you.”

Sherlock’s head is tipping back, his thighs spread as wide as they will go across the surface of the desk; he can feel the flush on his chest and throat radiating heat, the trail of marks John’s left down the skin of his torso throbbing gently.

The thought that he is naked save for the silver chain around his throat, the intricate locket lying heavy against his chest, warmed by the flush of his skin, while John is bending half-clothed above him makes a thrill of arousal move through him so sharp and all-encompassing he feels slightly dizzy in the aftermath.

He feels utterly laid bare—hot and searing; he wants John to take all of him.

“I want you to—to take me. The way—” he swallows hard, licking suddenly dry lips. “The way you told me about.”

He feels, rather than hears, John’s groan against him; and then he feels John lifting his mouth away and a throb of resentment moves through him.

John is straightening up over him, and Sherlock arches his body forward like a bow, pressing the weight of his erection against John’s hip.

John presses a kiss to the side of his neck; his answer is a sigh against Sherlock’s throat. “I can’t give you what you want,” he shakes his head against Sherlock, his voice full of remorse. He kisses him again, as if the words cause him physical pain. “I’m sorry. Not yet.”

Sherlock shifts against John, lifting his hands to John’s hair.

“I want to so badly—god.” Sherlock feels the shudder that runs through him. “So badly. But we can’t. Not tonight…” John pulls back, as though to look at Sherlock through the dark. “Soon though. I promise, alright? I promise you, it will be soon.”

Sherlock’s eyes have finally adjusted to the dim light and he can see John’s brow is knitted together with concern. He wants to smooth away the worry he sees there with his hands.

“You’re not too disappointed, are you?”

Sherlock shakes his head, hands shifting slightly down to grasp John by the back of his neck. “No!”

But his body is still vibrating with tension, desire thrumming through him like a chord through a set of strings.

“I just need…”
“Yes, my love, tell me what it is you need.”

John’s mouth is making its way back down Sherlock’s chest, slow and wet and sliding, and suddenly, what Sherlock needs is all too clear.

John’s mouth has returned to kissing the sensitive skin on the inside of Sherlock’s thigh, his fingers so close to Sherlock’s aching cock, but still not touching.

“I need your—your mouth…”

John’s answering breath is a long coil of heat against the base of Sherlock’s cock; it is exquisite torture.

“Yes?” Sherlock can feel John’s wicked grin against him. “What about my mouth? Tell me, Sherlock.” John’s hands stroke once over his inner thighs—the touch too light, teasing. “Ask me.”

Sherlock’s knees jerk upward in response. His breath is a low hiss of need.

“Y-your mouth around my…” He licks his lips, his cheeks flushing hard. He’s momentarily overcome with self-consciousness.

“Around your… where, Sherlock?”

John’s thumbs trace the curves of Sherlock’s arse under his balls, which are drawn up tight against his body, and Sherlock has to bite his lip hard to keep from yelling.

He grips the edge of the desk, gasping.

“Around my cock! Pl—please,” he adds just in case John is going to be difficult.

John’s answer is a long sigh of pleasure against the base of his cock. He drags his mouth up to the swollen head of Sherlock’s erection, which is leaking profusely against his stomach.

“Well, since you asked so nicely…”

Sherlock’s fingers are white-knuckled where they grip the desk.

“Anything for you my darling,” John looking at him with a wry grin, eyes gone dark, thumbs tracing the grooves of Sherlock’s hips as he leans down to finally take Sherlock into his mouth.

At first it’s almost too much sensation—the long wet slide of John’s mouth around him—so warm, the pleasure so all encompassing, that for one tremulous moment Sherlock is afraid he’s going to come right then and it will all be over.

But he bites down hard on his lower lip, his head thrown back, knees clenching hard against John. He can feel sweat beading on his forehead from the effort it takes to hold himself back from the edge, but he manages, and John, perhaps sensing his dilemma pulls off his cock to ask in a low voice, “Is it alright?”

Sherlock nods frantically, unable to find the breath to speak, but when John hesitates, still looking up at him, he manages to gasp out, “I’m not—I’m not going to last long. It’s too good, John. You feel too good.”

“Good,” John says, and even through the dark, Sherlock can see the brilliance of John’s grin in response. “That’s good.”
And then he’s wrapping his fingers around the base of Sherlock’s cock and taking just the head of it into his mouth again, licking long and slow over the slit, and Sherlock actually yells then, the sound escaping him before he can stop himself.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” he whispers, his words slurring, barely able to get the words out, his mind sparkling with pleasure, his whole body illuminated by the touch of John’s mouth. He feels like a map of the night sky—every point on his body that John has touched, lit up and shining like a star. John smoothes his hands down the insides of Sherlock’s thighs, and then pulls off again to respond. Sherlock can feel the heat of John’s breath against his cock when he speaks and he shivers, clenching his knees in against John again.

“It’s alright. I think the others are having such a good time we’ll hardly be the focus of their attention tonight.”

Sherlock takes a moment to shift his awareness beyond the lovely circle of his immediate surroundings to listen to the sounds coming from the rest of the ship, and sure enough, he can hear the distant but definitive sounds of the many revelers up on deck, like a low hum above them.

The shift in his attention is a good thing because it means when John takes him back in his mouth, Sherlock’s mind is still somewhere up above himself, and by the time he has fully returned to his awareness of his body, John’s mouth has descended several inches, his tongue stroking the underside of Sherlock’s cock in a way that three minutes previously would have spelled the end for Sherlock.

As it is, he can barely contain himself, and he finds his eyes sliding shut, body tilting forward of its own accord to sink deeper into John’s mouth, the pleasure of it so sweet—so rich that Sherlock finds his mind, as it often does in these intimate moments with John, filled with music.

He just manages to still his hips, remembering from his own experience how quickly it can become too much when one is on the receiving end of this activity, his arms shaking with the effort, but then John is pulling his mouth off again, hands warm but insistent on the outsides of Sherlock’s thighs.

Sherlock can sense John is looking up at him so he forces his eyes open to find John’s through the dark.

“Sherlock.”

Something about the way John says his name makes a frisson of heat move through Sherlock; his voice is low and soft, but intent—there’s an edge of pure steel underneath that makes something warm and golden burst open inside of Sherlock, quivering with anticipation.

“Are you listening to me?”

Sherlock nods—the barest dip of his head to show he’s heard.

“I want you to fuck my mouth.”

Sherlock almost comes again right there, all over John’s neck. His fingers clench against the desk. He thinks about asking John what he means exactly, whether he’s sure that’s what he wants, but Sherlock knows exactly what he means, exactly what it is he wants just from the tone of John’s voice. So instead he nods, wrapping his legs tighter around John, heart pounding in delicious anticipation.
John takes Sherlock back into his mouth—slowly, exquisitely slowly—his mouth sliding down and down until he’s swallowed half of Sherlock’s cock, giving Sherlock the time to drop his head back, eyes falling closed again, his own breathing loud and ragged in the quiet of the small space, something shockingly intimate about the sound of it in his own ears.

John stops when he has taken Sherlock as deep as he will go and they both pause for one brief, trembling moment—Sherlock’s weight thrown back on his hands, his back arched, calves pressing in against the muscles in John’s back—and Sherlock feels a single bead of sweat slide down his temple and whimpers at the aching perfection of everything he is feeling.

And then John’s hand is squeezing lightly at his hip, signaling him to move, and Sherlock has never been more happy to acquiesce to one of John’s requests; he thrusts his hips forward, slowly at first, gasping at the way the movement pushes him deeper into John’s mouth, at the way John’s cheeks hollow to provide more sensation, and then John’s hand is squeezing him again, encouraging him, Sherlock can only guess, to move faster.

Everything that comes after that is something of a blur.

John’s hands slide down to grasp at the curves of Sherlock’s arse, encouraging him, and Sherlock finally lets go. He begins to rock his hips in short, sharp bursts—the warm, wet, friction of this movement causing a chorus of small, desperate, moaning sounds to pour out of him unbidden as he loses himself in the feeling of John all around him, the bliss of John’s mouth, his lips, his tongue—against his cock.

It can’t be more than a few minutes (if it’s even that long) before Sherlock feels the tension in him building to an unbearable pitch—he’s thrusting now in a steady rhythm, still moaning continuously, his hairline drenched in sweat.

It’s a sound that John makes that finally pushes him over the edge—he can feel John groan, deep and low, the vibration like heaven around his cock—but it isn’t so much the feeling of the sound, as it is the knowledge that John is just as aroused by this as he is, that makes every muscle in his body tense up, his back arching sharply as his orgasm rips through him.

Pleasure explodes inside of him and he’s frozen momentarily in time as the sweet overwhelming force of it overtakes him, blacking out his senses; his mind, for one, brief, exquisite instant eclipsed in a flash of white.

John pulls back when Sherlock goes soft against him—all the tension falling from him at once, his legs sliding from where they were locked around John’s back, his body feeling suddenly boneless, but also weightless, as if any second he might float away.

He tries to sit up on the desk, his shaky arms no longer able to support himself, but even that proves difficult, and he finds himself leaning forward into John.

He tries to speak, to tell John how absolutely incredible that was, how grateful he is—how full of light and color and music he feels—how once again John has changed everything, probably the very fabric of the universe will never be the same again—but all he can manage is a long sigh as John straightens up beside him.

“John,” he gasps, unable to say anything else, tipping his head up to be kissed.

And then John, lovely, perfect John, is laughing softly, and gathering Sherlock into his arms, kissing his ear, and the damp curls at his forehead, before kissing his mouth—long and sweet.
John’s fingers twine through the curls at the base of Sherlock’s neck, his hand half-cradling Sherlock’s head so tenderly, and he pulls back to look at Sherlock with astonishment, his eyes almost completely black in the low light.

“God, you beauty.” He reaches up to touch the curls that are clinging to Sherlock’s cheeks, his brow. He looks like a man who’s seen into another world. “You beauty, you beauty.”

He kisses Sherlock again, pulling Sherlock to him with the hand at the small of his back, still cupping Sherlock’s head with the other, fingers so soft in Sherlock’s curls, and Sherlock melts into the kiss, feels his whole body lift to meet John’s.

John breaks the kiss to look at Sherlock again, shaking his head, before bending to kiss the elegant arch of Sherlock’s neck.

“Look at you… you’re exquisite… you’re perfect.”

Sherlock tips his head back, shifting his own hands to settle in John’s hair, too happy and content to question this fit of reverence that’s come over John.

John kisses his neck, each kiss tenderer than the last, his hand reaching up to take one of Sherlock’s in his own, tangling their fingers together; his other hand trailing over Sherlock’s side, just the backs of his knuckles tracing the curve of Sherlock’s bare hip, making Sherlock shiver and press closer into John from his perch on the desk, legs twining lazily around the backs of John’s.

He’s still sitting, naked, on the desk, and as he presses himself forward into John—John who is still somehow wearing his trousers—he remembers with a pleasant shiver of anticipation that John has yet to come.

He can feel the bulge of John’s trapped erection, hot through the fabric, and Sherlock pulls his fingers out of John’s to reach down between them.

He leans in until their foreheads are pressed together, pausing with his fingers on the fastenings. “May I?”

Sherlock watches John’s eyes fall closed. “Oh, god, yes.”

Sherlock pulls the fastenings apart as fast as he is able, feeling something sharp and hungry move through him as his fingers brush the deep grooves of John’s pelvic bones as he pushes the material down his hips.

He knows that John’s cock is what needs his attention right now—the feel of it, blood-hot and rigid against his thigh is enough to make Sherlock moan helplessly—he feels John shift against him at the sound, his breathing strained—but he cannot stop himself from reaching down and letting his hands enjoy a thorough exploration of those exquisite hips, the luscious muscles of John’s arse.

God, it’s impossible that he should be able to do this, to touch John like this—he can scarcely believe that it’s real.

He lets his hands stroke over the front of John’s thighs, feeling his own breath going shallow at the shape of him, the power held trembling in every inch of John that he touches. There are muscles in John that Sherlock did not even know existed in the human body, and he thinks once again of his father’s anatomy books, wishing for a fleeting moment that he had a talent for drawing so that he could somehow capture the unbelievable beauty of the man before him.

As his hands drift up over John’s abdomen, sliding warm and flat over the hard heat he finds there,
he does not even realize that his eyes have drifted closed until he hears John make a small, needy
sound and Sherlock’s eyes flutter open in astonishment.

“I’m sorry, love, I know you want to touch me everywhere but could you—first, just—”

Sherlock does not let him finish.

He takes John’s cock in both his hands, wrapping the fingers of one hand around the base, and
palming over the head with his other, pulling back the skin to reveal the moisture leaking from the
tip.

John’s breathing has gone harsh and ragged; his eyes closed again, his fingers gripping at
Sherlock’s bare thighs.

“God, that’s—yes, Sherlock, god that’s good…”

Sherlock listens to John’s breathing to find the right rhythm for his movements, his legs twining
anew around the backs of John’s bare thighs, his own body tilting forward into John’s as he
strokes.

The way they are positioned, with Sherlock still sitting on his desk, means that for once, their
heads are level with one another, and Sherlock finds that having John’s face tilted in so close to his
own while he touches him like this, their mouths not quite touching, the ragged warmth of John’s
breath trembling against his lips, makes the experience all the more intimate, makes it easier for
Sherlock to find the pace that begins to make John gasp against him, and start to thrust into
Sherlock’s hand.

He reaches around with his other hand to grip John’s arse, kneading the muscle there, pushing his
own body closer in against John’s so that he brushes his own stomach with his knuckles while he
strokes.

“Yes, good…” he finds himself whispering to John, encouraging as John did for him, wanting to
give John just as much pleasure as he just received.

He kisses John’s jaw, his chin, overcome with sudden fierce tenderness for the man clenched
between his thighs, for the shattered look on his face as he approaches the height of his pleasure—
his eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks, a crease between his brows.

Sherlock tightens the circle of his hand into a fist so that John can thrust up into it, and he pulls
John close against him with the grip of his thighs, struck with sudden inspiration.

He presses his mouth to John’s ear, his voice pitched velvet-deep. “Imagine it’s me, John. Imagine
it’s my body around you, pulling you in. The heat of it—the pressure—it’s me, John. Me, opening
for you—only for you.”

Sherlock feels the stuttering motion of John’s hips before John cries out and comes in a hot pulse
into Sherlock’s fist, the muscles in his arse clenching under Sherlock’s hand as he thrusts forward,
gasping, and spilling his release against the skin of Sherlock’s belly.

Sherlock strokes him through it, feels John go boneless against him, his mouth pressed hot and
open against Sherlock’s cheek as he gasps through the after-shocks, which go on much longer than
Sherlock anticipated, his arms looped all the while around Sherlock’s neck.

Sherlock wraps his arms around John’s waist and holds him close, listening to John’s breathing,
only pulling back when it’s returned to its normal pace.
He leans his forehead in against John’s, feeling slightly self-conscious, worried suddenly that maybe that wasn’t what John wanted.

“Was that… all right?”

He’s grateful again for the dark because it means he can hide some of his self-consciousness; but it also means he can’t quite decipher the look on John’s face.

John’s hands lock around Sherlock’s neck, and he laughs suddenly, low and breathless.

When he speaks his voice is rougher than it was before. “God, Sherlock. That was…” He shakes his head. “It was much more than all right.”

He kisses Sherlock then, and Sherlock wonders, for one fleeting moment if he’s made John —John—slightly speechless, and he feels his cheeks flush with pleasure.

The kiss is long and deep and Sherlock feels something in him flutter happily at the knowledge that maybe he does have the ability to make John feel as good as John makes him feel.

When John pulls back, there’s something intent in his look, and Sherlock feels his heart skip in his chest, wondering what he is about to say.

He places his fingers beneath Sherlock’s chin, and tips Sherlock’s gaze up to meet his own, his eyes so dark on Sherlock’s, so deep. “You know how I love you, don’t you? I need you to know, Sherlock. Tell me you know this.”

“I—I know,” Sherlock gasps, that same dizzy immense feeling overtaking him, as though he can feel the planet shifting on its axis, so great is John’s love for him, so powerful are his own feelings in return.

He feels blown apart by it.

“Tell me you know,” John insists, rising again, gathering Sherlock in his arms, drawing Sherlock’s body close to him until both their chests are pressed together, until the pounding of their hearts seem to speak in tandem.

“I know,” Sherlock says, steadier this time, holding John’s gaze with his own, his hands locking low around John’s waist.

“Good,” John says, his eyes on Sherlock’s, as black as the deepest reaches of the ocean, and Sherlock shivers, thinking of the ghost ship, but he doesn’t look away.

John bends down to press another kiss to Sherlock’s neck.

“You’re my sea flower—evening blooming. My prince.”

Sherlock feels the flush crawl up his throat beneath John’s mouth. He doesn’t think he’ll ever manage to stop blushing when John compliments him like this.

“I hope you didn’t mind me doing those things to you on top of a desk,” John says, his voice a warm murmur against the skin of Sherlock’s neck.

Sherlock shakes his head, damp curls flying, because even if he was dubious at first, he’s now certain it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to him.

“Good,” John says, laughing, warm, and Sherlock knows in that moment that there is no better
feeling in the world than the feel of John Watson’s laughter against the side of his neck.

“Let me take you to bed,” John says, shifting Sherlock’s arms around him so he can lift him from the desk. “Where I can have you properly.”

Sherlock shivers at John’s words, looping his arms around John’s neck. “You think we still have time?”

John’s eyes turn upward toward the sounds of pounding feet and laughter drifting down from overhead, his mouth, curling into the loveliest smile, as he leans in against Sherlock.

“I’d say we still have hours yet.”
John carries Sherlock the two steps to his narrow bunk, and Sherlock is breathless with it, with the knowledge that John can lift him so effortlessly—even if it's only to carry him two steps; even if there’s a distant part of him that’s telling him that he should be ashamed to be carried like this, like a swooning maiden—all pale limbs and flushing cheeks, ribbons sliding from her curls.

But he doesn’t feel ashamed; not really, he feels strong in John’s arms, elated, and when John lowers him to the sheets, Sherlock keeps his hands around John’s neck to pull John down beside him.

John resists, laughing. “Wait a minute, let me just get the rest of these things off.”

He’s still wearing his trousers, Sherlock realizes, shocked, so he relinquishes his hold to allow John to tug them off and kick them away into the darkness.

Their eyes have nearly adjusted now to the grey half-light but John hesitates by the lamp, turning as he takes the matches in hand to look at Sherlock in question.

It’s so hot that Sherlock almost protests but before he can open his mouth to do so John says, “I’d like to see you,” his voice soft—intent, and the memory of John’s body, licked golden by the candle flames makes Sherlock nod in agreement.

He lights only the candle on Sherlock’s desk, the movements of his hands, even while bandaged, so practiced and precise, and Sherlock thinks he could watch John do anything, anything at all, and it would look like art.

He watches from the bed, a quiet thrill moving through him as John’s face is illuminated by the sudden wash of golden light, the flame as it catches the wick leaping in strange sharp shadows over his throat and chest.

“There, now,” John says, climbing back in beside Sherlock, making Sherlock gasp a bit as their bare legs slide together, his body tingling all over at the feeling of a nude John Watson settling in beside him. “That’s much better.”

“Mmm.” Sherlock hums his agreement, twisting a bit to make more room for John, wriggling his hips until they’re slotted neatly against John’s side.

It’s always crowded in Sherlock’s narrow bed. There’s scarcely enough room for them to lie side by side. Of course, Sherlock doesn’t mind—even if it’s hot and sticky in the candlelit dark, the air in his cabin warm and close—it’s still John pressed against him, which makes even the discomfort pleasant, he gamely tells himself.

Then he lifts an arm to drape it over John’s hip and bangs his elbow hard against the wall.
Sherlock curses softly, and John makes a sound of sympathy, reaching out to take hold of Sherlock’s arm and settle it against him.

He sits up on his elbow to look down at Sherlock, pushing the hair off his forehead where it’s stuck with sweat.

Instead of making him feel grimy as he knows it should, the gesture makes Sherlock feel warm all through, that familiar sunlit feeling that only John can give him.

“I’m sorry about all this you know.”

John’s voice is full of remorse; his eyes soft on Sherlock’s face as he continues to stroke the hair back from his forehead.

“What?”

“This.” John gestures to the narrow creaking room, the distant sounds of laughter overhead. The thump of pounding feet from the upper deck makes the candle shudder in its holder. “I wish I could give you better than this.”

“But…” Sherlock is at a loss for how to even reply. “None of this is your fault.”

“I know,” John says, the rhythm of his fingers so even, so soothing. “But I still wish I could change it.”

Sherlock does not like this melancholy mood that has come over John; he does not want to disrupt the movement of John’s fingers but he needs John to stop this nonsense. He sits up on his elbows so that he can look at John.

John lifts his hand away startled by Sherlock’s sudden insistence.

“You do change it. Every day. Simply by virtue of being on board this ship you have made it better. Do you think—?”

Sherlock pauses; frustrated, searching for the right words. He shakes his head, adamant.

John is watching him with a rapt expression on his face.

“I wouldn’t have survived this voyage without you! They would have tipped my body overboard weeks ago after that storm, without another thought.”

Sherlock does not stop to register the look of horror on John’s face—he’s too caught up in what he’s saying—he needs John to understand.

“Nobody even cared to see that I was missing, John, nobody but—you. And even if I’d survived that, I was so miserable I probably would have thrown myself over the side not long after!”

He’s never actually admitted that to himself before, certainly never said it out loud.

It’s only now that he’s said it that he realizes it’s the truth.

John’s hand is suddenly warm on Sherlock’s chest.

“Don’t.”

He shakes his head, his expression grave.
“Don’t talk like that.”

Sherlock looks down at John’s hand, the warm brown of his fingers against Sherlock’s pale chest; shame licks at his insides like tendrils of flame.

“It’s only the truth,” he says, without looking up.

“Maybe so but I can’t bear to hear it.”

“The point is…” It takes a great deal of effort for Sherlock to lift his head and find John’s eyes again, to swallow down his shame and remember why it is he needs to say this. “You have made a difference, John. You’ve made all the difference. And I don’t know how I will ever repay you.”

John’s hand slides up to curl around the back of Sherlock’s neck—the gesture sudden, intense. Sherlock sees his eyes go soft, pupils glittering in the dim light; but when he speaks, his voice is fierce.

“You can repay me by staying alive—yeah?”

Sherlock nods, his own throat too tight to speak.

“Promise me that, Sherlock. Will you promise me?”

“I promise.”

John lets out a ragged breath, “God—” and then surges forward to press his mouth to Sherlock’s, his hand still warm on Sherlock’s neck.

Two tears drip hot in quick succession down John’s cheek; Sherlock shifts at the feel of them, startled.

John presses their foreheads together, draws another shaky breath, then laughs unsteadily. The sound makes Sherlock heart clench in his chest.

“God,” John says again, “I’m sorry. I’ve never… I’m not usually… well, this much of a mess… with lovers, I mean.” John rubs at his cheek with the heel of his hand. “God, what you must think of me.”

Sherlock tries to ignore the squirming feeling of jealousy that erupts within him at John’s use of the word ‘lovers.’

“It’s different with you though…” John says, his hand returning to Sherlock’s neck, sliding up into his hair, his eyes flickering soft over Sherlock’s face, his expression full of awe. “Everything is different.”

His fingers card up through Sherlock’s curls and Sherlock can’t help melting at the touch, his neck lengthening as he tips his head back into John’s embrace.

“God, look at you.” John’s voice is a whisper, full of reverence. He leans in to press a kiss to Sherlock’s throat, his other hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, guiding him back down against the bed. “I want to give you everything, Sherlock. I want to offer you the entire world.”

John kisses him again, higher up on his neck, just beneath his jaw, and Sherlock sighs in contentment, hands sliding up John’s back, feeling the welcome weight of John’s half-hard cock press in against his hip.
John lies back against the pillow, his legs still tangled up with Sherlock’s, but his gaze now somewhere above them.

“God, if I could have you in a proper bed… no banged elbows, no scratchy threadbare blankets… no need to keep quiet. Think of it. Just think of it.”

Sherlock does, looking up at the ceiling, his ribcage heaving as he lets out a long sigh.

“Maybe,” John says, and there’s something dreamy in his voice, something daring. “When we get to Rio—”

And then he stops and Sherlock feels him draw in an enormous breath and hold it in his lungs for several plunging heartbeats.

Sherlock feels the slow sinking of John’s chest against him when he finally lets it out.

“What?” Sherlock asks, but he knows already, for John’s fear must be the same as his. The possibility of it is so tantalizing, so close, almost within their reach and yet…

“There’s no guarantee, is there?”

He tries to keep the disappointment from his voice, to keep it even. He doesn’t succeed.

“No,” John says, eyes on the ceiling, his bandaged hand still where it rests over Sherlock’s.

“There’s no guarantee.”

He draws another breath, and Sherlock tries his best to keep the hope from blooming in him.

“There’s… well, there’s a chance, of course. There’s always a chance. And with Anderson gone—”

Sherlock can hear the sudden blinding smile in John’s voice even without looking at him.

“Well the chances are very much improved. But there’s no telling what the captain will do. He’s completely unpredictable. On most ships, it’s decided randomly. Sometimes each mess will flip a coin to decide. Other times it’s the first officer who will decide.” He sighs. “But it’s rare that everyone can get shore leave, especially if our stop is short, which I reckon it will be.”

“But… if…” Sherlock tries to calm his pounding heart. “If you were… able to get away, would we… I mean—on shore, where would we…?”

John laughs and Sherlock delights in the feeling of it against him.

“Rio’s a big place. We wouldn’t have any trouble finding somewhere to spend the night, if that’s what you’re asking,” John says, teasing smile still in his voice as he turns towards Sherlock. Sherlock can see his eyes gleaming in the candlelight. “Besides, I know some folks in Rio… it’d be no trouble finding us a private room, maybe even someplace with a proper bed…”

The excitement on Sherlock’s face must be utterly transparent because now John is leaning in again, laughing softly against him before capturing Sherlock’s mouth with his own, his hand settling on Sherlock’s bare hip and stroking lightly down.

Sherlock presses eagerly forward into John, deepening the kiss, happily losing himself in the taste of John’s mouth, trying not to think about just how disappointing it will be if John doesn’t get the chance at shore leave, how he will be able to bear it.

But before he can completely banish the thought from his mind, John is pulling back again, his
eyes on Sherlock’s bright with curiosity.

“That reminds me… now that we’re alone, you must tell me. How did you do it? How did you manage to get Anderson removed from duty?”

Guilt swirls up in Sherlock in a sudden storm as the details from his conversation with the captain this afternoon come back to him all at once. After the way things transpired he’d prefer not to tell John any of it, but he knows that’s not an option. He owes John the truth about what he told the captain, at the very least. Better for John to be on his guard from now on—just in case.

Then again, would telling him really help him at all? Or would it just cause him unnecessary worry, on top of everything else he has to deal with?

Sherlock doesn’t like the idea of keeping anything from John, but he’s uncertain whether he really needs to tell John everything.

He decides to go for the most direct approach.

“I talked to the captain,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Of course you did,” John says, shutting his eyes briefly, as though silently appealing to the gods to give him patience. “Oh, Sherlock…”

He’s silent for a moment, and Sherlock waits.

If John wants to know the details, let him ask.

“And what,” John says, opening his eyes to look at Sherlock, “did you say to him exactly?”

“I simply explained to him that Anderson wasn’t doing his job properly, that he was misusing his position of authority.”

“And that… worked?” The disbelief in John’s voice is plain.

“It… Not exactly,” Sherlock hedges. “I explained to him that it was in his best interest to remove Anderson from his position, since harming members of the crew would only cost him in the end. I appealed to his interests.”

“I see,” John says, clearly still aware that Sherlock hasn’t told him the whole story, but also clearly not yet willing to pry it out of Sherlock.

There is a beat or two of silence and Sherlock feels the guilt in the pit of his stomach squirm unpleasantly.

It’s suddenly, uncomfortably clear to him that it isn’t John’s wellbeing that’s keeping him from telling the whole truth; it’s his own shame.

Sherlock sighs.

“I told him I had information that would interest him, that I would give it to him in exchange for removing Anderson from his position.”

Sherlock can see the shock plain on John’s face.

“You blackmailed him? The captain of this ship? Sherlock…”
“It wasn’t blackmail!” Sherlock insists. “I was simply offering him a reward in exchange for what I was asking! It wasn’t compulsory.”

“Oh, Sherlock…"

The worry on John’s face is distressing. Sherlock is now remembering all the reasons why it was a terrible idea to tell John the truth. But now that he’s halfway there, he figures he might as well finish the job.

“He didn’t take me up on my offer.”

It takes a moment for the meaning of Sherlock’s words to sink in.

John’s eyes on Sherlock’s are full of puzzlement.

“What? But then how did you…?”

“He said he only wanted one thing in exchange—”

The words stick in Sherlock’s throat. But here he must tell John the truth, because on this point in particular it’s in John’s best interest to be fully aware, so that he may protect himself, in case the captain decides to act on the information Sherlock has confided in him. Of that much he is certain, whatever he tries to tell himself.

Sherlock closes his eyes.

“He wanted to know the name of the sailor I was trying to protect.”

“But…” The confusion is clear in John’s voice. Sherlock can almost hear the gears turning over in John’s brain as he struggles to make sense of what Sherlock is telling him. “You mean, you told him—”

“No!” Sherlock’s eyes fly open, horror filling him at the prospect that John would think he had freely offered up that information, even with the goal of getting John out of danger.

“No, I didn’t say anything about you. I only said that I knew Anderson was mistreating the men under his command. He… deduced it,” Sherlock says, using the word that he and Mycroft used to use when they played their game of guessing things about people, cringing inwardly at the similarities it suggests between the captain and himself, even while he’s fully aware that the captain had done to him exactly what he’s done to so many people over the years.

“He figured it out somehow,” Sherlock says, cheeks growing warm, embarrassed that his feelings for John could be so easily read, especially by someone who would not hesitate to use the information against him—against both of them.

“He said it was obvious I wasn’t interested in the well-being of the crew out of any kind of philanthropic gesture,” Sherlock goes on, the bitterness plain in his voice. He feels John’s hand shift against him in what he imagines is meant to be a comforting gesture and fights the instinct to shake it off. He doesn’t deserve comfort for this. “So reason stands that I must be interested in one crew member in particular.”

There is a long uncomfortable silence in which Sherlock knows he should keep talking but he can’t seem to bring himself to relate the final detail.

John’s voice, when he finally speaks, is soft. “What did you tell him?”
Sherlock shuts his eyes, guilt crashing over him again with such violence that for a moment he fears he may be sick.

“I told him your name.”

The silence that follows is almost too much for Sherlock to take, but he can’t bear to open his eyes to look at John’s face, for fear of what he might find there when he does: horror, fear—betrayal.

“Sherlock.”

John’s hands on his body are unbearably gentle.

“Sherlock, love, look at me.”

Sherlock draws an unsteady breath, but still he doesn’t open his eyes.

“Sherlock, it’s all right.”

The reassurance in John’s voice is too sincere to be faked; tentatively, Sherlock opens his eyes.

John’s face is full of worry, but it’s clear almost immediately that the worry is all for him—there’s not a trace of the horror Sherlock imagined, the look of wounded betrayal.

“That was incredibly fucking brave what you did.”

John’s hands slide up to rest on the back of his neck, his eyes never leaving Sherlock’s.

“It was also incredibly reckless,” he adds with a touch of exasperation that makes Sherlock stiffen slightly, “But we’ll get to that. What’s more important is that you succeeded. You got rid of Anderson, and do you know what that means, Sherlock, aside from the fact that you’re incredibly brave?”

Sherlock shakes his head when it’s clear that John is waiting for a response from him of some kind.

“It means you’re also incredibly selfless,” John says, his voice hard with resolve. “To put yourself at risk like that, for all of our sakes, not just mine.”

Sherlock opens his mouth to protest but John goes on speaking.

“I don’t care what the bloody captain says, you are fucking philanthropically motivated—what you did wasn’t just for me—it was for the whole mess. I know you, Sherlock, and I know you did it for all of them as much as me.”

Again, Sherlock wants to voice his protest. It was mostly for John, what he did, even if not entirely—but John has that look in his eyes, that steel-hard glinting look that suggests it would be better if Sherlock let John finish.

“So the captain knows you care about me? So what? I don’t see how that makes our situation any worse than it was before. What I don’t understand is why he didn’t want the information that you said you had for him. Which was what, by the way?”

Sherlock experiences another savage stab of guilt as it becomes clear what else he will have to reveal to John.

“I told him I knew who took the ship’s manifest from his cabin.”
There is a pause while John digests this information and the implications that come with it.

“You were going to give him Ferguson’s name,” John says at last, his voice soft with something like shock. It’s not a question.

Sherlock nods miserably.

As he waits for John’s reaction it becomes clear to him that the feeling of horror he’s experiencing has less to do with the fact that he feels genuine remorse about putting a man’s life in danger and more to do with his fear that John will think poorly of him for his decision to do so.

He didn’t consider John’s reaction when he formulated his plan; he was too preoccupied with ensuring its successful outcome to spare a thought for what John might think.

It’s only now he realizes how much John’s opinion of his actions means to him.

“Sherlock, you know that…”

John hesitates and Sherlock is certain he knows what John is about to say; is certain John hesitates because he’s aware that Sherlock already knows.

He answers John before he can finish the sentence.

“That doing so would have likely ensured his death? Yes,” he says quietly. “I know that.”

There’s no point making excuses for himself. He knew what his actions meant. He was in full knowledge of the fact that in making his request to the captain he was putting another man’s life on the line.

“Well,” John says slowly after a moment of silence, “I can’t say he wouldn’t have deserved his fate had it come to that. He’s obviously somehow embroiled in this whole business. I also can’t say that I would be sorry to see harm come to him,” John says, voice growing darker. “After what he did to you. But Sherlock… gambling with another man’s life that’s…”

John shakes his head.

Shame opens in Sherlock like a chasm.

“I know,” he says, voice small, dropping his eyes. Suddenly, he can’t bear to look at John.

“I’m in no position to judge you for it—I’m no paragon of moral virtue myself, God knows,” John says, his voice suddenly full of something almost like humor. “I’m just… surprised is all.”

Sherlock steels himself against the implications of John’s words, inwardly recoiling from the reality of how John must see him now.

Surprised by how low you’re willing to stoop to get what you want… surprised by how utterly heartless you are… how unfeeling… how—

“I’m surprised you were willing to take a risk like that—that you would do that for all of us. That’s… Sherlock,” John says, suddenly reaching out, sensing perhaps that Sherlock is beginning to spiral away inside himself. “It’s a bit… not good that you were prepared to offer up another man’s life to do so but… the fact that you were willing to do that for me, for us, that’s…”

John shakes his head again, and this time, Sherlock sees, risking a cautious glance upward, that it’s not disappointment that makes John do so, but rather… awe.
Sherlock holds his breath, too afraid to hope.

“No one’s ever done anything like that for me before…” John goes on, his voice growing softer, pensive. “Made a sacrifice like that on my behalf. It was a big risk you took doing what you did.”

His hands slide back up Sherlock’s shoulders and the way he’s looking at Sherlock now, his eyes full of gratitude, but something sharper, brighter, makes Sherlock finally release the breath he’s been holding, makes him realize, startled, that there’s a new kind of respect in John’s eyes, an acknowledgement of this darker side of Sherlock, and not just an acceptance of it, but also perhaps… an appreciation for it.

“You’re made of tougher stuff than I thought, Sherlock Holmes.”

Sherlock thinks for a moment about all of the wild, reckless, incredibly stupid risks he’s taken in his life, how most of them have solely been for his own benefit. Looking back, he thinks, how pointless they all were, how if given the chance to reconsider his actions, he probably wouldn’t take the same risks again.

But when it comes to the risk he took this afternoon—if given the chance to do what he did all over again—he would so in a heartbeat, if it meant protecting John.

He looks back at John as he thinks this, one corner of his mouth quirking up in a partial smile.

“You don’t know the half of it.”

He’s pleased to see the warmth on John’s face in response, his mouth flickering into a corresponding grin, his eyes full of heat; and then he’s leaning in to capture Sherlock’s mouth with his, one hand warm on the back of Sherlock’s neck.

When John finally pulls back to give them both a chance to catch their breath, his eyes are bright. “I have a feeling this won’t be the last time you surprise me.”

Sherlock drops his eyes, pleased by John’s response, but still distracted by the low tug of worry in the pit of his stomach, by the persistent fear that he’s somehow put them both at greater risk by what he’s revealed to the captain.

“There’s one thing I still don’t understand though…”

Sherlock’s eyes flicker back up to John again.

“Why didn’t he take you up on your offer? Do you think he already knew what Ferguson had done?”

Sherlock shakes his head.

“No. He did it to make sure I remember who’s really in control—to show me that there isn’t anything I have that he can’t get if he wants it. That’s why he asked me for your name.”

Sherlock takes a breath, the captain’s motivations crystalizing before him as he speaks, suddenly clear to him in a way he couldn’t access before.

“He wanted me to realize that he knows my vulnerable point—he knows what it would take to make me hurt the most. Now that he has that information he has power over me; he can use it against me anytime he likes, anytime I might need a reminder who is in control.”
It’s only in the silence after he speaks that it occurs to Sherlock that perhaps he shouldn’t have said all this out loud.

But when he glances up at John again, he realizes that John is quiet because he’s thinking. When he finally speaks, his eyes are full of steel.

“I don’t care what the captain thinks, as far as I’m concerned he doesn’t have anything he didn’t already have before. I think your read on the situation is correct; I think he did what he did to make you feel small—that was clearly his priority. If you’re right, and I think that you are, then more than anything it sounds like he was trying to give you a warning.”

John takes a breath, holding Sherlock’s gaze as he continues speaking.

“Whatever this business is with Ferguson and Knott, you said you think it has something to do with the captain’s urgency to get to Rio, isn’t that right?”

Sherlock nods.

“Well, as long as you stay out of his way until then…” John says, and Sherlock can hear the gentle note of appeal in his voice, the not-quite-asking to stay out of trouble but suggesting it. “I think we’ll be all right.”

Sherlock nods again, still fighting the hard knot of fear in his throat that makes it difficult to talk.

“I still wish I hadn’t told him.”

“All that matters for now is that Anderson is gone, and I think that for that reason alone we still have cause to celebrate,” John says, something bright and mischievous warming his eyes, his hand reaching down to settle on Sherlock’s bare hip. “Mmmm?”

Sherlock shifts against him, torn between the desire to listen to John—to just forget everything, to choose to believe that it will be all right—and between the very real fear that, in fact, the problem is much bigger than either of them can guess, that Sherlock has crossed a line that he never should have crossed, and now there’s no turning back.

But maybe John is right, maybe all the captain really wanted was to demonstrate his power over Sherlock; and it’s up to him to make sure he doesn’t give the man a reason to use it.

The trouble is, Sherlock knows himself too well, and if there’s one thing about himself of which he is certain, it’s that he’s never succeeded at staying out of trouble for long.

But John’s hand is moving slowly up his side, following the curve of his waist and Sherlock finds his thoughts caught by the movement, his awareness suddenly drawn back to the fact that he and John are lying pressed together in his narrow bunk, their legs tangled together from hip to ankle.

He feels John’s calf where it’s lying draped over his leg tighten slightly, drawing him closer, pulling their hips into alignment, and now all chances of forming a coherent thought are lost to Sherlock as he feels the growing hardness of John’s cock against his own.

“Besides…” John says, his hand gliding back down until it settles on the curve of Sherlock’s arse. “At this point, I don’t think the nature of our relationship would come as that much of surprise to anyone on this ship. Especially not after this afternoon.”

John bends his mouth down to Sherlock’s but he pauses before bringing their mouths together, his breath soft against Sherlock’s parted lips, something slightly teasing in his smile, in the lift of his
“Do you?”

Sherlock pushes his chin forward so that his bottom lip just brushes John’s, sending a shiver down his spine, causing John’s fingers to press in with a hiss against him, hips shifting forward again to drag their erections together.

Sherlock gasps, mimicking John’s motion with his hips, his own hands slipping closed around John’s neck.

“I’m sorry,” he pants into John’s mouth. “What was the question?”

Laughing softly, John finally ducks his head to kiss him properly, rolling his hips into Sherlock’s as he does so, his tongue slipping into Sherlock’s mouth and stroking.

“Never mind,” John says when he pulls back, leaving Sherlock breathless, his thoughts dissolving into mist, his body pressing in against John at every point, aching, wanting, filled with a shivering, growing heat. “I think we have more important things to do now than talk.”

Sherlock nods, hardly hearing John’s words, so desperate is he to get his mouth back against John’s, his hips hitching up of their own accord to create that lovely friction again between them.

Now it’s John’s turn to gasp, his fingers clenching again in the flesh of Sherlock’s arse, and Sherlock thrusts forward with a wild sound, half-growl, half-whimper, and bites lightly at John’s bottom lip, his own hands kneading at the muscles in John’s back as he pulls John against him, rolling as he does, shifting them so that he’s stretched out on his back and John is above him.

The change in position means that John’s body is a warm and welcome weight between Sherlock’s legs, and Sherlock shivers with pleasure as he feels John’s cock slide alongside his. He thrusts up experimentally with his hips, testing out this new position and is rewarded by the joint gasp they both release at the sensation.

John’s hands are now bracketed on either side of Sherlock’s head; he’s supporting himself with his weight on his forearms with such easy, casual grace, but Sherlock knows if he were in the same position, his muscles would be trembling with the strain.

He spares a moment to run his hands down John’s sides, over the lean curves of his stomach and hips, marveling at the power in John’s slight form—how still he is—there is no hint of a tremor. It’s easy to imagine in moments like this that beneath John’s skin, in place of muscles, are plates of beaten steel.

But no—it’s more wondrous than that, because for all the hardness, for all the unbending strength of John, there is softness there too, not just in the silky quality of his skin over his hips, at the base of his spine, his neck; the pale hair under his arms—even in the hardest places on his body, when he lowers himself to Sherlock, when he leans in, offering himself—both qualities are there in equal measure. What’s most astonishing of all is when John chooses, with Sherlock, to be soft.

Some of Sherlock’s reverence must be evident on his face, in the touch of his hands, because John is looking down at him with that crooked grin of adoration that makes Sherlock heart turn to liquid fire in his chest, and Sherlock’s hands still in their worshipful exploration as he surrenders to the sensation now, stricken breathless.

“What are you thinking?” John asks, the smile blooming wider on his mouth, and Sherlock cannot
bear it—he shifts his hands back up to John’s neck to pull that smiling mouth down to his, to tell John without words what he was thinking. He tells him with the movement of his lips, his tongue, in the gentle rising of his hips against John—the slow slide of his fingers down John’s back.

“Ahh, is that right?” John says, pulling back, grinning wider than ever. “Do you know I had the very same thought myself?”

“You couldn’t have,” Sherlock says, curls sliding into his eye as he looks up at John with a trace of indignation. “I was thinking about how unique you are.”

“Mmm,” John hums his acknowledgment, reaching to brush the curls back off Sherlock’s forehead, his voice teasing. “But I was thinking the very same thing about you.”

Sherlock huffs his disbelief but John catches his mouth before he can turn away, fingers tangling in Sherlock’s curls, settling his weight more firmly between Sherlock’s legs and rolling his hips until Sherlock is gasping into John’s open mouth, thighs spread as wide as they will go across the bed.

“John,” he pleads, when John lifts up a bit, not sure what he is asking for, but very aware that the hot aching length of his cock needs some more pointed stimulation, needs more friction, more pressure, more something.

He squirms beneath John, his body lit up with need.

John looks down at him, eyes glimmering in the low light.

“I have an idea.”

Something about John’s look makes Sherlock go absolutely still. He is suddenly aware of his heartbeat pounding all down the length of his cock.

He doesn’t need to say anything; John can see he has his attention.

“I was thinking we could try… that act that you’re so curious about.”

If Sherlock hadn’t been utterly still before, he would have frozen at John’s words, every fragment of his awareness trained on John.

“I wanted to wait until… well, I wanted to wait until we had nicer accommodations… more time, more space. It’s an activity that shouldn’t be rushed. To be honest with you, I was planning to wait until Rio,” John says, his cheeks flushing slightly in a rare display of self-consciousness. “But I realize now it’s silly to wait since we might not have that chance.”

The thought that John was planning a special time and place for this particular activity makes something hot and bright flare up in Sherlock’s chest. The feeling is so intense it’s enough to drown out the insistent disappointment at the possibility that it might never happen.

“The thing is… it’s a bit more challenging to be on the receiving end, so I thought we might try it with me in that position first, the receiving position that is… that way you can learn how it’s done, and the next time well… we’ll work up to it,” John says with a sudden grin, and it’s like the sun catching on a pane of glass; Sherlock is momentarily blinded by it.

But just as quickly, John seems to grow self-conscious again, his smile vanishing from his lips. “Only if that pleases you, of course. To try it like that.”

Sherlock is speechless.
He’s so overcome with excitement, arousal, trepidation—that he cannot find his voice.

“It’s… very good both ways, I assure you,” John continues, sounding a bit nervous now. “But the decision is yours to make. If you don’t feel up to it, or if you’d rather wait to be the one who—”

“No,” Sherlock says, more abruptly than he means to, desperate to convey his interest before John can change his mind. “I want to do it.”

“Alright,” John says, smile building slowly now again until the warmth of it seems to fill Sherlock. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“We’ll have to go slowly. It’s been a long while since I… well.” That flash of a smile again, bright as sunlight. Sherlock aches at the sight of it. “And you’ll have to help me since I cannot use my hands —”

At John’s words, Sherlock experiences the familiar sick swoop of guilt.

“But I have no doubt that you’re up to the job. I think in fact, that your hands will be far more adept than my own, at this particular task.”

Sherlock’s cheeks are burning with heat at the compliment as he considers John’s meaning; Sherlock isn’t exactly sure of all the details of this act but he can imagine, and what he’s imagining is making the ache at the center of himself grow steadily worse, it’s making his erection thicken and pulse between his legs as he thinks about what is going to pass between them.

He shifts so he’s partly sitting up, his weight on his elbows, as he looks at John from beneath the sliding fall of his curls. He licks his lips, eager to convey his seriousness.

Never in all his studies has Sherlock been such a willing pupil.

“Tell me what I need to do.”

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry! The next chapter is basically written! I was actually toying with the idea of posting both this chapter and the next as one long chapter but then it just got too long, and I decided it was better to give you at least the first half now, since it is done! So do not fret- there will be more very soon! ;))
Chapter Forty Three

John laughs in response to Sherlock’s request, pushing at the obstinate piece of hair that’s determined to cover Sherlock’s eye with a fondness that makes Sherlock’s chest flood with sudden warmth.

“You’re going to be very good at this—I can already tell.”

The sounds of the party above them are as raucous as ever, but Sherlock is filled with a sudden anxiety about how much time they have. They cannot afford to waste a moment.

He shifts until he is completely sitting up, his rapt attention focused on John.

“Tell me.”

“Well, first of all, we’re going to need a little something to help us and lucky for you…” John leans down over the side of the bed, reaching for something in the dark. He straightens up after a moment and holds up a tiny vial with a grin. “I came prepared.”

Sherlock looks at John, stunned.

“Do you carry that with you all the time?”

John’s grin widens. “They don’t call me Three Continents Watson for nothing.”

Sherlock stares, uncertain whether to be impressed or appalled, caught halfway between suspicious jealousy and intense arousal at the thought of John having been in enough situations to warrant him carrying that little vial in his pocket at all times.

But before he can get too lost in his jealousy over John’s past lovers, John is sliding back in against him, covering Sherlock’s partially opened mouth with his own and slipping his tongue between Sherlock’s lips as he reaches to twine their fingers together again, effectively grounding Sherlock in the present moment.

Sherlock presses his body forward into John’s, his arousal growing at the feeling of John pushing the little vial in against his palm, as his mind begins to fill with the thought of what the liquid inside is for.

Sherlock closes his fingers around it, his tongue slipping over John’s as the kiss deepens and John begins to thrust his tongue against Sherlock’s in a motion that mimics the rolling motion of his hips against Sherlock’s.

Sherlock copies his movements, shuddering hard at the feeling of their cocks sliding back into alignment. It feels good—so good—to slide alongside the slick, hard heat of John, to feel the wetness at the tip of John’s cock brush against his own, but the friction isn’t concentrated enough, and as good as it feels, it’s enough to make Sherlock remember that there’s something potentially better if he only has the patience to learn it.

He pulls his mouth back from John’s, gasping slightly, feeling his pulse throb against the vial clutched in his hand.

“Tell me,” he says, holding it up between them. “What do I do?”
“Well,” John says, his expression sobering as he takes one of Sherlock’s hands in his to guide it down between their bodies.

Sherlock gasps with pleasure at the feeling of his fingers slipping past the stiff heat of John’s erection, down past his bollocks and underneath to the deeper heat between his legs. John guides his finger in until it’s pressing, there, against the entrance of John’s body.

John’s face is very close to his, his voice a quiet murmur, and Sherlock tilts his head in as he listens.

“What you need to understand is that this part of our bodies is a muscle, and just like any other muscle, it can stretch. It can stretch to accommodate quite a bit, but it needs to be warmed up first—so that it doesn’t hurt when you introduce something… bigger than it’s used to. Understand?”

Sherlock nods so hard his hair slides back down again to cover his eye.

“Good. So what we need to do first—what you need to do,” and here, Sherlock gasps again as John readjusts his fingers around Sherlock’s, “Is help me open up, a little bit at a time. Do you think you can do that?”

Sherlock nods again.

He can hear the way John’s voice has gone suddenly low, at what he imagines is the presence of his finger—and also, he imagines, in anticipation of what they’re about to do.

“What this is for,” John withdraws his hand from around Sherlock’s to reach up towards Sherlock’s other hand that is still holding the tiny bottle of liquid. “I’m sure you’ve probably guessed.

Sherlock nods hesitantly. “Oil?”

“Yes.” John takes it from Sherlock and pulls the stopper out. “It’s not the nicest smelling stuff… another reason I wanted to wait until we reached Rio to do this—I could get something much nicer there—but this will work just as well.”

John tips the vial between his fingers.

“And as you’ll soon discover, it feels fucking glorious.”

He takes Sherlock’s hand in his and rubs his slick fingers over Sherlock’s, coating them in the slippery liquid.

“I would use it all the time with you if I could, but I only have a limited supply.” He looks up at Sherlock with a grin, “So I save it for special occasions.”

The twinge of jealousy Sherlock experiences as he thinks of John’s former lovers evaporates in an instant, at the feeling of the pads of John’s fingers slipping over Sherlock’s, the oil making the movement fluid, making even this innocent touch between them layered with sensation.

Sherlock’s cock twitches between their bodies at the feeling.

“Now…”

Taking hold of Sherlock by the wrist again, John guides Sherlock’s oil-slicked hand back down between their bodies, until Sherlock’s fingers slip into the heat beneath John’s bollocks and come
to rest at the entrance to his body.

Sherlock can hear John’s breathing go thin.

“So now just… push in a little bit of a time to help me—” John gasps as Sherlock readjusts his finger. “To help me get accustomed, alright?”

Sherlock nods, his curls brushing John’s cheek as he leans in. He can’t speak—he’s too overcome by the intimacy of this moment, at the feeling of his slick finger poised against this place on John’s body. Even though he’s done this before, something about this time feels different, more charged, perhaps because of what it’s leading up to.

He knows by now how much this affects John—he came almost immediately the previous two times Sherlock has done this, and that knowledge makes Sherlock’s own arousal increase, his heart stuttering in an eager staccato against his ribs, the blood rising in his face as he thinks about how John will be affected when it’s more than just his finger entering him.

He pushes his finger in, drawing an astonished breath at how easily John’s body takes him in with the help of the oil. Encouraged, he slides the tip of his middle finger around the rim, relishing the sound of John’s sharply drawn breath in response.

“Is that alright?”

“God—more than alright.”

They’re still lying side by side, but John has shifted slightly to give Sherlock more room to reach; he’s turned now so he’s on his back, Sherlock propped up on one elbow, his own hips pressed in against the side of John’s thigh.

“You can go ahead and add another,” John says, and his breathless voice would be encouragement enough even without his words so Sherlock pushes his second finger in alongside the first, astonished once again at how easily John’s body yields to him. He lets his long fingers push in and in, feeling his own arousal tighten in his belly at the sensation of John’s body stretching around him.

“God.” John draws out the word, releasing it on a long exhale so that it goes on and on, lifting his hips to meet the slide of Sherlock’s fingers until they are buried as deep as they can go.

“God,” John says again, and the way he says it makes something spark inside of Sherlock. “Your fingers—your fingers are so long.”

It’s rare that Sherlock has any confidence when he’s trying something new like this, something that he’s afraid he won’t be good at, that he doesn’t quite understand, but at John’s words now, at the plainly shocked and delighted quality in his voice, Sherlock can’t help but look up and smile, his hair falling forward again into his eye.

He loves to make John sound like this—John, who’s seen so much of the world, who’s done so much, who knows so much—when Sherlock can astonish him, can bring that bright and breathless quality to his voice, it makes Sherlock’s whole body go warm with pleasure.

He shakes the troublesome lock of hair out of his eye so he can see John’s face clearly, refocusing his attention, searching for that spot that John found inside of him that made the rest of the world fade to a distant blur around him.

John must know what he’s looking for because he pulls his knee up, opening himself wider to
Sherlock, angling his hips, closing his eyes as he does so and letting out another long breath.

Sherlock moves his fingers, turning, reaching, conscious of the fact that he’s trying to help John’s body adjust, watching John’s face carefully as he does so to be sure he doesn’t push him too far or too fast.

“You’re almost there… just curl your fingers and you’ll—"

John’s body tenses with a gasp and Sherlock knows he’s found it.

“There, there, there,” he says in a low rush, pushing his hips forward and gasping again.

Sherlock rubs his middle finger over the spot that feels like a tiny bump inside of John and watches in fascinated delight as a shudder of pleasure rolls through him, his hands tightening into fists where they’re lying at his sides.

“What is it?” he asks, his curiosity so intense he forgets that perhaps now is not the right moment to ask John complicated anatomical questions.

“It’s—Jesus,” John’s cock surges against his belly as Sherlock’s searching fingers rub against the spot. “I don’t know exactly but it’s—” John makes a stifled sound, tipping his head back. When he finally lifts his head to finish speaking, his voice is rough. “It feels incredibly good, I can tell you that much. Oh my god, Sherlock, your hands.”

John’s head drops back again, his knee lifting in an effort to draw Sherlock’s fingers deeper but the space in Sherlock’s narrow bed is so confined that when he does so, his knee knocks up against the wall. He curses lightly, twisting his torso to try to make more room, and ends up rolling his hips instead to get the stimulation he’s searching for, and whatever he’s done must have worked because he lets out a moan that goes straight to Sherlock’s cock.

“Give me another finger,” John gasps, and the fact that there’s already something desperate in his voice, that it’s almost more of a command than a request, makes anticipation leap in Sherlock’s belly. If John is already this affected, what will it be like when it’s his cock inside of John instead of just his fingers?

Sherlock cannot imagine.

He hurries to comply, and he finds that his third finger slides in just as easily as the second.

“Now twist your fingers a bit to help me—ahhh yes, perfect—good.”

Sherlock does as John asks, twisting all three fingers to help stretch him open, trying to rub that little spot inside of John as he does so to give him some pleasure to ease the discomfort.

John moans again, the sound low and broken, his body rising to meet Sherlock’s hand, and it’s so good—seeing John like this, hearing the sounds he’s making—that Sherlock could almost, almost be tempted to make John come like this. It would be very good for John—of that much he is certain.

But he’s too curious to know what it will feel like to actually be inside of John, and now that he has the thought in his mind, now that he can almost imagine it, he knows he will never be satisfied until he’s felt it.

He loves the feeling of John’s body around his fingers, the tight heat gripping him; it makes Sherlock’s own cock throb in anticipation and he rocks his hips forward into John’s thigh without
thinking, seeking stimulation.

John’s knees twitch wider, his body straining to pull Sherlock’s fingers deeper in, and this time he bangs his knee hard into the wall beside him.

Cursing, John sits up on his elbows.

“Hang on—we need to reposition.”

It’s true that it isn’t exactly easy for Sherlock to reach from where he’s lying pressed against John’s side. Even given their very confined space there’s probably a better way to do this.

“Sit up a moment.”

With reluctance, Sherlock pulls his fingers free, and sits up.

Pulling his knees up, John gestures for Sherlock to come sit between them.

“Come between my legs—this will make things much easier.”

Sherlock crawls around to kneel between John’s spread thighs, and oh god, why haven’t they been doing this from the beginning? The sight of John like this, legs parted, knees bent to expose his arse-hole, which Sherlock can see is stretched wider than usual from the presence of his fingers, the darker hair around it slightly damp from Sherlock’s oil-coated fingers; and above it, his bollocks drawn up against his body, his cock flushed and leaking where it’s straining against his stomach—it’s enough to make Sherlock’s throat tight with arousal, to make his whole body ache with a feeling like hunger, but deeper, more primal.

Sherlock licks his lips.

The tiny bottle of oil is still clenched in his left hand, and he reaches for it now again, pulling out the stopper and re-coating his fingers, before closing it again with some difficulty and dropping it to the mattress beside him.

He places his hands instinctively on John’s bent knees, eyeing the lean lines of muscle in John’s thighs, the rounded curves of his arse, and there must be something in his look that betrays his hunger, because John is laughing as he looks up at Sherlock, the sound of it breathless but delighted.

“Appreciating the view?”

Sherlock hums his assent as he slides his hands down the insides of John’s thighs, his fingers leaving smears of oil in their wake that catch the light from the candles, drawing attention to the grooves of muscle there, and Sherlock can feel himself slipping into that state where his body dictates his next action, rather than his mind.

It’s so strange, this feeling, but Sherlock surrenders to it, lets his fingers glide where they want to go, first up and over the swell of John’s bollocks, savoring the gasp from John at the feeling of his slick fingers, palming up over the root of his cock, and then back down, thumbs tracing the curves of John’s arse cheeks, before circling back up to the puckered flesh of John’s arse hole, caressing, massaging the sensitive skin, but not yet pushing in.

He circles the opening with the tips of each finger, appreciating the difference in texture there, aroused and fascinated in equal measure at the feeling of John’s body opening to his touch, trying to draw him in.
It’s clear this time that John is ready, and he does not ask before slipping one, then two fingers easily in, savoring the feeling of John’s body gripping him as he buries both fingers up to the highest knuckle.

“Oh god…”

Sherlock looks up to see John’s eyes falling closed, one hand coming up to grasp his own forehead.

“Is it alright?”

John laughs again, but this time, the sound is so breathless it’s more like a gasp. He opens his eyes to look up at Sherlock and the blue in his irises is warm and hazy, his pupils enormous and studded with light.

“My god, Sherlock…”

And that’s all he manages because Sherlock has found that particular spot again, and has begun massaging it lightly. It’s easy to reach with Sherlock’s long middle finger—and John’s hips buck in response, his mouth falling open in a silent exclamation of pleasure before a long moan slips out.

Sherlock watches, fascinated as a bead of liquid pulses out of the flushed tip of John’s cock. He reaches out with the hand that’s not inside John and rubs his finger through the moisture.

John curses loudly, hips jolting upwards again.

“Jesus Christ!” The look John gives him in response makes heat pool low in Sherlock’s abdomen. And then John is smiling at him in such astonished delight that Sherlock feels his heart turn over.

“I told you, you’d be a natural.”

It’s such an intimate place to be touching John—the fact that Sherlock is allowed to do this, to know John in this way… it feels like an incredible gift. Not for the first time, he’s overcome with a feeling of something like holiness, or at least what Sherlock has heard other people describe the feeling to be like.

A feeling of awe, of wonder comes over him, such that Sherlock almost forgets his own arousal. He only wants to go on stroking John here until he’s crying out with pleasure, until his body is clenching around Sherlock’s fingers as he comes. Sherlock wants to know that feeling, he needs to know it, suddenly more than he’s ever wanted anything else in the world.

But all of a sudden John’s hand is at Sherlock’s wrist stilling the movement.

“Stop,” he breathes, looking up at Sherlock with something like regret. “I need you to stop or else I’m going to come.”

Sherlock looks back at John, breathing hard, and it takes him a moment to remember what they’re building up towards, why John coming right this instant isn’t what they want.

“Oh my god, your fingers feel so good.”

John scrubs a bandaged hand down his face as if he’s trying to draw himself back from the edge. There’s sweat shining at his temples. When he looks back up, Sherlock can see that the blue in his irises has receded to the slenderest rings around his pupils.

“But I want to feel your cock inside me; I want you inside of me, Sherlock.”
Pleasure rolls through Sherlock’s body at John’s words, and he remembers his own cock lying heavy against his thighs.

“Yes,” he says in a breathless rush, once again overcome with the fear that they’ll run out of time before they can get to it. “Yes,” he says again, pulling his fingers free and groping for the bottle where he dropped it on the bed.

Time is a blur that he cannot distinguish; Sherlock has no idea how long it’s been since they stumbled down the staircase and through his door. It feels like no time at all has passed, but surely, it’s been hours. Is the party still going on above deck?

He can hear the distant sounds of music above them, a sudden bark of drunken laughter—and someone, closer at hand, shouting above the din.

But none of that matters—that world beyond the door is irrelevant to them in this moment, and the other people on board—the memory of Sherlock playing his violin for them in the blazing afternoon sunlight—feels like a lifetime ago.

That experience, of making music with John in front of everyone, is a world away from the intense intimacy unfurling between them now: the closeness of the room, the candlelight trembling on the lines of John’s body, the stifling heat… it all serves to draw them closer together, so that the sweat streaming down Sherlock’s back connects him to John through the perspiration at his temples, the gold light at John’s throat is the same as that on Sherlock’s shoulders, and Sherlock’s palm on John’s knee is but one of a thousand countless points connecting them in this moment.

At least, these are the delirious thoughts in Sherlock’s mind as he pulls the stopper from the tiny bottle of oil.

He freezes with the bottle tipped against his fingers as he realizes that he isn’t sure exactly how to go about the next step (beyond the basic principal, of course).

John must sense his uncertainty because he sits up then, eying Sherlock through a heavy fringe of golden lashes.

When he speaks, his voice is like sex itself.

Sherlock almost drops the bottle.

“Come closer and kneel up so you’re right against me… there.” John runs an appreciative hand up the back of Sherlock’s thigh and Sherlock shivers at his touch. His skin feels electrified. “Good.”

John lifts his fingers to the hand holding the vial of oil and brushes Sherlock’s knuckles.

“Now you’ll want to coat yourself thoroughly. Normally I would help you do this part,” Sherlock hears something in John’s voice catch. “But this time I’ll just have to be content with watching.”

Hands trembling harder than ever, Sherlock uncorks the bottle, tipping probably far too much of the precious oil over his fingers. Then he reaches down to take himself in hand.

At the touch of his own slick fingers against the heated skin of his cock, all his breath leaves him in a hiss.

Oh god, John wasn’t wrong when he described the feeling of this—the motion of his fingers is so smooth that it’s all Sherlock can do not to just keep touching himself until he finds release. If he always had something like this when he touched himself… my god.
John is watching him intently, his own cock flushed nearly purple where it’s lying against his belly. Sherlock wants to reach out and take hold of it with his slick fingers, but he knows that would be the end for John. He steadies his breathing and then looks up to John for his next direction.

“The head is always the hardest part, so try and do that all at once, and then give me a little time to adjust. I’ll tell you when it’s alright to move, all right?”

Sherlock nods, scarcely capable of forming words in this moment.

He’ll be lucky if he doesn’t come instantly at this point.

But he does as John says; with one hand, he positions his cock so that the tip is lined up against the entrance to John’s body.

John’s breathing is growing increasingly shallow so Sherlock looks to him, waiting for some sign, trying not to let his eyes stray down the line of John’s body, to the shadows pooling in the grooves of his hips, his tensed abdominal muscles, his splayed open thighs because if he looks too hard at the sight of John laid out beneath him like this, he will come right now and it will all be over.

John pulls his knees up, tilting his body fractionally closer to Sherlock’s waiting cock, and then he nods.

Biting his lip to keep himself from moving too quickly, Sherlock pushes with his hips—slowly, slowly—conscious all the while of John’s heavy-lidded eyes, the down-turned shape of his open mouth, and oh god John’s body is parting around him and the feeling of it is like nothing Sherlock has ever experienced—he stops himself, breathing ragged, fingers tightening on the base of his cock because it’s too much, it’s too good, and he needs a moment, otherwise it feels as though the world may shatter around him.

He doesn’t even realize his eyes have fallen closed when he hears John’s voice, sounding slightly strained.

“Breathe, Sherlock.”

He opens his eyes and sees John looking up at him with some concern, and it’s only then that he realizes he’s been holding his breath. He lets it out in a rush, careful to keep his hips still as he draws another deep breath in.

John looks searchingly up at him, the familiar crease between his brows betraying his worry. “Better?”

Sherlock nods.

“You can keep moving—I’ll tell you when to stop.”

Drawing another deep breath to ground himself first, he pushes forward with his hips, an inch at a time, his eyes on John’s face, waiting for a sign from him to stop.

He can see the discomfort on John’s face, the groove between his brows deepening, a faint flicker of not quite pain.

“Should I stop?” he gasps.

John shakes his head. “No—just keep—going slowly… like that—just like that.”
Sherlock does, although it’s difficult to keep the slide of his hips slow. His body feels like it’s begging him to move—to create friction, to make use of this indescribable feeling of heat, of pressure around his cock.

And all the while the knowledge that it’s John—this is John whose body he is entering, who’s taking him in inch by agonizing inch is enough to make Sherlock need to stop every few seconds and remind himself to breathe.

He stops when his hips are almost flush with John’s arse, not because John has told him to, but because John’s eyes have fallen shut and there’s a look on his face that is halfway between pleasure and pain and Sherlock needs to be certain that it’s the former and not the latter.

“Is it—is it all right?”

“Yeah, just… give me a minute.”

Sherlock watches John’s chest rise as he draws in a deep breath—skin contracting over his ribs, the sharp lines of his abdominal muscles deepening as his chest expands, and Sherlock is once again struck by the impossible beauty of the man before him, by the reality of what they’re doing now, together.

It’s almost too much.

Sherlock drops his head, forcing himself to draw another deep breath, mimicking John’s actions.

His arm is trembling where it’s planted on the mattress by John’s hip. It’s unbelievably hot in the tiny room and Sherlock’s hairline is soaked with sweat—he can feel a drop of it now, creeping down his neck.

Sherlock glances back up at John. There’s sweat glistening on his forehead, on the curves of his pectorals. His nipples are erect and flushed dark and Sherlock’s mouth fills with water at the sight of them. He’s half-tempted to bend down and take one into his mouth but he doesn’t dare move.

He watches John’s stomach expand as he lets out another long breath.

“What does it feel like?”

John opens his eyes and Sherlock sees that they are hazy with lust, the blue of his irises storm-dark, so thin now they seem to bleed into the black of his pupils.

John tips his head back, lengthening his neck. Sherlock can see his pulse beating in the base of his throat. He wants to lick that too. He feels another bead of sweat crawl down his neck.

“It’s… strange but good. It will feel even better in a minute… it just takes a bit of getting used to when you’re out of practice.”

John takes another deep breath, and at the sight of John’s chest expanding again, his dark nipples standing out from his chest, Sherlock can’t help himself. Some part of his brain knows he should ask first, but another part of his brain is just as certain that this is the right course of action.

He bends down and licks at one flushed nipple, dragging his tongue over the peaked flesh, feeling a bolt of pleasure run straight to his cock at the sensation of it hardening beneath his tongue.

John gasps above him, one hand coming instinctively up to grasp at Sherlock’s hair, his back arching to press himself closer.
Encouraged by John’s response, Sherlock repeats the motion, lapping at the little bead of flesh several times before closing the whole of his mouth over it and sucking lightly.

John lets out a moan, his hips jerking instinctively, and this time it’s Sherlock’s turn to gasp as the motion finally brings some longed for stimulation to his aching cock.

Sherlock’s eyes slam shut. He doesn’t dare move for fear of hurting John but even that hint of movement, of friction—is so good.

“Oh my god, John.”

His voice is so deep it’s almost unrecognizable.

“I know.”

John’s voice is ragged, his head dropping back against the pillow.

Sherlock bends his head again to John’s chest, this time licking over the prominent muscles of John’s pectorals, tasting salt and sweat, before taking the nipple into his mouth and sucking.

John moans again, the sound low and guttural, his hips stuttering upwards, and his voice when he speaks is scraped raw with longing. “Ok, I’m ready—oh my god, Sherlock, please—I need you to move.”

Sherlock’s tongue is still circling John’s nipple when he acquiesces to John’s request. His thrusts are shallow at first—he doesn’t know what will feel best for John—or, to be honest, how much he will be able to take—and he was right to be cautious, because even those first few gentle thrusts release a pleasure in him so intense that he loses all ability to do more than two things at once.

He lifts his head from John’s chest, his mouth dropping open in shock.

John is smiling now beneath him. “I know. It’s only going to get better. Keep—” Sherlock watches the muscles in John’s throat shift as he swallows. “Keep going.”

Sherlock hardly knows how he will be able to—the feeling of it is so overwhelming—but his body seems to know better. His hips begin to move again, this time thrusting slightly harder, deeper, the rhythm of what his body wants coming to him instinctually, and he knows he must be doing something right when John lets out a sound Sherlock has never heard him make before—sharp and high—full of need.

“Jesus, Sherlock—the feeling—of you… don’t stop. Don’t stop.”

Sherlock drops his other hand to the mattress, so that both his hands are planted now on either side of John, to give him better purchase to thrust.

It feels so good—it’s so good he can’t think—the friction, the heat, the slow slick slide of his cock in and out is like nothing he’s felt before. It’s making his thoughts fracture and splinter, sizzling into an incoherent mass of sparks, bright color and white light, gold pulsing star-bright and hot against the darkness behind his eyes.

He wants to ask John if the pace is all right—to make sure that it isn’t too fast or too hard, but before he can get the question out, John is lifting his legs to wrap them around Sherlock’s waist, and arching his back, changing the angle to bring Sherlock deeper inside him.

Whatever he did must have worked because when Sherlock thrusts again, John makes the same
sharp, keening sound—but louder, longer, this time—desperate.

“Fuck, Sherlock—yes, keep… yes.”

And he wishes he could see John better, wishes he could freeze time in this moment so he could forever capture the sensation of being this deep inside of John, buried in him, the exquisite perfection of this—Sherlock can feel the pulse inside John’s body throbbing against his cock, the pressure of his heels on either side of Sherlock’s spine—but he can’t stop, and he’s too far gone—it’s been too much, for too long, and before he can even think to stop himself, he realizes he’s coming, his body tensing over John, the first wave of his pleasure tearing through him with such force that he thinks he might be crying out, he cannot tell over the roaring in his ears.

He feels John’s heels digging in on either side of his spine and he wonders, distantly, if John is coming too, but before he can piece together how he might help facilitate that his elbows are buckling, his body collapsing against John’s chest as pleasure unravels his last ounce of muscle control.

He lies against John, gasping, his body dripping with sweat, waiting for his heart rate to slow, waiting for the strength to return to his limbs so that he can lift himself up and ask John what he can do for him.

It takes longer than it’s ever taken before and he’s grateful that John is so patient, that John seems to understand as always, what Sherlock is going through.

John’s arms come up around him, and as he lies there, still inside of John, with his arms and legs twined around him, his cooling cheek pressed against John’s chest, Sherlock thinks, This is everything. Nothing will ever be as perfect as this.

John’s fingers push through the sweat-dampened hair at Sherlock’s neck.

“Alright?”

Sherlock snorts against John’s chest, lifting his head with some effort.

John’s face is lovelier than he’s ever seen it—the look of soft delight as he studies Sherlock disturbed only slightly by the tension of what Sherlock imagines must be still be a profound amount of arousal, the flush in his cheeks creeping all the way down his throat to his chest.

The lights in John’s eyes seem to have doubled and Sherlock knows it’s just the reflection from the candle flame but to Sherlock, it looks like starlight, suspended in the darkness of his pupils.

Sherlock has nothing to say in answer, nothing intelligible anyway, so he merely shakes his head.

John slides his second hand into Sherlock’s curls, pulling him up to his flushed and smiling mouth.

“I take it that’s a yes?”

Sherlock closes the distance between them, his own hands sliding up to cup John’s face as he kisses him.

John’s mouth is wet and soft, and he feels his cock give a half-hearted throb inside of John in response.

Sherlock’s cheeks flame briefly with embarrassment. “I’m sorry that was so…. short.” He pulls back, eyes intent on John’s. “What—what can I do?”
John strokes absently down the length of Sherlock’s spine with the backs of his knuckles. Sherlock shivers at the light touch.

“Don’t you dare apologize.” John kisses his worried mouth. “You were absolutely spectacular. As for your question, if you’re not too tired…”

Sherlock shakes his head so hard John lifts both his hands in surrender, laughing.

“Fine, fine—that’s good. Well, if you’re still eager to continue…” John shifts Sherlock slightly against him to give Sherlock room to wriggle backward, placing his mouth at Sherlock’s ear as he does so. “I’d love to feel those fingers of yours inside of me again.”

Sherlock is so eager to comply he bangs his elbow into the wall beside them in his haste to sit up.

“Easy, easy,” John smoothes a bandaged hand once more down Sherlock’s spine. “I’m… I’m close now it won’t take much. Honestly, anyway you touch me is going to be—”

John’s words are lost in a gasp as Sherlock reaches down between John’s spread thighs and pushes his fingers in.

He needs no preparation. As Sherlock had assumed the entrance to John’s body is stretched wide from the presence of Sherlock’s cock, his insides still slick from the oil but also—Sherlock realizes with a flutter of an emotion he cannot describe—from Sherlock’s release.

The thought makes his own thoroughly sated cock give another half-hearted twitch against his thigh, makes him ache to give John the same feeling of pleasure that he just experienced.

Sherlock leans in closer, slipping a third finger in alongside the other two with no difficulty. At this point, he isn’t certain whether four would be better.

“Tell me what you need.”

John’s eyes have fluttered shut, hips lifting in an effort to help Sherlock find that spot inside him again.

Sherlock curls his middle finger like he did before and—

John’s breath catches, hips stilling briefly.

Sherlock rubs against it, flexing his fingers.

“Ju—just like that—yes. But… move your fingers in and out.”

Sherlock does, the passage of his fingers made easy by the slickness inside of John.

“Yes—” John lets out a groan, his eyes sliding closed. “Fuck me with your fingers, Sherlock. Yes, yes—yes.”

He watches John’s mouth fall open, head dropping back onto the pillow, his thighs splayed wide as Sherlock searches for the rhythm that will pull John apart.

It’s easy when he can see John before him like this, his whole body laid out for Sherlock’s hungry gaze; easy to track the tiny signs of pleasure, the shifts in his reaction as Sherlock readjusts his speed, the angle of his fingers.

He quickens his pace, making sure that the tips of his fingers brush that spot inside of John on each
upward thrust—not too hard, but with just enough pressure—until John is moaning, the sound low and helpless, and lifting his hips up to meet every stroke.

His fists are curled above his head in a helpless gesture, and to see John, whose strength is as much a part of him as his easy smile, his blue eyes, his quick temper, to see John made vulnerable in this way, his body shaking under Sherlock’s hands—it makes Sherlock’s throat close up, makes him reach his free hand down and lay it on John’s trembling abdomen, overcome with the beauty of the man before him.

Even if Sherlock is fairly certain that what he’s doing is very good, he cannot help but ask just to hear John’s affirmation.

“Is that—alright?” he asks, surprised by the breathless quality of his own voice. He stills the movements of his hand, shifting on his knees to bring himself closer to John, placing a hand on the sensitive skin of John’s inner knee and stroking lightly.

John’s whole body shudders at the touch—Sherlock sees his cock leap against his belly.

“Don’t stop!”

John’s eyes fly open and there’s a wild look in his eyes before he seems to remember himself.

“Yes—yes it’s perfect, god—don’t stop now!”

There’s a flush climbing high in his cheeks, staining his gold skin a darker bronze, in a way that Sherlock rarely sees.

Blushing comes as naturally as breathing to Sherlock whose pale skin shows every mark and change of mood, but not John, who’s tanned so dark his color rarely shows. It’s a sign of how deeply affected he is now to see it. His chest is mottled with color too, his nipples flushed dark and painfully erect.

Seeing them, Sherlock cannot help but lean forward as he did before, and brush his closed lips against first one and then the other.

He has a sneaking suspicion that what he’s doing might be considered cruel, especially when he hears John make a broken sound above him that sounds like a strangled version of his own name, but it’s all in service of what Sherlock is working towards, which is to give John as much pleasure as he just gave to Sherlock, and when Sherlock is in this mood—his body guiding him before he has a chance to second guess his decisions—it usually pays off.

He opens his mouth and flicks his tongue against John’s nipple, then presses his whole mouth down and sucks wetly, just as fingers start to move again.

John actually yells, his thighs clamping hard around Sherlock’s forearm as Sherlock re-establishes the rhythm that seemed to work so well.

“Fuck Sherlock—fuck, yes. Fuck.”

John’s hips are moving in time with Sherlock’s hand and Sherlock can feel the power in his body as he thrusts.

He sits up on his elbows to give himself a better angle and the change in position must be good because as soon as he sits up, his eyes are fluttering shut again; Sherlock can see the whole of his throat flushed with heat when his head drops back.
“Fuck yes fuck—yes.”

He’s chanting in time with his thrusts; Sherlock sits up higher on his knees to meet him, delighting in the crush of John’s thighs around his arm. John is so strong.

“Give me—give me one more finger.”

Sherlock complies without question, his fourth finger slipping in as sweetly as a song, and now John’s hips are speeding up, driving Sherlock’s fingers hard into the center of himself, harder than Sherlock ever would have dared try, until he’s moaning continuously—so loudly that Sherlock experiences the briefest flicker of concern—what if someone were to hear…? But surely everyone is still at the party, and even if they came below, the sounds from above deck must be more than loud enough to drown them out.

He struggles for a moment to hear beyond the sounds contained within the narrow room, but Sherlock can hear nothing besides the sounds John is making: his low moans; the strange slap of his arm moving against John—and suddenly he cannot be sure whether there is no sound, or if he simply cannot hear it. But as his eyes fall back on John, all thoughts of the outside world are forgotten at the sight of John before him, sweat running down his neck in shining rivulets, the power of his body blazing before Sherlock like an open flame.

Sherlock’s arm is starting to ache but he wants so badly to bring John to a close in this way that he doesn’t think about stopping. He’s just wondering if he should try and reach for John’s cock to give him some extra stimulation—if he can even manage right now—when he feels John’s body buckle and jerk, John’s thighs closing so hard on Sherlock’s arm he actually gasps in pain—but then everything else is forgotten as he feels, actually feels, John’s muscles contract around his fingers as he begins to come.

John presses his forehead in against Sherlock’s chest as the waves of pleasure rock through him, and Sherlock feels seared by the touch, so hot is the press of John’s forehead against him, as if the light of the sun were pouring through him into Sherlock; the coiled strength in John’s stomach and thighs curled against him like the might of the ocean held in check.

John gasps against him, burning, shaking—his whole body glittering with sweat. If Sherlock didn’t know better he would think that John was in tremendous pain, his thighs still tensed around Sherlock’s forearm, his body curled into Sherlock’s as though in question, and Sherlock were the answer.

He can still feel John’s body clenching around his fingers, and it’s like nothing Sherlock has ever experienced. The realization that he’s feeling John’s reaction in the most intimate way possible makes him reach instinctively for John’s cock with his other hand so he can feel the pulse of his release there too, the warm gush of fluid over his fingers.

The touch of his hand makes John gasp anew and Sherlock feels John’s body clenching hard again around his fingers as a new wave of pleasure shudders through him—feels the hot pulse of liquid that bursts out of him in response.

John makes a whimpering sound and Sherlock moves to reach for him, to hold him by his hip, to give him some support because if John is experiencing even a tenth of what Sherlock is experiencing in this moment then he must feel as though he’s coming apart.

All at once, he feels the tension go out of John—his legs unclench from around Sherlock’s arm and he sags, as though with sudden weariness, back onto the mattress. It’s as if all the muscles in his body have turned suddenly to water.
He lies with one arm thrown over his eyes, utterly motionless save for the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

Sherlock takes the opportunity to pull his fingers free, and then gently lowers himself down to lie beside John.

Without opening his eyes, John lifts his arm and settles it over Sherlock’s shoulders, pulling Sherlock in close against him. Sherlock rests his cheek against John’s shoulder and looks up at him, watches the flush receding from John’s chest and throat, the delicate tremor of his pulse in his closed eyelids.

There seems no need to say anything at all—John’s posture conveys his contentment more eloquently than any words ever could. Still, Sherlock feels the need to sit up a bit so that his head is propped on his hand and he can get a better look at John, searching for the right question.

He’s trying to work out exactly what to say when John opens his eyes.

The blue in his irises is warm with affection.

“You’re worrying aren’t you?”

Sherlock feels vaguely affronted. He opens his mouth to deny it. “I—”

But then John says: “I was right about you.”

Sherlock licks dry lips. “What do you mean?”

John reaches a hand up to caress the hair at the back of Sherlock’s neck.

“When I told you that you were a god from the depths of the sea. No other being could possibly have the ability to make me feel as good as you just did.”

Sherlock thought it wasn’t possible for him to feel any happier in this moment; he was wrong. He can feel the glow of his pleasure at John’s words lighting him up from within.

He cannot keep the smile from his face. “Really?”

“Let’s just say, I’ve never experienced pleasure like that before in my life.”

John’s hand at the back of Sherlock’s neck pulls him down into a kiss. John’s waiting mouth is soft and open—Sherlock loses himself in it, his own hand coming up to cup John’s jaw, his thumb brushing the curve of it as he tries to memorize this moment in time, sear into his being so that he has it with him always.

When he finally pulls back for air, his heart is pounding hard against John’s side.

“You’re a creature of magic,” John murmurs, looking up at him with lights in his eyes. “It’s the only plausible explanation.”

Sherlock has no response to this; he’s too overcome with happiness to argue, to tell John that he is wrong, of course. He’s got it backwards—John is full of magic, not Sherlock. It’s as obvious as the fact that his hair is blonde, that his eyes are blue; anyone who looks at him can see it rising off of him like steam.

Instead, he tucks his chin in against John’s shoulder and allows himself to shut his eyes, relishing the feeling of John’s hand skimming up his side, every pore of his being intent on preserving this
moment forever in his mind.

He’s so focused on the feeling of John’s body against him, John’s fingers so gentle at his hip, that at first he thinks he imagines the sound. From far above their heads, over the familiar creaking of the *Galatea*’s hull, comes the distant sound of shouting, voices raised in argument.

He feels John still the movement of his fingers.

So not imagined then.

It’s as if all the sounds of the outside world are only now creeping back in around them, as if a spell had kept the noises of the regular world at bay.

Distantly, he can hear the chaos of the celebrations above—the sounds of drunken laughter, the pounding of footsteps, the slightly off kilter music of Old Leroy’s mouth organ.

But the shouting voices are distinct from the noises of the raucous celebration, and it takes Sherlock a moment to understand why—it’s because they’re closer, getting louder every moment actually, and as the owners of the voices reach the hatch of the deck above, Sherlock recognizes, with a frisson of ice-cold fear, the drawling voice of one detested individual in particular.

“—I’m telling you, they’re in there! If you’ll only look, you’ll see I’m right—”

“Will you put a cork in it, Anderson?” It’s Lieutenant Deverall, sounding very irritated, and maybe slightly drunk. “We know! You’ve been saying the same bloody thing for the last twenty minutes. We’ve agreed to go knock on his door, haven’t we?”

Sherlock sits upright, his heart pounding like a piston in his throat, and stares at John, who does the same, pushing himself to a sitting position, and looking at Sherlock with an expression of quiet horror dawning on his face.

They stare at one another and Sherlock sees the same naked fear reflected back in John’s eyes, along with the same unspoken question.

*What do we do?*

“It’s fraternization of the most sordid kind. You’ll see! Watson’s in there with him getting up to all sorts of unspeakable acts. As soon as the captain finds out, hanging will be the least of his worries!”

“Yes, Anderson, so you’ve said.” A third voice, sounding equally exasperated and bored, responds this time. It’s the other officer who’s always hanging round with Deverall. Sherlock cannot think of his name. His mind is sluggish with panic.

It’s happening—Sherlock can’t believe it’s actually happening. After so many nights of fearing this exact scenario, so many hours of terror and worry and dread anticipating this nightmarish possibility—just like that, when they finally stopped fearing it would happen, here it is.

The footsteps of the three men are audible now, descending the stairs.

Sherlock needs to think; there has to be a way out of this—it can’t end like this—not now. But the fear is blotting out his ability to think, like spilled ink covering a page; he can’t get his mind to cooperate, to focus.

All he can think is that if they take John now he will never forgive himself.
Time seems to slow and stretch around them as they hear the men’s footsteps reach the bottom of the stairs and begin walking up the corridor.

Sherlock watches the expression on John’s face close over at the sound. It’s like a shadow falling over him, like a door being shut somewhere inside of him so that the light cannot get out, and Sherlock knows, seeing it, that John has given up on any chance of escape; he’s preparing himself for the inevitable now, steeling himself for that door opening and everything that will follow.

This must be what John looks like in the moments before battle.

Sherlock can’t think what to say. He wants to apologize to John, to tell him that he loves him, to tell him not to be afraid, that he will fix this—but there isn’t time. Each one of these things feels too trivial, feels inadequate in this moment that may very well be their last.

Then all of a sudden it hits him.

Dimmock, that’s the officer’s name.

And as soon as Sherlock remembers it he knows what he has to do.

Without saying a word to John, he leaps off the bed and throws himself with all his might against the case that stands between the end of his bed and the wall. It only takes two shoves to move it aside and reveal the hole in the wall behind it.

He doesn’t need to say anything to John; he’s already off the bed and gathering his clothing in his arms. He doesn’t pause to dress. He crosses the room to the foot of the bed and is lowering himself to his knees when Sherlock grabs him by the arm.

He wants to tell John that Ms. Simpson’s room is next door, that the hole leads to the space under her bed, so he’ll be alright as long as he hides under there, but the footsteps have come to a halt outside Sherlock’s door, and now there’s a sharp knock on the wood.

Sherlock’s whole body jolts with terror at the sound.

“Mr. Holmes?”

John does not waste another moment. Before Sherlock can say anything to him he’s on his hands and knees, shoving his bundle of clothing in front of him and vanishing into the darkness of the room beyond.

“Mr. Holmes, are you in there? If you don’t mind, sir, we’d like a word.”

For one horrifying moment, Sherlock cannot make his voice work.

“Mr. Holmes?”

“Yes, just a minute!”

As quickly and silently as he can, he moves the case back into place to hide the hole in the wall, and then, realizing that he’s still stark naked, begins to search in desperation for his breeches in the chaos of shed clothing on the floor.

“Why are you waiting to open it?”

Sherlock can hear the hiss of Anderson’s voice as clearly as if there was no door between them.
“For god’s sake, just go in!”

There’s a scuffled thumping sound and then Sherlock hears Deverall’s furious voice in reply.

“Speak to me like that again, and you’re going to be scraping barnacles off the underside of the hull with your teeth for the rest of this voyage, do you understand me?”

Sherlock does not catch Anderson’s reply.

The knock on the door sounds again. “Mr. Holmes!”

Sherlock yanks his breeches up his thighs, his shaking fingers fumbling with the ties.

“Coming!”

Then, kicking the whole pile of discarded clothing under the bed, he throws one last glance at the case to be sure it doesn’t look too out of place, and crosses the room to open the door.
Chapter Forty Four

Chapter Notes

The opening scene of this chapter has some mild violence (nothing worse than you have seen so far), and some early-19th century homophobic slurs. If that is potentially difficult for you, please proceed with caution. <3

The first thing Sherlock sees upon opening the door is Lieutenant Deverall’s severely irritated expression, and Dimmock, standing at his side, looking very red in the face, whether from embarrassment or too much drink, is impossible to tell. Sherlock suspects it must be some combination of both.

Behind them, trying desperately to look past them into Sherlock’s room is Anderson’s scowling, furious face.

It occurs to Sherlock, too late, that it probably would have been a good idea to put a shirt on as well.

He feels all at once, completely exposed, standing there before the two officers in nothing but his breeches. He doesn’t want to know what his hair must look like.

But he can tell from one glance at both of them—could tell even before he opened the door—that they have no interest in being there. It’s obvious that Anderson, desperate to enact some kind of revenge upon Sherlock for getting him demoted, has been hounding them all night in an attempt to catch him and John in the act.

He must have really been badgering them—Sherlock can’t think why else either man would have agreed to this errand, especially not when—Sherlock can tell by the smear of rouge on Deverall’s unbuttoned collar, at least one of them was enjoying the festivities.

They’ve clearly only come down here in an effort to shut Anderson up; they want this over as quickly as Sherlock does, so they can return to the party up on deck.

Knowing this makes it easier for Sherlock to slip into (what he hopes comes across as) a cool and unassuming manner, in spite of the fact that he’s standing half-clothed in front of them, full of the knowledge that the only thing currently hiding John from view is a decrepit old sea chest.

“Gentlemen,” he says by way of greeting. “How can I help you?”

“Good evening, Mr. Holmes.” Deverall inclines his head with exaggerated politeness. “So sorry to bother you but—well, we were just stopping by to inquire whether you, by any chance, had ah…”

He coughs in an obvious attempt to hide his discomfort. “Whether you ahh—had anyone in the room with you, just now?”

Sherlock shakes his head, fixing his features with a puzzled look.

“No. I’m afraid it’s just me.”

“Ah, well. You see… this is slightly embarrassing but… Mr. Anderson here is convinced that we
might find a certain member of the crew in here with you. He claims that he heard ah... noises of a particularly... indelicate nature coming from your room. He was worried some of the other passengers might be... upset by it. He claims that the noises were... quite loud.”

Sherlock notes with some interest that Dimmock’s face is getting steadily redder by the moment.

“It isn’t…” Deverall clear his throat, looking only marginally less uncomfortable than Dimmock. “There are rules against crew members ah... fraternizing with passengers, you see.”

Sherlock does his best to look shocked and affronted at the same time. He isn’t sure he manages it.

“I see. And which crew member is it that Mr. Anderson believes me to be—to borrow your expression—‘fraternizing’ with?”

“You know exactly who it is!” Anderson spits from over Deverall’s shoulder, apparently no longer able to contain himself. “You filthy sodomite!”

In spite of himself, Sherlock feels his cheeks color at the accusation. Rage blooms in his chest with sudden heat.

“Well, I’m so sorry to have to discredit Mr. Anderson’s lurid tale…” He levels Anderson with a look of poisonous hatred. “But you are mistaken.” He steps back, gesturing to the room behind him. “As you can see, there’s no one here but me.”

“You lying filth!”

Anderson lunges at Deverall’s shoulder in an effort to get past him into the room. Deverall puts an arm across the door to restrain him.

“Look at him, he’s lying! Look at his chest for God’s sake! Where do you think he got those marks?”

Sherlock only just manages to stop himself from looking down in horror at his own chest.

He doesn’t need to look; he remembers, too late, the trail of livid marks running from his jawline to his hip. The flash of accompanying memory—John’s mouth, hot and wet and biting—is like a sudden flare in a dark room. He knows, without having to look, that the marks are as red as freshly opened roses.

It takes all of his willpower to keep him from reaching down to cover himself.

Deverall’s embarrassment seems to increase tenfold. He clears his throat, purposefully averting his eyes from Sherlock’s very bare chest.

As Dimmock attempts to restrain Anderson, Deverall leans in towards Sherlock, lowering his voice considerably.

“Look, I know this is awkward as bollocks, but would you mind terribly if we just came in and had a quick look around? I can’t see any other way of shutting him up.”

Swallowing down his own profound discomfort, Sherlock nods.

“By all means.”

He pulls the door open and then stands aside, praying that the sight of his pounding heart is not too visible in his very naked chest.
“Thank you.”

The amount of relief in Deverall’s face would be comical to Sherlock if he weren’t so preoccupied with a potent mixture of rage and terror as Anderson shoves his way forward into the room.

Sherlock’s room is tiny—if Anderson is determined to find John (and he evidently is), he will not hesitate to tear the place apart. Given the chance, it will only take him a matter of seconds to find the two-foot hole in Sherlock’s wall.

As reluctant as Deverall and Dimmock may be to conduct this search, if they do actually find John they won’t have a choice but to turn him in.

He’s praying that John has been listening to the exchange and that he’ll take the opportunity to make his exit now that they’ve all filed into Sherlock’s room.

But the truth is there’s no telling what John will do; he might very well decide it’s a safer bet just to stay put.

Sherlock takes a step backwards, positioning himself by the wall at the foot of his bed, so that he’s not explicitly shielding the case from view with his body, but he’s at least near it in the event that Anderson tries to move it.

He isn’t sure what he’ll do if that situation arises; he’s hoping he’ll think of something by then.

With all three men standing in the room, it’s more evident than it’s ever been before just how small the space is. There’s barely room for the four of them to all stand without touching.

Dimmock hangs back by the door, while Anderson tears forward, looking around him in a furious circle.

“Look,” Deverall says with an exasperated gesture. “There’s clearly no one here.”

“He was just in here—I know he was! I heard them!”

The idea that Anderson heard them—that he was listening somewhere near by—makes a shudder of revulsion crawl down Sherlock’s spine.

Dropping to his knees, Anderson looks underneath the bed. He flings the pile of discarded clothing aside as if it might be shielding something from view.

“Alright Anderson, that’s enough. You’ve had your look. You were wrong. Time to go.”

Deverall reaches to take Anderson by the shoulder as he climbs to his feet, but Anderson pulls himself out of Deverall’s grasp with an enraged shout.

“I AM NOT WRONG!”

Sherlock sees Anderson’s eyes begin to scour the perimeter of the room, scrutinizing the space for evidence of where John might be hiding. Sherlock cannot let him put two and two together; he cannot give him the opportunity to look behind the case.

Mind searching frantically for anything to break Anderson’s focus, Sherlock steps forward, and says the first thing that comes into his head.

“Admit it, Anderson. You’re wrong again. Certainly not the first time though, is it? I think it might be time for you to give up on your naval career. Do something more suited to your talents like…”
oh, I don’t know, cleaning out chamber pots. But wait—that’s what you’re going to be doing for the rest of the voyage anyway, isn’t it? So maybe you’ve finally found your chosen—"

Before Deverall or Dimmock can react, Anderson has seized Sherlock by the shoulders and slammed him, with nauseating force, into the wall at his back.

“WHERE IS HE? WHERE ARE YOU HIDING HIM?”

Anderson’s face is purple with rage—his eyes are deranged. He looks utterly manic; his hair has escaped from its queue and is standing up around his face. There’s spittle flying from his mouth. Sherlock’s head is ringing from where it connected with the wall; he tries to catch his breath to respond but before he can manage Anderson is slamming him back into the wall again.

“ANSWER ME!”

Deverall grabs again for Anderson’s shoulder but Anderson shakes him off, shoving him so hard he sends Deverall spinning off kilter into Sherlock’s desk chair, nearly upsetting the candle on Sherlock’s desk.

Dimmock, clearly at a loss for what to do, dithers in the middle of the floor for a moment before turning to help Deverall climb back to his feet.

Sherlock can only hope that this relatively poor performance being demonstrated by Her Majesty’s best is due to the large amounts of alcohol that have been imbibed this evening, rather than lack of training or skill.

His own responses certainly feel slowed and Sherlock chooses to blame it on his alcohol consumption earlier this evening rather than the shameful possibility that he might actually be frightened of Anderson.

But if he is, it’s because there’s something more than deranged about Anderson in this moment.

Teeth bared in a grimace of pure hatred, Anderson readjusts his grip so he’s holding Sherlock by the throat.

Sherlock experiences a sick swoop of fear at the sudden pressure, a memory rising unbidden to the top of his mind of Steven’s hands in the same place, choking him.

“He was in here with you, fucking you,” Anderson hisses, his fingers digging into Sherlock’s windpipe. “I heard you! No one can convince me otherwise.” His face is so close to Sherlock’s he can see a vein in Anderson’s temple throbbing, the spittle clinging to his exposed teeth. “Now tell me where he is.”

Sherlock reaches up to pull Anderson’s hands off of him but his grip is unyielding. Anderson’s face breaks into a sneer.

“Bit difficult to say anything clever now, isn’t it?” He tightens his grip, his eyes glittering with something sharp and dangerous. “I should break your scrawny neck for speaking to me like that.”

Panic opens in Sherlock’s chest and this time he kicks out with his feet, as hard as he can, and manages to connect with Anderson’s legs.

He’s still barefoot so the blow doesn’t do much but it at least succeeds in startling Anderson enough to loosen his grip.
Sherlock drags a grateful breath into his lungs, and before Anderson can reach for him again Deverall and Dimmock are upon him, this time each taking one arm and dragging him backwards across the floor.

Deverall, clearly at the end of his patience, lets go of Anderson long enough to pull back his fist and punch him directly in the eye.

“That is enough, Anderson! My god! What is wrong with you?” Deverall turns to Dimmock, disgust clear in his voice. “Come on, let’s get him out of here.”

Anderson, momentarily disoriented by the blow, sags in Dimmock’s grasp. But as soon as Deverall reaches to take his other arm, he begins to struggle again.

“I’m sorry about this, Mr. Holmes!” Deverall calls over his shoulder, as they drag Anderson towards the door and force him through. “It won’t happen again! He’s going to be roundly punished for this, I promise you that.”

Sherlock doesn’t have the breath to respond, he nods at Deverall before he disappears through the open door.

Anderson’s screams are still audible as they drag him away down the corridor.

“He was in there—you fools! We’ve got to back and find him! He was in there—I’m NOT WRONG! You can’t let them get away with this!”

Sherlock shuts the door behind them, and then leans against it, and closes his eyes.

His hand is trembling faintly where it’s still closed around the knob.

That was close—too close.

He struggles to calm his breathing; his heart is still beating far too quickly against his ribs.

It’s over; they didn’t find John. It’s all right. He’s safe. John is safe.

But the panic is still with him, the fear still alive inside of him.

Anderson heard them, which means he must have been close at hand—listening. They were too loud this time—that much is certain, but not loud enough to be heard over the sounds of the party if someone was still on deck, which means that Anderson must have come down to listen, that he may have been right outside in the corridor.

The thought of him standing just outside, hearing the things he and John were doing together makes revulsion rise up the back of Sherlock’s throat; it makes his skin crawl. It feels like a violation.

How long had he been out there?

And if he had been just outside, listening, why hadn’t he barged right into the room and apprehended them himself? Why bother to get Deverall and Dimmock to come down here, especially when they were clearly so reluctant to be dragged away from the party?

But the answer occurs to Sherlock before he’s even finished asking himself the question.

If Anderson came here by himself and caught the two of them together, who would believe him? Clearly, he was in no position to take on the two of them without reinforcements. If he had come
here alone he would have been outnumbered, and what’s more he would have no proof other than his word, which is obviously not very highly esteemed by anyone on board this ship.

Sherlock lets out a long breath in an effort to calm his still raging heart.

It’s a good thing Anderson was already so deranged with fury—otherwise Sherlock’s obvious ploy to distract him would not have worked. Even if provoking Anderson in his current violent state was maybe not the best idea Sherlock’s ever come up with, at least it was effective.

He can still feel the ghosts of Anderson’s fingers around his throat. Sherlock takes another deep breath to dispel the image of Anderson’s contorted face from his mind.

The sound of a quiet knock makes him jump.

Sherlock’s eyes flicker to the case where it’s still covering the hole in his wall.

John.

He’s across the room, dragging the case back out of the way before he can think whether it’s a good idea to do so, and even if it isn’t, at the sight of John’s tarnished blonde head emerging from the mildewed shadows, his heart gives a leap of pure relief.

He falls to his knees beside the hole, reaching for John and helping to pull him through before he can think what to say.

John, who is still fully naked and clutching his bundle of clothes, is now covered with smears of cobwebs and dust. Sherlock doesn’t like to think what might be the source of the blackish patches now streaked across John’s face. He always knew the Galatea was old, and it isn’t as if the ship is habitually cleaned by anyone, but still.

He opens his mouth to apologize to John for directing him into such a dark and horrible hiding place, but before he can say anything, John is rising up on his knees and gripping him by the upper arms, his blue eyes wide with concern.

“Are you alright?”

It takes Sherlock a moment to realize that, in spite of the fact that John is the one who was in the most immediate danger, and who just had to spend the last five minutes of his life crouching naked in a spider-infested hole, his concern is all for Sherlock.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock says, wanting to ask the same thing of John but distracted by the sight of John’s eyes flickering over every part of him with such avid tenderness that it makes something in Sherlock’s chest hurt distantly.

John does not look reassured.

He lifts his hands to Sherlock’s face, touching him lightly, and then to his shoulders, his hair, touching every part of him, as if to reassure himself that Sherlock is still there in one piece before him, before finally taking his hands and kissing each one, just above the knuckles.

He leaves his mouth against the back of Sherlock’s hand a moment and Sherlock feels the long shaking exhalation of his breath.

It occurs to Sherlock as he does this that John was right on the other side of the wall the whole time—John would have heard everything.
Oh.

Sherlock reaches to take John’s hands in his.

“That’s what?” he says again, his voice softening. “I’m fine. Truly.”


When John looks up at him, his eyes are wet with angry tears. “I almost fucking threw that case aside so many times, Sherlock. I swear to god. I don’t know what stopped me.”

Sherlock smoothes his thumbs over the backs of John’s knuckles in an effort to soothe him.

“Because you knew that if you did you wouldn’t be here right now.”

John lets out another angry breath and drops his eyes.

“You did the right thing, John. Actually I can’t believe you’re still here—I was hoping you’d manage to get away when they came in the room.” Sherlock draws a sharp breath, feeling his lungs tighten again at the memory. “I was so frightened they’d find you.”

John’s eyes flicker back up to him.

“That’s why you said what you did to Anderson, isn’t it? To distract him—you were worried he would figure it out.”

Sherlock nods, and John’s expression does something complicated that is difficult for Sherlock to follow.

Frustration—fondness—exasperation—relief.

“Well it worked, didn’t it?”

Sherlock tries to offer him a wry smile and John sighs in mock exasperation before leaning forward and pulling Sherlock into his arms in the tightest hug he’s maybe ever received.

“I’m just glad you’re alright,” he says into Sherlock’s hair.

Sherlock’s arms come up around John and he tries to use the feeling of John—solid and alive and warm against him—to let go of the last of his panic and fear.

When John finally pulls back, he keeps his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders as he studies him, his blue eyes very bright in his dirt-smeared face.

“He hurt you, didn’t he?”

He watches John’s eyes alight on what must be the emerging bruises left by Anderson’s fingers at his throat.

John lifts his chin with gentle fingers to look.

Sherlock swallows hard, watching the storm of fury build in John’s eyes, feeling self-conscious, embarrassed that he’s once again failed to defend himself in yet another confrontation with someone on the ship who wants him dead.

He tries to make light of it. “Obviously I haven’t been practicing enough recently. I need to work on my self-defense technique.”
John’s eyes fill briefly with some emotion Sherlock cannot name. “Don’t you dare take responsibility for this. Anderson is a fucking sadist—we both know that. He’s clearly furious that he’s lost what little power he has and he’s going to do whatever he can to try and enact his revenge. He’s in a dangerous state.”

John sits back with a sigh.

“I was worried about something like this happening, I just didn’t think it would be so soon.”

He scrubs a bandaged hand down over his face and Sherlock sees the weariness return to his posture all at once. It makes him want to lunge forward and take hold of John, to chase it out of him again, with words, with kisses—anything to make that exhausted, worn-down quality go away.

“If anyone’s to blame for this, it’s me—I got careless.” He shakes his head. “I shouldn’t have let us… do the things we did on board the ship. I should have known it would be too much. I probably shouldn’t have even come here tonight…” Sherlock feels a flash of horror at his words. John shakes his head again, studying his bandaged palms where they’re lying face up on his thighs. “I was just so happy to see you—I didn’t think… I didn’t think about any of the consequences.”

Sherlock reaches out to take John’s hands again.

“John, look at me. You’re right—neither of us did anything wrong. It’s Anderson—he’s the problem, not us.”

John looks up at him and maybe he’s as startled by Sherlock’s sudden eloquence as Sherlock is himself—there’s something like amazement on his face; the prospect only encourages Sherlock to continue.

“Please don’t have any regrets about what happened tonight. What we did… what you showed me… it would kill me to think you had regrets about any part of that.”

Sherlock sees the change come over John at his words, sees the swell of emotion rising in his face.

“You’re right—I’m sorry. God—of course, I don’t regret that. Of course not.”

He sits up on his haunches and leans into Sherlock, sliding a hand around the back of his neck to bring their faces close together.

He stops with his mouth just a breath away from Sherlock’s.

“Forgive me for saying so?”

Sherlock slides his hands around John’s waist in answer, tilting his head up to bring their mouths into alignment.

“Oh course I do,” he says, and then he kisses John.

He holds John’s waist while he kisses him, every fiber of his being crying out with joy that they are able to do this, once again, in spite of everything working against them to keep them apart; marveling, as he always does, at the contrast between the lean strength in John’s torso bending down to him—the hard planes of muscle shifting underneath his thumbs—and the feeling of John’s warm mouth, soft and wet, opening against his own—so achingly vulnerable and precious to him.

And Sherlock knows, in this moment, that he is willing to sacrifice anything to keep this—he will do whatever it takes, no matter the cost.
John pulls back slightly and Sherlock follows him with his mouth; he feels John smile against him, and lean back into the kiss, his hands sliding down to hold Sherlock’s shoulders.

It takes only another few seconds of kissing John like this—sweetly, deeply—their hands sliding hungrily over one another’s torsos, before Sherlock remembers with utter glee that John is still fully naked, leaning ever closer into Sherlock.

He slides his hands down the dramatic curves at the base of John’s spine until he’s cupping John’s deliciously bare arse in his hands and squeezing it gently.

John groans into the kiss, his fingers gripping Sherlock’s shoulders in response, his body pressing back into Sherlock’s embrace; and then he’s sitting up with a gasp, breaking the kiss.

“God—wait. We shouldn’t—we shouldn’t do this.”

Puzzled, Sherlock tries to pull John back against him, but John places a gentle hand on Sherlock’s chest to restrain him.

“I want to. So badly I can’t even tell you…” John shakes his head as if to clear it. “But…”

John’s eyes cloud with some emotion Sherlock cannot read, and something in Sherlock’s chest stirs faintly in warning. He draws his hands down the lengths of Sherlock’s arms and then squeezes his hands one final time before sitting back.

“I shouldn’t stay. They might be looking for me now—and if they don’t find me, they might come back. I shouldn’t be here when they do.”

John starts climbing to his feet, and Sherlock does the same, feeling incredulity rise in him. What John is saying isn’t making any sense. They won’t come back—not tonight.

John reaches down to pull his trousers on, and Sherlock feels a pang of sorrow at the sight of John covering himself again.

“No, John! They won’t come back. They don’t give a damn about what Anderson said—they only came in the first place to get him to leave them alone! Deverall told me as much.”

John is doing up the buttons on his shirt, not meeting Sherlock’s eyes.

Sherlock can’t understand what’s happening. Surely, there’s no need for John to leave. If he can just convince John, make it clear how sure he is…

Sherlock hurries to explain.

“They’ll go straight back to the party—I know they will. Deverall was clearly in the middle of an interlude. And Dimmock had no desire to be here. They’re going to go right back to the party. Right after they’ve chained Anderson up in some dark corner of the ship where he can’t cause any more trouble.”

John doesn’t answer; he’s sitting on the bed now, pulling his boots on.

The feeling of fear in Sherlock’s chest is growing steadily with every second.

He can’t believe that John is actually going to leave now—they were supposed to have the whole night ahead of them.

But now that Sherlock thinks it, he realizes with a sinking feeling that it was never clear exactly
how long John was going to stay tonight; he’d just assumed it would be the whole night because that’s what he wanted.

John finally looks up at Sherlock once he’s fully dressed, his eyes moving meaningfully to the gaping hole in the wall beside them. “We should probably move that back.”

Sherlock isn’t too concerned about it—it isn’t like the walls aren’t as thin as paper to begin with, and Ms. Simpson is assuredly as deaf as they come—but he nods anyway, and moves to help John shove it back into place.

John looks up at him once they’ve stepped away from the wall, a tiny smile tugging at his lips. “I didn’t get a chance to say—that was really bloody brilliant, by the way—your hiding place. How long did you know that was there?”

Sherlock shrugs, feeling suddenly like he has no idea what to do with his hands if he can’t touch John; and right now, he feels like he’s not supposed to, which he hates.

John moves to sit on the bed, and Sherlock follows him, feeling more confused than ever.

“When I was cleaning up some broken glass when I found it. Didn’t really think about how useful it might be. It’s doubly fortunate that it’s Ms. Simpson’s room.”

It suddenly occurs to Sherlock though that he has no idea if she’s in there right now.

“Did you—did it sound like she was in there?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. I didn’t move the whole time I was under there except to crawl back out again. I could tell I was under her bed, but it was too dark to see much else. If she was in there I didn’t hear anything. Let’s hope for her sake that she wasn’t.”

John pulls at a strand of cobwebs dangling from his hair with a grimace. Sherlock decides it isn’t worth telling him that it’s one of several. He resists the urge to reach out and brush them away himself.

“Luckily for her I think she’s very hard of hearing.”

“I guess that would explain why we haven’t had any trouble up until now. And thank god what’s his name obviously sleeps like the dead.” John gestures with a nod towards Sherlock’s other neighbor.

“Amesbury—yes. I think he’s still up on deck.”

John scrubs his hand through his hair, discovering more cobwebs and pulling them out with a look of mounting disgust. “To be honest, after this evening we’re lucky the whole bloody corridor didn’t hear us.”

Sherlock feels a flare of indignation at this remark. “They were all up on deck anyway! The party —”

John shakes his head. “Not all of them. There’s that family two doors down—I didn’t see them up on deck. And that elderly couple. There were lots of people probably still in their rooms. Besides, sound carries.” John rubs his hands down over his face and then holds them there for a long moment. “God, Sherlock, we’ve been too careless. It can’t go on like this.”

Sherlock feels the dread in the pit of his stomach harden into a ball of ice, his mouth going
suddenly dry.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… we shouldn’t be… we can’t do this anymore—not in your room.”

Sherlock’s heart is pounding so hard he’s sure John can hear it in the quiet room.

“Where then?”

John’s shoulders slump helplessly. “I don’t know.”

“John,” Sherlock slides forward on the bed, taking John’s hands in his. He feels prompted to action by John’s sudden helplessness. “Look, it’s fine—we’ll be quiet. We can do better, we can—”

But John is shaking his head. He looks up at Sherlock and his eyes are full of misery. “We both know that we can’t, Sherlock. We’ve tried and it doesn’t work. It isn’t—”

Sherlock feels stung—betrayed, even if he knows that isn’t fair.

John drops his eyes and takes a breath. Sherlock can see a struggle raging on his face.

“It isn’t just the noise—I shouldn’t even be here. It’s too dangerous—for both of us. The officers were right. If I’m found here—if anyone reports seeing me, if one of the passengers complains—it’s over. It’s their word against mine.”

“What would they…” Sherlock can’t bring himself to finish the question. He suspects he knows the answer anyway.

“I don’t know exactly. Previous captains I’ve served under might put me in irons for a few days, probably give me a few lashes…” The way John says this, so casually, as if it were nothing to him makes the horror of it infinitely worse. “But when it comes to Roberts, it’s anyone’s guess. He didn’t give us new Regulations when he took command of the ship. You know what he’s like—he seems to do whatever he pleases depending on his mood. For all we know, it could be a hanging offense in his eyes.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say. The problem is he knows John’s right. He just doesn’t want it to be true.

How can he bear the rest of this miserable voyage without John? He cannot do it; he cannot imagine how he will bear it.

And even if by some miracle, he is able to survive it, after that—what? They haven’t talked about what will happen when the ship reaches India. Sherlock can’t think about it.

To his horror, Sherlock feels his eyes prickle with tears. He turns his head away from John, ashamed.

“Sherlock, listen to me.”

Now it’s John’s turn to reach for Sherlock’s hands, trying to pull Sherlock’s gaze back to his own. Sherlock looks at him, blinking hard, hating himself for not being stronger.

“The truth is, after everything that’s happened with the captain recently, it’s you I’m worried about. We don’t know what it is he wants—all we know is that he’s dangerous and unpredictable and now he’s got his eye on you. That means if we give him any excuse… any excuse at all, he could
use it to hurt you, to try and control you. And I can’t—Sherlock, I can’t—let myself, let either of us, do anything that might put you at greater risk.”

At John’s words, there’s a snip somewhere inside himself, and Sherlock feels distinctly that he’s falling; as though there were a rope tied around Sherlock’s waist keeping him upright, keeping him above some terrible, unknowable abyss, and the rope’s just been cut.

Because he knows that John is right.

It’s far too risky, far too stupid to go on meeting when it’s blatantly against the rules onboard the ship; when there’s—not just one—but what feels like a legion of people against them, just waiting to catch them out.

And it isn’t just Sherlock who’s at risk; what’s painfully, unmistakably clear is that the person who is truly at risk, is John. Because the captain knows now; he knows that John is who Sherlock cares about most in the world, and if he wants something from Sherlock, he will know just who to go after to make Sherlock give it to him.

He knew all this—the ramifications of his meeting with the captain earlier today had made themselves known to him, glimmering and horrible—but he was so exuberant over his victory, so delighted at the chance to see John, that he shoved the realization away; as if forgetting about it could make it untrue.

He feels too upset to cry anymore; he feels sick.

Because in spite of all that—in spite of the realization that John is in far worse danger now because of Sherlock, than he’s maybe ever been in, in his life—all Sherlock can think of, selfishly, is that he will not be able to bear it. If being separated from John means saving him, then it should be easy.

But it isn’t; and Sherlock hates himself for how badly he wants to resist it.

“Sherlock? Sherlock!”

He looks back at John, uncertain how long John has been saying his name.

John is looking at him with a frightened expression on his face.

“Please, you have to understand me when I tell you that this is the last thing I want. But I should never have let us take as many risks as we did. It has to change now. I couldn’t… I couldn’t live with myself if anything happened to you. You know that, don’t you?”

Sherlock stares back at John, feeling numb. He wants to reassure John. To tell him that of course he knows that. He feels the same way! But the power of speech seems to have abandoned him.

He feels as if all of his internal organs have suddenly been removed from his body—he doesn’t know where they are, or how to get them back—but his voice seems to be one of the things that’s left him.

“Look… maybe there’s a way around this. We’ll—we’ll think of something. And maybe when we get to Rio—” John’s voice catches on the word, and Sherlock looks up in horror to realize that John is crying.

Sherlock’s horror at the sight of John in tears is compounded by the fact that if John is crying it means he really doesn’t think there’s any chance that they will get to leave the boat in Rio.
The hollowness inside of Sherlock, impossibly, seems to expand.

John draws a ragged breath, and something breaks inside of Sherlock to see it, to see how hard John is trying to keep himself together for Sherlock’s sake, and he realizes in this moment, that maybe it’s just as hard for John as it is for him.

Without saying a word, he reaches out and grabs hold of John, pulling him into his arms.

He hugs him so tightly he would be worried about cracking one of John’s ribs if it wasn’t for the fact that he knows some part of John is made of steel.

John holds onto him, his tears trickling hot and wet into Sherlock’s neck, his arms around Sherlock almost squeezing the air from his lungs, but the pain is good because it reminds Sherlock how strong John is, gives him the reassurance that no matter what happens, John will survive this, even if he might not.

When John finally pulls away, what feels like minutes later, his filthy face is streaked with tears, and looking down, Sherlock sees a black smudge on his chest where John was pressed against him.

Gingerly, Sherlock reaches out and pulls another cobweb from John’s hair.

They both stare at it in Sherlock’s hands.

“I should go.”

Sherlock nods, wordlessly, not because he wants him to, but because he knows that it will be easier for John if he helps. He cannot give the burden of this to John alone.

Watching John rise to his feet, Sherlock can see that John looks stiff again, weariness returning to the line of his shoulders, the angle of his head, like some invisible weight, dragging him down.

Sherlock stands with him, his throat tight with misery. He wants to ask John, needs to ask John—what next? When will they see each other again? But he’s afraid that this time—especially now, John doesn’t have an answer.

John turns to him anyway though, once he’s reached the door, his features stiff with sorrow.

“I’ll see you—up on deck anyway, probably sometime tomorrow. At least we can talk to one another around the ship again.” John offers him a weak smile.

Sherlock struggles to return it and fails.

It feels like it should be more of a consolation then it is now.

“If we’re lucky they’ll keep Anderson locked up for a few days.”

Sherlock nods.

“And we’ll—we’ll see what happens when we reach Rio, yeah?”

John smiles again but it’s even worse than the last one; Sherlock almost can’t bear to see it.

Sherlock nods again, and he must look as miserable as John because without another word John turns to reach for the door handle.

Then suddenly Sherlock remembers.
“Wait, John!”

John turns to look back at him, startled.

Sherlock rushes to the bed and begins clawing through the sheets.

It only takes him a moment to find it.

He crosses the room back to John’s side, and then taking John’s hand in his he presses the little vial into John’s fingers.

“You can’t leave without this.”

John looks down at it, but instead of taking it from Sherlock, he folds Sherlock’s own fingers over it.

“You keep it.”

Sherlock looks back at him stunned, and when John looks up at him, this time, the smile he offers Sherlock is genuine.

“I can’t keep this—”

It feels wrong somehow, like taking a part of John.

But John wraps both hands around Sherlock’s, pressing gently to emphasize his words.

“Keep it. It isn’t as though I’m going to have a use for it without you. Think of it as a promise for the next time—that there will be a next time, because there will be, Sherlock. I promise you that.”

Sherlock feels a thrill of heat at John’s words, at the sudden fire in his eyes.

“Besides…” The look John gives Sherlock now makes warmth pool suddenly in his belly. “You might want to use it in my absence.”

Sherlock feels his cheeks burn.

“I couldn’t—”

“You should. And when you use it, you should think of me, and of all the different ways we’re going to use it together in the future.”

Sherlock’s fingers tighten on the vial, and this time, he nods.

John’s slow smile in response makes Sherlock feel suddenly light-headed.

“Good.”

John lets go of Sherlock’s hand and Sherlock feels the warmth go out of his chest like a light flickering out.

He steps nervously forward as John turns back toward the door.

“Let me—let me check first.”

John nods and steps aside.
Overhead, the sounds of the party are louder than ever. Someone lets out a whoop of drunken laughter.

Sherlock pulls the door open and peers into the corridor beyond.

There’s no one in sight.

Now that the door is open, he can clearly hear the sounds of Colonel Jackson’s voice loudly singing ‘What do you do with a drunken sailor?’

Sherlock looks back at John and nods.

John steps up to him and then, rising up on the balls of his feet, he presses the briefest kiss to Sherlock’s mouth, before continuing on through the door.

“See you tomorrow.”

Sherlock can only nod in response, watching until John passes the staircase at the end of the corridor and continues past it until he reaches the door that leads to the other half of the deck.

Sherlock watches the door close behind him, and it’s only then that he retreats back into his empty room, his misery like a vice around his throat.
Chapter Forty Five

Chapter Summary

Sherlock discovers he has more allies than he thought…

Chapter Notes

CW: Content warning this chapter for a somewhat detailed depiction of corporal punishment (caning; not flogging), and for a character being humiliated and in pain. The scene is near the end of the chapter and you will be given fair warning when it’s coming up in case you want to skip it. If you want more details about the scene before you read it, feel free to send me a message on tumblr, or leave a question in the comments. Take care of yourselves, lovely readers. <3

Also, today just happens to be my BIRTHDAY! So I'm posting this chapter as a happy birthday gift from me to all of you! Those of you who've been reading my fic for a while now know this is a thing I like to do. There's nothing that makes me happier than hearing from all of you, so really it's a selfish desire. But I suppose, we might think of it as a win-win type situation. ;)

I know it's been almost two months since I posted anything new, but seeing as this chapter is suuuuper long (it's almost the length of two chapters, really!), I'm hoping you'll forgive me. Anyway- happy reading!

It’s only after John has left, that the full force of Sherlock’s unhappiness makes itself known, breaking over him like a wave. He sinks down onto the bed, his shoulders bowing with the weight of his grief.

He lies down on his side, tucking his hands in under his cheek, still clutching the little bottle of lube in one hand like a talisman against his sorrow.

He listens to the steady pounding of his heart against the pillow and tries to ignore the increasingly raucous sounds of celebration from above.

Colonel Jackson’s singing has been joined by a chorus of other voices. From farther down the deck, there’s a different source of music; Sherlock can hear the thump of feet as someone keeps time.

It isn’t fair. John should be here now. One whole evening that they could have spent together lost —taken from them, snatched by Anderson’s vile and intrusive presence. That’s one less evening in the brief span of time that they will have together in their lives.

Sherlock wonders what John is doing now—will he go straight to bed? Only to lie alone in his hammock and think of Sherlock? His eyes on the swinging shadows, trying to drive out the sound of stamping feet from overhead and concentrate on the memory of Sherlock’s skin under his hands,
Sherlock’s body bending over him...

Or will he re-join the celebration? Will it prove too much to lie alone in the darkness and think about what he and Sherlock could be doing together? How they could be lying right now in one another’s arms, limbs tangled, foreheads pressed together, just listening to the sounds of one another’s breathing.

Two hot tears trickle down over Sherlock’s clasped hands and he pulls his knees in close against his chest, letting the misery pound against him like waves against the surf.

*It isn’t fair. It isn’t fair.*

This is the mantra that’s poundiing through his head.

He repeats it to himself until the sounds from above begin to grow distant, until all he can hear is the rushing of his own blood in his ears.

He’s still thinking it when he falls asleep.

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Sherlock is convinced he will be too miserable to sleep, but his exhaustion gets the better of him, and he sleeps long and deeply, woken only by a dream that he and John are on the ghost ship under the sea.

They are making love on deck, a chorus of ghosts in a circle around them, watching them.

Sherlock wants them to go away; he keeps getting distracted by the mournful stare of their blank eyes, their hands limp on their transparent knees.

Everything is blue around them in the milky twilight of his dream, John’s body lit by strange sources of light suspended above them, orbs that look like glowing jellyfish hovering by the bare and skeletal masts of the sunken ship.

The ghosts are motionless, the only movement the occasional ocean current that lifts their hair in strange haloes behind their heads.

He tries to ask John if he sees them too but John doesn’t seem bothered by them—he keeps on going, bending Sherlock over on his hands and knees, and telling Sherlock he’s going to fuck him from behind.

Sherlock is so delighted by this turn of events that he finally forgets about the ghosts. All of his attention is now on John’s mouth against the back of his neck, his kisses like drops of sunlight against Sherlock’s spine, and when John enters him, Sherlock can actually feel John coming inside of him, filling him up in a way he didn’t think was possible.

Sherlock wakes with a gasp, a raging erection pressing into his stomach.

He’s still curled into a ball, but his hands are clenched between his knees, the bottle of oil on his pillow making an indent in his cheek.

He sits up, disoriented, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, his mind full of blue light, body tingling from the feelings in the dream. He briefly considers trying to go back to sleep.

But who is he kidding, honestly?
Sherlock licks his lips and looks down at the little bottle lying innocently on his pillow.

He shouldn’t. John only has this one small bottle and he is certain it was expensive and difficult to come by. He shouldn’t use it without John—it isn’t fair.

Sherlock lies back down, determined not to use it, fingers trembling slightly as he works open his breeches, sighing once his fingers close around himself, almost shocked by how hard he is already.

God, it felt so real.

His eyes flicker back to the bottle beside him.

John did say he wanted Sherlock to use it. What if he asks Sherlock later, and Sherlock tells him that he didn’t use it—won’t John be disappointed?

Sherlock reaches for the bottle. It’s fine—he’s only going to use a little bit.

He sits up on his knees, feeling his arousal increase as he pulls the stopper free and coats his fingers—thinking of John as he does so, John’s hand on his guiding his hand down between John’s legs.

Sherlock’s eyes flutter closed at the thought. God—what would it feel like to have John preparing him in that way? So tenderly—pushing first one, then two fingers inside him, working him open, his fingers a warm, slick presence inside of Sherlock.

Sherlock whimpering at the thought, then opens his eyes again to be sure that he closes the bottle carefully and sets it aside.

He pushes his trousers a bit further down his hips before taking himself in hand with his oil-slicked fingers.

Sherlock’s eyes immediately fall closed again at the sensation—god, it feels so good to have the oil help his fingers along. It makes the touch of his own fingers feel like silk against his skin.

Sherlock strokes himself a few more times, losing himself in the feeling, his thoughts returning to his dream.

That position—John crouched over him, the muscles of John’s stomach pressing against Sherlock’s back, one of John’s arms around his waist as he thrust into Sherlock.

Sherlock lets out a moan, his fingers speeding up around himself.

God, it would be so good… it would be so, so good like that.

Then Sherlock has another thought. He lifts his hands off himself, reaching for the bottle of oil again, fingers slipping on the stopper.

He knows he’s already used some, but just a little bit more won’t make any difference… and he’s enjoying so much the world of his dream, he’s wondering if he can’t help his imagination along…

He pauses before pouring more oil into his hands, to push his trousers the rest of the way down his thighs so that he can move freely. Once he’s freed himself fully of his trousers, he sits up on his knees, thighs spread wide, flushed cock straining up towards him as if in supplication.

But for now, he ignores it, reaching down instead between his thighs and circling a slicked finger around the entrance to his body.
He closes his eyes and thinks about John, imagines it’s John’s finger slipping in past the first ring of muscle, breaching him, imagines John’s mouth soft against his neck, his hair, murmuring meaningless soothing words as he pushes the finger in and starts to stretch him.

Sherlock rocks back onto his own finger, gasping, as much for the feeling of it, as for his response to the John in his head, whose mouth is nuzzling Sherlock’s hair line before biting down gently on the back of his neck.

He adds another finger and it slips in easily thanks to the oil, and now the tightness, the fullness that he feels is enough to let him imagine that it isn’t just John’s fingers inside of him, but John’s cock.

He imagines John’s hands on his hips, guiding him; imagines the long, slow shudder of bliss moving through John’s body as he sinks into Sherlock until his own hips cradle the curves of Sherlock’s arse; imagines his own feeling of pleasure at the sensation of being filled up with John so completely.

He moves his hips in a circle, exploring the feeling, pushing deeper, and only now that his fingers are buried fully inside himself does he finally reach for his cock.

The feeling, when he starts to stroke, is enough to make his eyes fly open again in shock.

Why—why has he never done this before?

He starts to rock his own hips in time with his strokes so that he’s thrusting up into his own fist and every movement drives his fingers a little deeper inside himself.

He knows he isn’t going to last long—the dual stimulation is too good—but what finishes him, almost before he’s begun, is the thought of John beneath him—Sherlock on his lap, and John fucking up into him, his powerful thighs flexing under Sherlock’s arse, his hands on Sherlock’s hips guiding him through every thrust, his voice in Sherlock’s ear prompting him to give John everything he’s got.

Sherlock comes with a wordless shout, his hips arching dramatically upward, his torso curling down against his own hand as burst after burst of his release pulses out to coat his stomach.

Sherlock collapses down onto the mattress, his sticky fingers shaking, his cheeks warm from the exertions of his body.

He lies there gasping for several minutes, savoring the last of the visceral pleasure sparking through him.

He has never come so intensely by himself.

He’s still trying to decide whether it was the oil, the dual stimulation between his arse hole and his cock, or the fantasy of John when he falls back asleep.

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When Sherlock wakes again, it’s fully daylight.

He sits up, blinking, shocked that he managed to sleep through the whole night, slightly repulsed by the amount of dried come not only on his person but clearly all over his sheets from his and John’s activities the previous evening.
Thankfully, if it’s this early, it means he has not missed the delivery of his daily allotment of fresh water for washing.

The ship is markedly quiet this morning. After so many hours filled with the sounds of music, drunken laughter and carrying voices, it seems strange to hear nothing but the usual groaning protests of the Galatea’s hull, the rush of the water against the sides of the ship.

Sherlock swings his legs out of bed and notices, as he does so, the bottle of oil, lying where he left it, beside him on the mattress.

He’s distressed and slightly embarrassed to note that it’s now almost half empty. He’s fairly certain it was full when John pulled it out last night.

It just means that Sherlock will have to buy him more when they get to Rio—and they’ll use up the rest of it together.

At the thought of Rio, Sherlock is startled to find that his black mood of despair from the previous evening has receded greatly. He finds that in its place is a tentative feeling of optimism. For some reason, this morning, the situation that he and John find themselves in no longer feels completely hopeless. There’s bound to be a way that he and John can go on meeting in secret without putting either of themselves in too much risk.

And for absolutely no discernible reason whatsoever, Sherlock feels confident that they’re going to have the chance to see each other in Rio. They just have to.

Sherlock’s thoughts are interrupted by a knock on the door.

Wrapping a sheet around his torso, Sherlock crosses to the door and is surprised when he opens it to find, in place of the usual sullen, scowling face of Jameson, the passenger steward, the bright and eager face of Billy, looking up at him

“Good morning, Mr. Holmes!” Billy says cheerily. “I’ve got your water for you. Shall I bring it in?”

“Yes, thank you, Billy.”

Sherlock steps aside to let him into the room. He watches Billy pour it into the basin on the stand beside the door, whistling jauntily all the while.

“Where’s Jameson this morning?”

“He wasn’t in a fit state to do his duties. He drank too much at the party last night.”

“I see. And did you have a good evening last night?”

“Oh, yes sir!” Billy’s face, impossibly, brightens further. “Colonel Jackson let me fire one of his pistols off the starboard bow!”

Sherlock lifts one eyebrow in mock surprise. “Did he now?”

Billy drops his voice in a conspiratorial whisper. “Then he gave me a draught of his best spirits!”

“It sounds like you had quite a night.”
Sherlock wonders suddenly if the drama of Anderson’s intrusion made itself known above deck.

“Any other… interesting happenings from last night?”

It was also relatively early when he and John left the party—plenty of time for any number of liquor-fueled mishaps to take place.

Billy lowers his bucket and turns to give Sherlock the full report. “Colonel Jackson arm-wrestled half the crew. Mr. Summersby got so drunk he took all his clothes off and tried to climb the aft-mast—Mr. Burns had to go up and get him down. And two of the midshipmen—Cunningham and Cherry got into a fist fight and Peter Cherry broke Cunningham’s nose.”

He pauses for a moment to take a breath.

“Oh, also sir!” Billy looks up at Sherlock, his face full of eagerness. “I forgot to say! Your fiddle playing was absolutely brilliant!”

Sherlock feels a smile stealing over his face; he can’t help smiling in response to Billy’s sheer delight. “Thank you, Billy.”

“And you and Mr. Watson together that was…” Billy shakes his head, the expression on his face completely awe-struck. “That was something else.”

Sherlock finds suddenly he does not know where to look. He readjusts his grip on his sheet, painfully aware of his own awkwardness in the face of so much praise.

Luckily, Billy does not appear to notice. He’s looking wistfully at the empty bucket in his hand. “I wish I could play an instrument like that.”

“Well, maybe someday I could teach you.”

He has no idea what prompts him to say it. Maybe it’s just the look of longing in Billy’s gaze, or the fact that the boy has done so much for him over the past few weeks. Whatever the reason, he regrets the words as soon as they are out of his mouth. He would make a horrible teacher.

But now Billy’s looking up at him with that same bright look rising in his face. “Do you really mean it, sir?”

Sherlock clutches at his sheet in desperation as he tries to think of what to say.

“To be perfectly honest with you… I’ve never tried teaching anyone to play anything before.”

Then, seeing the crest-fallen look on Billy’s face, he hurries on to say, “But given the opportunity, you know I could certainly try.”

Billy looks suddenly serious. “I’d like that very much, sir.”

“Well… if you ever give up seafaring, you’ll have to come find me.”

Billy looks at him, tilting his head inquisitively. “And where will that be, sir?”

Sherlock shrugs, feeling his mood darken at the mention of his future. “You know, Billy, I’m really not sure.”

The sound of a door slamming further down the corridor makes Billy straighten up, seems to startle
him out of his reverie about the future.

“I’d better be on my way.”

“Yes, of course.”

Sherlock stands aside to let him by.

“See you around, Mr. Holmes!”

“Goodbye, Billy.”

Before he pulls the door shut, Sherlock adds: “I won’t forget about your musical aspirations.”

Billy responds with a final grin. “Don’t worry, sir. I won’t let you!”

And then he’s off and running down the corridor.

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Eager for more news of last night’s goings on (and also, news of Anderson), Sherlock heads to breakfast, feeling much revived by the bucket of fresh water Billy brought to his room.

There are quite a few seats noticeably vacant this morning, and Sherlock can tell by the looks on several of the present diners’ faces that there are more than a few regrets about last night’s indulgences.

Mr. Summersby is notably absent, as is Bailey, the pock-faced young barrister who Sherlock saw throwing back spirits beside Colonel Jackson last night up on deck.

However, one diner who is assuredly present is Molly; Sherlock is delighted to see her, seated beside her aunt, looking especially rosy-cheeked and fresh-faced.

The seat on Molly’s other side is occupied as well, so Sherlock heads for the vacant seat opposite her.

As he makes his way around the dining table, Sherlock is unsettled to note that his entry into the room sets off a stir of glances and whispers. For one horrifying moment he wonders whether John was right: were their activities last night overheard by others besides Anderson?

Sherlock feels a cold thrill of horror at the prospect.

But as he moves to take his seat, he looks again, and sees that many of the glances are not accusatory or scandalized at all but rather curious and full of cautious interest.

In response to the lingering look he is being given by the usually stern-faced Miss Goodfellow he remembers all of a sudden his performance last night with John. Billy’s words come back to him, and Sherlock now recognizes the look of awe he saw on Billy’s face mirrored on the faces of some of the passengers around the table.

The older Damson boy is openly pointing to Sherlock while leaning in to whisper something to his mother. She snatches his finger out of the air with a scandalized expression on her face.

Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, Sherlock decides to ignore the looks to the best of his ability, settling himself in the empty seat beside Ms. Simpson, who smiles at Sherlock in the same mild-mannered, slightly vacant way she does every time he sees her.
Sherlock is relieved by this response because it’s a sure sign that the older lady has no inkling of any of the drama that went on last evening, nor indeed that there was a stark naked John Watson at one point hiding underneath her bed.

Sherlock acknowledges her bland smile with a nod, issuing a silent prayer of thanks yet again to whatever power placed her and Sherlock in adjoining rooms.

He glances around the table to find his other neighbor, Amesbury, but there again he’s certain that the man is as unaware of last night’s events as Ms. Simpson. He was up on deck when Sherlock and John first went down below, and judging by the grayish pallor of his face and the slightly pained way he keeps reaching for his water glass, he was up taking advantage of Colonel Jackson’s private stores as well, long after the incident with Anderson.

As Sherlock’s gaze continues around the table, he notices one face that is certainly not filled with admiration at his presence and that is the haughty face of George McKinley, who fixes Sherlock with a look of such pure disdain when his eyes light on him that it’s almost enough to make Sherlock laugh out loud.

The sight of his furious face cheers Sherlock up considerably; he’s happy to know that there will be no more overtures of friendship made to him from that quarter.

Miss Gibbons and Miss Long are also absent this morning and Sherlock is relieved that he does not have to deal with any more prying questions about the nature of his and John’s activities last night when they vanished from the deck. He’s not sure what he would say if questioned on that matter.

On the other side of Molly, Ms. Grimsby is, as ever, deep in conversation with Colonel Jackson’s wife beside her. However, this doesn’t stop her from throwing positively scathing looks in Sherlock’s direction every few seconds.

The Colonel himself has not yet made his appearance at the breakfast table; judging by the amount of private spirits that he doled out last night, Sherlock isn’t surprised by this fact. The man must be sleeping it off in his room.

Sherlock is eager for a chance to talk to Molly but that will have to wait until after breakfast. He looks up to see her watching him and he can see reflected in her face the same desire to speak with him alone.

He offers her a smile, which she returns—and it’s so radiant, so full of gratitude that Sherlock is certain then that it was the right decision to pull her away from her aunt last night so that she could have the opportunity to meet with Lestrade.

Sherlock opens his mouth to say something but thinks better of it. They can’t really talk here—not in present company.

Molly’s eyes flicker pointedly to her aunt seated beside her. ‘Sorry’ she mouths across the table.

Sherlock considers briefly. He wants to ask Molly if she’d like to take a walk with him up on deck after breakfast. However, he isn’t sure whether it’s even worth asking after what he did last night. The pretense he was working so carefully to uphold, of being courteous and deferential toward Molly’s chaperone in order to stay in her good graces, has surely been completely shattered. He’s certain Ms. Grimsby’s opinion of him is lower than it’s ever been.

Then again, after Molly’s defiant reaction last night perhaps something has shifted ever so subtly in their dynamic. Anyway, what does he have to lose?
Sherlock clears his throat.

“Miss Hooper?”

Molly looks up at him attentively, her lips pursed hard to hide her amusement. “Yes, Mr. Holmes?”

“I was wondering if you would care to take a turn about the deck with me after breakfast?” He attempts a deferential tone. “That is, if your aunt has no objections?”

Sherlock watches the disapproval on Ms. Grimsby’s face intensify into an outright scowl, but he also notices, much to his delight, the tension with which Molly suddenly grips her porridge spoon.

Ms. Grimsby does not deign to give him an answer other than to sniff and turn her head away, but Molly beams at him. “No, she doesn’t have any objections. I would be delighted to join you.”

Sherlock has to hide his grin behind his napkin.

It looks like Molly’s independent streak has continued. Although at what cost to Molly Sherlock does not like to imagine. Ms. Grimsby’s thinly suppressed fury is palpable, even from across the breakfast table.

George McKinley looks like he’s about to say something and Sherlock braces himself for the unpleasantness.

Happily though, before the other man can open his mouth, a loud and jauntily whistled tune announces Colonel Jackson’s entrance into the dining room.

In contrast to many of the drawn and haunted faces around the table, Colonel Jackson looks to be the picture of perfect health.

His entry into the room is like a blast of fresh air.

“Good morning, everyone!”

He settles himself at the head of the table and begins piling his plate with bacon.

“How is everyone this morning?”

He looks around the table with a good-natured chuckled before sawing into his pile of bacon.

“I see several missing faces, which is always a sure sign of a night well spent.” Colonel Jackson throws a meaningful look in his wife’s direction, and then winks. “Isn’t that right, my dear?”

Tabitha Jackson makes a point of frowning at her husband but Sherlock can see the distinctly creased lines around her eyes, which betray the smile she’s hiding underneath her fan.

“A memorable evening, to be sure. Although it seems that some of the crew are paying the price this morning.”

Sherlock stiffens. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I was up on deck just now—taking my usual morning stroll before breakfast—such a beneficial activity for the digestion, suggested to me by my own dear wife.” Colonel Jackson reaches out to lovingly pat his wife’s lace-gloved fingers where they rest atop the table. “And it seems that at least one young man failed to show up for his shift this morning, which of course—on a ship of this size—is absolutely unacceptable.”
Sherlock’s conversation with John last night about the unpredictability of the captain, especially in regards to discipline, looms up like a specter before his eyes.

Sherlock’s heart is pounding in his throat. “Which crew member?”

It wasn’t John—it couldn’t be John.

“I’m sorry to say it was a rather charming young midshipman, who I had the pleasure of drinking with last night. Baynes, I believe his name was. Lovely young chap. But it seems he isn’t yet old enough to hold his liquor.”

Sherlock feels relief pour through him.

Some distant part of him is aware that he should probably be feeling sorry for this midshipman, whoever he is, but he’s too distracted by thoughts of John to spend more than a moment thinking of it.

“Yes, there was quite a to-do going on up on the quarterdeck. I steered well clear of it.” Colonel Jackson glances meaningfully at the open door to the dining room, before leaning a bit closer to the other diners and lowering his voice. “To make matters worse, our dear Captain Roberts seems to be in one of his tempers this morning.”

Several heads turn towards Colonel Jackson with concern.

Sherlock feels a sliver of icy fear lodge itself somewhere deep in his belly.

This time Miss Goodfellow beats him to the question. “What was he angry about?”

“The winds have changed. We’ve lost the head wind that was giving us such an advantage. From what I overheard, we’re no longer making the speed the captain wants to get us to port on time.”

“On time for what?” This time it’s Amesbury who voices the question.

“That, good sir, I cannot tell you. But it’s no secret that the captain has a particular desire to reach the port of Rio de Janeiro by tomorrow. It seems that without the wind, that goal is no longer achievable.”

A heavy silence settles over the table as the reality of this news sinks in.

Colonel Jackson takes a long drink of coffee before settling his cup back in its saucer with a mournful rattle. “I very much would not want to be in Lieutenant Lestrade’s shoes this morning—that much is certain.”

Not only does this mean one more day until any of them will have the chance to escape this ship—for however brief a time—what’s far more troubling is the news of the captain’s foul temper.

Even Amesbury (who from what Sherlock has witnessed is about as thick as they come) seems to realize that they are all of them subject to the captain’s whims while on board this ship. And any time he is in a foul temper, it can’t mean anything good—for any of them.

As Sherlock considers this, his eyes going round the table to take in each passenger’s reaction, it occurs him that he has not seen either Knott or Ferguson for at least two days. There was no sign of either of them up on deck at the party yesterday evening, and neither of them is present this morning at the breakfast table.
Knott’s absence from the party last night makes perfect sense. After all, it was on the occasion of the previous party that he narrowly escaped being poisoned by the captain. He obviously wouldn’t want to expose himself to the same kind of danger again.

But Ferguson’s motivations are not so obvious. The only reason for him to lie low as far as Sherlock can tell is because he’s plotting something. The last words Sherlock heard him say to Knott were that he wasn’t giving up on his plan to blackmail the captain. Perhaps it would be worth taking a stroll past his cabin later to see if he can ascertain anything of interest…

Although Sherlock will have to be careful to stay well out of the other man’s sight. Ferguson is at the top of the growing list of people on board this ship who have it in for Sherlock.

The rest of the meal passes without incident, and as soon as Sherlock has finished his porridge, he crosses the dining room to take Molly’s arm to lead her up on deck.

Molly smiles gratefully up at him, excusing herself from the company of her aunt with a promise that she’ll come and find her as soon as she has returned from her walk with Sherlock.

Ms. Grimsby again says nothing, her mouth shrinking to the size of a shriveled raisin, but she nods to communicate that she’s heard what Molly’s said.

Sherlock leads Molly from the dining room.

They pass through the cabins on the upper gun deck on their way to the stairs. Both Ferguson and Knott’s rooms are on this deck and Sherlock glances at them as they walk past. However, there’s neither a sign nor a movement from behind either closed door.

They pause outside Molly’s room.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll just fetch my parasol before we go up on deck.”

Sherlock nods and Molly ducks in through the door leaving Sherlock standing in the hall, eying the unchanging outline of Ferguson’s door.

Then to Sherlock’s great surprise, who should come up to him as he’s waiting in the corridor outside Molly’s room, but Ms. Simpson.

She’s smiling at him in the same bland way she always is but this time, she stops and puts her hand on his arm.

She leans in towards him and says in her brittle old voice, “I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others, but I wanted to let you know that any time your young man needs a place to hide again, you can count on me.”

She pats Sherlock’s arm reassuringly.

“I can keep a secret better than the best of them. I gather he made it back to his own quarters unnoticed?”

Sherlock nods, speechless with shock.

“That’s good. What a handsome young man. And kind, too. I can tell he has a good heart. I wouldn’t want to see any harm come to him—not for your sake or his. So don’t you worry, my dear, your secret is safe with me.”
She pats Sherlock’s arm again one more time, the touch of her frail hand as light as paper.

“We should play another game of whist again soon. We made a good team, didn’t we? Well, I’ll leave you to your walk with Miss Hooper. Enjoy the rest of your morning, Mr. Holmes.”

And before Sherlock can even manage to think of a response, she’s moving away down the corridor towards the stairs.

It’s at that very moment that Molly re-emerges from her room, parasol in hand.

“Thank you again for waiting. Are you ready to—goodness!” She stops walking when she catches sight of Sherlock’s face. “Are you all right? You look as though you’ve just seen a ghost!”

Sherlock stares at Molly helplessly. He’s certain that he would be in less shock right now if he had.

“Yes, fine. Just… just had a bit of a surprise is all.”

Molly peers at him with some concern.

“Are you quite sure?”

Sherlock nods, taking Molly’s arm. “Come on. Some fresh air will do me good.”

Molly is still looking at him curiously but mercifully she decides to let the matter rest. She’s quiet as they take the stairs to the upper deck.

Sherlock is grateful for the chance to recover from his shock.

Apparently the old woman isn’t quite as deaf as Sherlock always thought.

While he’s grateful that she’s clearly an ally they can rely on if they need to in future, Sherlock is stricken with the realization that if she heard enough to know John was hiding under her bed, then she probably could hear a lot more of what has gone on between them over the last few weeks than Sherlock ever suspected.

Sherlock is more grateful than ever for the cool shadows of the gangway—he is certain his face has never been redder than it is right now.

The things that woman has overheard in the past week and a half…

Sherlock feels faint just thinking about it.

He’s not only mortified by this discovery, he’s horrified to realize that the fears John voiced last night are not far at all from the truth.

Even if Ms. Simpson is apparently in support of their relationship (which Sherlock can still scarcely believe)—he doesn’t think he could so much as hold John’s hand with the knowledge that Ms. Simpson was on the other side of the wall, listening in.

Sherlock must look as unwell as he feels because Molly is studying him again with real concern.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

They’ve reached the upper deck and Sherlock heads straight for the railing by the capstan. He leans against it with some relief.
“Yes, I’m fine. Just too much time below decks is all. It’s good to see the sky again.”

Molly looks unconvinced, but she nods in agreement, following Sherlock’s gaze to squint up at the sun blazing in the cloudless blue sky.

Whatever disagreement may have taken place on the quarterdeck while Colonel Jackson was taking his morning stroll seems to have dissipated. The captain is nowhere to be seen, nor are any of the lieutenants. Mr. Graves is the only person Sherlock recognizes on the quarterdeck, looking down at the man at the helm with a stern expression on his face.

It’s difficult to glean anything from Mr. Graves’ expression. He tends to look stern and disapproving more often than not, but it seems to Sherlock that there is an added element of severity to his features that he can only guess is in response to the captain’s recent ill temper.

The rest of the ship seems relatively quiet. The men seem to be going about their usual business. However, as Sherlock looks up at the sails, it’s immediately apparent that they’ve lost the wind: the sails hang slack and listless by the masts. The sight fills the pit of Sherlock’s stomach with dread.

Glancing closer at the faces of the men, it’s apparent that the high spirits of last night’s festivities are definitively at an end. There’s a palpable tension in the atmosphere that is difficult to pinpoint, but seems to hang heavy over the entire ship, like a fog.

Molly notices it too. She shifts her grip on the handle of her parasol, careful to keep her voice low as she looks around the deck.

“I can see what the Colonel was talking about. Something feels… not right, doesn’t it?”

Sherlock gestures towards the slack sails. “Yes, and we’ve certainly lost the wind.”

Molly nods grimly. “I can’t imagine what the captain’s so desperate to get to in Rio de Janeiro—can you? I mean, other than the chance to walk on dry land again. But he’s a sea captain, surely he can’t mind it that much.”

Sherlock is tempted to voice some of his suspicions, but then he immediately thinks better of it. There’s a somewhat weighted pause before Sherlock speaks.

“I can honestly tell you that I have no idea what’s motivating the captain.”

A slightly awkward silence falls between them and Sherlock feels his high spirits start to sink.

He realizes now standing beside Molly that there isn’t much he can say. He still doesn’t think it’s a good idea to confide in Molly about the captain’s involvement in Lestrade’s poisoning—or the business with Ferguson and Knott.

John’s words of warning about the unpredictability of the captain rise unbidden to the front of his mind yet again. While it’s perfectly all right for Sherlock to put himself in idiotically dangerous situations, he wouldn’t want to put Molly in any kind of risk. He needs to be more like John—thinking of others’ well being before his own. And just because Sherlock might get some satisfaction out of sharing the details of this puzzle with Molly, that doesn’t justify putting her in unnecessary danger.

He almost considers telling her about Ms. Simpson—he has a feeling it would make her laugh. But as soon as he thinks it he catches himself.
Telling her would involve an explanation of why John was naked in Sherlock’s room to begin with, and Sherlock isn’t certain how Molly would react if she knew the true nature of his and John’s relationship.

It makes him sad to think it. It’s nice… having Molly. But Sherlock has no idea what’s appropriate to say to her, and how much would be considered too much. The last thing he wants is to frighten her away.

She’s said that she considers him a friend, but Sherlock doesn’t have much experience in that area. The only friends he’s ever had all turned out to be false ones. They all turn on him in the end, for one reason or another.

Sherlock scowls, thinking of Sebastian Wilkes.

It feels inevitable to him that the same thing will happen with Molly—that he’ll disappoint her eventually, upset her in some unforgivable way without ever meaning to—but he’d prefer to put the moment off as long as possible. Especially since he’ll need someone to help him while away the long and lonely hours if he and John are no longer able to continue meeting in private.

The prospect of this suddenly feels a lot more likely to Sherlock than it did an hour again. Perhaps it’s just the grim mood hanging over the deck, or maybe it’s the news of the captain’s newly foul temper, but for whatever reason, thinking of it now makes Sherlock feel again the way he did last night, as though the ship has suddenly vanished from beneath his feet, and there’s nothing to keep him from plummeting down into the ocean, into a void of meaningless empty space.

Sherlock grips the railing hard, staring down into the endless blue of the waves, interrupted only by white foam here and there curling over.

It’s Molly’s gentle voice that breaks him from his trance-like state.

“You know… part of the reason I was so pleased you suggested that we take a walk together is because I never got a chance to thank you.” Her voice is soft but full of a tentative kind of delight. “For what you did last night.”

The genuine pleasure in her voice draws Sherlock’s melancholy gaze from the ocean to look up at her face.

She smiles at him, radiating the same quiet joy he saw on her face at the breakfast table.

“It was really… incredible, what you did. Giving us the chance to be alone like that,” Molly’s cheeks color briefly but she hurries on. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

Sherlock feels his dismal mood start to dissipate slightly.

“It was nothing. I simply thought of how I would feel in your position if John and I were—”

Too late, Sherlock realizes his mistake. He snaps his mouth shut, his cheeks burning crimson.

He frantically considers trying to cover it up, but there’s nothing he can do about it now; he can’t take back what he has said.

He’s too frightened to look at Molly; he stares at the ocean instead, silently willing the waves to rise over the railing and swallow him up.

Molly, to her credit, is carefully silent for about thirty seconds and then she says, very quietly, “It’s
Alright, you know. I don’t… I mean I completely understand if you prefer not to say anything more about it. But if it makes you feel any better, I… well I already sort of suspected you two were…” She pauses awkwardly, her voice full of hesitation. “Well…”

Sherlock, scarcely daring to believe his ears, glances over at Molly and sees her blushing hard.

“That we’re what?”

Molly’s blush deepens.

“I mean I wouldn’t want to presume anything…” Molly takes a breath then and seems to find her courage. Straightening up, she turns to look Sherlock dead in the eye. “Well, if you asked me what I thought, I’d say you two were sweethearts.”

Sherlock stares back at her, searching her gaze for any sign of judgment, scorn, or disgust. But he finds none.

Molly looks steadily back at him, her chin raised slightly, as if in challenge.

“And that notion doesn’t offend you?”

“Why should it?”

Sherlock gives her an incredulous look, and this time, Molly lowers her eyes, the blush returning to her cheeks.

“You two clearly care about each other a great deal. What should it matter that you’re both…” Molly’s cheeks flush dark again. “Both gents. I can’t see why that should make any difference.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say.

“I think it’s really romantic actually. I mean… it’s obvious how much he likes you.”

Sherlock looks at her, stunned.

“Is it?”

This time, it’s Molly’s turn to look surprised. “You must know he’s crazy about you!”

“I…” Sherlock falters; shakes his head. His heart is pounding so hard it’s difficult to get the words out.

It’s too surreal. To be having a conversation about this. Out loud. With another human being.

He can’t quite manage it.

Luckily, Molly saves him from having to answer.

“I can see it just from the way he looks at you. When the two of you performed that duet last night…” Molly’s voice goes soft and dreamy. Sherlock looks up at her again in shock. “You know, I think half the ship was in love with the pair of you.”

At first, Sherlock is genuinely flattered.

But just as quickly, the feeling is replaced by a creeping kind of dread.
If Molly was so quick to notice John’s feelings for Sherlock, there’s a good chance that others have taken note as well. How many others onboard are aware of the true nature of his and John’s relationship?

Sherlock starts ticking through the list in his head.


And how many people now, after their performance together last night, could tell?

Sherlock thinks back to the stares he got at breakfast and feels himself start to sweat.

He thought they were staring at him because of his performance, but maybe it was for a different reason entirely. He remembers the way Mrs. Damson had snatched her boy’s pointing finger out of the air.

What a fool he’s been.

“Sherlock?”

Molly puts a gentle hand on Sherlock’s sleeve. He stares down at it, only half-aware of what he’s seeing.

“I’m sorry. The last thing I want to do is make you feel uncomfortable. I won’t mention it again if it makes you upset.”

Sherlock shakes his head. As much as he’s panicking at the realization that his feelings for John are perhaps more public than he thought, there’s a feeling of profound relief that Molly knows and doesn’t… well, hate him for it. He’s still not over the shock of it.

“No, it’s—it isn’t that. I’m just worried… if you could tell so easily, how many other people might know after last night. People who might not be as understanding as you are.”

Sherlock turns to look at her and he can see her forehead creased in concern.

“There are some people onboard who already know, and don’t approve.”

“Who?” Molly asks, lowering her voice and dipping her head down close to Sherlock’s.

“One of the midshipman—Anderson.”

Molly makes a stifled noise of dislike and Sherlock glances at her again. “You know him?”

Molly readjusts her grip on her parasol, her nose wrinkling with distaste. “I’ve seen him more than once being cruel to the younger boys. I can’t abide anyone who picks on someone smaller and weaker than themselves. Absolutely vile behavior.”

Sherlock can feel his mouth twisting just thinking about Anderson.

“Well, for whatever reason he has it in for me. He—” Sherlock hesitates, still uncertain how much detail to disclose to Molly. Her being aware of his feelings for John is a far different matter from her being aware of what they do together in private. “John and I were alone together last night. In my room.”

He stops, watching the color rise in Molly’s face. He’s careful not to look at her as he continues.
“Anderson ratted us out. Brought two of the lieutenants down to try and catch John where he wasn’t supposed to be.”

Molly’s hand goes to her mouth in horror.

“He didn’t catch him, did he?”

“No, luckily he got away. Thanks to a ah… structural flaw in the design of the ship.”

Molly looks at him, puzzled.

“There’s a bloody great hole in the wall between my room and Ms. Simpson’s.”

It takes her only a split second to realize.

Molly’s hand flies back up to cover her mouth.

“He didn’t…”

“He did. Fortunately, the hole leads to the space directly underneath her bed. He stayed under there the whole time until he crawled back through to my room—it was only for a few minutes.”

“Did she see him?”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t think so. Until just now that is. She stopped me in the hall outside your room to ask me if John made it back to his room all right last night.”

Molly’s hand is now gone from her mouth. Her mouth is wide open in shock.

“You can’t be serious.”

Sherlock nods.

“She said she wouldn’t want to see any harm come to him. Because—because he has a kind heart.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what’s happening to him. Maybe it’s all the tension and the stress from weeks of holding all of this inside himself; maybe it’s the relief of finally being able to talk about it with another person—but for whatever reason, he feels laughter bubbling up inside him, and spilling out between his words.

“She referred to him as ‘my young man.’ Told me how handsome she thinks he is!”

Sherlock’s laughter is infectious. Molly is laughing now too, her parasol shaking with the movement.

“She told me—” Sherlock is laughing so hard he can barely get the words out. “She told me any time John needs a place to hide, she’s our—oh god! She’s our woman!”

The more Sherlock thinks about it, the more absurd the situation appears to him.

“And I thought she was deaf!”

He’s doubled over, clutching at the rail. Molly’s joined him. She’s let her parasol fall. There are tears streaming down her cheeks.

Sherlock doesn’t think he’s ever laughed so hard in his life.
Molly is gasping for breath.

It’s a long while before they are able to compose themselves again.

Just when Sherlock thinks the fit of laughter has passed, he remembers her parting words.

“Do you know what the last thing she said to me was?”

Molly clutches at her stomach, “Oh god, don’t tell me—I don’t think I can take it!”

Her eyes are sparkling with tears of laughter.

“She told me she can’t wait to play another game of whist!”

This sets them off again.

When they do finally manage to return to the realm of sanity, taking deep breaths, and wiping at their tear-stained cheeks—Molly straightening the panels at the front of her dress—Sherlock feels like a new person.

He grins over at Molly, and she shakes her head.

“I don’t know if I’m ever going to be able to look her in the eye again.”

“You won’t be able look her in the eye? Imagine how I feel!”

Molly giggles, but manages not to relapse into full hilarity. “God, I can’t think the last time I’ve laughed so hard.” She turns her warm smile on Sherlock. “Thank you for that.”

“Don’t thank me.” Sherlock looks at her with a look of mock offense. “Thank Ms. Simpson!”

They both giggle stupidly into their hands.

“Well, if nothing else, it’s good to know you have another ally on board the ship.”

This remark—finally—has a sobering effect. Sherlock takes a deep breath, and nods, his mind filling suddenly with the names of all of those onboard who definitively aren’t an ally of his. The list is far too long for Sherlock’s liking.

“John did make it back to his quarters all right last night, didn’t he?”

Sherlock draws a sharp breath. “I haven’t seen him yet this morning.”

Saying this aloud makes fear rise up in Sherlock’s breast. His eyes flicker out of instinct to the masts overhead, but where the dead sails hang there is little trace of life or movement, other than the one sailor standing at watch in the foretop. He isn’t a member of John’s mess, which is all that matters to Sherlock.

Molly’s eyes too have taken on a sheen of genuine worry.

“But yes, I think so. The lieutenants who came to investigate weren’t too keen on being there. They were clearly just humoring Anderson to shut him up. More than anything else, I think they were irritated with him for taking them away from the festivities. So they didn’t stay long. And I have a feeling Anderson is being punished for his behavior last night.”

Sherlock says this with a grim feeling of satisfaction. With any luck, Anderson is in the brig and
will remain there for several days.

“I don’t think any of the officers are a great fan of Anderson’s. But I trust that Lieutenant Lestrade made a fair decision.”

At the mention of Lestrade’s name, Molly’s cheeks grow quite pink.

“That’s right,” she says, eyes on the horizon as a look of quiet joy steals over her face again. She looks up at Sherlock. “I was thanking you for last night, wasn’t I? It was really… really lovely to have a moment like that alone together. Even if it was only a moment.”

Sherlock can hear the pang of longing in her voice, and that same note of empathy that drove him to help her last night returns to him now.

He’s silent for a long moment, staring out at the blur of the horizon.

“I know what that’s like. And I thought…” Sherlock shrugs, feeling awkward. “If it’s possible to help, then it’s only logical that I should.”

He’s reassured by the sight of Molly’s smile out of the corner of his eye. He still isn’t good at this. Talking about… things with another person.

But maybe he’s getting better.

“Besides, when I saw you were trapped between your aunt and George McKinley…” Sherlock mimes gagging over the railing. “I couldn’t leave you to that fate.”

Molly giggles into her gloved hand.

After a moment though, her look grows serious again.

“It’s a shame really… that we don’t have more control over what our hearts want.” She chews her lip as she looks out over the horizon—it’s a habit that she has; Sherlock has seen her do it when she’s nervous. “I never would have chosen this.”

Sherlock is shocked to hear her tone change completely. In the span of one second all the humor has gone out of her voice. Her eyes on the horizon are narrowed against the glare of the sunlight.

When she turns back to Sherlock, she offers him a smile, but Sherlock sees, in the instant before she does, that the expression on her face is as bleak as her voice. And in that instant, it strikes Sherlock yet again that he and Molly Hooper are far more similar than one might imagine.

Before he can think what to tell her to help assuage some of the miserable hopelessness he saw in her face, he’s interrupted by the booming tones of Colonel Jackson behind them, speaking with Mr. Graves.

“I say good fellow, where have all the crew got to? It’s a bit of a desert up here at the moment!”

Both Sherlock and Molly turn to look.

The ship’s master looks none too pleased to be entertaining inquiries from Colonel Jackson, but Sherlock imagines he must be used to it by now, as it’s apparent the Colonel considers the running of the ship as much his business as it is any of the crew’s.

Mr. Graves casts his disapproving gaze over Colonel Jackson’s robust figure where he stands beneath him.
At least the Colonel no longer has the audacity to go up onto the quarterdeck; Lestrade must have spoken to him about that. Sherlock remembers overhearing the uproar that particular infraction caused.

“Disciplinary action taking place on the upper gun deck. All members of the crew are required to be in attendance.”

Molly glances over at Sherlock with a worried look.

“Disciplinary action, you say?” The Colonel lowers his voice as he steps closer. “Not the poor lad who was late to his shift this morning?”

Mr. Graves looks torn between his unwillingness to reply and his eagerness to show Colonel Jackson that he is privy to all kinds of information that the Colonel does not have access to. He’s silent for a moment before replying. Sherlock does not miss the vaguely smug look on his face.

But after a moment he grunts an affirmation. “The very one.”

“Dear, oh dear me.”

It’s as hot today as it has been for several weeks now. There is sweat shining on Colonel Jackson’s high forehead as he receives this news. He reaches into the front of his jacket and pulls out a flaming red handkerchief, which he uses to mop his face.

Much to his own surprise, Sherlock feels a stab of pity for the man. After all, it was his spirits that were responsible for the lad’s drunkenness.

“That’s very unfortunate news. Very unfortunate indeed.”

He tucks the handkerchief back into the front of his waistcoat, and then dips his head in gratitude toward Mr. Graves.

“Thank you, sir.”

It isn’t until Colonel Jackson turns to walk away that Mr. Graves plays his trump card.

“You’re welcome to watch.” Mr. Graves offers the Colonel a nasty smile, revealing rows of sunken teeth. “Might do you good to think on it next time you decide to doll out a keg of private spirits.”

Sherlock watches the Colonel’s red face go pale at the shipmaster’s words.

Without saying a word, Colonel Jackson turns and makes his way back down the deck away from the quarterdeck.

Molly, beside Sherlock, looks infuriated.

“Well really, I don’t think that was necessary,” she says, under her breath. “It isn’t the Colonel’s fault if the boy drank more than he could handle!”

Sherlock is about to agree with her, but at that moment, as if on cue, comes the raised voice of the captain from the deck beneath them.

“Are all men assembled, Lieutenant?”

Sherlock can hear Lestrade’s answer as clearly as if he was standing on the upper deck.
“All men assembled, Captain.”

Colonel Jackson has gone to stand at the gratings. He’s peering down through the latticework to the deck beneath, his face still the same deadly pale color.

And then Sherlock isn’t sure what prompts him do it—maybe it’s the fact that he knows John must be down there if all the crew are indeed being forced to assemble on the upper gun deck, or maybe it’s just to give Colonel Jackson some company as he stands in silent horror peering down at the scene that’s about to unfold. The man clearly feels it’s his duty to witness what’s about to take place.

Molly follows silently in Sherlock’s wake. His first instinct is to tell her not to, to advise her to stay back, but then he stops himself.

He isn’t about to tell Molly what she should or should not do. She’s clever enough to make that decision on her own without Sherlock condescending to her.

He isn’t sure what he’ll see when he looks down, and somewhat to Sherlock’s relief, at first he can’t see much.

He can make out the faces of the first line of men, standing around one of the cannons, and Sherlock doesn’t know whether he’s disappointed or relieved to find that John’s face is not among them.

Sherlock can’t yet see the captain, but there’s Lieutenant Lestrade, standing with his posture straighter than Sherlock’s ever seen it. Something about the sight of it makes a roll of worry pitch through Sherlock’s stomach as if the ship had taken a sudden plunge in the waves.

His face is a mask of composure. It looks as though all traces of Lestrade the man are gone; there is nothing standing down there except an extension of Her Majesty’s Navy. There is duty in every line of his posture. His eyes seem to look at nothing.

“I’m sure you all know why you’re assembled here. To witness this boy’s punishment. Midshipman… Say your name, boy!”

There’s a sniffling sound and Sherlock hears only a mumbled reply.

“Louder, boy!”

“M-midshipman Gideon Baynes, sir.”

“Midshipman Baynes failed to report for duty this morning, when he was expected on deck at eight bells. It should come as no surprise to any of you to hear that I will not tolerate this kind of negligence. Mr. Baynes will be punished in accordance with the severity of his offense.”

He pauses a moment as if to let the effect of his words sink again. Sherlock has never heard the crew so quiet.

“Two dozen strokes, Lieutenant Deverall!”

There’s a murmur of discontent in response to this sentence and it isn’t hard for Sherlock to guess that this punishment isn’t customary at all.

Sherlock can see Deverall, standing just in front of the first line of men. He’s turned away from Sherlock so he cannot make out the expression on his face, but judging by the set of his jaw, he is
no happier about this than any of the men.

“And if I see you holding back I will double that number, is that understood?”

“Aye, sir.”

He watches the boy—Baynes—shoved forward by someone behind him in the direction of the cannon.

At the sight of him, Sherlock feels his stomach drop once more.

Sherlock has seen him on deck before. He’s by no means the youngest of the midshipmen; in fact, he seems to be about Sherlock’s own age. If Sherlock had to guess, he would put him at seventeen, maybe sixteen. He’s a good sailor, Sherlock knows, talented in the rigging, even-tempered, generally well liked. He seems to get on well with the other midshipman. He treats his mess well too, Sherlock knows.

He looks awful now. There is no trace of his usual sunny disposition. His face is red and splotchy; his head is bowed, his hair covering his face. His hair is curlier than Sherlock’s—it looks a mess now.

And then to Sherlock’s horror, he watches the boy’s hands move to the fastenings of his trousers. At first, Sherlock can’t understand what he is doing. They can’t be serious. Sherlock has heard of the barbarity of naval discipline but this is too much.

With shaking hands, the boy pushes his trousers down to his ankles. Someone behind him shoves him another staggering step forward.

“Get a move on!”

Molly, putting one gloved hand up to cover her mouth in horror, steps back from the grate. Sherlock doesn’t blame her.

She shakes her head at him once, in silence, indicating that she cannot bear to watch, but she stays by his side.

Sherlock finds that he cannot look away. It feels as though it would be a disservice to do so now. Looking down at the faces of the men who stand in a ragged ring around this cruel display of discipline, Sherlock can feel that in each steadfast gaze there is an offering of support. For Baynes’ sake, they will not look away; and Sherlock feels absolutely certain in this moment that he must do the same.

“Bend over!”

Sherlock can see the struggle on the boy’s face as he fights to keep his composure, and he knows that worse than the threat of the impending strokes—however painful they might be—is the humiliation of the whole spectacle, the indignity of it: forced to bend, bare-arsed, over the cold iron of the cannon for everyone to witness.

If he himself were in the same situation, Sherlock does not know how he would stand it.

The boy does as he is told, and as he lowers himself down, the nickname that the sailors give this particular form of punishment flashes suddenly through Sherlock’s mind: *kissing the gunner’s daughter*. The turn of phrase strikes Sherlock as a mocking one, but there is nothing like humor in the faces of the men now, only a grim kind of solidarity.
It occurs to Sherlock that it could have been any of them there in Baynes’ position; that any one of them could have overslept on account of having drunk too much and showed up late to their post. The feeling in the air now suggests that they all know it too.

“You may begin, Lieutenant.”

Lieutenant Deverall steps forward with the cane in his hand, and the expression on his face, Sherlock can see, is as grave as Lieutenant Lestrade’s. His features are drawn, his mouth a hard line that poses such a contrast to his usual open expression that it’s shocking to behold.

Something tells Sherlock that none of the hard disapproval evident on the man’s face is for the boy bent over the cannon before him, but for someone else entirely.

He counts the blows as they land. Sherlock can tell from the sharp sound the cane makes on impact that he is not tempering his strokes.

Sherlock knows that this punishment—reserved only for midshipmen and the youngest members of the crew—is mild in comparison with most other forms of discipline doled out on board a ship.

The instrument of punishment—a thin rattan cane that Sherlock recognizes from his boyhood school days—although nothing like the dreaded instrument used in flogging the sailors, is still exceedingly painful in its own right, particularly when applied to bare flesh.

Sherlock remembers all too keenly how painful it could feel, even through the thick wool of his school trousers. Never an obedient child at the best of times, especially not when faced with the arbitrary wrath of the schoolmasters, Sherlock has far more memories than he would care to admit of being beaten in a similar fashion.

The memory of the humiliation of it rises up now like bile in Sherlock’s throat.

Baynes, to his credit, does not cry out. Although Sherlock can see, even from his position high above the boy’s head that his face is screwed up in pain.

Deverall does not let up his pace; the blows continue to fall, one after another with a regular, horrible rhythm. Lestrade stands just behind him, his face as blank and impassive as ever, looking at nothing.

The captain stands a few paces from Lestrade, unmoving, his cold eyes glittering faintly as he takes in the scene before him. It is a scene he’s likely supervised hundreds of times before, but there is nothing routine now about his gaze—he appears to be scrutinizing Deverall’s delivery of each stinging stroke as closely as though his life depended on it.

Deverall’s halfway through his count of twenty-four and Sherlock can tell that the pain is beginning to take its toll on Baynes. His eyes are clenched tightly shut, and a low sound escapes him now every time the cane finds its mark.

The captain notices it too. His eyes flick to Deverall, and Sherlock imagines for one astonished moment that the man is going to tell Deverall to desist.

But the words that actually issue from his mouth come as no surprise to Sherlock.

“Harder, Lieutenant. I want this boy’s suffering to stick in the memories of those who observe it, lest they too fall short of their duties in the days to come.”

There is a low murmur of disapproval at his request—no, not disapproval—rage. Sherlock can feel
it seething up from the grate at his feet like heat from a volcanic fissure.

If Deverall too experiences the same reaction, it registers only as the briefest flicker on his face before vanishing again, to be replaced by the same look of grim resolve.

True to his orders, he hits the boy harder this time, so hard that Baynes lets out his first genuine cry of pain.

“That’s more like it. Again, Deverall! And no slacking!”

Sherlock can see the force clearly in each of Deverall’s strokes. There is sweat standing out on Deverall’s brow, whether from exertion or distress, Sherlock cannot be sure. Baynes’ cries of pain now do not stop.

The unrest seems to grow at Baynes’ discomfort; no one speaks a word, but there’s a shifting uneasy quality in the assembled men, and Sherlock knows, even though he’s never witnessed any kind of naval punishment before, that the captain’s sentence is excessively harsh. The men’s reaction tells him so as clearly as if the words had been spoken aloud.

Sherlock finds he can no longer bear the sight of the misery on Baynes’ face, but when he averts his eyes to look up at Deverall instead, what he sees there is worse by far.

It’s plain now from just one look him that he takes full responsibility for the punishment he is inflicting on the boy before him, as if every stroke he delivers is an admission of his failure—an assault on his ability to take care of his men.

Meanwhile the captain’s eyes continue to scrutinize the scene before him, his expression cold and impassive, but deadly. Sherlock recognizes it as the blank look of the reptile as it digests its prey.

Sherlock looks away in disgust, uncertain where to rest his eyes. He feels his own rage rising, almost as if the wall of anger emanating from the men beneath him were contagious, as though he were breathing it into his nostrils like smoke.

But it isn’t their anger that’s affecting him; it’s his own.

The injustice of the whole scenario, the absurdity of it—that one man has the power to control an entire ship full of men, that he can direct them according to his whims, however unjust, however arbitrary—it makes Sherlock sick with rage.

He steps back from the grating, suddenly desperate for the sight of John. Sherlock knows he’s down there somewhere, and just seeing him will give him strength.

He glances back at Molly, but she does not see Sherlock look at her. She’s too transfixed with horror, gloved hand still up over her mouth, her eyes looking at nothing.

He goes to stand beside Colonel Jackson on the opposite side of the grating.

From this new vantage point, he can no longer see Baynes’ face, nor Deverall’s, nor the captain’s—they are facing away from him now. Sherlock’s eyes greedily scan the faces of the men standing beneath him and his heart performs a giddy lurching movement and seems to pitch into his stomach as there, at last, standing at the very center of the line of men, is John.

The first feeling that grips Sherlock after the initial rush of relief he always experiences seeing John alive and well—the shock of his blue eyes so brilliant in his deeply tanned face even through the murk of the gun deck—is a jack-knife twist of fear at the open look of defiance not just on his
face, but visible in every line of his body.

Sherlock has never seen John look so angry; not even when he almost broke Stevens’ face that day after painting the deck.

Looking at him now, Sherlock suspects that all the rage he felt rushing up from the deck beneath him came not from all of the men assembled, but from John alone.

His arms are crossed over his chest, his face is set, jaw lifted as though in challenge. There’s a hard and blazing quality to the gaze that he directs over the cannon to where the captain stands. The disapproval in his posture is as evident as if he were shouting it.

The sight of him makes Sherlock think of a fire he once started, by accident, in his room. He was experimenting with different chemical substances and one reacted rather more strongly than he had anticipated. It caught the candle he was using to warm the liquid and the whole of the worktable went up in flames, so quickly that Sherlock’s eyebrows were singed completely off his face.

He’ll never forget that blast of heat, the sheer force of it, or how quickly the flames had moved then, how hungrily they swallowed up everything that lay in their path.

He couldn’t react fast enough; he was too shocked to think how to stop the progress of the flames.

It was Mycroft who put the fire out in the end. He heard Sherlock’s shout and came running, tore the curtains off Sherlock’s bed and between the two of them they managed to staunch the blaze before it spread to the rest of the room.

He remembers sitting on the scorched carpet beside Mycroft, both of them gasping from the exertion, their faces red and shining, and Mycroft’s hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, so tight it hurt him, asking him over and over again, “Are you all right?” until Sherlock had spluttered a reply, and then Mycroft left to go get water to pour over the smoking ruin of Sherlock’s work table.

They never discussed the incident after, but the thought of it haunts Sherlock to this day—the uncomfortable knowledge that he may well owe Mycroft his life always making him cringe and shy away from the memory.

But it comes back to him now—the feeling of the deadly power in that wall of flame—as he looks down at John, at the naked hatred in his face, and feels the force of it, crackling and alive.

Fear pours through Sherlock at the sight of it—every warning about the captain from John’s own lips reverberating through his head.

What does he think he’s doing? Does he know how he looks?

Sherlock wants to call down to him in warning, to shout at John to pull himself together. If the captain were to see him, surely the look on John’s face alone is all the evidence anyone would need to lock him up for treason.

But no, Sherlock remembers, his heart fluttering like a dying thing inside his throat—the punishment for treason isn’t just imprisonment, nor flogging—it’s hanging.

And then a horrible thought occurs to Sherlock.

What if John knows exactly how he looks? What if his intention is to re-direct the captain’s rage from the boy onto himself? That would be exactly like John—offering up himself in place of someone he believes is innocent.
Sherlock clutches the edge of the grating before him in terror, feels sweat prickle the back of his neck and begin to run down the collar of his shirt.

He cannot remember the last time he felt this afraid.

But if the captain notices John’s defiant stare, he doesn’t acknowledge it. His eyes are all for Deverall and Baynes.

Refocusing his attention, Sherlock hears the number for the final stroke called out.

Deverall, finally, lowers his hand.

The ship’s surgeon comes forward to help pull the boy to his feet, but he does not manage to stand on his own. Lieutenant Dimmock comes around to his other side and between the two of them, they get him upright again.

Sherlock does not have the heart to look again at the boy’s face but he can hear him weeping openly as they lead him away.

The captain steps forward, his beady eyes glimmering as he turns to look into the faces of the men standing in a circle around him.

“Let that be a lesson to all of you that I will not tolerate the neglect of duty onboard this ship. Do I make myself clear?”

There is a sullen, weighted silence.

Sherlock cannot take his eyes from John, who is still standing with his arms crossed over his chest, looking at the captain with the same look of open defiance on his face. His blue eyes have gone grey in the dim light—they are steel. Not once does he blink or look away from the captain’s glance.

“I said: do I make myself clear?”

Sherlock sees Lestrade twitch with agitation behind the captain’s shoulder. Deverall is standing mute at his side, his face now lost in shadow.

The captain turns again, his grey hair making Sherlock think suddenly of a wolf, standing before a flock of sheep, trying to decide which of them to eat first.

“If I am not making myself understood, I would be happy to flog each member of Mr. Baynes’ mess in turn, until you get the message.”

The captain seems to look directly at John, and Sherlock feels his heart stop.

“So I will ask you once last time—do I make myself clear?”

There is a grudging chorus of assent. “Aye, aye, sir.”

Even John’s lips form the words, although his eyes still speak of death.

Thankfully, the captain has turned away from John. He turns on his heel, barking out one last order.

“Now get back to your duties!”
And then he’s vanished into the shadows of the gun deck, Deverall and Lestrade following silently in his wake.
Time seems to stand still for several lurching heartbeats in the wake of the captain’s departure.

Or at least, that’s how it seems to Sherlock, who watches the men begin to move away beneath him with a kind of numb horror.

The immediate danger has passed—he knows. The captain did not seem to notice, or care that John was issuing a silent mutinous challenge to him with every line of his body.

But the fear won’t leave him; it grips his throat like a fist, making it difficult to swallow, making it difficult to move.

He stares hard at the bright spot of John’s head in the darkness, willing him to look up so that he might catch Sherlock’s gaze.

*Look up, look up, look up.*

But John does not look up. He turns and follows the other members of his mess into the depths of the gun deck, and as John vanishes from sight Sherlock feels a swooping panic fill him.

Sherlock can tell by the set of his shoulders, by the way he held his fists at his sides that the anger has not left him, and something about his walk, the angle of his head as the shadows swallowed him up makes Sherlock fear that if he lets John out of his sight, he will do something reckless.

He knows in that moment, in a way he cannot explain, that he needs to go to John. He cannot leave him alone in this state. Somehow, Sherlock knows, in some intuitive way that the members of John’s mess will not be able to help. It needs to be him.

This knowledge breaks the spell that seems to have frozen Sherlock—he turns, and remembers as soon as he does that he is not alone.

Colonel Jackson has stepped back from the grating—his expression looks haunted.

Sensing Sherlock’s gaze, he shakes his head without looking up, his melancholy expression trained on the handkerchief still in his hands.

“A dreadful business, absolutely dreadful.” He looks up at Sherlock then, his eyes flickering from Sherlock to Molly behind him. His voice is grave. “I’m a changed man, my young friends.”

Neither Sherlock nor Molly responds.

“I must return to my Tabitha.” Tucking his handkerchief out of sight, Colonel Jackson tips his hat to them. “I’ll leave you now. A sobering day for all of us, I’m afraid.”

Without another word, he turns and makes his somber way back across the deck.

Molly, too, looks pale and worried, and it suddenly occurs to Sherlock that the right thing to do before he goes running off after John would be to ask her whether there’s anything he might do to help.

Sherlock takes a step closer to Molly. “Are you all right?”

She shakes her head, and then glances up at Sherlock. Her eyes are troubled. “I’m fine. But I think
—I think I shall also return to my rooms.”

“Of course.” Sherlock hesitates, knowing he should offer to take her there himself; he knows it is the gentlemanly thing to do.

But she anticipates his offer, looking up at him with a quick smile. “I’m alright on my own. You go and try and find John.”

Sherlock shuts his open mouth; he doesn’t know what to say.

Molly squeezes his hand once, briefly. “I did enjoy our walk, you know. And I won’t tell anyone about you and John. Your secret is safe with me. Take care. I’ll see you later.”

And then she too is heading across the deck toward the gangway, leaving Sherlock alone with his fear and his relief, and his reckless plan to go and talk to John still pounding through him like a call to arms.

He doesn’t bother to stop and think about whether it’s a good idea, because he knows if he does he will have to reconsider.

He just wants to see John briefly—and it isn’t as if it’s against the rules for them to talk anymore, not now that Anderson’s out of the way.

Sherlock heads to the gangway at the center of the ship that leads down directly to the sailors’ quarters on the upper gun deck.

As he descends the steps into the latticework shadows, chaos greets him. The dark space is a mass of sailors—some pushing to get through, others standing and talking to one another in low tones. Above the din, a boatswain blows his whistle to try and call the men to order.

For one wild moment, Sherlock wonders whether he hasn’t made a horrible mistake. But as he steps down into the clamoring swarm of men and is instantly swallowed up by the crowd, it occurs to him that the current chaos is actually in his favor because it makes his presence among the sailors less conspicuous.

It will make it a bit harder for any of them to notice that there is an interloper among them.

Sherlock tucks his head down and does his best to push his way through the crowd, making his way toward the corner of the deck where John’s mess usually congregates.

He manages to make it there with only a few elbows to the ribs (happily Sherlock can elbow as good as he gets), and to his relief, he sees Burns deep in conversation with Half Pint Lee and Banana Bill over the cannon that constitutes their section of the deck. All three men look worried.

Burns is the first to notice Sherlock’s approach and he can’t be certain but he thinks that perhaps there is a flicker of relief on the other man’s features at the sight of him.

Sherlock stands before them, breathless, his jacket askew from pushing through the throng and all he can think to say by way of greeting is the one thought currently pounding through his head.

“Where’s John?”

Burns studies Sherlock briefly, as if to determine how much Sherlock knows.

“You heard the boy’s punishment then?”
Sherlock nods.

Banana Bill and Half Pint Lee exchange a look that Sherlock cannot fully read.

“He’ll be down on the lower gun deck, going through sails with Patterson and Ironsides. I just sent Mathews down to go and talk to him. He’s… in a bit of a bad way. They’re doing their best to calm him down.”

Burns eyes Sherlock significantly. “Might do him good to talk to you though. I’d say you have a good few minutes together if you’re quiet about it.”

Sherlock watches Burns glance down the deck at the officers in charge of sending the men back to their posts.

“I’ll take you down now. Stick close to me and keep your head down.”

Sherlock nods in gratitude.

He follows Burns as he weaves his way through the crowd of men back towards the stairs leading down to the lower gun deck.

There are so many men about it’s easy to slip past the officer on duty without being seen.

The air is darker down here, thicker—more rank. It takes a minute for Sherlock’s eyes to adjust, before he sees the huddle of dim figures further down the deck.

As he and Burns draw closer, he hears the sound of somewhat urgent whispering.

He does not see them mending sails. On the contrary, the three members of John’s mess are sitting before him, eying him warily as John stalks up and down in front of them, his fists clenched.

Matthews is the first to notice their approach. He breaks away from the small group and comes down the deck to meet them.

Seeing Sherlock, the look of relief on his face is plain.

“Thank god you’re here, lad.” Matthews says in a low voice, glancing warily at John. “We’ve been trying to get him to calm down but so far nothing has worked. He’s really worked up this time.”

Sherlock glances at John’s pacing form. “Has this happened before?”

Matthews nods. “It used to happen more in the early days. Things have been better in the last few years. But this is worse than we’ve seen in a long time.”

Burns shakes his head. “A good fist fight would help take the boil out of his blood. I’ve half a mind to send him down to Anderson to use him as a punching bag. The officers might even turn a blind eye based on the way they feel about him right now.”

Sherlock looks at Burns in astonishment. “Where is Anderson?”

“Confined to his quarters for the time being. Lieutenant Deverall threw him in the brig last night but sadly, he was only in there a few hours before the captain sent Lestrade down to pull him out again.”

This revelation makes a chill run through Sherlock. How much did the captain know about their near discovery last night?
“Yeah,” Matthews chimes in with a dreamy quality to his voice. “It really added to our celebrations last night when we heard Deverall locked him up.”

Sherlock has never actually seen the brig. He pictures it now—a small, barred room with only enough room to stand in—the smell of rot and standing water thick in the air.

He, too, wishes he could have seen Anderson’s miserable face squarely behind bars.

“Now that you’re here though…” Burns looks pointedly at Sherlock and Sherlock feels his cheeks fill with heat in spite of himself. “Well, maybe that’s the next best thing.”

Matthews nods in agreement. “Aye.”

“I’ll leave you to it. If I get any trouble from Moore, I’ll send word.”

Lieutenant Moore is the officer who replaced Anderson, Sherlock knows. He’s the youngest of the officers on board but he has a reputation for always treating the men fairly. Luckily, he looked like he had his hands full earlier so Sherlock doubts he’ll be coming to check up on them anytime soon.

“Good luck, lad.”

Burns claps a fatherly hand on Sherlock’s shoulder before turning to make his way back to the gangway in the middle of the ship.

“Come on.”

Sherlock follows Matthews down towards the other end of the deck where the three other members of John’s mess are sitting beside a pile of sails. The only one who appears to be actually working is Ironsides, who’s humming merrily away to himself as he pushes an enormous bone needle in and out of the thick canvas.

“Johnny Boy! Someone here to see you.”

John turns, and seeing Sherlock he freezes. Sherlock can see John trying to will himself to calm down.

The other three look up at Sherlock, all with similar expressions of relief on their faces—Ironsides, however, outdoes them all with his enormous grin. He’s the first to climb to his feet and take Sherlock by the hand, which he begins pumping vigorously.

“Good to see ya again, Master Holmes. A real pleasure, as always.”

“Same to you, Ironsides,” Sherlock says, offering the other man a genuine smile, but uncertain whether it would be impolite to reclaim his hand, which the one-eyed man is still shaking eagerly.

“Alright Ironsides, give him some air.”

Stapleton smiles at Sherlock, while Patterson doffs his hat in a sweeping gesture.

“Our savior!” Looking up at Sherlock, he winks.

The affection with which they greet him is heartening for Sherlock. It isn’t just that they’re grateful that he has relieved them of Anderson’s tyranny, which as far as Sherlock is concerned would be victory enough, but it’s clear—it’s been clear for a while now—that they genuinely like him.

And Sherlock realizes, with something almost like shock, that what John said last night is true—
Sherlock genuinely likes them too.

John has come up behind the others and it’s unsettling to see that the warmth that usually graces his features in a moment like this is markedly absent.

“Give us a little privacy, lads?”

The other men nod, but then Matthews touches John lightly on the arm and points to a door just beyond the stairs leading to the front of the ship.

“You might have a bit more privacy under the forecastle. There’s no one will be in there now. No one should be down again until noon.”

John nods his thanks, polite but still unsmiling, and Sherlock follows John through the door beyond the gangway that leads to the space at the front of the ship where the sailors sleep.

True to Matthews’ word, the space is deserted, the hammocks all neatly stowed between the low-hanging beams above their heads, leaving John and Sherlock alone in the patchwork darkness. Sherlock has not been down here since the night of Lestrade’s poisoning, when he came down in such a hurry to fetch John’s surgeon kit, and the space, in the daytime looks completely different.

On a sunny day like this, the lighting down here is dramatic; what would otherwise be intense darkness punctuated every few feet by sharp beams of light shining in from the portholes.

It’s brighter here than it was in the middle of the ship and Sherlock can see John better now, as he begins to pace up and down, the light when it catches his hair, turning it to brilliant gold.

The pacing alone would be sign enough that the anger is still with him, but now that Sherlock can see him better, he can see evidence of it everywhere in his body; there is tension in the line of his jaw, in the taut muscles of his forearms, in the continual twitch of his fingers as though they long to tighten into fists.

Sherlock stands a few feet back, uncertainty rising in him. Now that he is here—he isn’t sure what exactly he can do.

As if sensing Sherlock’s doubt, John stops his pacing to look at Sherlock. He pushes a hand through the tumble of hair that’s fallen loose over his forehead—that lock of hair, which is another sign of John’s distress. He normally keeps it combed neatly back; the fact that it’s fallen forward means he’s been pushing his fingers through it in agitation.

Sherlock wants to reach out and smooth it back into place, but he senses that he should continue to keep his distance for the time being.

It isn’t that he’s afraid of John; he knows John would never hurt him in a million years. But the rage coming off of him seems to vibrate in the air around him, the force of his anger so strong, it’s as palpable as the heat from an open flame, and Sherlock knows he must tread cautiously to avoid getting burned.

John looks at him now and Sherlock can feel the effort it takes for John to stand still and look at him like this, to really see him.

He tries to convey in his expression that he saw what happened, that he too witnessed the injustice right alongside John, even if he cannot fully understand the depths of John’s fury.

“What can I do?” he asks, his voice soft—uncertain.
He watches John shut his eyes, visibly trying to calm himself, hands clenching into fists at his sides.

“God, Sherlock I’m so angry.”

Sherlock studies John’s eyelashes, so pale in the light from the porthole that they seem to glow.

“I’m so angry I almost did something really stupid, almost put everything at risk.”

He opens his eyes to look at Sherlock and in that moment, Sherlock can see his misery is as powerful as his rage.

So Sherlock asks him—even though he already knows, he asks.

“Why are you so angry?”

John takes a tight breath, then lets it out slowly. He rolls his neck as if that will help relieve some of the tension.

“It isn’t right—the way he punished that boy. This is not a naval vessel. It’s a merchant ship. Boys are beaten like that in the navy all the time, but this is a merchant ship. Midshipmen shouldn’t be flogged for showing up late to their shift. Or even if they are, it’s six strokes not—”

John shuts his eyes, his fists clenching tighter.

“Not three dozen.” John says this through his teeth, his eyes still clenched tight.

Sherlock wants to touch him so badly, to offer comfort but he knows it isn’t the right time yet.

“I can support a captain that’s hard on his men, but this…” John shakes his head. “This is something else entirely.”

Although they are alone in the forecastle and there is no one within earshot, Sherlock cannot stop thinking about what Lestrade has said—that ships have ears.

Sherlock glances upwards.

Clearly audible through the floorboards are the raucous sounds of the men above them, the light filtering down through the cracks blinking in and out as they move about overhead.

He doesn’t dare tell John to lower his voice but fear is rising in him again at John’s words.

Anyone—anyone at all could be listening.

John is pacing again, raking his fingers through his hair.

“The worst part is, even though I almost ruined everything, even though I know the cost, I still feel it. I want to go back up there right now and—”

John takes a tight breath.

Even saying the words is too dangerous.

Then with a sudden violent movement, he turns and slams his fist into the wall above the porthole, making Sherlock jump.
He leans forward, pressing his forehead in against his coiled fist.

“I wanted to kill him, Sherlock. I still want to.”

The words are quiet, spoken into the space between John’s face and the wall, but even at a whisper, the words are too loud.

Sherlock is frozen, overwhelmed with the desire to reach out and touch, to try and offer some kind of comfort, but he’s afraid—afraid that it won’t be enough. And it’s all he can offer. If that fails, there’s nothing else he can do.

“I’m sorry.” John says, his shoulders slumping, still speaking into the space between his arm and the wall. “I’m sorry you have to see me like this.”

The light from the porthole is streaming in against John’s face. Sherlock can see every crease, every line of weariness and despair. It makes John look ten years older than he actually is.

“I feel so powerless. That’s the worst part about all of this. Even if I wanted to, there’s nothing I could have done to stop it. All I could think about—all I can still think about—is what if it had been you? There’s nothing, absolutely nothing I could have done.”

John’s bandaged fist clenches where it’s still pressed against the side of the ship, his jaw working.

At John’s words the intensity of his rage suddenly makes sense to Sherlock.

That’s what John had been imagining the whole time. It wasn’t just the injustice of what was happening to Baynes, although surely that was part of it—it was the realization that the captain could choose any one of them and make them suffer, at any moment, and there’s nothing John could do to stop him.

It takes a moment for Sherlock to find his voice.

“That won’t happen.”

But even as the words leave his mouth, Sherlock knows—as they both know—that anything could happen. Especially now that Sherlock’s caught the captain’s attention, if Sherlock crosses him, or perhaps more significantly, even if he doesn’t—the captain could have Sherlock stripped to the waist and flogged like any member of the crew. The same thing could just as easily happen to John. The only thing determining what he does to any of them is his own arbitrary will.

John looks over at Sherlock and the look in his eyes is so bleak it makes Sherlock’s chest go cold.

“It might.”

Sherlock is shocked speechless.

He’s never heard John like this before. There is such a cold resolute quality to his voice, as if hope is a concept completely unfamiliar to him; as if he’s never known anything but sorrow. The contrast between this and John’s normally bright disposition makes it all the more troubling.

It reminds Sherlock of John’s hopelessness after he injured his hands, but it’s different now, for it isn’t just hopelessness—there’s rage there as well, the hard and burning look that Sherlock has seen in his eyes before, that Sherlock is certain is what John must look like with a sword in his hand, when he’s staring down the barrel of a gun.
The sight of it gives Sherlock a tiny glimmer of hope because it means all of John is not lost to this misery, his light is still there, it’s just taken on a different shape, flame-bright and crackling at the edges with rage.

John turns to face Sherlock fully, the blazing look in his face growing brighter.

“If he tries it though—if he tries anything—I will kill him.”

The simple matter-of-factness of John’s words makes the sudden warmth in Sherlock’s chest grow cold. It’s plain from the way he speaks, from the determined look on his face that he means it.

A board creaks above their heads.

Terror rushes through Sherlock, makes him reach out in an instinctive gesture and press his fingers to John’s lips.

“Don’t say that, John.”

Fear makes his voice a strangled whisper. Sherlock is ashamed of how afraid he feels but John’s life is at stake—he’s got to stop him from talking like that.

He shakes his head, swallowing hard around the words.

“Don’t.”

John stares at him in the half-light from the porthole, his body gone utterly still.

Sherlock knows John is aching for a fight. The rage is like a fever that’s taken hold of him. His heart is beating so fast Sherlock can see the pulse pounding in his throat. What is it Burns said? If only he could throw a few punches it would take the heat out of his blood.

Or maybe something else would be just as effective…

Sherlock feels the blood rise to his cheeks at the thought. He felt ashamed when Burns implied it but at the touch of Sherlock’s finger at John’s lips, something has shifted imperceptibly between them.

Looking at John now, the quick rise and fall of his chest under the collar of his faded shirt, his lifted chin as he looks up at Sherlock as if in challenge, that sun-bleached lock of hair threatening to slide forward into his eyes, Sherlock is shocked to realize that his own arousal is there just below the surface.

The sight of John like this, dangerous, full of fury, lit up at the edges like sun bursting through an advancing storm cloud, it makes longing pour through Sherlock like molten gold.

It’s crazy that he can feel this way for John, even in a moment like this, threaded through with danger. But perhaps the danger is part of it… that challenge in John’s gaze, Sherlock wants to answer it, he wants to reach out and hold his fingers closer to the flame.

Sherlock feels his own breath start to come quickly.

John still has not moved. His eyes in the half-light from the window are brilliantly, impossibly blue.

The moment stretches on between them, crackling with unharnessed energy, like the tension in the air before a storm, and then, before Sherlock can change his mind, or think better of it, he bends
down and replaces his fingers with his mouth.

John’s gag of surprise as Sherlock’s mouth meets his only lasts a moment, and then he’s kissing Sherlock back, hard and searching and desperate, hands lifting to tangle in Sherlock’s hair, his body rising until his chest brushes Sherlock’s.

Sherlock can taste the fury in his kiss, the desperation; he opens his mouth against John’s, offering his tongue, his fingers cupping John’s jawline as he does, as if to say, ‘Here, I am. Take me. Take this as my offering of comfort.’

He feels, rather than hears, John’s moan against him in response, his body sinking deeper in against Sherlock’s, the brush of his hardening cock against Sherlock’s thigh setting off a flurry of sparks in the base of Sherlock’s stomach.

But almost as soon as John leans into him, he is pulling away, breaking the kiss, and dropping his hands down to Sherlock’s shoulders to hold him at bay.

“No, no, no. We can’t, Sherlock—we can’t. Not after last night. Not here.” He shakes his head at Sherlock through the dark. “It’s too risky.”

Even through the shadows, Sherlock can see his expression is agonized. He knows John wants it just as badly as he does. Strange, how quickly their roles have reversed.

“It’s alright,” he gasps, struggling to catch his breath. “The others are keeping watch. Burns said he would send word if there’s any trouble.”

John shakes his head, his eyes full of sorrow.

“I’m sorry. I want to, Sherlock—but we can’t. We just can’t.”

John pushes Sherlock gently backwards another half step, and then all of the fight seems to go out of him. Lifting his bandaged hands to cover his face, he falls against the wall at his back, sliding down to the floor.

He shakes his head behind his hands.

“I’m so tired of it, Sherlock. I’m tired of the lack of privacy. I’m tired of the lack of space. I’m tired of not being able to touch you when I want, of not being able to see you when I want. I’m so sick of being told what to do all the time.”

“I missed you last night. I missed you so much. I know it’s stupid—it was only one night—but I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t sleep for missing you.”

He lowers his hands to look at Sherlock and Sherlock hates the look of defeat that he sees there, the look of emptiness like he’s been run through and drained of all the light inside of him.

He tips his head back against the wall and shuts his eyes.

Sherlock slides to the ground beside John.

“It’s moments like these when I find myself longing for life on shore. I would give anything for the feeling of solid ground underneath my feet, for the smell of the earth—for the touch of it, warm and alive in my hands. God, Sherlock, what I wouldn’t give for the sight of something green and growing.”
Sherlock can hear the ache in John’s voice like a physical wound inside him. He wants so badly to help somehow—to be able to give those things to John, to help take away his suffering. But he can’t. The only thing he could possibly do to help has been denied him. He feels useless, superfluous. What good is he to John if he can’t help him now? When John needs him the most?

In the long and painful silence, Sherlock can hear Mr. Graves shouting orders up on deck.

“Have I ever told you about the farm where I grew up?”

Sherlock shakes his head.

“It was a small farm—and we were only tenant farmers—we didn’t own the land. But sometimes, standing in the middle of those rolling fields—the sky rushing down to meet you, the sunlight warm on your face—it didn’t matter who owned it. It’s most beautiful this time of year—in summer when the wheat’s coming in. On warm days like this when the sun shines on the fields, the stalks of wheat in the sunlight look like a golden sea. And when the wind moves over the wheat, it makes ripples like waves.”

John’s eyes are open now but they’re fixed on something distant that Sherlock cannot see.

“I never loved the work of a farmer. It’s monotonous, brutal, unforgiving work. But on days like this, I would give anything to be back there. To feel the sun on my face, to hear the sound of the wind in the trees, to see it moving through the wheat.”

Sherlock is still silent beside John. He’s trying to listen to John’s words but he’s having trouble focusing, he’s lost—he feels like he’s drowning in his own helplessness. He wants to give John what he needs but he’s realizing now just how powerless he is to do so.

“I’m sorry,” he finally manages, his own voice sounding strange in his ears. “I’m sorry I can’t do more. To help you.”

“Oh Sherlock,” John says, his voice resonant with sorrow, and then John is reaching for him, his arm going around Sherlock’s shoulders, pulling Sherlock in against his side. “God, if there’s anyone who should be sorry it’s me.”

He presses a kiss to Sherlock’s curls and Sherlock feels an ache move through him at the realization that it’s John comforting him once more, when it should be the other way around.

“I’m so sorry that I can’t do more for you, Sherlock.” The pain in John’s voice cuts through Sherlock like a knife. “There’s so much, Sherlock—so much I would give to you if only I could. The fact that I can’t…”

Something in his voice gives way and Sherlock feels him shake his head against Sherlock.

And then Sherlock doesn’t care if it’s too dangerous—he doesn’t care if they’re sitting on the lower gun deck in the middle of the afternoon, he can’t bear to hear the sorrow in John’s voice.

He tilts his face up to John’s until his mouth is inches away from John’s, until he can feel John’s breath against his parted lips.

He doesn’t say anything, he just holds his mouth there, his heartbeat growing faster as he feels John’s breath quicken against his.

“We shouldn’t,” John breathes against Sherlock’s mouth, his voice full of agony. “God, we really shouldn’t...”
Sherlock lifts his chin and his lips just brush John’s.

John groans against him.

“Forgive me,” he murmurs against Sherlock’s lips. “God, forgive me for my weakness but I am only human...”

And then he closes the distance between them, his hand sliding up the back of Sherlock’s neck into his curls, kissing him fully—deeply—turning his body into Sherlock’s with a low, desperate sound.

It’s like a spark catching a dry pile of kindling—the force of the desire between them is more than the two of them have power to stop.

Sherlock opens his mouth under John’s, pushing himself up on his knees so he can lean in closer, the front of his thigh brushing against the bulge in John’s trousers as he does. He feels the shudder that moves through John in response, and he rubs his leg against it again, this time with intention.

John groans into the kiss, his body rising to meet Sherlock’s until they’re both on their knees, clinging to one another like drowning men—John’s hands cupping Sherlock’s face as he kisses him, Sherlock’s hands fist ing in John’s shirt, dragging the material out of his trousers to get at more of him.

Sherlock is the first to break the kiss so he can slide his mouth down John’s jaw, pausing to suck a mark into the side of John’s neck—feeling delirious, hungry for John in a way he cannot account for in the moment.

All he knows is that he wants to help John feel better—he needs to, and he knows, in some deep, visceral way that this is the answer.

Some distant part of his brain is telling him that this is risky; is warning him to stop before it’s too late—but they’re too far past that point now—they’re so far past it, Sherlock wouldn’t know how to turn back if he could.

And even if he could, he doesn’t want to.

It’s always John who’s taking responsibility for Sherlock’s wellbeing; taking charge of every situation. It’s Sherlock’s turn to make the decision—if anything goes wrong, let it be his fault. Let the blame fall on his shoulders.

“Sherlock, Sherlock—wait—wait! We’ve got to stop. We can’t do this here—we shouldn’t—”

But then Sherlock’s mouth is back on John’s kissing him quiet, his hand sliding down between their bodies to rub at John’s cock through his trousers. He can feel how hard it is even through the fabric.

“We can be quick,” he says against John’s mouth—his voice so deep it’s almost unrecognizable—spreading his palm and dragging it up the long hard line of John’s erection.

John’s response is a hiss of pleasure, his head dropping back as Sherlock’s mouth returns to the vulnerable line of his throat and licks all the way up to the base of his ear.

“Fine—fine,” he gasps, fingers clenching in Sherlock’s curls, making Sherlock want to rub his own hardening cock against John’s side like an animal in heat. “But we have to be quick.”

“Yes,” Sherlock breathes into the base of John’s throat, resisting the urge to drag his shirt down
low so he can suck on John’s nipples, concentrating instead on finding the fastenings to John’s trousers and pulling them apart. “I promise.”

If time is in short supply, then he needs to focus on what counts—and removing items of clothing when they are in plain sight is probably not the wisest course of action. Even in his lust-addled state, Sherlock is aware of this.

He satisfies himself by tracing his fingers over one of John’s nipples through his shirt with his free hand, and is rewarded by the feeling of the little bead of flesh stiffening under his fingers.

With his other hand, Sherlock pushes the buttons apart on John’s trousers, somewhat clumsily, but successfully, and experiences a brief flare of confidence at his improvement in this area as he reaches to take John in his hand.

The two of them both gasp as Sherlock’s fingers close around the warm flesh, and Sherlock feels—as he always does with John’s cock in his hand—like a man who’s just struck gold. John’s hands slide down to grip Sherlock by the shoulders, his breathing going shallow.

He would normally ask John what he wants—would normally take much more care to touch him in a certain way—but there isn’t time, so Sherlock rubs his palm over the slit, which he knows is very sensitive and is delighted to find the head of John’s cock is already slick with moisture.

He uses this to coat his hand and begins to work John in and out of his fist, bowing his head in close to John’s mouth so he can listen to his breathing.

John’s tightening fingers on his shoulders and the quickened pace of his breath tell Sherlock that so far, he’s doing alright—but still he has to be sure, so he puts his mouth down beside John’s ear, and asks in a rough whisper: “Is that alright?”

John’s fingers slide back up Sherlock’s neck in answer, turning Sherlock’s mouth to his with gentle pressure so that he can lick into Sherlock’s mouth with deep, wet strokes.

The feeling of John’s tongue in his mouth almost makes Sherlock lose his rhythm, but he manages to keep his hand moving on John’s cock, speeding up his movements slightly as he feels John begin to work his hips in tandem with him.

“So good,” John breathes into his mouth. “You’re so good at this.”

He tastes the words more than he hears them—between long, wet licks into his mouth—and Sherlock is glad they are already kneeling because the feeling of this—John’s tongue in his mouth, John’s cock so slick and hot and hard in his hand—would be enough to make Sherlock’s knees give out if he were standing.

It does not matter that he can still hear voices above them and the sounds of footsteps as people walk around overhead. Sherlock’s senses have shrunk to the points of John’s body against his, the sound of John’s shallow breathing in the warm dark.

He wishes he could take more clothes off—it’s stiflingly hot below deck, even with the porthole open, the humid tropical air does nothing to relieve the heat, and Sherlock can feel his shirt is sticking to his back with sweat; his own cock, aching where it’s still confined within his trousers.

And then as if on cue, as if John can read his thoughts, he feels John’s mouth shift on his, his fingers slipping in between their bodies.

“I want—to feel you against me.”
His fingers fumble at the buttons of Sherlock’s trousers and Sherlock lets go of John briefly to help him, equally desperate for the feel of John’s naked cock against his own.

As soon as Sherlock has freed himself they both hiss in relief at the sensation of their cocks coming together, the heat of John against him makes Sherlock’s knees buckle at how good it feels.

“Fuck.” John leans his head back, baring his neck briefly to the light. Sherlock sees, from the crack of light leaking in through the bulwarks, a wet stripe from his own mouth on John’s throat, and then John is leaning back in, growling against Sherlock in frustration.

“I can’t—my hands—” and there’s such furious sorrow in his voice that Sherlock reaches to take them both in hand without thinking, wrapping his long fingers around both of their cocks to stroke them together.

“Yes—oh god…” John’s mouth is open and hot against his as Sherlock strokes the pair of them, hard and fast, the way he knows John likes it.

The sudden stimulation is too much for Sherlock—he comes almost immediately—his hips stuttering forward against John, the rhythm of his stroking turned erratic as his orgasm overtakes him.

“S—sorry, I’m sorry,” he gasps into John’s mouth.

He didn’t mean to come first—John was supposed to be his priority. But he’s too sensitive to John—too finely tuned to the feeling of John’s body against his, to the sun-bright, briny scent of him—that forelock of fair hair sliding down to brush against Sherlock’s cheek.

“It’s alright,” John murmurs, his fingers tight on Sherlock’s upper arms to hold him up, his mouth skimming Sherlock’s hairline. “God, it’s more than alright. But we should—” John grunts as Sherlock takes him into his hand again. “We have to hurry.”

Sherlock knows that John is right. Through the haze of his diminishing orgasm, that flicker of fear is rising back to life inside him again. How many minutes have elapsed since they came down here? Five? Ten? It’s impossible to tell.

Sherlock can hear voices on the other side of the door. John must hear them too because he’s suddenly very quiet save for the quickening sound of his breathing.

John’s fingers tighten again on Sherlock’s arms.

“Sherlock—”

But before he can protest, Sherlock bends down, pushing John’s shirt up out of the way, and in one silent movement, he takes John into his mouth.

The position is awkward—because John is already on his knees, Sherlock has to bend low to reach him, placing one hand on the floor beside him for balance. He knows he won’t be able to sustain it for long—but it’s worth it when he hears John’s gasp above him, and feels John’s hands clenching in his hair, the lovely full hard heat of him filling Sherlock’s mouth.

“Oh god.”

John’s head drops back, his mouth opening, and if Sherlock was nervous to try this again, as he’s nervous every time that he will get it wrong, that he will mess it up, all his nerves leave him at the feeling of John’s body melting under his touch.
He wants to kiss every inch of John down here—to draw it out, to tease him—pressing gentle, close-mouthed kisses in against his thighs down to the base of his knee and back up again, until John is tugging at his hair and begging Sherlock to take him back into his mouth.

But they don’t have that kind of time; and Sherlock has to be quick.

He licks his tongue over the slit—slowly, once—and then he lowers his mouth—careful to breathe through his nostrils, relishing the feeling of John’s fingers tightening in his hair as his mouth moves down.

“Oh, god Sherlock…”

Using one hand to guide his movements, Sherlock starts to pump, bobbing his head up and down, hollowing his cheeks to provide more sensation, listening to the sound of John’s breathing going ragged above him.

He tries to use every bit of knowledge he has gathered about performing this activity on John to his advantage now, and it frustrates him that he can’t do all the things he would like—that he can’t touch John in all the ways that he would like. He wishes that he could ease John down onto his back and pull his knees up, spread his thighs apart, so he could have access to all of John—to lick and suck and push his fingers into the entrance to John’s body—oh, what he wouldn’t give to have that little bottle of oil in his hand right now.

But with every second that passes the danger of their situation increases, and Sherlock knows he has to hurry.

His back is starting to hurt from being hunched over in this position, his knees are aching; the sweat is pouring down his back, but he can tell John’s orgasm is close—he can feel it in the clench of John’s abdominal muscles, the slight trembling of his thighs.

Sherlock has to pull off to take a breath, so he decides to change tactics. Taking just the head back into his mouth, he wraps his fingers around the base of John’s cock and resumes stroking, faster than before, bobbing his head in time with his strokes.

He feels one of John’s hands leave his hair and realizes from the muffled sounds above him that he does so to cover his own mouth—and then he’s coming, hips arching up into Sherlock’s mouth as his orgasm overtakes him, muscles going taut, the fingers of his other hand clenching hard in Sherlock’s hair.

Sherlock keeps John in his mouth through each wave of his release, swallowing the bitter liquid down with a deep sense of satisfaction, with the knowledge that he is taking a part of John into himself.

He hears a sound above him almost like a sob and he pulls back at last, so that he can look up at John, straightening up so that he’s kneeling between John’s spread thighs.

John has a hand up over his mouth and Sherlock is confused to see the expression on his face is one that looks like sorrow.

But before Sherlock can ask what’s wrong, John is pulling Sherlock to him and kissing him, wet and open-mouthed and grateful, holding Sherlock’s face between his hands as if it were something infinitely breakable.

“Thank you,” he says, soft and breathless into Sherlock’s mouth. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”
Sherlock lets John pull him half into his lap, his arms coming up around John instinctively and he holds onto him as John’s head comes to rest against the side of Sherlock’s neck. In spite of the heat, in spite of the growing pain in his knees—he stays like that, crouched against John, his heart pounding against John’s cheek where the collar of his shirt is pulled open, John’s wet breath in the hollow of his neck making him clench his fingers hard in John’s hair and whisper over and over again. “It’s alright—I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

And he does.

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Sherlock is the first to move—even if he hates himself for breaking the moment—but he knows they’ve already taken far too many risks and they can’t afford to spend another moment like this. The realization that they just did what they did in the middle of the day on the lower gun deck is only now creeping over Sherlock with a kind of belated cold dread.

How lucky—how unbelievably lucky—that no one has come through this part of the ship in the last quarter of an hour.

Sherlock knows that they can no longer afford to rely on luck.

He sits back to do up his trousers and when he looks up again, he sees John looking at him.

John’s expression is softer, the lines in his face no longer visible, his eyes as they study Sherlock a cool grey-blue. Sherlock can see that the storm that was raging there before has finally quieted and he feels relief move through him to douse some of his anxiety.

As long as it worked, it will have been worth it.

“Better?” he asks softly, and the worry must still be clear in his voice because Sherlock can see John make an effort to find a smile.

He leans in between Sherlock’s thighs, kissing him softly, one hand sliding up into Sherlock’s curls.

When he sits back, the smile looks more genuine.

“I didn’t even know I needed that—but I did.” He strokes his hand down the back of Sherlock’s neck, blue eyes going dark. “You knew better than I did what I needed. I should have known… it was worth it, in spite of the risk. Thank you for that. Next time, I’ll trust you.”

Sherlock feels a complicated tangle of emotions in response to John’s words—pride that he knew what was best for John, satisfaction that it worked, but also, shame—that he put them both at risk the way he did.

After everything they talked about yesterday evening, about how dangerous it was for them to be together on board the ship—Sherlock’s actions flagrantly disregarded all of that.

John must read some of Sherlock’s emotional turmoil in his face because he’s lifting Sherlock’s chin up with his fingers so Sherlock will look him in the eye.

“No regrets. All right?”

Sherlock forces his gaze up to meet John’s and nods, swallowing down the bitter feelings. What’s done is done. He can’t change it now. And John is feeling better. That is what counts.
“Good.”

John kisses him once more, lingeringly, before pulling back, to say with sadness in his voice, “We’d better get back up.”

Sherlock nods again, even if he can’t suppress the pang of sorrow he feels at John moving away from him.

John is already dressed and on his feet again by the time Sherlock moves to stand. He reaches a hand down to help Sherlock to his feet. Sherlock takes it, amazed, as he always is, by the strength in John’s grip, how easily his arm takes Sherlock’s weight.

He lets go of John’s hand to straighten his waistcoat, looking at John as he does so, watching John smooth that errant lock of hair back into place with his hands, feeling something in his stomach turn over at how unbelievably handsome John is in this moment—the light coming in from the porthole illuminating his broad cheeks, the strong curve of his jaw, the soft line of his mouth.

John catches him looking and smiles at him, curious. “What are you thinking about?”

Sherlock blushes. “Nothing.” He drops his eyes to his waistcoat, pretending to be absorbed in tugging it back into place, embarrassed by how absolutely smitten he is.

“How do I look?” he asks so John won’t repeat the question. “Presentable?”

John’s smile grows roguish, and the sight of it makes the heavy feeling in Sherlock’s heart grow momentarily lighter. It’s proof that John is back to normal.

John steps in to pull Sherlock to him by the hips.

“What are you thinking about?” he echoes, his voice low.

His eyes travel from the roots of Sherlock’s hair down to his boots and Sherlock feels heat follow in the wake of John’s gaze, making him blush harder than ever.

“Oh yes,” John says, leaning in, his voice full of a lovely kind of dark promise. “But I’d prefer not to present you to anyone right now... I’d much rather keep you to myself.”

He leans in then and kisses Sherlock deeply, his fingers rising, as always, to Sherlock’s hair. He smooths a tumbled curl back into place before stepping back. “Shall we?”

Sherlock nods, taking John’s hand as they make their way back down the deck towards the door leading to the center of the ship.

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Even though they drop hands before going through the door and appearing before John’s messmates again, Sherlock is certain it is painfully obvious what just happened between the two of them, at least to some members of John’s mess.

Burns, looking somber as ever, is the first to speak.

“Alright, Johnny boy?”

Iron Sides is beaming openly, Patterson is clearly trying to keep from laughing and failing, and Matthews is politely looking anywhere but at them.
“Yes, thank you,” John says genuinely. “I’m feeling much more… grounded.”

Sherlock stares hard at a lantern swinging just beyond the others’ heads, working to affix his face with a look of pure and unknowing innocence.

“I want to apologize for earlier. I wasn’t… I wasn’t thinking straight. I’m sorry if I caused any of you to worry,” John continues, his voice full of regret.

“We know, lad. It’s all right. I’m only glad young Mister Holmes here could help you sort it all out.”

Burns’ tone is impassive, without irony.

Even so, Patterson cannot help from snorting into his hand. Matthews kicks him sharply, and for maybe only the second time in his life, Sherlock sees John look embarrassed.

But the look fades almost as quickly as it comes as Burns turns to them with a more serious expression. “It’s a good thing you came back when you did—I was just about to send someone down after you. Moore wants us back up on the topsails. Just in case the wind picks back up again. Captain’s orders.”

Sherlock can hear from the tone of Burn’s voice that this is a pointless command; the wind is not going to pick up anytime soon. They all know this.

What they also know is that now is not the time to question any of his orders. Nor to speak openly about how pointless they might be.

“Aye, aye.”

“I better get back,” Sherlock says before John has to tell him himself.

John nods, leaning in briefly to press his shoulder against Sherlock’s. And then he says, in a low voice only for Sherlock, “Look for me this afternoon. I’ll be up in the top sails.”

Sherlock feels a flicker of excitement at John’s words. He nods, before stepping away.

Sherlock bids farewell to the rest of John’s mess, ignoring the look of irrepressible mirth in Patterson’s eyes as he turns to go.

“We’ll see you again shortly, Mr. Holmes.”

“Send us a prayer for strong winds! So we can all raise a glass together in Rio.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Sherlock says, fighting the smile provoked by Matthew’s hopeful words.

But as Sherlock makes his way back to the gangway at the center of the ship, he hears Stapleton say to John: “Odds aren’t good that any of us will get shore leave, do you think, Johnny? Not with the captain’s temper what it’s been…”

“We can’t be certain of anything at this point.” Sherlock can hear the note of caution in John’s voice even from all the way down the deck. “His moods are so changeable… It’s anyone’s guess what he’ll decide by the time we make port.”

“Judging by the winds, we won’t reach Rio till the day after tomorrow at the earliest, I’d say.”

Sherlock tries to ignore the sinking feeling in his belly at the news. He cannot even think about Rio
now—his hopes are too high—perilously high. He does not know what he will do when they come plummeting back to earth.

He looks back at the little group of sailors before heading through the door leading to the passengers’ quarters, and John, looking up to catch his eye across the deck, winks.

Sherlock shuts the door carefully behind him, his mind full of how John will look when he sees him later this afternoon, climbing up the rigging with the sun shining on his bare shoulders, blue sky at his back.

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The rest of the afternoon passes in a slow trudge of lethargy.

Sherlock does go up to watch John in the topsails but just as the sailors prophesied, there is no wind, so there isn’t much for John to do, other than sit up near Patterson talking in the golden light of afternoon.

Sherlock sits far beneath him on deck, in a tucked away corner by the longboats, where he can see the sun occasionally flashing on John’s hair, and hear the sound of his laughter echoing over the water as Patterson tells him some lewd joke.

It’s only now, thinking back over what they did this morning that Sherlock realizes just how stupid it was to take the risk they did; how unbelievably lucky they were not to get caught.

He leans his head back against the railing behind him and shuts his eyes, savoring the feeling of the sun on his face.

They certainly won’t be that lucky a second time. They can never do that again.

All of their hopes are now pinned on Rio. Somehow the ship’s destination there has gained an almost mythic significance in Sherlock’s mind. It’s as if everything after that point is an indistinguishable blur—even if Sherlock knows they still have weeks to go afterward until they reach Madras; he somehow can’t imagine anything beyond Rio.

It isn’t good, he knows. But he doesn’t know how to change it.

He’s only glad that right now that things seem to have reached some kind of equilibrium; the ship is strangely quiet in the aftermath of what happened this morning. Everyone is wisely keeping their heads down and out of trouble—both crew and passengers alike.

Sherlock does not see the captain, but he does catch sight of Lestrade standing briefly at the railing of the quarter deck and he does not look improved from what Sherlock saw this morning.

If anything, he looks more rigid-faced and grey. Even from the distance of several dozen feet, Sherlock can see clearly that there is weariness bleeding out of every pore of him, in spite of his best efforts to look as though he’s his regular composed self.

Sherlock feels a throb of sympathy for the man. He cannot imagine the pressure he must be under right now. He wishes there was something he could do for him. But for once, Sherlock knows it will be more helpful for him to keep his distance.

He sees Molly at dinner and takes a moment to get her alone so he can ask her quietly how she’s doing. She looks pale but she insists to Sherlock that she’s fine, that she’s only tired, and Sherlock wonders if she isn’t worried about Lestrade too. How could she not be? The thought never
occurred to him this morning but it’s all too obvious to him now—that must have been all she was
talking about as she watched him, grey and stone-faced as he oversaw the boy’s punishment.

He’s again struck with the fruitless desire to do something to help them both but he isn’t sure what
he can do. So he leaves her alone, lets her go back to her room without questioning her further.

Sherlock does not get a chance to talk to John again that day. He’s no longer up in the topsails
when Sherlock goes back on deck after supper. He waits for a while to see if John will re-appear,
but somehow he knows that he won’t see him—they’ve been granted too much good fortune
already today.

The next day passes in the same slow kind of drudgery.

Everyone on the ship seems to be holding their breath, waiting for the wind, waiting for the sight
of green on the horizon. Even if they have lost the wind, they must still be creeping closer—
Sherlock has no idea how long it will take now if they do not get the wind back. How many days
will they be stuck in this hellish limbo?

Then, sometime in the haze of the afternoon, when Sherlock is down below, stretched out on his
bed, plucking lethargically at the strings of his violin, he hears excited shouts from up on deck.

He hurries to tuck his violin back in its case before rushing for the stairs. He’s joined in the
corridor by several other curious passengers, including Amesbury, who gives Sherlock an
absolutely filthy look as he passes him. Perhaps the man had been in his room the night of the
party after all... At this point Sherlock could care less.

As he reaches the upper deck, Sherlock can see immediately what the excitement is about.

The wind is back.

The men are being called to their stations, and Sherlock feels a thrill move through him as his eyes
find John, already halfway up the ratlines and reaching for the cables as he makes his way to his
post in the foretop.

John has explained to Sherlock that he is an able seaman, which means he is one of the sailors who
goes up into the rigging to help let down and reef sails. Apparently not all sailors are able to do this
work—others must simply man the halyards and help with the raising and lowering of sail with
two feet planted firmly on the deck. John’s station is in the foretop, which means that when it’s
time to reef or let down sails, he must climb to the highest possible point on the ship to do so.

This of course also means that his position is the most dangerous—and is probably a large part of
the reason why John is so loved and respected by so many members of the crew, not just his own
mess. That he’s good at his job is evident from even the most novice perspective.

Watching from below, Sherlock cannot believe how lucky he is to be able to witness this once
again. Even if every time, he is filled with equal parts admiration and terror—his heart in his
mouth as he watches John climb boldly up into the sky—Sherlock is always struck by just how
natural John looks navigating the rigging, his movements so graceful, so easy—as though he had
no fear at all of falling, as if the thought of the void of the ocean beneath him, the endless sky
above him filled him with joy instead of terror.

Sherlock has asked him about it before and John told him that the feeling of being up there is
indescribable. “Nothing but the wind in your hair and the vast blue of the ocean below you, the
blue of sky all around you. It’s the most free I’ve ever felt. It’s impossible to explain unless you’ve
experienced it. You feel invincible up there. It’s what I imagine flying would feel like—like you become part of the sky.”

“I don’t think I would feel invincible,” Sherlock had said with awe in his voice.

“Ah, you would. You would love it. I know you would.”

Looking up at John now, as he reaches the highest part of the mast and begins to move out along the yardarm Sherlock cannot imagine ever feeling at ease up there, much less loving the experience.

Even though he has seen John do this dozens of times before, Sherlock cannot stop the plunge of real fear in his stomach as he watches John drop himself down onto the yardarm and place his feet on the braces.

He almost can’t watch, but he forces himself not to look away, afraid in some half-formed superstitious way that if he does, that is when John will fall.

But of course John does not fall—he manages it with ease, his movements as natural, as practiced as a rider swinging down from a horse, or as Sherlock is certain he himself must look when tucking his violin under his chin and setting his bow to the strings.

Sherlock can see the exhilaration on John’s face even from where he stands below on deck.

The other men are right behind him but John is the first to reach his post, way out on the very end of the yardarm by the lifts. He must wait for the others to reach their stations before he can begin undoing the ties. Patterson is next—followed closely by Stapleton and Banana Bill. They’re fast too—it’s shocking to see how quickly they can navigate the complicated system of ropes and rigging—but none of them are as fast as John.

Sherlock can hear the sound of the others good-naturedly jeering at John for reaching his station first. He cannot make out John’s response over the shouts of the boatswain on deck but he can see the flash of John’s grin as they finally join him, and the rippling sound of his laughter is as refreshing to Sherlock as rain out on the sunny deck.

There’s so much activity on deck during moments like this, that it’s taken Sherlock a while to find the perfect spot to watch without being in the way—but after so many weeks at sea, desperate for a glimpse of John, he’s finally found it—tucked out of sight just beneath the longboats.

The captain has emerged to oversee the proceedings; Sherlock can feel his presence on the quarterdeck without even seeing him—like a long shadow cast over the working bodies of the men.

He’s close enough to the quarterdeck that he can hear the captain talking with Lieutenant Lestrade. Their discussion is of little interest to him, as it’s almost entirely comprised of technical nautical language he does not understand. He’s only half-listening when something in the captain’s tone signals a shift in the topic of conversation.

“What is the name of that sailor, Lieutenant? Up on the foremast topsail? Blonde hair.”

Sherlock freezes in his hiding spot beneath the longboats. There’s only one person the captain could be talking about who fits that description.

The men up on deck cannot see him where they stand—of that, Sherlock is certain. So he holds himself absolutely still and listens.
If Lestrade is unsettled by the question, his answer does not betray it. “That’s John Watson, sir.” There is a pause as both Sherlock and Lestrade wait for some further explanation. “Why do you ask?”

“He’s a very skilled foretopman.” There is another weighted pause before the captain goes on speaking. “He’s skilled in other regards as well, I’ve heard.”

Sherlock has gone so still he has stopped breathing.

“He’s...” The question seems to have thrown Lestrade, but he quickly regains his composure. “Well yes, sir, he was trained as a surgeon, I believe. Worked as a surgeon in the navy before he was wounded in duty. Sent back to England to recover before he joined the merchant fleet.”

“Pity to see a man like that in a position as lowly as his.”

Sherlock can tell from the delay in Lestrade’s answer that he isn’t sure how he’s meant to respond to this comment. “Is it, sir?”

“It was he who helped you the night that you were taken ill.”

His words this time are not a question.

“It was, sir.”

“How did the man find you?”

“He—” The delay in Lestrade’s answer betrays his nervousness. “Another passenger who saw me taken ill went and fetched Watson, sir.”

“And which passenger, pray tell, was that?”

“Holmes, sir. Sherlock Holmes.”

“Ahh.”

The sound Roberts makes now is like the sound of a man who has just pushed himself back from the table after a fine meal.

It makes the hair stand up on the back of Sherlock’s neck.

“And how is it that young Holmes came to know about Mr. Watson’s particular capabilities?”

“I... I’m sure I don’t know, sir.”

“Are you suggesting it was dumb luck that he happened to bring Watson to your aid?”

“No, sir.”

Lestrade stops there but Sherlock can feel by the weighted tension in the silence that the captain is expecting him to say more.

“That is... the two of them seem to have taken a liking to one another. They’ve... forged a friendship, I believe.”

“I see. And as a commanding officer on this ship, do you approve of this kind of... ‘friendship’?”
Sherlock’s ears have gone very hot; he cannot imagine what Lestrade’s face must look like now.

“I do, sir.” Sherlock is shocked by the firmness in Lestrade’s voice. It is not what he expected to hear. “I see no harm in it.”

“Indeed? How very modern of you.” The captain’s tone is unmistakably mocking. He pronounces the word ‘modern’ as though it left a bad taste in his mouth. “I may be an old-fashioned man, Lieutenant, but I’ve always considered hanging as a punishment for sodomy to be far too lenient.”

There are several horrible beats of silence in which all of the blood drains out of Sherlock’s face.

Lestrade sounds equally shocked by the pronouncement. “Sir?”

“Keep an eye on those two. See to it that this ‘friendship’ doesn’t turn into anything more unseemly. I’d hate to have to make an example of such a promising young sailor. It would be such a waste.”

“I don’t think—that is to say, I wouldn’t—”

“You may trust my judgment in this matter, Lieutenant. I’ve been a naval officer for too long not to recognize the signs. Anderson may be a fool but I have a feeling his suspicions on this matter are not unfounded.”

“But—but there was no one in the boy’s room that night, sir. Deverall and Dimmock checked his cabin from top to bottom. Anderson was wrong. He has it out for Holmes, sir. Has had since the start of the voyage for some reason.”

“Be that as it may. I will not tolerate behavior like that on board my ship. Like any other disease, it has a tendency to spread. I am entrusting you, Lieutenant, to ensure that that situation does not arise. Have I made myself clear?”

“You have, sir. Entirely, sir.”

“Good. Now go fetch Graves and tell him I want a word.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Lestrade’s departing footsteps signal the definitive end to the conversation.

Still hidden in the shadow of the longboat, Sherlock pulls his knees up against his chest and presses his forehead against them, trying to take deep even breaths—trying to ward off the rising wall of panic that feels like it’s crushing the air from his lungs.

He knew—he knew—that he had put John at greater risk by telling the captain John’s name; and he knew, on some level, that word about Anderson’s accusations would reach the captain’s ears. But to hear the captain tell Lestrade to keep an eye on the pair of them—to hear the captain say that he believed Anderson’s suspicions were right… to hear what he said about the punishment for sodomy…

He knows; he knows everything.

Sherlock presses his forehead harder against his knees, a wall coming down in his mind.

Breathe… just breathe…

It’s several long minutes before he feels calm enough again to lift his head off his knees and let
himself consider what he just overheard.

In truth, nothing has changed. He and John are in just as much trouble as they have been before Sherlock heard this conversation take place.

It’s just… it was easier to ignore the reality of their situation before he heard the truth directly from the captain’s mouth.

Things are exactly as John feared. He was right last night to leave Sherlock’s room when he did. The whole situation is far too risky for them to carry on meeting on board the ship—it’s like a powder keg, set to explode at any moment.

The memory of what they did together yesterday in the forecastle comes back to Sherlock now like a slap in the face.

Sherlock feels his breath come short again.

God, how stupid stupid stupid he was to initiate that.

If anyone had found them, if anyone had come down there and seen what they were doing together…

Sherlock’s fingers dig with painful deliberation into his thighs.

He will never be able to forgive himself.

The shrill sound of the boatswain’s whistle drags his attention back to his immediate surroundings; the men are being called down from the sails.

Sherlock considers creeping out from underneath the longboat to watch John climbing down, but fear keeps him where he is.

Best to keep his distance in light of what he just overheard—he has no way of knowing if either Lestrade or the captain are still up on the quarterdeck. He will have to resort to more discreet means of getting word to John.

What’s more, Sherlock isn’t certain whether he should say anything about it to John. After all, what good would it do? It would only make him more worried, more fearful for both of their sakes.

No; better to keep it to himself for now.

Sherlock waits until the foretopmen have all come down from their posts and gone below before he comes crawling out of his hiding place. Now that the wind has come back, the men all seem to be in high spirits. Sherlock can hear their shouts and laughter as they disappear down through the forehatch at the front of the ship.

They are likely, all of them, eager for the chance to make port soon—shore leave or no, the ship will have the chance to resupply, and even the sight of land on the horizon will be like a much needed breath of fresh air for eyes weary of the unchanging sight of the sea.

However, at the thought of Rio, Sherlock feels a horrible dread steal over him.

It hasn’t occurred to him until this moment, but it’s plain to him now, that after the conversation he just overheard, Lestrade will never permit the two of them to leave the ship together. How could he? To do so would be in direct defiance of the captain’s orders.
The familiar feeling of panic is making Sherlock’s chest feel tight again.

If he and John are forbidden to see each other on board the ship, and if they cannot manage to see each other in Rio, then… when will they have the chance to see each other again?

The absence of an answer to this question opens up like a void inside of Sherlock.

_Don’t think about it—just don’t think about it._

Something—they’ll think of something. There has to be some way around this. He can’t give up hope yet. As long as he and John still draw breath, there’s got to be a way around this.

There has to be.

Sherlock shuts his eyes; forces himself to draw another long breath, then counts the seconds before letting it out.

He can no longer hear the sounds of either the captain or Lieutenant Lestrade up on the quarterdeck. For some time now, he has heard only the voices of Lieutenant Deverall and Mr. Graves. Enough time has passed that Sherlock judges it’s safe to make his exit without being seen.

He peers out first to make sure no one is nearby before climbing to his feet and heading, as quickly as his footsteps will take him, to the hatch leading down below.

But as he reaches the top of the stairs, he sees George Ferguson, standing in the shadows a few steps down, looking up at the full sails with a strange, glittering kind of eagerness in his eyes.

As soon as he catches sight of Sherlock, he throws him a filthy look, and turns to head back down the stairs.

Sherlock waits a minute or two before following after him—happy to give the man a wide berth. Curious as he may be about the other man’s activities, he has no wish to have another encounter like the last one, and if he dares to get too close to Ferguson he’s certain the man will be happy to pick up right where he left off.

Sherlock hasn’t seen much of either Ferguson or Knott since the incident with the ship’s manifest. Knott seems content to confine himself to his room for the remainder of the voyage, but Sherlock is surprised that he hasn’t seem more of Ferguson. He was beginning to wonder whether Ferguson had decided to take Knott’s advice after all. But after seeing the look on his face just now, Sherlock is certain the man has something else up his sleeve.

Just what that something might be occupies Sherlock’s thoughts all the way until the supper bell. It’s a much less painful topic to consider than what Sherlock overheard earlier, and he does his best to put the conversation between the captain and Lieutenant Lestrade firmly out of his mind.

However, much to Sherlock’s dismay, he finds that keeping his thoughts free of what he overheard earlier proves impossible in light of the dominant conversation around the supper table.

All anyone can talk about is Rio.

The mood in the passenger saloon is markedly more buoyant than it was at the midday meal.

As usual, Colonel Jackson is abreast of all the most recent news.

“The ship is back up to making the speed she was before we lost the wind. They’re saying we may
reach Rio by tomorrow mid-morning.”

Sherlock is glad to see the man has returned to his usual confident good humor. To see Colonel Jackson so silent and cast down after the events of yesterday morning was unsettling to say the least. He had spent the remainder of yesterday afternoon like the walking dead, and it had affected everyone’s spirits.

Now, all the faces of the table are turned towards him as he goes on.

Sherlock can tell he is basking in the attention from his audience. He leans confidingly towards them all now, one eyebrow quirked slightly in excitement.

“And I have it from Lieutenant Lestrade himself that we will be staying for three full days.”

There is a burst of excitement at the Colonel’s words.

Everyone begins talking at once.

“Three days?” Miss Long squeals, dropping her soupspoon with a clatter. “Then we’ll surely have the opportunity to head to shore ourselves!”

“Yes, it takes at least twenty four hours to re-provision the ship—as well as whatever cargo we may be leaving or trading in this port before moving onto Madras. The Captain will likely have his own business to attend to, so there will certainly be time for those who are interested to spend some time on shore.”

Ferguson, Sherlock notes, is one of the only passengers who does not react to the news with visible excitement. He is silent, staring in deep concentration at his plate. His reaction only confirms Sherlock’s suspicion that he is planning something for their time in port.

The other passenger who is markedly silent, Sherlock notices, is Molly. She is quiet by Ms. Grimsby’s side. Her head bowed, hands folded in her lap.

Ms. Grimsby sniffs condescendingly, shifting in her chair. “Some of us have absolutely no interest in leaving the ship. We wouldn’t want to mix with such foreign climates—not if we don’t have to.”

“Begging your pardon, Miss, but isn’t the place to which we are heading in the East Indies also very foreign?”

“Certainly not, Mr. Bailey!” Ms. Grimsby snaps at the awkward young barrister. “Madras is a post controlled and operated by the British Empire. The seedy shores of Rio de Janeiro are quite another matter.”

Molly’s gloom seems to visibly deepen at her chaperone’s words. Sherlock is certain she was looking forward to the chance to leave the ship as much as any of them. But it seems Ms. Grimsby will make Molly’s leaving the ship absolutely out of the question.

Looking across the table at Molly’s bowed head, Sherlock feels a silent bond of solidarity with her. The more excited the talk grows around the table, the lower Sherlock feels his own spirits sink. The prospect of being allowed to leave the ship without John is almost worse than the idea of neither of them having the opportunity to do so.

Sherlock pictures himself, sitting alone in a dingy tavern, watching the other sailors shout and sing, pulling women into their lap, making themselves sick with drink, and finds he must resist the urge
to be sick suddenly himself.

He leaves the table before the meal is over, with a quick sympathetic glance to Molly as he passes her by. He cannot bear another minute of the boisterous eager conversation about what delights await in Rio, and how each passenger plans to spend their time.

Sherlock stretches out in his bunk and spends the remainder of time before he falls asleep killing each imagined scenario about Rio he has let himself dream up.

He pictures himself digging a hole in the earth and tossing each image in.

Green water and blue sky go into the pit. White sand beaten by the waves.

The dream of solitude—four solid walls around them and no one within earshot for miles—that goes into the pit too.

The sight of John’s face filling up with light as he breathes in the scent of the trees on the air, as he touches the grass with his fingertips, as he curls his toes in the earth—all this goes into the pit, as well.

He allows himself one last look, one last moment full of misery to say farewell to all that now can never be, before he fills in the hole, covering all of it savagely with dirt.

In spite of all this, that night when Sherlock finally slips into troubled sleep, his dreams are full of long white beaches, the gentle crash of turquoise waves foaming against the sand, and far down the shore, a distant figure walking towards him, his bare arms wide open, the sunlight turning his golden hair to flame.

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Sherlock wakes early. The pale grey light of dawn is just beginning to creep down through the cracks between the boards.

He lies in the sticky silence for several minutes before he hears it, the sound of the ship’s bell, ringing out in the dawn.

There’s nothing out of the ordinary in the ringing of the bell—it rings out every half an hour to mark the changing of the sailors’ watch—but as the bell continues to ring, far longer than it does for the changing of any shift, Sherlock realizes, sitting up with a start, that the bell is ringing to alert everyone on the ship of something else entirely.

His reaction is so visceral he does not stop to think.

He throws himself out of bed, barely pausing to pull his trousers on, before he’s running out into the corridor and taking the stairs of the gangway two at a time, to arrive barefoot up on deck.

There is already a small crowd of sailors gathered at the starboard waist, and there, over their heads, beyond the vast grey expanse of the sea, Sherlock can see, on the horizon a long dark smudge of green.

He can see mountains rising up beyond the shoreline, their tops shrouded in mist, and the long curve of the bay that marks the entrance to the port of Rio de Janeiro.

In spite of all of his fears and worry, all of his dread about what this might mean for him and John, he cannot stop a grin from breaking out across his face at the sight of that long, long line of green
stretching unbroken across the horizon, at the screaming of the gulls above the ship, as the voice of a sailor from aloft cries out: “Land, ho!”
Chapter Forty Seven

It takes the better part of an hour for the \textit{Galatea} to reach the entrance to the harbor of Guanabara Bay upon whose shores lies the port city of Rio de Janeiro. All that time, Sherlock stands at the bulwarks looking out at the green horizon drawing nearer. He finds he cannot look away, afraid that if he does the sight of it will vanish, and he will find it all a dream.

In the whole of his short life Sherlock has never seen a view like the one before him now, the landscape so alien to him it resembles images he has only seen in books and paintings.

All around the blue-green waters of the bay rise strangely-shaped mountains, their towering peaks so high they are lost among the clouds, their sides covered in the lush dark green of tropical forests. Small islands interrupt the clear water here and there, and in the distance, white shores frame the enclosure of the bay so filled with ships that from where Sherlock stands their masts resemble a small forest. He has never seen so many ships at once, not even in Portsmouth when they left England.

Last night at dinner, Sherlock heard Colonel Jackson tell his eager audience how the port city had only opened its doors again to foreigners the previous spring with the arrival of the Portuguese Royal Court, fleeing Napoleon’s invading armies as they’d claimed the Iberian Peninsula. The Prince Regent and his mother had arrived, bedraggled and disheveled after months at sea, along with more than ten thousand courtiers, military advisers, religious leaders, and lawyers, to establish the rough and tumble port city as the new capital of Portugal.

According to the Colonel, the wealth of this region had primarily been lumber and sugar, until the discovery of gold and precious minerals at the end of the previous century had brought scores of Portuguese settlers to its shores, eager to profit from rewards offered by the Portuguese government.

Now that the city has opened its doors to trade with the rest of Europe, and especially Britain, activity in the port has exploded—even within the last year.

Sherlock can see evidence of this in the busy harbor coming into view before him now, crowded with ships of every size and description, many of which are flying British colors. He can also make out the flags of several other nations as well, many he does not recognize.

As the \textit{Galatea} clears the narrow entrance to the bay and moves its way fully into the harbor, Sherlock watches the first few rays of the morning sun break through the clouds, picking out the gold in the rigging of the ships, and dispelling the mist wreathed between the treetops on the mountain. Color suddenly fills the landscape before him as though the light of the sun were a box of paints tipped over somewhere in the sky, filling in the greys of early dawn with brilliant greens and blues and yellows.

The sight of it is breathtaking.

There is now a sizeable crowd gathered around Sherlock, lined up along the bulwark and gazing out with visible eagerness at the approaching port. The group is made up of mostly passengers—the sailors who initially stood beside Sherlock have all been called to their duties; they have been busily moving around Sherlock for the last hour, following the shouts of the lieutenants’ orders as the ship maneuvered its way into the bay.

The excitement onboard is palpable. It seems to shimmer in the air around the ship as the sun
breaks fully from the clouds, bathing the glittering port in bright strokes of gold.

But even more intoxicating than the view is the fact that carried on the breeze moving over the water, Sherlock can smell the scent of earth.

He’s forgotten—he’s forgotten entirely that land can have a smell; but now that the scent reaches him, he realizes with a visceral shock that moves through his whole body, how much he’s missed it.

It’s the smell of wet earth, of rain—as John had said, of green and growing things—but somehow thicker, fuller than Sherlock has experienced before; and threaded through the moist, rich smell of earth is the faint, sweet, intoxicating scent of flowers.

Sherlock finds himself dragging in deep lungfuls of air, so grateful for it after months of nothing but the smell of saltwater and unwashed bodies crowded close together, and the ever-present rotting stench of the bilge.

He’s so intent upon the details of this new world that he does not notice that Molly has come up to stand beside him until she speaks.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

He turns to look at her and he can see the excitement shining in her eyes, as clearly as he can see it in the faces of the passengers crowding the decks around them.

Sherlock shakes his head, at a loss for how to communicate his awe.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Nor I.”

Looking more closely at the assembled crowd, Sherlock sees a fair number of passengers have come up to watch the ship’s arrival. Even Ms. Grimsby is present. Sherlock sees her standing several paces beyond the crowd beside Colonel Jackson’s wife, both their heads hidden beneath their parasols.

Sherlock hears the boom of Colonel Jackson’s excited voice from further down the deck talking to one of the midshipman—Peter Cherry. If Sherlock remembers correctly, he’s the one who broke Spencer Cunningham’s nose.

The quarterdeck is bristling with officers this morning—Sherlock has never seen so many of them on deck at once—and the captain stands in the midst of them all, his hands folded behind his back, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

“It seems certain we will be making port for at least three days.” Sherlock can hear the carefully disguised longing in Molly’s voice, hidden behind a veil of feigned disinterest. It makes pity stab through him. “Do you think… will you be joining one of the boarding parties?”

He does not know how to answer. It seems cruel now to tell Molly that he has no interest in going if he has no hope of seeing John—it seems ungrateful, petty even. But equally cruel is the option of telling her that he might be going when she will be forced to stay onboard—so close to the promise of the bustling port and all the excitement it entails, and yet so far.

Sherlock hesitates, guilt-stricken, but he is saved from having to answer by the shrill sound of the boatswain’s whistle.
“BRING SHIP TO ANCHOR! All hands to their stations!”

There is a sudden bustle of new activity as the men on deck run for the halyards.

Sherlock glances up towards the foretop, and to his profound delight, who should he see swinging down from the shrouds to land lightly on deck, but John?

He’s barefoot, dressed only in his white linen trousers and faded-blue jacket, which is open at the waist to reveal the muscles of his stomach and chest, already shining faintly with sweat. He has been on duty since land was first sighted in the early light of morning. Sherlock spotted him when he first came up on deck but he’s been kept so busy up in the sails, he has not had a chance to try and catch his eye—nor has he dared to, with the captain and every officer present on deck.

In fact, he decided it was safer not to look at John at all—lest he be tempted to wave hello, or worse—tempt John into doing so himself. Sherlock has not spoken to John since their time together down in the forecastle the day before yesterday, so John still knows nothing of the conversation Sherlock overheard between the captain and Lieutenant Lestrade.

Sherlock is resolved to tell John as soon as the opportunity arises but he is more frightened now than ever of being seen speaking to John in front of any of the officers. Although he’s certain Lestrade has no personal motive for keeping him and John apart, he cannot imagine that the lieutenant would act in direct disobedience of the captain’s orders. It only makes sense that Lestrade would alert his fellow officers of the same directive.

But seeing John now, closer at hand than he has been all morning, his concentration fixed absolutely on the task before him, the sun-bleached hair that’s pushed back from his eyes starting to uncurl from his exertions, the strip of skin visible underneath his jacket glowing in the light of the morning sun, Sherlock finds he’s forced to drop his gaze, so quickly does the blush rise to his cheeks.

Molly must follow his glance because he sees her hide a sudden smile behind her gloved hand.

Mortified that his affection can be so obvious, Sherlock risks a look up again in defiance of his own shame, just in time to see John climb up the gunwale and vanish over the other side.

For one horrible second, Sherlock’s heart stops because it looks as though John has dropped over the side of the ship into the sea.

But just as quickly he realizes that John is standing on the other side of the gunwale by the part of the ship they call the cat’s head, where the anchor is stored.

Patterson and Matthews are right behind John, standing by the anchor chain to await their orders, the rest of John’s mess taking their positions at the capstan with another group of sailors.

Leaning forward as far as he dares, Sherlock looks down the side of the ship to see John sitting astride the enormous anchor, the muscles in his thighs bulging where his knees grip the iron, his bare feet snug against the flukes. In one hand, he holds a giant metal spike. As precarious as his position might look, it’s clear from the ease in his posture that John has no fear of falling.

At a shout from the boatswain, the men at the capstan begin to walk, unloosing the cable holding the chain, making it slack. In a series of quick, complicated movements John uses the spike to unhook the mechanism holding the chain.

Lifting the chain free of the anchor, he passes it to the man standing at the gunwale, before climbing back up to stand beside the cat’s head, holding onto the gunwale with one hand and
watching as the men at the capstan continue to let loose the cable that will ease the massive anchor down into the sea.

John stands like that, leaning out into the sea to watch the anchor’s progress as it’s eased off another device with a hook at the end, before he climbs back over the gunwale.

As confident as John may have looked straddling the anchor and hanging one-handed off the side of the ship, Sherlock feels his breath come easier again once John’s feet are both firmly back on deck.

Another shout from the boatswain sends the men running to new positions on the deck again—John among them—and Sherlock feels a little twinge of disappointment that John didn’t see him watching, although he tells himself that it’s for the best.

The business of bringing the ship to anchor is as complicated as any of the numberless feats that Sherlock has seen the sailors perform. Even now, after his many months at sea he is still overcome with awe at the speed and complexity of the tasks executed on the deck around him.

It’s several minutes more before the command is given to drop anchor, and by this time, many of the passengers have gone below, presumably to begin preparations for their expected visit to shore. There has yet been no word issued to contradict the Colonel’s attestation that the ship will be moored in this harbor for three days.

Molly remains standing at Sherlock’s side throughout the preparations to come to anchor, seemingly as fascinated by all the activity on deck as Sherlock. Of course, the choice between standing up on deck and going below with Ms. Grimsby does not seem a difficult one.

They are both witness to the incredible splash made by the anchor as it is finally dropped into the sea, the rattle of the chain as it’s pulled up from the depths of the ship louder than Sherlock would have imagined possible. The feeling of the ship connected—however distantly—to solid earth once more is enough to make something that’s been tightly wound in Sherlock’s chest loosen slightly.

A cheer goes up from the men on deck, and even though the shipmaster shouts at them for order, the feeling of their excitement fills the air like a physical presence.

Molly turns to look at Sherlock and the exhilaration on her face gives Sherlock an absurd feeling of hope. If Molly can be this excited, even when confronted with her grim fate of being bound to the ship, how can he possibly feel anything less?

Sherlock’s eyes find John, straddling the foretopsail yard like some lazy god, leaning back with a grin on his face as Patterson punches his arm with good humor.

At first John does not seem aware of Sherlock’s regard, but then, as if he can suddenly feel Sherlock’s gaze upon him, John’s eyes meet Sherlock’s down on deck.

He’s high enough above Sherlock’s head that Sherlock cannot make out the details of his expression, but seeing Sherlock, the grin on his face grows to a blinding magnitude, transforming his already smiling face until it looks to Sherlock as bright as the sun itself.

Sherlock smiles back, feeling his heart beat faster with excitement, and it occurs to him in that moment that as far as John knows, the two of them will be able to leave the ship together. Sherlock does not know what the crew has been told, but judging by their excitement, some word must have been communicated to them that they will all have time to come ashore.

Perhaps it’s just the effect of being on the receiving end of John’s brilliant smile, or maybe it’s the
combined effect of everyone’s excitement on board the ship, but for whatever reason, it occurs to Sherlock all of a sudden that if John is granted shore leave, then there is nothing preventing Sherlock from leaving the ship at the same time as John. Even if Lestrade is determined to keep them apart, he has no control over either of them once they are on shore, so as long as Sherlock is quiet about it, he can certainly arrange to go ashore the same time as John.

The tentative hope that blooms in Sherlock’s chest in the wake of this thought feels like a living thing inside him.

John is still looking down at him, and Sherlock wishes he could communicate somehow this fragile, growing excitement to John.

But the look between them is interrupted by a new set of shouted orders from the lieutenants, and now everything feels like it is happening at once, as a group of sailors push past Molly and Sherlock to position the first of the longboats into place above the water, and Sherlock sees the captain begin to descend the stairs down from the quarterdeck, followed by Deverall and Lestrade.

The new swarm of activity on deck means there is very little space to stand, and pressing an apologetic hand to Sherlock’s arm, Molly turns to make her way towards the stairs that lead below.

“I better get back below,” she says with reluctance in her voice. “My aunt will be looking for me.”

Wishing he could say something of comfort to her but not wanting to make empty promises, Sherlock simply nods.

“See you at dinner?”

Sherlock nods again, having forgotten completely that the taking of meals onboard the ship is of course something that will continue even while the ship is at anchor.

It occurs to him too late that he has no idea whether he will actually be going to dinner, but Molly has already turned away toward the stairs. He can only hope that she will understand the reason if he does not appear.

The captain is now walking with great haste towards the ship’s waist, and the longboat they are clearly readying for him. Sherlock hastens to stand out of sight, weaving between the moving men until he’s far enough down the deck to be out of the captain’s immediate line of vision, but still within earshot. Sherlock knows he too should go below—stay out of the way—lest he jeopardize his own chances of leaving the ship, but he’s too curious about what the captain will do now that they’ve finally reached Rio.

In spite of his disastrous attempts to determine whether or not the captain was smuggling, he still hasn’t ruled the possibility out completely. After all, what else could be the explanation for the captain’s eagerness to get to port?

As Sherlock looks over the side of the ship into the calm waters of the bay, he can see there are already several boats making their way from the shore toward the *Galatea*. One of these has just pulled up alongside and Sherlock watches as a man in a slightly shabby frock coat climbs his way up the skeleton ladder to the ship to greet Lieutenant Lestrade. The man—who Sherlock can tell from one cursory glance is not the harbormaster himself, but one of his clerks—dips low in an elaborate bow to Lestrade.

Sherlock can hear him offering words of welcome, the man’s English thickly accented. Lestrade performs the customary pleasantries in return, the other lieutenants standing respectfully behind
him. The purser—a Mr. Bryant—moves forward to speak with the new arrival.

However, the captain pays the man no notice at all.

Ignoring the sailors who are readying his launch (which has still yet to be lowered into the water), the captain strides directly past the man from shore and climbs down the side of the ship into the boat he just arrived in, giving the order in broken Portuguese for the men piloting the boat to cast off.

Even with no knowledge of naval custom, Sherlock can tell from the expressions on everyone’s faces that what the captain has just done is a breach of etiquette.

He cannot hear what Lestrade is telling the man from shore but as Sherlock watches him lean in with an apologetic look on his face, it’s clear the lieutenant has some quick-thinking diplomacy work to do if he wants to make up for the damage done by the captain blatantly ignoring the harbormaster’s lackey and commandeering the other man’s boat.

Sherlock can see the boat already making its way toward shore with the captain sitting at the prow, high above the men manning the oars. His posture is as intimidating as ever, his back very straight, but Sherlock can detect a certain degree of tension in the stiffness of his shoulders, in the way he grips the side of the boat.

It doesn’t make sense.

If the captain is smuggling—whether contraband or legal goods—he would certainly be interested in any business conducted with the harbormaster and his staff.

It occurs to Sherlock that perhaps the captain didn’t want to deal with the man’s lackey, perhaps he wanted to speak with the harbormaster directly, but that theory also doesn’t make sense. It isn’t that the captain saw who had been sent and decided to head for shore—he didn’t even look at the other man. His only interest in him was in his boat as a faster means of getting to shore.

It would be one thing for him to treat the man coldly or rudely, but his total lack of interest in everything the man represents makes it clear that he has no interest in the ship’s cargo.

Even if he wished to conduct an exchange of goods without the harbormaster’s knowledge—perhaps with some smuggling contact on shore—why would he leave the ship before any of the unloading had even begun? If there were some kind of contraband cargo that he wanted to sell, surely he would want to stay with the ship to ensure its safe delivery?

The only other possibility is that he’s picking up a shipment of goods to take with them to the East Indies. Maybe he has to meet with his contact on shore first before he can arrange for the goods to be delivered to the ship.

Either way, it’s now abundantly clear that there is nothing currently in the ship’s hold that concerns him. Whatever it is that’s preoccupying him is obviously waiting for him on shore.

But just what—or who—that could possibly be is still frustratingly beyond the limits of Sherlock’s knowledge.

Stepping out from his hiding place behind the foremast, Sherlock glances up and down the deck for a sign of Colonel Jackson. Of all the passengers on board he would surely know what’s typical nautical custom and what isn’t. But it seems the man has gone below with all the others to begin preparations for heading to shore.
In fact, looking around at the bustling deck, it appears that Sherlock is the only passenger still up above.

Sherlock’s gaze returns to Lestrade to see that he has managed to smooth things over—the harbormaster’s man is in conversation with the purser. Lestrade and Deverall are standing nearby, talking in low voices.

The men seem to know Lestrade will be making an announcement soon; a small group of them have gathered in the ship’s waist, standing a respectable distance back from the lieutenants but waiting somewhat impatiently for the men to finish their conversation. The men in the sails seem to be waiting too. Sherlock expects they are all eager to hear the final pronouncement about how their time will be spent while in port.

Finally, Lestrade turns to the expectant crowd.

“I’m sure many of you have heard by now that we will be moored here for the next three days—I can now confirm for you that this is true. We will indeed be making port for the next 72 hours.”

A cheer goes up from the men.

Lestrade raises a hand for silence.

“Our schedule will be as follows: the first twenty fours will be the standard watch and watch for unloading cargo, and refitting the ship. Tarring, cleaning the ballast, painting—all the usual preparations. Then, each man will have twenty-four hours shore leave—”

Lestrade is interrupted once again by a boisterous cheer, and for the first time looks genuinely irritated as he holds up his hand.

“But that is contingent upon the successful completion of all your duties. If we have not finished all that needs doing by then, your time on shore will necessarily be cut short. You will be permitted off ship when—and only when—the officer of your mess gives you leave, is that understood?”

The men respond in an enthusiastic chorus of ‘aye’s.

“If everything is completed to our satisfaction then the larboard watch shall have the first leave, beginning tomorrow morning at eight bells. The starboard watch will have the following day.”

The murmured excitement at this news has grown so loud Lestrade has to raise his voice almost to shouting to be heard above the din.

“The usual rules pertain. If you do not return to the ship in your allotted time, your pay will be docked accordingly—one day’s pay for each hour’s absence. I expect you to complete your work in the next twenty-four hours as carefully and efficiently as possible. The other lieutenants and I will be watching you closely to ensure that you do. Now, see to your officers for your duties!”

The men disperse to their stations in a far more orderly manner than Sherlock would have anticipated based on the pitch of their excitement—but of course, this is routine to most of them. And they are all well aware that the faster they work, the sooner they will be able to get off this ship.

Sherlock watches Lestrade head back to the quarterdeck, before glancing skyward to see if John is still aloft in the foretop.

The fragile hope that has taken root inside his chest—that maybe, just maybe it will be possible for
he and John to have some time on shore together—has begun tentatively to bloom.

If all goes well—Lestrade said—every man will have his twenty-four hours…

Twenty-four hours. Twenty-four.

Sherlock pictures each hour like a precious jewel. He imagines them piled up together, glittering—infinitely precious.

Thus far on this voyage, he and John have counted themselves lucky if they’ve managed to spend two hours together at a time. Four hours is the usual allotment they’ve had to be satisfied with—perhaps the most they’ve ever spent together in an uninterrupted stretch is eight.

So to imagine having twenty-four…

Of course, he does not yet know whether the passengers will be allotted the same kind of time. But if their stay in Rio is anything like their stay in Madeira, then the passengers should be able to remain on shore for as long as they like. All he has to do is be sure he leaves the ship the same time as John. As long as he’s quiet about it, no one but the two of them will ever have to know.

But as Sherlock’s eyes scan the sails above his head, he sees that John is no longer up in the foretop. He and his messmates are obviously no longer needed in the sails now that the ship is at anchor. He must be somewhere down on deck.

Sherlock turns, looking for the tell tale glint of John’s hair in the sudden commotion around him.

The flood of new activity means there is precious little space to stand in that isn’t in someone’s way—Sherlock has to leap aside twice within the space of a minute—first to avoid being run down by a sailor carrying an armful of heavy cable, and then to narrowly dodge a beheading from a boom being swung over the deck.

He’s just given up trying to find John at this particular moment and is making his way towards the hatch at the back of the ship when someone grabs his arm.

Sherlock turns, not sure whether to be angry or apologetic, only to find John, blue eyes shining, his face lit up with exhilaration.

“Did you hear? It’s happening—I didn’t think we’d manage it, I didn’t think it would be possible—but it’s happening!”

Sherlock is speechless, overcome with the sensation of suddenly standing so close to John on the crowded deck, his fingers warm on Sherlock’s arms, the sea-salt, sun-bright smell of him making Sherlock want to shut his eyes and bury his face in John’s hair.

There’s a shout near the main gangway and John’s eyes dart toward the sound.

“She’s just given up trying to find John at this particular moment and is making his way towards the hatch at the back of the ship when someone grabs his arm.

He pulls Sherlock to him until he’s grasping him by the arms, his voice breathless with excitement.

“Did you hear? It’s happening—I didn’t think we’d manage it, I didn’t think it would be possible—but it’s happening!”

Sherlock is speechless, overcome with the sensation of suddenly standing so close to John on the crowded deck, his fingers warm on Sherlock’s arms, the sea-salt, sun-bright smell of him making Sherlock want to shut his eyes and bury his face in John’s hair.

There’s a shout near the main gangway and John’s eyes dart toward the sound.

“I have to get below but I had to see you—I had to tell you—I’m on the first watch. If all goes well, we head to shore tomorrow morning at eight bells.” John looks up at him, excitement making his eyes seem to glow. “Will you come tomorrow morning? Will you come ashore with me?”

The fact that there’s a question in John’s voice—that behind the expectant look of hope on his face there is the faintest trace of doubt—makes sorrow pierce Sherlock like an arrow, at the same time it makes his love for John seem to grow, in that moment, impossibly brighter. How could John still
doubt that this isn’t everything Sherlock has longed for in the last two weeks?

It’s like looking suddenly into a mirror to realize that John—even sun-bright, irrepressible, invincible John—has moments of self-doubt—that he wants Sherlock so much that sometimes he can’t believe any of it is real.

Sherlock pulls John a half step closer to him by the grip on his arms; it’s as close as he dares on the open space of the deck—and tries to communicate in the look he gives John the depth of his feeling in response to this news.

He doesn’t think he’s ever wanted to kiss John so badly as he does in this moment.

“Yes.”

His answer is a low rush of air in the space between their bent heads.

“Yes, of course. I’ll be there.”

He hears the exhalation of John’s breath in response to his words, watches as joy floods his features.

“Good.”

The smile he’s giving Sherlock now… Sherlock has to drop his eyes before he does something that both of them will regret.

John shakes his head, and lets go with reluctance, stepping back. “I’ve got to go.”

It’s like a light being suddenly blown out—losing that contact between them.

“But I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Sherlock looks back up then, and the smile John’s giving him again—he wants to tuck it away inside himself and save it for some dark season when there is no sun—that smile could keep him warm on the most frigid, Arctic night.

“See you tomorrow then?”

Sherlock nods, his voice warm and resonant and low; in his eyes, he hopes, the promise of all that tomorrow will bring.

“See you tomorrow.”

***

It takes all of Sherlock’s willpower not to simply remain standing, awe-struck up on deck, waiting for another glimpse of John as he goes about his duties helping to unload the ship.

But John has gone below anyway—down to the ship’s hold with the rest of his mess to begin the arduous work of lifting out the various crates and barrels and boxes of goods that will be sold in port, and sending them up to be loaded into the boats that will take them to shore.

It’s heavy, grueling, difficult work but the men are in such high spirits they seem to not to mind it.

Sherlock can hear their boisterous voices even from his cabin, the sound of their shouting and laughter rising up through the decks, occasionally punctuated by bursts of song.
The corridors of the passenger cabins are almost as busy as the space up on deck as everyone makes the necessary preparations to leave the ship. Miss Gibbons and Miss Long are continuously running between one another’s cabins to compare bonnets and reticules and God knows what else. Sherlock can hear the giddy tempo of their footsteps as they run back and forth, their giggling echoing down the corridor.

The Damson children have also taken up the generally excited mood and are racing up and down the corridor chasing the ship’s cat, which appears to have been disturbed from its usual hiding place down in the hold.

Even the perpetually gloomy Mr. Summersby can be heard whistling in his room as the hour draws nearer when they will all be permitted to leave the ship.

Sherlock has now heard officially from Colonel Jackson (who he ran into on the stairwell on his way down) that the passengers will be permitted to leave the ship beginning at eight bells tomorrow morning with the crew, when the officers have given them leave. They may remain on shore as long as they like—but they must tell the steward before they disembark how long they plan to remain away from the ship, and they must return in three day’s time, by Sunday morning at eight o’clock—for that is when the ship sets sail again.

Sherlock can still scarcely believe any of it is real.

He’s trying, as hard as he might, not to get too excited, to remind himself that nothing is a guarantee. It will not be real until he and John have both stepped out of those longboats and set their feet on solid ground again—anything at all could still happen between now and then.

But it’s almost impossible to keep the good mood from stealing over him, to keep the rising excitement from lifting him up.

He returns to his room to dress properly and shave, but then he heads back up on deck almost immediately, unable to stay in the dim confines of his cabin while the sounds and smells from the nearby shore beckon—the rich, green scent of trees and earth wafting enticingly over the deck with the breeze.

The noise from the port is audible from the harbor as well, and Sherlock spends several long minutes, leaning out over the prow of the ship, listening to the distant sounds of the city: the cries of men unloading the boats by the wharf, the shouts of vendors, the barking of dogs—and underneath it all, occasionally, bright strands of music can be heard, drifting over the water—strange and vibrant and completely foreign to Sherlock.

He’s afraid that the hours between now and tomorrow morning will crawl by, but in fact, the opposite proves true. There is so much happening on deck, so much to see, that the time passes more quickly than Sherlock would have dreamed possible.

He watches the complicated business of the crew unloading the ship with fascination, watches as they remove the gratings, the men down in the hold lashing the enormous casks with rope and maneuvering them up through the decks with giant winches and pulleys that swing out over the sea to deposit them in the waiting boats.

John’s mess is down in the hold for most of this operation; Lieutenant Deverall is stationed below to oversee them, while Lestrade remains standing at the gangway, directing the men in the boats. Lieutenant Dimmock appears to be shadowing Lestrade for this particular operation, while Moore is overseeing the men working on the hull.
It’s early afternoon by the time they finish loading all the casks into the longboats, and by this time the Brazilian sun is hot above them. It’s strange to think it’s winter here when the temperature in June is high enough to rival England’s hottest summers.

Sherlock spares a moment of pity for the officers dressed in their dark woolen uniforms. He watches Lieutenant Dimmock briefly remove his hat to mop his forehead with an already damp handkerchief. Lestrade, who’s far too dignified for such a gesture appears to be suffering in noble silence, but Sherlock can see thin trails of sweat running down the side of his face from underneath his hat.

The sailors on the other hand, who have no such restrictions on the decency of their dress, have almost all stripped down to their trousers.

Sherlock is just counting himself lucky that John’s mess is currently not on deck (he isn’t sure he could bear the sight of John so similarly déshabillé) when the sound of laughter from the forehatch announces their arrival.

He turns to see Matthews, Stapleton, and Ironsides Jake climbing up the steps—followed in close succession by the rest of John’s mess.

Even though they haven’t been up in direct sunlight, the air in the hold is humid and close, so most of them have already shed much of their clothing. The only one who appears not to have needed to strip almost everything off is Burns, who looks perfectly comfortable in his jacket and shirt.

John is the last member of his mess to arrive on deck and when Sherlock sees him, it’s all he can do to keep his jaw from dropping. He’s shed his jacket since Sherlock saw him last, and is dressed now in nothing but his linen trousers, the worn fabric riding low on his lean hips—so low in fact that Sherlock can see the twin grooves of his pelvic bones where they vanish below his waistband.

It’s been a long time now since Sherlock has seen John with as little on as this out in broad daylight. It’s different down in the perpetual twilight of Sherlock’s cabin, in the strange half-light of the world below decks. He can never see all that he wants to see—it’s so clear to Sherlock that John isn’t meant to be down there in the squalid gloom. No, he’s meant to be up here, with the sunlight picking out the strands of paler gold in his sun-bleached hair, warm on the dramatic curves of his muscles, catching the sheen of sweat on his shoulders and back and making his golden brown skin seem to glow.

Seeing him like this, all at once, is almost more than Sherlock can take.

He drops his eyes, forces himself to take a deep breath before he looks back up again.

When he does, he sees, much to his surprise that John appears to be in conversation with someone walking just behind him up the steps, someone who is making him laugh in that absolutely devastating way he has of throwing his head back and laughing with his whole body, joy pouring out of him like light from a flame.

Who could possibly be making John laugh like that? Sherlock can see all the other members of John’s mess already on the deck before him.

And then he sees Lieutenant Deverall mount the steps behind John, his handsome face lit up in a smile.

Sherlock knows better than anyone that it’s impossible not to smile when John laughs like that, but who is Deverall to be the recipient of it?
Unlike the other miserable-looking officers, Deverall looks as cool and composed as if he’s just walked out of his dressing room. Indeed, the man looks like he has hardly broken a sweat. He has his hat underneath his arm, his dark hair swept becomingly back from his brow.

Jealousy—hot and poisonous and thick—suddenly courses through Sherlock.

What could Deverall possibly have said to make John laugh like that? What business does he have talking to John anyway? Sherlock has never seen them speak more than two words to one another before.

They pause together at the top of the stairs, and Sherlock watches the tall, young officer incline his head slightly in John’s direction and say something else that makes John laugh again.

Sherlock is too far away to catch what Deverall said but he can hear John’s laughter—musical and low as it’s carried over the deck.

Then he watches Deverall reach out and touch John briefly on the arm—just above his elbow, his head inclined towards John again as he says something else that Sherlock cannot hear before he moves away along the deck.

It is a light, affectionate gesture—so brief that anyone else would likely not have noticed it at all. But to Sherlock’s eyes, the moment seems like an eternity.

Rage fills Sherlock—irrational and swift.

It’s never occurred to him before just how handsome Lieutenant Deverall is—or perhaps he’s noticed in an offhand way—but it’s never mattered before now. Now, suddenly, all Sherlock can see is how extremely attractive the other man is. He looks like the kind of man every girl would picture as the hero of a novel. He’s tall, muscular and lean, his dark hair always arranged impeccably around his handsome face.

In fact, it occurs to Sherlock in a moment of dawning horror that Deverall is like the more conventionally handsome version of himself.

He’s also tall and dark-haired, but unlike Sherlock, he isn’t too pale and too thin—his forehead isn’t so high and narrow—his cheekbones not as sharp. His lips don’t have a funny shape like Sherlock’s do; his eyes aren’t set at a strange angle.

He’s older too—stronger, more in possession of himself—his broad shoulders filling out his uniform in a way that drives most women who see him to distraction. He’s a real man, Sherlock realizes, unlike himself, who’s only just managed to scrape his way out of boyhood.

Looking at Deverall now—Sherlock feels like a pale weed that’s been kept too long in a cupboard in the dark. He feels scrawny, insubstantial—like an underdeveloped copy of Deverall’s full-grown original. If Sherlock is a frail young sapling, Deverall is an oak tree.

He watches the other man cross the deck and join Lestrade at the gangway—his every movement informed by a kind of casual, easy grace. It’s the way he carries himself more than anything that makes him so appealing; it’s his self-possession. It’s the fact that when he moves through a space he does so with the attitude that he belongs there.

And that is the greatest contrast between the two of them, Sherlock realizes—Sherlock, who always feels awkward, ill at ease, shoulders hunched up around his ears, ready to flee any situation that he cannot handle like a hunted animal; Sherlock, who has never felt like he belonged anywhere.
If he could move like that through a room—if he could just stop caring what others think of him so much…

Sherlock grits his teeth, and forces himself to look away, trying to calm his wildly pounding heart.

It’s stupid to be jealous, he tells himself. He and John were only talking.

*Don’t be a fool.*

But as he lifts his eyes again to find John standing with his messmates preparing to help unload a new shipment of cargo, he can’t quite shake the tiny seed of doubt the interaction has sown in his mind.

It might be nothing now—but what if Deverall *were* to make an advance one day, would John turn him down?

The question, Sherlock suspects, is one that will haunt him for some time.

He goes to stand at the railing, breathing in deep lungfuls of the warm tropical air in an attempt to clear his head.

Leaning over the side to look, Sherlock sees that the boat that has just pulled up alongside the ship is loaded down with casks of water.

A sailor from the *Galatea* is already down in the longboat, attaching a barrel hitch to each of the enormous casks so they can be hauled up onto the ship.

Sherlock looks back at Deverall, who’s gone to stand by Lieutenant Lestrade, presumably to give him his report from the hold. Lestrade is shouting orders to the men in the longboats below.

John has gone to man the braces aft of the foremast with Stapleton and Banana Bill. He and the other two men are in charge of pulling on one of the heavy lines of rope that will hoist the enormous casks of water up out of the longboat and down into the ship’s hold.

Sherlock turns to watch, unable to hide his astonishment as the order is given for John and his messmates to start hauling.

The difficulty of this task is evident even to Sherlock’s untrained eye.

Once the cask has been raised to the level of the deck, they must hold the line taut, while the cask is swung into position over the open gratings so that it can then be lowered down into the hold.

“HEAVE—HEAVE—HEAVE—AND HOLD!”

Sherlock can see the exertion in the way all three men stand, their knees bent, every muscle in their bodies coiled tight to hold the heavy weight in place, the sweat standing out along their foreheads, running down their arms and backs.

The three of them have clearly been chosen for this job because they are the strongest members of their mess. Stapleton and Banana Bill are both big men—Stapleton is built like a tower; Banana Bill is slightly shorter than Stapleton but massive, his body thick with muscle; each of his thighs is probably the same circumference as Sherlock’s waist.

John, by contrast, looks petite beside the two of them.

It’s always slightly surprising to see John beside other men because in truth, he’s quite short.
Somehow it’s very easy to forget, even if standing beside him, John is half a head shorter than Sherlock.

John is both shorter and smaller than the other two men; so it’s all the more impressive that he can hold his own beside them at this task. Sherlock has never been so in awe of John’s strength as he is in this moment—the power in his body evident in the tensed lines of muscle standing out in his arms and thighs, in the muscles of his back.

Watching him now, it’s difficult for Sherlock to keep his thoughts from straying into memories that make his own clothing feel hot and too restrictive—memories of how those muscles feel under the sliding palms of his hands, the way they tense and stretch when John moves against him.

Sherlock has to drop his eyes. It’s too much—he can’t go on watching. His face feels far too hot. If anyone were to look at him right now, it would be impossible not to guess what he was thinking about.

But in glancing away, his eyes light on Deverall, who is standing and watching from the other side of the deck.

There isn’t anything suspect in Deverall’s stance or his gaze; or even in the fact that he’s watching the three men. Indeed, he is the officer currently in charge of overseeing this particular task—he’s simply doing his job.

But just the fact that Deverall is seeing John like this: half-dressed, his tensed muscles gleaming with sweat—it makes jealousy erupt again like molten fire in Sherlock’s chest.

What if John doesn’t want to spend his time on shore with you? If Deverall were to ask him to spend his free hours with him—do you really think he would refuse?

He looks away, breathing hard, ashamed, but unable to stop the poisonous current of his thoughts from spiraling out of control again.

He glances down the deck, desperate for something to distract himself—for anything to take his mind off the relentless torrent of his jealous thoughts—and to his great surprise, sees Ferguson standing at the opposite end of the ship, on the other side of the mainmast, with his back against the railing, furiously examining a pile of cargo on the deck before him and making notes on a piece of paper in his hand.

Sherlock watches him for several moments, unable to believe the man is actually doing what he’s doing—it’s so unbelievably bald-faced and stupid. But the longer Sherlock watches, the more obvious it becomes that he’s doing exactly what it looks like.

He knows he shouldn’t intervene; it would be foolish at this point not to keep his distance. But he’s so desperate for some distraction—and it would be so satisfying to do it—that Sherlock cannot help himself.

He makes his way quietly up behind the other man, standing several feet back, placing one elbow casually beside him on the railing to communicate his nonchalance.

He’s silent for a few seconds as Ferguson leans over a barrel on the deck before him, sniffing at it before scribbling something on the paper in his hand.

“Sword blades,” Sherlock says, nodding at the barrel with a bored expression. “Obviously.”

Ferguson whirls around, his features clouding with anger as he recognizes Sherlock.
“Why you—”

“And the one behind you is bullets. That one’s cotton. Linen. Cast iron.”

He points disinterestedly at each box, barrel and crate, watching with a faint sense of satisfaction as the rage grows on Ferguson’s face.

“How could you possibly know any of that?” the other man snarls.

Sherlock shrugs.

“Easy enough to tell by looking at the size and weight of each container. This case took three men to lift—obviously it’s not full of textiles. They wouldn’t pack ammunition in a wood case either—so it’s not bullets. Food stores only go in casks so it’s not anything consumable. It has the East India Company seal, which means it isn’t personal goods. The cast iron is always packed in smaller boxes. Therefore, by process of elimination—it has to be sword blades.”

Unable to help himself, Sherlock adds, “But to be perfectly honest, just looking at the shape of the box, any idiot would be able to tell there are sword blades in there.”

Ferguson has turned a rather vibrant shade of puce.

“And why is it… that you have taken it upon yourself to tell me this?”

“Oh, it’s no concern of mine really. I just thought I would spare you the trouble of trying to figure out what’s in all of these containers by telling you that in fact none of these items are contraband.”

Ferguson has lowered the paper in his hand and has drawn a threatening step closer to Sherlock. His voice from between his tightly clenched teeth is sharp with anger.

“And why would you assume that I think any of it is contraband?”

“Because I know you’re planning to blackmail the captain by proving that he’s smuggling illicit cargo.”

Ferguson stares at Sherlock with open hatred. He’s now within arm’s reach of Sherlock, his voice low and shaking.

“How dare you?”

Sherlock ignores the open threat in Ferguson’s voice.

There’s some reckless, foolish part of him that can’t help himself, some self-destructive streak that pushes him over the edge. He has to go on speaking, even if he knows Ferguson’s reaction will be violent.

“I can tell you for certain—there isn’t any illicit cargo. I should know. I looked.”

Dropping the pen and paper in his hand, Ferguson lunges for Sherlock, grabbing him by the collar of his coat and shoving him up against the railing.

“You thieving little worm. I knew it was you! You’ve been spying on me, haven’t you? Haven’t you?”

Sherlock reaches up to pull the other man’s hands off him, but his grip is too strong.
“Did you talk to the captain? What did you tell him?”

His face is so close to Sherlock’s he can see the individual beads of sweat standing out on his forehead, and Sherlock realizes, seeing the wild look in his eyes this close up, that the sweat on Ferguson’s face is not from the heat—but from fear.

In spite of the fact that Ferguson is still going forward with his plan to try and extort money from the captain, he clearly has taken some of Knott’s warnings to heart. He must know the dangers of such a confrontation are very real. Whether his determination to persist with his half-baked plan stems from greed or genuine need is not clear.

“What did you say to him?”

“I didn’t say anything to him!” Sherlock snaps, still struggling ineffectually to twist free of Ferguson’s grip. “A fact, which you should not only be grateful for, but which should have been obvious to you—based on the fact that you’re still alive!”

Ferguson, seemingly stunned by this revelation, loosens his grip marginally.

Using all of his force, Sherlock shoves the other man’s hands off of him causing Ferguson to stagger back a step, nearly colliding with the container at his back.

His own rage has risen up in response to Ferguson’s violence. Although Sherlock’s motives for speaking with him may have not been entirely pure-hearted, by telling Ferguson what he has, he may in fact be saving the other man’s life, if only Ferguson had the good sense to realize it.

Sherlock hears a shout from further down the deck and the sound of advancing footsteps. He steps in over Ferguson, taking advantage of the fact that he’s a good head taller than the other man to stare down at him now in clear contempt. He lowers his voice so that no one else will hear his words.

“Count it as another favor from me when I tell you that if the captain is smuggling contraband goods, then it certainly isn’t here in Rio. So you can spare yourself the trouble—and the embarrassment—of a confrontation which will yield nothing at all of benefit to yourself!”

Ferguson’s expression of hatred and anger is now mixed with genuine bewilderment.

“Why are you telling me all this?”

Sherlock shrugs irritably, tugging his jacket into place as he steps back. “Why does anyone do anything? Boredom, I suppose.”

“Oye! What’s going on over here?”

In his typically incompetent fashion, Dimmock has arrived on the scene far too late to actually intervene.

Sherlock fixes Dimmock with a look of wide-eyed innocence.

“Nothing, sir. I was just explaining to Mr. Ferguson here that it’s in his best interest to stay out of the crew’s way while they’re busy restocking the ship.”

Dimmock looks from Sherlock to Ferguson in consternation as if attempting to judge the truth of this statement by both men’s expressions.
Ferguson is glaring openly at Sherlock.

“Er… very well. Quite right. In fact, it’s better if both of you clear off. We don’t need passengers out and about right now cluttering up the deck.”

“Exactly as I said, Lieutenant,” Sherlock says, bowing his head slightly to acknowledge Dimmock’s wisdom in the matter.

Sherlock sees Ferguson curl his lip in derision from the corner of his eye, but he turns to follow Sherlock toward the hatch in the center of the deck.

Sherlock knows he should head straight below so as to avoid calling any further attention to himself—especially since his goal right now, above all else, is to keep a low profile, to ensure that he will be able to leave the ship tomorrow morning on the first boat bound for shore.

But just as he reaches the hatch leading below he hears the sounds of a commotion at the gangway where he and Ferguson where just standing, and he pauses at the top of the stairs to look.

It’s clear that there’s a boat that’s just pulled up alongside the ship, but just who, or what is on the boat, Sherlock has not yet gathered.

There’s a midshipman standing at the gangway looking down into the water, and Sherlock sees the boy’s face go suddenly white. He looks up in panic at Lieutenant Dimmock.

“Dear god, sir! It’s the captain!”

Ferguson, who’s shoved past Sherlock to make his way down the stairs, pauses halfway down when he hears the midshipman’s frantic shout.

Pandemonium breaks loose at the boy’s words.

The boatswain is screaming out orders, while Lieutenant Lestrade sprints across the deck towards the gangway. Dimmock is signaling frantically to a group of men who Sherlock assumes are the ones meant to formally greet the captain when he arrives on board. Above it all, Sherlock hears Deverall’s angry shout, “Dammit, man, where are those pipes?”

But before any of this chaos has sorted itself out, the captain appears over the side, unattended, looking more furious than Sherlock has ever seen him. He climbs down over the gunwale, just as Lestrade arrives to greet him.

Sherlock knows that proper naval etiquette dictates that the captain is to be met with due ceremony when he arrives on board ship—clearly the ragtag group that greets the captain at the gangway is not up to standard procedure. However, Sherlock also knows that the captain is supposed to announce himself long before his gig has reached the ship, which the captain, in this instance, clearly did not do.

Easing forward to get a better look, Sherlock sees that the boat out of which the captain has just climbed is not his official vessel, but rather one of the boats from the port. It looks like an ordinary fishing sloop.

All of the frantic activity on deck has momentarily come to a halt as the men at their stations stop whatever they were doing, curious, and turn to watch.

“Sir,” Sherlock can hear the customary deference in Lestrade’s voice, but beneath it, he cannot fully conceal his surprise or the breathless quality that’s the result of running half the length of the
ship. “Forgive me for the poor reception. Your vessel was not announced, so we did not—”

“Spare me your excuses, Lieutenant. I don’t have to tell you that this is a shocking breach of
etiquette. I expected better from you.”

The words sting, Sherlock knows, from the color rising in Lestrade’s face.

“I trust I do not have to remind you who’s in command of this ship, do I, Lestrade?”

“No, sir.”

“I should hope not. What do you have to report?”

Lestrade, still looking flustered, seems to gather himself.

“We’ve finished unloading all of our cargo from the hold. The last longboat is being loaded as we
speak. As far as our own provisions go, we’ve only just started revictualling. There’s another
British ship that arrived before us—the Agamemnon, sir, and they currently have use of the water
hoy. We’ve had a few casks delivered just now to tide us over, but we’ll have to wait on the big
shipment until likely the day after tomorrow—”

“Belay that, Lieutenant.”

“Sir?”

“I said to belay that order. There won’t be time for another delivery. There’s been a change of
plans. I want this ship revictualled and ready to sail by eight bells tomorrow morning.”

There is a beat of weighted silence.

“Forgive me, sir, I believe I may have misunderstood.” Lestrade’s tone is carefully apologetic.
“You cannot mean—that is, if I heard you correctly—that you intend for us to sail tomorrow
morning?”

“Indeed, Lieutenant, as you have so deftly repeated—that is precisely what I intend.” The sarcasm
in the captain’s voice is biting. “It appears your powers of apprehension are perfectly in tact.”

This time Lestrade does not bother to conceal his shock.

“But sir! It isn’t possible. We cannot finish restocking our stores in that amount of time. And with
the Agamemnon ahead of us for provisioning, we will not receive even a quarter of the necessary
supplies by tomorrow morning. Besides, we’ve promised the men—”

“Whatsoever it is you think you need to do before this ship sets sail, it can be done in the next sixteen
hours, Lieutenant. I have not been a captain this many years without understanding what the basic
requirements are for revictualling a ship. Whatever cannot be completed in that amount of time is
not necessary.”

Even from where he stands across the deck, Sherlock can see, that perhaps for the first time ever,
Lestrade is on the verge of losing his patience.

He watches the man take a moment to gather himself so that he can speak calmly.

“Sir, you must understand—”

“I must understand nothing, Lieutenant!” The captain snaps. “How dare you speak to me in that
condescending tone? Your lack of faith in my judgment is bordering on insubordination. This ship will set sail tomorrow at eight bells. You will ensure that everything is ready for our departure at that time, and I will not hear another word out of you on the subject. That is an order from your commanding officer, not a point up for debate!”

The silence in the wake of the captain’s words is absolute.

Every crewmember presently on deck has ceased working to watch the interaction unfold. The men stationed below in the longboats have climbed up the side of the ship and are peering over the gunwale to watch, the men in the rigging hanging motionless overhead.

Sherlock sees John standing on the other side of the deck beside his messmates, unmoving, the great length of rope coiled like a sleeping serpent at their feet.

Lestrade’s lips are pressed so hard together it look as though his mouth has vanished completely. Sherlock can see that the line of his shoulders has gone absolutely straight.

“I am begging you, sir, to be reasonable. If I might only speak with you in private…”

“You may not!” The captain barks, insensate with rage. “END OF DISCUSSION.”

But Lestrade, much to Sherlock’s amazement, continues standing in the captain’s way. He steps closer to the other man, lowering his voice, the urgency on his face plain.

Even though he drops his voice, Sherlock can still make out his words.

“With all due respect, sir, what you’re suggesting is tantamount to suicide. Even if we could forgo a cask or two of beef, our current supply of fresh water is insufficient for even half the amount of time it will take us to reach—”

“That is enough, Lieutenant!” the captain roars.

Although Lestrade clearly lowered his voice out of respect, the captain makes no such accommodation for his first officer. His voice is carrying, as though to make certain of Lestrade’s humiliation for daring to question his orders. “If this ship isn’t ready to sail at eight bells tomorrow morning, I’ll have you seized up and beaten at the gratings like any common sailor. Do I make myself clear?”

Lestrade’s face is flushed with suppressed rage; Sherlock does not know how he manages to refrain from drawing his sword and running the other man through with it right then and there, such is the degree of disrespect to which he has just been treated.

Instead, he answers dutifully, the words sounding like gravel in his mouth.

“Yes, sir.”

“And if I hear any complaints out of any of you—” The captain turns to the immobilized crew. “You’ll all be beaten like the dogs that you are. Now get back to work. ALL OF YOU!”

With this final bellowed command, the captain storms across the deck to the door leading to his quarters, the men parting before him like waves before the prow of a ship.

But the rest of the men remain motionless, still watching the spot the captain just left as though unwilling to believe the outcome of the interaction they just witnessed.
“You heard him,” Lestrade echoes, turning now to face them, his cheeks still flushed with suppressed emotion. “Get back to work.”

No one moves. It’s as though they’re hoping Lestrade will tell them to disbelieve what they just heard; to reassure them that he will intervene on their behalf.

But the Lieutenant does no such thing.

He stares at them in incredulous fury, the color in his face rising.

“Did you not hear me? I said get back to work!”

Still, they go on staring, as if they know that once they begin to move again, they will no longer be able to deny what’s happened.

“What is the matter with all of you? GET MOVING!”

In the most open display of emotion Sherlock has ever seen the man exhibit, Lestrade removes the lieutenant’s hat from his head and throws it to the deck.

“Goddammit!”

Then turning, he kicks the gunwale beside him as hard as he can.

This unprecedented behavior from their first officer finally breaks the men from their spell. Like clockwork machines coming back to life, they begin to move mechanically about their duties.

There’s no laughter at Lestrade’s expense. Instead, Sherlock can detect a general feeling of embarrassment in the weighted silence as the men return to their work. They are embarrassed for Lestrade—to see him treated the way he has been by his commanding officer. They are embarrassed that he lost his temper, but perhaps most of all, they are embarrassed for their own behavior—that they played a part in Lestrade’s humiliation by however briefly, refusing to return to work.

Sherlock himself cannot fully absorb what just transpired. Or he could, if he let himself. But he does not want to. He does not want to consider the implications of what he’s just witnessed. The reality of his situation will come for him soon enough. Better to put it off as long as he possibly can. So he goes on watching, all the activity in his brain turned down to a barely detectable hum.

He watches Lieutenant Deverall take a tentative step toward Lestrade, his brow furrowed in obvious concern.

“Sir?”

Dimmock is hovering behind Deverall, looking more nervous than Sherlock has ever seen him—which is saying something.

He stoops to pick up Lestrade’s hat.

“Get below!” Lestrade snaps, snatching the hat from Dimmock’s hands. “Both of you!”

“Yes, sir.”

Deverall bows his head acknowledgment, lingering just a moment, an uncertain look on his face, before turning away without saying anything more, Dimmock following in his wake.
Sherlock watches Lestrade place his hat back on his head, and then stride stiffly toward the men loading the rest of the cargo on deck into the waiting longboats.

“You there—I want this deck clear of cargo before the first dogwatch, is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

The sailor who responds does not look Lestrade in the eye, but there is no trace of disrespect in his voice, only a lingering embarrassment.

Without another word, Lestrade turns and follows his first officers down the aft hatch and into the bowels of the ship.
Sherlock is still standing at the top of the stairs of the main hatch, as if standing where he is will somehow prevent what he just witnessed from being real.

In spite of his best efforts however, it’s already happening—he can feel it. The inevitable tide of realization is stealing over him, dragging him down as if there were irons around his legs.

He looks back across the deck to where John is stationed, only to see that John has already returned to his work. His back is to Sherlock, his concentration fully on the difficult task before him once again.

Sherlock wishes he could talk to him. Just walk across the deck and take John by the hand, pull him away from his work so they could go and speak together in the privacy of Sherlock’s cabin, so that they could mourn together the opportunity they have just lost.

He wishes he could somehow break the momentum of the ship’s inevitable routine, the constant, never-ending flow of work; the schedule that dictates every hour, every minute of each crewmember’s day.

He’s filled suddenly with the impulse to smash the hourglass that stands beneath the quarterdeck so that he might halt the rush of sand that keeps the men always working, always moving to the next task, as though the sand itself controls them, as if stopping it would finally free them from its tyranny.

Or better yet he and John could simply flee the ship.

He thinks about running across the deck, taking John’s hand in his, and leaping with him over the gunwale into the turquoise waters of the bay. It can’t be so far to swim to shore—Sherlock can see it glowing green in the late afternoon sunlight even from where he stands at the top of the stairs, can feel the warm, earth-scented breeze so soft against his face.

But the fleeting appeal of that thought dies as quickly as it comes.

After all, Sherlock cannot even swim.

They could steal a longboat—row to shore—climb up those dense mountains covered in greenery—escape into the jungle and never look back. But even thinking it, Sherlock knows how impossible it would be—even getting off the ship unnoticed would be more than they could manage.

He stands for one more moment, hoping John will look back so he can catch his eye, so that he can communicate something to him, but John does not turn around. He’s back to hauling on the line, the midshipman on duty shouting at the men to work faster.

Sherlock can see from where he stands John’s hair is soaked dark-gold with sweat, the muscles in his back standing out from the strain. He looks so small compared to the men beside him, and yet his pace on the rope never falters, the muscles in his arms gleaming with exertion.

At the sight of John already pulled back in to the inevitable tide of his work, the full weight of
Sherlock’s despair overtakes him.

He surrenders to it, reaching blindly for the railing at the top of the stairs and using it to guide his leaden footsteps down into the darkness below. It’s pointless to stay up on deck, willing the impossible into existence.

The corridors are still humming with activity—the word must not yet have spread to the other passengers.

Sherlock has no wish to make it known to them.

He moves among them without speaking, like some kind of pale apparition that they may sense but cannot see. If he looks especially downcast, it’s certainly not the first time they’ve seen him that way.

Instead, he retreats into his room, eying the bag that he packed earlier with a look of pure poison. The small parcel of items he’d arranged to take to shore sitting neatly beside his violin seems to mock him with its aura of hopeful expectancy, making something sharp and painful twist inside his chest.

For one irrational moment, he’s overcome with the desire to throw them both across the room into his shaving glass. He imagines the glass shattering, the satisfying crunch of the bridge of his violin breaking—how the momentary violence would soothe his rage. His fingers twitch into fists at his sides.

But he shuts his eyes and waits for the feeling to pass.

When it leaves him, he falls onto his bed, and sits with his head in his hands, unmoving, as the disappointment and fury tear through him, like the silent howling of a terrible internal storm.

It’s childish to react like this, he knows—but that doesn’t mean he knows how to stop himself from feeling this way.

After all this anticipation, after getting his hopes up only to have them smashed once again—it’s almost more than he can bear.

How will he tolerate it?

How will John?

How will any of them be able to make it through the tyranny of the coming weeks without a visit to shore?

He thinks again, with a sudden swooping sickness, of the fact that he still hasn’t told John what he heard the captain say about them—about the increasing danger of their situation. Leaving the ship meant he could put it off a little longer without fear of the repercussions. But now, trapped as they are on this floating island of misery for god knows how many more weeks, Sherlock will have to tell him.

How he will even manage to do so without them being seen together is a problem he has yet to sort out.

He pushes his face deeper into his hands, wishing that his misery were strong enough to pull him into unconsciousness so he wouldn’t have to think about it anymore, so he wouldn’t have to hear the gentle sounds of the waters of the bay moving so lightly, so musically against the side of the
ship, taunting him, as if the waves themselves were trying to coax him out of the squalid darkness and into the soft green light of the afternoon.

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He does not know how long he sits like this, in a kind of stupor, when he hears the gentle knock against his door.

He starts to his feet with the half-formed thought that it might be John; that he’s somehow managed to escape his duties so he can come and talk to Sherlock.

But he knows before he’s reached the door that the knock is too tentative, too uncertain to be John’s, and when he pulls the door wide to find Molly standing there, he realizes that some part of him knew it must be her all along.

She stares at him, white-faced, a look of shocked distress clear on her features and for a moment Sherlock wonders if it’s possible that Molly has somehow knocked on the wrong door.

And then he realizes just as quickly that the look on her face is due to embarrassment, not surprise.

He looks from her clenched hands to her blank face and is just about to ask her why she’s come when she opens her mouth and begins speaking in a rush, the words tumbling out over one another almost faster than he can make out.

“You must forgive me for disturbing you like this. I didn’t know where else to go—and I had to know. Is it true what they’re saying? That the captain’s ordered the ship to leave port tomorrow morning? Is it true, Sherlock?”

He looks at her pinched face, at the tears standing out in her eyes, and feels a vague panic fill him.

He cannot think why she might be crying—even less why she would come to him in her distress. When he nods, finally, in answer to her question, he has no idea how long she has been waiting for him to respond.

Molly shakes her head, puts both her hands up to cover her mouth. Sherlock watches one of the tears break free and slide down her cheek.

“Forgive me,” she says, her voice wavering.

Much as the sight of her tears makes the panicked feeling in Sherlock’s chest intensify, it also causes some modicum of human decency to come to life within him. He has a vague notion that leaving a woman to cry openly in his doorway is a violation of some basic social code. Not that Sherlock usually cares about things like that, but it also occurs to him—perhaps somewhat belatedly—that Molly is his friend before anything else, and whatever the reason for her distress he should at least try to offer her his aid in whatever capacity he is able.

He cannot think what to say—it’s difficult for him to think through the fog of his despair—but he has enough presence of mind to step aside so that Molly knows she is welcome to come into the room.

Luckily, Molly does not need a verbal invitation. She crosses the threshold into Sherlock’s cramped cabin without hesitation and it’s a sure sign of her distress that she does not apologize more as she does so.

Sherlock closes the door behind her, just as it occurs to him that inviting an unattended young lady into his room without her chaperone is certainly a violation of several social codes, but if Molly
isn’t bothered about it, then he sees no reason why he should be.

It isn’t as if he cares what the other passengers think.

Sherlock’s room is so small the only option besides standing is the narrow chair by Sherlock’s writing table—either that, or the bed—but somehow, inviting Molly Hooper to sit on his bed is too much of a breach of social decorum even for Sherlock’s sensibilities. So he gestures to the desk chair, which Molly falls into without seeming to see it, and Sherlock perches on the edge of his unmade bed, wishing that he had a handkerchief to offer her because the tears are now streaming fully down her cheeks.

She wipes at her eyes, her expression apologetic, even through the tears.

“I’m sorry for going to pieces like this in front of you—it’s stupid of me, I know. It’s just that—I really thought—” Her breath catches. “I don’t know why but I honestly thought there might be some way for me to get to shore in the next couple of days. Even if Grimsby strictly forbade me going, I was hopeful that I could change her mind. Or barring that, that I could slip away unnoticed somehow. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say.

He’s still so preoccupied with his own miserable feelings that it’s difficult for him to imagine that anyone else could possibly feel as distressed as he does at the loss of this opportunity.

Mercifully, Molly has produced her own handkerchief from somewhere and is now using it to wipe her eyes.

“I was sure three days would be plenty of time to think of something. But now—if we leave tomorrow… Well, there’s no hope, is there?”

Sherlock watches in rising distress as Molly’s eyes fill with a fresh wave of tears. She bites her lip and shakes her head as the tears cascade anew down her cheeks.

This new onslaught of tears makes Sherlock feel more stiff and panicked than ever. Crying women have always made him distinctly uncomfortable but there’s an added degree of unpleasantness to the experience due to the fact that Molly is someone he genuinely cares about. Seeing her so openly unhappy makes concern creep in among the feelings of discomfort and panic.

“What is it that…” Sherlock stops; tries again. “That is… why is it so important that you get to shore?”

Molly looks up at him through a veil of tears and Sherlock is certain that he’s said exactly the wrong thing.

She shakes her head again.

“I don’t… I don’t know exactly. I didn’t realize how important it was until I heard the news that we wouldn’t be staying.”

She looks down at the crumpled handkerchief in her hands and Sherlock waits, hoping she will say more without further prompting.

“I suppose it’s just that… getting to see this place was my last chance of any real freedom before we reach India. Once we arrive in Madras, I’ll be ushered immediately into the care of the family I’ll be serving. It’s like Grimsby said—they’re locked within the walls of their estate. As far as I
understand, they live very much as any English family does. I’ll be trapped there just as I’ve always been trapped by my life back in England.”

She squeezes the handkerchief between her fingers, her tear-stained face whitening.

“I can’t tell you, Sherlock, how trapped I’ve felt all my life.”

He’s surprised to see her shut her eyes.

“I thought maybe just for a few days, I could escape that feeling. Before the bars of the cage close around me for good.”

Sherlock is taken aback by the gravity in her tone. She seems to speak with the voice of someone much older. Looking at Molly sitting in his desk chair now, she hardly seems to take up any space at all, and it strikes him how frail she looks, how weary of the world. She could be sixty-five instead of her twenty-three years.

A better person might tell Molly that she’s wrong, that there’s reason yet to keep on hoping, that her circumstances might change for the better, the doors of the cage may open up again, but Sherlock is not that person. What good would it do to lie to her now? It would be an insult to her intelligence to feign to placate her in this manner.

No, all he can do is tell her the truth. And the only truth Sherlock can offer in this moment is his own.

“I was looking forward for a chance to leave the ship as well.”

His own voice sounds hollow in his ears; he hates the sound of it, but he forces himself to keep on speaking.

“John and I, we—”

He stops again. He can’t do this.

Suddenly, Molly’s gloved hand is reaching out to squeeze his own. The gesture is brief but that contact—the deliberate press of Molly’s hand against his—fills him with a not altogether unpleasant feeling, which he thinks might be gratitude.

“Oh, Sherlock. I’m so sorry. Here I am, crying over my nonexistent ruined plans, when you’ve actually lost an opportunity to spend more time with John. How selfish I am—I didn’t even think... You must be devastated.”

To Sherlock’s horror, he feels his throat go tight in response to Molly’s words, and the vaguely reassured feeling caused by Molly’s offering of comfort leaves him as quickly as it came. Sherlock can feel something inside of himself closing over in response, shutting her out.

He sits up straighter on the bed. He does not need her pity.

“It’s fine.”

Molly must sense the glacial undercurrent to his change in mood and understand that she has overstayed her welcome.

She rises from the chair, her self-consciousness returning all at once, apologies tumbling from her lips.
“I’m sorry. I’ll leave you. Please forgive me again for intruding.”

It occurs to Sherlock, as she reaches the door, that this isn’t right; he should stop her from leaving. He should ask her to sit back down, tell her that there’s no need to apologize; express his sympathy for her predicament. That’s what he would do if he were a proper friend. He wouldn’t let her leave like this, in a flurry of apologies she doesn’t need to make.

He wouldn’t leave her alone to her misery.

But the truth is he doesn’t want her here. He doesn’t want her looking at him with that horrible pitying look in here eyes, making him aware of just how pathetic he must look. He doesn’t want a witness to his suffering.

He’d rather be alone. It’s better this way. Better for them both. If she stays, Sherlock cannot be sure what he might say to her. He might say something cruel.

But as soon as she’s gone, closing the door carefully after her, leaving behind the lingering scent of dried lavender, Sherlock finds himself wishing he’d stopped her from going.

Now all he has left to keep him company is the relentless miserable tirade of his own thoughts.

_Quite right, little brother. It’s much safer for everyone this way. You never really understood friendship anyway, did you? Too selfish. Much too selfish to have proper friends…_  

He drops his head into his hands, resisting the urge to scream.

He grinds his fists into his temples.

_Shut *up*, Mycroft. Shut up shut up shut up._

He rises from the bed with a start. Maybe it’s not too late. Maybe Molly’s still in the hallway.

He staggers outside, thinking he will go after her and call her back, but when he reaches the corridor there is no sign of Molly, only Colonel Jackson, walking slowly in the opposite direction with a case in his hand.

Hearing Sherlock’s door open, he turns.

“Ah, Sherlock, my boy—have you heard the news? Dreadful, absolutely dreadful business. And here I’d just promised young Master Billy that I could finally give him a proper go with my dueling pistols once we’d made it to shore. It was he who came and brought me the news. Poor lad —looked absolutely cast down. Seems as though none of us will get the reprieve we’ve so been looking forward to. But of course the captain’s word is law. Nothing any of us can do about it, except keep our chins up and carry on.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say but apparently his own miserable expression communicates the equivalent of a satisfactory response because the Colonel is nodding as if in agreement.

“I’m just on my way from delivering a packet of letters. If you have anything you’d like to send back to England, now’s the time to do it. The mail barge just arrived but it’s leaving again within the hour. We are all of us scrambling to finish our correspondence. Doesn’t give one much of a chance does it? Here we all thought we’d have several days to get them in order—perhaps pen off a colorful missive about the delights we were to experience on these sultry, tropical shores—but alas! No time for that now. Ah well, no time like the present I always say. I know for a fact it’s shortened up Tabitha’s lengthy responses quite a bit…”
Sherlock lets the Colonel go on talking for several minutes more without listening. He’s thinking somewhat morosely about whether there’d be any point at all in writing to Mycroft, to try and ask him for further insight about the captain.

It would likely be a futile waste of ink, if Mycroft’s useless letter upon Sherlock’s departure is anything to go off. He’ll probably just fill the page with vague warnings and condescending indictments of Sherlock’s past behavior, rather than offering any kind of helpful information about the captain.

Then again, if this is indeed their only opportunity to send post before they reach India, it might be worth attempting.

Sherlock is pulled out of his ruminations by Colonel Jackson’s silence. He must have asked Sherlock a question because he is looking at Sherlock expectantly now. Sherlock is about to ask him to repeat it when he’s saved from having to reply by a sound that causes both him and the Colonel to freeze where they’re standing and look up.

“How Jove, is it that time already? Why it must be the dogwatch.”

Sherlock glances toward the stairs and even through the gloom two decks down he can just make out a sheen of sunlight on the top of the upper step, the heavy golden light seeping through the portholes one deck above marking the sun’s descent toward the horizon. The sun sets early here because they are so close to the equator.

The sound of a mouth organ playing a sweet, melancholy tune signals that the sailors have been given their first rest from the labor of the day. Sherlock also cannot believe it’s already that time—he’s been so lost in his misery that he’s completely lost track of time.

“I must get back to my Tabitha. She too is quite inconsolable over this sudden change of plans. I’m hopeful I shall think of something to lift her spirits. Let us hope that when next we meet we will have better tidings to celebrate.”

Sherlock bids the Colonel farewell. Watching him make his way toward the staircase to the upper decks, Sherlock makes up his mind.

He’ll write to Mycroft, even if it proves to be a pointless effort. Who knows? Perhaps his letter will find Mycroft in a charitable mood and he’ll decide to indulge Sherlock’s request.

Sherlock snorts to himself as he opens the door to his cabin and goes to pull out paper and ink.

He cannot think of even one occasion when Mycroft has ever indulged a request of his.

But then again, it isn’t as though he has anything better to do.

Mycroft,

You will likely be distressed to learn that I have not yet succumbed to any sea-borne illness or fallen overboard and been devoured by sharks, but have survived so far to see the ship reach the port at Rio de Janeiro.

I write to you now, not because I imagine that you lie awake nights wondering what has become of your little brother—I am under no such illusions—but rather, because I am in need of information. The person that you spoke of in the letter you sent me upon my departure has proved to be of a decidedly duplicitous, and likely criminal, nature. I cannot divulge any details for obvious reasons but suffice it to say that I doubt very much they came into their current position by any legal...
means. Their behavior thus far has proven to be erratic and, I can now say with certainty, lethal. Therefore, if you could provide me with all the information you have on this individual with the greatest possible expediency in the hope that I may receive your missive at our next port of call, it would be in the service of not just my own well-being (for which I know you have little regard), but for the wellbeing of everyone else on board.

Knowing full well that you have no heart whose goodness I might appeal to in the hopes of your satisfying this request, I appeal instead to your rationality and good sense, by reminding you that if things do continue in the direction they are currently heading, it will be a great big mess you will have to deal with upon the ship’s return to Portsmouth in some months’ time.

I remain your ever insubordinate brother,

Sherlock Holmes

Sherlock signs the letter with a flourish, feeling satisfied that he has done his best, even if he is fairly certain that Mycroft will ignore his request entirely—if the letter even reaches him before things escalate further.

He folds and seals the paper and tucking it into his waistcoat pocket, he heads out the door of his cabin and towards the upper deck, hoping that the mail barge has not yet left.

As he climbs the stairs, he can still hear the sound of music from the men on the dogwatch. He recognizes the familiar sound of Half Pint Lee’s mouth organ, but there is another instrument that catches Sherlock’s attention, one that he has not heard thus far on the voyage, that almost makes him pause on the stairs to listen.

He knows the sound of that instrument; he has heard it before…

He hurries up the remaining stairs, his curiosity piqued, the golden light of the setting sun growing brighter with each step he takes, until he emerges out into the gilded world of the upper deck.

Ignoring the pull of the music, he looks instead for where the mail barge is docked, and sure enough sees a courier standing by the gangway near the quarterdeck with a satchel at his feet, deep in conversation with Lieutenant Deverall.

Sherlock recoils at the sight of the handsome lieutenant. He considers turning around rather than have to interact with him; but then he chastises himself, tells himself he’s being foolish. There’s no reason he can’t hand off a letter to the mail courier just because Deverall is standing there.

Summoning his most self-important posture—shoulders straightening, chin lifting a fraction of an inch to convey his superiority—Sherlock strides forward to stand beside the two men.

“Excuse me, Lieutenant.”

Deverall turns to look at Sherlock, and something in his face sharpens at the sight of him.

The scrutiny in his expression startles Sherlock. But no, it isn’t quite scrutiny, more… curiosity.

It makes something hot and fearful flare up in Sherlock’s chest.

He’s interested in me—why?

Had Lestrade spoken with the other lieutenants about the captain’s warning? What had he told them?
Sherlock feels cold sweat prickle his brow.

“What is it?” Deverall prompts, beginning to look annoyed that Sherlock interrupted his conversation for seemingly no reason at all.

“I have a letter to post,” Sherlock says, dropping his eyes, hating himself for adopting an obsequious posture in his sudden fear.

Deverall nods then, his irritation visibly lessening as the courier takes the letter from Sherlock.

“You are lucky, sir,” the man tells him in thickly accented English. “I am just about to leave. Only waiting for—”

Sherlock notes with interest Deverall’s sudden movement in response to the man’s words as if he’s about to tell him to stop talking. But he’s interrupted anyway by the sound of running footsteps.

All three men turn to look.

Sherlock sees Billy, breathless as ever, coming from the door leading under the quarterdeck. He’s holding a letter in his hand.

“Here it is, sir!” he says, skidding to a halt in front of the courier and handing him the small folded square of paper.

Sherlock tries to get a look at the address on the envelope as the courier takes it from Billy’s hand but he cannot read the writing before the other man slips into the front of his coat.

It does not escape Sherlock’s notice that *this* letter does not go into the satchel with the rest of the mail.

“Thank you, Billy,” Deverall tells him, and it’s clear that this is the letter the courier was waiting on, as he stoops to lift the satchel at his feet and pass it to a man standing at the gangway. “You’ve done well. Go and have your supper now. It’s been a long day, and I don’t imagine we’ve seen the end of it yet.”

Billy nods up at Deverall, and turning, notices Sherlock for the first time, his face brightening.

“Hello, Mr. Sherlock, sir!”

“Hello, Billy.”

It’s heartening to see Billy’s eagerness upon recognizing him, and it occurs to Sherlock, not for the first time, how fortunate he is to be able to count Billy among his few allies onboard.

Although he’s fairly certain he knows whose letter it was that the courier was waiting on, he’d like to find out from Billy for certain.

“Are you headed to the forecastle?” Sherlock asks, knowing full well that’s where Billy is headed if he is to take his supper.

“I am.”

“I’ll walk with you,” Sherlock tells him, turning away from the other men, grateful to see that Deverall’s attention is now directed elsewhere. “I was just headed that way myself.”

Billy nods cheerfully in acknowledgment and falls into step beside Sherlock.
In spite of his eagerness upon seeing Sherlock, it’s painfully evident how tired the boy must be, judging by his silence as they begin to walk together towards the front of the ship.

Glancing over at him now, Sherlock can see from one look at him that he’s been run ragged since the moment they came within view of the shore early this morning. Being on the absolute bottom of the pecking order on a day like today has clearly taken its toll on him.

“How are you?” Sherlock finds himself asking, although that was not the first question he intended to ask.

Billy peers up at Sherlock through his fringe, clearly surprised by the question—as if he isn’t used to people asking about himself, which of course, he wouldn’t be.

He sighs enormously then.

“Absolutely knackered, if I’m honest. It’s been a mad day.”

“I’m sure they’ve kept you busy.”

Billy nods.

Sherlock isn’t really sure what compels him to say what comes out of his mouth next.

“I’m sorry that you won’t get a chance to have a real go with those dueling pistols.” It’s true, he really is sorry about it. “Colonel Jackson told me he was going to let you try them out on shore.”

Billy’s shoulders slump in response and Sherlock suddenly feels stupid for mentioning it.

“Yeah,” he says, his voice wistful. “Would’ve been fun.”

His footsteps seem to grow heavier as he thinks of it.

“Listen, Billy,” Sherlock turns suddenly, and puts a hand on Billy’s shoulder. “I want to ask you something.”

They’re just on the other side of the main mast and Sherlock stops them before they reach the place on deck where the sailors are gathered at the front of the ship. He glances around to see if anyone is within earshot and then stoops down to face Billy, satisfied when he determines that no one around is paying them any attention.

The sound of the sailor’s music is clearly audible from where they stand; it seems to tug at Sherlock like a physical hand on his shoulder. He ignores it, focusing on Billy.

He faces Billy squarely, keeping his voice carefully low.

“Whose letter was it that you just delivered to the courier?”

Billy looks fearful all of a sudden.

“It’s all right.” Sherlock is quick to reassure him. “I won’t tell anyone that you told me.”

“Well, it was from the captain.”

“Did you take it from him yourself?”

Billy nods.
“Do you know who it was meant for?”

Billy shakes his head, and Sherlock feels his hopes sink.

Billy must notice his disappointment though because he goes on to add, “I don’t know who it was for, but I know he was answering a letter he’d just gotten from someone on shore.”

Sherlock’s gaze on him sharpens.

“I’m the one who brought him the letter,” he goes on, and Sherlock can sense Billy’s pride at being a critical player in these events in the way his shoulders lift as he says it, his look brightening. “He made me stand and wait while he wrote a response. It didn’t take him very long.”

“Did he say anything else when you gave him the first letter?”

Billy shakes his head.

“How did he react to it?”

Billy crinkles up his nose as he thinks. “He didn’t really react at all. He just looked... disgruntled. Sort of the way he always looks. Lieutenant Lestrade was in his cabin with him when I brought the letter in though.”

“He was?”

Billy nods, his expression grave. “He was upset. I could hear him...” Billy scrunches up his face again, considering his words, “Not yelling exactly, but... I could hear him talking before I came in. He was angry, I could tell.”

Sherlock is momentarily shocked by this piece of information.

He can’t believe that Lestrade would attempt once again to persuade the captain to extend their time in port. It’s obvious that’s what he was doing. There is no other likely explanation.

After his display earlier, it’s reassuring to know that Lestrade hadn’t simply given up. Sherlock feels his respect for Lestrade grow exponentially in that moment.

“Did you hear what he was saying?”

Billy shakes his head again. “They stopped talking as soon as I came in. But... I think he was trying to change the captain’s mind about shore leave. In fact, I’m certain of it.”

Sherlock’s mind is whirling as he digests this new information. What had been the contents of that letter?

“What did he do with the note that he received?”

“I don’t know. I suppose he left it on his desk, but I don’t know what he did with it after I left.”

Sherlock considers briefly just how risky it would be to attempt to sneak into the captain’s cabin to read that letter, but dismisses the idea almost at once. The captain is no fool; he will have burned the letter as soon as Lestrade left his cabin. If it contained any information at all about his illicit dealings on shore, he would not leave it lying around to be discovered.

Sherlock straightens up, suddenly mindful of the fact that he is using up minutes of Billy’s precious time off duty.
“You should go have your dinner. Thank you. For answering my questions.”

Billy nods at him, the exhaustion in his whole body unmistakable.

“Anything for you, Mr. Sherlock,” he says and offers Sherlock a weary smile.

Sherlock smiles at him in return. “Go on then. Maybe I’ll see you back up on deck when you’re done.”

He watches Billy make his way to the front of the ship and descend through the hatch into the forecastle, and then turns his attention, finally, to the sailors gathered beneath the foremast.

Drawn by the sound of the music, he takes a few steps closer, tentative, aware that he is an intruder upon this moment but too curious to stay away.

The scene that greets him now is very different from the chaotic tumult of even just a few hours ago.

The dogwatch shifts are those hours in the day when the men finally, formally, take a break from work, and have their dinner, in two separate shifts below decks. After they have finished eating, they have a chance to come up above and smoke their pipes, tell tales, sing songs, mend their clothes, or however else they choose to spend their leisure hours.

Depending on the general mood onboard ship, this time of day can be more or less boisterous, oftentimes with a fair amount of singing, dancing, and carrying on.

The mood today, Sherlock is hardly surprised to see, is a somber reflection of the dismal proceedings of the afternoon.

The men are staggered in various seated or reclining positions around the foremast, which is where they generally tend to congregate this time of day—out of the way of the few men still on watch.

They are markedly silent, the expressions on many of their faces serious and drawn. Sherlock is struck by how much older they look when they are at rest like this, the wrinkles carved into their weather-worn features so stark their faces look like so many masks.

The longer Sherlock looks at them, the more they seem like figures carved out of wood in some strange tableau—the only movement among them the smoke from their pipes, which winds its way between their grave faces like strands of mist.

They are listening, all of them, to the sounds of this strange instrument that Sherlock is certain he has heard before—but he can’t quite remember where or when.

From where he’s standing on the edge of the crowd, he cannot see who’s playing it. His view is blocked by the foremast. He creeps closer—as quietly and unobtrusively as possible—so as not to shatter the particular stillness of the atmosphere.

He recognizes the instrument before the person playing it comes fully into view, an image called up into his mind by the sound with such stark visceral clarity that he cannot believe that he’s forgotten it until this moment.

He was young—six, maybe seven years old when Mycroft had taken him to London for the first time, on an errand to purchase new clothes for school. He had been thrumming with excitement. He could not wait to see it, the city he’d read so much about in books it had taken on a mythic significance in his mind. He remembered pressing his face to the window of the carriage for most
of the journey, fogging up the glass, Mycroft continually tugging on the back of his collar to make him sit down properly.

When they’d finally arrived, Sherlock’s disappointment had been keen. He was overwhelmed by the chaos: the sounds and the smells, people and horses everywhere, the streets filthy with mud. Mycroft hardly afforded Sherlock a chance to look at anything. He had to run to keep up with Mycroft’s long gait or else risk being left behind. At seventeen, Mycroft was at the peak of his new adult smugness and superiority—he was irritated that he was given the task of taking Sherlock into town. A promised trip to the British Museum that Mycroft employed as a bribe the whole daylong to keep Sherlock in line had amounted to nothing and Sherlock’s resentment over this overt lie had lasted for months.

All of his memories of that day were tinged with boredom and despair, the thick choking scent of London smoke and too many people crowded close together, the putrid stench rising off the swollen river, but one memory stood out—shining like a rare stone among so many ordinary grey pebbles.

Mycroft had been hurrying them along the street to whatever errand next awaited them when they’d passed a musician on the street, playing an instrument Sherlock had never seen before.

It was a string instrument with a cavernous body that enhanced the sonorous quality of the sound, worn by a strap around the musician’s back. In order to make the notes, he pressed the fingers of his left hand to the fingerboards along the neck of the instrument, plucking the strings with his right.

The man playing it should have looked as ordinary as the filthy streets around him, and to this day, Sherlock isn’t sure if the man himself was strikingly handsome, or if it had simply been the sound of the music he was making that shone upon him like light reflecting off of water, making everything he did look somehow holy.

Sherlock remembers the man’s blue double-breasted jacket, the sweep of his long dark hair pushed back from his face, which seemed to gleam with some kind of internal light, but more than anything else he remembers the sight of the man’s fingers moving over the strings—so sinuously, so quickly that Sherlock remembers stopping dead in his tracks to watch, not caring if Mycroft left him behind in the street.

For whatever reason—whether because he was also intrigued by the music, or whether he was simply tired of fighting Sherlock’s dragging pace—Mycroft stopped walking too, and stood beside Sherlock to watch.

They’d stood there for Sherlock does not know how long, listening to this man play with incredible virtuosity. Sherlock can still remember how it had sounded—fast and lyrical, intricate and full of unexpected rises and falls. It was like nothing he had ever heard before.

“It’s called a guitar,” Mycroft told him later, when they’d left the spell of the enchanting street musician behind and were sitting in the carriage on the drive back home. “Very popular currently at the Spanish court. That man was certainly from Spain—he was playing in the Spanish style.”

Sherlock thought about the musician and the sound of his music for the duration of the long carriage ride back to the Holmes family estate, and that encounter on the street had made the whole disappointing trip to London worthwhile.

The fact that someone on board the Galatea was playing that instrument now could only mean one thing—someone must have brought it onto the ship in one of the first boats that had arrived from
shore, laden down with curious people from the port city, eager to meet the people onboard and sell them goods.

Sherlock had seen one of the boats pull up this morning, full of people who looked different than most people Sherlock had seen before, their skin very dark, their clothing brightly colored, speaking a language he knew was not Portuguese.

Lestrade had managed to direct most of the boats away, knowing that the men had too much work to do to be distracted for the time being. “You can buy all the trinkets you like when you get to shore tomorrow,” Lestrade had told them.

But clearly, some of the wares from the first boat had already found new homes. Looking around at the assembled sailors with newfound scrutiny, Sherlock notices a new earring glinting in Ironside Jake’s ear, and a small bird with brilliant green plumage sitting on the shoulder of a sailor called Finch.

His curiosity heightened, Sherlock takes another step forward, leaning around a group of sailors to catch a glimpse of the musician.

As the figure playing the guitar finally comes into view, Sherlock stops dead in his tracks.

For several seconds all he can do is stand and stare, as though he’s been turned to stone by the sight before him, because the person playing that beautiful, complicated instrument is John.

How? How can it be possible that John knows how to play the guitar?

It’s clear from his playing that he has some knowledge of the instrument, and although his golden head is bent over the strings in concentration—his eyes on his fingers as he plays—the music flowing from his fingers is as clear as a bell.

Of course, of course, it was his music that called Sherlock up on deck like some kind of siren’s song. No wonder it was so difficult for him to resist the sound.

He’s wearing his jacket again, Sherlock notices with frantic relief, the worn fabric dull against the gleaming guitar in his arms. Sherlock whispers a silent prayer of fervent thanks for this fact. It’s bad enough watching John play this instrument with assurance and skill, Sherlock knows he would not survive the sight if John were dressed only in his linen trousers.

But just as quickly Sherlock realizes that the jacket makes it worse. John has rolled the sleeves up to his elbows, revealing the shifting muscles in his forearms as he plays, and he has no shirt on underneath, so Sherlock still has full view of the pronounced shadow between his pectorals; can see that the dip in his throat where his collarbones meet is faintly iridescent with sweat.

Sherlock bites hard on his lower lip; has to remind himself to breathe.

He watches John turn and direct a smile at the person sitting next to him, and this man, who Sherlock has never seen before, is clearly one of the men from the boats that came from shore this morning. He’s dressed in the same loose, brightly colored clothing that the others had worn, his dark hair cropped close against his sun-browned skin. He’s the only one within view who seems to have managed to stay on board—and as soon as Sherlock sees him, he knows that it’s his guitar—that John is borrowing it.

Sherlock feels a sudden pang at the realization that he has no idea how long John has been playing; he has no idea how much of this he’s missed.
However any unhappiness that Sherlock might feel evaporates in the next instant as he realizes—his eyes following the graceful movement of John’s hand up and down the neck of the guitar—that John has removed the bandages from his hands.

Sherlock leans against the main mast to listen, tucked mostly out of sight at the back of the crowd. He has a clear view of John from where he stands, but John would have to know he was there to look to find him.

His playing changes suddenly, shifts from the complicated finger-picking of a moment before to a simpler tune, and it’s clear from the movement that goes through the listening crowd that he is playing the prelude to some well-known song.

And then, just when Sherlock was certain he couldn’t possibly handle any more, John begins to sing.

_Farewell my lovely Nancy, for I must now leave you,_
_Unto the salt seas I am bound for to go,_
_But let my long absence be no trouble to you,_
_For I will return in the spring as you know._

It’s a simple tune—sweet but melancholy, and as usual Sherlock is certain that if he heard anyone else sing it, he would find it utterly forgettable. But the feeling in John’s voice is so affecting—so sorrowful and pure, Sherlock feels a pang go through him at the sound of it.

John’s voice would be moving enough on its own, but the accompaniment that he plays on the guitar adds a depth, a texture to the music that enriches what would otherwise be a simple melody. Set against John’s lovely voice, the march of the changing chords lends gravity to the words that he sings. In contrast to the quick sweet sound of the high notes there is something dark and inevitable in the deep reverberation of the low strings. Sherlock can feel them resonate in his chest.

_Like some pretty little sea boy, I will dress and go with you,_
_In the deepest of dangers I shall stand your friend,_
_In the cold stormy weather when the winds they are a-blowin’_  
_My love, I’ll be willing to wait on you then._

It’s a conversation—Sherlock realizes, between two speakers. That ‘Nancy’ wants to go to sea with her lover disguised as a lad is a common enough trope in the songs sailors sing.

Sherlock remembers suddenly a broadside he’d seen for a song like this once on a different trip to London, pinned up on the side of a tavern—a woodcut illustration of a woman in a tri-corn hat, a belt at her waist and a sword in her hand—the cheap paper already coming apart at the edges, the print of its tawdry lyrics splattered with mud.

But somehow with John singing it now, it doesn’t feel trivial or common at all. The story feels unique—heart breaking. It makes Sherlock think about how he would feel if John tried to leave him on shore.

_Your pretty little hands cannot handle our tackle,_
_Your pretty little feet to our topmast can’t go,_
_And the cold stormy weather, love, you never could endure,_
_Therefore, lovely Nancy, to the sea do not go._

Watching the intricate movement of John’s fingers on the guitar, the expressive tilt of his head as he sings, looking somewhere beyond the deck of the ship to a place only he can see makes that
pang move through Sherlock again—a physical pain that cuts through the heart of him.

_Farewell my lovely Nancy, for I must now leave you,_
_Unto the salt seas I am bound for to go,_
_But let my long absence be no trouble to you,_
_For I will return in the spring as you know._

There is something so mournful in the way that John sings it, so much conviction in the earnest look on his face that in a hot flash of feeling Sherlock wonders—not for the first time—if this is what John said to Mary when he left; if this is how he felt.

Sherlock knows not to make the mistake of reading too much into John’s choice of song as he’s now done several times in the past—after all, there are an apparently endless number of songs about girls left behind on shore—but it’s difficult not to be convinced by John’s performance every time he sings; he embodies each song so completely, it’s impossible not to be transported to the harbor where John stands saying farewell to his sweetheart as the cold salt wind whips her hair against her face, her frozen fingers clenched tightly in John’s hands as she begs him to take her with him.

Sherlock has always pictured Mary as a sweet, simpering thing, golden-headed as a doll—so fragile as to be almost insubstantial. But what if she wasn’t? What if she was like the girl in the song? Stout hearted, desperate for adventure, bored by the endless hours she must sit embroidering, sipping tea, and discussing the weather—waiting endlessly for John’s return. Would she have asked John to take her with him? Disguised as a sailor? Or would she have known how fruitless it would have been to even ask?

And if she had asked, and John had said no, how much greater was his devastation when he’d returned to the news of her death?

Sherlock will likely never know the answer to any of these questions but as he watches John, having finished the song, turn to say something to the Brazilian man beside him, Sherlock realizes that the stout-hearted girl he is picturing isn’t Mary at all, but Molly.

Guilt rises up in Sherlock like bile at the memory of how they’d parted ways. He will make it up to her somehow. He has to.

Sherlock’s thoughts of Molly are interrupted by the sight of John lifting the guitar strap from off his neck and offering the instrument back to its owner. However, the guitar’s owner, who apparently does not speak very much English, is gesticulating adamantly with his hands in refusal, pushing the guitar back into John’s hands, pointing at John and then at the guitar, clearly urging him to play another song.

A voice of assent calls out from the crowd. “Go on, John! Just one more.”

“You heard him, Johnny! Give us another!”

Laughing at the other man’s eagerness, John places the guitar strap back over his head.

“Alright, alright, I’ll play one more. Although I don’t know so many songs for the guitar… Let me think a minute.”

John settles the instrument against his chest as he thinks, his gaze traveling over the back of the crowd, and just like that, his eyes light on Sherlock and his whole expression changes.

It’s more than just the smile that spreads over his face, there’s a new kind of brightness to his look
that wasn’t there before. It’s like a window suddenly opening in a shuttered room.

Sherlock can feel his whole face flushing warm with pleasure in response.

A few of the men glance behind them to see what it is that’s caught John’s eye, and Sherlock hears a snicker, but before too many people have turned to look, John draws their attention back to himself.

“Leroy!”

John beckons the old man up to sit beside him. He bends low to speak in his ear, and Leroy nods and pulls his mouth organ out of his trouser pocket.

John re-settles the guitar against himself and the silence that falls over the waiting men is filled with expectation.

“This is a song I learned from our own Fionn MacConnell. He can sing the song in Irish—but speaking no Irish myself, I’ll be singing the version he taught me with just the one word of Irish thrown in.” John grins at somebody in the crowd, and Sherlock sees Fionn winking back at John. Then he bows his head, his expression sobering. “It’s called ‘The Blackthorn Tree.’”

John strums the opening chord and lets the sound reverberate into silence before he starts to sing.

*Of late I’ve been captivated by a handsome young man*

Sherlock’s cheeks flame red—someone in the crowd wolf whistles loudly.

John just smiles, and goes on singing.

*I am daily complaining for my own darling John*

*Confuse them consume them who’d say I’m not true*

*Through green groves and lofty mountains, I would roam, love, with you.*

It’s not until he’s finished the first verse that he begins playing in earnest. The guitar accompaniment is simpler for this song, slower and more pronounced, but it complements John’s voice well.

It takes Sherlock until the end of the first verse to realize that of course, this is not a song that John has written about himself from Sherlock’s point of view—but is obviously meant to be from the point of a view of a woman.

Sherlock is embarrassed that he entertained the possibility at all—then again, he obviously wasn’t the only one who had this thought when John started singing, judging by the snickering reactions in the crowd.

They’ve quieted now, transported by the sweet tenor of John’s voice to a completely different world from the sunset deck where they all currently sit.

Not only is the guitar accompaniment slower for this song, John’s singing is slower too—the pace more leisurely, which gives him time to draw out the notes, adding poignancy to the words.

*Oh down by the river the wild birds sing,*

*Over mountains and valleys the dewy leaves spring,*

*The wild flowers are shining, gazed on by the sun,*

*And fairest of all shines the Droighneán Donn.*
Watching John’s face as he sings, it’s clear to Sherlock that John can see the place he’s singing about as clearly as can see the ship under his feet. What does it mean? The word in Irish must refer to the title of the song. Has John ever been to Ireland? How can he sing about it with such melancholy sweetness if he hasn’t?

As John’s lovely voice pulls them all deeper into the spell of the song, it occurs to Sherlock that John chose to sing this song after seeing Sherlock in the crowd. Therefore his choice of this song must have some significance. Once again, Sherlock finds himself searching for the secret message that must be contained within the song.

If I had a small boat on the ocean to float  
I would follow my darling wherever he would go  
I would rather my darling to love sport and play  
Than all the golden treasures by land or by sea.

During this verse, something in John’s face changes. The way he smiles around the word ‘darling’ makes Sherlock feel as though the bottom of the ship has suddenly dropped out from underneath his feet.

All of his longing for Sherlock, for the time on shore that they will now never have, it’s all there in his voice, in the sweet aching way it curls around the words, in the deliberate rhythm of his fingers as they move over the strings of the guitar, and suddenly it’s more than Sherlock can take. His chest feels too tight, as though his body is too small to contain the magnitude of all that he feels for John.

Much to his profound relief, he is given a brief respite as Leroy plays the melody for the length of a verse on his harmonica. Sherlock forces himself to take several deep breaths, fighting against the burning sensation in his eyes that is threatening to turn into tears.

Before Sherlock is properly ready, John begins to sing again.

I am constantly waiting for my true love’s return  
And for his long absence, I will never cease to mourn  
I will join with the sweet birds till the summer comes on  
And I’ll be shaded by the green leaves of the Droighneán Donn.

As the last note fades from Leroy’s harmonica, the final chord resonating through the guitar against John’s chest, it’s fitting that the golden sky behind them has taken on a deeper sheen of brilliance as the sun begins to slip below the horizon, casting the mountains in shadow, staining the waters of the bay bright gold.

It looks as though the sun is celebrating John’s magnificence, illuminating the deck where he sits, painting his bare forearms in stripes of gold, catching on the laminated surface of the guitar and winking like a star.

It’s several seconds after the song comes to a close before anyone moves or speaks. And Sherlock realizes—in the glistening bubble of that silence—just how powerful John’s music really is.

For the length of a few minutes everyone on this deck, each miserable member of this hardworking crew left their anxieties and worries behind. They forgot about their canceled shore leave, the fact that they will gain no respite from their endless labor; they forgot about the heat and the stink of the ship, their aching limbs, the burning callouses on their hands, the tasteless food digesting in their bellies; instead they existed in that cool green world, where their only sorrow was the longing for their lost love.
That John can do this for them, that he can give this to them when they are suffering—now that Sherlock knows more intimately than ever the unceasing misery of their lives—he finally understands just how powerful that is.

Despite the guitar owner’s renewed protests, John has lifted the guitar strap from around his neck and pressed the instrument with gentle finality into the other man’s hands.

“Obrigado, obrigado. É o bastante.” John bows to the man to show his gratitude, one hand pressed to the center of his chest, near his heart. Sherlock wonders where he learned the gesture—whether it’s something appropriate to the local culture, or whether he’s simply improvising; or perhaps it stems naturally from the depth of his feeling.

“Let someone else have a go!” he says, grinning, as he rises to his feet. “Mulligan!” John gestures to a young looking sailor with ruddy brown hair. “I’ve seen you play a guitar before—get up here.”

There’s a general hollering of consensus and his surrounding messmates shove the protesting sailor to his feet. His head is down as he approaches the foremast but John gives him a reassuring clap on the shoulder when he arrives, pulling him close to say something in his ear which Sherlock can only assume are words of encouragement, because the boy looks up grinning a moment later, and sits down to take the guitar looking significantly less nervous.

MacTavish gets up beside the boy and begins to belt out the lyrics to a bawdy song that the assembled sailors demonstratively approve of. After fumbling with the guitar for the length of the first verse, Mulligan begins to strum along in earnest.

Watching all of this unfold, Sherlock glances back to see that John is no longer standing where he was by the foremast.

His eyes sweep over the crowd with concern, only to see John weaving his way through the sailors sprawled out on the deck, making his way to the place where Sherlock is standing.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to my Portuguese-speaking readers if there are any errors in John's one line of attempted Portuguese! Any mistakes are due to John's poor language abilities, rather than my own. ;)

If you would like to hear versions of the songs John sings in this chapter, you can find the first one here, and the second one here.

One final note: the reason that this chapter stops RIGHT in the middle of the scene is because as usual what I intended to be one chapter ballooned massively and had to be split into two. The next chapter will pick up right where this one leaves off. :)

Thank you for reading!!!
Chapter Forty Nine

Special thanks go out this chapter (but also in general!) to idelthoughts (truthisademurelady on tumblr), who has helped me IMMENSELY in the plotting of the events of this chapter, and with various complicated nautical details. Also, she agreed to edit this beast on the spur of the moment yesterday afternoon, and her feedback and commentary KEEPS ME GOING! So please go show her lots of love--either on tumblr, or by reading her fics! :D Her Lieutenant Lestrade series (Fair Winds and Following Seas) is going to have lots of new exciting additions soon... so stay tuned for news of that in the future!

Also, I am very pleased to be posting this on the longest day of the year! Happy Summer Solstice, my darling sea anemones!

Ok, and now without further ado, onto the chapter!

Sherlock is blushing as soon as he sees John coming towards him through the crowd, and when his eyes meet John’s, his blush only intensifies at the smile that breaks out on John’s face.

Will Sherlock never acclimate to the magnitude of John’s smiles?

It doesn’t seem like it’s going to start happening anytime soon.

As John comes to stand before him, it’s a sure sign of John’s particular magic that the first thing out of Sherlock’s mouth is not a complaint about the captain’s disastrous decision and his misery over their ruined plans, but instead a breathless expression of wonder at this newfound talent of John’s.

Unfortunately, Sherlock is so incredulous it comes out as an accusation.

“You never told me that you know how to play the guitar!”

John laughs, the sound bright in the stillness of the sunset deck. He reaches for Sherlock’s hands, still laughing.

“Come with me,” he says, his hand sliding into Sherlock’s so he can draw them a few steps further away from the crowd of sailors until they are just on the other side of the mainmast.

Sherlock does a quick inventory of who on deck can see them where they stand and is relieved to find that they are hidden from view of the quarterdeck.

His eyes flicker back to John to see John watching him, laughter still tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“So you liked my playing?”

Sherlock lets out a flustered breath which makes him sound more irritated than impressed, but he’s
reached the limits of his ability to express himself over the impossibility that is John Watson.

He shakes his head.

“You’re incredible.” Sherlock says, grasping for words. “That was... absolutely incredible.”

He hates to repeat himself, but as usual he doesn’t have the capacity to convey at all what the experience of hearing John play was really like.

“Where did you learn to do that? How long have you been playing? What other instruments do you know how to play?”

Sherlock is bursting with curiosity—the questions tumbling out of him in a breathless voice, and John laughs again—the sound fond and soft and full of joy. His hands slide up Sherlock’s forearms to reassure him.

“Easy, easy, one question at a time.”

Sherlock looks down at John’s hands. They are warm against Sherlock’s arm; the callouses on his fingers feel more pronounced than ever. Sherlock resists the urge to flip them over and inspect his palms.

“How are your hands?” he asks instead, his voice suddenly softer.

“Better,” John says, his eyes locked on Sherlock’s, the blue in his irises so vivid against the golden sky at his back that Sherlock feels like he could drown in them. “Much better.”

Sherlock has to drop his eyes, because if John goes on looking at him like that there is no telling what he might do in response.

“That song—” Sherlock tries again but is immediately overwhelmed by the inadequacy of language. How can he possibly convey to John what it was like to hear him play?

John’s hands on his forearms squeeze gently in encouragement; Sherlock can feel John’s eyes on his even though he’s not looking at him.

“Which one?”

He’s so close now that if Sherlock ducked his head, his lips would meet John’s forehead. He doesn’t dare look up for fear he will be tempted to do so.

“The second one. It was—”

Sherlock shakes his head, frustrated, but forces himself to continue.

“It was like magic,” he says risking a look up at John, and is rewarded by the sight of a slow smile unfolding over John’s face, making his features look softer, warmer, like he’s lit up from within. It encourages Sherlock to go on speaking. “You made everyone forget—just for a few minutes—all of the terrible things that have been happening. And that’s like magic. That you can do that… that you did that.”

John is looking at him so much like he’s going to kiss him that Sherlock is forced to drop his eyes again.

“I’m glad,” John says, his voice full of a kind of tentative wonder. “I’m so glad you think that I managed to do that.”
“You did!” Sherlock says with sudden ferocity, looking up, his voice softening as his eyes meet John’s. “Of course, you did.”

“I’m glad especially if it helped you to forget… that was my intention.” It’s John who drops his eyes then, his gaze settling on the place where his fingers encircle Sherlock’s forearms, his thumb tracing a delicate line up the inside of Sherlock’s wrist. “When I saw you standing there, I wanted to bring you some light, some joy. I wanted you to know how badly I want to take you somewhere we can finally be alone together.”

John’s words send a current of longing through Sherlock so strong he feels a physical ache beneath his ribs.

“John,” he starts, drawing John’s gaze up towards him again, his hands stilling on Sherlock’s arms. But he doesn’t know what to say, can’t think of anything that will ease the torment of their current predicament.

The same reckless, nonsensical desire to dive with John over the side of the ship flashes through Sherlock’s mind and he glances over John’s shoulder to the waters of the bay behind him, shining a burnished copper in the blaze of the setting sun—only to see Molly standing on the other side of the deck, her gaze directed out over the water towards the shore, the evening breeze gently ruffling the hair around her face—and feels a pang of guilt at the sight of her.

She, too, must have heard the music, just like Sherlock, and been drawn up towards the deck to listen. Or maybe she was simply too miserable to stay below any longer, full of the knowledge that this would be the last sunset she ever witnessed over the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The guilt in Sherlock’s stomach twists at the memory of how they parted ways.

Registering the change in Sherlock’s face, John follows his gaze to where Molly stands at the railing.

“What is it?”

Sherlock hesitates, uncertain if he wants to reveal this ugly side of himself to John—John who is full of so much goodness, so much light.

But the force of John’s gentle curiosity proves too much for him to resist.

“Molly came to see me earlier and I was—” Sherlock falters, his cheeks burning with sudden shame as he remembers how he treated her. “I was unkind to her,” he says, ducking his head to hide his face. “I was unkind to her when she needed sympathy. I was too lost in my own misery to help.”

John’s voice is gentle, full of compassion. “I’m sure it isn’t anything that can’t be remedied.”

Sherlock nods, miserable. The kindness in John’s voice only makes him feel worse.

“Do you want to go and talk to her? I have to get back soon anyway,” John says with a sinking sound in his voice. “My shift is almost over.”

Sherlock shakes his head, his throat tight, painfully aware of the fact that he’s always ruining everything—his guilt intruding on the few moments he and John have together.

“No. I’ll… I’ll talk to her later.”
John nods, and Sherlock feels his fingers trace another delicate line up the inside of his arm. He shivers in response.

“I can’t quite accept it myself,” John says in a low voice, making Sherlock dip his head closer to catch his words. “We were so close. We came so close, Sherlock. To have it snatched away like that…”

John shakes his head. The pain in his voice is unmistakable.

It makes Sherlock reach instinctively to take John’s hands in his just as he remembers—as if he could ever forget—that they’re on a deck surrounded by people, and he stops himself just in time, hands clenching into fists at his sides.

“We’ll figure something out,” John says with a conviction that Sherlock is sure he does not really feel. “I’m not sure what exactly but… we’ll find a way. Some way—to see each other again soon.”

At John’s words, Sherlock remembers with a cold, pouring horror that he has not yet told John about the conversation he overheard between Lestrade and the Captain.

John has no idea about the renewed risk that’s involved in their meeting.

Even the fact that they are standing here now and talking within plain sight of everyone on deck is dangerous, far too dangerous for John to be kept in ignorance.

Sherlock has to tell him.

“John—”

But before the words are even out of his mouth, Sherlock is interrupted by the clanging of the bell that signals the end of the first dogwatch.

John’s fingers move fleetingly to Sherlock’s face, his knuckles brushing Sherlock’s cheek with tenderness before dropping away.

“I have to go. Whatever it is, tell me next time.”

“But John—!”

The urgency in Sherlock’s voice is drowned out by the hubbub of the sailors changing shifts, as those who were working down below begin to emerge on deck and John’s half of the crew moves to take their positions again. The sudden influx of people means there is twice the amount of noise.

Then over the noise of the crowd, there comes a shout for order.

John and Sherlock both look toward the sound but they cannot see anything from where they are standing.

Sherlock throws John an inquiring look, and without a word, John takes Sherlock’s hand in his and begins winding his way through the mass of people, until he has brought them both to the front of the crowd where they find an anxious-looking Lieutenant Dimmock standing by the helm. At the sight of him, Sherlock reflexively lets go of John’s hand.

Dimmock does not have to call for order again. It’s clear that he has an announcement to make and after the unprecedented events of this afternoon, they are all anxious to hear the news from the quarterdeck.
Sherlock can feel the tension in the crowd around him, simmering underneath the men’s silence like the surface of a pot of water that’s about to boil. It makes his own anxiety sharpen in his breast. Why would they send Dimmock to deliver the news instead of Lieutenant Lestrade?

And then Sherlock remembers with a creeping feeling of dread what Billy told him earlier—that Lestrade was in the captain’s cabin when Billy delivered the letter to the captain—that Lestrade had clearly been arguing with him, fighting for the chance at shore leave.

Sherlock feels his mouth go dry with fear.

But no, it isn’t possible… the man wouldn’t kill his own first officer. He wouldn’t dare.

Except for the fact that he’s already tried…

No, Sherlock reminds himself, attempting to calm his racing heart; that was a mistake. Reckless as he may be, the captain wouldn’t be stupid enough to murder Lestrade out right, of that much Sherlock is certain.

However, the fact that he wouldn’t kill Lestrade doesn’t necessarily preclude the possibility of him punishing his first officer in any number of other horrifying ways.

Sherlock closes his eyes briefly, feels the dread coiled in his belly tense like a snake.

“I bring news from the captain,” Dimmock begins in what Sherlock suspects is meant to be a carrying voice but comes out thin and nervous.

“Speak up, lad,” one of the sailors shouts from the back of the crowd.

Dimmock glares in the direction of this request, but when he speaks again he does so in a more audible voice.

“Lieutenant Lestrade has spoken with the captain and he has amended his earlier decision.”

The murmuring that has broken out in response to Dimmock’s first words falls off abruptly.

“The ship will not be leaving tomorrow morning, but instead will remain in port for the next thirty-six hours. Each crew member will be entitled to his twelve hours shore leave after—and only after—the completion of his duties.”

Dimmock’s words are greeted by stunned silence.

And then someone calls out, “Is this a joke?”

Dimmock goes red at the comment. “I assure you I am entirely serious.”

“Where’s Lieutenant Lestrade?” another voice queries.

Hearing this question, Sherlock realizes that he is not alone in his anxiety over Lieutenant Lestrade’s wellbeing. It’s difficult to believe, after the display they all witnessed earlier, that the captain would suddenly concede to Lestrade’s plea. It doesn’t make sense.

Dimmock bristles at this. “The Lieutenant is in his cabin, attending to other matters of business.”

“Why didn’t he come tell us himself?”

“Is he alright?”
“He’s fine,” Dimmock snaps.

Sherlock himself can scarcely believe what he is hearing.

Twelve hours shore leave—each crewmember will have twelve hours shore leave… that’s what Dimmock said.

Sherlock glances over at John to see his arms crossed over his chest, a deep furrow between his brows. He looks just as suspicious as the rest of them as to the veracity of this news.

It’s all too sudden. Something isn’t right.

Then again, it’s Dimmock. It isn’t as if he is lying to them. Sherlock doubts the man is even capable of attempting a lie. If Lestrade truly were suffering at the captain’s behest, Dimmock would not be able to hide it from them.

No, Sherlock suspects that the captain’s sudden about-face has nothing at all to do with Lestrade. After what he learned from Billy, it’s obvious to Sherlock that the reason for this sudden change of plans has everything to do with the letter the captain received while Lestrade was in his cabin.

Dimmock is speaking again; Sherlock refocuses his attention.

“The larboard watch will take their leave first, beginning tomorrow morning at eight bells, and the starboard watch will take their twelve hours when the larboard crew returns to the ship at eight bells tomorrow evening. The ship will then set sail again at eight bells the following morning.”

The murmuring of the crowd has begun to swell as the reality of this news sinks in, as they determine that Lieutenant Dimmock is in fact telling them the truth.

Dimmock has to shout now to be heard above it.

“Lieutenant Lestrade urges me to remind you that what he said earlier today still stands—all of your duties **must** be completed before you will be allowed to leave the ship. There will be **no** tolerance for sloppy workmanship or cut corners. Anyone caught doing a slapdash job in an effort to get off the ship faster will be lashed to the gratings and flogged. Have I made myself clear?”

A voice calls out from the back of the crowd in triumph, “**THREE CHEERS FOR LIEUTENANT LESTRADE!**”

The whole of the crowd seems to answer with one voice. “**HUZZAH! HUZZAH! HUZZAH!**”

“Enough of that!” Dimmock shouts, going red again. His voice is barely audible above the din. “I repeat—have I made myself clear?”

This time the men respond in a chorus of assents.

“**Very good,**” Dimmock says. “**Now get back to work!**”

In the ensuing chaos of the celebrating crowd, Sherlock can scarcely grasp the repercussions of what has just occurred.

Can it be possible?

There are still too many ‘ifs’, too many uncertain factors…

*If* Dimmock is to be believed, *if* the captain doesn’t change his mind again, *if* nothing else should
occur between now and eight o’clock tomorrow morning…

Sherlock knows he should not let himself believe it will happen—he cannot afford to have his hopes dashed again, but how can he prevent it? How can he stop the feelings of excitement, of relief from bubbling up inside of himself? Especially when John is turning to him now, his face awash in tentative joy.

But before they can say anything to one another, out of the corner of his eye, Sherlock sees Lieutenant Dimmock making his way towards them through the crowd.

John must see something in Sherlock’s expression change because he too turns to look, and seeing Dimmock, his posture shifts subtly, shoulders squaring, chin lifting slightly.

Dimmock comes to a halt in front of John, and John bows his head in customary deference. “Lieutenant.”

“Watson,” Dimmock says somewhat breathlessly, holding his hat in place as a sailor jostles past him on his way to his post on the mizzenmast. “Watch where you’re going, Turner!”

“Sorry, sir!” The sailor calls over his shoulder, doffing his hat and grinning back at Dimmock. “Won’t happen again, sir!”

“I should hope not!” Dimmock turns back to John, pink-cheeked with indignation. “You’re to come with me, Watson. Lieutenant Lestrade wants a word.”

Dimmock’s eyes alight on Sherlock.

“You as well, Holmes. He wants to speak with the pair of you.”

And just like that the joy inside Sherlock turns to shrieking darkness.

The world around him seems to shrink.

Of course, he should have known it was too good to be true. He never should have considered even for a moment that he and John would get their time together on shore.

He knows exactly what this is about. Lestrade is going to tell them that they cannot see each other anymore. Or perhaps it’s worse than that. Perhaps he saw them together on deck and now he’s summoning them to relay their punishment.

God—why didn’t Sherlock tell John as soon as he heard?

He feels sick with guilt and horror. Suddenly it’s all he can do to remain on his feet.

John nods to Dimmock, throwing Sherlock a curious glance that Sherlock scarcely registers.

His mind is racing. Maybe he can take John aside now and tell him quickly before Lestrade does, to try and soften the blow. But Dimmock is already walking away, expecting them to follow, and if Sherlock is honest with himself he doesn’t know how he could possibly bear to tell John now what he should have told him immediately, especially now that he’s likely about to be beaten as a result of Sherlock’s cowardice.

Sherlock hears Mycroft’s voice in his head. It’s like the hiss of a serpent.

Spineless.
John falls into step behind Dimmock and Sherlock has no choice but to follow them both, through the door under the quarterdeck that leads to the officer’s quarters. He is surprised to find he can move his legs at all—his whole body is numb with dread.

Dimmock leads them down a corridor past the stateroom and the captain’s cabin to Lestrade’s considerably smaller room on the larboard side of the ship.

Partway down the corridor, John slows his steps until he is abreast of Sherlock. He bumps his shoulder gently into Sherlock’s.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, so low only Sherlock can hear him.

Sherlock looks over and sees John’s face is creased with worry.

He looks helplessly back at John, self-hatred churning in his gut.

But it’s too late now. They’ve reached Lestrade’s cabin. Sherlock recognizes it from the night Lestrade was poisoned.

Dimmock raps twice on the door and they hear Lestrade’s voice from within.

“Come.”

Dimmock opens the door, ushering John and Sherlock inside.

Lestrade is seated at a narrow desk in the corner—he is his lieutenant’s hat on a peg by the door, his grey head bent over a sheaf of papers.

Dimmock remains standing in the doorway—Lestrade’s room is so small, it would be difficult for all three of them to find room to stand in.

“I have relayed the news to the crew, sir.”

The light in the small room is dim but Sherlock can see from the lamp hanging over the lieutenant’s desk just how haggard Lestrade looks as he turns to face them.

If he looked at the end of his rope earlier today, Sherlock does not have the words to describe him now.

He looks like a man who has suffered through an ordeal, and yet somehow, miraculously, in spite of all odds, has come through the other side to remain standing. His weariness is evident in his face, and yet underneath the exhaustion Sherlock can detect a look of grim resolution.

“How did they take it?”

“They…” Dimmock glances nervously at John and Sherlock, as if he isn’t sure he should say in front of them. “They asked about you, sir. They were… concerned.”

Sherlock sees an expression flicker over Lestrade’s face faster than he can identify before it’s gone again. “Did you remind them that no leniency would be tolerated in the completion of their duties?”

“I did, sir.”

“Very good.”
Dimmock’s eyes slide back over to John and Sherlock.

“Would you like me to wait, sir?”

“No, thank you, Lieutenant. I’m sure Holmes and Watson can see themselves back. Tell Deverall I’ll meet him in the wardroom shortly. I shouldn’t be long.”

With a deferential nod, and one last glance at the pair of them that Sherlock cannot read, Dimmock closes the door behind him.

Lestrade turns more fully in his chair to face them.

“Thank you both for coming. I’m sorry we have to meet in such close quarters. However, the matter that I am about to discuss with you demands privacy.”

Sherlock can scarcely hear Lestrade over the pounding of his own heart in his ears.

“Watson, I know you’re on duty now so I will make this brief.” He directs his gaze at John. “I have a matter of ship’s business that I am hoping you will be able to help me with.”

John does not say anything but his expression conveys his willingness to hear whatever Lestrade is about to say.

“It has come to my attention that a rather large number of our medical supplies are running low.”

John tilts his head, curious, listening intently.

“I know that you have been trained as a surgeon, and that you are a competent medical man. Therefore, I was hoping that I could entrust you with the errand of seeing our stores replenished during your time on shore.”

Before John can say anything in reply, Lestrade continues.

“If you feel that you are up to this task, I will excuse you from your regular duties so that you may have the full twenty-four hours on shore to complete it.”

Sherlock stares at Lestrade in shock. He could not be more surprised if Lestrade had suddenly begun speaking to them in French.

Replenish the ship’s medical supplies? Why on earth would he ask John to do this?

Sherlock scrutinizes Lestrade’s expression, which is painfully formal. He looks as though he’s trying as hard as possible to be sure no other emotions creep onto his face.

“What do you think, Watson?”

Sherlock glances over at John to see that he looks almost as surprised as Sherlock.

“With all due respect sir, why not send Thompson?”

Thompson is the ship’s surgeon. A tall sullen man with a shining, bald, head and a red face, Sherlock has only ever seen him a handful of times. He seems rarely to leave his quarters in the bowels of the ship. The last time Sherlock saw him, he had been in an argument with the passenger’s steward. He seemed drunk—his words slurring, still wearing his filthy surgeon’s apron stained dark with old blood.
He gives all appearances of being useless at his job.

Lestrade’s grimace confirms Sherlock’s suspicions about the man’s incompetence.

“Thompson is currently… indisposed. I’m afraid he is unable to leave the ship at the moment. To be perfectly frank—and I tell you both of this in confidence—” Lestrade’s glance flickers briefly to Sherlock before moving back to John. “I would rather not entrust this particular task to Thompson. One of the stores that has been almost completely depleted is our store of laudanum. The only person who has access to those stores is Thompson.”

He looks pointedly at both of them.

John simply nods to show he understands full well what Lestrade is implying.

“He is not one of those on board who I would have signed on for the voyage had I been consulted in this matter.”

John’s look sharpens.

“What?”

Lestrade shakes his head. “Thompson was a last minute addition to the crew—same as the captain. He came aboard the day before we left port. There’s a reason I didn’t send for him that night I fell ill.”

Sherlock and John exchange a glance.

The dark meaning of Lestrade’s words does not need to be said aloud.

It is not just the man’s incompetence that posed a potential threat to Lestrade’s livelihood—it is also the likely possibility that he is in league with the captain.

“So… would you be willing to undertake this errand?”

“Aye, sir.”

“I have a list for you.”

Lestrade turns back to his desk, rifling through the papers for a moment before pulling out the one he wants, and handing it to John.

John takes it from him, glancing over the contents briefly before nodding and tucking it away out of sight.

“Thank you, Lieutenant for… trusting me with this.”

Lestrade stiffens with sudden self-consciousness. “I know it’s a slightly unorthodox request, but as you are well aware there is much about this voyage that has been… shall we say, atypical.” The darkness in Lestrade’s voice is impossible to miss. “It calls for an atypical response.”

Sherlock is burning with curiosity about what happened earlier in the captain’s cabin, and whether Lestrade has any more knowledge as to the reason for the sudden change in plans.

But he doesn’t dare say anything—especially not when he’s still waiting for Lestrade to tell John that he and Sherlock cannot see each other anymore. It’s the only explanation for why Lestrade summoned Sherlock as well as John.
As if on cue, Lestrade turns to Sherlock, the formality in his expression becoming more pronounced.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I asked you both to come.”

Sherlock doesn’t say anything. Terror stops his throat, making it suddenly difficult for him to breathe.

“Holmes, I trust that you would be glad for a task to occupy yourself on shore?”

He doesn’t give Sherlock time to reply, instead carries brusquely on.

“I want you to accompany Watson on his errand. He’ll have a lot to do and not a great deal of time to find everything he needs, so I’d like you to go along as his… assistant.”

And here, for the first time, Lestrade’s composure falters. Sherlock can see the color in Lestrade’s cheeks rise even as he goes on speaking.

“I know you’ve been quite desperate to have something to do on board this ship the whole voyage. I thought this might help… keep you out of trouble during your time on shore.”

Sherlock is so shocked by this pronouncement that he cannot speak.

He can hardly process what Lestrade is saying.

It cannot be real.

What Lestrade is proposing is absurd. Sherlock has not seen the list of what John needs to get, but surely, twenty-four hours is more than enough time for him to do so. And how on earth could Sherlock possibly help him?

Sherlock must be hallucinating; he must be dreaming. Someone must have slipped a dose of laudanum into his morning tea. How can it be true?

“So what do you say, Holmes? Can I count on you to help Watson get everything he needs?”

Sherlock stares at Lestrade. He doesn’t know what to say.

“I…”

It’s so completely unprecedented he wants to demand the real reason behind Lestrade’s decision, especially after what he heard the captain say about him and John. How can he just say yes and trust that this is real?

He thinks about asking Lestrade why he is doing this; why he isn’t reprimanding them like he’s supposed to.

But then Sherlock registers the embarrassment on Lestrade’s face, and suddenly the real meaning behind his offer becomes clear to Sherlock.

He wants them to have this time on shore together. He knows all too well what they will get up to, and he’s not only condoning it, he’s making it possible. Whether it’s to thank them for helping save his life, or whether it’s his way of acting out against the captain in retribution for what happened today, Sherlock cannot know. But he knows at least that Lestrade’s offer is in earnest, and that is enough for now.
“Yes,” he says, his own cheeks heating with embarrassment. He finds he is unable to meet Lestrade’s gaze. “Yes, of course.”

“Very good,” Lestrade says too loudly. There’s a forced note of joviality evident in his voice that makes Sherlock cringe. “Yes, very good. Well. I’m glad that’s settled.”

Sherlock stares at the toes of his boots, his face on fire.

He does not dare look over at John.

“Well,” Lestrade says again, and there is a long uncomfortable pause before Lestrade rises to his feet.

He crosses to the door, and then turns to address John.

When he speaks again his voice has mostly gained its normal composure.

“I will inform Lieutenant Moore of your situation, so you will not be expected back on the ship tomorrow night.”

“Very good, sir.”

John’s voice, Sherlock is impressed to note, holds not a trace of embarrassment.

Lestrade pauses with one hand on the door and looks back at them.

“One more thing—Watson, you may tell the members your own mess, of course, as they will inevitably learn of your absence, but I’d like to keep this information as quiet as possible before tomorrow morning. The fewer who know about this, the better.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Very good.”

Lestrade pulls the door wide.

“I’ll look for both of you then on the longboat tomorrow at eight bells sharp.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Sherlock simply nods, still too embarrassed to look Lestrade directly in the eye, and follows John out into the corridor.

They bid Lestrade a curt farewell and make their way back down the corridor and through the door in the quarterdeck in stunned silence.

When they reach the open air of the main deck, Sherlock follows John to stand in the shadows cast by the longboat on the larboard side of the deck, where they might speak without fear of being overheard.

It is a good time for a furtive conversation. While John’s half of the ship may have returned to work, the members of the starboard watch are enjoying their two hours of leisure up by the foremast, the pitch of their merriment noticeably more boisterous in the wake of the good news.

Their shouts and laughter, and the pounding of their dancing feet, provide a welcome din to drown out John and Sherlock’s conversation from any eavesdroppers.
John looks up at Sherlock through the deepening twilight—the sky at his back, which was stained a dull gold before Dimmock’s announcement has now darkened to a bruised purple at the horizon, as darkness settles softly over the bay.

Even through the shadows, Sherlock can see John’s eyes are wide with astonishment.

He shakes his head, and lets out a low whistle.

“Well bugger me if I know what any of that was about.”

Sherlock stares at John, shocked only for a moment by John’s language, before the hilarity of John’s choice of words in connection with this particular situation hits him.

“But John,” he begins, laughter already spilling in around his words. There is a curious feeling unspooling in Sherlock’s chest that makes it difficult to get the rest of the words out. “Don’t you see? That’s exactly the idea!”

And then he dissolves into helpless giggles.

An unexpected giddiness is rising up in Sherlock. It must be all the stress of the last twenty-four hours—the fact that their fate has been flipping back and forth like a fish flopping out of a boiling kettle and then back in again.

Sherlock feels suddenly as though a bottle of champagne has been uncorked inside of him, as though his chest is filling up with golden, bursting bubbles.

Now that the shock of the news has begun to recede, the reality of their new situation is suddenly, startlingly clear. Awkward as he may have been in doing so, Lestrade has just made it possible for them to have a full day together on shore.

And Sherlock realizes then that the feeling in his chest—this champagne bubble buoyant feeling that’s making it feel as though he’s about to start floating above the deck—this feeling is relief.

John is looking at him with a mixture of fondness, amusement, and downright bewilderment.

But Sherlock’s fit of helpless laughter is clearly contagious because there’s a grin beginning to unfold across his face.

John steps closer, reaching forward to hold Sherlock gently by the hips, the smile blooming fully on his mouth as he pulls Sherlock in against him.

“What on earth are you talking about?”

Sherlock is still trying to suppress his laughter.

“I’m sorry,” he gasps out, “It’s just… you said—”

John is looking at him with an expression of wonder on his face, and a tenderness that’s so profound it makes the laughter in Sherlock’s chest suddenly still.

“I’ve never seen you like this.” John’s voice is soft, his eyes moving with something like wonder over Sherlock’s face.

“What? Gone to pieces over my own bad joke?”

But the humor is all gone from Sherlock’s voice now, his breath sharpening as John slides his
hands around until they settle low on Sherlock’s back.

“Laughing like this… it’s beautiful… you’re beautiful when you’re like this.”

John’s eyes are on his mouth, his irises the color of the midnight sky—deep blue, studded with tiny points of light like stars.

“John.” Sherlock reaches up to clasp John by his upper arms. He has to remind himself that they are still on deck, shadows or no, and there are people all around—Sherlock can see someone standing on the windward side of the deck, just a few feet beyond the edge of the longboat they are standing under.

John makes a small stifled sound of frustration and Sherlock can tell that they are sharing the same thought.

“It’s alright,” Sherlock says, his fingers tightening on John’s arms, feeling that same irrepressible buoyancy swell beneath his ribs again. “Tomorrow—”

But he finds that he cannot finish the thought. Even in the face of his giddy relief, he is overwhelmed with the sudden superstitious fear that if he speaks of it, it will not come true; that at any moment their fate could change again.

“Yes, tomorrow,” John echoes, but there is something tentative in his voice. “Even if…” He stops himself and Sherlock watches his face, watches the sequence of conflicting emotions ripple through his expression. His eyes meet Sherlock’s—full of longing, but also a deep uneasiness. “Can we trust it, Sherlock? I cannot make sense of what just happened back there. Why would he do that for us?”

Sherlock looks at John and realizes all of a sudden that John doesn’t know.

“I think…” he begins, careful with his next words. “I think it’s his way of thanking us.”

“For what?”

“For saving his life—the night of the party.”

Recognition pours into John’s face.

Sherlock doesn’t actually think that’s the whole reason. That’s part of it, to be sure. Just as it’s also probably true that Lestrade would much rather John restock the ship’s medical supplies than the laudanum-addled Thompson.

However, the real reason, Sherlock suspects, is that Lestrade decided to make it possible for them to spend time together because doing so is in direct defiance of the captain’s orders. It’s a relatively risk-free way for Lestrade to act out against the man who treated him so disgracefully this afternoon.

As far as Sherlock knows, it’s the first time Lestrade has defied any of the captain’s orders.

“But… does he know about…?” John lets his question trail away into the gathering shadows. “He must know. Why else would he send the two of us together?”

John looks up at him, his eyes searching Sherlock’s.

Sherlock can feel his laughter bubbling up inside him again; he manages to quell it, but one corner
of his mouth ticks up in a smile.

“He knows.”

“Oh god.” John reaches up to grasp his own forehead, his eyes staring, unseeing, past Sherlock’s shoulder in mild horror. “Oh my god, that’s why he was so flustered.”

John looks back at Sherlock with his mouth fallen open, and then begins to laugh, softly, helplessly, into his hand.

“The poor man.” He shakes his head. “God, I wish I could thank him.”

The person standing just out of sight beyond the end of the longboat has turned away from the railing and with small clicking footfalls is making their way to the aft hatch.

In the ripple of calico fabric that passes by the end of the boat, Sherlock recognizes who it was that was standing for so long at the starboard rail and looking out at the darkening mountains.

“Do you know…” says Sherlock, and like that, within the space of an instant, an idea comes to him fully formed—an idea, he realizes that has been simmering at the back of his brain all day. “I think I know just how we might be able to return the favor.”

John looks at Sherlock, curiosity making his blue eyes sparkle.

“Do you really?”

“I do.” Sherlock smiles then, and he feels as though his whole chest is filling with light, as if it’s pouring out of him, making John grow brighter in front of him. “I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow.”

***

The hours between that conversation up on deck in the fading light of the setting sun and six bells the next morning go by in spurts and drags.

Sherlock is busy half the night, putting his plan into action, arranging everything just so.

It helps to have a plan; helps to take his mind off the waiting; off the unbearable prospect of imagining what may or may not happen tomorrow; the unbearable feeling that this opportunity might be snatched away from them yet again.

He tries as best as he can, not to think about it; instead, he gets to work.

He bids John farewell under the longboat, watching him vanish into the deepening shadows as he makes his way back up to the forecastle, his hand still warm from the press of John’s against his in the dark, the brief pressure from John’s fingers lingering like a promise.

His chest feels tight with a mixture of hope and fear—anticipation and dread—and something, which just might be excitement over the plan that has emerged fully formed in his mind, the plan that will enable him to show his gratitude to both Molly and Lieutenant Lestrade, for all they have done for him over the course of this voyage.

He wants to go to Molly at once, but there are still a few details he needs to work out, and he doesn’t want to present the plan to her until he’s confident that every piece of the puzzle will fit, that every moving part will perform its function seamlessly, and without error.

By the time he’s reached the corridors of the lower deck, the dinner gong has sounded and
Sherlock makes his way to the passengers’ saloon, deep in thought, his mind racing over various solutions to the obstacles in his plan.

He’s solved nearly all of them by the time he takes his seat at the table, insensible to the din of the other passengers, who have clearly heard the latest news from the quarterdeck, judging by the deafening pitch of their chatter.

He has eyes only for Molly, whose hopes have clearly not been renewed by the good news. She picks at her food, her head bent in quiet defeat above her plate, responding to Grimsby’s few attempts at conversation in dull monosyllables.

Sherlock does not dare try and speak to her during the meal—he must wait to pull her aside until after it is over—and although he uses the time at the table to iron out the final kinks in his plan, the meal still seems to go on interminably.

Sherlock is sure he has lived several lifetimes through by the time the other passengers finally rise from the table, Molly along with them, following silently behind Ms. Grimsby and Colonel Jackson’s wife, who appears to have fully regained her health in the wake of the good news, the nervous flutter of her fan making her bonnet strings drift in the current of air like a miniature tempest.

“You’re sure you won’t come ashore, Gertrude? Not even just for the morning?”

“Tabitha, with all due respect, I would rather be torn apart by wild dogs than set even one toe onto the heathen soil of that country. Molly and I shall be perfectly happy enjoying the peace on board while everyone is ashore.”

Sherlock has to move quickly to get Molly’s attention before she’s swept out of the dining room in the wake of the other two women. But he’s stuck behind Miss Long and Miss Gibbons who pause in the doorway to compare reticules.

“Molly!” he hisses over their bent heads.

Mercifully, she turns to look just as Sherlock manages to squeeze past the two young ladies, who huff with indignation at his rudeness.

“Molly,” he gasps in relief, coming to stand before her in the narrow corridor, ignoring the scathing looks being thrown his way by Miss Long and Miss Gibbons as they walk past. “May I speak with you for a moment?” His eyes dart nervously to where Grimsby and Colonel Jackson’s wife still stand immersed in conversation up ahead. “In private?”

Molly’s look of surprise is replaced instantly with curiosity. “Of course. Let me just tell Grimsby that I left something behind in the dining room so she doesn’t wait for me. I’ll only be a moment.”

She runs up ahead and Sherlock is careful to tuck himself out of sight in the bend of the corridor as Molly speaks with her chaperone.

Sherlock’s own excitement must be somehow physically contagious. When Molly returns a moment later, somewhat breathless, her eyes shining with anticipation, her glum look of distress has all but completely evaporated.

“What is it?”

“Come with me.”
He takes Molly to his room so that they will not be overhead and does not say a word until the door is safely sealed behind them both. Then he tells her his plan.

She’s shocked at first—and then delighted. Then frightened that there’s no way it will work. But Sherlock reassures her; he has seen to everything.

The first part of the plan necessitates Molly returning to her rooms as though nothing is out of the ordinary. He goes over the plan with her in great detail—twice, just to be sure she will not forget any part of it. It’s arguably the first part that is the trickiest—but the tricky bit is all up to Sherlock. Molly need only wait for his knock at her door once Sherlock has acquired the necessary tonic. Then it will be up to her to be sure it goes into Grimsby’s evening posset, which she takes every night before bed, like clockwork, at a quarter past ten o’clock.

It should be no trouble for Molly to intercept the steward’s tray and slip a few drops of the potion into the old woman’s drink.

Sherlock expects much more resistance to this part of the plan than Molly gives evidence of. It’s a testament to just how desperate she must be that she seems to have hardly any qualms at all about drugging her chaperone. Just in case any latent conscience asserts itself later on, Sherlock reassures her that the effects of the potion are harmless. It will only make her sleep longer than usual.

When she’s certain the old lady has drunk down the entire contents of the mixture, Molly is to wait for Sherlock to come to her; they will then proceed to his room for the next phase of the plan.

She takes all of this in stride, nodding, steely-eyed, when Sherlock questions her to be sure she’s gotten all the details right. She has. She doesn’t miss a beat.

Once she leaves Sherlock’s room a few minutes later, as cool and level-headed as though they’d just been discussing the results of the afternoon’s latest game of whist, he begins to wonder if he hasn’t in fact done a disservice to Molly by not putting her in charge of the next phase of the plan. She’s clearly got the head for it.

But as he steals out of his room a short while later, listening first with his ear to the door to be sure the corridor is empty of excitable passengers, and descends with quiet footfalls down the ladder leading into the bowels of the ship, he’s selfishly glad that he’s left this part of the plan for himself. It feels good to be focused so completely on something that doesn’t have anything to do with the matter of whether he and John will be able to leave the ship tomorrow morning, his brain humming happily over the details of his plan, the thrill of potential danger sparking up and down his spine, sharpening all of his senses to a state of keen electric awareness.

In fact, he’s somewhat disappointed by how easy it turns out to be.

He meets no one on his way to the cramped, dark room located on the far side of the orlop deck behind the purser’s quarters, and when he gets there, the room is empty of occupants, save for Thompson himself who is passed out in his chair at the scarred and stained table, a single candle guttering in a pool of wax before him.

The air down in this part of the ship is stuffy and close and the narrow room smells of old blood and misery, as if the ailments of all those who have been tended to in this room over the years have seeped into the walls, leaving behind a distinctly foul yet formless stench, like the ghost of some horrible odor that will never fully die.

The man’s medical case is sitting out in plain sight, and it takes Sherlock less than a minute to locate the bottle he needs and pull it out from its place among the rest. The sleeping man does not
stir as Sherlock gently replaces the lid of the wooden case and slips, without a sound, from that fetid room and back through the shadows of the orlop deck to the stairs.

Luck is with him once again as he makes his way back to Molly’s rooms. The few people he sees pay him no attention and Molly answers the door almost immediately after hearing his knock. The small glass vial is passed between them with success, and then Sherlock is headed once again back down into the heart of the ship to execute the next phase of his plan.

This next bit is also potentially tricky, but Sherlock is confident that it will work. After all, he’s blackmailed Hopkins with success once before, and the new information he has about the boy should make it easier than ever.

Sherlock finds him in the wardroom, playing cards with the red-cheeked Peter Cherry and a dark-haired midshipman named Theophilus Coyne. He tells the other two that Lestrade wants to see them up on deck, leaving him alone with Hopkins. He knows he has only a few minutes before they figure out he’s sent them on a made-up errand, so he gets right to it, telling Hopkins that he’s come to borrow his spare uniform, and if he doesn’t give it to him, he will tell Lieutenant Deverall not only that the boy has been stealing his snuff but that he’s been swapping shifts with Cunningham so he can slack off.

It goes about as well as Sherlock predicted. There’s a moment where Hopkins comes very close to punching Sherlock in the mouth; he can tell it is a near thing; and then the moment passes, and the boy sees sense.

Red-faced with fury, muttering, he gives Sherlock the uniform.

“You better return it to me in decent shape!”

Sherlock waves away the threats, unconcerned. He’s gotten what he came for, and the boy has no power over him.

By the time he arrives back at Molly’s door, the tonic is sure to have gone to work on Grimsby. Indeed, he can hear her snoring loudly even from outside in the corridor.

He lets Molly change in his room. He waits outside in the corridor while she does, pacing, worrying at the too long piece of hair on his forehead, trying to keep his mind off of tomorrow morning, but it’s becoming more and more difficult.

He can hear small flurries of movement inside the rooms along the corridor as people prepare for their visits to shore tomorrow morning, the low excited murmur of their voices, and the longer Sherlock listens, the harder it is not to think about the beckoning sweep of that white line of sand, the green heaving scent of the trees which he can almost detect even now, even below deck…

It’s taking Molly ages.

Sherlock cannot imagine what on earth could be so difficult to figure out about men’s clothing—surely women’s garments are far more complicated. Molly is relatively bright. He doesn’t understand how it could possibly be taking this long.

Just when Sherlock’s patience is at its end and he’s about to go knock on the door himself, Molly opens the door a crack.

There are a few minor adjustments needed—the hair is all wrong, and needs to be hidden more convincingly beneath the cap; but more than that, Sherlock realizes she needs to learn to hold herself differently. The way she stands is all wrong—it’s a dead giveaway.
They spend the next few hours in Sherlock’s room, with Sherlock teaching Molly how to stand like a lad, how to widen her stance, cross her arms, how to spit, how to swagger, how to lower the pitch of her voice when she delivers a curse.

“It will be critical, tomorrow morning especially, that when we go up, you keep your hat down over your eyes. Don’t look at anyone. Lose yourself in the crowd of men as much as possible so you won’t be accounted for. As soon as you’re on shore there will be no trouble, because everyone will assume you’re a sailor from the other British ship in port. If anyone from our crew asks, you tell them you’re a midshipman on the Agamemnon—alright? It’s only from now until when that boat touches shore that you have to worry about.”

Molly nods, looking nervous, but determined.

She’s a better pupil than Sherlock would have expected. She learns quickly; and doesn’t ask irritating questions.

It’s well after midnight by the time Sherlock is satisfied that Molly has learned all he can teach her; and now, all that’s left to do, is wait.

They’ve decided it’s safer if Molly does not return to her rooms again that night—the risk of someone seeing a midshipman stealing into Miss Hooper’s rooms, or exiting again the next morning—is too great, so they pass the remaining hours until daybreak in Sherlock’s rooms together.

He lets Molly sleep in his bunk; insists that he isn’t tired—he’s not.

Instead, he sits at his desk, recklessly burning down the remainder of one of his candles as he works over John’s composition, poring over the score he’s written.

It’s the only thing he can think to do that will help keep his mind off of tomorrow. Every time his mind edges near it, a low bubble of anticipation rising sickeningly in his belly, he closes his eyes; imagines his fingers on the strings of his violin and he plays through the composition in his mind.

He does not know if Molly manages to sleep at all. She lies on top of the blankets with her back to him, knees tucked up against her chest. He imagines she must be as nervous as he is about tomorrow.

If she sleeps, she does not make a sound, nor does she move, until daylight has seeped down between the cracks in the wood and the bells sound the hour for seven o’clock.

They do not dare go to breakfast.

Molly cannot go, and Sherlock has no stomach for anything. He cannot even consider the thought of food; all he can think about now is that stripe of white sand, the green smell of the land that seems to have grown stronger over night—or is it just his imagination?

If all goes to plan, Grimsby will sleep well into the middle of the morning, until long after Molly has gone.

And so they wait, looking at one another in silence as the sounds of the ship coming to life around them creep in through the thin walls.

Sherlock expects this last hour to be the slowest, the most excruciating of all, but instead, somehow it’s over before he’s properly ready, and suddenly everything is happening too fast.
He makes Molly go up first so they aren’t seen going up together—just a minute ahead of him so that he can keep an eye on her until she’s safely installed in one of the boats; but he finds to his great dismay that by the time he arrives on deck himself only a few minutes later, he’s already lost her in the crowd.

There are far more people on deck than Sherlock anticipated.

It takes only one glance to ascertain that most of the chaos is being caused by the huge swarm of passengers all fighting to obtain a place in one of the first longboats headed to shore.

Sherlock can see Lieutenant Lestrade standing in the center of the crowd, visibly clinging to his last thread of patience as he attempts to manage the situation.

“Madame, I assure you, if you do not get a seat on this boat, you will simply take a seat on the next boat that is headed to shore. There is plenty of room for everyone, but you will have to be patient. Lieutenant Dimmock will be sure that you get a place on the next boat, won’t you, Lieutenant?”

“Indeed, sir.”

“Simply tell the Lieutenant your name so he can take it down and he will tell you which boat you shall be on.”

“But—”

“Right this way, Madame, please. There are other matters that need my attention.”

Lestrade all but pushes the protesting woman out of his way and onto Lieutenant Dimmock so that he can move past, and the crowd reforms with Dimmock as its center.

“Deverall!” Lestrade shouts. “I need you!”

Deverall, who is standing halfway down on the larboard side of the deck, overseeing the lowering of the boats into the water, looks up at Lestrade’s call.

Sherlock is tempted to intercept Lestrade as he makes his way over to Deverall but judging by the look on the man’s face, now is not the moment.

Besides, he has to find Molly first. He can’t get into one of those boats until he’s seen Molly safely on her way to shore. And getting her into a boat is apparently going to be much trickier than Sherlock initially imagined.

If the Lieutenants are keeping close track of who gets into which boat, then Sherlock does not know how they are going to slip Molly past them in her new disguise. It isn’t as if they can simply invent a new midshipman out of thin air.

Sherlock is now regretting more than ever that he did not go through with his initial idea, which was to simply knock Hopkins unconscious and take the uniform off him that way. Then they could have at least attempted to pass Molly off as Hopkins.

Sherlock knows that some midshipmen are guaranteed spots in the first boats, as he knows the midshipmen are divided into two watches, just like the sailors. Therefore half of them will take their leave at eight bells with John’s half of the ship. The trouble is Sherlock has no idea which half.

He also has no idea where Molly is at the moment, which is a much bigger problem.
Elbowing his way through the chaos of people, Sherlock manages to find a spot along the larboard railing where he can lean over the side and see that the first few passengers have begun to make their careful way down the side of the ship and into one of the waiting boats.

It makes sense that they would begin loading the passengers first as they take much longer to get into the boats.

Sherlock recognizes a member of John’s mess standing at the helm of the boat and helping passengers to take their seats. Sherlock is not surprised to see Colonel Jackson already seated in the prow of the dinghy as Tabitha makes her unsteady way to his side.

Seeing Sherlock looking, Colonel Jackson waves exuberantly, causing his wife to emit a small shriek of dismay as the motion rocks the boat. “A fine day for a visit to shore, is it not?”

Sherlock waves back, attempting a smile, but he’s busy counting seats.

Each boat will be made up of a mixture of passengers and crew since the longboats must be rowed to shore. However, this first boat will clearly mostly be filled with passengers. Calculating quickly, Sherlock determines that it’s in Molly’s best interest to get a seat on this boat, as the passengers will be less likely to recognize an unknown midshipman. As long as Molly keeps her head down, she should be able to go unrecognized.

However, the seats are filling up quickly, and Molly is still nowhere to be found.

Cursing under his breath, Sherlock turns back to the mayhem on deck, his eyes skimming the mass of eager passengers and frustrated crew for the telltale blue of Molly’s uniform.

Where on earth could she be?

But just as Sherlock is about to give up entirely he hears the angry voice of a frustrated sailor from further down the deck.

“Out of the way, lad! Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

Following the sounds of the scuffle, Sherlock looks down the deck to see Molly, at last, hunched in her uniform, the collar of her jacket raised to hide her face, tripping over her own feet in her eagerness to get out of the way of the sailor unloading cargo on the opposite side of the deck from where the longboats are being lowered into the water.

Sherlock wastes no time crossing the deck to seize her by the arm and pull her back to the other side of the ship where the longboats wait.

“What were you doing over there?” he hisses, low in her ear, his relief at having found her eclipsed by his fear that she’d almost been discovered.

“I’m sorry! When I came up on deck, the place by the gangway was crawling with Grimsby’s friends. I was afraid they’d recognize me!”

“It’s alright. But we have to act quickly. We’ve got to get you into that boat that’s being loaded now. I’m afraid if we put you in a boat with too many crew members they’ll notice that you’re not one of them.”

Molly glances over the railing to see the boat Sherlock is talking about and lets out a squeak of dismay.
"I can’t go in that boat! That boat is full of passengers! They’ll recognize me instantly."

It’s a valid concern, Sherlock realizes. But every moment that passes, the seats are filling up, and it’s far more risky for Molly to go to shore on a boat full of crewmen—of that much Sherlock is certain.

Sherlock looks at Molly’s face. Her upswept hair and the low angle of the hat do much to disguise her at a passing glance; but it’s true that if anyone were to look at her for more than a moment, she’d be recognized.

Molly stares back at him, the panic on her face unmistakable.

“We just need something to disguise your face…”

Sherlock lets his glance move over the deck in front of them and then, there—he spots it—a bucket of tar, left unattended.

Without a second thought, Sherlock seizes the brush.

“Close your eyes,” Sherlock tells her.

Molly looks at the brush with concern. “What are you—”

“Just trust me. I have an idea.”

With a look on her face like she can’t believe she’s actually going along with this, Molly closes her eyes.

Before she can change her mind, Sherlock swipes over Molly’s closed eye with the brush, leaving a smear of black over the lid and the skin just underneath.

“Hmm…” Sherlock looks at his handiwork, considering. “Don’t open your eyes yet.”

“Sherlock…” There’s a note of warning in Molly’s voice.

“I am sorry about this,” he says, and then spits generously onto his fingers, smearing it over the tar under her eye.

“Sherlock! What on earth—!”

But before she can protest it’s done. Sherlock squints at her.

“There! Now you’ve got a black eye. Not only does it help disguise your face, but now people will think twice before starting anything with you.”

“I…”

“No time!”

He would have spent longer trying to come up with something to complete her disguise, but over Molly’s shoulder Sherlock has spied Billy, making his merry way toward the ladder leading down to the longboats.

He needs to get Billy’s attention but he doesn’t want to call attention to himself.

“Come with me,” he breathes to Molly in an undertone, seizing her by the hand, and walking as fast
as humanly possible towards the gangway.

He doesn’t call the boy’s name until he’s just a few feet away from him.

“Billy!”

Billy turns at the sound of Sherlock’s voice.

“Mr. Sherlock, sir! Have you heard the news? We’ve got shore leave after all! I get to go on leave with the larboard watch,” he tells Sherlock, beaming. “Colonel Jackson said I might get a chance with his dueling pistols after all!”

“That’s wonderful news, Billy,” Sherlock says, crouching down so he can talk to Billy in a low voice. “Listen, I’ve got another favor to ask you.”

“Anything, Mr. Sherlock, sir!”

“I have a friend here, who needs to get to shore on this first boat.” Sherlock gestures with a jerk of his head towards Molly, who’s standing just behind him, her collar hiding her tar-stained face. “The thing is… he isn’t necessarily supposed to go to shore in this boat, so I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind accompanying him—since you’re headed to shore anyways yourself—just to be sure that he gets there without anyone noticing his presence.”

Billy looks over at Molly, his expression confused but curious.

“Well… alright, Mr. Holmes. I suppose so. Although… I don’t recognize that midshipman, who is he?”

“That’s just it, Billy. Who he is is something of secret at the moment, and needs to remain that way until he gets to shore.”

Excitement flares to life on Billy’s face. “You mean… he’s a stowaway?”

“Er… in a manner of speaking, yes. Can I count on you to get him safely to shore? Even if I can’t tell you who he is at the moment?”

Billy draws himself up, his expression solemn.

“Yes, sir. Mr. Holmes. You can count on me.”

“Thank you, Billy,” Sherlock is so relieved he claps a grateful hand on Billy’s shoulder in gratitude. “I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

“But what about you, Mr. Holmes? Won’t you be going to shore?”

“I will, Billy. As a matter of fact, I’ll be right behind you in the next boat.”

Billy’s face brightens at this. “Perhaps you’d also like to have a go at Colonel Jackson’s dueling pistols with me!”

Sherlock grins, in spite of himself. “Billy, if that would make you happy, I’d love to.”

“Woohoo!” Billy’s excitement at this revelation makes him leap—just once, into the air with delight—like a young billy goat, Sherlock thinks, and then is immediately horrified by the thought. The boy has made him absolutely sentimental.
“Alright, hurry now. I don’t want you two to lose your places.”

Sherlock urges Molly forward.

“But Sherlock, sir—why aren’t you coming in the same boat as us?”

Sherlock glances up at Billy’s words, his eyes scanning the faces of the sailors on deck.

“There’s someone I’m waiting for. But don’t worry—I’ll be right behind you. Now go!”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Sherlock, sir!”

Sherlock pushes Molly in front of him so she can follow Billy.

“Wait,” Billy says, stopping so abruptly that Molly almost collides into him. “What’s your friend’s name, Mr. Holmes?”

“Er…”

Sherlock exchanges a panicked look with Molly.

“Mmm—Morris,” Sherlock says, feeling like a fool as soon as he says it.

But Billy takes it in stride without missing a beat. “Alright! Come along then, Morris!”

Molly throws one last desperate look back at Sherlock, who waves her on encouragingly.

“I’ll see you on shore,” Sherlock says to her in an undertone, and watches Billy begin to push his way through the people to get to the gangway.

Luckily there’s so much chaos right now up on deck, no one pays any mind at all to Billy and the slouching midshipman as they make their way through the crowd to the ladder leading down to the waiting longboat.

Sherlock glances over the railing and sees with a small throb of fear that the boat is almost at capacity. There are still two seats left at the front of the boat; if they hurry they will make it.

He watches Billy approach the gangway, with Molly close behind him. The member of John’s mess helping the passengers to their seats is looking up expectantly for the next person headed down the ladder.

But then just when Billy is swinging a leg over the gangway, Lieutenant Deverall stops him. It takes all of Sherlock’s willpower not to curse aloud.

*Go go go*, he whispers in his head at Molly, as if by sheer force of his mental powers he can make her hear his thoughts. *Go down the ladder now while Deverall is distracted!*

But Molly is frozen behind Billy, hat tugged low over her eyes, staring at her boots.

What on earth could Deverall want with Billy at this point?

Sherlock cannot hear their conversation; he is too far down the deck.

He’s one second away from shouldering through the crowd to intercede when he sees Billy nod, and Deverall turns away, seemingly satisfied by the exchange. The moment Deverall’s back is
turned, Billy ushers Molly down the ladder first.

Sherlock can only watch, heart in his mouth, as Molly starts to climb her way down the side of the ship.

It never occurred to him that a simple task like this might be enough to give her away. Women aren’t used to doing anything—what if she can’t make it down the side of the ship without falling in?

There’s one critical moment where Molly’s boot slips and Sherlock has to shut his eyes in terror. *Oh god what has he done?*

But when he opens them again a second later, she’s righted herself, and now is making steady progress down the ladder.

Sherlock lets out a long breath.

He watches Molly take a seat in the prow of the boat, Billy leaping nimbly in after her a moment later. No one pays them any mind. The passengers nearest to them are busy chattering with excitement, or, if one woman’s grey face is anything to go by, preoccupied with not falling in.

“Alright, that’s everybody!” Patterson yells up to Deverall before casting off. “See you on shore, lads!” he calls to the men above. They cheer in acknowledgment, and as the boat begins to pull away from the ship Sherlock realizes all at once that they’ve done it—they’ve actually pulled it off; Molly is on her way to shore.

He tries to catch Molly’s eye as the boat moves away but she’s too busy hiding her face to look up and see him. Billy sees him looking though, and doffing his cap, he waves it in the air over his head.

Sherlock waves back, grinning, triumphant, and feels a weight lift off his shoulders.

It’s only when he turns back around to the crowded deck that it occurs to him that he needs to get himself onto a longboat next.

There’s a strange fluttering sensation in his stomach that is half exhilaration, half dread; and he suddenly realizes just how much assisting Molly has helped keep his mind off the unnamable terror that he has been suppressing since the previous evening, the fear that something will prevent him and John from getting to that glittering expanse of sand.

Now that Sherlock is alone with it, it’s all he can do to keep from throwing up on the spot the anticipation is so intense.

He shuts his eyes, feeling cold sweat prickle his forehead, and waits for the feeling to pass.

*Everything is going to be fine; you’ll see. Just keep it together, Sherlock, for a little while longer. We’ve almost made it.*

It soothes him to realize that the calming voice inside his head is, of course, John’s.

He opens his eyes then, feeling slightly more grounded.

The second boat bound for shore is already being lowered into the water—Sherlock recognizes Stapleton and Matthews manning the pulley, and looking around, he realizes he’s seen nearly every member of John’s mess this morning except for John himself.
It’s fine, he tells himself. He’s busy. He’ll be here.

Sherlock watches the men pull the boat into place, and almost immediately begin clambering down the ladder to take their seats.

A few of John’s messmates pass him by on their way to the gangway, and call out a boisterous greeting.

Matthews and Ironsides stop to speak with him. “You comin’, lad?”

Ironsides Jake punches him happily on the arm. “You won’t want to miss this! NO sirree! There’s nothin’ like shore leave to remind you why this rotten life is worth living!”

Sherlock winces in response, resists the urge to rub his arm. “I’ll be there,” he tells them. “I’m waiting for John. Have you seen him this morning?”

“Oh aye, he’ll be along! He was up in the sails, last I seen him. Some bit of business Lieutenant Moore wanted him to attend to before we set off. But I expect he’ll be along shortly.”

Sherlock nods in thanks, watches them climb down into the waiting boat; and then turns, straining his eyes to see if he can catch sight of John up top.

But there’s no sign of him, and the next thing he knows the second boat is casting off for shore.

A third boat is lowered into the water, and as the deck begins to empty of people, and still John does not emerge, Sherlock starts to feel his chest grow tight with panic.

He’s starting to wonder if he maybe he should go look for him, when Lestrade, seeing Sherlock waiting by the gangway, crosses the deck towards him, a bemused expression on his face.

“Why haven’t you left yet with one of the boats?”

“I’m waiting for John!” Sherlock blurts out. “Have you seen him?”

“I—no,” Lestrade says slowly, clearly take a moment to think about it. “Not this morning.”

“I don’t understand where he is.” Sherlock doesn’t bother to disguise his panic from Lestrade. “I’ve been on deck since the first boat left for shore and I haven’t seen him!”

Lestrade looks alarmed—however, something tells Sherlock it’s more from the open display of his emotions than it is for any concern over John’s wellbeing.

“I’m sure he’ll be along.”

“That’s what everyone keeps saying, but he hasn’t turned up yet!”

Lestrade is looking more and more as though he regrets ever having approached Sherlock.

“Well, I suggest you secure a place for yourself on this boat if you want to get to shore this morning. There won’t be another until the starboard watch gets their leave this evening.”

This news only makes Sherlock’s panic intensify.

Worse still, he realizes that Lestrade himself is about to climb down over the gangway. If Lestrade is going to shore, he will surely be one of the last ones to leave.
“Are you headed to shore as well, sir?”

“I am. As I said, this boat will be leaving imminently. I suggest you get onboard unless you want to be left behind.”

Sherlock doesn’t know how to tell Lestrade that there’s no point of him going to shore if John isn’t there—but Lestrade is eying him with impatience, and before Sherlock can respond, Deverall has come up next to them, breathless with industry, to give Lestrade his last report.

“Everything is in order, sir. There’s just a few men finishing up down below and once they’re aboard, that’s everyone from the larboard watch.”

“Very good. You may as well get onboard, Deverall. I’ll wait to see that the last of them are accounted for. I want to have one last word with Lieutenant Moore before we depart.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

If a few men are still down below then John must be one of them. Sherlock could ask Deverall—he could do it. But his distasteful jealousy for the other man stops his mouth as effectively as any gag, and before Sherlock can think better of it, Deverall has stepped up to the gangway to climb down the ladder.

Lestrade, apparently taking pity on Sherlock, looks back at Deverall. “Was John Watson with the men down below, Lieutenant?”

There’s a horrible pause in which Sherlock’s entire life seems to shrink before him. Deverall looks at Sherlock for one long moment before answering, and then his eyes flicker back to Lestrade. “He was.”

“Very good.” Lestrade looks significantly at Sherlock before walking away, but doesn’t say anything more. He doesn’t have to.

Sherlock waits until Deverall has had sufficient time to descend the ladder to the boat below, and then, with one last longing look at the forehatch, that fails to produce John through Sherlock’s sheer force of will, Sherlock relents and climbs over the side of the ship.

Sure enough, the boat is almost full by the time Sherlock makes his way down to it. There are just a few seats left up by the prow and a few empty seats by the oars that Sherlock assumes will be filled by members of the crew.

Sherlock squeezes his way in between two sailors whose names he does not know. They do their best to make room for him, grinning at him without comment. Everyone is in good spirits.

Sherlock wishes he could share in the good mood but all he can do is stare tensely at the gangway, willing John’s face to appear over the side, regretting every moment that he decided to get into the boat without John.

He will never forgive himself if this boat leaves for shore without him.

After what feels like an eternity, but is probably only a few minutes, they hear the sound of voices and then a few more sailors climb down the ladder, followed not long after by Lieutenant Lestrade.

At the sight of him, Sherlock feels his throat close up with dread, but before his panic can eclipse his last rational thought, Lestrade says, “There’s two more coming.”
Lestrade takes his seat in the prow, and then Sherlock sees Burns emerge at the top of the gangway.

Sherlock watches Burns make his way down the ladder to the waiting boat.

All the while, Sherlock’s hands are clenched tight between his thighs, and it’s all he can do to keep from chanting out loud the plea running on loop through his head.

*Let John be next Let John be next Let John be next*

And then, just when Sherlock is ready to rise from his spot and climb back up the ladder himself—finally—Sherlock catches sight of a familiar faded blue jacket at the top of the gangway, followed by a shock of white blonde hair.

Half the men in the boat let out a wild cheer at the sight of John, and then Sherlock sees John’s grinning face glance down at them once as he climbs over the side, before he turns to descend the ladder.

Relief courses through Sherlock as potent as a drug. The effect of it is so strong he feels drunk; he feels washed away; as though his body is dissolving—turning to sea foam.

Sherlock watches John descend the ladder as if in a dream.

He feels light; weightless.

Since John is the very last to leave the ship, it’s his job to cast them off, and Sherlock watches, without breathing—he has no body; he no longer needs to draw breath—as John unties the final rope mooring them to the *Galatea* and then leaps from the ladder into the boat.

A moment ago, Sherlock would have been concerned to see this—he would have feared for John’s safety, leaping like that from so great a distance into the moving boat—but his fear has left him with his body; so he can appreciate the beauty of John’s movement, the ease with which he leaps and lands, so lightly, so adroitly into the boat, without any trouble.

Then the whole boat is cheering, hands clapping John on his shoulders and arms as he climbs his way back to his empty place at the oars, which is behind Sherlock, mercifully. Sherlock does not know how he would survive the entirety of the trip to shore if he had to do so watching the rhythmic pull of John’s body as he worked the oars, the strong curve his shoulders would make with each stroke forward, muscles bulging under the worn fabric of his jacket, hair catching at his forehead in the spray from the waves.

Sherlock does not turn around even once to see—it’s all there in his head; he can picture it so clearly—and he needs to concentrate on remaining in the boat; if he does not continue to concentrate all his energy on clenching his hands between his knees, on keeping his eyes directly ahead of him at the sight of the *Galatea*, gradually beginning to grow smaller as they move away from her towards shore, then he cannot be sure that any of this is really happening; that it isn’t all just a dream he will wake from at any moment, and find himself back in his cabin onboard the ship.

As the boat moves out over the water, Sherlock’s weightless feeling begins to recede slightly.

He can now feel his own fingers where they’re clenched against his thighs; he can feel the movement of the boat lurching under him with the drag of the oars; but what cuts through the fog of his dreamlike state—what tells him, irrefutably, that his senses do not lie—is the overpowering smell of that green shore growing closer; the ripe, dark scent of the jungle moving over the water...
towards them, rising in his lungs.

Sherlock breathes it in—great, dark green breaths of it—his eyes shut against the clamor of other sensations warring for his attention, threatening to dissolve him into formlessness again, the sunlight harsh against his eyelids.

And then, before Sherlock has fully accepted that this is not a dream, that this is truly his reality, some of the men are leaping from the boat into the surf, to guide the boat up onto the sand.

John is one of the men to jump out—Sherlock knows this because when he turns back to look, John’s place is empty—and with a lurching sensation that Sherlock later realizes is the boat grinding up against the sand, he wonders for one horrible moment whether John was ever really there.

Then the sailor beside Sherlock is rising to his feet, and Sherlock watches, as one by one, the sailors leap from the longboat and down into the surf. The water is not deep here, he can see it striking against their upper thighs as they move through the water to the shoreline, like mermen just grown legs.

It’s all a blur to Sherlock’s eyes, the sunlight so bright against the sand, the heaving green line of the trees—he feels as though he’s drowning in it.

He knows it’s his turn to rise and leap from the boat, but he finds he cannot get his legs to cooperate, and maybe he will never make it to shore after all, he will just have to stay in this longboat going back and forth until the *Galatea* leaves the bay, but the sailor beside him, it’s Burns—he realizes, is helping him to his feet.

“Go on, lad. It’s just one little jump.”

The request feels impossible, but Sherlock does his best to do what he’s asked.

Somehow he makes it up over the side and then he’s jumping down into the water, which is much warmer than he would have guessed, the surf much shallower too—the sand sinking disconcertingly underneath his boots where he lands.

He takes several staggering steps, the ground unsteady beneath him—it’s certain that he’s going to fall, it’s only a question of when really—and then, John is there, suddenly beside him, sliding an arm around his waist.

“All right?” he says in Sherlock’s ear—and Sherlock hopes John does not expect him to respond because words are beyond him in this moment.

Sherlock can hear that John is grinning even without turning to look at him—he knows exactly which grin it is too—it’s that blinding, irrepressible grin that seems to generate a light of its own. He can’t bring himself to look because if he does, he knows the sight of it will be too much for him, and he’ll never make it the last few yards to the beach.

But John’s arm is around him—he can feel the solid weight of it against him, and every point at which John’s body leans in to meet his own is a confirmation to him—finally—that this is no dream. He can trust the feeling of John’s body against his because this, he knows, he could not dream up.

John is here—this is all that matters now.

And suddenly, Sherlock feels that he can breathe again; he can feel his own heartbeat pounding
underneath his ribs, the wobble in his legs, the water beating, warm against his thighs, the hollow feeling in his belly reminding him that it’s been far too long since he last ate—and all at once, joy erupts inside him—that champagne bubble, buoyant feeling filling him up, making him turn, at last to look at John, whose eyes are squinted hard against the glare of the sun, looking towards the shoreline.

John looks at him then—the sunlight reflecting off the water seems to make a halo of gold around his head—and Sherlock is glad for the pressure of John’s arm under his ribs because otherwise he knows, he would not be able to go on standing.

“Welcome to Rio,” John says, and grins, then tightening his arm around Sherlock, he guides the two of them up through the surf and onto the bright sand.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, if you haven't thrown your cell phone/laptop/tablet across the room upon reading the last line of this chapter, I will consider my work here a complete failure.

:D

lol I'm kidding of course--please don't destroy your devices! I HOPE YOU GUYS LIKED IT. :D :D :D
The first thing that really hits him is the smell. The heavy, wet green scent of growing things that he caught snatches of in the breeze blowing off the shore is suddenly all around them; the air so thick with moisture Sherlock can feel it on his skin. It’s the smell of fresh water and damp earth, of life—but it’s more than that, it’s different than any climate Sherlock has smelled before, it smells… wilder somehow, brighter, richer. Threaded through the scents he recognizes are dozens that are new to him—wild smells, tropical smells, complicated and teeming with life.

It makes him want to tear forward across the sand and run towards the dark tangle of trees stretched along the shoreline, to locate the source of each new smell, to climb up through the thick vegetation crawling up the mountainside so that he can catalogue each new specimen of flora and fauna, to see everything that this new country—this new continent has to offer.

He was so wretched all those months ago when the ship stopped in Madeira that he never even left his berth, much less set foot on shore. He feels so differently now than he did then; it’s shocking to realize how much has changed in just a few months.

But the idea of running anywhere at the moment is laughable.

Just standing on this beach and breathing the air already seems to be too much for Sherlock.

The experience is so overpowering it’s all he can do to keep from falling to his knees in the sand.

Walking is proving more complicated than Sherlock remembers; he feels shockingly unsteady on his feet—like a newborn fawn just learning to walk—and it isn’t just the fact that they’ve finally made it to shore, or the disorienting unreality of the whole situation—no, the ground actually feels like it’s rolling beneath him, as though the land has somehow taken on the heaving pitch and sway of the ocean.

John has left his side briefly to help his crewmates haul the longboat in up the beach and Sherlock feels pathetically unmoored without him.

He’s heard about this happening, of course, to those who have been at sea for many months. The affliction is supposedly temporary—but watching John now, laughing in the spray from the waves as he and his crewmates drag the longboat up the sand, none of them appear to be affected by the transition at all, and Sherlock feels a flicker of frustration at his own comparative weakness.

To make matters worse, Sherlock sees Lieutenant Deverall striding up the beach behind the men, his gait as strong and confident as ever. Never has the man looked more casually elegant and at home in his surroundings. Instead of making his appearance more ragged and disheveled, as Sherlock is certain he looks after their brief journey to shore, the salt spray appears to have sculpted his dark locks into perfectly tumbled curls. The waters of the bay at his back, the wind pulling at the gold braid on his coat, the splash of the waves around his boots—all the details of the landscape around him somehow lend a dashing, noble air to his appearance that makes him
look as though he strode right out of a painting by Girodet.

It is only the work of a few minutes for the men to finish stowing the boat, and then they are headed up the beach toward where John left Sherlock, a loud and merry group, already boisterous at the prospect of their precious twelve hours laying bright before them now, as untarnished as a newly minted coin.

The hours are theirs to do with as they will, and as Sherlock watches the men approach, John at their center, grinning and joking along with the rest of them, it occurs to him with a sudden sinking feeling that he isn’t sure how John will want to spend his time on shore.

Up until this moment Sherlock assumed that every moment of John’s free time would be his and his alone—but maybe John would like to spend some of it with his shipmates. After all, he’s the one who’s been worked to the bone this entire voyage, these last few weeks especially—perhaps all he wants right now is to simply head to the nearest tavern and drink away his wages while he has the chance.

Sherlock tries valiantly not to let the prospect of this happening upset him—but he can already feel something in his chest sinking at the thought. Where will he go if John wants to drink with his friends? What will he do with twenty-four hours alone in a strange port city?

All at once, his feelings of excitement seem to shrink within him.

He glances morosely back toward the _Galatea_ but before he can get too lost in the miserable prospect of returning to the ship alone to while away the time in port, the boisterous group of men is upon him.

John is somewhere in the midst of them so Sherlock joins the throng, letting himself be pulled along by the force of the crowd up the worn path from the beach that leads through a tangle of sparse weeds and sea-grasses towards the busy sounds of the approaching port.

Before Sherlock can make his way to John’s side, he’s intercepted by MacTavish—the giant, red-bearded sailor who made such an ill-advised bet with John a few weeks back. He slings a massive arm across Sherlock’s shoulders.

“Oye! Johnny Boy, I think you’ve lost something,” MacTavish calls good-naturedly, giving Sherlock a shove through the crowd towards John.

Sherlock lets out a tiny squawk of dismay at being handled like so much baggage but when John looks up, his face bright as he reaches out for Sherlock, Sherlock can forgive anything.

And then John’s shoulder is bumping companionably against his, his arm threading through Sherlock’s to draw him near.

“All right?” John asks, leaning in close, and Sherlock feels a flood of warmth at the genuine concern in his question, at the feeling of John’s arm wound tightly through his own, and all at once, Sherlock feels his worry evaporating like mist in sunlight.

Sherlock nods, reassured by John’s solid presence beside him once more.

He wants to ask John about the unsteadiness he’s feeling—how long it typically lasts—but the clamor of the excited men around them makes Sherlock hesitant to speak.

As if sensing his discomfort, John slows his steps so that they fall to the back of the group of men.
Sherlock keeps his voice low so that it will not be overheard. Lestrade and Deverall are walking just a few paces behind them.

“Does it always feel this… disorienting to be back on solid ground?”

John’s voice is reassuring.

“It’s always a bit strange at first, but what you’re feeling now shouldn’t last long. It usually takes a couple of hours before you get used to it.”

Sherlock nods, swallowing down his disappointment. It’s difficult not to feel a kind of desperate greed about every hour they have on shore. Two hours of feeling ill and disoriented feels like a significant cost when they only have twenty-four in total.

But it won’t do any good to think like that; he should be grateful for the time they do have, instead of panicking already about hours lost.

He turns his thoughts to their surroundings, to try and silence the creeping feeling of resentment.

The winding, dirt path they are walking on has begun to widen as they approach the harbor, the sounds of the bustle of people up ahead growing louder with every step.

To their right stretches the bay, dotted with ships of all sizes—small fishing vessels and trading boats, wooden junkets and coracles with square sails, grand three-masted tall ships like the Galatea herself. Sherlock recognizes another merchant ship about the same size as the Galatea, flying British colors, and knows at once that it must be the ship that Lestrade mentioned, the Agamemnon.

Judging by the white trousers and navy jackets of some of the sailors Sherlock can see walking along the wharf, the sailors from the Agamemnon have already disembarked for their own shore leave.

It occurs to Sherlock that this is a stroke of good fortune for Molly, whose presence on shore—at least initially—relies upon this fact.

He wonders how far she could have gotten by now. The other longboats were no more than an hour ahead of theirs.

Sherlock squints his eyes to try and make out any members of the Galatea, but there are so many people around, it’s impossible to tell.

He can see a cluster of ramshackle buildings up ahead that mark the beginnings of the town, toward which their small group is now heading, and where, he imagines the other members of the Galatea await them, or at least, those members of the group eager to spend their hard-earned coin on whatever vices the port has to offer.

Just where the buildings begin, there is a long jetty stretching out into the waters of the bay, boats moored all along its length, its wooden boards bristling with people, all speaking different languages, wearing clothing Sherlock has never seen before in an array of vibrant colors.

As they draw closer, the details of this colorful crowd begin to come to life around them, and Sherlock finds himself utterly absorbed in taking it all in.

There are men and women of every age and social class, of every skin color, talking and shouting and bartering for goods. There are fishermen in wide straw hats standing beside tables heaped
silvery high with fish, baskets bristling with crabs and other strange sea creatures Sherlock cannot name; there are women with baskets on their heads selling fruit and spices, their bare feet dusty beneath their bright skirts; there are soldiers and merchants; men in clerical robes; aristocrats and members of the Portuguese court; there are women with their skirts pinned up at their waists who even to Sherlock’s untrained eye he identifies as women selling trade of the more intimate kind. There are people of every description—beggars and officers, whores and brigands, all mixed up together, and through it all, children and animals darting under foot.

Most of the languages Sherlock hears are ones he does not recognize.

Everywhere people are talking, shouting, laughing—the cries of the merchants mixing in with the bleating of goats, the shrill squawks of a flock of chickens, a group of shouting children playing ball and the drunken singing of a group of passing soldiers—all of it seems to form one thick cacophony of sound, and the deeper they go into the crowd, the more overwhelming it becomes. He hopes John does not notice the added pressure on his arm. It isn’t that he’s frightened—that would be stupid. It’s just that it’s been such a long time since he’s seen anything new at all.

As much as he hates to admit it, he has grown used to the thin grey walls of his cabin, the monotonous heaving line of the blue horizon; as tedious as they have been these many months, they have formed the boundaries of his world—simple, dull, reliable. Sherlock realizes that in that time his senses have grown dull as a result, like an unused muscle grown stiff without use.

This sudden onslaught of new information, of sights and sounds utterly foreign to Sherlock’s senses—it’s all just so much.

Perhaps John does sense his unease, because he’s lowering his mouth to Sherlock’s ear again. “What do you think?”

But as soon as the words have left his lips, Sherlock realizes that John has no idea that Sherlock feels overwhelmed. His voice is bright with eagerness, and when Sherlock turns to look he sees that John’s face is shining with excitement. He thinks Sherlock is happy to see all this, as he is. In fact, now that he focuses his attention on John, Sherlock realizes how evident his excitement is, his whole body is humming with it—its presence so powerful Sherlock can practically feel it buzzing up John’s arm.

Sherlock doesn’t know how to answer, but luckily, he doesn’t have to. They’ve arrived at the first few buildings on the outskirts of town. Sherlock can see that they are not quite as ramshackle as they appeared at a distance, but they are haphazard wooden constructions, clearly thrown together quickly, and they look shabby in comparison to the line of gleaming white stucco buildings Sherlock can see if he looks inland, away from the bay, and toward the west, where the rest of the city unwinds against the edge of the mountains. He can see the spire of what might be a church, and plumes of smoke rising up above the red tile roofs of the buildings.

Sherlock’s attention is drawn back to the building before them, which he realizes, from the sound of singing and merriment spilling out the open windows, is a tavern.

Glancing down the muddy street that lines the wharf, and the flimsy wooden buildings that crowd together along it, Sherlock realizes that most of these buildings are taverns, or dens of vice of various kinds. He wonders suddenly how John’s messmates will know which one their fellow crewmembers have gone into, before realizing just as quickly that they probably do not care much either way.

Thinking again of Molly, and feeling a sudden sick swoop of guilt, Sherlock scans the muddy
street before them, wondering where she could have gotten to. He does not see any of the
*Galatea*’s passengers on this street; he imagines that most of them have headed into the center of
town, in search of more refined delights.

Which direction would Molly head if left to her own devices?

Her terror at being recognized likely would have led her away from the ship’s passengers. Sherlock
can only hope that Billy helped guide her in the right direction.

The group of sailors from their longboat seem to be satisfied with going into the first tavern they
see, and John follows gamely after, still pulling Sherlock along by the arm. Is this how they will
spend their time then? Drinking in this crowded tavern by the wharf? Sherlock tries once again,
without much success, to quell his sinking feeling of disappointment at the prospect. This is John’s
shore leave—he should spend it in whatever manner he likes, and Sherlock will not say a word
against him.

As almost everyone on the last longboat was a member of the larboard watch, the entirety of the
group heads into the tavern with them, save for the two lieutenants, who fall into conversation just
outside.

Sherlock tilts his head in their direction as he and John pass by, curious to overhear what sounds
like Deverall pressuring Lestrade into coming and having a drink with them.

“I have business with the harbormaster, Deverall, as you well know. I don’t have time for drinking
and carousing.”

He sounds more agitated than he has reason to.

Sherlock does not hear what Deverall says to him in response, but he can hear the tone of
Deverall’s voice, measured yet insistent.

Whatever he said must have had some effect on Lestrade, because just before Sherlock ducks in the
door of the tavern, he hears him burst out, “Yes, fine—I’ll come back when I’ve finished. But it’ll
be one drink, Deverall—that’s it.”

Even though it’s early morning still and the shutters on the windows are flung open to let in some
air, the tavern is dim and warm and crowded with people, the heat from their bodies and the smoke
from the candles on the tables making the air thick, the sound of their laughing voices filling up the
room.

The air is heavy with the scent of sweat and old liquor, but rising above that is also a pleasant
savory golden smell, of food cooked with unfamiliar spices. The scent of it makes Sherlock’s
mouth water and he remembers, smelling it, that he’s skipped far too many meals in the past
twenty-four hours.

He and John have barely taken two steps inside when there’s a loud whoop of excitement prompted
by their entrance, and Patterson runs up to punch John on the arm.

“How about time you got here! What took you so long?”

John drops his hold on Sherlock’s arm to reach out and scrub a hand through Patterson’s hair in a
gesture of rough old brother affection.

“Some of us had work that needed finishing down below. It’s not all of us that can go skipping
merrily off at the first cry of shore leave.”
Patterson shoves him away, grinning.

Sherlock sees Stapleton and Matthews come up beside Patterson, pewter tankards in their hands, wearing matching expressions of glee at the sight of John. Sitting at the table just behind them are the other members of John’s mess. Banana Bill and Half-Pint Lee are playing dice, Ironsides Jake beside them, cradling his tankard in his arms as tenderly as a lover. Burns is already seated with a pint, although he only walked in the door a moment ahead of John and Sherlock.

In fact, looking around, Sherlock sees that half the Galatea’s crew seems to be here, crowded round the narrow tables—laughing and swearing and clinking their tankards together in celebration.

Now that his eyes have adjusted to the dim light, Sherlock can also see that the space is bigger than he initially thought, but the place is packed to the gills with people of all sorts. Many of them are sailors but Sherlock can see the same diversity in the tavern’s population that he saw represented outside on the wharf. He recognizes the British sailors by their clothes—the majority of the ones he sees are likely from the Agamemnon, but there are sailors here from all kinds of ships—some light-skinned, some dark-skinned, wearing all manner of motley clothing, speaking all manner of languages.

There are women winding their way among the tables too, clearly offering their company to any man who can afford to pay for it.

Sherlock sees a woman wearing hardly anything at all, sitting in the lap of a grinning dark-haired sailor with a livid tattoo of a snake on his neck. He’s absently fondling her breast with one hand, while he deals out cards with the other, a smoking pipe clenched tight between his teeth.

Sherlock looks away quickly, feeling faintly shocked at the sight of a bare-breasted woman, and hears Patterson, not to be outdone by John’s display of brotherly affection, teasing him in reply.

“Ah, the only reason you had to stay below is because Lieutenant Deverall wanted to keep his eye on you a little longer,” he says, his eyes sparking with mischief. “And not because he was concerned about the quality of your work...”

Sherlock feels as if the bottom of the tavern has dropped away beneath his feet. So it’s true then. He isn’t the only one who’s noticed it.

Sherlock looks over at John to see how he will react and sees John clearly thinks nothing of it; he’s punching Patterson in the arm and laughing.

But Patterson’s eyes are still sparkling dangerously.

“I don’t blame you,” he goes on. “It would be worth a few extra hours of special duties in the Lieutenant’s berth for the potential promotion alone, even if he wasn’t as handsome as the devil himself.”

Stapleton, laughingly, raises his tankard in John’s direction. “Don’t forget about the rest of us when you become an officer, eh John?”

“Aww, our John would never engage in such nonsense.” Matthews, who sounds genuinely distressed at the idea of John trying to sleep his way to the top and leaving them all behind, looks to John for reassurance. “Would you, Johnny?”

“Of course not.” John slings an arm around Matthews’ shoulders, who looks distinctly relieved.

Sherlock feels sick.
It never occurred to him that John sleeping with Deverall could result in actual material gain for John. But as Patterson said—why on earth wouldn’t he be tempted if it meant the chance of a promotion? Sherlock has never considered before the prospect that John would want to become an officer, but why wouldn’t he? Better treatment, better pay—the chance at a real career. John’s status on the ship currently is but one rung above the very lowest station. As Sherlock himself has witnessed time and again these last few months, John is nothing more than so much chattel for the British merchant fleet to dispose of as they will. Who is Sherlock to stand in the way of John gaining something better for himself, if he has the means to do so? What on earth can Sherlock offer him by way of comparison?

“I was also asked to stay below,” Burns chimes in from where’s seated at the table just behind them. “Are you implying that Deverall has it in for me too, Patterson?”

Patterson, blushing now, ducks his head and mumbles something incoherent in response.

“What’s that, lad? Are you saying I’m not equally appealing to the younger officers, is that it?”

Ironsides lays a comforting hand on Burns’ shoulder. “I think you’re a most striking older gentleman, Burns.”

“Thank you, Ironsides.”

Burns lifts his tankard to take a drink and catching Sherlock’s eye, winks.

Patterson and Stapleton are roaring with laughter.

Sherlock is not quite sure what to make of any of it, but it occurs to him that Burns’ comment may have been for his benefit.

“Well, if anyone fancies asking the man himself,” Banana Bill says, removing his pipe stem from his mouth to gesture with it towards the other end of the tavern, “he happens to be right over there.”

They all look to where Banana Bill is pointing to see Lieutenant Deverall ordering a drink at the bar and Sherlock feels his insides go cold with horror.

Of course, it’s just his rotten luck that of all the wharf-side taverns in Rio de Janeiro, Deverall would choose the same one as John’s mess to drink in.

He should have realized that Deverall was going to come into this tavern based on the conversation he shared with Lieutenant Lestrade outside, but Sherlock had been hopeful that there was another place just around the corner, specifically for officers and higher-ranking members of the ship that the lieutenants would have gravitated towards.

There’s a woman behind the counter pouring drinks—a pretty woman with dark skin and a red flower in her hair. Deverall is leaning over the counter towards her, one lock of dark hair tumbling becomingly onto his forehead. She’s laughing as she pours him his drink, smiles at him as she pushes it over the counter.

Sherlock looks away, disgusted. Is there anyone breathing that Deverall won’t flirt with?

But he knows that it isn’t Deverall’s promiscuity that bothers him; it’s his own jealousy, rising hot as poison in his throat.

“Looks like someone else may have caught his eye already…”
“Aw, don’t be jealous, John,” Patterson says, slinging an arm around John’s shoulders. “I’m sure we can find somebody to keep you company.”

He looks pointedly at Sherlock and grins.

Heat erupts in Sherlock’s cheeks. He drops his gaze, embarrassed.

Sherlock realizes distantly that this is their way of showing affection—teasing one another like this. It means they think he’s one of them now, if they’re subjecting him to the same kind of treatment as John. But he doesn’t know how to respond to any of it. He’s never had friends before. He feels clumsy and awkward—like a horse at high tea—terrified he’ll smash something precious without meaning to.

He looks back across the room, unable to meet any of their eyes, and watches Deverall carry two overflowing tankards to a table in a corner of the tavern where Lieutenant Dimmock and a host of the Galatea’s midshipmen and junior officers are seated together, their expressions varying degrees of overjoyed and terrified. One of the younger ones, Jack Beecham, is staring with his mouth open at the bare-breasted woman in the sailor’s lap. Deverall passes one of the tankards to Dimmock who manages to spill about half of it down his sleeve.

Deverall takes a seat beside Hopkins, who—Sherlock is irritated to see—straightens up conspicuously at Deverall’s arrival, a smug expression tugging at the corners of his mouth, as if by sitting beside him Deverall has blessed him with a special purpose.

Among the company of midshipmen, Sherlock is surprised to see Baynes seated on Deverall’s other side. The poor boy looks smaller than he did when Sherlock saw him last—he looks diminished somehow, his mouth unsmiling, his face drawn.

Sherlock cannot help but experience a flash of pity at the sight of him. It’s only been three days since his vicious beating—he is surely still feeling its effects. Sitting on a hard tavern bench is likely nothing short of excruciating.

It occurs to Sherlock, seeing him seated where he is, squashed tightly between the handsome broad-shouldered Patrick Molloy, who is the oldest of the midshipmen next to Anderson in the ship’s company, and Theophilus Coyne, who tends to keep a bit of a distance from the others as his father is a member of the peerage and he likes to hold it above the others, that there’s a sort of protective air of the others towards him.

Sherlock watches Deverall lean around Molloy to say something to Baynes, causing a brief but genuine smile flicker to life on the boy’s face. Even from where he stands on the other side of the tavern, Sherlock can see that there is kindness in Deverall’s expression in the way he looks at Baynes.

The sight of it makes the sickness in Sherlock’s belly twist sharply. Because of course it isn’t enough that Deverall is handsome, clever, capable, and brave—he also has to be deeply kind-hearted, as evidenced by his treatment of the most vulnerable members under his care.

What it must have done to him to be the one responsible for beating the boy, Sherlock does not like to imagine. He feels a twinge of pity for the man in spite of himself.

Unable to bear anymore scenes from the heroic novel that is Deverall’s life, Sherlock averts his eyes from the table in the corner, only to notice someone skulking in the shadows of the tavern, just beyond the bar, someone whose body language communicates that they feel just as out of place in this crowded tavern as Sherlock does himself.
Sherlock looks closer and as he does so the person lifts their head, and Sherlock sees that it’s Molly, her pale face stark against the navy of the uniform she’s wearing, the fake bruise Sherlock gave her garish in her white face.

Seeing her, his immediate feeling is one of relief—that she hasn’t been recognized and dragged back to the ship, or worse, become embroiled in some seedy wharf-side scheme designed to snag gullible young seamen and rob them of their livelihood.

It would seem that the disguise has proved successful in keeping her from being recognized; however, it appears to have had another effect, which is to make her so strange-looking that no one has dared approach her.

Sherlock’s eyes rake the surrounding crowd but there’s no sign anywhere of Billy. He wonders if it was Billy who led her here, or if she simply followed the rest of the sailors from the *Galatea* in order to dodge the curious gazes of her fellow-passengers.

It doesn’t look as though she’s introduced herself to anyone yet and seeing her there, alone and uncertain, Sherlock feels his relief replaced by guilt. He never should have pushed her into one of the longboats by herself. She seemed so confident this morning when they headed up on deck. But perhaps she’s feeling just as overwhelmed as Sherlock by all the unfamiliar sights and sounds, the hubbub and chaos of the harbor bubbling around them, as heady and intoxicating as some strange new liquor.

It must be even more overwhelming for her as a girl—who, Sherlock imagines, has not yet had many opportunities to go anywhere unchaperoned, much less a wharf-side tavern crowded with sailors indulging in all manner of vices.

He’s just considering going over to her when he feels John put a hand on his arm. Sherlock turns to see John looking at him with an apologetic expression on his face.

“What is it?” he asks, worry rising in him at John’s look.

“I have some errands that I need to run in town, in addition to getting the things for Lieutenant Lestrade. I think… it might be best if you stay here while I go. I don’t want to drag you all over town while you’re still trying to get your land legs back. And I’ll be much quicker if I go on my own. What do you think?”

Sherlock stares at John, disappointment and confusion warring with his promise to himself that he would concede to John’s wishes during the entirety of their stay on shore. He didn’t actually anticipate John wanting to spend part of the time without him.

He tries to school his features into a look of understanding but he obviously fails because John is reaching for his hands now, his grip warm and reassuring.

“I’m sorry to leave you on your own for even a minute, but it’s for a very good reason, I promise. I’ll only be gone a short time, and once I’ve finished, I’m all yours.”

Sherlock looks down at their hands, not trusting his expression not to betray his unhappiness.

“What is it that you need to do?”

John squeezes Sherlock’s hands in his, and Sherlock can feel that he is smiling even before he looks up to see it.

“Now, that would be telling.”
There is something glittering in John’s eyes that makes Sherlock feel as though he’s just taken a long draught of the fiery rum they serve onboard. He feels giddy, light-headed by what that look promises.

“Alright,” Sherlock says, licking his lips, which suddenly feel very dry.

“Let me buy you a drink before I go. And something to eat.”

Sherlock is about to refuse—he can very well pay for his own food and drink—when he remembers with sudden dismay that the bag he’d so carefully packed for his time on shore with John, containing, among other things, his money and a change of clothes, is sitting, just where he left it, by his desk in his cabin, alongside his violin.

In all the excitement of helping Molly get ashore he’d completely forgotten to bring his things with him when he’d gone up.

Worse than the money almost is the fact that he’s left his violin.

“What’s wrong?”

“My bag—I left it onboard the ship.”

Sherlock shakes his head, as John looks at him uncomprehending.

“I don’t have any money with me.”

“What does that matter? I’m not letting you pay for anything while we’re ashore anyway.”

“But John—!”

The horror in his expression at this suggestion must be all too clear because John is reaching up to lay a soothing hand on his shoulder.

“It’s fine. If you’re so worried about it, you can pay me back when we’re back onboard, alright?”

Sherlock nods miserably.

“I also left my violin.”

“Ah.”

Sherlock is certain that the sound that escapes John in reaction is entirely involuntary, for he can hear the regret in John’s voice, and knows that John is just as disappointed by this news as he is.

John’s hand slides up his shoulder to briefly caress the back of his neck.

“It’s fine. I have plenty of other things in mind to keep us occupied while we’re here. Don’t you worry.”

Sherlock can hear the same glittering quality in John’s voice that he could see in his eyes a moment ago, and the sound of it makes a shiver of anticipation ripple up Sherlock’s spine. In all fairness, this could also be the result of John’s thumb, which has just brushed softly, yet meaningfully over the base of Sherlock’s neck.

It makes Sherlock suddenly keenly aware of just how many clothes he’s wearing in this tropical climate and how desperately he wishes he could be rid of them.
He tugs at his neck cloth, which feels restrictive in the close air of the tavern.

“Go and have a seat with the lads, and I’ll bring you back something to drink, alright?”

Sherlock nods, swallowing thickly, and turns to the table where John’s messmates are crowded in together, drinking and laughing.

Much as he likes all of John’s messmates—and he does feel more comfortable around them now, it’s true—he’s not exactly thrilled at the prospect of sitting alone with them and drinking until John comes back. Especially if he’s risen in the rank of their affections to where good-natured teasing is the highest form of camaraderie.

He stands, hesitating, mentally bracing himself for the experience while trying to decide who is the best person to seat himself next to when he remembers Molly.

He looks back across the room to see that she hasn’t moved. If anything, she’s retreated further into the dark corner at the back of the bar. This might be because a woman in red petticoats—wearing nothing to speak of on the top half of her body—has just walked by in the arms of a dark-skinned sailor. He’s wrapped around her like an octopus, kissing her neck. Sherlock is surprised that they manage to make it to the bar without tripping over each other.

He can see Molly’s blush from all the way across the tavern.

Taking pity on her—or perhaps, if he’s honest with himself, he will admit that he hopes her presence will help draw the attention of John’s messmates away from himself—he crosses the room to rescue her.

He takes the most circuitous possible route through the crowded tavern in order to avoid passing too closely by the table where the Galatea’s midshipmen sit with Deverall and Dimmock. He tells himself it’s because he doesn’t want a run in with Hopkins, but again, if he’s honest with himself, he must admit it’s because he doesn’t want to have to look at Deverall’s stupidly handsome face any closer than is strictly necessary.

Molly is so busy trying to disappear into the wall at her back that Sherlock is afraid she won’t recognize him, but she spots him right away as he approaches, and the look in her eyes is of a drowning man being thrown a rope.

And then to Sherlock’s immense surprise, she throws her arms around his neck and gives him a hug.

“Oh thank heaven, you’re here!” she says into his shoulder, her voice slightly muffled by fabric. “I can’t think of the last time I was so happy to see someone!”

He is so stunned by this unforeseen gesture that for several seconds he does not move at all, he just stands woodenly with his arms held aloft in surprise.

He can feel Molly’s heartbeat pounding against his chest in what he imagines must be relief.

Before he can think what to do with his arms though, she’s pulling away, establishing a much more reasonable amount of space between them.

She looks up at Sherlock, eyes shining, in some combination of excitement and fear.

“I’m sorry—I’m just so relieved to see a friendly face. This has all been much more difficult than I anticipated. The truth is I didn’t really know what I was getting myself into.”
All at once, she looks like she might be on the verge of tears.

Sherlock, who felt overwhelmed by Molly’s tears in the privacy of his cabin, does not feel at all prepared to deal with them in the middle of a crowded tavern.

“It’s all right,” he says, trying to make his voice sound reassuring and certain that it absolutely does not. He goes on quickly, before Molly can say anything else that makes her feel like crying. “Listen, the reason I came over here is to invite you to come and sit with me and John’s mess. I can introduce you as a midshipman from the Agamemnon—they won’t recognize you. And you won’t have to say much—they’re a fairly rowdy group. But… nice,” he hastens to add. “The nice kind of rowdy.”

He’s concerned that he hasn’t made the invitation very appealing at all, but he needn’t have worried. Molly’s face is practically glowing with happy relief.

“Oh, could I? You’re sure it wouldn’t be an imposition?”

“What nonsense! Of course not.”

“I don’t know how to thank you!”

“You don’t need to thank me,” he replies, embarrassed, trying to ignore the tiny wriggle of guilt over the fact that he hasn’t been entirely truthful. John’s messmates will likely ask Molly a heap of questions, including how on earth it is that Sherlock knows a midshipman from another British ship.

His mind is whirring, scrambling to piece together a plausible story.

“I’d better introduce you to John first though,” Sherlock realizes. He can’t possibly lie to John, not least because his own conscience won’t allow it. Any story he tried to put by John would likely crumble to dust before his eyes.

“We’ll have to tell John the truth,” he tells her. “Don’t worry, he won’t tell anyone.”

But once again Sherlock needn’t have worried.

Molly’s look—impossibly—brightens further.

Her voice is a squeak of barely suppressed excitement. “Oh! I haven’t met John yet—not formally anyway. I’ve seen him around the ship of course, but I’ve never been properly introduced.”

Sherlock does not bother to tell her that there’s no such thing as a ‘formal’ introduction in the circles John moves in, nor does he voice aloud the question that rises to the top of his mind, which is whether it will really count as a proper introduction if Molly meets him in a tavern filled with whores and drunken sailors, disguised as a midshipman with a black eye.

She seems to have momentarily forgotten her appearance, which appears to have cheered her considerably, so Sherlock says nothing, guiding her instead back across the room towards the bar, where John is standing waiting to catch the barmaid’s eye.

There’s a loud group of sailors at the other end of the bar, clearly already deep in their cups, to which she’s currently doling out drinks. They seem to be demanding all of her attention at the moment, for which Sherlock is grateful because it means he has a chance to talk to John away from the others.
“John,” Sherlock says in a low voice, coming up behind him.

John turns, his whole face lighting up at the sight of Sherlock, the warmth of his smile spilling over onto Molly as well since she’s standing directly behind him.

Sherlock hears Molly audibly draw in her breath. He understands completely. He has a hard time breathing every time John looks at him like that too.

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

John arches one eyebrow, curious, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his lips, and for a moment Sherlock forgets everything he was about to say, distracted by how devastatingly attractive John is.

He’s leaning with an elbow against the bar, his posture casual, his other hand in his jacket pocket. The smoky light of the tavern is soft against his face, drawing out the paler strands of gold in the hair pushed back from his forehead. His eyes look darker in the half-light, his irises a barely detectable rim of deep blue around his pupils.

He’s caught sight of Molly now, and Sherlock can see him studying her face, his expression slightly puzzled, as if he’s sure he’s seen her somewhere before but he can’t quite place her.

Taking hold of Molly’s arm, Sherlock shuffles her forward so that she’s no longer partially hidden from view behind him.

“This is the friend I’ve told you about,” he says in a carrying voice. “My old school friend, Marcus.”

John’s puzzlement is now writ clear across his face. His eyes flicker to Sherlock in confusion, so Sherlock leans in until his mouth is almost touching John’s ear.

He ignores the jolt that moves through his body in response to being so close to John. He can feel something in John’s body too, like a barely detectable hum of energy rising to the surface as Sherlock draws closer, like a flame bending in the air from a draft.

“It’s Molly,” he says, the words no more than breath against John’s ear. “This is our thank you to Lieutenant Lestrade.”

He pulls back, registering the look of dawning recognition on John’s face, mingled with surprise, and what might be, Sherlock detects with a sinking feeling, something like worried disapproval.

Molly must see it too because she’s starting to fidget beside Sherlock, clearly uncertain of what she’s meant to say, or how she’s meant to act.

Sherlock wishes he had time to explain to John that it has more to do with Molly’s wishes than anything to do with Lieutenant Lestrade, that Molly wanted to come ashore, and that he was only trying to help her out in the best way he knew how. He also wishes he could explain to John how helpless she looked, standing on her own in the corner of the tavern, and that they only have to keep an eye on her until Lieutenant Lestrade comes back, which he surely will—Sherlock heard him make his promise to Deverall, and he knows that if nothing else, the Lieutenant is a man of his word.

He also wishes he could explain to John how important it is that they keep her real identity a secret—but that much John seems to pick up on his own because he’s reaching across Sherlock now to take Molly’s hand in his, a warm and genuine smile on his face.
“Of course, I remember,” he’s saying as he shakes her hand. “John Watson. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

And Sherlock knows when he says it, that it’s really Molly he’s talking to, and that he *does* mean it, that the warm smile on his face is for her. Sherlock has talked about Molly a fair amount to John, and the fact that they are finally meeting makes something small and bright inside Sherlock flare to life.

This is the first time in his life he’s ever had more than one person he’s liked so much, so he’s never had the experience of getting to introduce them to one another. He finds the experience not altogether displeasing.

Molly seems too flustered at first to respond. Seeing as this is her first experience as the intended recipient of one of John Watson’s smiles, Sherlock understands completely.

She starts to dip into a curtsy and only just catches herself in time. Instead she does an awkward little bow over John’s hand, smiling at him, shy, and clearly delighted.

And then, as if to deliberately make matters worse, John clasps her hand between both of his and leans in to tell her quietly, “Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

As he pulls back from her, he winks, smiling his most charming lopsided smile, and Sherlock is almost angry at him on Molly’s behalf. The poor girl can barely keep it together as it is! Is John *trying* to make her fall into a faint at his feet?

Molly, to her credit, remains standing. However, her cheeks are very pink when John lets go of her hand.

The bar maid has finally finished with the group of drunken sailors and comes over to take John’s order.

Seeing him, her face breaks into a smile.

“Bless my stars! If it isn’t John Watson returned to Rio de Janeiro!”

She stands for a moment with her hands on her hips, looking him over, her eyes full of merriment.

And then to Sherlock’s great surprise, John is leaning over the bar to embrace her, pressing a kiss to her smiling cheek.

“Alright, Sally?”

“You could say that.”

John leans back, taking hold of her hands between his own.

“You grow lovelier every time I see you.”

She makes a dismissive gesture at the comment, pulling her hands out of John’s, but as she reaches up to tuck a strand of dark hair behind her ear, Sherlock can see that she looks pleased.

“And you, John Watson, are just as much trouble as ever I can see.”

John laughs, the sound full of fondness.

“How’s business?”
“Booming. Ever since the port reopened we’ve had almost more trade than we can handle. Seems we’re full up at all hours these days. I can’t complain.”

“I hope that lot wasn’t giving you any trouble.” John gestures with a jerk of his head to the other end of the bar.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” she says, something steely coming into her gaze. And then she smiles at John and there’s a flash of fire in her brown eyes. “You know me.”

There’s something in the smile shared between them that makes the now familiar feeling of jealousy lurch unpleasantly to life in Sherlock’s chest. It’s all too clear from the look that passes between them that John does know her—or at least, he did once, it seems, quite intimately.

“But I’m being rude—let me introduce you to my friends.”

John turns back to Sherlock suddenly and then it’s hard to remember to be jealous because John is tucking his hand in under Sherlock’s bicep to pull him closer, his voice shining bright with eagerness.

“Sally, may I present to you, Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock, Sally Donovan.”

Sherlock inclines his head slightly in the appropriate formal greeting expecting the customary curtsy in return, but Sally reaches out to take his hand in hers, shaking it firmly.

He’s surprised by the strength of her grip.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Holmes.”

“Likewise, I’m sure.”

Her gaze is also more direct than most women Sherlock is used to—there’s something sly in the tilt of her head as she looks at him, and Sherlock thinks, perhaps he is being appraised.

Whatever it is she sees in him though, she appears to find to her satisfaction. There’s a glimmer of approval in her gaze as she lets go of his hand.

“And this is Sherlock’s friend, Marcus.”

Sally turns to Molly, reaching to shake her hand as well. She pauses before she does, looking Molly up and down and making a small sound of appreciation.

“Hello, Marcus. My, you’re a sweet thing, aren’t you?”

Molly is apparently too overcome by this assessment to respond.

Luckily, John intervenes.

“I’m afraid, dear Sally, that Marcus is taken.”

“Shame,” she says as she finally releases Molly’s hand. “Young thing like yourself? Where’s your sweetheart? All the way back in England?”

Bewildered, Molly shakes her head.

“Or perhaps you’re like John here, and you prefer the company of your own sex?”
Molly shakes her head again, even harder than before, her cheeks flaming pink.

Sally laughs, the sound of it light and musical.

“Well never mind. If you ever change your mind though, you know where to find me.”

She winks at Molly then, before turning back to John.

“Much as I’d love to stand around chatting with you lot all day, I’m afraid there’s business to be done. What are you having, John?”

John orders a pint for Sherlock and then pauses, turning back around to look at Molly.

“What do you say, Marcus? Can I buy you a drink?”

Molly looks at Sherlock, as if asking his permission.

“Thank you, John,” he says. “That would be lovely.”

John tells Sally to make it two.

“You two go on and get a seat with the lads. I’ll bring the drinks over.”

Molly, who appears relieved at the excuse to make her exit from the entire interaction with Sally, looks to Sherlock first for approval. Sherlock nods at her, feeling similarly overwhelmed by the encounter, but for entirely different reasons.

Before he can follow after Molly though, John stops him, catching him gently by the arm.

“Hey,” he says, his voice low, suddenly serious, and for a moment Sherlock is confused by the worry in his eyes until he realizes that the concern he sees there is for Molly. “Are you sure about this?”

“It will be fine,” Sherlock tells him, trying to convince himself as much as John. “She’ll be perfectly fine. And Lestrade will be back before long. He can look after her then.”

John looks like there’s something else he wants to say, but he appears to think better of it.

“Alright,” he says, nodding at Sherlock. “Better get after her before she gets herself into trouble.”

Sherlock turns to see Molly hovering awkwardly a few steps away, clearly aware that they’re talking about her, but uncertain what to do with herself while they do.

“What happened to her face, by the way?”

“Oh, that.” Sherlock is embarrassed now by the total inelegance of his attempt at a disguise. “I was... trying to make it look like she had a black eye.”

“Ah,” John says.

“I know it didn’t really work. But she was worried someone from the ship would recognize her. It was the best I could do under the circumstances.”

John, to his eternal credit, declines to say anything more on the subject.

“Don’t worry. It will be all right. I’m certain of it.”
Saying the words aloud feels like a lie—Sherlock is not at all certain it will be all right. It would be more accurate to characterize his feelings about the situation as blind hope, rather than certainty, but he wants to dispel the look of worry in John’s eyes.

John nods again. “I trust you.”

Sherlock knows, looking into John’s eyes then, that perhaps in spite of all his better judgment, John does trust him.

The realization makes something twist sharply in Sherlock’s chest and he realizes it’s guilt—that John can trust him so completely when Sherlock himself is not at all certain it will work out.

Worse still, seeing John look at him like that makes the tiny shard of jealousy wedged in under Sherlock’s heart feel suddenly like a betrayal. Why can’t Sherlock trust John as implicitly as John seems to trust him?

The logical part of his brain knows that there’s nothing going on anymore between John and Sally, that he has no cause for worry—John has told him now on several occasions that Sherlock is the only person he’s interested in spending his time with on shore—but after seeing them together just now, the warmth and the familiarity in their address, it makes fear trickle through Sherlock, cold and inevitable.

What if John forgot to tell Sherlock about Sally? Maybe they have some kind of understanding where they take up together again whenever John returns to Rio. Maybe that’s why John chose this tavern in particular… Maybe John has women in every port he’s visited, waiting for him to return. John’s crewmates have certainly implied as much.

Or maybe he didn’t forget, maybe he simply assumed that Sherlock would be fine with it.

After all, you don’t earn the nickname Three Continents Watson for nothing.

Sherlock’s dismay must be evident on his face because John’s hand is rubbing his arm in gentle concern.

“What’s wrong?”

He doesn’t want to say anything—doesn’t want to give evidence of his mistrust of John—and now is certainly not the time and place to discuss it, but he can’t seem to help himself. The tiny shard of jealousy is like poison; he does not know how to reverse its effects, save for blurting out:

“How do you know Sally?”

If John is surprised by the question, he only looks it for a moment. Then his face is softening into a look of tenderness. “Oh, love. Sally is a good friend of mine, but there’s nothing between us anymore.”

So they were lovers once—unbelievably that knowledge still stings.

“What happened between us—it was a long time ago. We’re just good friends now. You have nothing to worry about.”

Sherlock nods, miserably, but he must not look convinced because John is reaching up to brush his fingers over Sherlock’s cheek.

“Alright?” John asks him softly, his eyes flickering back and forth between Sherlock’s with
newfound concern. There’s a groove of worry between his eyebrows, a shadow growing on his face, and Sherlock feels suddenly sick for making John look like that.

“Yes,” he says, nodding again, this time with more conviction.

He wants to reach up and catch hold of John’s hand, to press it in apology, but he does not dare show so much open affection in this public place.

“I better get back to Molly,” he says then, all too aware of how close they’re standing together, how badly he wants to eliminate the few inches of distance between them by pulling John’s mouth to his.

John nods, but does not step away, his eyes alighting briefly on Sherlock’s mouth, and Sherlock can feel all of a sudden that John is experiencing the exact same irresistible pull towards himself that he is experiencing towards John.

It takes all of his willpower then to take a step backwards, to drop his eyes from John’s, and make his way to where Molly is standing, waiting for him to lead her to the table where John’s messmates sit.

He cannot help but turn around just once to look back at John, and when he does, he sees that John is still watching him from where he stands beside the bar, his hands back in his pockets, his posture seemingly casual again.

But Sherlock knows John too well now to be fooled by him; even from across the room, Sherlock can read the tension in the way he holds himself, the longing in his body as clear to Sherlock as a streak of flame against the night sky.

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Introducing Molly to John’s messmates goes far more smoothly than Sherlock feared. No one seems to care much about the details of their past together, or seems to think it strange that Sherlock should have a boyhood friend who joined the navy who just happened to show up in the same tavern as the rest of them.

Everyone seems to be in too good of a mood to bother much with details.

No one even asks her why she has pitch smeared over one eye, and Sherlock offers up a small silent prayer of thanks to whichever gods happen to be listening.

They manage to both squeeze themselves in on the end of the bench beside Burns.

There is one nerve-racking moment when hearing mention of the Agamemnon, Banana Bill looks up from the other end of the table to say, “My old mate Charlie was a foretopman on the Agamemnon some years back. Is he still with her?”

Molly, stammering out a reply that she isn’t quite sure, maybe she’s heard the name once or twice before, but she isn’t actually all that well acquainted with every sailor onboard, being a fairly new recruit herself, but at that point Banana Bill becomes distracted by Lee winning their current round of dice.

“Dammit, man!” he cries, pounding the table in frustration.

“Next round’s on you, old boy!” Half Pint Lee cackles, slapping him on the back.
It’s at this point that John arrives, his hands full with a pint each for Sherlock and Molly, and both Molly and Sherlock turn to him with what Sherlock imagines must be matching expressions of desperate relief, because he laughs when he sees them.

“Never seen two people who looked more eager for a drink!”

He slides the drinks across the table towards them, and Sherlock takes his, grateful to have something to do with his hands.

“There’s food coming as well. I thought you both might be hungry.” John turns to Molly, “I’m not sure how well they feed you boys on the Agamemnon but if it’s anything like the naval ships I’ve worked on, I’d guess you’d never turn your nose up at a square meal.”

“That’s very kind,” Molly says, and then, remembering herself, goes on to say in a slightly rougher voice, “Let me re-pay you.” She reaches for something in her jacket and Sherlock is impressed that she had the foresight to bring money with her. It can’t be easy for her to access with Grimsby as her chaperone.

But John waves away her offer, looking displeased. “Nonsense. If you’re a friend of Sherlock’s, then you’re a friend of mine. You can buy me a drink some other time.”

He smiles at her, and Sherlock can practically feel Molly swooning beside him.

“Oye, speaking of which—” Patterson yells from across the table. “Where’s your drink, Johnny?”

“I’m not staying,” John says, straightening up.

There’s a collective chorus of disapproval at this announcement.

“What a loss, what a great loss,” Ironsides intones, shaking his head over his pint as though he’s just learned of the death of a dear friend.

“Aw, come on!” Patterson calls. “You’ve plenty of time! Stay for one drink, at least!”

But John shakes his head. “Too much to do,” he says mysteriously.

Sherlock looks around the table at the faces of John’s messmates, wondering if any of them know what John is up to.

Burns has a knowing look in his eye, but then again, he always does.

The rest of them look more jovial than disappointed, their efforts to make him stay clearly more of a pretense than anything else. Sherlock suspects he would have told them whatever it is he’s planning.

“I’ll be back to get this one in a bit.”

Sherlock is startled out of his speculation by the feeling of John’s hand on his shoulder.

“Look after him for me, will you?”

“I don’t know,” Patterson says, provocingly, leaning across the table in Sherlock’s direction. “If you’re going to leave him alone like this as soon as you arrive maybe we should find him some better company!”

Sherlock bristles at this as the rest of them laughingly voice their agreement.
The only one who doesn’t laugh is Burns, who looks steadily at John and says, “Aye, we’ll look after him for you, lad.”

“Thank you, Burns,” John says, offering him a brief but deeply appreciative look before stepping back from Sherlock, and turning to Molly.

“At least I know I can count on you, Marcus, even if I can’t trust this lot. Keep an eye on your old friend for me—make sure he doesn’t get into too much trouble, eh?”

Molly nods frantically over the top of her pint. The pewter tankards aren’t all that big but somehow it makes her look smaller than ever when she has it in her hands. Maybe it’s just because Sherlock has never seen Molly with a pint before.

“Good lad.”

John turns to go, and all of a sudden Sherlock cannot stand the thought of John leaving him here.

“Wait!”

He twists around in his seat on the bench and grabs for John’s hand.

John turns, startled.

He wants to demand that John tell him where he is going, insist that he cannot go unless he takes Sherlock with him, to rage at him for daring to leave Sherlock here for even an hour when they have so little time together, but then he sees the look on John’s face—soft and open and patiently waiting for whatever it is Sherlock is about to say and Sherlock feels something in his chest give way.

He’s painfully aware that everyone at the table is watching them.

“Nothing,” he says, his voice small and choked, and he’s filled with a sudden rush of self-hatred.

He sounds like a petulant child. The room feels too small, too hot all of a sudden, as if the walls have started to shrink. He wishes the others would look away.

He can’t help but adding, with some desperation. “Only… come back soon.”

“I will.” John squeezes Sherlock’s fingers gently between his own, holding Sherlock’s gaze. The look in his eyes is so intense that for one brief moment, the rest of the tavern seems to melt away, leaving only the two of them, linked by the shimmering promise in John’s eyes. All of the noise, the shouting, the laughter, the drunken singing, it all goes quiet, and Sherlock realizes in that moment that that is all he wants—to be alone with John, anywhere, anywhere at all, if only it is away from the noise, the clamor, and the probing eyes of other people.

And then John lets go of his hand, turning to make his way towards the door, and all the noise comes rushing back in, leaving Sherlock bereft and overcome all at once.

End Notes

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