A Spell of Deduction

Summary

Newly returned from fighting Death Eaters in the Middle East, Healer John Watson gets a new flatmate and discovers he's exchanged one battleground for another in postwar London.

Notes

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

There was a line John vaguely remembered from a play his sister Harry had made him see on his last leave. *Cry havoc and let loose the dogs of war*. He wasn't sure about the second part--he'd seen trained dogs in some units, seen them grinning, tongues lolling, at their trainers one second and leaping for the jugular moments later--but *cry havoc* was right.

Especially when there was magic in the mix.

God help the Muggles. If they were lucky, it was a Killing Curse, green and silent, over in an instant. He'd seen the bodies of men hit with *Cruciatus*, their faces frozen in a rictus of pain and pure, hopeless confusion. Mostly pain. *Cruciatus* did that to a person, regardless of whether or not they knew what it was.

It wasn't John's job to fight. He did, when push came to shove, but he'd been sent here to be a medic--a mediwizard, technically speaking, dealing with the spell damage the Muggle doctors couldn't handle.

Somewhere in the distance, he could hear the telltale rattling of machine-gun fire. Strange how that was a relief, a moment of respite.

The last he'd heard from Harry was that it had been weeks since they'd last read about a captured Death Eater in the *Prophet*. John had smiled bitterly at that. *It's because they're all here, sis, in this bloody desert*. He hadn't recognised any of the ones they'd killed so far, but that wasn't a surprise. You-Know-Who--he'd never got out of the habit--had had followers all over Europe, and when he'd fallen, they'd taken flight, sought out the places where nobody in their right mind would go, but where there were older, deeper magics to be found.

They were fighting now in the shadow of the Hindu Kush, where gigantic statues carved into the cliffs watched them in silence as they'd watched hundreds of thousands of generations battle over these wastelands. Try as he might, John couldn't understand why.

A few fitful red sparks spat from the end of his wand to tell him five minutes had passed since the last spell he'd cast. Grabbing his kit, he crept out from behind the boulder where he'd taken refuge and made his way toward the nearest prone figure. This one was at least still breathing, keening under his breath and clutching what remained of his left leg.
John had never been squeamish, and even if he had been, three years in eastern Afghanistan would have cured him quickly enough. There simply wasn't time to be squeamish. His hands moved mechanically--antiseptic, then bandages, enough to get him to the field hospital.

His first thought when the curse grazed his shoulder was that it was patently unfair to sling *Sectumsempra* at a medic. But the Death Eaters had never played fair.

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It was just as well he'd never needed much sleep, because Mycroft Holmes suspected any self-respecting healer would have quit refusing to give him Rest Charms months ago. Not that many were left, of course, and not that they didn't have far better things to do than worry about the sleeping habits of a minor Ministry official in the Department of International Cooperation. There was so much work to be done, still, and he knew that fully cleaning up the mess left by You Know Who’s return would likely be the work of decades. At least they’d finally gotten the werewolf problem under control, and his three o’clock meeting with Nachtboff, the goblin representative, held the promise of finally getting the new treaty signed. They certainly didn’t need a Fifth Goblin Rebellion just now, with wizarding resources strained almost to breaking and so much mistrust, everywhere. Years of not knowing what side anyone was on still...stained...far too many interactions.

Three interdepartmental memos floated onto his desk, the last so poorly folded it wobbled on its wings. Ah well, he hadn’t especially planned on stepping out for lunch today. As usual. Right now, he had more important work to do than addressing the memos from Muggle Relations, Magical Trading Standards, and, from the poor construction, the latter clearly hailed from Sports.

The scrolls on his desk now represented the culmination of months of work, of scrying and travel by his best people, but he finally had in his hands a list of all the living Ministry personnel scattered to the four winds by the fighting. Magical tattoos would have been so much simpler, but of course, too many people had objected with paranoid, short-sighted, needlessly emotional concerns about it being too close to a Dark Mark.

He conjured up a butterbeer and began reading, stopping to sip his drink and take notes on who should be left in place, promoted, demoted, rewarded, arrested, recalled... Many of the summaries made for interesting reading, he made a note of which could be safely leaked to the *Daily Prophet*. One or two made for especially interesting reading, those he earmarked for the *Quibbler*.

The next name had a slight glow to the ink, indicating Thais had flagged this one. Hm... St. Mungo-trained mediwizard, *embedded with Muggle military* in the far East...interesting. Trained in Muggle healing as well, but had gone through standard Ministry combat training...this had the late Albus
Dumbledore’s fingerprints all over it, and Mycroft wasn’t surprised to find that he’d been a prefect at Hogwarts (Hufflepuff) and that, yes, Dumbledore had written glowing references, veiled threats, and anything else that had been necessary to place his ex-student where he’d wanted him, protecting unsuspecting Muggles.

He threw some floo powder into the roaring fire. “Weasley, when convenient?”

Promptness was one of Percy Weasley’s strong points, and he stepped out of the fire precisely three minutes later. “Mr Holmes?”

“I need you to get me the current location and status of John Hipparchus Watson.”

“Hipparchus with two p’s, sir?” Weasley was scribbling the name in his ever-present notebook.

“Correct.” The boy was still desperate to prove himself here at the ministry, and to his new boss as well. Mycroft appreciated eagerness in subordinates.

With a smart nod, Weasley disappeared back into the fireplace. Rather to Mycroft’s surprise, he returned less than an hour later, just as he’d been preparing an elegantly folded crane for Sports, to tell them that if they couldn’t start handling things at their end he would arrange for the cancellation of the next Quidditch World Cup.

“John Hipparchus Watson is currently in the Spell Damage ward at St Mungo’s, but I’m afraid I could get little more than that from his paperwork.” Weasley was looking at his shoes, clearly displeased with himself. “Half of it’s been redacted, sir. Whoever he is, someone high in the Ministry ranks is interested in making sure nobody knows about him.”

So someone was still watching over Watson. To protect him, or to... Mycroft allowed himself a hint of a smile. This was getting more interesting. Certainly more interesting than handling those oafs in Sports. “Thank you, Weasley, that will be all for now.”

“Very well, sir.” That was another useful trait of Weasley’s--he never asked unnecessary questions, at least not of Mycroft. It seemed he’d started asking them during the False Administration, the one the Ministry refused to discuss on account of it having been run almost entirely by wizards under the Imperius Curse. Mycroft was not the sort to rule through fear, manipulation was far more effective, but he was not above taking advantage of his subordinates’ existing proclivities.
Once Weasley had headed back into the fireplace, Mycroft turned to address one of the many portraits covering the walls, this one of a rather stout witch wearing Healer’s Whites and with an expression suggestive of a pleasant bedside manner. “Madame Derwent, would you be so kind as to look in on a fellow healer who may be in need?” He added a slight bow for good measure.

“Oh, go on then, you...” the portrait of Dily Derwent replied, eyes twinkling at the overt flattery. “Back in two shakes of a hippogriff’s tail.”

She was as good as her word, appearing back in her frame only a quarter of an hour or so later. Her mood, however, had changed from flirtatious to what he could only think to colloquially describe as mothering, though it was not a mood that would have ever been found on his mother. “Poor lamb, he’s been through a lot. Sectumsempra to the shoulder, still healing, miracle he’s as well as he is. Cruciatius curse to the leg, I shouldn’t wonder, and of course he’s not eating nor sleeping enough.” She twisted her hands together in a way that suggested a fervent desire to immediately begin treating him. “If you ask me...”

Mycroft interrupted before she could begin what looked to be a long litany of concerns about how St. Mungo’s healing standards had obviously gone downhill in the last three hundred years. “Will he recover?”

“Dark curses all come down to the strength of will of the caster and the victim, but if he’s made it so far I expect he’ll survive, though not without scarring and some loss of mobility. Cruciatius...it affects people differently, there’s no way to tell before he’s using the leg again.” She shrugged. “The rest is nothing that rest and care couldn’t cure. I’d say he’s perfectly capable of a good recovery, physically speaking, though the poor duck is likely to have nightmares for some time to come.”

Mycroft thanked her, then began preparations for his afternoon meeting with the goblins.

She doesn’t cackle with glee, but it’s a near thing. Weeks of negotiations, meetings in alleys and secret messages, for this. This moment. The only wrinkle is the knowledge she can’t tell anyone. Oh, but it would be a treat to show them, to see the envy on their faces and know that just once she’d actually gotten one over on them. As it is, though, she’ll have to settle for knowing she’s better than them, that she has this, and they’ll never even know. Surely there’s a great deal of pleasure in that, as well. But for now, she pushes all thoughts of anything else aside to focus on the wooden box in front of her. It’s smaller than she’d expected, but good things and small packages and whatnot. Carefully, carefully, she lifts the lid...she’s not a child at Christmas, after all, to ruin a thing by being too rough with it.
The last thing she sees is a flash of purple light, and if she has time to think anything before the end, it's that it's every bit as beautiful as she had hoped.

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John wasn’t entirely sure how long he’d been in hospital. There were the vague, snatched memories of being carried beneath fluorescent lights and the incessant beeping of various machines—only, suddenly, it had all stopped and he couldn’t recall exactly when or under what circumstances. When he’d finally come to—really come to—there wasn’t a single machine in sight. The smell, too, had shifted, from the tang of Muggle antiseptics to smells of herbal concoctions that tugged at his scattered memories. It all added up to two things: one, he wasn’t dead, because death didn’t hurt so bloody much afterwards, and two, he was back in St. Mungo’s, back in London, back in England, back...home.

And with that thought, his exhausted body made the executive decision that that was quite enough thinking for the nonce, thank you very much, and he promptly passed out again.

This pattern continued for more days than he was able to count. Occasionally he was poked or prodded by a mediwitch or wizard, and far more often than he’d have liked a truly vile concoction or two was poured down his throat. Every now and again, he’d wake up to find a bouquet of flowers on the side table with a card from someone whose name he didn’t recognise until he hit the surname and remembered he’d served with them. He heard nothing from his sister, but then, he hadn’t really expected to. On the rare occasions he could manage it, he pestered staff for their copies of the Daily Prophet, to try to make up for all that he’d missed of the wizarding world.

You Know Who’s major supporters had all been killed or tried and sentenced to Azkaban, they’d begun reconstruction at Hogwarts...and strangely, that had hurt too, to think a place he associated with some of the best years of his life was another casualty of this sodding war. And always, references to the Boy Who Lived. It really said everything you needed to know about the whole damned war when you realised the highest title they could give to someone was that of a survivor.

He’d finished his seventh year at Hogwarts before Harry Potter had started, so he’d never had the dubious pleasure of meeting him.

The gardens at St. Mungo’s were, thankfully, actually outside, instead of just being enchanted to seem that way. The sky over London bore not the slightest resemblance to the clear, star-filled black of the desert, but it was still a sky, and it had been a great relief when John had been judged healthy enough to roam there, cane at the ready.
Well, he was still getting accustomed to the cane. But that, his doctors had told him brightly, would come in its own time. John was getting used to hearing that. He knew he’d used the same upbeat, professional tone himself, once, but it grated to hear it from the other end.

“John! Merlin’s beard, John, is that you?”

He nearly spun on his heel before realising he could no longer do that. Leaning heavily on the cane and biting back a series of increasingly profane mutterings, he turned to find himself face-to-face with a man in Healer’s robes. A familiar-looking man.

“Michael?” he finally ventured, wondering why he found it so surprising. They’d sat the exam for St Mungo’s together, after all. Surely it couldn’t be that strange to find him working here. “Michael Sorrel.” He forced a smile. “It’s been...” How long had it been? “...a long time,’ he finished lamely.

Michael looked ready to clap him on the back by way of greeting before seeing the cane and thinking better of it. “Too long, John m’boy, too long.” He summoned over a bench wide enough for both of them and sat carefully down at one end. “Do us both good to catch up, I expect.” He laughed, and John was amazed to discover that Mike’s good nature, at least, had survived the war intact.

He learned, over the course of the next hour or so, that it was April, which explained both the chill and the threatening clouds. Mike had begun his residency at St Mungo’s within a few weeks of John’s shipping out for Afghanistan. He’d married, a blonde healer specializing in tropical diseases, and they’d both spent the war practically locked down at St. Mungo’s, treating any wounded they could get their hands on. “Muggles as well, if you can believe it,” Michael chortled. “Very nice, once you get to know them.”

“I treated a fair number of them myself,” replied John. “Enough to make me wonder what all the fuss was about. They’re not so very different from us, in the end.”

“No arguments here, m’wife’s one quarter and I have a Muggle great uncle. Named me after him, he always gave me butterscotch candies when we visited.” Mike smiled at the memory. “But enough politics. Tell me what you’ve been up to, John, from the look of things it’s quite a story.”

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The witch had been in her forties, brown hair, robes that had seen better days. In life, she would have been average looking; in death, she was comparatively better looking than many corpses, there not being a mark on her. Of course, she’d have been in even better shape if she’d been found a few weeks earlier, but she’d apparently kept to herself, and the neighbors had only really realised something was wrong when they’d noticed the pile of Daily Prophets outside her door. There was also a bit of a smell, but one learned to ignore awful smells this close to Knockturn Alley.

Lestrade sighed. It was hardly the first mysterious death he’d seen (the count was three so far this month) but even when magic was involved, there was still a logic to crime. And, to his mind, an illogic to violent death, which there’d bloody well been enough of during the war to last another hundred years.

“Send an owl for Holmes, I have a feeling we’re going to need him on this one.”
SEVENTH VICTIM FOUND IN STRING OF MYSTERIOUS DEATHS

IS IT DEATH EATERS?

WILL WE ALL BE MURDERED IN OUR BEDS??

Ministry remains silent as yet another body is found.

DAILY PROPHET EXCLUSIVE

by Rita Skeeter

My dearest readers, you are no doubt all wondering what on earth I’m going on about, but that’s just what the Ministry would want you to believe. I, Rita Skeeter, investigatrice extraordinaire, a crusader for truth and bestselling author—-but I digress.

Members of Magical Law Enforcement found the body of Hildegard Brown yesterday morning in her London flat. The cause of death is as yet undetermined.

Miss Brown, 42, was a plain-looking, mousy witch who worked as a bookkeeper for Odds and Bodkins, a secondhand shop near Knockturn Alley.

“Kept to herself, never friendly,” sniffs Gladys Llewellyn, neighbor of the deceased. “Thought she was a bit above us, like. And after I’d brought over me nan’s own recipe for cauldron cakes. After that, I told my Hubert, well, I shan’t be darkening her door again. And I didn’t exchange more than five words with her after, not in ten years.”

Why should you, my dear readers, care about this Miss Brown, an unfriendly, unattractive, and not particularly interesting person? Because it is my pleasure to reveal that she is clearly the seventh in a series of unexplained deaths the Ministry would rather you not know about.
Auror Lestrade, chief investigator on this case, was unavailable for comment. Possibly he’s ashamed of having let seven unexplained deaths remain unexplained. Miss Brown was only one among a number of bodies found since the defeat of the Dark Lord who shall not be named. There’s only one connection between these deaths--discovered, of course, by yours truly--that each and every one of them either was or was known to consort with a known Death Eater.

So, what have we got here, dear readers? The Ministry assures us that the Dark Lord is dead, but they thought so before, didn’t they? Who’s to say what this might mean? Even if the Ministry knows, they certainly aren’t telling.

But rest assured, dear readers, I, Rita Skeeter, will stay on the case, and you shall be the first to know when an eighth body inevitably turns up.

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He met with Michael a few more times after that, always in the gardens. John knew Mike must have had access to his records, if he’d wanted to look, and could have visited him in his room, but appreciated the courtesy of meeting outside, where they could pretend they were just old friends and not healer and semi-invalid.

“So what’s next for you, John?” Mike asked one Wednesday, after John had mentioned being well enough to finally leave St. Mungo’s. (He wasn’t healed, exactly, but he’d reached the point where the hospital couldn’t fix any more, and there must be others that needed the bed space.)

John fought the urge to shrug, a movement that did his shoulder no favours. “I’d like to stay in London... But flat prices are mad here. I’ve even checked the Muggle papers, though the exchange rate’s gone to hell.”

“Maybe a flatshare?”

“Who’d want to live with me?” he wanted to add “a useless, crippled ex-soldier with nightmares and a very small Ministry pension,” but that was self-pity, and he doled that out as carefully as the healers doled out the more addictive painkillers.

Mike stared at him for a minute, opened his mouth, closed it, and continued staring. John was just beginning to worry that Sorrel was about to do something very stupid and awkward, like offer to let him move in with them, when the other man spoke.
“Do you know, you’re the second person I’ve heard that from in as many days?”

“Really?” John was as wary of hope as self-pity, but he really didn’t want to leave the city. Besides, after everything else he’d been through, he was hard-pressed to imagine someone so horrible he couldn’t handle living them. “Who was the first?”

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Most of the staff at St. Mungo’s knew that underneath the main floors were several floors of basements. A few of the staff knew there were under basements. No one, apparently, had known about the sub-sub-sub-basements until Sherlock Holmes had waltzed in one day, pointed them out, and then proceeded to set up his own potions labs down there.

“....and they just let him?” John asked, incredulous, as Mike led him down stairways that looked as though they hadn’t been used since the hospital’s founding.

Mike chuckled. “He’d just worked out which of the nurses had been stealing the powdered dragons’ scales. The administration was so happy he’d found the thief and was willing to not tell the ministry about the thefts they’d have been happy to give him a pile of Galleons. But he asked for the space instead.”

The narrow, twisting stairs were killing John’s leg and he kept knocking his cane against the damp stone walls. “He sounds...interesting.”

“You’ve no idea.”

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John was reminded rather uncomfortably of the Potions classroom in the dungeons of Hogwarts, right down to the angular, dark-haired figure darting back and forth at the far end of the subbasement. He’d never admit to having had the occasional nightmare about his former Potions professor Snape. Any Hogwarts student with half a brain, as far as he could tell, had just those kinds of nightmares. Now his nightmares were rather more full of deserts and those soldiers he hadn’t been able to save, and suddenly he envied a younger self whose greatest worry had been an unpleasant professor.
‘You’ve interrupted me at a very delicate moment. If this turns green, it means a man’s life.’ Holmes’ slowly added three drops to a glass container full of blue-coloured liquids heated by a small fire.

‘Now,’ he said, finally turning to face them, and John had a first impression of a thin, pale face, all planes and angles, almost floating in the darkness between the black of his hair and his robes.

‘I see you’ve brought me a potential flatmate, Michael,’ he announced, and proceeded to stare at John much in the same fashion that he recalled from Occlumency training. On instinct, his mental wall sprang up. Some things, you didn’t forget.

From Mike’s lack of reaction to his abrupt manner, John assumed that this was normal behaviour for Holmes. ‘Ah, yes, Sherlock, allow me to introduce my old Healer friend John Watson, lately...’

‘Yes, yes, recently returned from fighting in the Middle East...embedded with the Muggle military, no less, interesting... I play the violin at all hours and sometimes go days without talking...and while I’ve my potions lab here, I have been known to take some experiments home, though I generally don’t bring back anything too likely to explode. Will that be a problem?’ Most of the last statement was addressed to John.

Before John could answer, he added ‘I feel flatmates should really know the worst of each other in advance.’

John’s jaw wasn’t on the floor, although it desperately wanted to be. ‘How exactly did you...?’

‘Slightly fading tan, you certainly didn’t get that in London. It stops at your cuffs and neckline, so work, not holiday, kept you there. Your stance is Muggle military, as is your haircut and your boots, very distinctive, but Michael called you a healer and you’re clearly a wizard, especially with your wand stored where you can pull it at a moment’s notice, a trait you usually find in Aurors and other trained fighters.’

John’s gaze flicked downward to where his wand rested in a holster at his belt. ‘Old habits die hard.’

Sherlock smiled. It wasn’t a safe smile. ‘There are worse habits to keep. I think you’ll find, John Watson, that in coming to London you’ve only exchanged one battlefield for another.’
“What do you mean? I’d heard the last of the Death Eaters has been rounded up ages ago.”

Sherlock appeared about to say more when a loud noise behind him made them all look to see the potion had indeed turned a glowing emerald green. With an exclamation of excitement, Sherlock rushed back to the lab table and once again began doing... something... with all of the potions.

“Two-twenty one B, in Baker Street, I’ll meet you there tomorrow at half past eleven.”

John opened his mouth to reply but Sherlock seemed to have already forgotten they were there.

“We may as well head back, there’s no talking to him when he’s like this,” Mike confirmed.

Just as they’d reached the beginning steps of the spiral stairs, a voice called out “If you continue to your left, then the corridor to the right, there’s a rather ancient but functional dumbwaiter, I think Healer Watson should find that easier on his leg than the stairs.”

“As you can see, John, he’s... a bit peculiar,” Mike said apologetically. “I’d quite understand if you didn’t want to room with him. As it happens I’ve just remembered a friend of my wife’s second cousin’s...”

“No,” John said. Rather to his own surprise, he was smiling. “I think this one will do.”
Chapter 3

A week and a half or so later, John had settled in to his new flat. 221 B Baker Street turned out to be a comfortable two bedroom that looked as though it had last been decorated during Victoria’s reign, nestled in a primarily Muggle neighborhood; and best of all the landlady (a very motherly Squib named Amelia Hudson) was willing to accept rent in Galleons or pounds.

Settling in to his new flatmate seemed likely to take a bit longer. It wasn’t simply a matter of finding the (not so) occasional eyeball in a jar at the back of the refrigerator, or the lingering aroma of formaldehyde that seemed to have taken up permanent residence in the loo. John had lived with worse--far worse. His path and Sherlock’s crossed only occasionally in those first few days, limited to a few incoherent grunts in the morning before John had finished making coffee, or late in the evenings, choosing items from Indian or Chinese takeaway menus.

He still had no idea what Sherlock actually did for a living. It had occurred to him to ask, but whether he feared what the answer might be or merely preferred having some mysteries in his otherwise painfully predictable existence, chose to keep his questions to himself.

Then there were the visitors. And the owls. They came at all hours, and with the exception of a few of the owls, rarely made repeat visits. Sherlock always left notes asking for the use of their shared parlour when a visitor appeared, and John would politely banish himself to his bedroom or, more frequently, head out for a walk with his wretched cane. Many of the guests wore robes with deep hoods, which had almost startled John into drawing his wand the first time he’d seen one. Too close to Death Eaters, and he’d worried for a bit that he might be living with a Dark wizard, until he’d noticed that some of the guests were obviously non-human. He was half convinced he’d even heard mermish, late one night when he again hadn’t been able to sleep.

Thus, John wasn’t surprised to see his flatmate sprawled on the couch this morning, looking for all the world as though he hadn’t moved since John had last seen him in that same pose the night before. At this point, the only thing that would have surprised him in Sherlock’s behaviour was not being surprised by Sherlock’s behaviour.

“Making tea, would you like any?” he asked as he made his way around the piles of Sherlock’s scrolls and books towards the kitchen.

Sherlock made a noise he decided to interpret as an affirmative, but otherwise remained as still as the victim of a Stunning Spell.

John put the kettle on, then took three rats out of the freezer. While the Earl Grey brewed, he brought
the now thawed rats back into the parlour and tossed one at Sherlock’s owl Theodora, who perched imperially atop a bronze bust of Catullus. The other two rodents were given to John’s Elspeth, presently making herself at home on a wingback chair. She was already looking better than she had when he’d retrieved her yesterday, but he planned to check her feather growth and take her to the Owlery in Diagon Alley sometime soon, just in case.

Just as he headed back into the kitchen to get the tea, he heard Sherlock’s voice drift up behind him.

“Two lumps.”

“You are hands down the oddest person I’ve ever met,” John said, settling a steaming mug on the coffee table end nearest Sherlock’s head before settling down into the wingback chair. “And that’s saying something, my mum used to have a subscription to the *Quibbler*. She said it was for the horoscopes, but one time it published an ‘expose’ claiming there were mind control potions in chocolate frogs and she wouldn’t let us eat any for months. I was terrified I’d never get my Helga Hufflepuff card and complete the set.”

“And did you?”

John took a sip out of his *Montrose Magpies* mug while he tried to remember. “...I did, yes, traded Arthur down the street a John Dee and a Circe for it, but I think mum threw them all out my last year at Hogwarts.”

Sherlock continued staring at the ceiling, his tea untouched. “Pity, that printing of that particular Founders’ set is now considered rather collectible. One recently went for several hundred galleons at auction.”

“Damn,” John said ruefully, “I could use the gold... Wait, why are we talking about this?”

“You’re trying to distract yourself from thinking about your brother Harry, and I’m trying to decide if talking with you is more or less interesting than talking to the skull.”

“Hey!” John and the skull both exclaimed, then eyed each other warily. Well, he had a feeling the skull was eyeing him back, it was a bit hard to tell. He leaned forward, towards his flatmate. “How do you know that? About Harry, I mean.”
“Your owl.”

“What about Elspeth?” John glanced up behind him, but didn’t see anything particularly noteworthy about his striped owl.

In one quick motion, Sherlock swung his legs off the couch and sat upright. He turned his pale grey eyes towards John and for the first time since their initial meeting, John felt like he had his flatmate’s full attention. He fought the urge to sit up straighter. “You’ve only just brought her to the flat, but from her age and your comfort with her, she’s clearly not a recent purchase. Ergo, she’s either your owl, or your family’s. She wasn’t with you in the desert because as a member of *Asio clamator*, native to South America, she would have been uncomfortable there. Moreover, you likely thought it both too dangerous for her to be near the fighting and terribly conspicuous for you to have such a pet around Muggles. You obviously care about her, so you’d only have left her with someone close, someone you trusted, while you were away. Family, then. But you’re living with me, not them, so you’re either not that close or there’s been a falling out. Since you’ve only just retrieved your owl, this was the first time you’d seen them since you’ve been back, which means they didn’t visit you in hospital. Even distant relations usually come by for war heroes, so it was a falling out, most likely while you were stationed abroad.” Sherlock still hadn’t stopped to take a breath, and some corner of John’s mind wondered if he’d manage the entire train of thought before he passed out from a lack of oxygen.

“Your care with your owl suggests you’re worried about her condition, meaning you no longer trust the caretaker, and with good reason. The cage is almost too small for her species, which is why you let her out the minute you got back, and no one would intentionally downsize their owl cage. Unless they had to. Marks on it show it was purchased from a pawn shop, which suggests the current location of the original cage. The latch, however, has many recent scratches that show unsteady hands opening and closing it, the hands of a drinker. The cage is lined with old correspondence and newspapers, on at least one piece is visible the name ‘Harry Watson’, and some of which is clearly stained with spilled alcohol, which causes the ink to bleed in a distinctly different manner than water. Add all that to your obvious anger since your return from your visit, and you have an estranged brother Harry, currently suffering financial difficulties due to his recently acquired drinking problem.”

John sighed and brought his hand to his face, briefly, before dropping it back down to wrap both hands around his mug. “Wow. Just....wow. Dead right, almost all of it. Harry’s been...well. Since the war, and our parents, then Clara, she’s...”

It was Sherlock’s turn to be surprised. “She?”

“Yeah, that was the bit you were off about. Harry’s my older sister. Harriet Everilda Watson.”
“Well.” With that, Sherlock went back to studying the ceiling. “I always miss something.”

John opened his mouth several times over, each time stopping short of actually forming words. When he finally did speak, three gulps of scalding tea later, it was only slightly less incredulous than he’d feared. “Is this what you do for a living, then? The owls, the people in dodgy cloaks, the mermish...”

“Consulting detective. Only one in England, possibly the world.”

“Right.” John sank back into his chair. “Right, consulting detective.” He drank more of his tea.

“When people have a problem they can’t go to the Ministry with, or when the Aurors are out of their depth, which is always...they come to me. And I solve it for them.”

“You solve it for them,” echoed John. Well, of course he did, his subconscious put in helpfully, and sounding disturbingly like Sherlock himself. “Good to know.”

A snowy owl flew in the window. John was reasonably certain he’d seen it here before.

“It’s from the Lestrade.” Sherlock leapt up and took the message from its extended leg. “Another mysterious death...oh, that is interesting...”

He was now a virtual whirlwind, quickly scribbling a return note for the owl and sending it off again back through the open window. “No time to waste. I’ve told them not to touch anything this time, they destroyed the last crime scene before I could get there.” Sherlock spun a black cloak onto his shoulders in a single fluid motion. His eyes darted around the room one last time, then fixed themselves again on John. His grin lit up his entire face.

“Want to come?”

There were a number of answers John could have made to that. Yes, of course, Sherlock, I’d love to come along with you, a man I met two weeks ago and am still not convinced isn’t insane, to a crime scene where I’m likely not even legally permitted to be. Or possibly he could have claimed he had somewhere else to be, except that that was unlikely to work on anyone who had seen his schedule since moving in, least of all England’s only bloody consulting detective.
He settled for, “Sure, why not?”
Chapter 4

It had been long enough since the last time John had experienced Side-Along Apparition that he felt an unwelcome wave of nausea hit as soon as Sherlock grabbed his arm, and squeezed his eyes shut against it. When he opened them again, they were standing next to a dingy brick wall. Above them swung a familiar sign.

“Someone’s died at the Leaky Cauldron?” John frowned. “That’s not good.”

“It will be the seventy-fifth death at this establishment since it was built in 1500 by Daisy Dodderidge,” Sherlock said as they made their way to the entrance, currently blocked off with yellow ribbons blinking “STAY AWAY” and “NOTHING TO SEE HERE” back and forth furiously. “Before then this was the site of a minor battle in the second Goblin rebellion.”

He touched his wand to the centre of the doorway, and with a murmured “Sinoineo” the ribbons retreated, rustling at the edges of the doorframe. “Hurry up, they’ll be back in a few moments.”

Somehow, John knew better than to ask if Sherlock’s use of the Auror spell was entirely legal. He’d only been inside the Leaky Cauldron a handful of times, but it was still odd to see the place nearly empty as it was now. Half-empty breakfast dishes still sat on some of the tables; he supposed they must have only found the body in the morning when the victim didn’t come down. Seated at one of the cleared tables was a man he vaguely recognised as Tom, the hunchbacked owner of the inn, and two uniformed Aurors. One of the Aurors was outright glaring at Sherlock, the other just looked... resigned?

“Ah, Holmes, you’ve arrived.” The voice came from John’s other side and he found himself facing a third Auror, a tall man with prematurely silver hair. “I’ve kept everyone out, like you asked, but you’d best make it quick.” He noticed John. “Who’s this and why have you brought him to a closed crime scene?”

“He’s here to assist me, Lestrade.” Sherlock swept past them all, heading upstairs. “Come along, John.” He didn’t glance back to see if John followed.

At Sherlock’s announcement, the other two Aurors turned and stared at John. That was enough to convince him that following Sherlock was likely his best course of action. He really really didn’t want to know what they were seeing when they looked at him. John made his way up the stairs slowly, trying not to feel the questioning eyes on his back as he struggled with his cane.
Sherlock waited for him just inside the doorway of the room furthest down the hall. “Well?” he said, gesturing at the corpse on the bed.

Trying not to feel self-conscious, John stepped forward. He wasn’t sure what sort of strange test Sherlock was giving him, but he owed it to the dead man to try his best. “Well, it looks like he died sitting up, which is a bit odd. No signs of forced entry, and his wand is in the pocket of his robes, over there,” he gestured to the dark blue robes hanging in the open wardrobe. “We ought to do Priori Incantatem on it, all the same. It might tell us something. Could be poison, I suppose, from the wine bottle on the nightstand…”

Leaning over the body, he pulled out his wand and performed a quick Diagnostic Charm, one of the first lessons he’d had at St Mungo’s aeons ago. “No internal damage. In fact…” he frowned, “that’s not right.”

“What’s not right?”

Really, the victim looked like a perfectly normal elderly gentleman, perhaps a bit on the portly side, and suffering an unfortunate case of combover-- “Declining eyesight, slightly elevated blood pressure... the wear and tear I’d expect to see... He’s generally healthy for his age, other than being dead.”

“That would point to ill health,” Sherlock said absently, eyes rapidly moving around the rest of the room. “Killing curse?”

“That would be my first thought, but...I say, Sherlock, look at this.” He pointed at the man’s face, above the scraggly grey beard. “He’s smiling.” It wasn’t the grinning rictus of the mad, it was just a...very happy smile. As though he’d gotten what he wanted for his birthday, Christmas, and his team had won the Quidditch World Cup, all at once.

“They all are. The Ministry has thus far managed to keep that fact from becoming generally known.”

“All?” John finally turned back to him. “How many are there?”

“He makes eight,” a weary voice said from the doorway. John turned to see Lestrade standing there. “Eight deaths and we haven’t so much as a clue what killed them, let alone who. Please tell me you’ve noticed something, Sherlock, I don’t want to see a ninth.”
Sherlock was still looking round the room, and John could almost see the wheels turning in his head. “Apart from the obvious, there’s not much here.”

Lestrade sighed, either at Sherlock or the murder. Maybe both. “What’s the obvious, then?”

He paced back and forth in the room as he talked. “Recently arrived in London, he spoke at least three languages and has just come in to some good fortune. Near sighted, bachelor, owned a dog, right handed, though that’s almost certainly irrelevant. He’s registered here under a false name because he was here to do something illegal, which is why he hasn’t yet been reported missing. He’s actually a scholar from the Continent, affiliated with the Universität-Wittenberg, if you contact them with his physical description I’m sure they can tell you out his real name. He was alone in the room when he died.” Sherlock sped to the window and threw it open, then leaned outside looking in all directions. He made a satisfied noise then slammed the window shut again. “The killer is getting bolder.”

John risked a glance back at Lestrade, whose slightly pained look confirmed that Sherlock’s “obvious” was a good deal more than he’d previously had to go on.

“The killer?” John echoed. “But you said he was alone.”

“I know,” Sherlock said, and clapped his hands together. “Isn’t it lovely?”

That wasn’t the word John would have used. Nor, if his face was any indication, would it have been Lestrade’s choice. “

Sherlock moved to the bed and stared intently at the mussed sheets next to the body.

“Humour me, Holmes, and tell me how you got all that,” Lestrade waved an arm at the room, “from this.”

“No wedding ring or marks thereof. He keeps his wand on the left, so right-handed, and his clothing has dog hairs. He still has the travel detritus on his cloak from his long broom ride, he’s recently arrived. The fact that he’s elected to travel by broom instead of Apparation or Floo suggests he’s travelled some distance, and the feather stuck in the bristles is from a bird species native to the Continent. He’s packed only a few changes of clothing, but his bags are full of books and his hands are heavily stained with ink. A scholar, then. The books are in several languages and there are no dictionaries, thus, he’s fluent. Two bear marks of belonging to Universität-Wittenberg, and are
valuable enough they’d not have been allowed to leave the library unless the person taking them was a trusted member of the university community.

“His bag has a monogram that doesn’t match the name he registered at the Cauldron under, so he didn’t want to be found out, but he didn’t bother changing his robes or tidying himself up, so he was clearly not planning to meet a lover. Additionally, the bottle was purchased here, nearby, it’s an expensive vintage and he only has one glass. If he expected to have anyone else in the room surely he’d have gotten two.”

“Well,” John said, after several seconds of stunned silence, “I suppose, there we have it.” He looked at the body again, and then back at Sherlock. “Wait. No, wait. Are you actually serious?” Glancing towards Lestrade, he gestured at Sherlock. “Is he always like this?”

Lestrade almost quirked a smile at that. “Yeah, just about.”

“That...that was bloody amazing.”

“Really?” Sherlock spun around to face him. He sounded surprised.

“Yes, really.” John smiled, even though they were at a crime scene and there was a dead man not ten feet away and he still wasn’t entirely sure what the hell he was even doing there, because it turns out his flatmate really was a bloody marvel and he just didn’t have it in him to even pretend to not be impressed.

Sherlock actually smiled back, this time with a hint of what on anyone else John would assume was shyness. “That’s not what people usually say.”

“What do they usually say?”

“Sod off.”

The ensuing silence was broken by Lestrade’s cough. “Look, I hate to spoil the moment, but my team needs to have a look round.”
They broke eye contact, Sherlock glaring at Lestrade and John finding something fascinating on the wall above the bed.

“Alright, I’m...we’re done doing your jobs for you. Contact me when you’ve found out who the deceased was...you can manage that, can’t you?” He once again swept past Lestrade, his coat billowing dramatically behind him in a way that should have looked contrived but didn’t.

“Is he always like that?” John asked, still trying to wrap his head around everything he’d just seen.

“No, usually he’s less polite.”

“Oh.” Because what, really, could you say to that? “John Watson. Erm...Healer.” He switched his cane to his other hand and held out his right. It felt a bit absurd, but politeness was too deeply ingrained to dispense with now. “Pleased to meet you.”

The Auror’s handshake was firm as they tried to gauge each other. “Geoff Lestrade. Likewise. How the hell did you get mixed up with Sherlock?”

“We’re flatmates.”

“Flatmates.” Geoff said, in a tone laced with questions and no small amount of curiosity. “Well, you’re a braver man than I.”

John didn’t quite know what to say to that, so he excused himself instead.

When he Apparated back to 221B, the flat was empty. John chivvied Elspeth into her cage, apologising under his breath for its size and promising to exchange it while they were out. It did seem silly to go straight back to Diagon Alley after just having left, but errands were errands.

At the Owlery, they asked him to leave Elspeth with them for half an hour for a proper examination, so John busied himself looking at window displays (the selection of new brooms made him itch to take his out for a ride) and getting almost the last of his Galleons out of Gringotts to pay for the new cage and any necessary care.
Half an hour later, he showed up to collect his owl. It was a new girl behind the desk now, and she seemed oddly twitchy. Even the owls seemed a bit subdued. “John Watson? Here to collect my striped owl?”

“Watson? Oh...yes, yes. Right this way, Mr. Watson.” She led him through a door in the back he’d never been through before, down a darkened hallway.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his right arm, and for the second time that day, he felt the uncomfortable squeezing-pulling of a Side Along Apparition.

The nausea this time was worse, and it took him a second with his head between his legs before he was able to straighten up and look around.

“My sincerest apologies for the mode of transport, Healer Watson. I should have realised that so much Apparating after so long without might have an adverse affect on you. Apologies as well for taking your wand, but with your...training I wanted to make sure you wouldn’t shoot first and ask questions later.” The man was tall, roughly his age, wore robes that cost more than John’s rent, and leaned on an umbrella John would have bet money was not an ordinary Muggle umbrella.

John’s hand went to his hip, and oh god, yes, the bastards had got his wand off him too. He ought to have been afraid...terrified, likely...but he was far too furious to bother.

“Your owl...” the man consulted a tiny leather notebook in such an ostentatious way that John just knew he didn’t actually need it, “Elspeth, was it...is fine. She has been looked at by top people, and is currently waiting for us to conclude this interview.”

“Is she?” John fixed him with a glare. “And who are you?”

“A concerned party. Please, feel free to sit, your leg must be hurting you.”

“I’d rather stand. Concerned about what?”

“Sherlock Holmes.”
Several responses to this revelation presented themselves to John, each equally unsatisfactory. Finally, he settled on a shrug. “Was it necessary to kidnap my owl? You could have used one of your own, you know. To send me a message. Or maybe even talk to him directly, if that’s what you’re after. I’m just his flatmate.”

“Flatmates. And he’s taken you to a crime scene. Do you move this quickly in all of your personal relationships?”

“I don’t see what business it is of yours if I did,” retorted John. “Why are you so interested in him and why should I care?”

“Your Ministry pension must be barely making ends meet. I’d like to offer you a stipend to keep me up to date on your flatmate. Nothing overly personal, nothing secret, just what he does and who he meets with. I worry about him so.”

John was clenching his teeth hard enough to hurt, but it took him several seconds to figure out anything even resembling a response. “You want me to spy on my flatmate? For you?”

“Spy is an ugly word. Observe, perhaps?”

“God forbid we use ugly words.”

“I’m to take that as a no, then?”

“Yes, you are.” John wasn’t sure why he stood at attention briefly before turning away, but for some reason it seemed like the thing to do. “I assume you aren’t going to stop me from leaving.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” the man said, and this time his smile looked almost genuine. “The fireplace behind you is connected to the Floo network. I assure you, it is perfectly safe.” He took several careful steps closer to John, then held out John’s wand slowly, deliberately, politely, the end facing himself. “You’ll find Elspeth waiting for you back at 221B.”

John’s fingers tightened around the wand. “I would say it’s been a pleasure, but I was taught that it was rude to lie.”
“Then I’ll say it for you. A pleasure meeting you, John Hipparchus Watson. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again, very soon.”

John was halfway to the fireplace when he stopped short. “Who are you?”

“The closest thing Sherlock Holmes has to a friend. An enemy. Good day, Healer Watson.”
It took John a good fifteen minutes to convince himself that he wasn’t being followed around Diagon Alley. He knew it was ridiculous, any wizard with that level of authority couldn’t possibly be stopped that easily, and the man already knew where he lived, but some caution couldn’t hurt either. He stopped for an ice cream cone at Fortescue’s, mulled again over the new broom in the window at Quality Quidditch Supplies, and pretended to read no fewer than six pages of Elphias Doge’s impassioned rebuttal to Rita Skeeter’s biography of Albus Dumbledore. Finally, when he was satisfied that anybody following him was sufficiently bored, he ducked behind a crowd of chattering witches and Apparated back to the flat.

Whatever he’d meant to say to Sherlock about owls and kidnappings was forgotten when he caught a glimpse of their sitting room.

Sherlock stood in the middle of a...thing...it looked a bit like a translucent blue wall encircling most of the room, extending from two feet off the floor and almost reaching the ceiling. At least half of the ostensible surface, though, was covered with scribbles in different colours, photographs, bits of paper...were those bright pink things Post-it notes?

“Feel free to walk through it as you please,” Sherlock said without turning. He pointed his wand at what appeared to be a crime scene photograph and an illuminated path appeared to connect it to a set of blueprints on the far side of the glowing wall. “Your jaw’s going to start hurting anytime now.”

John closed his mouth, trying not to sound too defensive when he replied, “I could have sworn the Aurors just used paper and string like everybody else.”

“The Aurors do. I do not.” With a few flicks of his wand, several photographs had moved around, unpinned and repinned like clockwork. “As you can see, eight victims.” John took several steps closer and, indeed, there were eight distinct constellations of evidence, connected by translucent strings, almost like the tails of shooting stars. He couldn’t help but wonder if this was what the inside of Sherlock’s mind looked like, a bizarre galaxy unto itself.
“It’s beautiful,” he said softly.

Sherlock glanced round, looking ever so slightly puzzled. “It’s the most sensible way to keep track of everything.” For one awkward moment he paused to look at John, before turning back to the path he’d just illuminated. “The first murder occurred almost a year ago and it was five weeks, two days until the second. Since then they’ve become more closely spaced, which is not uncommon with serial killers, though I’m not convinced that’s what’s at work here. Five men, three women; no unusual connections between them that the Aurors have managed to find.”

“Unusual connections?”

“The British wizarding world is quite small: they all visited some of the same shops, banked at Gringotts, all but the last went to Hogwarts, though in different houses...connections, certainly, but almost as certainly not meaningful ones. You probably share at least half of them.”

“Fair enough. Alright, you said the Aurors hadn’t found anything...what have you found?”

Sherlock did smile at that—clearly, he’d asked the right question. “They’d all made significant withdrawals from their bank accounts prior to their deaths. Varying amounts, but each would have represented a very large sum of money to the individual. And the victims have all been private, in some cases standoffish, types who would be unlikely to be missed. The professor was the first to have been found almost immediately after his death, the witch before him had been dead for two weeks before the body was found.” He pointed his wand in a desultory fashion at a picture of the corpse in question. It did, indeed, look two weeks old and although John was as far from squeamish as any self-respecting mediwizard who had spent time in open combat, there was something about that state of...dereliction, he supposed, that made it worse.

“Well, I can think of one group of wizards who might need to pay people off in this brave new world of ours,” John suggested, bitterness sharpening the words. “Any connections to known Death Eaters?”

Sherlock’s smile widened. “First thing I checked, but the records are a great bloody mess. Everyone’s still busy claiming they were threatened or cursed. I leave that sort of mess to the Ministry, generally; they may as well attempt to earn their Galleons.”

“I thought they’d stopped accepting the Imperius defence...” John shook his head. “Never mind. Barring that, I suppose...Some other sort of blackmail? Maybe something else they did or trouble
they got into during the war?”

“So far, nothing’s turned up.” Sherlock turned back to the glowing translucent wall, moving things about in seemingly random patterns. “Your owl looks much improved. Did you have a nice chat with my brother?”

“My...” John winced; between the case and Sherlock’s bloody brilliant organization spell, he’d completely forgotten about Elspeth. She was waiting near the window, all but tapping her claws against the bars of the cage in a distinctly annoyed fashion. The nice, new cage that was a great deal larger than the one she’d been in earlier today. “Wait, what about your brother?”

“Mycroft, yes. I do hate repeating myself. Did you enjoy your chat?”

“I...” John found himself paused halfway to opening the cage, prompting Elspeth to hoot impatiently. He had to try several times before the apparently rather complex latch finally unhooked. “Your...brother. He’s...unexpected.”

“That’s putting it nicely.” Sherlock was frowning at a photograph of a hook-nosed man whose wide, dead grin did not improve his face one bit. “Did he ask you to spy on me?”

“How did...yes, he did. I refused, as it happens.”

Sherlock glanced at him, looking vaguely surprised. “Pity. We could have split the reward. More than enough for the Nimbus Two Thousand and Five you’ve been eyeing. Think it through next time.”

John was rather keen on there not being a next time. “Does he normally kidnap people?”

“He probably waited a few weeks to see if I’d scare you off, first, before deigning to spend some of his oh so valuable time bribing you.”

John had at least a dozen different questions, but restricted himself to what seemed like the simplest. “He’s done this before, then?”
“Not important right now. Do be quiet, John, I need to think.” He flung himself on the sofa, hands steepled in front of his face. The blue map condensed upon itself then shot up to reform on the ceiling, where it again reminded John of nothing so much as the night sky in Afghanistan. With constellations of thoughts and corpses.

Elspeth pecked at John’s hand, as she tended to when she was hungry, and his stomach reminded him somewhat stridently that he hadn’t eaten since breakfast. “Do you...”

“Working,” Sherlock hissed, neither eyes nor hands moving.

“Right, then.”

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(Obituary published in Die Anzeichen, translated from the German)

GOTTFRIED VON ESCHENBACH (1904-1999)

Noted scholar Professor Gottfried von Eschenbach unexpectedly passed away on Tuesday. The only child of Manfred Stanislaus von Eschenbach and his wife Brunhilde (nee Dracheneisen), Professor von Eschenbach was a lecturer at the University of Halle-Wittenberg specialising in the study of mediaeval Magical artefacts. His best known work, a translation from the Latin of the personal diaries of Doctor Johann Faust, will be familiar to generations of alumni from both Wittenberg and Durmstrang. Professor von Eschenbach was awarded the prestigious Hermes Trimagus Award for Excellence in Magical Scholarship in 1982.

A memorial service for Professor von Eschenbach will take place at the University of Halle-Wittenburg’s Lion’s Hall on Friday at two pm. In lieu of flowers, mourners are encouraged to donate to the Manfred von Eschenbach Fund for Impoverished Scholars.

***

G. Lestrade

Department of Magical Law Enforcement

Ministry of Magic
John, at least, knew the value of eating more than once a week. It didn’t seem to make a difference, however, as he found himself in the armchair, staring at roughly the same spot on the ceiling that Sherlock had spent the past few hours contemplating. He hadn’t the energy for anything more after everything that had happened today.

He must have drifted off to sleep, because suddenly there was a hand shaking his (healthy) shoulder and an excited voice in his ear.

“Wake up, John. Fancy a spot of housebreaking?”

John made a sound somewhere between a groan and a mumble as consciousness quickly returned, a relic of his military training. “A spot of...”

“Housebreaking.” Sherlock was wearing a grin that could only be described as a maniacal. “Well, come on, then. You’ll want to change. Something dark, but not black-too obvious.”

“Whose house is this?” It occurred to John to wonder why it had taken him until after he’d finished dressing to ask that. Was it too much time following orders? Or was it just his mad flatmate? He imagined anyone else waking him up to assist in criminal activities and was pleased, then alarmed, to determine that yes, it was apparently that it was Sherlock asking that made the difference. “And why are we breaking in?”

“One of the earlier victims; I need to check something.”

“And this can’t be done during the day? Legally, even, perhaps?”
Sherlock made a noise that even on their short acquaintance John could translate as “takes too long, and besides, I want to see now.”

“Ah well,” John observed, resignation and more than a hint of humour in his voice, “easier to ask forgiveness than permission.”

“Follow my directions precisely and we won’t have to do either,” Sherlock stated as they headed out into the night.
There were few advantages to having spent one’s formative years in the chaos of one war only to see the same war reignite fifteen years later, but Mycroft liked to think it had given him a much-needed sense of perspective. This had been particularly true in Slytherin House, always the first suspected and last exonerated.

In the wake of the first Wizarding War it had taken an inordinate amount of time for Mycroft to convince his colleagues in the Ministry that he was neither a Death Eater in training nor under Imperius. By the time Voldemort returned after the utter catastrophe that was the Triwizard Tournament, however, he was merely interrogated alongside every other Ministry employee. Of course, that may well have been due to the fact that the Department of International Cooperation would have fallen apart without him.

Mycroft never hesitated to take credit where it was due.

He looked at the portfolio on the desk in front of him and sighed. On the front was a label in his own inimitably precise handwriting. *Operation Siegfried.*

And now his brother was involved. This was going to be a great bloody mess.

***

*S. Holmes*

*221 B Baker Street*

*London, England*

See attached parchment for the dates. I’ve got the *Märchenpolizei* breathing down my neck now too. Whatever you’re doing, do it faster.

G. Lestrade

***

*S. Holmes*

*221 B Baker Street*

*London, England*

Legally, that is.

G. Lestrade

***

They had Apparated to one of the parts of London where row after row of indistinguishable white
doorways stood side by side. Just past what had once been the entrance to a stable (Sherlock muttered something under his breath to the dragon on the knocker) they emerged into a shabby but good-sized square, one of the many pockets of Wizarding London tucked away throughout Muggle London like raisins in a currant bun. A fountain in the middle featured some sort of angry-looking creature with water jets sluggishly spraying out of arrow wounds in its sides.

“Is that supposed to be the...?”

“Questing beast, yes.” Sherlock sighed, though whether it was at John’s question or as an opinion on the quality of the sculpture, John couldn’t tell.

“But they don’t...”

“No.”

“And the eyes are all...”

“Quite.”

“You’d think the artist had never seen one,” John said, shaking his head.

“Less talking, more housebreaking.”

“Right,” John said, back in soldier mode.

Where gardens were concerned, wizards were as bad as Muggles (and often worse, considering some of the truly creative things John had seen growing up. He still had nightmares about a neighbour’s moving topiary). The access road behind the row of houses was bordered on each side by fences of uneven size and effectiveness. John couldn’t help but be grateful when Sherlock pointed to a house with a pathetic excuse for a fence before he recalled that he was in fact engaged in breaking the law.

He briefly considered asking Sherlock to remind him exactly why they needed to search the victim’s flat now as opposed to some civilized hour. Not that he was likely to have an answer, let alone a satisfactory one. That much he had already figured out about Sherlock. Then again, they weren’t hurting anyone, breaking into a dead woman’s house, and John was beginning to think the only chance the victim had of any justice at all was going to be Sherlock sussing it out.

And that’s why he was here. For justice. Definitely not because he felt more alive than he had in ages, roaming around London in the dark trying not to get arrested.

Sherlock was tugging on the ivy that draped the back wall of this section of the terraced houses before he signalled to John. “Our destination is on the first floor, second window from the left.” He pointed upward and John saw a window practically choked with ivy. “You see the signs of neglect.” Sherlock said. “Not just the ivy, but--”

He stopped. “I need to get a better look at the window.”

“But what?”

Sherlock had already shoved his wand back in his sleeve and was reaching for a fingerhold on the ivy.

“Oh, for the love of...” John said, swishing and flicking his still-lit wand at Sherlock, who began slowly levitating up the wall. “Stay still, I’m not about to catch you if you fall.”
“I don’t need--”

“Shut up, keep your hands still,” John ordered. “I can manage a basic levitation, thank you very much.”

Sherlock made a disgruntled noise, but allowed himself to be lifted to the height of the window. Casting *Lumos*, he peered at the window, the window frame, the bricks around the frame, the ivy, and Merlin-knew-what-else. John resisted the urge to call out--a great lot of good *Muffliato* would do then.

Standing in a stranger’s garden at night, one hand gripping his cane and the other his wand as he held his flatmate more than ten feet off the ground, it occurred to John that, like as not, this was not what his therapist had meant when she’d suggested he find some new hobbies.

Then again, he’d always been rubbish at darts.

“Let me down, John, I’m done here.”

The minute Sherlock’s feet were back on the ground, he was moving again, leaving John to limp quickly after him towards the building entrance. “The Aurors have, as usual, managed to miss everything of importance here. *Alohomora.*”

The last bit was directed at a back door, which obediently swung open. There was no crime scene tape visible; the Aurors must have given up on getting any further information out of the flat. They very quietly made their way up the stairs, John a few steps behind.

There was still more than a hint of decomposition in the dusty air, and John tried very hard not to think about the pictures of the body he’d seen earlier. Sherlock, of course, had no such compunctions, practically throwing himself around the flat in an effort to see everything.

“John, lie on the floor.”

“What?”

“You saw the pictures. I need you to recreate the pose they found her in.”

“I repeat, what?”

“I detest repetition. Just...” Sherlock wiggled his fingers, “...lie on the floor and approximate where the corpse was found.”

There were so many objections John had to this idea that he could hardly decide which one to air first.

“Don’t worry,” Sherlock added, “I’ll correct you if you get it wrong.”

“That is a great relief.”

The thing was, though...the thing was...why not do it? If he objected to breaking the law, he shouldn’t have come tonight. If he objected to Sherlock ordering him about, he’d already had opportunities to say no. He certainly wasn’t squeamish; he was a doctor, for God’s sake. If he minded being embarrassed, well, the only person who would see was Sherlock. If he was worried about the discomfort, well, he was a soldier.

If he was going to balk at, well, anything, this was a stupid point to pick, just because it felt more
than a bit silly.

Fuck it, he thought, in for a knut...as he eased himself onto the floor, Sherlock suggesting adjustments all the while.

“Head a bit more to the right, John, that’s it.”

“Alright, how long am I going to be stuck here?” From the sheer amount of dust, he guessed she hadn’t been much for cleaning even before she’d died.

“I’ll let you know when you can get up,” Sherlock said, slowly circling him.

John sneezed, then sneezed again. “Glad she didn’t have cats.” The awkward angle of his head meant the only thing in his immediate line of sight was now the even inkier blackness of the space underneath a loveseat. “Wait, bring the light back over? I think I see something down here.”

Sherlock dropped to his knees next to John’s chest and shone his wand under the furniture.

“See? Against the wall there.”

The object Sherlock retrieved was covered in a substantial layer of dust. John sat up as Sherlock began flipping through the glossy pages, only to bump his head against the tabletop, causing a stack of saucers to cascade onto the floor. His eyes met Sherlock’s in panic. Muffliato was designed specifically for voices, not sounds.

As if in response to his thought, a cry of “Hubert! Hubert!” could be heard from the flat below. John jumped to his feet, ignoring the throbbing in his head for more immediate concerns, namely how on earth they were supposed to get out.

“The roof,” muttered Sherlock. “The neighbours are downstairs and unlikely to be quick about it.” Stuffing the book into his pocket, he bolted across the tiny flat to the door, John at his heels.

As Sherlock had predicted, the neighbours were indeed downstairs and, from the looks of them, unlikely to catch up at anything beyond a glacial pace. Still, discretion being the better part of valour, John bounded after Sherlock, who was taking the stairs at least two at a time if not three. They emerged into a sea of Victorian slate rooftops, a strange miniature city of gables and towers and cupolas thrown together with no rhyme or reason. Sherlock grabbed John by the arm and John squeezed his eyes shut just in time.

When he opened them again, he wasn’t the slightest bit nauseous. They were standing on the pavement in front of 221B and the moment his eyes met Sherlock’s, John found himself dissolving into peals of laughter. “Oh, God. Oh, my God.”

“It was hardly a miracle,” Sherlock remarked between chuckles. “I could have told you the leg was psychosomatic.”

“Psycho—wait, are we talking about the same thing?”

Sherlock looked down, and John followed his line of sight to his own right leg. The leg he’d just run up multiple flights of stairs with. The leg that hadn’t pained him the entire time he’d done so.

“You... I... Bloody hell. I left my cane at that flat.”

And clearly he was insane, clearly they were both completely insane, because that set them off laughing again.
G. Lestrade  
Department of Magical Law Enforcement  
Ministry of Magic  
London, England  

Pursuing lead in Germany, need access to records of Universität Halle-Wittenberg and personal finances of the late Professor von Eschenbach. Tell Märchenpolizei I am acting on your behalf.

SH  

S. Holmes  
221 B Baker Street  
London, England  

Why on earth would I authorize that?

G. Lestrade  

Will trade authorization for your badge.

SH  

S. Holmes  
221 B Baker Street  
London, England  

You great bloody git.

See attached parchment.

G. Lestrade  

Include authorization for Healer John H. Watson as well.
We aren't dead. We'll try not to let so long go between chapters again, but until we can find a way to get paid for this, real life will sometimes take priority.
The authors apologize profusely for the delay in updating this fic--unfortunately, RL came at both of us pretty regularly and we lost a lot of momentum, but better late than never? (We hope?) Many thanks as usual to rosamund, our tireless beta-reader.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It was nice of Lestrade to send us those letters of introduction,” John said as they made their way along the Collegienstraße. “I’ve never been to Germany.”

“How’s your German?”

John shrugged, “Good enough to order a pint. I took French in school. And you?”

“Fluent in half a dozen and I can get by in another eight,” Sherlock said in such a straightforward fashion that it didn’t occur to John to doubt him.

John whistled. “Must be handy for chatting up women.”

“Not really my area.”

Ah. “Or...or blokes. Which is fine, of course.”

“Of course it’s fine.”

John cleared his throat in what was in no way a determined effort to change the subject. “So...which of von Eschenbach’s colleagues are we talking to first? Or are we heading to the local Aurors?”

“His fellow scholars would only notice something of importance if it had occurred at least three hundred years ago. As for the Aurors, well...” The ensuing sniff conveyed volumes, most of them disdainful.

“Well, then.” John paused. “Why are we here?”

“House-elves.”

Of course. In retrospect it made perfect sense. John could see how that was a trait of Sherlock’s that could get on somebody’s—or perhaps everybody’s—nerves.


“House-elves are loyal to their...” There were so many words, none of which felt correct anymore. “Employers, though, yeah?”

“The professor lived in the housing and used the services of the house elves provided for faculty; so long as we don’t seek to besmirch the honour of the Universität we’ll be fine.”

“No besmirching, right, got it.”
The Universität was a cluster of draughty-looking but picturesque buildings that John was relieved not to inhabit. As they approached the front gate, a uniformed wizard stepped out, one hand on his wand with the sort of precision John knew instinctively. Sherlock said something long and authoritative-sounding in German while brandishing Lestrade’s authorization scroll, and, with a grunt, the guard let them pass.

In sharp contrast to the medieval buildings for students, the house-elves’ dormitory was a modern monstrosity that made up in convenience for what it lacked in aesthetics.

“One might say the Germans learned their lesson from Grindelwald. It took us rather longer,” Sherlock observed. John knew there had been some recent reforms regarding house-elf rights, but he hadn’t followed the news much from hospital. He added “current events” to his mental list of things he needed to start working on again now that he was a civilian.

“It’s not unlike a Muggle system, really. Each house-elf is responsible for a certain cluster of rooms. We are seeking a house-elf named Hansi, who is responsible for the suite of rooms belonging to the late Professor von Eschenbach.”

It should not have surprised John that they arrived just in time to catch Hansi on his lunch break. He was further bemused by the house-elf’s friendliness—not subservience, but friendliness. Sherlock, he noted, treated house-elves with the exact brand of puzzled disdain with which he regarded most human beings. It was a compliment of sorts.

He was just beginning to grow accustomed to the vaguely comprehensible muddle of German when several distinctly English syllables shocked him to understanding. “Hansi speaks English, Doctor Watson.”

“That’s...very kind of you, Hansi,” he said, blinking his way back to the present.

“It’s in his best interests to help us find who killed his former charge,” Sherlock said to no one in particular. Then, turning back to Hansi, he returned to his questioning, now in English. “What can you tell us about Professor von Eschenbach’s activities prior to his last trip to England?”

“The professor was very excited. More so than Hansi had ever seen him.” Hansi’s eyes suddenly seemed very far away. “Hansi knew him for fifty years, Herr Holmes—cleaned his rooms, made sure he had his coffee in the morning and his schnapps in the evening, and every day Hansi carried all of his letters from the Owlery to his desk.”

“His letters,” echoed John.

“Good news often comes by post,” said Sherlock, suddenly focused on Hansi’s face. “Did he receive anything unusual? Anything that might explain his sudden change in mood?”

The house-elf considered this for a few moments. “Professor von Eschenbach’s desk is as it was when he left for England, Herr Holmes. You may examine it if you wish.”

Hansi led them from the house-elves’ quarters back to the older quadrangles. Withdrawing a massive iron key from one of his voluminous pockets, he unlocked the ancient wooden door on the first floor. “Hansi will join you?”

“Yes, but keep an eye on the stairs.” Sherlock’s attention was already on the cluttered desk surrounded by piles of books. John noted the meticulously folded robes (the house-elf’s work, he assumed) and straightened sheets in sharp contrast to the chaos of the desk. It was, he suspected, the one portion of the room that Hansi was not permitted to touch.
He wondered, not for the first time since he’d begun sharing a flat with Sherlock, if there was an actual scientific correlation between genius and mess. Because if so, Sherlock was the most ruddy brilliant man he’d ever met (likely true anyhow) and his mum owed an apology to Harry for all the times she’d insisted she clean her room.

“Interesting.” The word had a thousand connotations when Sherlock used it. He was holding up a thick, paperbound volume. After a moment, he reached into the voluminous pockets of his overcoat and pulled out a similar book. “I believe we have a connection.”

“From Hildegard Brown’s flat,” John said. “You don’t think it was a bidding war gone wrong or something idiotic like that?”

“No, the timing doesn’t make sense. Same auction house, different auctions.”

The catalogue was printed on thick, embossed paper with a stylised monogram at the top. *Kelley & Dee, Purveyors of Rare Magical Antiques and Antiquities.* John flipped through several pages, noting that the items in the photographs turned obediently as he examined them. As he caught sight of the prices, he couldn’t suppress a low whistle. “Isn’t this a bit beyond a professor’s salary?”

“Indeed. Although those are just projections.” Sherlock looked vaguely disappointed as he turned away from the desk.

John had barely shifted his attention back to the catalogue when he heard the sound of a body hitting the floor and dropped, unthinking, to a battle-ready crouch. Sherlock was sprawled flat on the faded rug, his nose practically in the cold ashes. John rolled his eyes. “What are you doing?”

“He was burning something. Papers. Or, no.” Sherlock snatched up a handful of ash and John barely caught a glimpse of what might have been flecks of paper. “Self-destructing parchment. Bloody Weasleys.”

“That’s...brilliant, actually,” John eventually conceded. “Also dangerous. Bet the Ministry hate them.”

“I think that’s the point. The war was just an excuse.” Sherlock was glaring at his hand through a magnifying glass, or at least that was how it appeared from where John stood. “Well, I suppose we should visit Weasleys’ and the auction house. If we leave now, we might even make it before the Floo Network shuts down for the night.”

“Wait a second.” John took a satisfyingly long pause. “We’re in Germany.”

Sherlock blinked once. Twice. “We are.”

“I told you I’ve never been in Germany before.” He waited another few seconds but Sherlock didn’t respond. “How about lunch? I haven’t eaten in twelve hours, and knowing you it’s probably been at least twice that. Besides, then I can say I’ve had authentic bratwurst.”

“You’ll probably be disappointed.”

“Of all the things I can imagine being around you, disappointed isn’t one of them,” John said, smiling. “Come on then, let’s see if you can deduce the Germans as well as you can the English.”

“Witches and wizards are alike the world over, John,” Sherlock said, but he started striding back towards the Collegienstraße, which meant John had won.

The bratwurst might have been disappointing, but it was at least piping hot. Not to mention the lager
was excellent. “So, do you know anything about this auction house?”

“Been in business for a few centuries now. It started when John Dee decided to retire from human society and held a rummage sale. A few others tagged along and the next thing he knew, he had a reliable business on his hands. They specialise in antiquities, and they’ve been doing very well since the war ended.”

“No doubt the contents of Death Eaters’ vaults are fascinating,” John said with a grimace.

“More often than not, I’ve found.” It took John a moment to realise he was speaking without irony. “It’s a shame most of it will end up in Mysteries. Or in my brother’s drawing room. I’m not sure which is worse.”

“I...” John did consider several options before finally deciding, “don’t want to know. It’s probably safer that I don’t know.” He made a mental note that on the exceedingly rare chance he ever found himself in that particular drawing room, he should not touch anything. Including the furniture, just to be on the safe side. Maybe he could just find a bit of floor and stand there very still until he could leave.

“Oh, he’d never use any of it. Mycroft just appreciates the value of display, perhaps a bit too much.”

“Lovely,” John said. “So he’ll have Pandora’s box on the mantelpiece because it goes with the curtains.”

Sherlock smiled—a small, secret thing that felt as though it was just for John. “You may be more right than you know.”

John peered at the two auction catalogues. One was titled Treasures of the Rhine and the other Parisian Gothic, which partly explained the respective interest of the Professor and Hildegard Brown, but little else. “So, another thing in common, then. They both went to auctions at this place. That would explain those withdrawals from their bank accounts, right?”

“Certainly it would.” Sherlock snatched the catalogues from John. “They’ll have records of who won, and possibly even all the bids for some of the more prominent items. They’re both auctions of medieval artefacts, which narrows things down a little, perhaps.”

He tossed Parisian Gothic back to John. “Look for markings, dog-ears, notes, anything to indicate an item Miss Brown may have intended to bid on. I’ll do the professor.”

There were three items of interest to Miss Brown, evidenced by tick marks so small John could barely make them out at first.

“She seems to have a soft spot for jewellery...” John looked closer at the estimates. “Really expensive jewellery. Diane de Poitiers’ earrings, the Empress Theodora’s hair ornament...”

“And yet there was no jewellery in her flat. Apparently the taste for the finer things she likely acquired walking past the window of Borgin & Burkes every day to work meant that if she couldn’t have the best she didn’t want any of it.”

John whistled. “Christ, I’m glad none of my ex-girlfriends were this posh. I’d’ve been in it every birthday.”

“Even worse, maybe. Diane de Poitiers’ earrings, Theodora’s hair ornament, and what else?”

John flipped back to the third item. “It claims to be a necklace that belonged to Helen of Troy.”
“Oh, that old thing.” Sherlock snorted derisively. “It gets trotted out every few decades. Nobody ever buys it because everyone knows it’s a forgery. Reasonable Byzantine work as it goes, but it won’t fool anyone with half a brain.”

“Right...” John set down the catalogue. “So, jewellery.”

“Not just jewellery, John. Enchanted jewellery.”

John thought for a moment, then shook his head. “Poor woman. What about the professor? Didn’t exactly strike me as the jewellery type.”

“No, his auction interests seem to have unsurprisingly lain in the same areas as his scholarly research. Medieval Germanic artefacts.”

“We need to find out if the other victims were auction-goers too.”

“We, John?” Sherlock stared at him intently.

John squirmed slightly under the searching gaze. “Well, I mean, yeah, I mean, if that’s...”

Sherlock smiled, and John had the oddest impression of a sunrise in spite of the overcast sky outside. “Well, best be getting on with it then, hadn’t we?”

***

Lot 465 - Ancient Greek gold and chalcedony necklace, date unknown
Estimate: 4,000 Galleons

A magnificent example of delicacy and grandeur, this necklace has a long and storied history and has been owned by such notables as Countess Báthory and the unfortunate “Mad Helena” Malfoy, best known for having burnt down the family manor in 1764. It is said to have been gifted to a certain Helen of Sparta by Aphrodite herself on the eve of her departure for Troy. The finest Wizarding scholars have been unable to prove or disprove this legendary provenance, but the quality of this necklace speaks for itself.

Chapter End Notes

Diane de Poitiers was the infamous mistress of King Henri II of France who reportedly ruled the country alongside him. Empress Theodora was the wife of Justinian I and perhaps the most powerful woman in the history of the Roman Empire. As for Helen of Troy, well...
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next relevant auction at Kelley & Dee’s took place a week after their return to London, a week Sherlock spent manic enough to make John exhausted just looking at him. His flatmate had alternated long stretches spent staring at his blue glowy note web... thingy... John kept meaning to ask him what he called it... and which had now expanded to take over the whole room when in use... and running around or sending John on various errands, only some of which had an obvious relevance to the case. Picking up files from Lestrade at Auror headquarters made sense. Retrieving mud from various parts of London did not. Nor did dissecting messenger owl pellets.

They’d determined that at least seven of the victims had some ties to the auction house, making it likely the eighth (second killed) had as well.

None of which explained exactly why John was currently being forced into charcoal grey robes with light blue pinstripes that were nicer than anything he actually owned.

“I can’t decide if I feel more like I’m going for a job interview or to the Yule Ball,” he said, standing in front of the mirror above the mantel as he tried to remember how to tie the rather smart-looking paisley bowtie that apparently went with it.

Sherlock appeared behind him in the mirror, already resplendent in deep purple robes. “You’ll attract far more attention looking as though you can’t afford anything there.”

“Not that I can,” John said, letting the ends of the bowtie drop to either side of his neck in frustration. He’d carefully sewn soldiers’ organs back together the Muggle way on the battlefield and managed a NEWT in Charms; surely a bloody knot shouldn’t have been this tricky.

“We’re there to observe, not to be observed,” Sherlock said, pulling John around to face him. Long, deft fingers went to work at John’s neck, brushing lightly against his chin as Sherlock tied the fabric into a perfect bow.

When he’d swept out of the room, John turned back to the mirror, conscious of the flush in his cheeks and the fact that he hadn’t been able to say a word with Sherlock there. “I could have done it myself. Eventually.”
“Are you coming, John?” Sherlock’s voice echoed from the stairwell. “We’ll be late.”

“Coming.” At the last minute, he grabbed his cane, which had sent itself from Hildegard Brown’s flat back to St. Mungo’s, and then, with a sternly worded letter regarding the proper use of medical equipment, to the flat on Baker Street. It would at least be useful for keeping people out of Sherlock’s way.

Kelley & Dee were located in a portion of the Royal Exchange that had been grudgingly granted to wizards when the Statute of Secrecy was set in place. After a quick discussion with a security guard whose uniform bore a slightly different crest from the others in the Exchange, John and Sherlock were ushered through a colonnaded corridor, up a richly wood-panelled staircase, and into a room that looked as though it hadn’t been redecorated since the reign of the queen whose massive portrait hung over the auctioneer’s podium. That it was Elizabeth I was clear enough, although John was certain he’d never before seen Good Queen Bess holding what appeared to be a genuine phoenix.

“It was one of her favourite symbols,” Sherlock supplied from behind him. “The phoenix and the pelican, although I suspect she preferred the former. More cheerful.”

“Seems old Albus Dumbledore had a phoenix tucked away for years,” said a woman’s voice from nearby, a woman from whom John nearly recoiled on sight. Everybody, even recent transplants from Afghanistan, knew Rita Skeeter. “Made quite the splash at his funeral. My dear Mr. Holmes, what on earth brings you out of hiding on such a lovely day?”

Sherlock bared his teeth--it certainly didn’t deserve to be called a smile. “I didn’t realise alchemical artefacts were your cup of tea.”

“Everything’s my cup of tea, dear Mr Holmes, when I’m working on a story. And clearly it is a story, since you’re here.” With one flick of her wand, a brightly patterned notebook and coordinated quill leapt out of her purse. “Care to share anything with my readers?”

“No.”

“Sherlock’s always playing hard to get,” Rita sighed, leaning conspiratorially towards John. “But then, I’m sure you’d know that, Mister...” John took a step back, concerned as much by her physical proximity as by the angle at which her alarmingly green cocktail was being held. The drink matched her dress exactly, but would hardly improve the look of his borrowed robes.
“Er...Watson, but that’s not...”

“Watson! What a nice name, Mr Watson. Pleasure to meet you, of course.” She grabbed his hand with the one not holding her drink, and her long fingernails, also a matching green, dug into his skin. “Any friend of Sherlock’s must be terribly fascinating.”

“I’m sure I’m not--”

“Of course you are, dearie. Now,” she turned back to Sherlock, thankfully releasing John’s sore hand, “surely you can tell me something. What brings the great Sherlock Holmes here?”

“Alchemy. What else?”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Believe as you like.” Sherlock turned on his heel and motioned for John to follow. “You usually do.”

“I think,” she drew out the word a little with a smile John found positively terrifying, “that if you’re here, it must be something to do with those murders.”

“What murders?” John asked, his best poker face firmly in place. Sherlock rather unhelpfully said nothing at all.

“Haven’t you been reading my columns? Shame on you.” She studied him for a moment over the nearly empty glass. “I don’t know you, Mr Watson.” Her smile grew predatory. “But I believe I should like to.”

“Er.”

“Sorry, must be going.” Sherlock grabbed John’s arm and all but dragged him toward a short, portly wizard in gold-trimmed velvet robes, who was fussing with several of the items on display. “Bloody amateurs. We’ll be lucky to find anything with her skulking about.”
“Doesn’t like you much, does she?” A glance back toward the green-clad witch revealed that the quill was scribbling furiously in the notebook as she drained her drink. That wasn’t a good sign. Neither was the slow wave John could only imagine was intended for him.

“You could call it that,” said Sherlock absently. “I know secrets she’d go to Azkaban to get, I won’t share, and I don’t care enough about what others think for her to have any leverage over me. Drives her mad. Unfortunately she’s clever and completely unscrupulous; don’t underestimate her.” When they reached the official-looking wizard’s side, Sherlock held out his hand with what John was relieved to see was a genuine smile. “Mr. Kelley.”

“Sherlock Holmes, as I live and breathe!” Kelley grabbed Sherlock’s hand and shook it vigorously. “I needed you desperately last week. Where were you?”

“Germany, I’m afraid. What was it?”

“We thought we might have got our hands on a genuine Siren’s comb from Thessalonika, but you know how forgeries are these days. I rang your brother but he said he’d no idea where you were.” To John’s surprise, Sherlock’s expression did not change at the mention of Mycroft. “Would you be willing to do a quick consultation for us? We’ve got to set up for our annual Greek Antiquities ‘do, and I’d love to have something brilliant for the finale.”

“I’m afraid you’re likely doomed to disappointment, but I’ll have a look. Just don’t trot out that Helen of Troy frippery again. It’s beneath your dignity.”

Kelley shrugged. “The Malfoys paid a fortune for it.”

“Two hundred years ago. Before they realised it was a fake.” As though suddenly remembering that John was there, Sherlock nudged him forward. “My associate, Dr John Watson.”

“A specialist? How wonderful. Where did you study?”

He looked so eager that John felt slightly bad for disappointing him. “I’m not that sort of doctor, I’m afraid.” He shifted the cane. “Just returned from the war.”
“Oh.” Kelley’s smile faded and he nodded slowly. “Nasty business, that.” After an awkward silence, he spoke up again with more jollity than might have been necessary. “What brings you here today, then, Holmes? If it’s the Nostradamus skull, I’m afraid...”

“No, Kelley, we’re not bidding today.” Stepping forward, Sherlock lowered his voice. “Do you know why the Skeeter woman is here?”

Kelley shuddered. “If there were any way to get rid of her, Holmes...”

“But do you know why?”

“Some nonsense about us selling off Dark artefacts behind closed doors. You of all people know it isn’t true, but she’s been going on about it for weeks now, so I extended an invitation so she could see for herself that nothing was happening. Then, hopefully, we need never hear another word of it.” He frowned. “If you’re not bidding, Holmes, then why are you here?”

“Case. We’ll talk afterward when you’ve got more time.”

“You know I can’t give away my clients’ secrets,” Kelley reminded him softly. “I have a business to run, as you do.”

“Believe me when I say you’ll want to continue this discussion in private,” Sherlock said, with a significant look in the general direction of Ms. Skeeter.

Kelley glanced that way nervously, as though he expected her to materialize beside him upon being mentioned. “Very well. You’ll have to wait about afterward, I’m afraid, but once everything’s settled, we’ll talk.”

With that, he excused himself and hurried to the podium, signalling for the doors to close and the auction to begin.

***

John had never been to an auction before, but he’d done enough gambling to recognise a similar
gleam in the eyes of many of the attendees. Instead of holding up numbers, each bidder cast the requisite spell--changed for each lot, for security purposes--in order to bid on an item. Although he couldn’t have guessed their names, John slowly began to notice patterns in who was bidding on what.

The witch with the watered silk robes might have been a statue, her only movement the raising of her wand any time someone mentioned the Philosopher’s Stone. The Nostradamus skull that Kelley had mentioned turned out to be a skull used by Nostradamus, much to the disappointment of everyone except for Sherlock, who pointed out that there were at least two different purported skulls of Nostradamus, neither of which stood up to any sort of scrutiny. A lost page from the notebook of Hermes Trismegistus went to a cowled figure bidding on behalf of an absentee buyer, while three of the Emerald Tablets of Djehuty (at least one of which Sherlock assured him was a fake) inspired a fistfight in the fourth row. By the end of the evening, John could see Kelley visibly relaxing at the prospect of sending everyone home.

After the auction ended, John excused himself to use the loo, half out of need after all that complimentary champagne and half to avoid the Skeeter woman, who he’d seen eyeing him from across the room again even as she tried to get quotes on the proceedings from auction-goers, most of whom, even at this distance, looked unhappy about being accosted.

The WC was, of course, posher than Buckingham Palace and bigger than most of the flats he’d lived in, all inlaid marble and fanciful carvings. He was unaccountably reminded of the Prefect’s Bathroom that had so dazzled him as a fifth-year at Hogwarts, with the added impressive view of London’s financial district. As he was washing his hands at a spigot shaped like a melusine, one tail for the hot and one for the cold, two wizards entered, neither especially noteworthy as far as he could see. Sherlock, he supposed, would have come up with their hometowns, favourite local watering hole, and astrological sign in five seconds flat.

As a game of sorts, John looked at them more closely. One was about his age, in nondescript grey dress robes and wire-rimmed spectacles, while the other wore what had clearly once been flamboyantly purple and gold robes now faded to a dull brown. They were both clearly lost in thoughts, shoulders hunched forward as though they didn’t want to be seen--a sentiment John could certainly understand. Which, in turn, reminded him that staring at people in the toilet was generally frowned upon, and he decided to make his exit.

Thankfully, the chairs in Kelley’s office, fancy though they were, were also ridiculously comfortable, and John let out a small sigh as he sank into one next to Sherlock.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?” Kelley said, as though reading his mind. “But to be successful, clients want to feel you’ve already got so many Galleons that you don’t care whether you have theirs or not.” He looked down at the meticulously tidy desk, and then back at Sherlock. “What did you want to ask me, then, Holmes?”
“If I were to give you names, Kelley, could you confirm whether or not the person is a client of yours? Obviously,” he added as Kelley opened his mouth, “I understand that you can’t reveal information about those clients, but if you could simply confirm their existence, that would be useful to us.”

Kelley pondered this for a moment. “I suppose that’s acceptable.”

The list of names Sherlock rattled off was one that John only partly recognised, and so, it seemed, did Mr Kelley. He confirmed three, none of whom were among the eight murder victims, much to John’s disappointment. One of them was none other than Mycroft Holmes--at which point, Kelley rolled his eyes at Sherlock.

“I’m being thorough,” said Sherlock.

“Wishful thinking, more like,” John muttered under his breath. If Sherlock heard him, he ignored it.

After a few more names that John did not recognise, Sherlock stood abruptly. “I’d say that’s all we need. Thank you, Mr Kelley; it’s been enlightening. Come along, John.”

***

John was completely knackered by the time they made it back to their flat, begrudgingly allowing Sherlock to pull him along on yet another Side-Along Apparition. Because of course their posh auction togs were far too fancy to risk getting Floo ash on.

Opening the door to 221b made him feel ever so slightly like Cinderella returning from the ball; a strange comparison to say the least. John suspected it was the exhaustion talking.

“That was…” he paused as Sherlock looked back at him, “helpful. I think.”

“Oh, very.”
After a moment, it was clear that Sherlock wasn’t saying anything else. “I...don’t suppose you plan to tell me what you’ve deduced, because I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

“When you’re awake enough to understand them.” Sherlock’s voice sounded strangely gentle. “Go to bed, John.”


He was halfway to his bedroom when Sherlock called out, “They’re yours, you know.”

“What?”

“The robes,” said Sherlock with a wink. “They suit you.”

There was absolutely nothing John could say to that, so he restricted himself to a grin and a wave before closing the door behind him.

As John very carefully hung the robes up, because they were just far too nice to leave crumpled on the floor, he discovered that somehow, Rita Skeeter had slipped her card into his pocket. With a personal note written in bright green ink on the back.

John slipped the note back into the dress robes. It could wait until morning.

Chapter End Notes

See, this story hasn’t been abandoned! We maintain that our schedule is better than Moffat and Gatiss. Which, yes, is a very low bar, but we’ll take it. Thanks as ever to rosamund and reluctantabandon for beta-reading and Britpicking.

John Dee is perhaps most famous for his occult-flavored hijinks during the reign of Elizabeth I. The same applies to Kelley. The phoenix portrait we’ve included is a variation on this portrait by Nicholas Hilliard (c. 1575).

Hermes Trismegistus is supposedly an Ancient Greek philosopher and alchemist; often conflated with Thoth and/or Hermes and the founder of hermeticism.

The Emerald Tablets of Djehuty (also known as the Emerald Tablets of Thoth) supposedly come from the Great Pyramid and contain the secrets of transmutation of
Nostradamus (Michel de Nostre-Dame) was the court astrologer to Queen Catherine de’ Medici of France in the late sixteenth century. His prophecies were published posthumously and make up fully $\frac{1}{3}$ of the History Channel’s programming.

Mélusine is a supernatural creature who is half-woman and half-snake and supposedly the founder of the French aristocratic house of Lusignan in Poitou. She also appears as the symbol for Starbucks Coffee.
Rita Skeeter proved just as troublesome in absentia as she did in person. John had tried everything from vanishing spells to *Incendio*, and Sherlock had even volunteered a pinch of Weasley’s Patented Disappearing Powder, but no matter what they did, that green business card still kept reappearing in the right-hand pocket of whatever John was wearing at the time. Even Sherlock seemed grudgingly impressed.

They were attempting to boil the card in venomous tentacula syrup when one of the official Ministry owls knocked impatiently at the window. Setting aside the protective gloves and goggles, John opened the window and extracted the message as the owl flapped away. The Ministry owls never seemed interested in treats or socialising. Sherlock probably knew exactly which subheading and bylaw concerned the proper behaviour of owls employed by the Ministry of Magic, but John was content to wonder.

“Sherlock,” he finally said after scanning Lestrade’s hurried handwriting. “There’s another victim. Except he’s not dead this time.”

“Not dead?” Sherlock sounded almost disappointed, though that might have been from the dripping yet somehow *still* bloody undamaged business card held tightly in his tongs.

“No, he’s in St Mungo’s in some sort of coma. The upstairs neighbour heard noises and the door was unlocked. No sign of the would-be killer. Still, victim’s a lucky man.”

“Maybe.”

“Lestrade says to be quick if we want to get there before the Aurors do.”

“Before they contaminate it, you mean,” Sherlock corrected him, flinging the tongs and Rita Skeeter’s card into the sink in disgust.

The card promptly materialized in John’s pocket and he sighed. “What should I do about *this*?” At precisely that point, he realised it was still sticky with tentacula venom and he hurriedly pulled his trousers off, where they lay in a sad smoking pile on the floor. “Shit, I liked that pair. Sherlock, we really need to do something.”
“I’m thinking about it. Murder victim first. Love life second.”

“You did not just say that about Rita Skeeter,” John called over his shoulder as he retrieved another pair of trousers from his room. “I’m pretending you didn’t.”

“She certainly seems to think so. Those pants are very red, incidentally.”

“Shut up, Sherlock. Just…. shut up. The tentacula venom was your idea.”

“If anything was going to work…”

“Let’s just go, shall we?”

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“So, do we have any idea how this one survived?” asked John as the world stopped spinning from their recent Apparition onto the pavement outside a decidedly ordinary-looking terrace house. “I don’t suppose his name matched any of the ones you asked Mr Kelley about?”

“No, that would be too convenient,” Sherlock replied. The flat in question was on the ground floor and had already been marked off with the magical tape that was becoming increasingly familiar to John. “The victim is at St Mungo’s being treated, though they have yet to disclose what, precisely, he is being treated for. As to how he survived… it would appear the killer was interrupted before they could finish the job.”

The victim was named Ottoway Gormal XVII, which, John thought uncharitably, meant he was a victim at least twice over, and his flat was crammed wall to wall with books, papers, and assorted objects, many of which John could not identify. The chair beside the crowded dining table was knocked on its side, and beside it was a pair of glasses, one lens smashed. Frowning, John picked them up. “Maybe he dropped his glasses and the killer got him from behind while was bending down.”

“No mention of head trauma in the initial report, but not a bad thought,” replied Sherlock from the next room. “How powerful are the glasses?”
John lifted the intact lens to one of his eyes and winced. “Bad. I’d wager he could barely see without them.”

“You’d already left Hogwarts when the Chamber of Secrets was opened, hadn’t you?”

“I was in training at St Mungo’s. We were all hoping Poppy Pomfrey might send us one of her petrification cases, but she never did. Always kept the good ones to herself.” Even as he said the words, John winced, recalling the many cases sent by emergency Apparition from Hogwarts after the final battle several years later. They’d sent him to Afghanistan shortly afterward when things went from bad to worse. “Why do you ask? D’you think it’s got something to do with the glasses?”

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise. “Any theories would be mere speculation at this point.”

John tried to remember the pictures he’d seen on Sherlock’s mind-wall-thing. “At least some of the other victims wore glasses too.”

“As I said, speculation,” Sherlock said, and refused to say anything more on the matter.

Once Sherlock had determined to his satisfaction that he’d seen all there was to see at the scene of the crime (John already having determined to his satisfaction that he’d noticed everything he was likely to, which wasn’t much) it was off to St Mungo’s to try and find out what they could from Mr Gormal.

John hadn’t been back through these doors in what he realised was months, and it felt considerably better walking in as a professional rather than as a patient. Especially when it didn’t involve the use of his cane.

“It’ll be the fourth floor,” Sherlock said sotto voce as they made their way in by walking as though they knew where they were going.

“Yeah, cheers, I did intern here,” John whispered back as they entered the lift, but it was clear that Sherlock wasn’t paying attention.

“Fourth floor - Spell Damage,” intoned the vaguely drowsy voice from the lift. John followed
Sherlock into the corridor. After about thirty seconds of Sherlock staring blankly into space, however, he had to intervene.

“Do you happen to know which room, smartarse?”

Sherlock grabbed him by the neck of his robe and yanked him back from the bend. “The odds-on-favourite is the one just round the corner, given the Auror currently guarding the entrance.”

“So what are we waiting for?”

“They may not have orders to let us in.”

“So we owl Lestrade and…”

“They may possibly have orders not to let us in.”

“Ah,” John said. “What did you do?”

“Why do you assume it’s….”

“Sherlock.”

“Alright, alright, I may have just accidentally awakened someone’s repressed memories of a Death Eater raid.”

“Sherlock.”

“It solved the case.”

“Sherlock!” John sighed. “Alright. Does that particular Auror know you?”
“No.”

“Then let me handle this.” Before Sherlock could answer, John spun on his heel and rounded the corner. Putting on what Mike had once called his Evil Trainee Healer face, he strode up to the Auror guarding the door.

“Sorry,” said the Auror, sounding not in the least bit sorry, “no clearance.”

“Funny story about that. Did you hear about the patient who died here because his fluids hadn’t been replenished on time?” John crossed his arms in front of his chest and stared directly at the Auror. “You don’t want to be responsible for that, believe me.”

The Auror shifted his feet uncomfortably and glanced down the corridor. It was between shifts, as John well remembered, so there was nobody else in sight.

John leaned in to stare at the Auror before pulling back abruptly. “I say, Sherringford, do you see what I see? His…” he gestured in the general direction of the Auror’s head.

Sherlock, bless him, was as quick on the uptake as ever. “I do indeed.”

“What? What is it?” the Auror asked, now alarmed.

“Well,” John demurred, “it’s probably nothing…”

“But then again…” Sherlock added.

“Then again,” echoed John. “Then again it could be more than nothing.”

Sherlock hmmmed. “Practically textbook symptoms.”

“Of what?” demanded the Auror.
John sighed. “Garuda pox.”

“What?”

“Now, calm down. The early stages are...well, I wouldn’t exactly say benign, but you don’t really need to worry until your extremities start turning puce and falling off…”

The Auror had bolted down the corridor before John could finish the sentence.

“You are a man of hidden talents, John,” Sherlock said, winking at him before he swept into the room.

Since Sherlock immediately began examining the victim, still lying comatose in his bed, John headed instead for the medical chart clipped to the bed frame. “They’re doing everything right, as far as I can tell, given that they’ve no idea what they’re dealing with. He’s stable, at least, but without knowing what caused it there’s no telling if he’ll ever…”

He looked over to see if Sherlock was listening and got his first good look at the victim, small and ashen and very, very still in his bed. “Sherlock.”

“Sherlock,” John repeated, slightly more insistently.

“SHERLOCK,” he said again, allowing a bit of drill sergeant into his voice.

“John, don’t…”

“Sherlock, I SAW HIM. At Kelley & Dee.”

Sherlock may as well have apparated for how suddenly he was in front of John, his hands gripping John’s shoulders and his eyes burning holes in John’s. “You. What.”
“I saw Gormal. In the loo at the auction house. He was with another wizard but I…”

Before he knew what was happening, Sherlock had grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the room they’d taken so much trouble to get into. “Sherlock, what are you doing?”

“We need a Pensieve. Fast.”

“Who…” John began to ask, before realising there was one place guaranteed to have a Pensieve. Unfortunately. “Mycroft.”

“Mycroft,” Sherlock confirmed as John felt the familiar falling-lurching sensation of a Side-Along.

***

“Merlin, but this place looks straight out of a spread in *Hound & Hippogriff,*” John exclaimed as they paused in front of Mycroft’s perfectly polished mahogany front door, complete with brass knocker in the shape of a griffin. It was in one of those parts of London that John never visited because he always felt too shabby.

“Probably because it has been, no fewer than five times,” Sherlock replied with a grimace. “They’ve never been known for originality.”

“I like our place better, anyway.”

Sherlock turned to look at him.

“I mean, sure, probably fewer accidental poisonings here…” John added, teasing. He had the satisfaction of watching a corner of Sherlock’s mouth quirk into a smile.

“I assure you, John, any poisonings here will be *carefully* planned,” Sherlock said as the door opened to reveal a small elderly house elf. Because of *course* the Holmes family had house elves. This one, at least, was wearing a tunic with a family crest John could only assume was theirs, which meant she was one of the paid ones.
“Master Sherlock, Master Mycroft is at the Ministry today, and Master and Mistress Holmes are still abroad…”

“Yes, thank you, Ingeborg, I had rather hoped as much,” Sherlock said.

“Can Ingeborg get Master Sherlock and his… friend some refreshment?” the house elf asked, scrambling to keep pace with Sherlock’s longer strides down the manse’s corridor.

“You know I never eat when I’m working.”

“I’d love a cuppa, if you’re offering,” John added, half out of politeness and half because, as usual, he’d had nothing to eat today.

What the house-elf brought with her when she returned about ten minutes later could be described in the most understated terms as a feast worthy of the Hogwarts kitchens themselves. John had known he was hungry, but his stomach made itself clear as soon as he caught sight of the tripartite tray filled with finger sandwiches, fresh-baked shortbread, and what smelled like pumpkin cakes.

“Is it a special occasion?” Sherlock asked suspiciously.

Ingeborg beamed. “Master Sherlock’s brought a friend home. Of course it is.”

John was torn between a desire to compliment the chef and not talking with his mouth full, but the food was delicious and he promptly decided he did not care. “This is fantastic. Thank you.”

“Can we get on with it, John? There is a case on,” Sherlock hissed, but he made no move to do anything but stand there.

“You may as well have some too--I know you’ve skipped breakfast again. Besides, she’s made your favourites,” John said, pointing.

Reluctantly, Sherlock reached for a sandwich.
“And afterwards, perhaps Master Sherlock’s friend would care to look at Master Sherlock’s baby pictures.”

“Yes, I would,” said John cheerfully, just as Sherlock tried to speak around a mouthful of bread. “It would be my pleasure.”

“John, we’re here to work,” snapped Sherlock. “Speaking of which…” He jumped to his feet—not, John observed, before snatching up a piece of pumpkin cake and wrapping it in a napkin—and tugged John toward what appeared to be a bookcase. At least until he reached for a copy of The Art and Science of Levitation, 3rd edition, and the bookcase opened to reveal a smaller chamber.

John had only seen Pensieves in pictures before, though it had become known posthumously that Albus Dumbledore had apparently kept one in his office at Hogwarts when he was headmaster. The one before him now was made of black marble, as clean and spare as might be expected, belonging to the Holmes family. It looked, somehow, simultaneously brand new and unspeakably ancient.

“So…” he said, licking his lips in a nervous gesture, “How’s this work, then?”

Sherlock held up his wand. “Hold the memory at the forefront of your mind, then I’ll remove the strand.”

“Easy as that,” John said dryly. He took a deep breath, then closed his eyes as he released it. “Alright, let’s give it a go.”

It felt a bit like someone pulling hairs out of his head, strand by strand, and he could see slivers of the image disappearing one by one until all that was left of what he thought was that memory was blankness. It was almost too easy. Sometimes, he thought, I wonder if the Muggles don’t have it right after all.

But Sherlock was bent over the black marble bowl and beckoning him forward. “There we are,” he said, gesturing with his hand to the strings of silver pouring from the end of his wand into the shimmering pool below. Emerging from its surface, vivid as life, was John’s memory of the loo in Kelley & Dee’s auction house. It really was fancier than it needed to be.

The wizard now known as Ottoway Gormal XVII was peering into the mirror above the amphibiously decorated sinks, blinking through his thick glasses. Beside him was a wizard in robes
that might once have been purple.

“Those were once fancy dress robes, but he’s worn them out. From the pattern I’d guess the latter half of the nineteenth century at the latest. Might even be William Morris. They don’t appear to know one another well, if at all.”

“You think that might be our man?”

“It’s certainly our best lead.” The memory ended, the figures dissolving away into the mercury-coloured waters of the shallow vessel. “Pity you didn’t stay longer.”

“I don’t make a habit of eavesdropping on strangers in public loos, Sherlock.”

Sherlock continued stirring the Pensieve absentmindedly with his wand’s tip. “Clearly you need to start. It’s a useful hobby.”

John was already half-turned away when another image rippled across the liquid surface, of a dark-haired boy chasing a dog across a field. He stopped and glanced at Sherlock, who didn’t appear to have noticed.

“Is that…”

“What?” Sherlock said, and the memory splashed abruptly back into the Pensieve, leaving only ripples behind.

Rather to John’s disappointment, a knock sounded at the doorway. Ingeborg was standing there uncertainly. “Ingeborg begs your pardon, Master Sherlock and Master Sherlock’s friend, but there is an urgent message for you. From the Auror Office.”

Sherlock was through the door before she’d finished speaking. It was left to John to thank the house-elf and follow, leaving the Pensieve and its undiscovered secrets reluctantly behind.

It might have been John’s imagination, but the owl, much like the one who had delivered Lestrade’s message this morning, seemed to be judging them both for tardiness. As soon as Sherlock untied the
message from its leg, the bird flew off, hooting aggrievedly.

Sherlock’s eyes widened slightly with an expression John had begun thinking of as his ‘thrill of the chase’ look—just the hint of a smile, and not necessarily a comforting one. Still, it made John’s blood start pumping faster.

“Someone’s just tried to break into Gormal’s flat.”

Chapter End Notes

Garuda is a part-bird, part-human creature who appears in both Hindu and Buddhist mythology. He is often depicted as the mount for the Hindu god Vishnu. Seeing as the wizarding world includes dragon pox as a legitimate disease, it seems only fair that other mythological creatures also becomes names for diseases in other parts of the world, and that John, having spent several years in Central Asia, might have come across a few.

Ingeborg gets her name from a rather unfortunate princess of Denmark who became the second wife of Philip II of France in 1193. He decided he disliked her within 24 hours and spent much of the rest of his life attempting to divorce her in spite of her protests. They eventually reconciled and she was reinstated as queen of France after his death. Any resemblance between her and the Holmes family’s house-elf is purely coincidental.

Of course William Morris was a wizard. Everyone knows that.
Ottoway Gormal’s flat looked much as it had when they left it earlier that day, except that the door was hanging open and it was surrounded by Aurors.

“We’d set extra wards on the place,” explained Lestrade as John and Sherlock reached his side. “Someone tried to break in through the back garden and set them off. Of course, there was no sign of anyone by the time we arrived.”

“What about Gormal?” John asked. “Is he alright?”

“No word from St Mungo’s to suggest otherwise, but I’ve sent some extra hands just to be safe. I hear,” he added, glaring at Sherlock, “that the guard posted outside his door earlier this afternoon was found in the Magical Diseases ward babbling about some sort of pox.”

“Can’t think what you mean,” said Sherlock. John just looked appropriately baffled.

“Said he’d been diagnosed by some healer named Sheffington. Tall fellow, dark hair, wore a funny coat. Are you sure you don’t know anything about it?”

“Best to have those sorts of things checked out,” John said innocently. “Just in case.”

“Only a fool wouldn’t listen to his healer,” Sherlock added gravely.

Lestrade eyed both of them for a moment before sighing and gesturing toward the door. “Go on, then. Do your...thing.”

“So what are we actually looking for?” John asked once they were inside.

“Curious, isn’t it?” Sherlock said. “Old stories about murderers returning to the scene of the crime. They don’t, generally. Why risk it?”
“This one did. Does.”

“Exactly. But why?”

As far as John could see, the flat looked more or less the same as it had earlier that day, the chair still on its side on the floor. John had set Gormal’s glasses on the table before he and Sherlock left, and they still hadn’t been moved.

“Everything looks exactly the same.”

“Which means whatever they’re attempting to do, they haven’t been able to yet. Which means we might still be able to catch them before they’ve killed again.”

“How’s that?”

“I am going to get in touch with an old acquaintance.” Sherlock reached into the right pocket of John’s shirt and withdrew Rita Skeeter’s card, which they still hadn’t managed to destroy. “And you’re going on a date.”

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“For the fifty-thousandth time, Sherlock, I am not going on a date with Rita Skeeter.”

“Correction: You have already agreed to go on a date with Rita Skeeter and will be meeting her at Florian Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour in precisely an hour and a half.”

John rolled his eyes. “So not only have I asked her out, I’m apparently twelve.”

“It’s a nice public place. She can’t do anything indecent. Well, nothing too indecent. Now,” said Sherlock, sounding far too satisfied with himself, “one last time.”

“At half two on Thursday afternoon Ottoway Gormal will be discharged from St Mungo’s Hospital,” recited John, as though it were a list of the eighteen guaranteed signs of improperly performed
Memory Charms. “I’m to tell her this in such a way that she absolutely cannot resist adding it to her column tomorrow.”

“That won’t be hard, John. The hard part will be pretending that isn’t the only reason you’re meeting her. And not letting her successfully pump you for information about me.”

John turned and headed into his room. He began rifling through his wardrobe for shirts, yelling back out at Sherlock, “Remind me again why I can’t be the one to go meet with Mundungus Fletcher in some dark and dirty pub and you be the one to get ice cream?” He grabbed a couple of possibilities and stepped over to the mirror to see how they looked.

Sherlock appeared behind him as he looked in the mirror, like some sort of reverse vampire. “And here I thought you liked danger.”

“There’s danger and then there’s suicide missions,” John said, turning to face his flatmate.

“One, Fletcher knows me and not you, so he’s likely to flee on sight if you turn up. Two, you’re the one Skeeter’s interested in at the moment. Three, Rita hates me and she’d never trust any information I gave her even if I did speak to her.”

“Why does she hate you so much, exactly?” asked John, peering suspiciously at Rita’s card. “Did you catch her doing something illegal? I don’t doubt she has, with the information she’s picked up.”

Sherlock looked slightly discomfited. “It’s a long story. Now don’t worry, I’ll be around to keep an eye on you both, as soon as I’m done with my own appointment.”

“Oh?”

“I will, of course, be using Polyjuice Potion to disguise myself.”

“Of course,” John said, because of course he was. “As?”

“Best you not know. You’ll be far more convincing that way. And not the red one, you’re not trying to look like someone’s grandfather.”
John flung his red cardigan in the direction of his closet. “I have gone on dates before, you know. Sometimes they’ve even been ones not set up as part of a sting operation by my mad flatmate.” One of them had even painted her fingernails green, but luckily that was where the resemblance to Rita Skeeter had ended.

“Wear the dark blue shirt, it shows off the muscle tone you’ve been getting back. Normal robes, nothing too fancy. We don’t want to give her too many ideas. She’s already got plenty.”

“Sherlock, I’m a grown man. I know how to dress myself. Will you please hover somewhere else?” John glowered at his reflection as he buttoned up the shirt Sherlock had suggested, reluctantly agreeing with his assessment.

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Rita Skeeter was already waiting when John arrived at Fortescue’s. Her nails were still lime-green, John noted despondently, and her smile unsettlingly wide, showing what seemed like too many teeth.

“I was beginning to worry,” she said. “I’ve been stood up before. Part of the job. But you seemed so polite.”

“That’s me,” said John, forcing a smile of his own. “Always polite.”

“John Watson,” she said, rolling the name over her tongue in a way that made John’s skin crawl ever so faintly. “Not a name I’ve encountered before.”

“We keep ourselves to ourselves,” John said, silently praying she wouldn’t bring up his sister.

“It’s not every man who would invite me to Florian Fortescue’s for a date. How charming of you, dear John. I may call you John, may I not?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “Trained at St. Mungo’s, excellent N.E.W.T.s, among the best in Hufflepuff in your year.” She flashed him another toothy grin. “A girl’s got to do her research, after all. You never know what sorts of...characters...are lurking about these days.”

John opened his mouth, then closed it again. “Especially at Fortescue’s. Would you like something?”
“Not for me, thanks. Watching the waistline. A bit wicked of you to bring me here, really.” Rita leant close enough that John caught a whiff of both perfume and what he was certain was gin on her breath. “I do know a lovely little place just round the corner…”

“Let’s see how things go first, shall we?” John said, as politely as possible. He stood. “I’m just going to… ice cream. Be right back.”

He fought the urge to glance around the shop, no matter how desperate he was to figure out which of the seemingly innocent bystanders was his flatmate. Was it the old man in the corner with a sundae and a stack of books? One of the bored looking teens behind the counter? He even found himself peering suspiciously at the old lady seated with her tabby cat, sharing what appeared to be a strawberry milkshake. Maybe it was her. Maybe it was the moggy.

“Butterbeer in a cup, thanks. And a… water, cheers,” John said. He glanced once more at the cat, who gave him an unsettlingly Sherlock-esque stare as he left a tip in the jar beside the till.

He made sure his smile was fixed firmly in place before he turned back to their table, politely placing the water in front of Rita before sitting down.

“Such a gentleman. Makes me wonder what you’re hiding,” Rita said, winking. She didn’t touch the water, tucking her hands beneath her chin in a way that made John fear for the safety of her jugular. Her fingernails really were disturbingly green.

“I’m an open scroll,” John told her as sincerely as he could. “Although I doubt you’d believe it, being a journalist.”

“Well, that’s for you to know, and me to find out,” Rita said. “So tell me, what could possibly make someone as apparently ordinary as you, if you’ll pardon me for saying--”

John waved his hand in a ‘go on’ gesture.

“--keeping company with His Mysteriousness himself. Must be something about you, John, and I’m just dying to peel back the layers and find out what,” she said, leaning in.
John hoped he was imagining the press of a foot against his own underneath the table.

“Actually, I was hoping we could talk about you.”

Rita pulled back slightly, looking a bit startled. John continued, “I mean, you must have some fascinating stories, doing the work you do. We weren’t often able to get copies of the *Prophet* overseas—owls interrupted you know—but it seemed like your byline was always on the front page.” Usually accompanied by an article that was first to be used as a dartboard in the mess. Dumbledore had been well loved by many of his former students.

She preened visibly. “I just report what I observe, dear John. If I perhaps observe more than people expect, well…” she gave an exaggerated shrug, “what’s to be done? I am surprised our esteemed Mister Holmes let you out without supervision.”

“He’s just my flatmate…Rita,” he managed to say the name without a grimace. “He’s not my keeper, you know.”


“Actually it’s not that interesting,” said John around a mouthful of admittedly delicious butterbeer-flavoured ice cream. It had been years since his last visit to Fortescue’s and he was beginning to wish Sherlock hadn’t forced him to ruin it by involving Rita Skeeter. *Don’t give her any more information than you have to,* he reminded himself. *And for Merlin’s sake don’t underestimate her.* “He’s doing me a favour, giving me a place to live while I adjust back to civilian life.”

“And in return, you’re… helping with his investigations? Must be handy, having a healer at his beck and call, the scrapes he gets into.”

“I’m not actually involved…”

“Then again, you clean up well. Were you at the auction house for more *personal* reasons? He probably would think an auction was romantic. There’s no accounting for taste.”

John filled his mouth with ice cream again in a desperate bid for time. Rita thinking he’d been on a date with Sherlock was just as awkward as the truth, but also less damaging to their investigation. The damage to his personal life…he supposed he’d just have to live with it. It wasn’t as though his
social calendar had been crushingly full lately. “Yes, actually,” he mumbled. “I can say I’d never before been asked on a date to an auction house.”

“Oh *indeed,*” Rita said, sounding surprised, though whether it was by what he’d admitted or the fact that he’d admitted it, John wasn’t sure. “I’d suspected he swung that way for ages, mind. There were rumours of something between him and a Victor Trevor back in…”

John winced. “I think I’d rather not know, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Which of course begs the question what you’re doing here with me, if you’ve got *that* warming your bed.” Rita gave a slow wink. “I mean, I can’t *stand* him and I’ve still got to admire those cheekbones.”

John could feel himself blushing like a Victorian heroine. “We’re not…it’s just been one date. Why can’t you stand him, just out of curiosity?”

“That story requires something a bit stronger than Fortescue’s, dear John.”

“In that case, the first round’s on me,” John said, hoping very strongly that he knew what he was getting into. “After you, Rita.”

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When John finally arrived back at 221B he was exhausted, dishevelled, and sported a large damp stain across the front of his robes.

“Remind me to never do you a bloody favour again, mate.”

Sherlock looked up from his position on the bloody sofa he’d been sitting on when John had left, looking for all the world as though he hadn’t moved in the intervening time. “You’re drunk,” he said.

“What makes you think so?”
“I can smell the Dragon Scale from here. I’d assumed you’d be back by now. Date go well?”

“Do not start with me, Sherlock, I am not in the bloody mood. You were supposed to be there, monitoring, not here making sure the sofa didn’t get up and walk away.” John flung his robe in the general direction of one of the chairs, then began unbuttoning his still-damp shirt. “I have had too much to drink, I have had to drink Rita Skeeter under the table, someone spilled their entire pint of Dragon Scale on me during the pub brawl, during which someone also picked my bloody pocket so that when I did leave, I couldn’t catch a bloody cab back here.”

He tossed the shirt at Sherlock’s head. “Luckily no one got their hands on my wand so I was able to get a lift on the Knight Bus.”

Sherlock delicately removed the shirt from his head, then froze as he looked over at John, still pacing angrily and now down to a white vest, red pants, and black socks.

“I…”

“Where were you, Sherlock?” John asked, pausing in front of the sofa to glare down at his flatmate, his fists flexing at his sides as though he were considering just how he was going to use them on said flatmate.

Sherlock opened his mouth. Then closed it again. “I was there,” he said in a rush.

“What?”

John still must have smelled like lager because Sherlock appeared to be having trouble breathing. Considering how many drinks he’d had, it wasn’t that surprising, he supposed. “I was there. With you, shadowing you, the whole time.”

“You what? You… how?”

“I followed you out of Fortescue’s,” Sherlock blurted out, “but had to change because the Polyjuice was wearing off and besides it was hardly the right disguise to take into a place like the Ship and Syren so I changed into someone else and came in a few moments afterwards. I was sitting at the bar next to you.”
“Wait, you’re…”

Sherlock visibly winced as John put two and two together. “Yes about that…”

“You started that bloody brawl!”

“She was about to slip something into your drink! Veritaserum, most likely. I had to distract you both so I could switch the drinks.”

“So you decided the best way to handle that was to insult the Cannons’ keeper in the middle of a bar covered in orange pennants?”

Sherlock sniffed. “You have to admit it was effective.”

“Mate, you’re lucky to be alive.” John had to walk all the way to the other side of the room just to give himself time to take it all in. Only then did he notice the bruising on Sherlock’s right temple. “You should put some ice on that.”

“Not important,” said Sherlock.

“Like hell,” John said, stomping back across the room for a closer look. He wrapped a hand around Sherlock’s chin to lift his head up, tilting it one way and then the other to assess possible damage.

“John, I’m fine,” Sherlock was protesting half-heartedly, though he made no move to push John away. “The bar took most of the blow, as it happens.”

“You’ll have a keeker in the morning, you idiot, and no mistake,” John said, brushing a thumb gently around Sherlock’s right orbital socket. “Pupils are dilating a bit. Any chance of concussion? And don’t you dare lie.” He grabbed Sherlock’s wand off the sofa with his free hand and waved it in the general direction of the kitchen. “Accio ice pack.”

“John, you really don’t--”
“Shut. Up.”

Rather to his surprise, Sherlock did just that. John held the ice pack against his temple and stepped back when Sherlock took hold of it, perhaps less gracefully than usual.

“You seem alright, but you’ll leave that in place and you’ll tell me immediately if you notice any pain or discomfort,” John informed him. “You’ve said it yourself, only an idiot doesn’t listen to his healer.”

“I say a lot of--fine. Yes. I’ll tell you if I notice anything. More importantly--”

“Sherlock.”

“Did you tell her about Gormal’s release?”

“I should make you read the *Prophet* tomorrow to find out.”

“You wouldn’t,” Sherlock hissed. “The only thing worse than that woman’s manners is her sense of prose.”

John rolled his eyes. “Don’t start with me, she wasn’t grabbing your arse tonight. Merlin’s beard but those nails are sharp. And yes, she managed to somehow pry the pertinent information out of me after a pint or two. In the strictest confidence, of course.”

“Then I expect we’ll see it in the *Prophet* tomorrow morning.”

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John picked up a copy of the *Prophet* on their way to Gormal’s flat the next morning, but when he didn’t see anything on a cursory glance, he set it aside in frustration. It didn’t occur to him until he was sitting down for a sandwich that Rita’s column might not always appear on the front page. Only on the slow news days. He blinked for a moment at a photograph of the despondent Keeper for the
Chudley Cannons, who had lost to the Wimbourne Wasps the previous night to absolutely no one’s surprise. He flipped through the pages, past the usual waving photographs of Ministry officials, until Rita’s grinning face, as well as an image of Gormal that looked like a badly recopied old apparition permit photo, stared up at him from page five above her latest column. *Ninth Victim Survives Nemesis Killer: But For How Long?*

He’d only just read a description of *the heart-thuddingly handsome Healer John Watson* when the wards suddenly began screaming. Reluctantly setting down the paper, he ran for the door, nearly colliding with Sherlock.

Outside on the front path, two of Lestrade’s Aurors were holding a struggling figure in place while a third worked a pair of magical handcuffs over the suspect’s wrists. He looked up, and John screwed his eyes shut and opened them again to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating.

It was Ottoway Gormal himself.

***

Chapter End Notes

Such was Winter’s dedication to this story that she recently visited Diagon Alley in at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, purely for research purposes. Thus she can confirm that Fortescue’s does have soft serve Butterbeer Ice Cream and that Dragon Scale is a lager served at the Fountain of Fair Fortune.

If you’re American, imagine the Ship and Syren is the Wizarding equivalent of a Steelers’ bar. If you’re in the UK, substitute Arsenal. If you’re from countries where we the authors are even less familiar with the local sportsball franchises of note, please picture whichever regional sportsball team has the most ubiquitous (and annoying) fans.

The Chudley Cannons, on a completely unrelated note, are the worst team in the entire British Quidditch League, having not won a League Cup since 1892.

Also, wow, John really can’t keep his trousers on around Sherlock, can he?

Special warmest thanks this chapter to Neverwhere for the emergency Britpick!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Neverwhere and Vulgarweed for beta-reading on short notice! And, yes, this is the final chapter and we finally finished this damn fic. Thanks so much to all of you readers for your encouragement and your patience!

John did a double take. Then he checked again.

No, it couldn’t possibly be Ottoway Gormal, because Ottoway Gormal was still, so far as he knew, in a coma at St. Mungo’s. Unless he’d made a speedy recovery the likes of which John had never encountered in his entire medical career, something was definitely wrong. Gormal hadn’t hurt himself, surely?

Sherlock was eyeing the new arrival with a disturbingly pleased expression. “Why, Mr Gormal, you’re home early.”

“Discharged,” said Gormal, blinking several times in quick succession. “They discharged me. Said I was free to go.” He looked down at the handcuffs, and back at Sherlock and John, holding up his hands pleadingly. “And then these...people attacked me on my way into my own home!”

“Terribly sorry about that, Mr Gormal,” Lestrade said, removing the cuffs with a quick flick of his wand. “but this is a crime scene and my Aurors were told to be careful of any intruders.”

“It’s my home,” repeated Gormal, rubbing his wrists. He was still blinking—or possibly squinting. John remembered the glasses he’d seen on the floor and wondered what, if anything, Gormal could see without them. “Thank you, Auror. Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s been a rough day.”

“Actually, Mr Gormal, we need to ask you a few questions,” Lestrade said. “You’re our best lead at the moment and it would be particularly helpful...”

“Yes, well, I’ll be happy to answer any questions...tomorrow;” Gormal said, making an aborted movement towards his door, only to be stopped by John’s sidestep. “Surely I can be allowed a night’s peace after all I’ve been through?”
“Mr Gormal,” John added, following Sherlock’s lead, “consider that you’ve just barely come out of a coma. In my medical opinion, it would be unwise for you to be alone.” He was rewarded with an approving look from Sherlock.

“Mr Gormal,” added Sherlock, “we couldn’t possibly leave you on your own after what you’ve been through. What if your assailant comes back?”

Gormal looked around at the three aurors, then at Sherlock and John. “Very well, very well, come inside, why don’t you, let’s get this over with.” As they followed him through the door, leaving one of Lestrade’s Aurors outside to guard the entrance, Gormal kept up an audible mutter about nasty government bureaucrats and their insistence on troubling perfectly decent citizens.

Sherlock, with uncharacteristic solicitousness, immediately insisted on helping to seat Gormal in the only chair in the flat not covered in what might charitably called artefacts and which John’s mum would have called dust catchers. “Tea, I think? Yes, of course, tea. John, would you be so kind? No, no, Mr Gormal, you should be resting.”

Lestrade kept glancing at Sherlock, clearly aware that he was up to something. John shrugged a ‘can’t help you mate,’ and went to make the tea.

“Well then, Mr Gormal… What can you tell me about your attacker?”

“Well I...” Gormal said, suddenly rather subdued. “It all happened rather quickly, you understand. And they...they attacked me from behind! Couldn’t see a thing!”

“Of course you must have been,” said Sherlock, picking up the glasses from the table and handing them over. “I assume these are yours?”

“Oh thank goodness...” Gormal said, “I’d no idea where they’d got to. Lose my head if it wasn’t...well.” He peered around as his eyes focused on them each in turn. “You aren’t...you two aren’t Aurors.”

“Sherlock Holmes, at your service, and this is my associate John Watson.”
“Cheers,” John said, handing Gormal a cup of tea.

Gormal blanched. “Sherlock...Holmes.”

Sherlock grinned. It wasn’t a nice grin. “I see my reputation precedes me. In that case, I’m sure you’ll indulge me if I deduce you came by way of the Knight Bus?”

Gormal became even paler. “Quite so, Mr Holmes.”

“It’s the dirt, you see. On the hem of your robes. Very distinctive. As well as the spot of candle wax on your sleeve,” Sherlock said.

“Impressive,” said Gormal with a swallow. He hadn’t touched his tea, though he kept glancing at the cup on the table. “Apparition didn’t seem like the best idea.”

“As I’m sure your doctors warned you,” John remarked, half an eye on Sherlock, who seemed both excited and utterly unconcerned. “Tea not to your liking?”

Gormal blinked at the cup, then took a noisy sip. “Very good, thanks. But, as I was saying, they got me from behind and I didn’t see a thing.” He looked at the table again.

“Why do you think someone might have been after you?” asked Lestrade, clearly doing his best not to glare at Sherlock. “Anything you could tell us would be helpful, Mr Gormal.”

“I can’t imagine why. I’ve never harmed anyone. Not even during all that nastiness with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

“Oh, nobody thinks it’s a vendetta killing,” said Sherlock airily. “You’ve certainly got a large number of artefacts sitting about. Do you think it might have been a thief?”

Gormal twitched. “Might have been. I told you, he came at me from behind—”

“He?”
“I don’t know! Might have been a she. How could I know if I didn’t see them?”

“Mr Gormal, please don’t upset yourself,” Lestrade cut in, this time actually glaring at Sherlock. “Do you think you might have some sort of...object...that might interest a thief?”

“Oh, you mean all this junk?” Gormal waved one hand vaguely. “I can’t imagine.”

“You say that,” Sherlock observed slowly, “and yet you keep glancing at that box on the table as though it’s about to sprout legs and walk away.”

There was indeed a box on the table--a battered wooden box with an unfastened brass latch. There might once have been writing on it, but it had long since faded.

“That old thing? Just an astrolabe, inherited it from an aunt. Now I’ve told you everything I know, surely I might be permitted to…”

“You also keep glancing at the clock, Mr Gormal. We’re not keeping you from anything? No...pressing appointments, surely?"

“Now see here, Mr Holmes, I think you’ve overstayed your welcome. I’ve told you everything I know, Inspector, and I’d very much appreciate it if you’d leave me to myself…”

“I’d think you’d be more concerned that you might have been burgled.”

“I told you, nothing’s been moved.”

“You haven’t even looked around to check.”

“I know my own flat. Merlin’s beard, can’t you leave a wizard in peace?”

“This box, for instance, how could you even know that it hasn’t been opened and the contents
stolen?” Sherlock said, reaching towards the box.

“Don’t touch that; it’s mine!”

Sherlock didn’t answer. Instead, he managed to brush his fingers against the box before Gormal sprang into action, lunging across the table and knocking Sherlock onto the floor. Before he knew what he was doing, John’s wand was in his hand and he’d silently Stunned Gormal, leaving him facedown on the floor.

“Excellent reflexes, John.”

“Sherlock!” shouted Lestrade, kneeling beside the motionless Gormal. “What the hell are you on about?”

“Mr Gormal is more than welcome to order us to leave his flat,” said Sherlock, “but this is not Mr Ottoway Gormal.”

It was John’s turn to look baffled. “It’s twins, isn’t it?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “It’s never twins, John.”

“Then what? And if you don’t tell me, it’ll be you in the cuffs,” Lestrade snapped. As he turned Gormal over, however, he nearly dropped him. “Merlin’s balls, really?”

“Yes, Lestrade, Polyjuice Potion,” said Sherlock proudly, pulling an empty glass tube with a poorly printed label out of his pocket. “Off-market, likely purchased from the Pret-a-Magie in Knockturn Alley. They cut costs by using poor-quality ingredients and it never lasts as long as a properly brewed version. Picked his pocket when we came in. Since it needed to last as long as possible but obviously couldn’t have been used on the Knight Bus, he had to have taken it immediately prior to summoning it. Based on the size, shape, and location of the candle drips on his robe, I knew he’d been on the bus for twenty-three minutes. Another two before we came inside, and John always takes three minutes, forty-two seconds to make tea. I knew your inane questioning was likely to take at least another five. Which meant that, given the average length of time that particular brand of Polyjuice lasts, I knew it was going to expire just about…now.”

Once he’d finished the unpleasant looking contortions that marked the wearing-off of a batch of
Polyjuice, the man lying beside the table was...completely average. Straw-coloured hair, a nondescript face, but even then, there was something strangely familiar about him.

“Recognize him, John?” Sherlock asked. “He was in your Pensieve memory.”

It was the man he’d seen with Ottoway Gormal in the loo at Kelley & Dee. John shoved his wand back into his sleeve and tried to think of something clever to say.

“This is your man, Lestrade. And this,” Sherlock added, jumping to his feet and peering down at the box, “must be what he’s after. Don’t open it.”

Lestrade gestured to his officer, who put the handcuffs back on and hauled the man to his feet. “Rennervate.”

“I think I know him, boss,” the officer said. “Ain’t you one of Dung Fletcher’s mates? Busted you once for petty theft. Dodger or something, isn’t it?”

The thief glanced around, confused and unfocused. John sighed, reaching over to snatch Gormal’s now useless glasses off of his face.

“So what the hell’s a two knut thief doing murdering people?” Lestrade asked.

Dodger started struggling. “I’m just a thief, I’m not a murderer, I didn’t touch them!” After a moment, he muttered under his breath, “And the name’s Artie, dammit. Everyone remembers bloody Dung’s name.”

“No, Mr Dodger, you didn’t so much as point a wand at any of them, did you? You didn’t have to.” Sherlock said. “Your murderer, Lestrade, is not someone. It is something.”

Lestrade crossed his arms and stared at Sherlock. “I hope you’re going to explain yourself, Sherlock.”

“I’ll do you one better. Stand back and, whatever you do, do not look at the item in the box.” With that, he flung open the lid. “The Mirror of Narcissus.”
“The what?”

“Really, Lestrade. I know Professor Binns is a running joke at Hogwarts, but did you learn nothing in History of Magic? Narcissus was famous--or infamous--for being so vain that he stared at a reflection of himself until he wasted away.”

John seemed to remember there was a curse involved, but he already knew better than to interrupt Sherlock when he was on a roll.

“The Mirror of Narcissus, on the other hand, was crafted in the thirteenth century alongside its counterpart, the legendary Mirror of Erised. But unlike Erised, which shows the viewer what they most desire and thus enchants them, this little beauty simply drains the life from them directly. A literal memento mori. Now,” he went on, “since you didn’t know that particular legend, let me tell you a slightly more contemporary story. Imagine a man. He is a petty thief, no one of any particular importance--”

“Hey!” Dodger cried.

Sherlock ignored him. “There is a war on, and everything is in chaos. And in the aftermath of this war, a great many artefacts, Dark and otherwise, are suddenly floating around on the black market. And somehow this thief comes across one that is simultaneously very valuable and quite, quite deadly. I’ll assume you didn’t mean to kill, the first time. You’re a coward, not a murderer.”

Dodger didn’t argue that point. Instead, he said, rather sulkily, “Was just gonna steal it back, figured she couldn’t report buying something she weren’t supposed to have.”

“But instead she was dead, and your item was the culprit. You could have got rid of the mirror--turned it in to the authorities anonymously, destroyed it, hid it away somewhere safe--any number of things. But you didn’t. You decided to profit from it.”

“The auction catalogues,” John remembered.

“Each victim possessed at least one catalogue from Kelley & Dee, usually related to medieval magical ephemera. But, as I learned from observing their living arrangements and speaking to the neighbours, none of them had the means to actually participate in any of their auctions; they just aspired to own valuable artefacts despite the fact that they couldn’t afford them. So our friend
Dodger here would corner them somewhere in the auction house and offer them a priceless item on the sly. No doubt that was what you interrupted when you saw him in the loo with the unfortunate Ottoway Gormal.” Sherlock began to pace back and forth. “A tidy little scheme--find some pathetic, covetous soul not likely to be missed, swear them to secrecy, then sell them the mirror for whatever Galleons they managed to scrape together. Wait for them to look at their purchase, then sneak into their homes before anyone realises they’re dead and steal back your mirror. Repeat as needed. And you needed more and more frequently, as time went on. By the end multiple witches and wizards must have been negotiating their own murders with you simultaneously. It’s a wonder you were able to keep all of your correspondence straight.”

“Why you little...” John said, fingers involuntarily clenching into fists.

Dodger tried to make himself look even smaller. “I’m in debt to some Goblins, okay? If I didn’t pay them the Galleons I owe they’d’ve cut off my thumbs or my nose or summat.”

“So you killed people instead?” demanded Lestrade.

“I wasn’t the one who killed them!”

“Technicalities,” Sherlock said, waving one hand dismissively. “You sold death to the unsuspecting and the greedy. I’m sure there’s a charge in the book that Magical Law Enforcement can throw at you.” As though that decided the point, he flipped the lid on the box shut with what John had to admit was a satisfying crack. “There, Lestrade. Satisfied?”

Lestrade nodded grudgingly. “Thank you, Sherlock. We’ll take it from here.”

“I hope you will. The exciting bit’s over.”

John narrowed his eyes at the box. “What are you going to do with the mirror?” There was, he was forced to admit, a small part of him that wanted to open it just to have a quick look. But that would be a very stupid idea. “The Mirror of Erised is still somewhere in Hogwarts, isn’t it?”

“Presumably,” said Sherlock. “Nobody’s seen it since the war.”

“As for this,” Lestrade told them, picking up the box gingerly, “we’ll be handing it over to Mysteries, who will hopefully keep it far away from the streets.”
“You may want to remind them not to look at it.” At Lestrade’s expression, Sherlock sighed. “I know people in Mysteries. Brains aren’t necessarily a qualification for the job.”

“Fine, Sherlock. I’ll remind them.”

“You’ll want to send an owl to St. Mungo’s too,” John added. “Now that we know what caused his coma maybe they can actually cure Gormal.”

As John watched them lead their culprit away from the flat, he found himself frowning. “How did you know it was the Mirror of Narcissus? You didn’t even look at it. Which, of course, ta, would kill you and all that, you absolutely should not under any circumstances look at it.”

“Professor von Eschenbach’s death confirmed that the victims were alone when they died. That meant the cause of death wasn’t a person but a thing. But not poison or any of the usual spells that would have been revealed by Priori Incantatem. The ivy on Hildegard Brown’s flat showed that it had been broken into, and the dust dispersion revealed that something had been removed after her death, most likely whatever had caused her death. The victims were another clue. Most murders occur because of love or money. Given the descriptions of the victims, clearly it was the latter here and not the former. They were all interested in rare artefacts, thus it must be an artefact of considerable age and historical significance.”

“That’s all well and good,” John said, trying not to sound as impressed as he was, “but there must be more than one Dark artefact that kills people who look at it, right?”

“The dust showed it was or fit into a rectangular object, roughly point six metres by point three. Victims were a mix of men and women, different ages, different sizes, thus likely not jewelry or something worn on the body. That narrowed it down considerably. All of the bodies were unmarked, and of course their grinning corpses were quite distinctive. That left a mere handful of possibilities. Gormal’s early discovery meant the killer hadn’t had time to get their murder weapon back, so I knew it was still here somewhere, and if Dodger was willing to enter the flat with us it couldn’t be immediately lethal. Once he was in here, he couldn’t take his eyes off the box. And once I saw that, I knew it had to be the mirror. There are faded markings on the box, but they aren’t so faded that I couldn’t read them. Lines about Narcissus from the Roman de la Rose, if you’re curious. And of course the style itself was a dead giveaway. Clearly thirteenth-century construction.”

“Clearly,” echoed John. He supposed it was a consequence of being around Sherlock that he always felt as though he were sprinting to catch up. “What did they expect the mirror to do for them, do you think?”
“Fools have died of starvation in front of Erised simply because they can’t bear to stop looking at their deepest desires.”

“But all they’d have seen in the Mirror of Narcissus was themselves.”

“Themselves as they most wanted to be.”

“Hm. So what do you think you’d see then, Sherlock?”

“Well, I did always want to be a pirate.”

John laughed. “There’s an image I won’t forget. Eyepatch and all?”

“Wouldn’t be a proper pirate without one, right?” Sherlock shoved his hands in his robes and watched as the Aurors Disapparated with Dodger. “I always imagined I’d have an owl instead of a parrot. Irritating creatures, parrots.”

“This just keeps getting better,” said John. “Now I’m almost sorry we don’t have the mirror.”

“Don’t be. It would consume even the best of wizards.”

John almost started to explain that he was joking but shrugged instead. “But that’s just desire in general, isn’t it? Whether you’re talking about what you want most or who you want to be.”

“Or who you want,” added Sherlock. When John glanced in his direction, he was looking at the ground. “Although I suppose Erised might show you that. I’ve never seen it in person, and everyone’s always been cagey about the details.”

“That’s Hogwarts for you. Dangerous enchanted objects all over the place, but the only time you need to ask permission is to use the Restricted Section of the library or to visit Hogsmeade.” John grinned. “I did always wonder about that.”
“Maybe we should take a case there next,” suggested Sherlock. “You seem nostalgic.”

“I don’t think I’d recognise it now,” John said, half to himself. Even Hogwarts hadn’t survived the war, not properly. “But I wouldn’t mind a trip back if you’ve got something in mind.”

“Headmistress McGonagall mentioned something about a missing student and a Vanishing Cabinet,” Sherlock said as they started down the path toward the road. “Seems his parents have been making enquiries and are threatening to involve the authorities.”

“Well, we can’t have that, now, can we?”

“Certainly not,” Sherlock grinned. “As you’ve seen, the authorities aren’t equipped to handle much of anything.”

John smiled back. “Good thing they’ve got you, then.”

“Us, John.”

“Quite right.” And, with that, they Apparated back to Baker Street.

***

Junior Auror Ravenwood was the lucky one tasked with delivering the now carefully sealed box to the Department of Mysteries. “It’s always me, isn’t it?” she muttered to the two or three floating memos in the lift with her. She could have sworn one of them tilted slightly in her direction, but none of them had the courtesy to reply.

By the time the lift reached Level Nine, the memos had all flown to their destinations, leaving her on her own. And, just her luck, the Unspeakable on duty outside Mysteries was her least favourite, although if anyone asked her--which nobody ever did--they were all equally smarmy gits.

Unspeakable Belloq grinned at her. “Well, Miss Ravenwood, what sort of nonsense has Lestrade sent us this time? He must think we’re made of spare time to handle his petty trinkets.”
“I’m afraid you don’t have the clearance to handle this, Belloq,” she replied through gritted teeth. “And it’s Auror Ravenwood, if you don’t mind.”

“I do mind. Give it here.”

Ravenwood sidestepped him easily. “Orders from Lestrade. I’m to hand it to Unspeakable Croaker directly.”

Belloq’s smile had vanished. “Unspeakable Croaker has far better things to do than—”

“Oh, he’ll want this. Now find him or send me to him or whatever seems best, but stop wasting my time and his, or I’ll have Chief Auror Lestrade report you to the Minister himself.”

She rarely pulled rank but it was so immensely satisfying when she did. Belloq sneered at her but pulled out his wand and muttered a spell all the same. A small silver weasel emerged from his wand and skittered off down the stairs to Level Ten. Ravenwood hid a smile; her own Patronus was a fox and far more dignified.

By the time she left Mysteries, the box had been handed off to Unspeakable Croaker and, on Lestrade’s strict orders, she’d reminded him not to open it under any circumstances. The Unspeakable had looked at her with eyes that made her shudder inwardly and nodded. “It would be a great fool indeed who looked into the Mirror of Narcissus,” he intoned in a voice that fitted his name. “Don’t worry, Auror. We’ll keep it safe.”

As she made her way toward the lift, she saw Belloq deep in conversation with a tall, ginger-haired wizard in impeccably tailored robes. They both glanced up as she passed, Belloq glaring daggers at her, and waited until she’d moved out of earshot before speaking again.

She couldn’t help but wonder what Operation Siegfried could be, and resolved to ask Lestrade the next time she saw him.

For now, however, this case was closed.
Thank you for reading! Should you be so inclined, we can be found on tumblr at bamfinacuddlyjumper (Winter) and poorshadowspaintedqueens (lareinenoire).

Works inspired by this one:
Illustration for A Spell of Deduction by procoffeinating

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