Invisible Bonds

by mamishka

Summary

Sherlock is hired to investigate a curious break-in which leads to murders most mysterious. But with a bit of magic, and little help from his “friends”, and John Watson at his side, he should be able to solve the case easily. Well, he could if John’s alcoholic sister, an elusive curator, and a Chinese Triad weren’t making things so difficult!

This is the second story in the Fallen series. One should read Fallen first, otherwise this probably won't make much sense. ;)

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Notes

It's important to me that I represent characters of different nationalities accurately and, in this story, there are Chinese characters with which I attempt to do just this. But China is a huge country with over three thousand years of traceable written history, rich folk traditions, and is the home to more than dozens of different cultural groups and languages. As such it is not only likely but inevitable that no matter how many people I consult or how much research I do, there will be mistakes and disagreements over my choices. As a result, this will probably always be a work in progress as I will continue to upgrade and improve the Chinese terms, language, and details whenever mistakes are revealed and as time and
energy allows. Thank you for your patience and understanding.
He watches her demurely pour the tea for these gweilo, serving these foreigners as she had served her former masters, fury burning in his belly. The anger is easier, safer than the gentler pang he feels in his heart. But he cannot deny her beauty and grace, the way her hands tenderly caress and handle the fragile antiquities. He cannot deny the peace and joy that radiates from her face as she tends to them, restores them. Watching her after all these years, a loneliness blooms within him. For so long it was just the two of them relying upon each other. Taking comfort in each other.

Until she left.

The anger flares anew, burning the brief longing in his heart to ash. Jealousy intermingles with rage as he keeps to the shadows, watching her every move with rapt attention. Foreigners, British and tourists, pass him by, but he remains unseen, unnoticed.

When the ceremony and demonstration ends, Soo Lin lingers on a little longer, pouring the remaining tea over the pots once more before gently patting them dry and finally packing them away. His eyes shift toward a young man, gangly, awkward, who steps over to her and begins talking. Another sei gweilo, a coworker apparently. He tries to make a joke, but it falls tragically flat.

“Four hundred years old, and they’re letting you use it to make a brew.”

Soo Lin smiles without looking back at her admirer, her hands deftly returning the pots to their protective case. Her eyes and wistful smile are that of a soul far, far older than his own, her gaze turning distant as she points out, “Some things are not meant to be kept behind glass. They’re made to be handled.” She turns her head to meet the foolish man’s regard. “To be touched.”

The yearning in the gweilo’s gaze is palpable, even from this distance. His lips curl in disgust at the display and his eyes narrow as Soo Lin turns her head away in rejection of the youth’s base need. Maybe she is likewise disgusted. Maybe it is a yearning that she has herself forgotten; that, like him, she can no longer relate to. Or perhaps she realizes that she must deny herself. It is best simply not to be tempted for something that they cannot have. Not any longer.

The young man fumbles out his awkward invitation to go out on a date. Soo Lin’s face falters for a moment. A brief flash of pleasure, of wishfulness, touching her features before she remembers herself and shakes her head. “I don’t think you would find me good company…”

He pushes, determined. Her expression becomes darker, anxious. She can’t be close to him, she can’t be close to anyone. Not now. Not ever. Her voice becomes cool, clipped, resolute. “I can’t. I’m sorry. Please stop asking.” The case shuts with a loud clack that echoes through the exhibition hall, the perfect punctuation to her request. The young man shuffles off, red-faced and embarrassed, and Soo Lin lingers on her work for an unnecessarily long time, till the room is finally empty, before letting her head drop. Her shoulders lift and fall with a deep breath, and when she lifts her head once more, her fingers brush over her cheeks and beneath her eyes, destroying the traces of tears lingering there.

For a moment, he feels a pang of regret. Remembers crouching in dark alleyways and in tiny cold rooms, wiping tears from her face with his own fingers. But then he remembers how she left him.
Betrayed him with tears and pleading. He will not be taken in again by her tears. He will not forget that it was she who broke her promises and left him all alone.

And so, when she finally departs for the evening, he follows, silent, invisible. He will give her one last chance to make amends. One last chance to stand at his side, where she belongs, once more. After all, in all the world they only have each other to rely upon, to be close to. Their destiny is forever intertwined and nothing will cause them to part again.

Chapter End Notes

gweilo = literally "ghost man" - a derogatory term for white people/foreigners.

sei gweilo = damned foreigner

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Chapter 2

Well, it was bound to happen at some point. Honestly, John’s a bit surprised that it’s taken this long for Sherlock to get so excited over a case that he just dashed off without telling John he’d left, let alone where he might be off to. And so, with a sigh of infinite patience, John consults the inner compass he now carries within himself at all times, the arrow within it always pointing to one thing. Sherlock.

It’s dark and blustery, spring coming in like a lion, it seems, after all, but thankfully it isn’t raining. Not yet at least.

Famous last words. The sky rumbles disagreeably before letting down upon London, rain pouring onto the good doctor and everyone else unfortunate enough to be caught out unawares. Brollies are pulled out and opened, leaving John one of the few to continue on tromping through the wet. He considers ducking beneath the awning of a nearby shop to wait it out, but he would really rather not. It sadly takes Sherlock very little time to get himself into trouble, and the sooner that John can catch up with him, the better.

The phone in his pocket chirps. Ducking under a shop front, John pulls it out and stares at the text message there.

We’re out of milk. Pick some up on the way home. SH

He sighs and rolls his eyes, angling himself north and east. There’s a Tesco on Oxford Street that’s roughly on the way home. He can stop off there. He’s pondering milk and Sherlock and groceries they might need, so it takes a few moments before John realizes that he’s being paced, followed, by a large black car. Once he stops to look, the car pulls over and a door opens, a man in a black suit and umbrella rising from the depths to stand in front of him. “Dr. John Watson, there is a request for your presence by my employer.”

Staring down a man that is six foot two when you are a mere five foot six, and sopping wet to boot, is no easy feat, but John makes the effort nonetheless. “Oh? And just who is your employer, exactly?” It really wouldn’t do for him to get into trouble for a change. Lord knows if Sherlock would even realize. He’d probably just put out a notice for a new flatmate needed after a week or two.

“Dr. Watson, I would really rather not resort to force, but if I must…” The cell phone in John’s pocket begins to ring, cutting the man off in mid-threat. John reaches for it and turns it on, all without looking, raising it to his ear as he continues to stare down the man in front of him, the soldier determining just where to hit, how hard and how fast. A cultured, elegant, and unexpectedly familiar voice speaks to him.

“Dr. Watson. I see that you are feeling disinclined to come with my associate, but I would appreciate it if you would be so kind as to indulge me for a brief moment. We have much to discuss, you and I…”

Mycroft. John’s ocean blue eyes continue to stare into the dark brown gaze of the man before him warily. “Do we? And what exactly might that be?” It really wouldn’t do to give in too quickly.
Mycroft would find that suspicious. And he has every reason to be concerned by this intervention. If for some reason Mycroft found John’s presence in Sherlock’s life… worrisome. Well, it wouldn’t be beyond the man to take such matters into his own hands. And John can’t help but remember how Mycroft had a fancy for ‘collecting’ magical creatures in his youth, whether they liked it or not. John might be able to use his angelic powers to protect Sherlock, but so far they don’t seem to extend to protecting himself.

“We have a certain individual in common. I really don’t like to make threats, but it’s certainly not beneath my abilities to do so. Be reasonable, Dr. Watson. After all, it’s just a friendly little chat…”

John holds pat for another few moments before thumbing his phone off without responding and nodding to the man before him. The back passenger door is opened for him and slipping in John finds himself sitting next to a lovely young woman. He blatantly stares at her, assessing by her demeanor that she is also an employee of Mycroft. Her hair is dark brown, her makeup meticulous, and currently she is holding a device, which seems to occupy the entirety of her attention. In comparison, John feels rather like a drowned rat in both appearance and water content. He’s currently dripping onto the upholstery and making small puddles. Without even looking at him, the woman shifts ever so slightly away, so as not to be tainted by his wet and shabby appearance.

It isn’t until John stares at her and offers a “hello” that she finally glances up at him, offering him an utterly insincere smile as she replies, “Hello there.” Despite the fact that she doesn’t seem to be paying any attention to him, John can’t help but feel a deep scrutiny of his person, his gaze shifting to study the interior of the vehicle, looking for tiny cameras or other devices which might be spying on him. But of course there’s no way of seeing or telling such things, so instead John turns his head back to the woman.

“I’m John. What’s your name?”

She doesn’t even lift her gaze, fingers still flying over the small device as she replies dryly, “Yes, I know. You can call me…” and she takes a moment to consider her options before offering, “Anthea.”

“Anthea. I’m guessing that’s not your real name.”

“Of course not.” Turning her head to him, ‘Anthea’ studies him quite seriously for a moment, blinking slowly before turning her attention back to her device. “John Hamish Watson. You should know better. A true name holds power.” The voice and words are half threat, half promise.

He fidgets in his seat uncomfortably, looking forward again, his hands flexing on his knees. John can’t quite tell what it is about the woman that makes him so uneasy. A sensation that she is something far more than she seems, but when he reaches out with his senses he can feel nothing unusual about her. No power, no signature indicating a supernatural nature. She appears to be wholly human. “Right. Of course.”

He stares out of the dark, tinted windows, watching the streets and buildings pass by. Of course, John Hamish Watson isn’t really his name. Even John is merely a simplified human word that stands for his name. His true name, well, like most angels it is beyond the comprehension and understanding of most humans. Just as the face of God would be so immense as to immolate anyone who looked upon it, so would an angel’s true name cause the rupturing of the tender vessel that heard it and leave the victim deaf and dumb. But since he is neither man nor angel any more, John has no idea what his true name might be.

The car pulls into a large warehouse where a man stands casually with an umbrella at his side, waiting for them. Anthea turns to John with a look that simply says, ‘get out’, so John gets out.
He walks toward the standing figure, Mycroft gesturing to a chair and noting, “Have a seat, Dr. Watson.” Even if he was still limping, John would ignore both the chair and the offer. As it is, he simply walks past the chair to stand five feet before Mycroft, still dripping slightly where he stands. His gaze doesn’t waver past the man to the angel standing beside him, though he belatedly realizes that there was no Guardian Angel in the car with him and Anthea.

“No thanks, I prefer to stand.” Glancing about himself, John asks, “Was the whole cloak and dagger scenario really necessary? You could have just offered to meet me for tea.”

“Mmmmm, yes, well, when one is wishing to avoid the notice of Sherlock Holmes, one learns to take certain precautions.” He shifts his weight as he studies John, nodding appreciatively as Anthea approaches him and hands him a file. Flipping it open, he studies the text there, but John can tell it is more of a dramatic device than a necessity, his eyes barely skimming over the text.

“You seem to have developed a keen interest in my brother. A devotion, one might say.”

His phone buzzes again. John studies Mycroft for a moment before reaching for it and reading the message there.

*Come home if convenient. Need tea. Bring milk. SH*

“Might one?” John asks absently as he thumbs the message away and returns his phone to his pocket once more.

“I think so. The question here is, why? Not that I mean any disrespect to you or Sherlock, but he has never been the sort to ingratiate himself to anyone, and certainly has never had quite so devoted a partner.”

“Flatmate,” John corrects.

“Even more so then. If you were in an intimate relationship with him, that might possibly explain your puppy dog like behavior. As it is, the very fact that you’re still living with him after two months is quite... remarkable. One might go so far as to say unheard of. But the fact that you go on cases with him and are virtually glued to his side is questionable. You are a soldier and a doctor, useful skills yes, but hardly essential for his needs. There must be something else that makes you valuable to him, that makes you useful. And there is the question of what, exactly, do you get out of the arrangement.”

“Did it ever occur to you that we might just enjoy one another’s company?”

Mycroft’s soft, sardonic laugh makes his sentiments on that point quite clear.

His phone buzzes again and John sighs, reaching into his pocket once more to check his message as Mycroft asks dryly, “So sorry, am I interrupting something?”

“No, no, not a thing,” John mumbles as he flicks his phone to life again.

*Come home even if not convenient. Pick up tea as well as milk. SH*

He sighs and slips the phone into his pocket once more, offering Mycroft a patently fake polite smile as he asks, “You were saying?”

Shifting the file in his hands under his arm, Mycroft stares directly into John’s eyes and asks
bluntly, “What exactly are your intentions toward my brother?”

“Well, I haven’t gone and purchased a ring yet, if that’s what you’re wondering…”

Mycroft does not crack a smile at the small joke, his expression shifting from genial to sober and deadly serious. “You met Sherlock only two months ago, seemingly through a very convenient coincidence. And before the day was done you killed a man in cold blood to save him. That either means that you have his best interests at heart, for no discernible reason, or that you wish to ingratiate yourself to him in order to, what? Gain something from him? Use him? Claim his life for yourself?” He steps closer to John, purpose in his movement, his hand reaching out.

“Don’t.” Instinctively John draws back, his right shoulder turning toward Mycroft in a naturally defensive gesture. It’s a common stance for one used to fighting; he makes himself a smaller target. But more importantly, he moves his left shoulder out of Mycroft’s range. After all he hasn’t forgotten that Sherlock’s brother is just as remarkable as his younger sibling – a powerful Sensitive. Just how powerful John does not know. Not enough, it would seem, to be able to tell what he is just standing there. But will he be able to sense what John is if he touches him? Touches his shoulder? Will he sense his power the way Eshu did? John can’t take that chance.

Mycroft gives John a disapproving look, the sort one gives small children when they are being unreasonable. “Anthea?” he inquires mildly.

She was so still and quiet, John had nearly forgotten she was there. Anthea steps forward, still staring at the device in her hands, fingers dancing over it as she speaks. “His intentions are good. Honorable. He does not mean Sherlock harm.” The woman glances up at John, staring at him with eyes that glow like a cat’s in the darkness. Her nose wrinkles slightly as she studies him with a gaze far too intense and direct to be human, as if she were looking through John. “In fact, I would say that he actively wishes to protect Sherlock, to keep him from harm.”

One elegant brow lifts, the answer reassuring but insufficient for a man of Mycroft’s power and connections. “Ever the soldier then, in search of something to protect and fight for?”

John startles at both their words, frowning, his mouth opening to contradict Mycroft before closing again, his attention shifting to Anthea. She hides her true nature well. She looks human, feels human, his Sensitivity giving him nothing to work on. But the way her eyes glow in the darkness, her words, betray that Anthea is anything but human. He stares back at her hard and reaches out with his power, his shoulder thrumming slightly, before he finally sees her. “You’re a Changeling.”

His eyes meet Mycroft’s, catching the tiny hint of surprise before it is masterfully hidden once again, a smug smile touching the elder Holmes’ lips. “Oh, very good John! I suspected that you were a Sensitive, but I didn’t realize how skilled you were.” His hand drops away and abruptly John realizes it was a test. One way, or the other, Mycroft was going to have his answer about what made John special. “Anthea is very good at masking her true nature. I’m surprised that you can see past her defenses. Few can, though she does tend to lack the more usual human social skills. But in this age of Aspergers and autism, who really even notices such things any more?”

Lifting his chin fractionally, John inquires coolly, “Are you satisfied then?”

“Hardly, but then a man in my position rarely is. So many compromises to make. So many favors to garner. But I am patient and willing to wait for what I want, unlike my brother.” Studying John for a moment, Mycroft notes, “The police never did find the bullet. I assume Sherlock did away with that. What did you do with the gun?” He doesn’t bother to ask how John got it. That is irrelevant.
“I don’t have it any more.” Hard to have something that never actually existed.

“Mmmmmm. Good. And a pity. Anthea?” The woman turns and heads back to the car, drawing out a case and returning, holding it out. Unsnapping it, Mycroft draws out a SIG Sauer, efficiently ejecting the magazine to check it before snapping it back into place and then clicking the safety off before pointing it directly at John’s forehead.

The two men stare at each other steadily. John doesn’t so much as flinch in reaction. Mycroft’s lips quirk in approval. Flipping the gun in his hand expertly, Sherlock’s brother clicks the safety back into place and offers the weapon to John, butt first.

“Here. On the off-chance you find that you need to use one again for Sherlock’s protection. It’s unregistered, untraceable. I do recommend you dispose of it after you use it, though. Best not to take chances with such things, and I can always supply you with another if need be.” He hands John both the weapon and an extra clip. “I’m sure you’ll use it with discretion. Try to keep it out of Sherlock’s hands, though. He does tend to be a tad… frivolous with such toys.”

“Toys?” John’s expression is dubious, but he takes the proffered weapon and tucks it carefully into the small of his back.

“Mmmmmm, yes. I blame Mummy for not giving him that chemistry set when he was younger. Perhaps if he had had an unfortunate accident at an early age it would have taught him something about restraint and consequences…”

“Are we done?”

Mycroft offers John an indulgent smile. “For the moment. But I’m sure we’ll talk again soon, John.” His head tilts slightly to one side as he muses, “I think perhaps I understand why Sherlock keeps you around.”

John stares at Mycroft uncomfortably, not liking the idea that Sherlock just ‘keeps’ him around because he’s useful. He glares. Mycroft smiles. After a long, awkward moment, John huffs and turns around to leave, but that smooth, cultured voice brings him to a halt.

“Oh yes, one more thing,” Mycroft adds, as if he had not been testing John’s patience, but had only just remembered. “I don’t suppose you would consider reporting on Sherlock’s activities in exchange for a generous monetary compensation?”

John turns, frowning fiercely, but Mycroft simply smiles at him mildly, noting, “As you might have guessed, I worry about him. Constantly. Having someone of your background looking after him is something of a comfort, but I do like to keep tabs on him personally.” His expression shifts subtly, transforming from benign concern to disturbing determination as his smile takes on a more sinister edge. “It would be far less intrusive and unpleasant than placing cameras at your residence. Possibly more reliable too, seeing as Sherlock seems to have a knack for finding the devices I have had placed in the past” And, as if John would require some sort of encouragement to accept his preposterous deal, Mycroft adds, “I do realize that you haven’t managed to find a position yet and your financial reserves are rather… low. This would certainly alleviate concerns in that regard.”

“You don’t suppose correctly.”

“Really? But I haven’t even mentioned a figure yet.” John’s expression remains resolute as Mycroft studies him with a small secretive smile. “Mmmm. Pity. I was hoping that in your attachment to Sherlock you would realize that I was his ally and not his enemy.”
“That would not, in fact, be my reason for declining your offer.”

“Ohhh? Interesting. You are very loyal to someone you barely know. And believe me, two months is not nearly long enough to ‘know’ my brother.”

Indeed it is not, but John isn’t about to mention that he has known Sherlock all his life. Instead he scowls slightly, because Watson tells him that’s the appropriate reaction to have for some reason.

Twirling his umbrella, Mycroft’s features compose themselves once more into a friendly façade before he turns and strolls away nonchalantly, calling over his shoulder, “It would seem that you have chosen a side… just make sure it’s the right one, hmmm? It would be a pity if the attachment you seem to have for Sherlock was not valued or reciprocated.”

John watches as Mycroft disappears behind a stack of crates before turning to look at Anthea, who has come up behind him. Her voice sounds puzzled as she notes, “I’m to take you home…”

Perhaps she was hoping that she would get to kill and devour him instead?

“Right. I’ll need to make a stop on the way, though…”

Chapter End Notes

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Trudging up the stairs, his arms laden with bags from Tesco, John pushes his way past the open door of the living room and pauses. Sherlock is seated upon the couch, hands steepled before his lips, eyes narrowed in contemplation as he stares at the computer screen in front of him. John’s computer screen.

With a soft sigh of resignation, John trundles his way into the kitchen noting softly under his breath, “Don’t mind me….” A box of tea is the first thing he pulls out and, turning around, he opens the cupboard to the right of the stove only to find… tea. Vast quantities of tea, in fact.

“Sherlock?”

“Hmmmm?”

“You said we needed tea.”

“Yes.”

“The cupboard is full of tea.”

“Yes.”

John’s hand lifts to press over his eyes as he begins to count before asking, “So if the cupboard is full of tea, why did you…?”

“We’re out of my favorite tea.”

John blinks and huffs, “What, so you couldn’t make a cup of some other type of tea?”

Sherlock’s head turns toward him for the first time. The look he gives John is filled with a lack of comprehension as to what exactly the problem is, gilded with a faint air of irritation that John is bothering with such a ridiculous idea. He doesn’t even grace the question with a reply, just turns his head back to the screen. After a few minutes of John grousing under his breath he interjects, “I gather, from your reaction, that you did not purchase the correct type of tea.”

“That’s not the point, Sherlock. Next time, if you want a specific type of tea you’ll have to tell me. I’m not a mind reader.” He opens the fridge and stares, reaching in to pick up the container of milk sitting inside, its weight indicating it is mostly full. “Why did you have me buy milk when we have full four pint carton already?”

Sherlock’s hands have dropped to the keyboard, dancing over it with a grace and speed that John never ceases to be envious of. The best he can manage is hunt and peck. “MmmMmmm, don’t drink that. Experiment.”

“Dear G… what sort of experiment do you have to perform upon our milk? And could you please mark it if you’ve tampered with it? Last thing I need is to drink milk laced with bile or some toxic bacterial cocktail that you’ve been incubating.” Again, Sherlock does not deign to answer, the question in front of him far more arresting than John’s whinging. Finding a large black marker, John draws a massive X on the mysterious milk and places the new container in on the furthermost
side of the fridge. “Right, I’ve marked the questionable milk. Make sure you don’t use the new milk by mistake, right?”

“Tea.”

“What?”

“I want some tea. Why haven’t you made any yet?”

John can’t help but splutter. He loves Sherlock, really he does, but sometimes even the patience of an angel can be taxed. “What, that’s it? That’s what you wanted me to come back to the flat for after you abandoned me without a word? You want me to make you a cup of tea?”

This time Sherlock’s eyes flicker over to John quizzically, his expression innocent and bemused as if the answer was obvious. “It’s better when you make it.”

John has to firmly squelch the small twist of tenderness that those words invoke. Sherlock would rather wait for tea made by him, because John makes it best. That’s a far better way to take those words than ‘Sherlock is just too lazy to make it himself and that’s why it’s better when John makes it.’

Suddenly the typing stops, Sherlock’s gaze now narrowed and considering John intently, combing his figure for clues. “Where have you been? You’ve been gone far longer than is strictly necessary to go shopping and get back home from where we were.”

“How would you know? When have you ever done the shopping?” The counter now clear of groceries, John leans forward and places his hands along the edge, head turned sideways to study Sherlock and consider his yet ungiven answer. To say that Sherlock has issues with his brother would be putting it mildly. Putting on Watson’s best “aggrieved” face, he tries a lie. “I had a row in the shop with the chip and pin.”

Sherlock’s brow creases, a quizzical expression touching his features as he asks, just to make sure he heard that correctly, “You had a fight… with a machine?”

“Yeah. It wouldn’t sell me anything and I yelled at it abusively.”

Silver eyes flicker to the empty bags on the counter as Sherlock notes in amusement, “But I see that you conquered it in the end, so how…” But his gaze grows sharper as he continues to study John, one brow lifting abruptly as he ascertains, “That’s a lie. Why are you lying?”

John sighs. “How can you tell?”

“Simple. When you’re really annoyed, you get this crease between your eyebrows. No crease, not annoyed, therefore lie. You were also limping slightly on your way up the stairs. You do that on occasion, when you’re worried about something tedious and are mulling it over. Temporarily thwarted shopping would not cause you to limp.”

If angels gambled at cards, no one would ever be able to tell they were bluffing. They all have perfect poker faces, utterly devoid of any expressions or physical tics. John Watson, however? Full of nothing but tells it seems, unless he’s being stoic and soldiery. Sherlock can take one look at his face and read him like a book most of the time. But a partial truth should sufficiently hold up to his scrutiny. “Your brother tried to bribe me to spy on you.”

“My brother?” Now it’s Sherlock’s turn to get a crease of irritation between his eyebrows before logic soothes it away. Rolling back, he stretches his long frame down the length of the couch to
ponder this new annoyance. “Hmmm, yes, well, I suppose I should have expected it. Really, he took rather longer than usual this time. Don’t tell me. He had you abducted off the street, didn’t he? He has a terrible flair for theatrics.”

John huffs and strides past Sherlock, pulling the curtain back with one hand to peer out the window curiously. The car containing the mysterious Anthea has indeed departed. “Yes, well, it runs in the family.” The words are only slightly more affectionate than sardonic.

Sherlock’s gaze sidles over towards where John is standing by the window, eyes slitted and suspicious as he asks in a soft, silky voice. “Did you accept his offer?”

John turns to stare at Sherlock, slightly affronted. “Course not.”

“Pity, we could have used the money. Think it through next time.”

Pivoting up and around, Sherlock brings his feet to the floor and leans forward again, fingers pressed against his lips as he stares at John’s computer screen. “Your blog is still blank. I thought that useless therapist of yours wanted you to keep a journal?”

A soft huff escapes John as he points out, “You know full well that I don’t really do technology. Just like you know that I keep a handwritten journal instead of a blog. Really, that is something about this century that I will never understand; why people have the compulsion to spill their every waking thought into a giant public pool for everyone and anyone to take a gander at. Some things are private, or should be.”

Sherlock’s silver eyes lift to John’s, narrowing as he notes, “Your journal isn’t particularly private – you just write ridiculous narrations of the cases that we go on.”

John takes a breath and holds it, then blows it out, along with an unexpected flare of temper, thanks to Watson’s sense of propriety no doubt. “You’ve read my journal?!” His hand lifts, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose as he closes his eyes and answers himself. “No, wait, of course you’ve read my journal. My what-everyone-else-on-the-planet-except-for-Sherlock-Holmes-knows-is-private-property-do-not-read journal.” That crease that Sherlock mentioned before? The one that forms between John’s eyes when he’s really annoyed? Very much present at the moment. His eyes snap open, glaring down at Sherlock. “You have absolutely no comprehension of boundaries, do you? No respect for personal space or, or private property.” John’s hands flail, gesturing at his computer which Sherlock has blithely been using all this time.

Sherlock blinks, waiting for John to get to the point, though the dubiousness of his expression suggests he doesn’t really think there is one. “I don’t see why you’re so angry,” he replies calmly. “There wasn’t anything in your journal that was ‘private’, so obviously you expected that I was going to read it.”

Hands on his hips, John grumbles, “Right. Well, I guess a part of me realized that you would, but that doesn’t make it okay! Maybe just part of me was hoping that you would prove me wrong.” Normally he would know everything that Sherlock got up to, but now he has all these annoying things that take up his time and remove him from Sherlock’s presence. Damn the need to run errands and sleep and all those other pesky details of being human!

“So, yes, because I live in a flat with you, where privacy is virtually nonexistent, I keep a journal solely about our adventures. If I wanted to keep any secrets, I suspect I would need to get a safe deposit box in a bank, and even then I don’t doubt you would find some way to access the data.” Course so, far he’s managed to keep the fact that they live with a Brownie named Tuppence a secret from Sherlock, but then the Fae are infamously good at hiding themselves from those that
they don’t wish to be seen by.

“Hmmmmm.” Sherlock’s smile does nothing to deny that likelihood. “Speaking of banks and cases, we have a new one.”

Flopping down in his chair after his apparently unaffected strop, John peers over at Sherlock, sullenly asking, “Ohhh? What’s this one about?”

“Locked room mystery, apparently. No details as of yet. An old… acquaintance of mine from University dropped me an email requesting my assistance. Something to do with security and confidence concerns, wanting to keep the inquiry private and discreet.”

“And I trust you’ll get paid for your ‘discretion’?”

Waving a dismissive hand, Sherlock points out, “It isn’t about the money, John, it’s about the work.”

“Yes, and work results in payment, which generally takes the form of money. I know you don’t care about such things, but I personally rather enjoy eating and having a roof over my head. If you want to continue to enjoy that damnably expensive tea you’re so fond of, you might want to consider that next time.”

“Fine, you can be my biographer and my accountant, just don’t pester me with such petty concerns…”

Grumbling under his breath, John points out, “They’re not so petty when you’re starving and freezing to death…” as he lurches out of his chair and stumps off to the kitchen to fix himself a cup of tea. There is a sigh of irritation, directed at himself for a change, when he finishes and looks down. He automatically prepared two cups instead of just the one and used the box that he just purchased; Sherlock’s favorite.

*****

Entering into the posh environs of Shad Sanderson, John follows Sherlock’s lead, trailing slightly behind as is his wont. He tries to tell himself that it is not, in fact, because the body he’s inherited has unusually short legs, or the fact that Sherlock’s are ridiculously long. He’s taken slightly aback, however, when after they introduce themselves at the front desk they are escorted to the office of one Sebastian Wilkes. The man in question gives Sherlock a smarmy smile and purrs, “Sherlock, so glad you could come,” shaking his hand firmly as if they were the best of friends when John knows full well they were the worst of enemies. Anger and resentment that he could never feel before he became human rises up within John, his hands clenching at his sides as he starts to grind his teeth together, remembering just how badly Sebastian once used Sherlock. And here he is, presumably to ‘use’ him again.

Much to his surprise, Sherlock gives Sebastian a friendly smile and shakes his hand just as warmly before turning about and offering, “This is John Watson, my…” There’s a brief moment of hesitation before he offers, “…colleague,” at the same time John speaks up and offers a bit too emphatically, “Friend,” his chin lifting in a subtle challenge, eyes flashing.

Sebastian gives Sherlock a look of barely concealed surprise, tinted with derision, as he echoes, “Friend??” as if to suggest that the very idea of Sherlock having an actual friend would be laughable.

Sherlock glances at John sideways, one brow lifting at his demeanor, but says nothing. His manner
is uncharacteristically demure, which both confuses and frustrates John. Even when he was an angel, he knew that Sebastian was a total git. He saw an opportunity to get what he needed, used Sherlock abominably, and then tossed him aside callously once he had what he needed, mocking him behind his back and telling stories to any and all who were curious. Granted, Sherlock didn’t take the slight lying down and made him look like a fool on more than one occasion, but the fact that Sebastian was surrounded by friends, while Sherlock had none, rather lessened the triumph of those moments.

“Please, please, take a seat,” Sebastian offers, as if trying to soothe ruffled feathers and move past John’s apparent faux pas. Sherlock, in turn, explains to John, “Sebastian and I went to University together.” John bites his lip and simply nods, trying to pretend and act like he doesn’t know exactly how these two met. He glances around the room instead, finally finding Sebastian’s Guardian standing by the window, looking out upon the world, rather than his charge. Sebastian’s smug voice cuts across John’s ruminations.

“Mmmm, yes. This blighter here had the most annoying habit of announcing everybody’s business to anybody who just happened to be around. Who’d been shagging who, who was cheating on exams, so on and so forth. Royally pissed us off, he did.”

John doesn’t miss the way Sherlock’s face closes off. It’s a subtle thing, but unmistakable; how his eyes grow flat and distant, his gaze shifts down and away. When he does conjure up a smile, it lies cool and false upon his lips. “MmmMMm,” is his only reply though. “So, what exactly is your problem?”

It’s almost as if Sebastian had forgotten the reason why he asked Sherlock to come here in the first place, readily slipping into old familiar roles. He leans across the desk, a faint hint of chagrin gracing his features as he confesses, “Right, yes, to business. I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time later to reminisce about the good old days.” He can’t help but chuckle as he muses, “Ironic that now you’re here specifically because of all those fancy ‘tricks’ that you can do, hmmm? Who would have thought it would turn out to be something useful?”

Sherlock’s eyes harden as he rumbles, “It’s not a trick. I merely observe.”

Whoops. Sebastian seems to realize that he has once more said the wrong thing, but rather than apologize or concur, he simply glides over the awkwardness with a slick smile and a shrug of his shoulders, his expression sobering as he moves on to the matter at hand.

“We’ve had a bit of a break-in. Let me show you.” Rising up once more, Sebastian leads John and Sherlock out of his office and down a hall noting, “It’s the office of our late Chairman, Sir William. We keep it as something of a memorial. But last night someone broke into his space and, well, you’ll see.”

Sebastian stops a few corridors down and opens the door of the office in question. Stepping inside, John and Sherlock stare at the grand painting of the Chairman, or more specifically the line across his eyes and the graffiti on the wall to the left of the painting.

Sherlock’s eyes narrow speculatively while John’s casts about the rather Spartan room curiously before asking, “Anything taken?”

Shaking his head, Sebastian replies, “Not a thing. But here’s what concerns us.” He strides over to a computer and types on the keyboard. “Every night when the offices close, each door of the building is automatically locked electronically. Every office door, every stairwell, every break room and toilet. Even the cupboards. If any door is keyed open during off hours, it registers the exact location and time in the computer system.”
“Let me guess,” Sherlock replies, “The door to this office was never opened.”

“Precisely. And take a look at this.” Stepping back, Sebastian reveals the CCTV’s recording of the previous night, the view being of the room’s interior. Everything is fine and then, suddenly, the image devolves into scratchy white and grey visual static. One minute later, the image clears and there, on the wall, is the graffiti. “The central system that runs all the cameras is in an area with a guard at all times. No tampering there. There is also no way for anyone to tamper with the camera in the room without falling into the view of the lens.”

“The Security officer on duty is reliable, I presume?”

“His record is impeccable, but naturally we are checking into his background.” Turning toward Sherlock, Sebastian’s expression for once becomes serious and solemn. “We have a security breach. Find it and we’ll pay you. Handsomely.” Drawing out a check from his breast pocket, he offers it to Sherlock noting, “This is an advance. Tell me how he got in and a much larger check will follow.”

Sherlock is barely even paying attention to Sebastian now, studying the room as he asks, “Hmmm. May I?”

“Please. Take your time. I’ll be in my office if you need anything or have any further questions.”

The check hovers in the air for a moment before John steps forward and notes, “I’ll just take that and hold onto it for him, shall I?” Somehow it comes out less than a question and more a command.

Sebastian turns to John, offering him a conciliatory smile, as if desperately trying to figure out just how he got off on the wrong foot with him. Handing over the slip of paper, Sebastian watches Sherlock for a moment before realizing that he’s essentially been dismissed. “Right, well, I’ll leave you to it then.”

Sherlock begins to prowl about slowly, taking pictures of the yellow markings and studying the nearly empty room while John stands out of his way, watching. The silence is comfortable, but John can’t stop himself from breaking it.

“You hate him.”

“Hmmmm?”

“Wilkes. Your old ‘uni chum’. You totally hate him.”

“I don’t indulge in petty emotionalism, John. You should know that by now.”

“Bollocks. You hate him. So why didn’t you tell him to stick this case up his arse? Why are you here, helping him?”

Straightening up from where he is examining the graffiti, Sherlock glances over his shoulder and blinks. “John, how many times do I have to tell you, it’s about the work. I don’t give a damn about Sebastian. But this,” he notes, gesturing to the room, “this is interesting.” He opens up the massive French windows and steps out onto the balcony, looking out at the view of London for a moment before leaning over to look down and then craning his head backward to look up thoughtfully.

John follows him out, wrapping his arms over his chest to ward off the chill from the stiff wind that whips about them. Distracted by the view and his own thoughts, Sherlock catches him off guard when he speaks up again.

“Bollocks. You hate him. So why didn’t you tell him to stick this case up his arse? Why are you here, helping him?”

“Distracted by the view and his own thoughts, Sherlock catches him off guard when he speaks up again.”
“So is that what we are then?”

Blinking, John turns to look at Sherlock, who has now climbed up onto the edge of the balcony and is leaning against the wall, staring at the side of the building, the wind buffeting him slightly.

“Jesus!” Lunging forward, John takes a firm grip on the blowing ends of Sherlock’s coat, fully prepared to pull him down before the wind knocks him off the balcony and down forty floors. “What?”

Sherlock’s gaze drops down to John, looking at each white-knuckled hand clutching his coat before those calm silver eyes meet John’s frantic blue ones. “Friends.”

John sputters for a moment before babbling, “Oh. Well, yes, I think so, don’t you? I mean, we’ve been flatmates for over two months now, and…” And I’ve been with you for all of your life and gave up my position as an Angel to save your life and you’re pretty much all I think about and you’re all that I care about and I killed a man for you in cold blood and… “well, for all your strange behavior and inability to clean anything or be polite I generally like you,” a lot, “and I think you like me? And could you please get down from there now?”

His pale eyes flash with amusement as Sherlock asks, “What is this, junior school? Are you asking me to go steady?” His chin jerks forward, indicating that he’s going to jump now and that John should move out of the way. Shifting back slightly, John continues to hold one side of Sherlock’s coat, breathing more easily once he’s back down on relatively solid ground once more, blushing furiously. Fortunately the bite in the air can excuse the color in his cheeks.

“Fine. Excuse my presumption. I’m your flatmate and your occasional colleague.”

“And the author of my memoirs, don’t forget that…”

“It’s my diary, not your memoirs.”

“History will say differently, just you wait…” His head tilts slightly to one side introspectively before he adds, “I am amenable to us being friends,” and then darts back inside.

Sadly, Sherlock is right. John can’t actually write the truth of his life within those pages. But to keep up the illusion of this human mantle he has taken on, he has to write something. Might as well be Sherlock’s exploits. Those are at least worth reading about.

For the next fifteen minutes, Sherlock prowls and darts around the area surrounding the office in question, zigzagging this way and that through aisles of desks and computers, bobbing up and down like some deranged meerkat on steroids. Narrowing it down bit by bit, he arrives at an office space to his liking, where he can stand still and see through to the Chairman’s office or, more importantly, to the graffiti upon the wall within it. A smug smile touches his lips as he lingers by the door on the way out for a moment, taking in the name of Edward Van Coon and the position of Hong Kong Desk Head before snatching the name card and pocketing it.

“Come on, John. Time to pay Mr. Van Coon a social call…”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice and Brit picking, to
Dalucii for being a top-notch beta, and to 99everafter and folha5eca for making sure my Chinese dialog/culture/references are correct! :D

Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
Getting into the building required some acting on the part of Sherlock. John has always been astonished at how Sherlock can be utterly clueless of the nuances of human behavior, and yet so brilliant at mimicking them. He’s rather like a mynah bird at times like these, successfully imitating speech patterns and emotions without experiencing or understanding them.

As a result, the naive and kindly new neighbor lets them into the building, thinking she’s helping one Edward Van Coon instead of a pair of busybodies who are simply not patient enough to wait around for the man to come home. A Good Samaritan act gone wrong.

On the ride up the elevator, John turns to Sherlock and finally asks, “Want to let me in on what you’ve figured out so far and tell me why you’re so keen to speak with Mr. Van Coon?”

Sherlock stares at the closed doors of the elevator and asks in return, “Isn’t it obvious?”

“No to me.”

There’s a gust of breath, the sort that Sherlock expels when he wonders why everyone around him is an idiot. Could be worse. Usually he flat out asks the rhetorical question. “The graffiti was a message and, thanks to the layout of the floor and the great abundance of pillars, it clearly only had one recipient. The only office with a clear shot through to the wall in question was Edward Van Coon’s.” There’s a brief moment of introspection before the doors open up and Sherlock adds, “Can’t imagine having to look at that portrait every night…”

“Night?”

“Van Coon is a banker with a Hong Kong account. Naturally he doesn’t keep traditional ‘banker hours’, John, do keep up.”

Arriving at the door, Sherlock knocks several times before crouching down to carefully examine the seam of the door, the knob, and the lock. Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a set of lock picks, flicking through them expertly before selecting the perfect tool for the job and murmuring almost conversationally, “Cover for me…”

Turning about to see what Sherlock is doing that he needs to be covered for, John gapes for a moment before hissing, “Sherlock! What are you doing?! That’s breaking and entering!” Pale eyes slide up the length of the door to peer at John’s dismayed expression before returning to the work at hand. “Nonsense. I’m not breaking anything. The lock will remain in perfect working condition, not so much as a scratch on it.” The soft snick of the lock releasing brings a quick, smug smile to Sherlock’s face as he rises up smoothly and turns to look at John, one gloved hand resting on the doorknob as he points out, “We will be entering, but I don’t think that’s specifically illegal, seeing as how the door is unlocked…”

John begins to sputter, but before he has a chance to protest, Sherlock has slipped inside stealthily. Raising his eyes up to heaven, John shrugs and follows, stopping just short of the door, standing next to Sherlock to take in the scene before them.

The place looks like a tornado has hit it. Everything is torn apart. Drawers have been opened and contents dumped on the floor. Furniture has been moved, cushions and pillows tossed hither and
yon. The kitchen is a disaster; containers from the cupboards and the fridge opened and poured out over counters and the sink. The bathroom is the same. Though there is thoroughness to the chaos, there is no indication of violence. No knife-shredded upholstery. No broken chairs or smashed possessions. Sherlock takes a moment to study the room, eyes narrowed intently, as if memorizing each object and their position.

Nowhere is there any sign of Van Coon. Turning to the bedroom door, Sherlock tries to turn the handle. Locked.

“Mr. Van Coon? I’m here on the behalf of Sebastian Wilkes? Are you here?” No response. Sherlock doesn’t waste time with his lock picks but instead puts shoulder to door and slams into it, the door falling inward and causing Sherlock to stumble in slightly.

The bedroom is in much the same condition as the rest of the apartment, with one notable addition. Van Coon’s body is splayed out upon the bed.

“Dear God,” John murmurs, rushing in to examine the man, but the blue tinge to his skin makes it clear that he’s been dead for some time now. Still, his hand reaches out to the man’s throat before Sherlock interrupts. “John, don’t touch him without gloves. You’ll contaminate the evidence.” Reaching into an inner pocket, he draws out two nitrile gloves and tosses them to John, who catches them in his right hand and quickly puts them on before reaching for Van Coon’s throat with his left.

Sherlock turns in place carefully, studying the chaos around them with narrowed eyes, waiting while John quickly examines the man. The sad, regretful expulsion of air is his cue to turn back around. “Well?”

“Well, dead. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock echoes, turning away once more to slowly stalk through the room, carefully examining the chaos. “What would you say was the cause of death?” He slowly removes his leather gloves, trading them for a pair of nitrile ones instead.

Turning back to the body, John notes, “Almost impossible to tell without an autopsy. Something that caused a pronounced lack of oxygen. Could have been a heart attack, though he’s a bit young for that. Possibly poison or drugs? But by the state of his clothes and the expression on his face, it wasn’t a peaceful death. Christ.” The small epitaph, more prayer than curse, is all Watson and causes John to still for a moment, his features crinkling. Even though Van Coon’s features have softened, muscles releasing their tension, there’s still a distinctly horrified look upon his face. “It looks like he was scared to death, but that’s impossible.”

“Mmmmm, quite,” replies Sherlock, crouching down next to a suitcase lying on the floor, its once packed contents strewn about haphazardly. Gloved hands paw through the clothing curiously. He pauses to pick up a shirt, sniffing it experimentally. But his gaze is drawn back toward John as his flatmate pulls out his phone and starts dialing.

“Who are you calling now?”

“Lestrade, of course.” John gestures at the body, noting, “The man’s dead, his apartment has been torn apart. Robbery at the very least? Clearly foul play.”

With an annoyed sigh, Sherlock continues to study the room, prowling about, crouching down on occasion to carefully inspect this and that while John asks for Lestrade and then gives his name and the address and a quick description of what they have found. Leaning over Van Coon,
Sherlock checks his pockets, examining their contents in detail before replacing them, firmly ignoring the pointed looks of exasperation that John keeps giving him. His features crease quizzically before he opens Van Coon’s mouth with one hand and reaches into it with the other, drawing out a strange, wet, black blob of something. Once the phone call is finished he straightens back up. Hands resting on his hips, Sherlock declares firmly, “This was no theft.”

Blinking in shock as he looks around, John queries, “How can you tell?”

Sherlock sighs, eyes rolling slightly as he points out, “Brand new Breitling, still on his wrist. Wallet in his pocket, credit cards still in place and a sizeable amount of cash still inside. There are several Picassos and a small Goya print on the walls that haven’t been touched, not to mention several other pieces of valuable fine art scattered about. His laptop is still here, as is his stereo equipment and flat screen television in the living room. No, he was frightened and was planning to leave the country.”

“I’m sorry, what? Leave the country? How can you tell?”

“Obvious. Suitcase was on the chair, partially packed, knocked to the floor of course during the search, passport on the dresser…”

“How do you know he was leaving?” John interrupts, pointing out, “As you said before, he’s the liaison for the Hong Kong account. For all we know, he just recently returned from Hong Kong? Perhaps he hadn’t finished unpacking?”

“John, don’t be ridiculous. By his passport I’ve already deduced that Van Coon is just recently returned from China. Since it is probable that he was in Hong Kong on a business trip, then his suitcase would have been full of business attire. But all of the clothes in the suitcase are casual wear – shirts, jeans, slacks, sweaters. Decidedly not business attire. They’re also all clean, freshly laundered just a day ago I would guess by the strength of the detergent scent still lingering on the fibers. No, this is not the suitcase of a businessman returning from a work trip abroad. This is the suitcase of a man on the run and wanting to look just as average and normal as possible. I’d suppose these clothes are the most ‘common’ wear he owns.”

“On the run? Why on the run?”

Reaching into one of the pockets, Sherlock pulls out a thick bundle of euros and replies, “Do you know of anyone who takes this much cash with them on a trip in this day and age of credit cards? There must be at least 10,000 euros here alone…”

“So the message… at the bank… it was some sort of warning or threat.”

“That would be likely. There’s also this,” Sherlock notes, showing John the strange black object that he extracted from Van Coon’s mouth. Bending over it, John asks, “Is that, wait, why was there a wad of black paper in his mouth?”

“Not just black paper, John, look at it carefully.”

Though the time spent in Van Coon’s mouth, the pressure and the moisture, have damaged the small object, upon closer inspection John can tell that it was carefully folded and crafted – a piece of origami. “That’s… that’s just bizarre.”

“It’s another warning, John. Another threat. Who ever killed Van Coon wanted others to know of it. That’s why he left this mark.” Sherlock lays the crumpled origami on the bed next to Van Coon, his eyes narrowing as a scrap of paper nearly hidden beneath the coverlet catches his gaze.
Bending over, Sherlock plucks the piece of paper off the floor, studies it for a moment, and then passes it to John.

Peering down at the paper, John glances up and notes, “It’s a phone number? What of it?”

“Call it. It’s in Bratislava, Slovakia. Find out what it’s for…”

“Wait, you know just by looking at the country code that the phone number is for a place in Bratislava, Slovakia? Do I even want to know how you know that?” The look that Sherlock gives John quells him pushing on the point. “Alright, alright, fine,” he replies, fishing out his phone and slowly entering in the number, “You want me to…?”

“Find out what or who the phone number is for. Hurry up, John. Lestrade and the police will be here any moment and I’m sure that they won’t let us hold onto any ‘evidence’.”

Sighing softly, John nods and holds the mobile up to his ear, eyes creasing slightly as he listens for a moment before murmuring, “I’m sorry do you speak English?” There’s another pause before he offers the person on the other end of the line an apologetic smile that they couldn’t possibly see, replying, “I see. And what sorts of services do you offer?” This time the pause is longer and Sherlock begins pacing in annoyance, John waving a hand at him before replying, “I see. Thank you very much,” and hanging up.

“Well?”

“It’s a place called Medical Beauty, Laserove’ wellness studio? Apparently they offer a number of different cosmetic surgery options and laser dermatology. Like liposuction, spider veins, and laser hair removal. That sort of thing.”

One brow lifts as Sherlock takes in the seemingly aberrant information, glancing over the body curiously, pondering for a moment before filing the data away for later. A knock at the door interrupts them and Sherlock waves John off, turning back to Van Coon to study him once more while he has the chance.

Huffing softly, John heads for the door and lets the police team in, blinking as the man standing before him is most decidedly not Lestrade. “Hullo, I’m John Watson, I’m the one who called?” He offers his gloved hand without thought.

“Detective Inspector Dimmock,” the man offers, without offering his hand in turn, taking in John’s gloved fingers with clear displeasure. His head tilts to indicate where his team should start working, cameras quickly taking pictures of the crime scene, moving methodically inward. “Why don’t you explain to me how you came to be here Mr. Watson.”

*Buy Sherlock some time! It’s clear to John in a heartbeat at this detective is no friend to Sherlock and will likely boot the pair of them out the moment that he can. Every second could be crucial to Sherlock’s success. Clearing his throat awkwardly, John offers an unnecessarily long-winded explanation of their presence here, resisting the pressure of Dimmock’s interruptions and the faint physical pressure that he exudes as he tries to crowd past John. But when the story is done and he demands to see the body, there is little that John can do except to turn and lead the way in to the bedroom.

Sherlock is of course there, oblivious to the blue-decked team taking photographs and collecting evidence. As Dimmock closes in on him, Sherlock offers him a bemused look before offering his gloved hand, and in a remarkable moment of manners begins by greeting, “Ah Sergeant, hello, I’m…”*
“Yes, I’m aware of who you are, Mr. Holmes. DI Lestrade warned me about you” His gaze drops to Sherlock’s gloved hands with annoyance as he snaps a finger to one of the forensics team, directing them toward the body. “And I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t tamper with the evidence. Lord knows how much of it you’ve contaminated already.”

For the second time that day, Sherlock’s expression shifts into one that John has not seen in years. Pinched. Subdued. Abruptly closed off. There’s annoyance there, to be sure, at the very idea that he would tamper with evidence. Well. To the point of destroying valuable evidence. But that would usually only encourage Sherlock to retaliate, to make some scathing remark upon Dimmock’s person. Instead he is quiet and subdued, as he had been in Sebastian’s office. There’s a moment of hesitation before Sherlock asks in a very soft voice tinged with disbelief, “Warned?”

Hands on his hips, the police officer in charge looks around in displeasure at the crime scene, noting, “Yes. I understand he requests your assistance on cases from time to time. Quite an embarrassment to the department, actually. I wouldn’t count on him requesting your assistance much more.”

“And where is Lestrade, Detective Sergeant? We called and…”

“DI Lestrade is currently busy with another case. And it’s Detective Inspector Dimmock, actually. I’m in charge here.” The two men stare at one another, sizing each other up, neither liking what the other sees. A touch of cold heat enters Sherlock’s gaze.

Dimmock’s head lifts, his hazel eyes pinioning Sherlock’s as he states in no uncertain terms, “Your assistance in this case is neither required nor requested, Mr. Holmes. The police have arrived. We’ll take matters from here. I just need to ask you a few questions and then you’re free to go.”

Sherlock’s gaze hardens, an icy shield as he offers in turn, “Very well…” Taking one of the evidence bags that have been placed on the dresser he turns toward the bed, picking up and carefully depositing the black item within it.

“Dr. Watson here tells me that the front door and the bedroom door were locked when you arrived. He mentioned that you broke down the bedroom door, but how exactly did you get into the apartment?” John’s gaze flickers back and forth between the detective who treats his flatmate with barely concealed hostility and Sherlock himself.

“I got in from the balcony,” Sherlock lies easily, his gaze flat and uncompromising.

“From the balcony?!” Dimmock’s disbelief is painted upon his features.

“Yes. I’m very athletic. As is the man you’re looking for who ransacked this apartment. He did, after all, come in the same way.”

“Now look here….”

“Sorry, Detective Inspector but as you said, my assistance is not required, and I have other appointments today.” He starts to stride out before stopping and muttering, “Oh, and here…” Dropping a plastic evidence bag with the black origami object in it, Sherlock adds, “Found this in the victim’s mouth. Rather telling, that. So even if the coroner does determine that the cause of death is somehow natural, I rather doubt that Mr. Van Coon took the time to make an origami flower and then put it in his mouth before dying. You might want to consider the implications of that.” Head high, eyes like chips of ice, Sherlock storms out of the apartment, John following along in his wake like a windswept leaf, glancing back awkwardly at Dimmock and the rest of his team before dashing after his flatmate.
Standing in front of the elevator, the silence between them is uncomfortable to say the least. Sherlock is still quiet, strangely subdued and yet also fuming, his expression shuttered. John shifts his weight from side to side restlessly, tapping his hand against his thigh, which has started to ache again. “I’m sure he didn’t say that. Lestrade, I mean,” he offers uncertainly. Sherlock says nothing, just stands and stares until the elevator chimes and the doors open. Stepping in after Sherlock, John turns about and tries a new tack. “You don’t think that he might be in trouble, y’know, for consulting with…”

“You’re ambidextrous.”

Blinking as Sherlock cuts off his thoughts with a complete non sequitur, John shakes his head slightly and asks in bemusement laced with denial, “What?”

“I noticed it before, of course. It would be impossible for me not to. But there’s a pattern to it that’s most curious.” Pushing the button for the Lobby with one finger, Sherlock reaches into his pocket for his leather gloves. “You’re right-hand dominant for most physical tasks – cleaning, shopping, picking up things, using tools. But you’re decidedly left-hand dominant for other tasks – writing, examining bodies, cooking…” Sherlock rocks back and forth slightly on his feet as the elevator carries them down, squinting thoughtfully.

“Sherlock, what about the case? Van Coon?” Stony silence greets his questions and an uncomfortable twisting of his guts causes John to drop the subject for now and indulge his flatmate. “Fine. You don’t want to talk about the case. For once. What brought this on?”

“When I tossed you the gloves, you caught them right handed. When you put them on and examined Van Coon’s body, you used your left. Curious. I gather you were born left handed and some relative in your family tried to disabuse you of the idea? Bit old-fashioned that. Most people don’t really care in this day and age whether you’re right handed or left. Obviously, the army would have taught you to shoot right-handed. That’s always done. Keep everything consistent and regimented, no need to worry about weapons being modified left or right handed in design. Logical. Practical. But that wouldn’t have changed your general handedness overall, let alone in such specific instances.” Sherlock is staring at John now in a manner that is disconcerting. As if he were a crime scene to be solved.

John clears his throat slightly, jutting out his chin and stuffing his hands into his pockets. “I don’t really notice it myself… any more,” he confesses awkwardly, just barely making the much needed correction, the truth partial at least. John is dominantly right. Watson was left-handed. He never really noticed, however, that different tasks are done by different parts of his personality. In retrospect, it makes sense. Watson’s body is used to doing specific things, trained things, a certain way. But the last thing John needs is more clues to make Sherlock suspicious of his true nature. “My grandmother, on my father’s side,” he lies, focusing on his angel self strongly to keep a neutral face. “Bit old-fashioned, terribly religious and superstitious. Used to tie my left hand behind my back, forced me to use my right instead. So every day things I do tend to use my right hand. But for writing and medicine, I’m more comfortable with my left.”

Sherlock makes a non-descript sort of sound, the kind that could mean that he’s found the answer to his question plausible, but boring. Or that he thinks the explanation is codswallop. Before he can venture an opinion one way or the other, John interrupts him instead.

“Look, Sherlock, enough about me. You’re avoiding the issue at hand. That is, well, Van Coon, the case, Dimmock.” He frowns. “He was a total git, but you’ve never worked with him before and you do have a reputation at the Yard, so it’s not completely unreasonable that he would…”
Sherlock’s expression, if anything, becomes even harder and frozen. “Still, you’ve faced that before and not been so, well…” John blows out a breath, growing flustered under Sherlock’s dissecting gaze, and tries again. “You… are you, I mean, I’m sure he didn’t mean it, Dimmock, that is. Mean what he said.” Another frown and a correction. “Right, yes, of course he meant it, some of it, but the bit about Lestrade. You know. I’m sure Lestrade didn’t say what he intimated he did. He was probably just exaggerating. But clearly you thought he did and it upset you, and before… well..” Another deep breath before he just blurts out, “Look, I know you said you’re fine, but are you all right? Because first at the bank and then with DI Dimmock, you’ve been acting a bit, well, strange, for the lack of a better word. Strange even for you. So I just wanted to make sure that you’re…”

“John,” Sherlock rumbles, his voice cutting and cold. “You really need to learn when you should keep your mouth shut, rather than babble on incessantly and, might I add, nonsensically, about things you simply do not understand. Just because you’ve been sharing a flat with me for two months does not mean you know or understand anything about me.” Sherlock’s gaze flicks away, as if John didn’t even deserve his focused attention, his address clipped and sharp, meant to wound. “Indeed, I seriously doubt that you have the sufficient brainpower to deduce me, let alone have any insight into my actions and behavior. I really do hate repeating myself, but since in your case repetition seems to be the only path to learning, I suppose I shall have to shoulder the burden till it gets through your thick skull.” The diatribe is briefly interrupted by a woman getting on, giving both men a nervous smile, going down one floor, and getting off again.

Sherlock stabs the button for the Lobby needlessly, continuing, “I don’t give a damn what Sebastian or DI Dimmock thinks of me. Lestrade can take a flying leap off a tall building for all that I care. All that matters is the work. I don’t get emotionally invested in other people.” There’s a moment of quiet before he murmurs, “Perhaps you should reconsider your earlier and hasty declaration of friendship. I have family, unfortunately, I have a few rare colleagues, I have enemies and arch-enemies and annoying police detectives that I have to put up with in order to have access to crime scenes, but I do not have friends. I have neither the time to waste nor the inclination to deal with the frankly ludicrous and irrational emotional baggage associated with such relations.”

John stands there, still as stone and as silent. When he shifts his weight awkwardly to one side, the invisible wound in his thigh spasms painfully, causing him to quickly shift his weight back to his left leg. “I… well, alright, fine then…” he offers, shock subduing him for the moment. The door of the elevator opens and Sherlock practically springs out, as if he could not wait a moment longer to be away from this place. Or perhaps away from John. Limping after him, John calls out, “Sherlock?! Sherlock, where are we going?”

Whirling about, one brow arches superciliously as Sherlock stares down at John. “We? We are not going anywhere. I am going back to the bank to give Sebastian a report on my findings so far and to inform him of Van Coon’s murder. You, well, I don’t know where you wish to go. But since this is an official inquiry and you are not my colleague, I think it would be unprofessional for you to be involved with the client any further.” Glancing down at John’s right hand, which is rubbing and massaging his leg, Sherlock snipes, “Your psychosomatic limp is back, I see. Really, John, and you wonder why I eschew emotionalism. Go home.” And with that Sherlock turns again, his coat swirling officiously as he strides out the front door.

*****

The rage still prickles within him, the need to kill swarming hungrily through his psyche, restless and vicious as a trapped tiger. But he dare not go back. Not empty handed, with nothing to show for his efforts. So he waits to be summoned for the next task. Waits and paces and hates and hungered.
He didn’t think it would be so soon, though, that someone would find the body. The arrival of the two men surprised him, as they pushed the button for Van Coon’s apartment multiple times before deluding a neighbor into letting them in to the building. He watched them surreptitiously, and wondered if he should follow. There were no instructions for this eventuality. The urge to follow, to see who they are and what they know is a powerful one. Perhaps they are connected. Perhaps they are responsible. But he hesitates when he senses the power of the smaller one. Not great compared to the tall gweilo, but more dangerous for him. The mófǎshī is powerful, but blind to the world he controls. But the little one would see him. The little one would know. So he waits and watches. Waits while they find the body. Watches as the police arrive at the posh apartment complex. And when the pair re-emerges, their expressions mutually annoyed and frustrated, he follows. Carefully.

It’s easier to get close here, on the busy streets of London. So many distractions. So many people and other things to confuse the mind and overwhelm the senses. Closer and closer he glides, following, listening…

“Sherlock, damnit, Sherlock slow down!” the smaller man calls.

The taller man takes no heed, striding down the street to the full extent of his long legs, coat flapping behind him dramatically. The small one is limping now, rubbing at his right leg as he watches the taller one stalk off. Temper flares in the small man as he snaps after the retreating back, “Oh, right, never mind me, I don’t need anyone, because I’m the great Sherlock Holmes and no one can compare with my massive intellect!” The anger and the hurt is compelling, like calling to like, drawing him closer to the small man. Flagging down a cab, the sandy haired man slips in and starts to give an address before pausing and frowning, looking out of the window of the cab.

He flows back and away, safety in distance. Nothing to see here. Just your imagination. He watches as the rumpled man shrugs and gives an address, but the words are lost between open air and passing bodies. The cab pulls away.

Turning, he considers the other man, further away now, but easily caught up with. Perhaps he should follow him. Perhaps he should hurt him, find out what he knows. Perhaps he could kill him. The hunger and hatred flare, burning bright at the very idea of the pleasure that would give him. The satiation. Brief, yes, but it would make up for the earlier loss.

He turns, follows, when it comes. The zhàohuàn. Rage surges up within him at the binding power of the call, the magic summons impossible to resist. Stopping, his lips curl into a snarl and passing individuals of a more sensitive nature alter their path unknowingly, giving him a wide berth. He lost his mark. His potential kill. And now he must return to his zhǔrén empty-handed.

But after a moment a small smile returns to his lips. A dark, disturbing smile. He might not have the zhèn bāo. He might not have an address. But he has a name. Sherlock Holmes. That should be worth something…”

Chapter End Notes

gweilo = literally "ghost man" - a derogatory term for white people/foreigners.
mófǎshī = wizard/witch
zhàohuàn = summons
zhǔrén = masters
zhēn bǎo = treasure

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

The sound of the violin being played, more violently than necessary, accompanies John’s heavy steps up to his room at the top of the stairs. Carrying a bowl with both hands, he uses his foot to catch the edge of the door to swing it shut, his back to press it firmly closed. It makes the wailing concerto below somewhat more bearable. With a heavy sigh, he places his bowl of curry on his bedside table. A second, smaller bowl is already sitting there, empty, and John spoons out some of his dinner into it before placing it upon a small stepstool on the floor.

It didn’t take long for Tuppence to learn that porridge was all well and good but far tastier options were available. In many ways, this has made things easier for John. Making porridge every night was getting a tad suspicious, Straightening up he glances around before calling out wearily, “Tup?” When he gets no response, John shrugs and takes a seat on the edge of his bed, leaning forward to rest his elbows upon his knees, his face in his hands, fingers rubbing over his eyes. The sound of a muffled giggle causes him to sit up and study the room again, frowning slightly and calling out once more, “Tup? I got curry tonight if you want some.”

No response.

Shrugging, John studies his own steaming bowl, but his appetite seems to have abandoned him. With a gusty sigh, he swings his legs up and flops down upon the covers, staring up at the ceiling.

“Ooooof!” cries a familiar muffled voice from under the pillow beneath his head, accompanied by less than familiar giggling.

“Bugger, sorry ‘bout that,” John offers, sitting up while Tuppence struggles his way out from beneath the pillow, glaring at John for a moment. A second later, another Brownie appears, the giggler it would seem as she giggles again and waves little fingers at John, hiding slightly behind Tup as if she were shy. Tuppence sniffs the air, his eyes turning glassy and bright, nose twitching as it catches a whiff of his favorite curry. “Never mind, Wingless. No ‘arm, no foul,” he offers cheerfully, before introducing, “You remember Teaspoon, don’t you?” Flinging himself off the bed with nary a thump upon landing, Tup scrambles over to his bowl and starts blowing across the hot surface to cool it off, fingers wiggling in anticipation of digging in, literally.

“Uhhh, yes, of course, nice to see you again, Teaspoon,” John offers awkwardly. Teaspoon offers John a little curtsey by way of greeting, her eyes not quite meeting his. John has the distinct impression that Tup’s guest is blushing, but since Brownies are covered in soft tawny fur, it’s hard to know for sure. Pleasantries exchanged, she hastily scrambles off the bed with nary a thump upon landing, Tup scrambles over to his bowl and starts blowing across the hot surface to cool it off, fingers wiggling in anticipation of digging in, literally.

“Uhhh, yes, of course, nice to see you again, Teaspoon,” John offers awkwardly. Teaspoon offers John a little curtsy by way of greeting, her eyes not quite meeting his. John has the distinct impression that Tup’s guest is blushing, but since Brownies are covered in soft tawny fur, it’s hard to know for sure. Pleasantries exchanged, she hastily scrambles off the bed, using the covers to climb down before approaching the bowl of curry with wide, curious eyes. John stares at the Brownies, then at his pillow and then back again before asking, “Tup, what were you and Teaspoon doing under my pillow??”

Teaspoon giggles once more, slipping behind Tuppence coyly and averting her gaze while Tuppence looks downright smug. Pinching the bridge of his nose, John mutters, “No, no, NO, tell me you were not having Brownie sex under my pillow. Absolutely not. Wait!” His eyes open and narrow on the pair as he asks, “What about Twaddle? I thought Teaspoon and he were….”

“Oh Wingless, stop viewin’ the world through those monogamous Christian glasses yeh always be wearin’. We’re faeries. Those sorts of arrangements are…” Tup’s fingers waggle through the air
expressively, “fluid.” Tup sticks one eager finger into the curry and quickly jerks it out again, sucking on it as his head cocks to one side, listening the caterwauling of the violin downstairs. “Cor, ‘e’s in a mood. Sounds like he’s guttin’ a cat fer ‘is strings!” He glances up at John, taking a good look at him this time. The ex-angel’s face is weary and lined, his mouth drooping at the corners with a despondency that hasn’t been seen since before he found Sherlock. Frowning, Tup shuffles his feet a bit before murmuring softly into Teaspoon’s ear. She takes a moment to consider John’s face as well before nodding. The human gets a wave of her tiny fingers, Tup a kiss on the end of his pointy nose, and then she’s off, slipping silently out through a crack in the window. All of this is lost on John, his face buried into his palms again. Blowing on the curry a few more times, Tup notes succinctly, “You look like shite.”

Lifting his head up, John glances about uncertainly before realizing that Teaspoon has left. “Well, it’s been a pretty crap day, to be honest.”

“’ow so?”

“Something’s wrong with Sherlock. We had a row.”

“Wait, you had a fight… with Sherlock?”

John’s lips curl into a mirthless grin as he remembers back to a similar query only the night before. “Yeah. He wouldn’t tell me anything and he then yelled at me abusively.”

Blinking a few times, curry sauce dripping from tiny fingers onto the floor, Tup stares at John before shaking his head sadly. “‘E yelled at you? Probably the nicest, most tolerant, reasonable ‘uman on the ‘ole bleedin’ planet and certainly the only one wot could put up with ‘is bollocks, and ‘e yelled at you?”

“Well, there was no actually yelling, but I think that actually made it worse. Yelling would have been better. I can almost understand yelling. This… it was more like being cut open with an ice cold scalpel.”

“Cor blimey, wot a bastard. So wot was this one-sided row about then?”

“Sherlock’s been acting strangely all day.” The pointed silence and staring from Tup makes John sit up and grunt. “Alright, strangely in a way that I haven’t seen for years. Not since he was younger. Today he met up with Sebastian Wilkes, a right bastard that screwed him over in Uni. I should have expected that he would turn down his request for help, or at least made Wilkes feel like an utter prat for suddenly needing him for the very skills he used to mock. But instead he took the job. Worse than that, he let Wilkes walk all over him again and didn’t so much as offer a sharp retort in response, let alone what he’s capable of.”

Frowning again, Tuppence clambers up John’s trouser leg and settles himself on one thigh, leaning back on his palms to give the angel his full attention. “T’ain’t natural, that,” he offers in agreement, tail twitching.

“I could ignore it I suppose if it was just that. But then it happened again, this time with a new DI from New Scotland Yard. He didn’t try to put him in his place or dazzle him with deductions. He just… took the slights and disrespect. As soon as Dimmock suggested that Lestrade had warned him about Sherlock, Sherlock just shut down, went cool and quiet, but not in his usual way. Not like he was above it all, but like it hurt.”

Looking down at Tuppence, John sighs, “I know that Sherlock isn’t the emotionless automaton that he likes everyone to think he is, but this is different. It worries me. He hasn’t really been himself
since, well, since that whole mess with the cabbie.”

There’s a period of quiet again before Tup asks, “That thing a few months back, with the cabbie
that could make people kill ’emselves. Sherlock never did tell you what ‘e said to ‘im, did he?”

John shakes his head back and forth. “No. He’s never said a word. Said it was ‘irrelevant’ and
brushed me off.”

“Right. And as I understand it, that cabbie used people’s sins and weaknesses against ‘em, to break
‘em down, yes?”

John’s head bobs up and down.

“So the question then becomes, what is Sherlock’s weakness? Obviously e’s not a Christian,
doesn’t believe in all that sinin’ stuff. ‘E barely thinks twice about doin’ some pretty outrageous
things, so makin’ ‘im feel guilty would ‘ave been a waste’o’ time, But from wot you’ve told me, ‘e
was right on the edge, ready to take that pill and end it all. So wot could make the great Sherlock
‘olmes that desperate?”

This human thing is still confusing and uncertain to John. But a flicker of comprehension runs
through him as he breathes out. “He’s alone. No family to speak of, no friends. No one accepts him
for who he is. No one appreciates him.”

“Other than you. That’s a very dark place t’be, even fer someone ‘oos convinced ‘imself that ‘e
doesn’t need anybody.” Scratching under his arm lazily, Tup rumbles, “You ‘umans fer the most
part need each other. Yer a social animal. Fer all ‘is smarts and pride and arrogance, I suspect
Sherlock is much the same.” Tup pulls a hand along the long length of his nose the way that some
people might thoughtfully stroke their beard. “Maybe ‘e needs less than most, or maybe ‘e just
thinks ‘e does, but ‘e probably still wants t’be loved and cared about by someone. Loneliness and a
general lack of acceptance ‘as certainly driven many a ‘uman to take their own life…”

The screeching of the violin downstairs has been tamed into a lonely, wailing dirge. John twists his
body toward the music, his expression slowly morphing from disappointment to worry.

“So how does that explain his behavior since then? All the secrecy and the not telling me things.
God, I think that’s the hardest part of all. I used to just know everything because I could see
everything. Now I have to constantly guess or ask to know what he’s doing and thinking.” With a
soft sigh, John’s regard turns back to Tuppence. “And how does that explain his behavior today?”

‘Ow can you see so much and understand so little? You’ve been watchin’ ‘umans all yer life, and
yeh still don’t understand, even though you practically are one.” Shaking his head, Tup asks,
“‘Aven’t you noticed? ‘Ow some ‘umans act out’o’ character when around certain other ‘umans?
Sometimes, people get under each other’s skin, Wingless. Maybe it’s an abusive parent who can
make their independent 30 year old son act like ‘e’s 8. Or an ex-lover that you jest can’t get over
no matter ‘ow hard yeh try. People are like guns. Triggers everywhere, no knowing what person
might be able to squeeze oo’s.

Frowning, John shakes his head and counters, “But that doesn’t make sense. A 30 year old man is
not suddenly transformed into a 8 year old. He has improved cognitive abilities, time to learn to
reconcile the past and create his own future.”

“Pfft! First off, I challenge yer assertion that an adult ‘uman will necessarily act any more mature
than a child. But if you be needin’ proof, just ask yerself!”
John stares in confusion, to which Tup rolls his eyes and clarifies. “Ask John Watson. Oo does he know that’s under ‘is skin? That drives ‘im crazy and makes ‘im act irrationally and that ‘e just can’t walk away from?”

It takes John less than a second to reply with a disgruntled expression. “Harry.” The angel blinks, his features shifting into confusion and then discomfort before he nods. “Alright, alright, I think I see what you mean, even if I still don’t fully understand it…”

“Right. So as you pointed out, Sherlock don’t give a twig wot some high muckymuck policeman ‘as to say to ‘im. But if it’s the silver one speakin’ ill of ‘em? That’s another kettle of fish! After all, the silver one is the only one ‘sides you to accept Sherlock fer wot he is, no? Even though Sherlock treats ‘im as bad as ‘e treated you today, the DI still calls on him, still listens to him, still takes ‘is advice. ‘E may not always like Sherlock, but ‘e respects ‘im.”

Rolling onto his stomach, Tup braces his cheeks against the palms of his little hands, kicking his heels aimless up in the air behind him. “As fo’ this Wilkes character, I reckon ‘e got under Sherlock’s skin when it ‘ad more slack in it. ‘E’s tighter than a drum now. Like a leather shield. But it’s ‘ard to be thick-skinned when yer young. Still room for ‘ope to take root and blossom.” His black button eyes shift up to John’s face. “Wot did this blighter do to Sherlock?”

His lips thin into a narrow line. “University was the first place that Sherlock wasn’t treated with contempt and cruelty by his peers. There is a certain respect for intelligence at an institution of higher learning that you don’t find in the lower grades. Sebastian convinced Sherlock that he liked him, that they could be friends. He was a consummate actor. All the while he was chumming up to Sherlock, he was mocking him and telling others about his private hopes and dreams and ‘strange’ hobbies. “

Stretching up his arms, John gently works his aching left shoulder and cracks his neck. “Sherlock and Sebastian were both initially studying the law module. Sherlock because he was following in Mycroft’s footsteps, Sebastian because, well, because he wanted power I suspect. Sebastian used Sherlock to cheat his way through several difficult classes that he knew he couldn’t pass on his own. The final blow was when he stole an essay that Sherlock had written and passed it off as his own. Once Sherlock realized the truth, the respective façade, and gloves, were off. But Sebastian had… connections. Sherlock couldn’t touch him in the more conventional ways, couldn’t get him expelled. His family was too powerful for that. And Sebastian had friends. Lots of friends. Pretty soon everyone knew everything about Sherlock, just as he was able to deduce everything about them.”

“Of course, in the end, without Sherlock’s help, and with the taint of scandal, Sebastian couldn’t pass the module and shifted over to economics. Sherlock wanted to get as far from the module he was in as possible. Gave up trying to impress Mycroft and ended up in a more flexible program, where he could study what he wanted instead. But that was a turning point for better and worse. Sherlock finally started doing what he wanted to do, but that included living wild, getting into drugs, a lot of his more destructive behavior…”

“Cor, what a bastard!” exclaims the Fae, jumping up to his feet and wheeling his tiny fists like he was going to head straight over to Sebastian’s house and give him what for.

The feisty gesture makes John smile for the first time since he entered the flat. “Yeah, pretty much. So I guess, maybe Sherlock never quite got over that, like you said. Or maybe there’s a connection between how Hope twisted him around and what Sebastian did to him such that it’s like a reopened wound…?” He breathes out a heavy sigh, struggling between what he’s witnessed, what Watson knows, and what Tup’s explained. His gaze lifts to the Fae beseechingly. “So what do I do?”
Tiny fists come to rest on his hips, though Tup’s tail still lashes from side to side restlessly. “Nothin’. Yeh do exactly wot you’ve always done, Wingless. You stand by ‘is side. ‘E’s expecting you to turn away from ‘im. To leave ‘im. Jest like all the rest dun. But yer better than that. Better than ‘em. ‘E done you wrong, no question ‘bout that. But fer better or worse, you love the bloody wanker. An right now ‘e needs someone who chooses to stay by ‘is side, especially when ‘e don’t deserve it and don’t expect it.”

“Unconditional love.” John blows out a deep breath. “That was a lot easier when I wasn’t human. But he has it. He will always have it.”

“You know that, and I know that, but ‘e doesn’t, now does ‘e? It’s not somethin’ Sherlock is much used to, I suspect. You might ‘ave to ‘it ‘im over the ‘ead with it a few times b’fore ‘e actually believes it’s true…”

*****

His body is eloquent, eyes closed in concentration, his tall, lean frame bending and swaying to the tragic melody like a storm-swept tree. The performance is a bit at odds with his appearance, though; bare feet, sweatpants, an old stretched t-shirt topped off by his blue silk dressing gown. It’s only the last bit that compliments the overall melancholy of the music, swirling and shifting about him expressively. Not that Sherlock is aware of any of this. All that there is right now is the music. The barometer of his mood. Jarring, discordant, screeching when he’s angry. Soaring, brilliant, incandescent when he’s in his element. Sharp, terse, restless when he’s bored.

Currently the violin beneath his chin is sonorous and regretful, sighing with sadness.

He has no idea how long he’s been playing. His arms are starting to feel tired though, so it’s been easily, what, an hour? John was there, talking about food again, and when he didn’t respond, John went away. Which was what he wanted. Except for the very tiny part that knew he’d been unfair, cruel even, taking out his anger and frustration on probably the only person who didn’t deserve it.

A soft creak upon the floorboards informs him when John steps back into the living room. The muscles in his arm freeze, the violin’s song coming to a sudden end as his eyes snap open. The window shows him John’s reflection, the slight tilt of his frame that indicates his leg is still bothering him, the empty bowl in his hands. But his flatmate’s expression is unclear, lost in the distance and the imperfect mirror of the glass. Sherlock waits for it. Waits for the inevitable words. The muscles of his back tense, braced and waiting for a blow.

Clearing his throat lightly, John offers the unexpected. “There’s some curry left, if you’re interested. Could just pop it in the microwave for a few?”

Sherlock pivots, his robe swinging about him as he stares a John for a moment, then at the ground by his feet. No suitcase. His gaze lifts again, before pointing out, “You’re not packed.” A tiny lump of dread breaks free from his throat and dissolves, allowing Sherlock to breathe a little easier.

“No, no I’m not. But then I do live here and haven’t made any holiday plans.” John’s head cocks quizzically to one side. “Why, are we going on a trip somewhere?”

Bow and violin are still in hand, but lower down to his sides, hanging limply in the grasp of his elegant, long fingers. Sherlock’s pale silver eyes study John quietly, looking for what he deserves – anger, resentment, exasperation. He deserves all of that, and more. Not just for today, but for the past two months. Today was the worst though. The proverbial last straw, or so he thought. He cannot disguise the hint of confusion in his eyes at John’s calm demeanor and lack of luggage.
“Other people have…” *left me for less.* He clears his throat and starts again, crafting his response more carefully this time. “Other people would probably decide it was in their best interests to find alternative accommodations.”

John stares at Sherlock hard, with the sort of expression that suggests that for all his calm and quiet, he has not forgotten, nor is he okay, with what Sherlock did. The soldier shining through the good doctor. It’s part of what makes John so unusual and unique, when on the surface he might appear to be bland and boring. Soft wooly jumpers, gentle hands, and a kind demeanor, hiding a core of steel resolve and determination. But his words belie the hard message in his eyes as he offers softly, “Guess I’m not other people.” His expression clears, gentles, the tiniest of smiles curving the corners of his mouth upward.

His meaning is clear, even if it isn’t spoken aloud. *You are forgiven.*

He’s torn between relief and egotistical pride. Of course he’s forgiven. He’s Sherlock Holmes, after all. People should kneel at his feet and praise his every word. But at the moment this isn’t about him. This is about John. Remarkable, mysterious, John. One corner of Sherlock’s mouth quirks upward as he acknowledges, “No. No, you are most definitely not.” *You continue to surprise me. Just when I think I’ve sussed you out, you prove me wrong. Just when I think I’ve reached your limits, they expand.*

There’s a knowing light in John’s blue eyes, as if for once he was the brilliant detective, deducing Sherlock’s unspoken words. He takes a step forward, hopeful. “So, curry?”

A flash of disdain comes into Sherlock’s gaze. What is it with John and food?? His mouth opens to bluntly reject the offer when he stops and thinks better of it. John has just offered him an undeserved olive branch. Is he actually thinking of knocking it out of his hand and trampling on it? He pauses for a moment, as if pondering the idea, even though it doesn’t matter what John’s answer will be. He will eat whatever the man puts in front of him tonight. “What kind?”

“You are forgiven. You are most definitely not.” John’s smile is stronger, more steady and relaxed.

With a roll of his eyes, purely for show, Sherlock turns to put his violin and bow away, noting over his shoulder, “Well, if it's *vindaloo*…” He misses the warm relieved smile that blossoms on John’s face, but catches the soft breath of relief. He listens as John putters about in the kitchen. Listens to the soft hum of the microwave, the contented clink of dishes and bowls, the sound of a kettle being put on. Sounds of a home. Sounds of belonging. Sherlock never thought such sounds would have any meaning for him. But there’s a gentle warmth in his chest that suggests otherwise.

When John offers him the bowl, Sherlock takes it, comfortably seated upon the couch, laptop in front of him. John settles down in his chair, a cup of tea in hand and when their eyes meet they hold for a long moment as Sherlock tries to express what he cannot bring himself to say.

*Thank you for putting up with me.*

*****

It’s like a game of cat and mouse. Or perhaps tiger and villager. He prowls around his next mark, studying the profusely sweating, fat gweilo with disgust. If this one has a bad heart as well… well, he won’t be pleased to lose his prey so quickly again. Perhaps he should be more careful this time?

The hunger fills him. He hurts. The hunger hurts so much. He needs to feed. To fill that insatiable pain by inflicting pain. Nothing else makes it go away now. Nothing else makes it better. Once, her soft cooling hand upon his brow…
NO! No, this is her fault! HER fault! For leaving. For taking away his comfort, his companion, his only tie to this world that was worth having. She has given him this unending pain, this impossible emptiness and yearning. If only she hadn’t left him… if only she hadn’t betrayed him…

The man picks up a book on the opposite shelf, his back to him. A cruel smile touches his lips as he reaches up and pushes a book toward the man. Closer, closer, closer, till the heavy tome barely balances on the edge of the metal shelf before falling to the floor with a loud thud.

The man startles, turns around, looking quickly left and right, but he doesn’t see him. Of course he doesn’t see him. They’re all so blind and helpless. He stares down at the book, confused, before bending down to pick it up. He studies the cover for a moment, frowning before looking around again, trying to determine its proper place but finding none. Glancing down at the book again, he opens the cover of it and then freezes, eyes growing so wide with terror that the expression is, quite frankly, comical.

Frantically now, the fat one looks about him before dropping the book and running out of the library just as fast as his fat little legs can carry him. He watches him go, smiling to himself. He always lets them have a lead. Lets them think that they are safe. It’s more fun that way, to prolong the terror. To revel in the shock when they realize the folly of their beliefs. After all, it doesn’t matter how fast they run or where they go. He will always be able to find them. Slowly he bends down and picks up the book, smiling at the marks made there before closing it and sliding it upon the shelf.

Time to hunt his quarry…

*****

Slamming the door of his flat shut, Lukis throws the bolt and slips the chain into place before taking a deep breath, laying his hand upon his heaving chest. With his back to the door, he looks around the apartment wildly before pushing away and moving quickly through each room, making sure that every window is shut and locked, drawing the curtains, before heading to the closet and pulling out the suitcase he only just unpacked two days before.

He doesn’t have any idea what’s happened or why he received that message of all messages, but he isn’t going to wait to find out, that’s for damn sure!

He grabs the basics - clothes, toiletries, all the money he can find on hand, his passport - his mind frantically running through what, when, where, and how. A hotel to start. Something to throw them off the scent perhaps. No, no that won’t work. If they found him at the library, they can find him anywhere.

Jesus.

*Right, right, okay, calm down, breathe, think! You didn’t do anything wrong. You did everything exactly as you were told. Maybe someone set you up. Maybe someone in Hong Kong kept the real vase and gave you a fake one? Fuck, how the hell am I going to be able to prove that??

A car. Rent a car, and drive. Just drive fucking anywhere. Cut the fucking tattoo off and drive to a fucking hospital if that’s what it takes. No time to screw around. God knows what that crazy cult might do…

Turning around, his cell phone in hand, Lukis lets out a soft shriek before backpedaling away from the man standing two feet behind him. Tripping over the rug, he falls back on his ass, his feet kicking and pushing away till his back hits the wall.
“I didn’t do it! Whatever it is that you think I did, I didn’t do it! I don’t know what’s going on! I didn’t do anything, I swear! I did just as I was told! I brought you the vase, just as we agreed!”

The Chinese man says nothing, his eyes just staring at Lukis, staring through him, his lips curled into a cruel smile. Part of Lukis keeps telling himself, ‘He’s just a man. He’s small, you’re big. He doesn’t look armed. You could take him. Just pick yourself up off the floor and grab that cricket bat you keep under the bed and tell him to fuck the hell off!’ But he can’t, and that terrifies him more than all the other reasons he’s already terrified. He can’t. It’s like being a rabbit caught by a snake. He can’t break free of that hypnotic gaze. His breath comes out in panicked spasms, sweat rolls down his brow.

The man lifts his hand to reveal a remote control within his grasp. Pointing it toward the television, he turns it on and then turns up the volume until it is blaring. The remote is dropped to the floor, unimportant now that it has served its purpose. He speaks with a thick Mandarin accent, his English awkward at best, as he slowly makes his way toward where Lukis is cowering on the floor.

“That may be so, but I do not care. You are nothing but dog, a gweilo cur, fetching sticks for my zhūrén. Only question now is if you are good dog or bad dog.” He reaches out one hand toward Lukis’ chest, his smile ratcheting up from cruel to sadistic as he rumbles hungrily, “I am hoping you are bad dog…”

Lukis stares, mouth gaping open, eyes wide, as that hand moves ever closer. At the moment of contact, his face stretches into impossible lines of disbelief and horror as he starts babbling, “No, no, please, no, stop, no, noo-oo…”

And then the screaming begins.

Chapter End Notes

gweilo = literally "ghost man" - a derogatory term for white people/foreigners.  
zhūrén = masters  
Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice and Brit picking, to Daluci for being a top-notch beta, and to 99everafter and folha5eca for making sure my Chinese dialog/culture/references are correct! :D

Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
Trundling down the steps from his room, John yawns and rubs at his eyes sleepily. He pauses in the doorway to consider Sherlock and the chaos of knowledge strewn about him. Books, scrolls, manuscripts, illuminated texts, symbols of every kind, every culture, every religion and arcane source are scattered about the detective who sits on the couch, bare feet curled up beneath himself, dressing gown spread about him like a seer’s robe. His eyes are focused straight ahead, but seeing things within his mind rather than without, most likely. Runes, glyphs, symbols, markings, his massive intellect culling through all the known and possible sources to determine the meaning of the marks left behind at the bank.

Moving quietly, John shuffles into the kitchen and peaceably makes them both tea and toast, spreading a thin layer of strawberry jam on his and a thin layer of clover honey on Sherlock’s before ambling back into the living room. He places Sherlock’s down on the table before him, moving some books out of the way. Sherlock doesn’t so much as blink in response. Settling himself down in his favorite chair, John opens the paper with another stifled yawn, takes a sip of tea and then a bite of toast.

Watson was a surprisingly patient man for all his need for stimulus and excitement in his life. And John is an angel. Patience is his forte. He is rewarded when Sherlock’s eyes lose their subtle abstracted quality, returning to the here and now, a faint scowl turning his features toward discontentment as he picks up the toast without thinking and takes a bite.

After chewing for a moment he stops and stares and then looks across the living room to where his flatmate is sipping his tea.

“John?”

“Hmmmnnmmm?”

“What is this?”

Lifting his head, John offers Sherlock a curious look, one brow arching as he asks, “Do you really need me to tell you that? I should think that would be a fairly simple deduction.”

“You made me toast. With honey.”

“Yes?”

“How did you….?” Sherlock’s voice trails off, bemused, as he clearly starts to travel back in time through his memories, looking for the moment when he ever made himself toast with honey on it in John’s presence.

Oh! Oh, John, so clumsy. So very, very stupid. Toast with honey. It was Sherlock’s comfort food as a child. Something his Mum used to make for him. Something that one of the more astute nannies would offer him when he became inconsolable. Something that he rarely indulges in now as an adult, but after the previous day John felt that perhaps Sherlock would appreciate something soothing and familiar. Something comforting. Something that John Watson shouldn’t have the slightest clue about.
“What?” He fumbles for a good excuse. “You don’t like butter, you don’t like jam. Honey seemed the next logical choice.”

Sherlock sits and stares at John with that all too discerning gaze, the one that makes John squirm on the inside. His eyes drop back to the paper as he takes a bite of his own toast in faux innocence.

Finally, Sherlock lets out a thoughtful, but not entirely convinced, ‘hmmmmm’, before placing his feet on the floor and stepping onto and then over the coffee table on his way across the room to pick up his laptop, twirling in place and then stomping over the table again in order to flop back onto the couch.

“I gather the search for the symbols is not going well?”

A disgusted and derisive snort is all the answer John gets for such a patently stupid question.

The laptop is opened and fingers are tapping on the keys restlessly, searching the internet for God knows what. And these days, he’s not exactly talking to John. God, that is.

“So, what happened with Sebastian?”

Another derisive snort. “Apparently the fact that one of his co-workers was murdered was barely sufficient reason for him to excuse himself from his pointless, pandering luncheon meeting. Once I suggested to him that perhaps he would prefer to meet later at Scotland Yard, he revised his opinion of the situation.” A hand waves through the air dismissively as he notes, “He told me more about Van Coon, nothing I hadn’t already gathered on my own from his flat. Apparently he had the devil’s own luck. He would lose five million one week, make it up the next. Rather telling, actually.”

“And?”

“Well, he’s a fool. They all are. I told him that Van Coon was murdered and that the graffiti was a threat. But a call from his chairman made all of that moot. Apparently the final diagnosis as to the cause of death was heart attack. Heart attack! And, according to DI Dimmock, despite the condition of the apartment, there was no evidence of a break-in, no fingerprints, nothing obviously missing. They don’t see it as a case of foul play, or the bank is hushing them up about it. Don’t want a scandal!” he hisses in a deliberately scandalous tone of voice.

Suddenly the lightning fast typing of Sherlock’s fingers stops. A slow, smug smile curls his lips as he murmurs to himself, “Oh. Oh ho. Yes. Yes, I knew it!”

Blinking, John puts aside his cup of tea and leans forward, asking, “Knew what?”

Turning the laptop toward John triumphantly, Sherlock announces, “I knew it was murder!”

Rising up, John crosses over before hunkering down, peering at the story displayed before him before reading it aloud.

“Freelance journalist from Earl’s Court, Brian Lukis, 41, was found dead in his flat after neighbors called the police, complaining that his television was playing too loudly. Lukis, a long term resident who often traveled for his work, was found on the floor of his apartment, dead from an apparent heart attack. Although his 4th floor apartment was torn apart, there was no evidence of a break in and the flat windows and doors had all been securely locked from the inside. Despite the strange conditions, the police at this point are claiming that this is a death by natural causes and not the result of foul play.”
“Sherlock. That’s exactly the same as…”

“As Van Coon? Yes. Once is suspicious. But twice? Exactly the same? That’s murder. I don’t know how yet, but definitely murder.” He gives John a vindictive smile, folding his hands beneath his chin. “How wonderful. And look who the investigating DI is.”

Glancing down again, John reads, “DI Lestrade.”

“Precisely. Not nearly as much of an idiot as Dimmock, and Lestrade knows when to listen.”

Jumping up to his feet in a swirl of blue silk, Sherlock flounces off to his bedroom, calling back over his shoulder, “Hurry up and get dressed, John! We have a crime scene to crash!”

*****

When the detective sergeant comes to Lestrade, telling him that there is someone at the door who claims to have vital information with regards to the case, the last person he’s expecting to find waiting there is a certain consulting detective.

“Sherlock!”

“Morning, Lestrade. Lovely day for a murder, don’t you think? You don’t mind if I just pop up and take a look around do you?”

“I…”

“No, no, of course you don’t,” he offers airily before bounding up the stairs without permission.

“Sherlock!!”

“Just five minutes!” Sherlock yells back.

Lestrade takes a breath to yell up after him in return before expelling it in a frustrated gust instead. His gaze flickers to John as he frowns slightly, trying to remember. “John Watson, wasn’t it? God, what is he up to now? This is not a murder. It’s a peculiar case, I’ll grant you that, but there’s no indication that anyone has broken in or that the death was anything but natural causes.”

Sherlock’s head pops over the railing in astonishment. “No indicat… good God, Lestrade, are you blind??” and then he disappears again.

“Actually, there is something unusual about the case,” John offers diplomatically. “Have you spoken to DI Dimmock yet?”

Frowning, Lestrade looks puzzled and shakes his head. “No, nothing except to try and soothe some ruffled feathers over Sherlock being at his crime scene. I gather the two of them didn’t quite hit it off.”

John smirks slightly, though there’s little humor in the twisted smile. Not after the hurt that Dimmock’s deliberate words caused Sherlock. “Not so much, no.” Clearing his throat, he takes a more serious tack. “I would strongly suggest that you get a copy of his report on Van Coon’s death. Apparently it is identical to Lukis’, down to the secure apartment, the total disarray with no evidence of anything stolen, and the apparent ‘natural’ causes.”

Lifting one brow, Lestrade glances back up the stairs and replies, “Really?”

“Really.”
“Well, damn. Right then. Best get up there and hear more about what an idiot I am…”

The two men trudge up the stairs after Sherlock, Lestrade waving the few officers still examining the scene and collecting evidence to allow him past. Following after Sherlock, Lestrade watches him for a bit before grumbling, “John filled me in briefly. Says you’re convinced that these two cases are related and that they are, in fact murders.”

Sherlock doesn’t even slow down in his inspection of the room, replying loftily, “It’s blatantly obvious.”

“Alright then, dazzle me. How did this supposed robber and murderer get in? We checked all the doors and windows. All locked from the inside. Someone with a set of lock picks then? Jealous ex-lover or roommate with a key?”

“Not a robber, at least not in the case of Van Coon, though it’s possible he took something from Lukis’ flat, but I don’t think so. Place would not be so thoroughly turned over if he found what he was looking for, and the chances of it being in the very last place he looked….” Sherlock’s tone alone indicates the great unlikelihood of that.

"As for a convenient ex-lover or flatmate, don’t waste your time. I seriously doubt you’ll find a Venn diagram when comparing the social circles of Mr. Van Coon with those of Mr. Lukis. No overlap there.” Sherlock crouches down and picks up a crushed piece of black paper, turning and examining it carefully before letting it rest upon the palm of his hand as he glances up at John and Lestrade. “Two men who traveled in very different circles and yet they both had one thing that connected them.”

“And that is?”

“China.”

“Dishware? Come again?”

Sherlock blinks and huffs before rising up and correcting Lestrade sharply. “China. The country. Van Coon traveled there frequently for banking business reasons, Lukis was a journalist who specialized in writing stories regarding China.”

“How do you know that?”

Rolling his eyes, Sherlock’s hand gestures to each piece of evidence in the flat, which, considering the outright chaotic mess, is rather impressive. “Bookshelves filled with books on the politics and culture of China. A recent return ticket from Hong Kong. His laptop is open and there’s a partially written article there on the current trade relations between the United States and China. Really, do you need me to continue?”

Folding his arms over his chest, Lestrade juts out his chin defensively and snarks back. “Right, so they were murdered by China then.”

“You don’t have the talent for mockery, Lestrade. Perhaps you should try stand-up comedy instead? No, obviously they were not murdered by China, but that is the link between them.”

“A nation of over one billion people. Gonna be a bit hard to narrow that down, Sherlock. Why don’t we stick the simpler, more relevant facts of the case. Like, how did this killer get in? You going to tell me he climbed the walls? Came in through the ceiling like a ninja?”

“Ninjas are Japanese, not Chinese. However that would be the story I would recommend you spin
for your reports, minus the whole ‘ninja’ reference. I checked the balcony and roof at the bank, Van Coon’s apartment, and I’m sure when I do the same here I’ll come to the same conclusion.”

“Wait a minute, what bank?”

“It’s the reason we were at Van Coon’s apartment in the first place,” John hastily explains, seeing Lestrade’s impatience and irritation rising fast in the face of Sherlock’s blunt and sardonic retorts. “There was a break in at a bank. Nothing stolen, but some graffiti marks were left behind. Sherlock believes they were a warning or threat to Van Coon.”

Nodding in confirmation, Sherlock adds decisively, “No one used the roof, balconies, or sky lights to let themselves into the crime scenes. No climbing marks, grappling hooks, or anything of the like. No, this killer, I suspect, quite literally walked through walls.” One of the nearby detectives raises his eyes and frowns at the overheard conversation before shaking his head, deciding that clearly he must have misheard that, and moves off to another room.

Lestrade glances about uncomfortably, walking closer as he rumbles under his breath, “Keep it down, will you? Bad enough having you in here, like this, without you spouting supernatural stuff that will get both of us kicked out of the Yard.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrow suddenly as he asks, “Did you warn Dimmock about me?”

“What? Warn? No.” And then, after a moment of reconsidering, “Welllll, not in so many words. I told him you are a complete arse to work with…"

Sherlock’s eyes shutter.

“…and that you’re utterly brilliant and he should seriously consider anything you have to say to him. What does that have to do with…?”

“Never mind. Not important.” But the small smile on Sherlock’s lips makes his pleasure plain to John. “Fine, for the sake of the mundanes, I’ll keep my voice down. I’m fairly certain we’re dealing with something supernatural here. As John said, there was an earlier crime, not a murder, at Shad Sanderson, and no, they haven’t reported it. They want to keep it discreet. But that mysterious break-in led me to Van Coon, who was an employee there in charge of the Hong Kong accounts and now here to Lukis, a reporter specializing in Chinese issues. In all three cases, the buildings and rooms were securely locked, in two cases there were additional security measures and cameras, and yet no evidence of an intruder beyond the deaths and damage done.”

Lestrade barely restrains himself from moaning in frustration. “It couldn’t be a very high tech job? An inside job?” He sound so wistful.

“Possible, but the likelihood is dwindling quickly. There’s also the question of the deaths. Van Coon was put down as a heart attack, but I’d like to see the autopsy report. And, naturally, I’ll want to know the minute you get the autopsy report on Lukis. You’ll also want this.” Sherlock tips the crumpled piece of black paper into Lestrade’s palm, causing the Detective Inspector to peer at it, and then him, quizzically.

“It’s an origami flower. A black lotus, to be specific. You might want to look it up in the database, though I don’t know how many cases you’ll find here. Probably hundreds in China.”

“Why, what is it?”

“The killer’s calling card.”
Lestrade frowns at the paper sculpture in his gloved hand, walking over to one of the evidence bags and slipping it inside before asking, “Anything else?”

“Was there any graffiti on the walls? Any symbols drawn or painted?”

“Graffiti? No, nothing like that.” A call from the other room has Lestrade waving the two on, noting, “I got a call into Dimmock, go ahead and keep looking around but you know the drill. No tampering with evidence, you got two minutes left…”

Moving through the apartment quickly, Sherlock huffs and starts muttering, “Where is it, where is it?”

“Where’s what?”

Whirling about, Sherlock pinions John with his gaze, but his tone is patient as he explains, “Lukis didn’t have an office like Van Coon did. His home was his ‘office’. So, logically, the cipher should be here. Somewhere that the killer knew he would be. Somewhere he was sure to see it.”

Looking about the flat, John rumbles, “Well it clearly isn’t here. If this is the same as the other case,” Sherlock’s dark look hurrying him to add, “and I’m sure that it is, we’ll need to find the cipher. But I have no idea how we’ll manage to do so. We don’t have any idea what Lukis might have done previous to returning home, and no way to find out. You may be the most brilliant consulting detective alive, but you’re no sniffer dog.”

There’s a moment of hesitation before Sherlock grasps John by the upper arms and spins him about. “You continually surprise me, John Watson. An excellent suggestion. I know just the hound.”

Dashing down the stairs in a flurry of coat and arms, Sherlock forces John to mumble a quick apology to Lestrade before running down the stairs after him. A look to the left and then the right causes John a moment of disconcertion before he realizes that he doesn’t need his eyes to find Sherlock Holmes. He waits a moment until he feels the pull, turning to the right and jogging till he manages to catch up to his flatmate’s leggy stride. Sherlock’s phone is out and held upright as he types rapidly with his thumb.

“Where are we going?”

“Nearest butcher’s shop.”

Blinking John sighs and stupidly asks, “And why is that?”

Sure enough, Sherlock gives him that look that says he just asked a stupid question.

“Because only the finest cut of filet mignon will do, of course!”

****

They stand in an alleyway, mostly overlooked by the pedestrians passing by. Which is just as well, because Sherlock is standing there, unwrapping a large piece of red meat from the white butcher paper surrounding it. Rubbing his lips over the raw steak, he murmurs into the tender flesh, “Pwca, crywed fy ngalwad! Rwy'n gwneud y cynnig yn gyfnegym am eich gwasanaethau. Gwneud fy ewyllys! Perfformio fy bidio!”

Blinking, John mutters, “You’re kidding, right? You think a pooka is going to fall for that?”
Sherlock’s eyes narrow as he tilts his head and asks in turn, “John, just how many languages do you speak?”

Oh bugger. He really needs to be more careful. First the honey and now this! Blinking owlishly, John offers sheepishly in turn, “A few.” Like, all of them. It’s a difficult thing, to pretend to know less than you do when certain kinds of information is as innate and unconscious as breathing.

A soft whine interrupts them, causing Sherlock to smirk and John to eat his words. To the rest of the world, it would appear that an enormous black dog with golden eyes is seated before the two men, fluffy tail wagging enthusiastically, tongue lolling to one side of a mouth full of very large, very white, teeth. To John, however, it is more than clear that this ‘dog’ is anything but.

“Of course not, John,” Sherlock drawls mockingly. “Pookas don’t ‘fall’ for any kind of trick. They’re players. They don’t get played.” Sherlock’s pale silver gaze meets the golden one, his expression solemn as he holds the steak out and asks, “I need a favor, and no tricks. I need you to track the last movements of a man for me in reverse sequence from last to first. In return, each month, for a year, I will provide you with a like offering of meat.” He lowers the piece of meat for the pooka’s consideration. “Are we in agreement?”

The shapeshifter eyes the meat, sniffs it, and considers Sherlock for a moment before his eyes slyly shift over to John. He isn’t certain, but is that damn dog grinning at him?

“Aye, I will track your man and play no tricks upon you,” replies the pooka before white teeth flash and the meat is snapped up from Sherlock’s fingers and wolfed down with obvious pleasure. His gleaming gold eyes, however, rest upon John and the ex-angel gets the most uncomfortable itching sensation between his shoulders. After all, the pooka made no promises toward him.

“You couldn’t have picked a better form,” Sherlock compliments, knowing that half of the way to a Fae creature’s heart is through their ego. “I specifically was going to request a canine, since I essentially need you to sniff out a trail for me. But I was half expecting you would show up in your traditional shape.”

The pooka doesn’t talk with his mouth full, but whether that is due to good manners or simply the lack of ability to slobber down such a massive piece of meat and articulate words at the same time is hard to say. Once done, he licks his bloody muzzle. “In the city, a dog is the least likely to attract attention. All the other forms seem to cause nothing but trouble and havoc.” His eyes gleam at the thought, however, as if nothing would please the pooka more than causing some trouble and havoc.

“We’re in a bit of a hurry,” Sherlock warns, pulling out a piece of clothing that he must has snatched from off of Lukis’ floor from his coat pocket. “You can cause all the trouble you like after we find what we’re looking for.”

“Sherrrrrrlock,” John intones chidingly. Really. One should never encourage a pooka to make trouble.

The pooka peers at John, and damn if it isn’t smirking again as it rasps, “Spoilsport.”

They make their way back to Lukis’ flat, the people around them giving Sherlock, John, and their very large ‘pet’ a wide berth. John just hopes that no one tries to report them for walking their ‘dog’ without a leash. He can’t decide which would be more difficult – trying to explain to the police officer that one cannot put a leash on a pooka, or trying to convince the pooka to wear a leash. Neither option would end well for them.

“Well?” Sherlock asks their guide. The pooka sniffs the air and then waits till the closest
pedestrian is out of hearing range before noting, “The man you’re wondering about? He reeked of fear. It’s hours old and I can still smell it.” He sniffs the air again and cocks his head to one side, the way dogs do, as he asks Sherlock, “He’s dead then?”

“Quite dead.”

The pooka puts nose to the ground and begins to sniff out the reporter’s movements in reverse, leading Sherlock and John across a busy intersection without a crosswalk, cars and cabs slamming on their brakes and honking their horns at the massive animal, Sherlock and John following in his wake, John offering pointless apologies and hand waving along the way. The path is random and circuitous, as if Lukis wanted to try to throw someone off his trail, but also was trying to find the quickest way home on foot. They stop abruptly, the pooka’s massive head turning to the right and looking up the steps toward the front door of the West Kensington Library.

“He was in there.”

Glancing about the street, John hisses softly, “Sherlock, we can’t bring a dog into the library.”

Sherlock doesn’t even look back at John, following the pooka up the stairs as he calls back airily, “Good thing we don’t have a dog, then, isn’t it?”

John rolls his eyes and runs up after them, hoping in vain that no one will notice the animal.

“Oi! You can’t bring that thing in here!” calls one of the librarians from behind the check-out counter. Sherlock and the pooka blithely rush on by, forcing John to stop and stammer, “Sorry, sorry, guide dog. We just… forgot to put on the jacket this morning. Dirty. Needed washing. Sorry!” He hurries off, hoping that the excuse will cover them sufficiently till they either find what they’re looking for or move on. The pooka gallops along the hallways, startling patrons right and left gleefully, Sherlock hot on his heels. By the time John catches up with them, Sherlock is scouring the bookshelves, looking for any sort of relevant clue.

“This is where it happened, whatever it is that scared him,” the pooka is explaining. “The scent is especially strong here and then tapers off.” As Sherlock begins an intensive study of the shelves, moving books out of the way, this way and that, the pooka turns and sits next to John. Tail wagging as he watches Sherlock study the shelves, his ears prick up before he murmurs slyly, “Eshu told me about you.”

John freezes, blood running cold as he watches Sherlock exploring the books, looking for a clue, apparently wrapped up enough in his own thoughts to not notice their conversation. Bugger. Why didn’t he realize before? Tricksters, regardless of their origins, tend to congregate together, telling stories of their various ploys and conquests.

Keeping his eyes steadily ahead, John hisses softly, “Could you keep your voice down?”

The pooka’s tongue lolls out of his mouth, a doggie grin coming over his face as the golden eyes turn toward John, gleaming with merriment. “He’s put you in a right pickle he has. Complicated business, being human, having memories of one.” Head tilts to one side as he queries, “He didn’t tell you, did he? About the spillover? About the strength of the human host?” A grumble from Sherlock causes the pooka to turn back toward the consulting detective, his voice a little louder as he rumbles, “You didn’t tell him, did you? He doesn’t know….”

“Oi, shut it. That’s enough from you. No need to say any more.”

Sherlock glances their way, but both supposed canine and John look back at him with expressions
of utter innocence. He frowns slightly before turning away, and with a snort of annoyance, John rumbles, “Bollocks. Just keep that information to yourself, alright?” before moving away to help Sherlock search the shelves.

Squinting up at an anomaly, Sherlock reaches up with lazy grace to a height that John could never hope to match, plucking a rather massive, oversized book from the top shelf noting drolly, “How curious, a book on Chinese Antiquities here in the Chinese history section? Definitely misfiled….” The book falls open and there, on the front page, is the now familiar pair of symbols spray painted on with yellow paint. It’s decidedly smaller than the first, but the shape and color are unmistakable.

“There you have it John. Proof. Proof that not even Dimmock can deny.”

“Except for the part where you got a pooka to lead us here, I would agree with you.”

With an annoyed sigh of eternal suffering, Sherlock stuffs the book under one arm and makes his way out of the library, muttering, “Details, details…”

The sound of Sherlock’s phone doesn’t even slow his pace, a gloved hand reaching into his pocket to pull it out, his voice rumbling with a hint of eagerness, “Lestrade. What do you have for me?”

He comes to a full stop, a hint of surprise and pure delight brightening his features as he covers the phone and turns to John, explaining, “The autopsy has turned up something unprecedented. Three impossible break-ins, two mysterious murders, and now a physically improbably cause of death? Ohhhh, it’s Christmas!” Turning back to the phone, Sherlock nods and replies, “I’m heading there right now. Tell them to have both Van Coon and Lukis ready for me.”

The phone is snapped off, the look given John one of pure excitement. “Come on John!” It’s a wonder he isn’t skipping down the hallway like a small child. As it is, Sherlock turns about and rushes down the hall, leaving John and the pooka behind, the former shaking his head before he starts to follow.

“Hey! Hey, you there! With the dog!”

Turning about, John winces as several members of the library staff, including a security guard, are making their way toward him and the massive non-dog at his side. “You can’t bring that animal in here! You need to secure it immediately and take it outside.”

“Bloody hell….” John begins to mutter under his breath, but he holds up his hands in a sign of surrender and offers apologetically, “Yes, yes, of course. I’m terribly sorry. It was just a misunderstanding, it won’t happen again…”

Problem is, he doesn’t have a leash. Hell, he doesn’t even have a collar, so how exactly is he going to ‘secure’ his ‘dog’? Turning his gaze back to Sherlock, John is faintly appalled to find his flatmate has gone and vanished, leaving him behind with the fae creature he summoned without so much as a ‘by your leave’.

The pooka is sitting next to John, tail a-wagging and tongue a-lolling, with that stupid, vexing doggie grin curling the corners of his mouth. It’s a gesture that some might find disturbing on an animal of his size, nay, downright threatening considering how white and sharp his exposed teeth are. With a frustrated sigh, John reaches for his belt and mutters to his companion, “Right, okay, just play nice and let me get us both out of here, alright?”

The pooka, wisely, says nothing, his tail wagging all the harder. John leans in to try and put the belt around the massive furry neck, but the damn creature is suddenly weaving this way and that,
licking at his face like he’s never been happier to see him, causing John to huff and spit and wrestle haplessly with the giant beast, muttering, “Bad dog! Sit! Stay!” Finally he shifts till he’s straddling the pooka’s back, using his legs to try and pinion the seated thing into stillness while he reaches around to slip the belt around his neck. John is so short, and the ‘dog’ so big, that he is literally almost seated upon the brute’s back. And that’s when it hits him. The pooka’s head turns to meet John’s dropping gaze, eyes gleaming with mischievous intent.

Oh shit.

In a flash the pooka rises up, lifting John off the ground. Losing his balance, John’s hands dig into the thick fur of the beast, his knees gripping the barrel of his chest and then the rest is a blur. There are shouts and curses, screams and running figures everywhere as the massive ‘dog’ takes John on a most undesired and wild ride through the library, dashing down hallways, winding in and out of bookshelves, sending patrons, furniture and, of course, books, flying in all directions. It takes all of John’s strength and concentration just to stay on the beast’s back, clinging for his life and praying that he doesn’t get thrown out a window or down a stairwell.

The pooka is having the time of his life, chasing unwary patrons and staff alike, flashing dangerously sharp teeth, and treating the elegant and stately West Kensington Library as his own personal dog run. Books are occasionally snatched off the floor and shaken between powerful jaws and pointed incisors, till pages fly free like terrified birds. Slamming sideways into a bookshelf at full speed, both pooka and man grunt and spin and John turns his head and watches dazedly as one shelf tips and falls, only to hit another shelf, which tips and falls only to hit another shelf… their madcap dash nearly overrun by the domino effect before the pooka leaps up a stairway, the wind of the final bookshelf ruffling John’s hair, the edge of it scraping his jacket before crashing to the ground.

And then, as suddenly as it began, the wild ride ends with the pooka ducking his head and abruptly coming to a halt, flinging John up and over to land…. on a comfy couch, upside down.

Dizzy, dazed and disturbed, John cautiously rights himself once more, blinking hard, waiting till his head stops whirling before looking around.

The library is a shambles, the pooka is nowhere to be seen, and in front of him are several very angry librarians and a police officer tapping his baton into his palm.

Glancing about sheepishly, John lifts his gaze to the officer and offers him a tentative, apologetic smile.

“Ummmm, would you believe me if I told you that wasn’t my dog??”

*****

Standing in the bathroom, Molly stares at her reflection in the mirror, the fluorescent lighting making her look even more ghastly than usual, showing up the pallor of her skin, the dark circles under her eyes, the utter lack of color. Reaching into her bag, she pulls out a small kit that she keeps on hand just for such emergencies.

Naturally, her inner critic has something to say.

*What are you doing?*

What does it look like I’m doing? I’m putting on makeup!

Reaching into the small bag she pulls out a tube of lipstick and uncaps it, studying the color before
realizing that it doesn’t really matter if it matches what she’s wearing or not. It’s the only one she’s got. Besides, she’s wearing a lab coat. What does it matter what color her lips are? Anything is better than the pale, chapped things that they currently are.

Turning the base, she lifts it to her lips with awkward fingers, unused to such techniques. Give her a scalpel and she’s an artist, but lipstick? Not so much, unless one finds clown makeup enticing. She takes a deep breath and tries to artfully apply the color to her blanched lips.

She takes a step back and studies the job that she’s done. Not too bad. Bit lurid, but not bad. What did her mother used to do? Oh yes. Reaching over for a paper towel, she places it between her lips and presses down, blotting the color, taming it to a slightly more natural shade.

*For an autopsy.* The derision of the voice is unmistakable.

“Yes, for an autopsy,” she mocks back aloud. It’s incredibly annoying, having to argue with yourself.

No, you idiot, because *Sherlock* is coming!

*But he doesn’t even notice you.*

Her eyes roll.

Oh shut up and let me concentrate.

Molly isn’t sure when she began talking to herself like she was two people instead of one. That’s just what happens when you live alone for too long, she assumed. Everybody does it, surely.

At least she only has these conversations aloud when she knows she’s alone. She prefers to think of it as a charming sort of quirk rather than the sort of thing that gets one committed. Thank goodness for Bluetooth. These days half the world goes around talking to themselves like crazy people. She goes for the gold and tries a little eyeliner.

*Yes, but they don’t answer themselves*...

I said, shut up! Oh, look what you made me do. Now my makeup is all smeared!

With a huff, she wets a paper towel and adds a little soap, carefully washing away the black blob before she makes herself look like a raccoon. Right then. No eyeliner. Just lipstick. Maybe a little blush?

*Why do you even bother?*

Because one of these days he’s going to realize just how much alike we are, how perfect we would be together.

*That is just sad. You sound like a bad romance novel.*

“Oh sod off!” she snaps, Molly’s reedy voice echoing in the empty stalls behind her. The following silence, both inside her head and out is a blessed reprieve from both embarrassment and further self-flagellation. She fumbles and hurries to finish up the job before tucking the lipstick away in her lab coat pocket and hurrying back to the morgue, hoping to beat Sherlock there.

No such luck. They quite literally collide at the door, Molly mumbling an awkward apology before pushing her way in ahead of Sherlock.
“DI Lestrade called to say that you were coming and to show you whatever you wanted to see. Lukis’ body is the one that I called him about, but since he told me the cases were related, I pulled out Van Coon’s as well. I understand that Mr. Van Coon was the first case, so I’ll show you him first.”

She leads the way over toward the covered body, only to turn and find Sherlock staring at her face. Sadly, not in a love struck, charmed sort of way, but as if there were a hideous caterpillar on her upper lip or something.

“You’re wearing lipstick.”

She barely manages not to touch her lips with either her fingers or her tongue to confirm this fact.

“Yes. Yes I am. So?”

“You never wear lipstick.”

Damn, he noticed. I mean, yes, she wanted him to notice, notice her lips, how luscious and full and kissable they are, but not for him to notice that she put on lipstick, like she’s trying get his attention. The fact that she is is besides the point.

But, of course, he’s oblivious. Sees the effect without recognizing the cause. Time to bluff.

“Of course I do. I just tends to rub off during the day. I just … freshened it up a bit.” Oh God, she can feel the terrible falseness of her smile. Stop it Molly, just stop it right now! But her lips hold to the ridiculous rictus as Sherlock’s gaze narrows suspiciously.

“You wear lipstick. When performing autopsies.”

Straightening her spine, Molly’s hands land on her hips, her chin arching upward defensively as she retorts, “Yes, well, you whip corpses to study bruising patterns after death.” It’s bad enough that she thinks she’s a fool. She doesn’t need Sherlock thinking she’s one as well.

Sherlock’s brow arches upward in wry amusement as he counters dryly, “These situations are hardly comparable.”

“They are if you consider that they both make us feel better after a long and frustrating day.”

Sherlock stands there for a moment before his lips quirk up at the corners. “Touché.”

Molly breathes a silent sigh of relief that she managed to stumble over that hurdle without too much difficulty. Molly: 1, Sherlock: 0.

“Right.” Her hands brush down her lab coat, straightening it unnecessarily. “So in the initial autopsy exam, Van Coon clearly suffered from heart failure, resulting in myocardial infarction. Definite damage to the heart tissue,” she notes, pointing out the darkened areas of dead tissue, “and what looks like a previously undiagnosed condition of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. He probably had no idea there was anything wrong. He could have literally just got up and had his heart fail on him at the drop of a hat.”

While Sherlock pulls on a pair of gloves and starts to poke and prod within the open cavity of Van Coon’s chest, Molly steps away to give him some space, picking up a paper towel and thoroughly wiping away the makeup from her mouth.

When Sherlock straightens, his irritated frown at Van Coon’s seemingly natural death grows puzzled. “You got rid of the lipstick.”
Great. Normally he doesn’t notice anything about you. Or at least he never says anything. Cut your hair, no comment. Wear a nice dress, no comment. Put on a blouse that really compliments your eyes? No comment. She supposes she should be pleased. After all, Sherlock is noticing and commenting. They’re just not the sorts of comments a girl is really hoping for when she tries to gussy herself up for the man she fancies. Damn it.

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t working for me.”

“Pity… mouth’s too…” and Sherlock wiggles his fingers in a nondescriptive way before criticizing, “small, now…”

“Right, oh-kay,” she wistfully sighs with a feeble smile. He’s an idiot. She’s an idiot. Why she bothers, she’ll never know. Best to move on to the one thing they do do well together. “Well, come over here and take a look at this…”

At least in this, she knows she will not be disappointed. Pulling back the sheet, Molly’s gaze is affixed to Sherlock’s face. To the way it lights up in pure pleasure, eyes gleaming, mouth open in astonishment, his breath actually catching before he murmurs, “It’s incredible!”

“I know, right??” Glancing down at the man’s open chest cavity, she has to agree. Where once there was a heart, now all that remains in a crushed and bloody pulp of muscle and tissue. It’s astonishing. It’s remarkable. Best of all? It’s impossible.

Smirking, Sherlock lifts his conspiratorial gaze to Molly and rumbles, “And they’re calling this a heart attack? Well, I suppose the terminology isn’t strictly inaccurate. It would certainly appear that something has attacked this heart and crushed it into a useless piece of pulp. My God, it’s fantastic.” He continues to study the demolished organ rapturously before he asks, “Any thoughts?”

“As to the cause of death? None. But let me show you something I did notice that I think you’ll find interesting.”

He’s all hers. In this moment Sherlock is utterly focused on Molly’s words, her hands, as she shows him her discovery, body a-tingle with the pleasure of knowing that she’s found something he’s sure to find interesting. She doesn’t know what it means, but if anyone can find meaning in this madness, it’ll be Sherlock.

“So, on the surface it would appear that the two cases are unrelated.” Molly walks back over to Van Coon gesturing at the open cavity of his chest, specifically his heart. “One is a simple heart attack, brought on by hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, the other, well, the other goes beyond explanation. Impossible, yes? But unrelated? Perhaps not. Look at this.”

Taking up a convenient scalpel, Molly points out the shape of the damage on Lukis’ heart as she discusses it. “You see these markings? These lines? These are, for the lack of a better term, the pressure points. These points here are where the forces that crushed his heart were centered. Now come take a closer look at Van Coon’s heart.” Crossing back over she points out, “See here? And here? And here?” And sure enough, faint, but notable signs of tissue damage are visible along similar points and lines. “These marks? It’s highly unlikely that they’re from the myocardial infarction. They’re highly unusual. And often with heart failure, all it takes is some sort of trigger to set it off. If I were a gambling woman, I would bet that whatever happened to Lukis started to happen to Van Coon as well, before being interrupted, likely triggering his heart attack.”

“May I? Sherlock inquires, staring raptly at the evidence, his eyes gleaming with excitement and comprehension.
Molly simply shrugs.

Pulling on a pair of gloves, Sherlock rolls back his sleeve and slips his hand into the chest cavity of Lukis first, carefully placing his hand over it before frowning. “Small, strong, hands…” Abruptly he turns, pale eyes pinioning Molly where she stands as he demands, “Molly, give me your right hand!” Blushing slightly, always a little breathless when his attention focuses on her so intently, she sacrifices her hand to him willingly, asking, “Alright… what exactly are you…?”

Interrupting her before she can finish he grabs her hand and positions it over the heart, aligning her fingers over the lines of compression, murmuring under his breath, “My hands are too large… yours however…” He draws her hand out and drags her over to Van Coon’s body, pulling off and tossing aside the one glove to offer her a fresh one, looking impatient as she wriggles her fingers into it. “Hurry…” he rasps, grasping her hand once she has completely the task and repeating the same process with Van Coon’s heart before he turns and gives Molly such a brilliant smile that she has to sternly remind herself that he’s not doing it for her.

“They’re the same!”

“The same?”

“Yes, the same! Precisely the same! It’s not as good as a fingerprint, but then how many people have small, strong hands and the ability to put them into people’s chests to crush their hearts?”

Her mind whirls as Molly offers faintly, “Ummm, none?”

Another blinding, if slightly pitying, smile curls Sherlock’s lips as he intones gravely. “Exactly.”

Chapter End Notes

"Pwca, clywed fy ngalwad! Rwy'n gwneud y cynnig yn gyfnewid am eich gwasanaethau. Gwneud fy ewyllys! Perfformio fy bidio!" is Welsh and translates to, "Pooka, hear my call! I make this offering in return for your services. Do my will! Perform my bidding!"

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Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
Climbing up the stairs to their flat John stares bemusedly at his fingertips, rubbing them together, faint hints of ink still trapped in the whorls from when he was fingerprinted at the police station.

“Ahhh, good, you’re finally back.”

Glancing up, John finds Sherlock staring at a wall, photographs from the crime scenes and of the ciphers tacked up on it. No apologies, no concern. He doesn’t even have the decency to turn around when he speaks.

John’s voice is a trifle sharp as he offers in turn, “Yes, well, it was a bit difficult, explaining to the police how I don’t actually own a dog, how it was my flatmate’s dog, but no, that doesn’t work because it was my flatmate’s pooka, except for the part where you can’t own a pooka, where they’re a mythological creature that can’t exist, but putting that aside it’s the pooka that my flatmate made a deal with, only he didn’t think to cover my arse as well as his own when he made said deal and then didn’t even have the decency to stick around and help his only friend out, oh no, he just buggered off to the morgue because a dead body that isn’t going anywhere is so much more important than the wellbeing of said friend.”

“Don’t be ridiculous John. The pooka never would have agreed to help me if you weren’t up for grabs. It was always implicit that you were part of the deal. How did you think I got off so easily? Filet mignon once a month for a year? Not nearly enough to entice it to help.”

For a moment he just stares, comprehension dawning over him slowly, Watson’s ire gathering up like a storm brewing, just waiting to blow. “Wait. Are you telling me…? Are you telling me that I was part of your deal with the pooka?!! You gave him implied permission to… to have his way with me in order to garner a favor??”

Sherlock’s mouth opens to answer, but John’s hand shoots up in reply. “No, no. You know what? I don’t want to know, because if I know then I’ll have to punch you.” Glaring, John grumbles, “Well, now I have to go back in to court on Tuesday. They’re giving me an ASBO. Me! An ASBO!”

“That’s nice…” is the distracted reply of his flatmate, who apparently has already dismissed the conversation as irrelevant or redundant. Likely both.

Of course, Sherlock couldn’t possibly understand just how embarrassing this is. There hasn’t been an angel in all of history that has gotten an ASBO. Not exactly the legacy John was expecting, but then again, he is Fallen. Others who have Fallen have gone on to do far worse.

Sighing softly, John rubs his fingers together again before forcing his hands to drop down to his side, grousing, “I seriously doubt that I’ll be able to get the pooka to come to court and testify that he was solely responsible for destroying the West Kensington Library and… what is that??” Staring at the wall, John takes a step forward before sputtering, “Did you? Did you actually rip pages out of that book? Sherlock that is a library book and you defaced it.”

Turning for the first time since John entered the room, Sherlock blinks almost languidly before rumbling, “I don’t see what you’re so upset about. You destroyed a whole library.” As the look on
John’s face becomes more outraged, Sherlock counters blithely, “Oh, don’t be tedious, it’s just the front page. Nobody reads the front page. There isn’t anything even written on the front page.”

“Still, Sherlock, it’s vandalism. And I didn’t destroy the library! The pooka did!”

“It’s your word against the pooka’s. Really John, who do you think they’re going to believe? Now, focus on what’s important, will you?”

With a soft sigh, John concedes the point and swallows his annoyance, drawing closer. “Right. Fine. So, what do we know? What have I missed?”

Turning to face John, a gleeful grin slowly curls the corners of Sherlock’s lips. “Oh, John, you won’t believe it. It’s positively wonderful.”

“Two people are dead and it’s wonderful?”

“No,” he corrects firmly, “two people are dead, but it’s the way that they were killed that is wonderful.” Pulling out his phone, Sherlock flicks through the images on it before reaching the relevant shot and showing it to John.

It takes Watson a moment before he can understand what he’s seeing, John’s voice faint as he replies, “That… was a heart.”

“Yes, yes it was. Quite specifically Lukis’ heart, though it turns out that if Van Coon hadn’t had a congenitive heart defect, it would have been what was left of his heart as well.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Someone, or something, crushed these hearts. There are only a few ways that one can magically do something like that. Thaumaturgy, like voodoo for example. Get something from the victim, a strand of hair, a fingernail clipping, bind it to a representational fetish and voila. Or, an incantation of some kind. But that would be complicated. It would have to be handcrafted, personally designed, and crafting magic from whole cloth is no easy feat.” Sherlock rocks back and forth on his heels speculatively. “Whoever killed these men was very powerful.”

“Voodoo?” A slight frisson of anxiety trickles up John’s spine as he considers his interaction with Eshu. Could the trickster god be involved in this? One of his followers? No, no that’s just paranoid. “As in a voodoo doll?”

“Yes. But I think we can safely rule that option out.”

“Why?”

“Because the killer was present at the scene of the crime. Voodoo is an excellent option for harming from a safe distance. But the fact that both apartments were torn apart indicates that this was done up close and personal. Of course, one can use it in close proximity, but we can rule out voodoo because of the handprints.”

“The what?”

“Handprints.” Sherlock’s hands waft through the air expressively, illustrating his point. “Each heart shows direct lines of pressure from where a hand was wrapped around them and squeezed. Small hands to be sure, but hands nonetheless, human in shape. If a voodoo fetish doll, or something of that ilk, had been used, it would have been too small for a hand to wrap around the heart placed within it. They still could have simulated crushing the heart, but the heart would not have actual
handprints on it as a result, it would have simply been crushed.” His head tilts to one side and he corrects, “In fact, voodoo would have been a more effective way of killing them if that was the point, and less easily traced. Far less suspicious. The power needed to create such actual physical damage would have been immense. They could have just as easily crushed the fetish heart between their fingers and the actual heart would have simply arrested in response. No, this was far more vicious, far more personal.” His head turns, pale eyes boring into John’s intently. “Whoever killed these men wanted them to suffer. He wanted them to feel pain, terror. I suspect he took his time. This wasn’t simply murder. This was torture that ended in murder.”

“So that leaves us with some sort of spell?”

“Most likely.”

“Doesn’t really help us narrow down the field, does it?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrow upon John before he replies, “Yes, and no. There are not a great many Adepts with the power to reach into a man’s chest and crush his heart without affecting anything but the heart. But then there are quite a few Adepts who keep their existence secret from others of their own kind. It’s one line of inquiry but at this juncture I think our best option is the cipher. Only the cipher can tell us why they died, John, which is currently more important than knowing who or how.”

Both men stare at the yellow designs before Sherlock reaches up and tears the images from the wall. “Right, time for us to consult with an expert.”

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Rolling his eyes, Sherlock retorts, “I’m not repeating myself.”


Sighing with annoyance as he wraps his scarf about his throat, Sherlock rumbles, “On painting, yes, I need an expert…”

*****

“When you said you needed a painting expert I have to confess, I thought we would be going to the Museum of Art…”

“Not that kind of art,” Sherlock offers without explanation.

Course, by this point, he doesn’t have to. It’s clear to John what sort of artist they’re looking for.

Between running after Sherlock all morning, running afoul of the pooka, and his run in with the police in the afternoon, the last thing John had been looking forward to was a tour through East London, talking on occasion to some of Sherlock’s homeless network, searching for this ‘expert’ painter. They wind their way along Brick Lane and Old Street, heading toward Shoreditch and Hoxton, checking every backstreet and alleyway along their way. John is tired, sore and hungry, limping slightly now but doggedly following after Sherlock. He tries to focus on the case, rather than the complaints of his all too human body.
“Right, well, how exactly are you planning to crack the cipher then?”

Glancing over at John, Sherlock notes, “This isn’t a modern form of cryptography. We won’t crack this code using computers and current electronic cipher methods. This is something older, harkening back to when the art of cryptography was simpler. Something along the lines of a substitution or transposition cipher. Perhaps something more akin to the Choctaw code talkers used by the United States in WWI or the Navaho code talkers in WWII. We need to take an older approach here.”

Turning a corner they come upon a young man dressed in cargo pants and a sweatshirt, a bag of paint cans by his sneakered feet, a can in his hand, rattling as he shakes it before applying a smooth, flawless line to his current masterpiece. He barely gives them a glance.

“Heard you were looking for me. What can I do you for?” His eyes remain focused, studying the concrete wall before him intently before thickening a section of the outline of his piece. John turns to study the work, brow creasing at the malicious red eyes and sharp teeth of a cop lifting his baton to bring it down upon the head of a cowering victim at his feet. The hint of demonic bat wings makes it all too familiar an image, though, sadly, most humans don’t need to be possessed by a demon in order to commit such acts of violence and cruelty. Catching the direction of John’s gaze, the lad offers him an unrepentant grin and explains, “I call it… Urban Bloodlust Frenzy.” He lets out a low, mirthless sort of chuckle.

Sherlock’s gloved hand reaches out silently, offering the young man his mobile. Tossing the can of paint to John, he takes the device and begins to shift through the images there.

“Recognize the author?”

There’s a slight shake of his head to indicate not, but he replies instead, “I recognize the paint. Looks like Michigan, hard-core propellant. Probably zinc.”

“And the symbols? Do you recognize them?”

His youthful features crinkle as he retorts, “Don’t look like a proper language. Might be some tagger’s private style, but it’s crap if it is…”

“Unlikely, considering it’s connected to the murder of two men. I need to know what it means, Raz. Somebody must know something.”

Dark brown eyes flicker back and forth between Sherlock, John, and the mobile before he offers it back to Sherlock. “Bit thin to go on, but I’ll ask around. Keep my eyes open. Get back to you the usual way?”

“That’ll do. I’d appreciate it if you could move on it quickly,” Sherlock rumbles, reaching into his pocket to pull out a folded bill, slipping it into Raz’s hand. “There could be more lives at risk than we realize.”

*****

“Sherlock. Sherlock? Sherlock!”

“Hmmm? What is it John, can’t you see that I’m thinking?”
“Where are we going?”

“Nowhere.”

“Yes, I gathered that, but could you be a little more specific?”

“I’m thinking John. Walking and thinking. Destination is of little consequence right now.”

Stopping dead, John waits till Sherlock realizes he’s not with him any longer, then waits till Sherlock finally turns around to stare at him, scowling slightly as he asks, “What?”

“It’s all well and good that you’re ‘thinking’, but if it’s all the same to you could we do this back at the flat or in a restaurant? I haven’t eaten in hours and I doubt you’ve eaten either. I’m completely knackered. I could do with a bit of a break.”

“No time, John,” Sherlock counters, moving on and forcing John to catch up. “We don’t have the time to lie about relaxing. There’s a killer out there, a powerful one, and there’s no telling where he might strike next.” He stops abruptly, John literally colliding against Sherlock’s back, both men stumbling slightly before Sherlock spins about, grasping John about the shoulders and guiding him down the street.

“What? Where are we going?”

“Not we, you. Time is of the essence. Divide and conquer. You, John, are going to go back to the police station. Ask Lestrade about the journalist. They should have his personal effects there by now. See if he had a journal or date book, anything that might have indicated his movements over the past week or so.”

“Alright…. Where are you going?”

“I’m going back to Van Coon’s office to do the same. I’m sure his PA will have some record of his appointments and activities. We know that China is the link between these two men. Now it’s time to see where their paths have bisected here in London.”

*****

His mind is awhirl as he examines the puzzle pieces gained in his latest visit to Sanderson Shad. It didn’t take him long. Van Coon’s secretary was clearly much more than that at one time, given by the expensive hand cream on her desk that matched the brand in Van Coon’s flat, the regret and grief in her eyes, but the stoic and slightly removed air about her. A woman who had been involved in an affair with her boss, but who got out of the relationship before she got in too deep. But she was not involved in his death. An arbitrary relationship, born of mutual attraction and opportunity, with a man possessing more money than sense. A man who believed that expensive gifts were sufficient to express his affections; that a diamond ring or an extravagant present equaled love. Clearly the woman felt differently, wanted something more. Something personal and intimate.

The receipts were more useful. A taxicab to arrive, the tube to depart, and a convenient bite to eat in between to inform Sherlock of exactly where Edward Van Coon went on the day of his death. The problem? The street in question is positively festooned with any number of gift shops, pawnshops, clothing stores, restaurants, apartment buildings, with no indicator of which one might have been his destination. There’s no telling where the cab dropped him, or what the distance was
between his destination and the tube station. Close, most likely, but that still left potentially blocks upon blocks to search through with no clue to go on.

Turning about slowly, Sherlock studies the café and tries to determine from its position on the street which direction Van Coon would have come from, muttering under his breath. “Come on, come on… I know you came here with a package. Why else would you come via a cab and leave by the tube? You were carrying something. Something heavy, perhaps something fragile. You didn’t want to risk it on the tube, so a cab. So far, so obvious. You got a bite to eat here before getting on at Piccadilly, but where were you headed from? Where did the taxi drop…ooof!”

Spinning about to see who he’s collided with, one brow lifts in a second of surprise. It’s John. No, no of course it’s John, because this is it, the point of intersection, the second point by which these two utterly different men lives bisect one another’s. He barely even pauses, shifting his monolog into a dialog with John.

“Van Coon was here, delivering a package. Something that he brought back from China. I managed to figure out this location due to a scraps of information and receipts that he gave to his secretary but I don’t know where the drop off actually happened.”

“Sherlock….”

“It has to be nearby, within at least a three to five block radius, but that’s still easily 132 possible shops, 52 possible service businesses, 47 possible restaurants, and 158 possible apartment complexes and over-shop flats…”

“Sherlock…”

“So the question of course is, which one? I can potentially suggest that he must have been walking up the block on this side, unlikely he would cross the street for this restaurant as there’s a large skip that would have hidden it from view until he was past it if he had been walking on the other side of the street, but that still doesn’t explain where he…”

With a sharp huff of breath, John interjects, pointing across the way. “That shop, over there.”

Blinking, Sherlock halts in the middle of his diatribe to peer at John and then the indicated shop. “How on earth did you deduce that?”

Lifting up his hand to reveal the small notebook gripped between his fingers, John points out, “Lukis’ diary. He wrote it down.”

Torn between relief at having the answer, and disappointment at the solution being so obvious, Sherlock can only offer a faint, “Oh…” before following John across the street to a garish little tourist trap.

They wander through the store, picking up this and studying that, not at all certain of what it is that they’re looking for. The Lucky Cat Emporium is clearly just a front, just a drop off point for the smuggled goods and therefore unlikely to have anything of use in their investigation.

“Sherlock,” John offers conversationally, trying to look more like an actual shopper than a detective’s assistant, “look at this. Maybe we should consider getting some new dishes for the flat…”

John gets ‘that look’ for his suggestion, one brow raising up defensively as he notes, “Well I, for one, am getting a little tired of having a completely mismatched set of dining ware just because you
keep using various pieces of it in your experiments. Just come and look at this…”

“John, concentrate on what’s important.”

With a huff of annoyance, John turns the bowl in his hand over to examine the price and blinks.

“Sherlock…”

“John, really, this is pointless, we aren’t here to…”

“Sherlock. Look. At. This.”

With a huff of his own Sherlock comes to John’s side, his expression quickly shifting from irritation to cool speculation.

“Do you see….?”

“Yes, yes, John, I see. Come along.”

John offers the shop owner a polite nod of his head and a thank you before he is bustled out the door burbling, “It’s the same. It’s exactly the same as the cipher.”

“Yes, yes it is. How stupid of me! I just assumed it was an ancient symbol, a magical or arcane set of symbols, but this, this is far more logical…”

“You recognize it then?”

“Recognize is a strong word, look around you, John…”

They’ve stopped in front of a produce vendor, small signs with prices in English, and their cipher, abound.

“It’s an ancient number system from China. Hang Zhou. Only street traders use it any more. Those weren’t words written on the wall of the bank. Not per se. They were numbers.”

Glancing about him, John points out each symbol now that they have a means to do so. “A fifteen. And the number one.” His elation, however, is short lived. “Right, okay, but what does it mean?”


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A short while later finds the pair in a restaurant. John doesn’t hesitate for a moment but orders something he knows can be delivered and eaten quickly. Hopefully before Sherlock finishes explaining everything to him. He waits while Sherlock silently mulls over the details and thanks the waitress when she places a piping hot bowl in front of him. He waits a moment longer, till she’s out of earshot, before lifting a spoonful of hot and sour soup halfway to his mouth, asking, “So… you think they were smugglers?”

Sherlock’s fingers stopping beating rhythmically against each other and fold before him, pressing lightly against the cupid’s bow of his lips. “So far, so obvious. We know that both Van Coon and Lukis went to China on a regular basis, they both brought something back with them, packed in their luggage, and they both delivered said something to the Lucky Cat Emporium. The question isn’t whether or not they were smugglers. The question is, what were they smuggling?”
John’s managed to get in a few bites by now, the bowl down by a quarter. He blows on his next spoonful of soup asking, “Drugs?”

“Drugs would be too risky. They wouldn’t chance carrying something like that in their luggage – dogs would sniff it out sooner or later and they both had successful careers in their own rights. No point in putting that at risk. So that leaves antiquities.”

Taking another bite, John’s brow creases. “I still don’t understand. If both men were smuggling goods in from China, and both of them dropped them off, why were they killed?”

“Think about it, John. They weren’t just killed. Their apartments were thoroughly and methodically searched.”

It only takes John another second to put the pieces together before his mouth opens into a small ‘o’ of comprehension. “One of them stole something…”

“Exactly. One of them must have gotten greedy and took something for themselves. And since it wasn’t known which one was responsible for the theft…”

“They were both killed and their flats ransacked.” John takes a moment, blinking before recalling, “But you said that the thief didn’t find what he was looking for at Lukis’ apartment, and if the stolen item had been at Van Coon’s apartment, then Lukis’ would have been innocent…”

“Correct. Which means, whatever was stolen is still out there and they’re still looking for it.”

“So there’s another player involved? Another smuggler?” John has forgotten his soup in the moment, spoon hovering between bowl and mouth.

“Difficult to say, but I think if we don’t move quickly, there’s going to be another body found in the same condition as both Van Coon and Lukis.” Rising up from his chair, Sherlock murmurs, “Come John,” before heading toward the door with purpose in his every step.

Staring down at his half finished bowl, John drops his spoon with a clink and sighs. Pulling out his wallet he puts down enough money to cover for the food, before hurrying to catch up before he’s left behind again. He can’t help but wonder if he’ll ever get to finish a meal out when Sherlock is on a case.

Once on the street again, they weave their way toward Charing Cross Road, Sherlock furiously typing upon his Blackberry.

“You know, I would have liked to have finished that,” John grouses.

Sherlock doesn’t even glance at him, asking mildly, “Finish what?” All he gets for a response is an exasperated sigh, which he dismisses as unimportant.

“Fine, where are we going?”

“I need to consult an expert.”

John stops dead in his tracks and after a few steps Sherlock seems to realize that he’s lost him and turns around, coat whirling in his wake. “What?”

John can’t stop the smug smile that is spreading his lips wider and wider. “Nothing, it’s just … two ‘experts’? In one day?? You’re slipping.”
Snorting in derision, Sherlock rumbles, “I can’t be an expert at *everything* John. I can’t be constantly filling up my brain with clutter.”

“Fine, fine, you’re only super-human, not omniscient. So where are we going?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Sherlock retorts. “To the British Museum.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice and Brit picking. :D

Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John will never understand how Sherlock can just stride into any establishment and make the personnel believe that he belongs there. It would be easy to chalk it up to a magic spell or charm, but John knows that Sherlock has never employed such a cheap trick to get what he wants. It’s confidence and a talent for mimicry that allows Sherlock passage through nearly any door. Such is the same with the British Museum where somehow they manage to gain passage into the research department without anyone batting an eye as Sherlock rolls some imaginary credentials off his lips.

When a dark skinned woman approaches them, his brow creases in mild confusion and irritation as he asks questioningly, “I’m sorry, but we’re looking for Soo Lin Yao?” The woman shakes her head and offers her hand which, after studying for a moment Sherlock accepts and shakes in turn. “I’m Susan Leighton. I am, well, I was Soo Lin’s supervisor. But I’m afraid that Ms. Yao has resigned her position. Is there something I can help you with, Mr….?”

“Gillette. William Gillette. And no, thank you, I needed to consult with Ms. Yao on some Chinese antiquities I recently acquired, from the Han Dynasty. I was told that she was the resident expert and unparalleled when it came to the authentication and restoration of Chinese relics.”

“This is true. She will be dearly missed here at the Museum. I’m afraid that we haven’t hired a replacement for her yet. She only just recently left. A family emergency, apparently. But if you like, I can take your contact information and as soon as we have a new head of Chinese antiquities, I can pass on your information.”

Shaking his head, Sherlock rumbles, “I’m afraid that will be too late for my needs, but thank you for your offer.”

Nodding, the woman notes, “Well, I’m sorry you came all this way for nothing. If you’ll excuse me, I have a great deal of work to do, in order to find someone to fill Soo Lin’s shoes.”

They watch as the woman departs before John murmurs softly, “Sherlock, why didn’t you ask her for the next best expert in London?”

“John, think about it. Two men return from China with relics from that country. Shortly after their return, they each receive a warning and then are brutally tortured and murdered, their flats torn apart. And at the very same time the resident expert on Chinese antiquities has abruptly and unexpectedly resigned her position.”

“You think she’s involved.”

“She’s obviously involved. The only question is how? Is she responsible, for the deaths of those two men? Has she gone into hiding because she’s been targeted by the killer to be the next victim?”

John licks his lips anxiously as he finishes, “Or maybe… maybe she’s already dead.”

“Excuse me?”

They turn in tandem toward a tall gangly man who hasn’t quite grown out of his youth yet. He looks at Sherlock and John with hopeful eyes. “I heard you talking about Soo Lin?”
“Yes,” Sherlock replies, eyes narrowing intently. “We were hoping to speak with her, but have just learned that she no longer works here.”

“Oh.” He is clearly disappointed.

“Why do you ask?”

“Honestly? I was hoping that you knew where she was.”

One brow lifts as Sherlock inquires smoothly, “Didn’t she leave a forwarding address?”

Shaking his head, the young man murmurs, “Well you see, that’s just it. It’s all very… strange. Soo Lin…. I mean, Ms. Yao. She was devoted to her work. It was all she cared about. But then three days ago I come in to work and Mrs. Leighton is asking me to go look at some vases at Christies that have just come in, telling me that Soo Lin had quit for some kind of family emergency. But that doesn’t make any sense! Soo Lin told me that all of her family were dead!”

His features redden as he confesses, “I thought it was strange, so I went to her flat to see if she was there. I rang and rang, but there was no answer. I left her a note, but she hasn’t called.” He swallows hard and stares at John and Sherlock before noting, “I’m concerned that something has happened to her. I mean, she wouldn’t just leave her work behind like this. Her work is her life.”

Sherlock considers the young man quietly, assessing him. New staff, over-eager to please, clearly utterly infatuated with the dearly departed Ms. Yao, still lives with his mother, but is saving up for a flat of his own. These and a dozen other observations are made in those brief seconds of dispassionate study before Sherlock offers a smile and asks, “Would you mind showing us her work?”

Andy gives them a quick tour of the space, stopping in front of a glass case of fragile looking clay pots. “These. These pots were her life. She was working on restoring them. Apparently you have to actually use them, make tea with them. Otherwise the clay starts to crack and break. She used to do tea ceremonies for the museum patrons as part of her work, demonstrating the tradition as it was performed hundreds of years ago while at the same time working on restoring the pots to their original strength and luster.”

He sighs softly, gesturing at the number of pots still flat and dry in appearance, only one pot shining with health and care. “As you can see, she had a way to go yet.” Turning back to John and Sherlock, his eyes imploring, Andy insists, “I know that something must have happened to her. She’s been with the museum for years, dedicated to adding to our collection and restoring antiquities. She wouldn’t have just left. She couldn’t have.”

Sherlock’s eyes study the pots, narrowed in concentration till they lift to Andy’s face. Tilting his head to one side, Sherlock smiles slightly and asks, “Do you happen to still have her address?”

The late afternoon sun is cutting through the buildings as they stare at the door before them, the little hand written card that says “Soo Lin Yao” with a tiny flower over the ‘i’. They’ve already pressed the doorbell several times, to no effect. Crouching down, Sherlock asks, “How long would you say it’s been since it’s rained?”

Of course John knows exactly how long, seeing as how the last time it rained he was being dragged off to meet with Sherlock’s brother. “Three days ago.” Sherlock’s fingers drag over the phone books propped up against her white door, still damp from where the rain got in through a
hole in the plastic covering them. He looks up once more. “Three days. She hasn’t been home in at least three days, hasn’t been to work in three days. Van Coon was murdered two days ago, Lukis yesterday. So the question now is, is Soo Lin our murderer? Or another victim?”

Rising up gracefully, Sherlock heads down the small alleyway next to her building, glancing about before espying a small open window. John stares up at it too before realizing what Sherlock is about to do. “Hang on a minute, you’re going to just break into her flat, just like that?”

“Come now, John, I’m sure that someone else has broken into it before us. Perhaps as much as four or five days before us.” His height gives him an advantage as he jumps up, fingers just barely catching the edge of the fire escape stairs, pulling them down before he clambers up them. John watches dubiously from the ground as Sherlock manages, just barely, to reach the high window and pull his lean, lanky form through it. Certainly not something John can manage with his broader form and shorter height, and Sherlock doesn’t even make an offer to help. A soft huff of frustration clouds the air for a moment before John makes his way back to the front of the building.

Jostling the table on the way in, Sherlock just barely manages to grab the vase of flowers there before it tips to the ground, water sloshing out of it before he delicately puts it back on the table and carefully pulls himself the rest of the way in. Frowning slightly he turns around, expecting to see John behind him, only to be corrected by a ringing of the doorbell and John’s voice calling through the thin wood, “Any time you feel like letting me in!” A small fleeting smile touches his lips before Sherlock becomes distracted.

Rising up he takes in the room, brows lifting up in bemusement. To say that it is stark would be something of an understatement. The tiny flat has little in it other than questions and mysteries. What few items it has are very old, very beautiful and very valuable, but none of it is personal. “Well, well, well, Soo Lin, just how involved in all of this are you?” he asks softly to himself, too taken with his exploration to give John’s knocking and yells much attention. A quick tour through the kitchen reveals that the person who lives here eats even less than Sherlock does. The fridge and cupboards are bare of food; there aren’t even any plates or utensils. A quick glance at the bathroom indicates the same thing. It’s beyond clean and closer to being unused, at least by the current tenant. No glass for water, no toiletries, no toothbrush or toothpaste or even a hairbrush. Not even a roll of toilet paper or a loose strand of hair. All in all, the flat seems less a home and more a storage space. There is art on the walls, likewise valuable and rare, but no pictures or photographs.

“No one’s been living here for days!” Sherlock yells again, down the stairs this time for John’s benefit or, more likely, in an attempt to silence the ringing of the bell and the pounding on the door. “In fact, I would say that no one actually ‘lives’ here!”

Returning the main room, Sherlock slowly turns once more, frowning. Amidst all the tidiness and ascetic style there is an anomalous spot of disarray and destruction. Crossing over to small, square table, Sherlock takes in the tableau before him. An old, elegantly carved wooden tablet, has been removed from where it rested against the wall and struck repeatedly until it has splintered and shattered into pieces. A knocked over bowl of incense has scattered thick dust all about. Crouching down, Sherlock picks up a battered frame. The faces of two smiling children look out at him from behind the broken glass; not a photograph but a painting, and quite old by the looks of it. He frowns at it thoughtfully, wiping the surface of it before placing it back on the table carefully.

Everything in the small flat has a fine layer of dust on it. Only a few days worth, a week at the most, but still faintly visible. This display, however, has been disturbed far more recently as indicated through the disturbed dust and scattered ash.

“But someone was here!” he yells. Someone who was very angry, it would seem. Eyes search the
apartment, looking for the telltale tag of yellow to no avail. The apartment is so small and so barren, there are few places that would hide such a mark. Only one, in fact. A beautiful, antique folding screen hides one corner of the room. With slow measured steps, Sherlock approaches the screen, one hand reaching out to pull it wide.

There is no warning. No flash of movement caught out of the corner of his eye, no sound of footsteps behind him. Which is why when something tightens around his throat from behind Sherlock is caught completely unaware. Gurgling, his air supply instantly cut off, Sherlock’s hands lift to his throat to try and grapple with what is strangling him, but to no avail. His grasping fingers find nothing there but his own scarf and skin in their desperate search. He gasps and sputters, trying to call out John’s name, but the sound comes out as little more than a pathetic croak.

His brain informs him that he only seven to fourteen seconds before he blacks out. Seven to fourteen seconds to break free from his attacker. Sherlock pushes and presses backward, seeking to collide into his attacker, to slam him against the nearest surface available. And for a brief moment he feels a smaller form against his back, moving with him as he struggles and fights for oxygen. His back hits the wall, causing Sherlock’s eyes to bulge in shock and confusion, his hands reaching behind him, trying to find purchase on something that isn’t there, apparently. Lunging forward, he briefly feels that grip loosen but then return, tightening against his larynx and carotid artery. His head is pounding, his vision starting to swim, his balance and coordination failing him as his body desperately tries to draw in a breath and fails. Sherlock trips against something and feels himself falling, falling, falling. Oh how pedestrian. John will be so annoyed. These are his last thoughts as his limbs go slack and everything goes black.

*****

Outside the door, John can just imagine what is going on inside. Sherlock exploring, deducing clues, and utterly forgetting that he no longer works alone but has a partner.

Course, it’s not like Sherlock really needs John. He’s solved hundreds of cases without him and likely would continue to do so with or without John’s presence. If he could just manage not to get himself nearly killed quite so often. Sherlock is shockingly good at solving mysteries, but shockingly bad at keeping out of trouble and in one piece. But it does make John feel left out, forgotten, which is a hard thing to accept now that he’s got a taste for being tangible to Sherlock. His left shoulder gives a wistful twinge and with a sigh, John reaches up one hand to gently massage it.

No reason to take it personally. His company is not merely endured by Sherlock, but actively sought out and enjoyed. Doesn’t mean the man is going to change overnight into a tender, caring individual. And it’s not like John expects or wants him to. Unconditional love. Whether Sherlock wants it or not, that’s what he’s got with John for a flatmate. With a soft sigh he gives up trying to get Sherlock’s attention. Folding his arms over his chest John leans his back against the door, looking up at the sky. He watches the people walk by. Here, in Chinatown, he can see the shift in belief systems and patterns more clearly. Some of the people walking by are followed by their Guardian Angels while others are flanked by their ancestors whom they have honored. There are also spirit guides and totem animals walking along with their humans. Even more rare is the occasional Hungry Ghost who, through rituals and offerings, has been transmuted and released from their suffering and now choose to act as protectors to the living.

He frowns slightly, reaching up once more to massage his aching shoulder, rotating the injured joint within its socket. Bloody nuisance it is, acting up at random. His eyes continue to watch the crowd curiously, noting with bemusement how they seem to be shifting toward the other side of the street.
Willing servants, ghosts, angels and guardians. Perhaps it is their presence that blinded John to the presence of another. Or perhaps it is only against this backdrop of contentment that John can suddenly sense the seething rage and terrible emptiness of a ravaged soul coming from behind him. Coming from the apartment. Spinning around, John starts ringing the bell and hammering on the door with his fists, yelling at Sherlock much to the astonishment and dismay of passers by. He can feel the anger and yearning for vengeance growing. People are veering away from Soo Lin’s apartment not because of the crazy white man hammering on her door, but because their guardians are urging them away from the devouring hunger that has awoken inside.

It’s been two months, but John can feel the transformation rushing toward him with the inevitability of a tsunami wave, every nerve ending in his body screaming out ‘DANGER! DANGER! DANGER!’ while his mind is crying, “SHERLOCK! SHERLOCK! SHERLOCK!” With a deft and powerful twist of his hand, the strength of it far beyond what a mortal would be capable of, John breaks the doorknob with a sharp jerk, the lock giving way, before surging inside and up the stairs. His back explodes with pain as his right hand lifts unerringly to his left shoulder, drawing out the burning sensation there, his scream of pain transformed into a battle cry.

The spirit stands before him, hands not around Sherlock’s throat but inside his throat, choking him to death, crushing his larynx and cutting off both his air and blood supply. Sherlock’s head dangles within his grip, tipped backward, throat arched and displayed like a sacrificial offering, his body sprawled awkwardly upon the floor, limp and lifeless. The ghost is half tangible to the human eye, half invisible, but John can see him clearly, completely, and growls in heated rage, “Release him, spirit, or I will disperse you into nothing!” His wings spread wide, filling the room, beating furiously, his sword ablaze with swirling colors, held before him in both hands.

The ghost stares at John, a mixture of hatred and astonishment on his face. His hands release Sherlock’s throat, sliding back out of his flesh as the consulting detective slumps to the floor like a broken rag doll. For a brief instant the ghost’s face transforms into something hideous and deformed – mottled and discolored flesh, flared nostrils, fanged mouth, bulging eyes; his true countenance after centuries of rage and abuse - before he whirls and plunges through the walls, vanishing from sight. John waits only a second to ensure the ghost is truly gone before dropping his sword and dropping to the ground beside Sherlock, fingers delicately running over his throat. Larynx severely bruised, but not crushed, the hyoid is still intact and none of the bones in his spine appear to be damaged. But he’s not breathing. Fingers press gently to confirm the next. No pulse.

Wings beat the air as John tips Sherlock’s mouth open and breathes deeply into it. CPR would do the same trick eventually, but there’s no guarantee and John has no idea how long Sherlock’s brain has been without oxygen. If the power is his for the taking, then, by God, he will use it. Each breath given to Sherlock contains life, John’s own spirit and energy, healing and repairing the damage done, urging Sherlock to breathe on his own. He lays a hand upon Sherlock’s chest. Watson knows intimately how the heart beats and functions; John wills it into doing so. After a few steady pulses, Sherlock’s heart gives a lurch and starts beating on its own. Though still limp and unconscious, his open mouth drags in a raspy breath and then another.

Shuddering, John falls over Sherlock, his wings blanketing them both, allowing John to see them for the first time since Michael struck him down. Gone is the brilliant white plumage, replaced not with feathers of black ink but instead with rich shades of russet and gold; the wings of a hawk. They beat the air desperately of their own will, as if trying to resist what is to come, before they shudder and vanish once again, as wholly inexplicable now as their presence was two months ago. Exhaustion floods John and with a soft sigh he slowly sits upright once more and gently eases Sherlock’s head upon his thigh to aid his breathing. Because he can, John tenderly strokes his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, waiting quietly while they both recover.
When Sherlock finally regains consciousness it is violent and struggling, his hands reaching to his throat, his body thrashing as if he were still trying to fight off his attacker. John’s hands catch his arms, holding his steady as Sherlock begins to cough and hack violently, his body shuddering as he tries to draw in breath through his damaged larynx. “Easy, easy, I got you, just relax Sherlock, relax. Take slow gentle breaths. Just breathe. In and out. In and out.”

Eventually Sherlock goes boneless again, allowing himself to rest against the support of John’s frame, focusing on nothing but breathing, his head shifting fractionally against John’s thigh as he tries to find the least painful position for this endeavor. As he quiets, John’s fingers absently return to stroking through the tousled mass of Sherlock’s black locks. He’s surprised by just how soft they are.

Finally, in a voice raspy and weak, Sherlock wheezes, “Is that a medically…” a rough inhale of breath, “p-proven treatment for…” another helpless gasp, “strangulation victims?”

“Sherlock, easy. Don’t talk. Just rest.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrow upon John’s upside-down features, scowling in rebellion as he drags in another unsteady breath and pushes on despite his doctor’s advice. “If so,” he wheezes, “it seems rather counterintuitive, seeing as it’s my thro…” a short cough and a flailing hand, “my throat that appears to have been wrung out like a wet towel and not,” another raspy inhale, “my head…”

“You damn stubborn git,” John grousers, but a small smile is upon his lips. A stubborn Sherlock is an undefeated Sherlock. “It’s a medically proven treatment for just about every form of assault, though in truth it’s often more for the benefit of the survivors than the victim, though some patients claim it has a soothing and reassuring affect.”

“Hmmmmm.” Sherlock’s tone is disbelieving, but he doesn’t move either head or hand to stop John. “So, what did I miss?”

“Well, I got tired of waiting for you, so I broke down the door and found you being strangled.”

“Mmmmm, yes, I could have deduced that much. What about the killer?”

“Male, Chinese, about 5’6” I believe. Finally, someone shorter than me. Strong, muscular. Oh, and quite dead.”

That catches Sherlock off guard. His eyes snap open as he rasps a bit too enthusiastically, “Dead?!” Which naturally catapults him into a fierce coughing fit. John helps him up and holds him till he settles once more, rubbing his back soothingly now.

“Yes, dead. Our killer is a ghost. Which I suppose explains how he was able to get into those locked rooms and kill his victims, and how he was able to crush Lukis’ heart from inside his chest.” His head tilts thoughtfully as John considers what they know and what he’s witnessed. “I would surmise he’s been dead for a rather long time to have such power. Not only can he shift between being invisible to humans to having a visible form, but he can also move and affect the material world. He can manifest physicality and shift readily between tangible and intangible form. That takes a long time for a being of the spirit world to master.”

Eyeing John quietly, Sherlock finally rumbles, “You are forever surprising me, John Watson. Not just a Sensitive but an informed Sensitive.” He takes a moment to consider the information before using John to help himself rise up. “Come on. It’s clear that Soo Lin is involved in all of this, just as it is clear that she has gone into hiding.”
“Or she’s dead,” John points out again.

Sherlock’s gaze has returned once more to the splintered pieces of wood lying on the floor. “Possibly. But there’s hasn’t been a body and we haven’t found any graffiti meant for her yet. None here or at the museum. She might be in danger, yes, but she may very well be the ringleader in all of this, John.” Crouching down, Sherlock collects the fragments, fingerling them lightly before slipping them into his pocket and rising up once more. “Either way, it behooves us to find her, and find her quickly.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice and Brit picking. :D
No beta on this chapter, sorry!

Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
When it comes to Sherlock, John has learned not to look a gift horse in the mouth. So when Sherlock mildly agrees to return to 221B Baker Street to allow John to take a closer look at his throat and feed him tea and soup, the only shock that he allows to show on his face is a raise of both eyebrows and a startled blink. It is wise not to question such things. Sherlock acquiescing to eating and resting is a rare, rare occurrence that is not to be wasted.

Of course, once back at the flat, Sherlock is not precisely doing anything quite so mundane as ‘resting’. He disappeared to the bathroom first and then returned to set up his microscope along with a set of chemicals and test tubes. Some ingredients purely scientific, other more arcane, Sherlock began studying something very intently. The science was less exciting, more methodical. The magic tests resulted in occasional puffs of smoke, bubbling, and fluids that shifted in color. Throughout the process both men keep shooting each other suspicious glances, John curious and confused by exactly what Sherlock was up to, and Sherlock, for utterly unknown, wholly Sherlockian reasons.

Nevertheless, he accepts the cup of tea from John and idly sips at it while he works and later accepts the bowl of soup, gingerly eating and swallowing the contents with only the occasional wince. He even downs the three ibuprofen John presses into his hand to help with the swelling and tenderness.

With a soft sigh, John finally shrugs, pulling out some vegetables from the fridge, and begins to prepare a simple stir-fry for himself. He’s lost in the moment, his left hand wielding the knife, cutting up a carrot when Sherlock is suddenly right there, pressed against his back, his voice murmuring into John’s ear like a posh growling tiger.

“John…”

His body jerks in surprise and his hand slips, the sharp knife slicing into flesh rather than the vegetable, causing John to swear and raise the injured digit toward his mouth. A strong hand on his wrist and Sherlock’s commanding tone cause him to hesitate.

“Wait.”

With a faint air of shock, John watches as Sherlock’s left hand comes around him, his body wrapped within his flatmate’s embrace as his finger is tilted till he’s bleeding into a test tube of all things. He jerks his hand, but Sherlock is prepared for such a reaction. His grip only tightens, holding him steady.

“Bloody… Sherlock! What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?!!”

He doesn’t want to hurt the man, but this really is taking things too far. His left hand drops the knife to reach up for the test tube at the same time that he firmly wrenches his right hand free. Sherlock dances away before John can snatch the offending item back, tutting mildly, “Waste not, want not.”

He could chase after Sherlock for his blood, and bleed all over the flat in the process of doing so, or he could tend to the injury. John chooses the latter even if he would prefer the former. “You
bloody git! You did that on purpose!” He turns on the tap and runs cold water over the cut before reaching for the medical kit they keep in the overhead cupboard. “You really are a total bastard. Tell me, what the hell do you need my blood for that you had to make me cut myself to get it? You better not be using it for some damn ritual or summoning circle or, I swear, I’ll bin every single experiment I find in this house when you’re out, regardless of how ‘important’ you might deem it to be!”

“I need it to test, obviously. To make sure you’re human.”

John freezes with water running over his hand, surprisingly grateful that Sherlock has already placed a drop of his blood on a glass slide, which he is currently studying avidly through the lens of his microscope. It means that he misses the look of panic that ever so briefly flashes over John’s face.

“Of course I’m bloody human, you daft git!”

Sherlock pauses to look up at John, more baffled than offended at the retort since it couldn’t be farther from the truth. “If you’re trying to get a rise out of me, you need to find better ammunition, John. Calling a genius a ‘daft git’ isn’t particularly effective, now is it?” An eyedropper is used to place a drop of blood in three separate test tubes, one reacting while the other two remain dormant, Sherlock’s pale gaze flickering between all three patiently. In the meanwhile he prepares more slides, different bottles of solutions added to each one before he slips them beneath his microscope to study the resulting effects.

There’s no point in trying to stop the process. If he rushes over and makes a fuss, that will only make him appear guilty of trying to hide something. And for what? He is human. Or, at least he thinks he is. It didn’t occur to John to do any tests on himself once he inherited this body. He has no idea what Sherlock might find out, but it’s certainly too late to stop him now. So he calmly bandages up his hand instead, asking, “Might I inquire why you suddenly doubt and mistrust me when I have never given you reason or cause to do so?”

“Several. For one, you’re a powerful Sensitive and you’re not insane.”

“I dunno. Ever since I’ve moved in here quite a few people have been questioning my sanity, yours truly included…” John mutters darkly, wrapping a plaster about the cut.

Sherlock’s hand waves off the feeble argument. “Few true Sensitives manage to accomplish that. Much more likely they end up on anti-psychotics or in mental institutions. Second, you’re knowledgeable, far beyond what your CV and background would suggest you should be. Third, you’ve displayed a number of unusual quirks of abilities and timing that, alone, might be unremarkable, coincidental. But together, they suggest a strong potential for a non-homosapien origin.”

“So, what, you just thought you would take some of my blood, figure out what I am?”

“And your hair. Got some from your brush in the bathroom. Excellent source of DNA…” Sherlock’s eyes are fixed on the test tubes, fingers steepled before him, tapping lightly on his lower lip till a scowl comes over his features.

John’s gaze flickers between the test tubes that have, apparently, finished doing whatever it was that they were doing. He manages to keep his voice steady and irritated, though the latter is not much of a stretch. “Right. Okay, what am I then?”

Staring at his test tubes as if they had utterly failed him, Sherlock huffs and mutters, “As far as I
can tell, you’re human. How dull.”

“Dull?” John can’t help but bristle a bit.

“Well, you’re definitely not Fae, and with these tests I’ve managed to determine that you’re not a Changeling. I’ve lived with you long enough to weed out the possibility of vampire or werewolf. The former do prefer living in cities and highly populated areas, but your enjoyment of sunshine and your service in Afghanistan rather negates that likelihood. The latter definitely do not do well in highly populated areas, but we’ve been out and about on several nights where the moon has been full and you didn’t so much as bark, so that’s clearly out.”

“Clearly.”

“You could be a skinwalker or some anomalous shapeshifter. I’ve managed to eliminate a few of the more common varieties thereof. But there are wards on the doors to alert me if any such creatures cross over the threshold, so you would have to have a very powerful talisman to overcome those if you were, and at the very least they would cause your form to slip a little each time you passed through, and I’ve not witnessed any such reaction thus far.”

Leaning back into the couch, Sherlock eyes sidle up John’s frame to rest upon his face. “You’ve met Mycroft. There are very few things he cannot See. Naturally, he wouldn’t allow you to continue to live here if he thought you were of any great threat to me. He already feels that I am ‘wasting my life’ and putting it at unnecessary risk. He wouldn’t encourage that. But he also cannot resist the opportunity to lord his knowledge over me. So if he detected you were something more than you appear, he would more than delight in letting me know.” A small crinkle forms between his eyes as he counters his own logic. “Then again, he wouldn’t feel the need to share that information with me until he could do so to great effect and with great satisfaction. For a man who once used to eat everything set in front of him he has certainly managed to develop a keen sense of delayed gratification.”

“Not a particular skill of yours,” John notes dryly, but Sherlock continues on as if he hadn’t interrupted.

“And then, of course, there are certain abilities that have no signifier that can be sensed. One can only test for such things.”

“Such as?”

“Abilities that straddle the line between magic and science. Psychic abilities, for example. Telepathy, telekinesis, empathy beyond the pure emotional rot that most people believe themselves capable of, astral projection, clairvoyance, precognition, psychometry, remote viewing, retrocognition, the list goes on and on.” Sherlock’s eyes narrow as he studies John’s face and asks bluntly, “John! What am I thinking right now?”

“That I’m an idiot.”

“Not good enough. I’m always thinking that about everyone. Concentrate. Try again.”

“Sherrrrlock.”

“John.”

With a soft sigh, John closes his eyes and mutters, “Fine!” Of course it’s all for naught. Even as an Angel, with all his powers, he had no ability to read the actual thoughts of his wards. But he plays along. “You’re thinking that I am the most reasonable, decent, and understanding member of the
human race that you are ever likely to meet and that you are so lucky and blessed to have me as a flatmate, because anyone else would have your guts for garters by this point, if garters were still fashionable in this day and age…”

“Fine! Forget it. If you’re not going to take this seriously…”

“Sherlock, I’m not psychic. I can’t read your mind or lift objects with my mind or see the future…”

“But you do have abilities, beyond what a Sensitive would. You’ve saved my life now on two separate occasions. The first was two months ago, when you shot Jefferson Hope. The second was today when you broke down the door. In the first you somehow managed to track me down to an obscure location and shot the man seconds before I would have swallowed poison, breaking his hold over me. In the second case, you again just happened to appear right when I was being strangled to death and managed to chase off a ghost who had the ability to crush my larynx from the inside. How?”

John blows out a rough breath and drops himself into his chair, staring at Sherlock across the space between them. He needs to be careful, to only answer truthfully. Ironic that he can answer Sherlock’s question without lying. John knows what he was, but for once he’s grateful that he has no idea what he is.

“Sherlock. I honestly don’t know what I am. What I do know is that I’m Sensitive. I… I’ve been fortunate in that I’ve been surrounded by others like me for most of my life. I wasn’t alone, so I knew that what I could see was real along with the fact that most humans couldn’t see what I could. I had access to information and made it my business to know what was in and of the world.” Dangerous territory, divert the focus. “But as for the other things… it only works with you.”

Scowling, Sherlock demands, “Explain.”

Taking a deep breath, John confesses, “The bit, where I know when you’re in danger? Where I know where you are when you’re in trouble? I can only do that with you.”

His eyes narrow, fingers steeping before his lips as Sherlock counters for clarification, “So, if I were to leave you here and head off to the worst area of London in the dead of night, acting like a drunk rich fool, you would know I was in danger? You would be able to figure out where I was and show up in the nick of time before someone put a knife in my gut and robbed me?”

With a slight grimace, John glances at the clock, the lateness of the hour, then back to Sherlock, murmuring “I really wouldn’t like to put that to the test but… yes. I think so. Maybe. I don’t know if it works for any kind of danger or just magical threats. But at least, with regards to magic, I seem to have an... affinity for you.” The faintest of blushes touch his cheeks. Affinity, indeed!

“And the fact that you knew I liked honey on my toast? Is that part of your ‘affinity’ as well?”

John shrugs, uncomfortable. “I told you, you don’t like butter, you don’t like jam. Some things aren’t a big mystery.”

“Parles-tu français? Sprichst du Deutsch??”

“For fuck’s sake, Sherlock, I was in the army. I traveled all over the world, worked with people from all different countries. So I have a knack for picking up languages. That doesn’t make me some supernatural creature.”

“And what about the ghost? How did you deter him?”
“Honestly? I think he was shocked by the fact that I could see him. That I knew what he was. They’re not so used to that kind of thing. It unnerves them. And I wasn’t afraid of him. I was too angry to be afraid.” And I was holding a sword of spiritual power in my hands that had the ability to utterly obliterate him. “I also don’t know that he was trying to kill you. He might have just been trying to frighten you off. He killed the others by crushing their hearts. Why change his MO?”

Sherlock’s mouth opens to press the point further, clearly not entirely believing the whole ‘element of surprise’ argument when his phone chirps at him, Reaching into his pocket with a soft huff of annoyance, the look of irritation on his features melts away into excitement as he rises up and quickly texts a reply before pocketing it once again.

“Right, we’ll talk about this more, later.”

“What? Where are we going now?” John is hungry and tired, exhausted really, and Sherlock should be resting, damnit all.

“That was Raz. Says he has something to show us. Come on, John.”

*****

They meet Raz in the middle of Hungerford Bridge, the young man jerking his head casually without so much as a hello, expecting them to follow. Crossing over to the south bank of the Thames, he leads them to a small alcove where skaters and BMXers are rolling and testing out tricks, the walls of which are liberally covered with graffiti.

Shaking his head, Sherlock mutters, “Clever. So clever. Find the places where graffiti abounds, leave a message there to be found. No one would ever notice it, message would be erased in short order, painted over by an actual tagger.”

Raz’s arm extends, pointing toward one of the massive supporting pillars. “There, y’see it? Bit covered up now, but…”

“Yes.” Sherlock draws closer, studying the hidden bits of yellow paint, the shapes still distinctive enough to recognize the style. “Same paint?”

“Yup. Been askin’ around. Word is this stuff shows up now and again ‘round here locally. Mostly down by the tracks and trains.”

Sherlock’s eyes snap to John’s, his lips curving slightly at the tired and exasperated look that his flatmate gives him. “We’ll split up then. Cover more ground.” A nod of thanks is given to Raz as Sherlock grabs John’s arm and drags him off.

With a flashlight each, they divide and conquer, wandering along the tracks and nearby structures, searching along papered and painted walls for some sign, some indication, that their cipher has made an appearance.

It’s a good hour into the search when John, quite literally, stumbles upon it. It’s been an insanely long day without much food or rest and as his flashlight catches a spattering of yellow paint on the ground he catches his foot on the edge of a rail and stumbles over it, his flashlight dancing over a wall just beyond the track, yellow sigils emblazoned upon it.

He gapes for a moment, running the flashlight over the surface, stepping back to take the whole image in before fishing his phone out of his pocket.

The device rings and rings and grumbling under his breath, John grouses, “Come on Sherlock, pick
up your phone. Pick up.”

So of course he doesn’t. When has Sherlock ever done what John wants him to? With an annoyed huff, he concentrates for a moment and then heads back down the train track, following the thin thread that connects them.

It still takes him at least ten minutes to finally catch up with Sherlock, huffing as he calls out, “Answer your damn phone, will you? I found something!” Sherlock’s head snaps up, no excuse given or apology offered. With a slight grimace, John turns back about and starts jogging back from whence he came.

So a total of twenty minutes. Thirty, tops. Standing in front of the now black wall John blinks, his hands resting on his hips before turning to Sherlock. His flatmate is looking at him dubiously at best, so John emphatically retorts, “It was here! It was just here, no more than thirty minutes ago, I swear!” Crossing over the tracks, he lays his fingers upon the black wall. The paint is dry, but the smell of it is still strong. Fresh. Which means someone must have covered it up mere minutes after John left.

“Someone painted over it. Someone…”

Sherlock draws closer, murmuring darkly under his breath, “Someone is watching us. Someone didn’t want us to see this and made sure to get rid of it, knowing that you wouldn’t be able to remember. I don’t suppose you thought to take a picture?”

John’s hand touches his pocket and the phone resting there. “Damnit!” Technology is still a bit strange to him and he is more apt to forget about the simple things that everyone else in the world takes for granted. Besides, his memory used to be photographic. Just one more thing that seems to have been lost along with his position as a Guardian Angel.

“Come on,” Sherlock rumbles thoughtfully. “I have an idea…”

*****

Upon closing the door to their flat, Sherlock hangs his coat and scarf and then turns about dramatically. “John. Do you trust me?”

Collapsed in his chair, limbs akimbo, John’s eyes pop open and flicker up to Sherlock’s impassive features.

“That’s a rather loaded question, Sherlock. Would you care to elaborate?”

“I need to perform a spell. On you.”

John’s frame instantly stiffens, eyes narrowing as he holds back his first thoughts and asks instead, “Why?”

Rolling his eyes, the answer obvious to him, Sherlock explains, “Because locked in your brain is a cipher message. At best you’ll be able to recall maybe 62% of it. Less now that we’ve come back to the flat. And that’s only if you were really concentrating on it when you saw it. But the information is in there, complete and intact. Your eyes saw it, it’s just a question of being able to remember it.”

John huffs and considers Sherlock’s words before he suggests, “We could try hypnosis?”

“Bah! A questionable process if there ever was one. Generally ones sense of recall under hypnosis
is only 68% correct, and that’s on generic data not specific imagery. But even if it was 100% you wouldn’t necessarily be able to redraw it accurately and we need an accurate representation of the cipher.” He waits a moment, letting his words sink in, his logic affirm itself before he rumbles, “John. It’s the only way. So I’m asking you again. Do you trust me?”

John takes a breath, holds it for a moment, and then lets it out again. He loves Sherlock, but love isn’t the same thing as trust. He wants to trust Sherlock. In some ways we does trust Sherlock, with his life. But this is Sherlock placing magic upon him. Magic that he will be able to sense and feel, but will be utterly unable to control. And Sherlock is going to be using this magic on his mind, tiptoeing through his memories. He could, if he wanted to, look for and find anything that he wanted while he was in there. Anything.

As if reading his thoughts, Sherlock continues, “I promise you, John. I’m only interested in helping you to remember and draw the cipher. Nothing else. I will not violate your mind or your thoughts.”

Closing his eyes, John’s hands briefly grip the arms of his chair. “I trust you, Sherlock.” His eyes snap open, meeting Sherlock’s again with a firm nod before he hoists himself up and out of the comfy chair. “Right. How do we do this?”

Bustling about, Sherlock brings over a blackboard and hands John a piece of chalk, something he keeps in great abundance about the flat for circle casting purposes. “Just stand here and close your eyes,” he instructs, grasping John by his upper arms and shifting him to the middle of the room, in front of the board.

“Why do I have to close my eyes?”

“No real reason. Might help you relax.”

“Then I’d rather keep them open.”

“Fine.”

This is a spell that Sherlock has used many times before, when witnesses have given him differing accounts or a lack of useful evidence necessitated more direct intervention. He doesn’t need to look up the incantation, nor even mix any ingredients. Long, delicate fingers rifle through a collection of small bottles, which clink and rattle against each other musically, a modern day version of a medicine man’s obscure collection. Drawing out a tall, narrow bottle, Sherlock uncaps it and presses his finger against the opening, letting the contents rest against the tip for a moment before reaching up to John’s forehead.

“Hold still,” he orders lightly, his forefinger touching John’s forehead between his eyebrows, drawing a small semi-circle up and then another below, the corners touching. Another dip of the bottle and he presses his finger again, a single dot. “I’m opening up your third eye,” he explains in deep mellifluous tones, “so you can look inward and see everything.”

Drawing back slightly, Sherlock’s hands lift into the air, molding it as he recites the incantation, gathering the magic, shaping it as his lips shape the words that John recognizes as Latin. “Mnemosyne, aperi hunc oculum ut visum videat, quaesitumque reducat. Aperi memorias omnes integras, et illi redde artem omnes manifestas redenddi.”

For a moment, John’s lips quirk in mirth, the accent and pronunciation decidedly not what the ancient Romans sounded like. But it’s close enough to be understandable. The humor slips away, however, as the magic begins to build in the air between them, roiling and churning as Sherlock shapes it, instructs it, molding the magic with the words and gestures of the spell, his gaze somber
upon John’s face. Mnemosyne, the Goddess of Memory, is very old and from a time when Gods trifled with their subjects depending upon their whims, often to disastrous effect. It feels like a storm brewing between them, powerful, wild, strong enough to rip either one of them apart save for Sherlock’s expert handling of it.

Then it shifts, the form congealing and lunging straight at John’s head. He can’t help but lift his hands up defensively as he can see the magic coming toward him, sharp and deadly as an arrow, and he gasps and jolts as it enters him through the third eye drawn upon his brow.

He had no idea. No idea at all. Most humans wouldn’t even notice the spell. They certainly wouldn’t feel it. But then John isn’t most humans.

To be a creature of magic, all magic is like oneself. You can interact it with, absorb it, repel it, move with it, reshape it. Occasionally it can be wielded like a weapon against you, different enough to require a parry or block to defend oneself. John isn’t magic any more, but he is a Sensitive. And to be able to see magic, feel magic, but not be magic when it hits you?

It’s terrifying.

The raw power pours into John’s brain, swimming around in it and he can’t help but reel backwards in shock, crying out at the brutal invasion. Sherlock’s hands lift to grip his upper arms once more as he rumbles sharply, with a hint of panic in his voice, “Breathe, John, you need to breathe.”

John draws in a ragged inhale, the eagerness of his lungs causing him to realize just how long he must have stood there, too shocked to even do something as automatic as breathing. He can feel Sherlock’s hands on his arms, he can faintly hear his voice, but it’s like being caught in a maelstrom, the visual cavalcade of memories dominating his sight, the cacophony of voices from centuries upon centuries filling his ears.

Dear sweet God, he’s going to go mad.

“John. John!” His body is shaken, hard, but he barely feels it. “I need you to concentrate on my voice, John. Remember the wall, nothing else, do you hear me? All that you need to remember is the wall. Can you see it John? Can you see the wall with the yellow cipher written upon it?”

As Sherlock speaks, the slideshow of everything he has ever witnessed, the sounds of everything that he has ever heard, stops drastically, dwindling down, down, down, till he finds his mind mulling over each instance of seeing the cipher. It finally settles on the most recent one. It’s so clear and brilliant, the yellow marks nearly glowing in his mind’s eye. His body trembles in the aftermath, the magic restless and squirming inside of him as Sherlock’s commands just barely manage to control it. “Yes… I see it. I see the cipher.”

Sherlock’s hands release him for a moment then return, pressing the chalk he had been holding back into the palm of John’s hand. Huh. He must have dropped it. How silly.

“Open your eyes, John.”

He didn’t remember closing them, but he must have when the visions began to assault him. A hapless attempt to stop the endless siege. His eyes open slowly, warily, but all he sees now is Sherlock superimposed against the wall, staring at him anxiously for a moment before the cool mask of assurance slips back into place. He moves to the side, guiding John forward as he murmurs into his ear, “The chalkboard is the wall, John. Do you see it? Do you see the wall on the chalkboard?”
John can only nod mutely, the two images overlaying one another.

“Good, John, very good. I want you to draw the cipher for me. Just draw over the marks on the wall.”

John nods again and steps forward, out of Sherlock’s grip. His mind and body feel separate from him now, obeying Sherlock’s voice, Sherlock’s commands. His hand lifts and begins to trace the cipher, his gestures firm and assured, graceful, as if writing Hang Zhou was something he did every day. The chalk scrapes softly against the board and he can sense that Sherlock is behind him, watching him work, studying the symbols as they are revealed one after another.

When he finally finishes, John steps away from the board, his hand dropping to his side limply.

“Very good John. I’m going to release the spell now.” And taking a breath, Sherlock intones firmly, “Dispergam.”

The power rushes out of John as abruptly as it entered him and he can’t stop the small whimper at the terrible emptiness it leaves behind, his legs suddenly buckling beneath him.

In a heartbeat, Sherlock is there, catching him as John’s body starts to slump to the floor and then practically carrying him over to the couch. John is so tired. He can’t remember the last time he felt this tired. Each limb is like a leaden weight that no amount of effort can lift and his head feels like a balloon floating several feet above his body, precariously anchored by a thin bit of thread. He’s dimly aware as Sherlock settles him down gently, lifting each leg onto the couch, carefully folding his arms over his middle. John struggles to stay awake, a questioning groan escaping him.

“Shhhhh, rest John, it’s alright. I’ve got you.”

He faintly senses Sherlock removing his shoes and pulling a blanket over him, his eyes flickering open and shut restlessly. A hand strokes over his brow as Sherlock repeats, “It’s alright, John. You can let go now. Sleep.”

And as the darkness subsumes him, he could swear he feels the soft brush of lips against his forehead.

Chapter End Notes

Latin Translation: “Mnemosyne, open this eye, that it might see what has been seen, recall that which we seek. Open all memories in full and give to this one the skill to reveal them in full.”

Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice, beta’ing, and Brit picking. :D Thanks also to all the people who offered help with Sherlock's Latin - kalypso_v, kirstenlouise, thisprettywren, phantomjam, sc010f, nonmillecarinae, and hobnailedboots. Translation still in flux (too many options, not enough consensus), but I didn't want to hold the chapter up any longer. Final expert will make the final call. ;)

Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
He wakes up slowly for a change, awareness filtering in gradually, neither his mind nor his body particularly eager to rejoin the world. He can feel the warmth of sunlight coming through the window, painting patterns over his legs. The soft warmth of a blanket cocoons him restfully, the urge to simply roll over and fall back into sleep a powerful one. It’s only the soft sound of dishes clinking in the sink, the soft steps that are decidedly not Sherlock’s that startle him into wakefulness.

Sherlock must be rubbing off on him, for it only takes another moment before he realizes that the person in the kitchen is not deliberately walking lightly, therefore their steps must be naturally light. Heavier and more deliberate than a child’s, more likely a very slight man or, even more likely, a woman. There is a subtle limp and slowness to the pace, but not a regular one of a person avoiding an injury or a sprain. So, a woman suffering some sort of ache or impediment. A slow smile touches his mouth as he calls out lightly, “Mrs. Hudson…. I thought you were not our housekeeper?”

“Oh!” calls out an elderly, faintly surprised voice from the kitchen, very much a female, very much Mrs. Hudson. “John, you gave me a start! I thought you were still asleep.” There’s the soft clatter of a pan before his landlady appears, wiping her hands upon an apron. “You’re quite right,” she confirms, “I am most definitely not your housekeeper, which is why I haven’t picked up a single thing or so much as washed a dish. But Sherlock asked me if I would be kind enough to pop in and keep an eye on you. Said you had a hard night and, oh dear, you do look quite a bit worse for wear. Had too much of a tipple, did you?”

John starts to shake his head and then thinks better of it, sliding on the couch till his socked feet are resting on the floor, his hands rubbing over his face and through his hair. “More like the subject of one of Sherlock’s experiments.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Hudson commiserates. “Best make you a cuppa.”

Smiling wanly, John offers in utter earnest, “Mrs. Hudson, I have it on the best of authority that you are, in fact, a saint.” His gaze falls upon an indistinct shadow within the air, his gaze sharpening till it comes into Sight. Mrs. Hudson's Guardian Angel watches with great affection as her ward makes her way back into the kitchen, lips curled into an almost secretive smile, wings flapping with casual grace. His gaze shifts when hers turns toward him, nose lifting up as he sniffs the air curiously. The flat smells deliciously of something freshly baked.

“Oh, pish posh,” she retorts with a charmed laugh, making her way back into the kitchen before calling out again, “How about a scone? I just made some fresh.”

John’s groan is rich and appreciative as he leans back and rests his head against the cushion of the couch behind him, slowly piecing back together what exactly happened last night. His eyes flicker open once more, head turning to where the blackboard has been moved over. Rising up, John shuffles toward the symbols, remembering writing them even if he doesn’t remember now what they looked like while he was doing so. Sherlock’s handwriting is here and there on the board, circles drawn around symbols, each one with its proper corresponding number written above, notes and question marks scattered about.
He’s not angry. He knows that Sherlock didn’t realize what effect the spell would have on him. Heck, John didn’t realize what effect the spell would have on him. His brow creases slightly in sudden consternation at the fact that once again Sherlock has buggered off somewhere without him. The day after a homicidal ghost almost killed him.

“Did Sherlock say where he was going?”

“Fraid not, dear. Nothing terribly specific. Something about needing to see an abbot? Such an old-fashioned term. I didn’t even realize he was Catholic…”

John’s lips quirk in amusement at the very idea, his head turning in surprise as he hears the front door bell ring.

“Oh dear,” intones his landlady from the kitchen, teacups rattling as she calls out, “John, would you be a dear and get that? My hands are a bit full at the moment and my hip is bothering me something frightful today.”

“Not at all,” he rumbles, tugging at his rumpled appearance as best he can while he makes his way down the stairs. By the time he arrives the person at the door seems to have become most impatient, practically leaning on the doorbell to keep it buzzing and buzzing insistently.

Opening the door, the first thing that John does is flinch away from the bright sunshine piercing his eyeballs. The second thing John does is flinch again and stumble backwards, almost falling on his arse as the person at the door thrusts a large cardboard box at him and yells, “What the bloody hell is THIS, John Watson?!?”

Stepping back into the shadow of the foyer, a sigh of relief is released as at least the first of his problems is solved. The second, unfortunately, is going to be much harder to get rid of. “Harriet,” he begins, before a vicious scowl and the threat of more verbal, and possibly physical, abuse has him correcting himself. “Harry… won’t you please come in? And could you keep it down to a dull roar? I do have neighbors you know.” The door slams and Harriet stomps up the stairs and into John and Sherlock’s apartment without a glance backwards. Following in her wake, the shadow behind her coalesces into Harriet’s angel, rising up the stair with silent grace, floating above the steps. Taking a deep breath, John prepares himself for battle mentally as he climbs the stairs after her.

God bless Mrs. Hudson. As he enters the room, the kindly woman is greeting Harriet effusively and offering her tea and fresh baked scones. Harry would have to be a true witch to not rein herself in and control her temper in the face of such motherly kindness and generosity. Indeed, John can’t keep the sardonic smirk off his lips as his landlady utterly derails his ‘sister’, Harry’s mouth twisting and writhing as she keeps wanting to say something crass, rude, and inappropriate but just… can’t.

“Well! That’s me off then!” Mrs. Hudson announces in a chipper tone. “I’m sure you two have plenty to catch up on. Shame on you, John Watson, for not telling me you have a sister and inviting her over sooner. Family is the only thing we have in this world. Never take it for granted, dear.” There’s a flare of satisfaction and vindication in Harriet’s eyes at those words. Not a good sign.

John really isn’t looking forward to facing Harriet on his own, but his puppy dog eyes and haggard expression don’t seem to be finding any ground with Mrs. Hudson, who merely pats his arm in a reassuring way and murmurs softly, “There, there, dear, you were in the army and all. Can’t be as bad as all that. Stiff upper lip.” And with a cheery wave of her fingers at Harriet, she slowly and carefully makes her way down the stairs with John waiting at the top, making sure she gets all the way back into her flat. He nearly jolts as he senses her Guardian’s touch upon his shoulder as she
passes, forcing himself to hold steady and without reaction. He waits until the pair have
disappeared into 221a before he turns around and shuts the door to 221b.

Entering into the living room, John’s gaze casts about, landing briefly on his ‘sister’s’ Guardian,
her wings flexing with mild agitation behind Harry, her eyes locked almost imploringly upon John.
As a result, his gaze shifts to the human and carefully he pinches closed his Sight, banishing the
angel to a mere shadow amongst many. He half expects Harry to burst into a tirade the minute she
has the opportunity, and is grateful beyond words that when she opens her mouth to chew him out
she does so in a far more reasonable volume, even if the anger remains unabated.

“John Hamish Watson, It’s been two months. Two months! I did as you asked. I waited patiently. I
gave you time. And then, after two months without a word you send me that,” she snaps, pointing
at the box that John put down by the couch. “What the fuck is that supposed to be?!”

Chagrined, knowing that he wasn’t planning to call her at all, hoping against hope that she would
forget all about him, John takes a step toward the offending item in question. According to
Watson’s memories, Harriet never was one for remembering dates or plans or much of anything,
really. Always invested in her own drama, the booze taking care of the rest. It wasn’t a terribly
unreasonable assumption to think that she would forget her desire for reconciliation and move on
with her dysfunctional life. Glancing down at the box, John pries one flap open and peers in before
looking back at her bemusedly. “What? It’s just stuff?”

“Yes John, it’s stuff. Specifically your stuff. Your trophies, your awards, best Rugby player,
Academic Achievement Certificate for science, AAC for English, not to mention pictures that dad
took of you at every game you played. Why the hell are you giving this stuff back to me?”

“It’s not all my stuff,” he counters, remembering the photo albums and other memorabilia tucked in
there from family holidays and get-togethers. He should have just thrown it away. He should have
realized how she would react when she got it. Or at least that it would have reminded her of his
presence in London. But he couldn’t bring himself to do that. “I gave it to you because I thought
you might want it. Because it’s family stuff and I…” I thought that someone ought to have John
Watson’s belongings at least, since you can’t have his remains or even a grave to visit and
remember him by. But it’s not like John can say that exactly, so instead he fumbles, “And I… I
don’t want it. Not any more.” Because it isn’t who he is, it’s whom he’s taken over. None of these
things, Watson’s successes, trophies, honors, none of them belong to John. It isn’t right for him to
keep them. He doesn’t want to keep them.

“Right. So you give all that sentimental crap to me. What the fuck? Just felt like reminding me
what a golden boy you were, what a fuck up I was growing up? Are you just trying to throw all my
failures in my face??”

“What? No! No, that isn’t the point at all!”

“Well, then what is the point?”

Dropping down to the couch, John pinches the bridge of his nose and murmurs softly, “Look,
Harriet… Harry. Could we just… not do this right now? My head feels like it’s going to explode.”

The tone in Harry’s voice changes as she laughs, “Ohhhhh, have the mighty fallen then?” Her hand
ruffles through John’s hair, almost affectionately until she twists it sharply between her fingers.
“Why didn’t you say so? Not like I haven’t needed the hair of the dog that bit me before…”

“No, Harry, ow! Quit it!” he protests, hands lifting to push her off. “No it’s not like that…”
“That’s what they all say. Better be careful, Johnny boy. Looks like your halo is slipping…”

Heading off into the kitchen, Harriet calls out, “Where do you keep your booze?!!”

“Harry, you are not drinking in my flat at,” his eyes open to peer at the clock on the mantle before finishing, “…10:30 in the morning!”

“No for me, you twat. It’s for you.” Her head pops out of the kitchen, her smile not exactly kindly as she taunts, “Come on, even you can admit you went on a bit of a bender and now you’ve got the hangover to show for it. Damn! I wish I had been there to see it. Would have been nice, seeing you get sloshed, getting a few digs in for a change.”

John starts to retort that he did not, in fact, go on some sort of drinking binge, but Watson’s sister has already disappeared into the kitchen, digging around the cupboards and fridge, pulling out all manner of odd ingredients before she lets out a little shriek.

“Jesus, are those fingers??!!”

Holding his head, John is starting rather to wish that he was drunk. That would make this more bearable. “Those are Sherlock’s fingers,” he starts, before correcting, “Not literally Sherlock’s fingers just, well, he’s a consulting detective and a bit of a… he’s an enthusiastic forensic scientist.”

There’s a long pause before Harriet draws out dryly and disbelievingly, “Riiiiight. And who’s Sherlock?”

Coughing lightly, John rubs his hands through his hair and leans back against the cushion behind him. Explaining Sherlock to Harriet is going to be complicated, so he simplifies it by answering, “My flatmate. So don’t mess with his stuff, or he’ll blame me. In fact, probably best if you don’t poke around in the fridge anymore.” Or the microwave. Or the cupboards. Really, it would be best if Harry got out of the kitchen entirely. Or even better, out of the flat entirely.

"You've got a weird flatmate." Emerging from the kitchen, Harry crosses over to the couch and hands John a glass, ordering, “Don’t ask, don’t sniff, just drink.”

“I’m not hung over,” he protests, but for some reason he lifts the glass up anyways, perhaps as a peace offering.

The stuff is vile. Beyond vile. Gagging violently, John nearly vomits up what he managed to swallow but Harry urges the glass up to his mouth again, chiding, “Uh-uh-uh, finish it all. Trust me, it will cure what ails you.”

John has no idea what possesses him to finish the contents of the glass. Possibly the faint knowledge that if he doesn’t Harry will raise such a stink that he’ll wish he truly had a hangover, just to justify finally drinking the stuff. It’s nasty as hell.

“There. Feel better?”

“Except for the part where I want to puke, oh, sure, all better.”

“Give it a few minutes,” offers Watson’s sister airily as she starts to wander about the flat, studying the environs. But something is off. John’s eyes narrow as he asks abruptly, a niggling sensation blooming within him. “Harry… why are you really here?”

“To return to you the box of crap that you tried to foist back onto me after asking me to hold it for you while you were away in Afghanistan, that’s what.” But her gaze doesn’t meet his, fingers
brushing over Sherlock’s possessions curiously, eyes softer now as she clearly searches for something of John in this new flat of his.

Pursing his lips, John seats himself down and studies Harriet quietly before shaking his head. “No, that’s not it. If you actually thought I gave that to you as some kind of petty commentary on our childhood, you would have chucked it in a bin, not at my head. So why are you really here?”

She doesn’t reply to his question at all, but leaves it hanging in the air between them. “Nothing here is yours, is it? How can you live in a place and have nothing of yourself in it? This is all his, but where are you?” Though Watson declares it impossible, John would swear that her tone is caring, concerned. Her blue eyes, identical to John Watson’s, stare at him in an unnerving way, as if she could see straight into the heart of him. Into the lie of him. John resolutely holds his ground, not replying to her questions either. It is a battle of wills between them, neither willing to give any emotional ground. But then the façade slips back into place, her voice blithely sarcastic as she counters, “What, a sister can’t come and visit her brother from time to time?”

“Harry. We haven’t ‘visited’ in over ten years. Not so much as a card at Christmas.”

“Fine.” Whirling about, Harry crosses her arms over her chest in a gesture that is both defensive and determined. “I want to start seeing you more often. I want us to be family again.”

John can’t help but narrow his eyes in suspicion this time as he asks again, “Why?”

“For God’s sake, John, cause you’re the only family I got and you almost got yourself killed in Afghanistan! So excuse me if that made me re-think some of my priorities!”

Doesn’t really help that her brother did get himself killed in Afghanistan, but again, he can’t say that. So instead, John retorts, “Have you stopped drinking?”

“God, John. Stop being such a fucking judgmental saint! I’m an adult! I can do whatever the hell I want!”

“Right. And I’m an adult too, which means that I can choose not to be a codependent or a witness to your continual self-destruction.” The bitter words rise to his lips easily, unbidden, Watson’s anger, issues, and arguments all within unexpectedly easy reach. “You nearly destroyed our family. You nearly killed mum, driving her blood pressure through the roof. You drove me away, you drove Clara away, did you ever think that maybe there was a reason why?”

“But before he can open his mouth to react or retort, Harry is huffing out a breath and reining in her temper. “Look, I didn’t come here to fight…”

“You could have fooled me.”

“Damnit, John, I’m making an effort here! Cut me some bloody slack!”

He feels terrible, sick to his stomach. It would be easy to blame that on the vile concoction she made for him, but the truth is, it’s Harriet. She triggers something within his memories, something
that reacts to her without his bidding or permission. And if that wasn’t unnerving enough, he’s also just a tiny bit afraid of her. Harriet Watson who, for all her years of estrangement and distance, is still John Watson’s sister. Harriet Watson, the one person in all the world who might be able to realize that John Watson is someone else entirely now.

“Look, Harriet. I’m not trying to be cruel here. But let’s be honest. Ever since you started drinking, well, we haven’t got along. I’m sure you’ve changed,” though on the surface she seems the same snappish, alcoholic, and argumentative bossy older sister that Watson remembers. “God knows, I’ve changed,” and that’s an understatement if there ever was one, “but we’ve always been very different from one another. The only thing that connects us is history.” He lets out a huff and finishes, “Let’s face it, the last time we managed to have a civil conversation that didn’t devolve into one or both of us yelling was when I was ten.”

Her expression is hurt and her mouth opens up to argue the point, but John’s hand stills the words on her lips.

“But I’ll ‘cut you some slack’ as you so quaintly put it. One night. We’ll go out, do something, I dunno, fun? And see if we can’t break the family tradition of being horrible to one another. I’m not making any promises,” and he fully expects her to be a huge disappointment, “but if it’s this important to you, we can give it a try.” At the smug look of victory in her eyes, John adds firmly, “No alcohol. For one night, you need to abstain. Those are my terms. Agreed?”

“God, you are such a prat,” she grouses, but there’s a small smile on her lips, and a mischievous gleam in her eyes as she concedes, “Agreed.”

Leaning over, Harriet manages to utterly surprise John by placing a gentle hand on his shoulder and a light kiss on his cheek before murmuring, “I’ll find my own way out. Rest up, little brother. You’re going to need all your strength for later.”

He takes her advice and rests, listening as the door opens and closes, waiting till her footsteps on the stairs fade away before sighing, “That’s what I’m afraid of…”

The peace and quiet lasts only for a few more seconds. Squeezing out from beneath a cushion of an easy chair, Tuppence looks about before letting out a breath. “Coast clear?”

John’s head bobs, his mind preoccupied as he concurs, “Coast clear.”

Bouncing up and down on the seat, Tup wheels his fists about like a boxer, spinning this way and that as if reenacting their verbal tiff physically. “Whooo-eee. She’s a right feisty one, she is! I like ‘er!”

“You would,” John snarks back dryly.

Fists drop down to his hips, the tiny Fae stomping along the arm of the chair, glaring back. “Oi! Wot’s that supposed to mean?”

John waves an apologetic hand before plopping his chin in the palm of it. “You hungry? No, wait, what am I asking. Of course you’re hungry.” Reaching over, John slides Harriet’s half-eaten, still warm scone over to Tuppence.

With a happy sigh the Fae scrambles over and makes himself a seat on the table, pulling the half-drunk cup of tea over as well, announcing happily, “Ta muchly! Don’t mind if I do!” He feasts, breaking off tiny handful after tiny handful of the buttery pastry and taking awkward sip after sip of the tea, all the while watching John curiously.
“You remind me of those old locomotive thingamajigs you ‘umans used to ‘ave.”

Distracted and puzzled, John glances over and asks, “What, you mean trains? We still have them you know.”

“Right, trains. But I mean when they used to use the black rock and fire to run and were made of iron.” He can’t help but shiver a little at the very memory, the metal monsters a thing of both awe and dread for a creature of the Faery.

“What about them?”

“When you’re like this, it’s like yer one of ‘em engines. Workin’, chuggin’, pourin’ out steam tryin’ to think so ‘ard…”

“Oi, what’s that supposed to mean?”

It’s Tup’s turn to wave an airy hand to John. “Simple. You think too much. So come on. Out with it. You want to lie back on the couch? Should I get a clipboard and glasses? Make notes and nod my ‘ead meaningfully and ask you things like, “And ‘ow does that make you feel?” and “Tell me about yer mother…”

“You watch too much day time telly,” John huffs back, resisting. It is a little embarrassing, having a Brownie for a therapist. But honestly? Who else is John going to talk to? Who else can he trust that knows him so well? He only manages to hold out for a few more minutes.

“I don’t know what to do about Harry.”

“Why do you ‘ave to do anythin’ about ‘er?”

“Because she seems determined to make up with her brother.”

“And that’s bad, why?”

“Damnit, Tup, you know why! Because I’m not her brother!”

“Ahhhh,” the tiny Fae rumbles with a thoughtful nod, stroking a non-existent beard. “Survivor’s guilt.”

The words take John by surprise and rather than retort, he holds onto the point for a moment, examining it carefully before replying, “Yes, yes I suppose so. Invader’s guilt is more accurate though. I feel uncomfortable around her, because she reminds me pointedly of the fact that I’ve taken something that doesn’t belong to me. And yes, a bit of the other as well. Both John Watson and I were destined to fall and die. For some reason, I was spared. Why?”

“Oh, codswallop. Yer British now. It’s all about the invadin’ with your kind. Best just to accept that. As for the rest, ‘oo knows? You, of all people, should know that life ain’t fair. Never ‘as been. And there ain’t always a rhyme or reason fer why things ‘appen.” But after a heartbeat, Tup points out, “She don’t need to know any of that. Why can’t you give ‘er wot she wants? What ‘arm could it do?”

“Because it’s a lie. It’s bad enough to be lying to Sherlock. But at least he didn’t know Watson. This is different. This is his sister. And I don’t want to ‘play’ the part of her brother. It’s bad enough I’ve appropriated his body, his life. I should leave his family out of it. I don’t want to put her at risk, and I’m not just talking about disappointment or the loss of her brother. Between Sherlock’s wild antics and not knowing what I am? The chances that she’ll get hurt are too great.
And it’s clear that she’s been hurt enough.”

“Right. So you’ll save ‘er from bein’ ‘urt by ‘urtin’ ‘er. Sure. That makes perfect sense! Clear as mud, you are!”

“Oh, stuff it.”

“Face it, Wingless. You’re afraid she’ll figure out ‘oo you are. Or, rather, what you ain’t.”

“Yes, that too. Though I suppose it’s stupid to worry. The most she’ll think is that John was changed by the war. She doesn’t know anything about the supernatural. But it’s still a risk. If Harriet realizes that something is off, Sherlock will realize that something is off. He already has started to. And they’re bound to meet up sooner or later if she becomes a part of John Watson’s life again. If she sees it, Sherlock will see it... and investigate.”

To that, Tup has nothing to say, so he wisely occupies his mouth with another bite of scone.

Burying his face in his hands, the ex-angel sighs and mumbles, “She hates John. So why does she suddenly care now?”

Tuppence gives a deep sigh of despairing patience and asks in turn, “‘Ow could you ‘ave been around ‘umans all this time and still not understand ‘em? Love and ‘ate, two sides of the same coin. Jest a question of which side is flipped up.” His head tips to one side as he counters, “Wot about you? Wot about John Watson? Did you ever think to look into the mind you’ve in’erited fer the answers you be needin’?”

It’s not something John likes to do, quite frankly. Slipping into Watson’s memories makes him feel like a thief, stealing into Watson’s life and taking what he wants when he wants it. The man deserved better than this. John should have known that what he asked for was wrong, that he should have insisted Eshu make him a new body, a new person. But there was the pressure of time, the need to be that blinded him. Rubbing his arms, John tilts back his head till it rests against the seatback, eyes flickering shut as he slides into Watson’s mind, the human’s memories swirling about him like a warm pool of water.

He has to dive deep to find the complicated tangle of memories and emotions that are Watson’s feelings about his sister. Like living brambles, they curl, twist, and twine about each other, the snarled branches sharp with thorns. But, incongruously, there are also tiny flowers of affection blooming there. He frowns, shifting restlessly on the couch as he forces his mind to reach into those memories and explore them, even if they are sharp and prickly to the touch. “He hates her… and he loves her. No. He hates what she’s become. He hates the drinking. On one hand, he knows that it wasn’t her fault. Their parents should have got a divorce. The marriage wasn’t working. They didn’t know the truth yet about their father and his adultery. They were just kids. But she made everything so much harder. Mum was so distressed, always bailing her out, always running damage control. Father couldn’t be bothered. John tilted back his head till it rests against the seatback, eyes flickering shut as he slides into Watson’s mind, the human’s memories swirling about him like a warm pool of water.

John draws in a shuddering breath, virtual hands bloody from the thorns of Watson’s childhood, but he needs to dig deeper. “Maybe Harriet couldn’t deal with it all without the alcohol and drugs. Or maybe she tried to hold the family together by giving them a problem to rally around. Either way, John tried to be the glue that put them back together. Neither of them was successful.” He frowns
again as he tries to tear away the barbed vines. “But he loves her. It’s why he’s so angry with her. He wants his sister back. They were so close when they were little. She was his best friend. He hates that their parents’ inability to handle their problems took her away from him. He hates that the alcoholism took her away from him. He couldn’t watch her destroy herself any more… it’s part of why he became a doctor, why he became a soldier. At least that way he could help others, he could make a difference. And he didn’t have to see. Didn’t have to be here when she finally self-destructed.”

He lets loose a rough gasp, as if he’d been holding his breath underwater, and opens his eyes once more before sensing something on his face. Fingers lift to touch his cheeks, his eyes widening in shock. “Tup…. Tup… I’m, I’m crying.” Worse, he’s feeling. The sadness, the bitterness, the deep sense of loss. Before, he had Watson’s memories, but no connection to his soul. So how is it now that he not only knows that John Watson suffered, but feels his pain?

“It’s called empathy. Or sympathy. I fergit which now. It means yer becoming ‘uman, Wingless.” Tup’s head cocks to one side as he asks warily, “Did you ‘ear jest now, wot you was sayin’?”

Wiping away the tears and pushing away the unwanted feelings, John counters, “What do you mean?”

Tup’s expression is uncharacteristically somber as he quotes, “John Watson is angry. ‘E wants, ‘ates, loves. All in wot you call the present tense. Strange, no? Seein’ ‘ow John Watson is dead an all and very much not in the present.”

Falling back against the cushions, John stares at Tuppence and breathes one word, part curse and part prayer.

“Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice, beta’ing, and Brit picking. :D

Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn’t for her encouragement, I wouldn’t be writing at all.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherlock was up for several more hours after he laid John upon the couch. In order to study the cipher, of course. He took pictures of the board, made prints, but most of his thought process took place upon the blackboard and within the confines of his own mind, to be shared with no one but himself. And if, from time to time, he paused to check on John, well, he was just conveniently there, wasn’t he? And it was unusual for him to sleep so soundly with Sherlock prowling about, speaking aloud from time to time, even playing the violin for a little while despite the lateness of the hour. It was the pounding on the wall from what Mrs. Hudson said was the ‘married’ ones that stopped him from playing further. All that pounding would wake John, after all.

At some point he must have dozed off himself in John’s chair, which he moved till it was facing the board with John stretched out on the couch to his left. He woke disoriented for a moment, glancing at his watch and then ejecting himself from the comfortable easy chair sharply. 9 am! He stared at the board a moment longer, vexed that he had come so far only to be stymied again before his gaze flickered over to John.

Right. Time to up their game a little. Now that he knew what they were dealing with, the last thing he wanted was to be taken unawares again. His lips purse into an unhappy line, however, when he ponders what steps he will have to take to ensure his and John’s protection with a ghost as powerful as the one they are dealing with. They were lucky this last time, if John was telling him the truth. It’s unlikely they will be so lucky in their next encounter.

A quick look in a mirror tells him that he needs to shower and change his clothes if he is to endeavor to get into anyone’s good graces today. So vexing, all these rules and patterns of conduct that people insist upon. Can’t they realize he’s brilliant enough that they should concede to his way and put aside their petty needs and proprietary requirements? A quick shower, fingers flicking over suits and shirts with casual aplomb, Sherlock dresses with a blithe negligence that still leaves him looking stylish and dapper. A holdover from his youth and the demands of his family. With a huff he emerges from his room, pulling on his coat and scarf before pausing next to John.

He wants him with him. That is his instantaneous wish, which causes Sherlock’s brow to crease. Why? He never wanted anyone before, never even considered bringing someone with him before. How is it that John Watson has become as desirable to him as chalk and his magnifying glass? His lips purse, a hand reaching down to shake his flatmate’s shoulder before it stops, fingers curling into a fist before he draws it away.

If John is still asleep at this hour, then he needs the sleep. It’s a decided effort for Sherlock to turn and head out the door solo. On his way down the stairs, however, he pauses once more to knock on Mrs. Hudson’s door, noting that he’s popping out but that John has had a rough night and perhaps she would be so kind as to check on him in an hour or so? There. That will ensure that she is upstairs within a few minutes to sit with John till he wakes up. His lips quirk as she retorts to him on his way out the door that she is not their nursemaid either. No, no, naturally not. She’s far more than either a housekeeper or a nursemaid.

Striding down the street, Sherlock flags down a cab and slides into the back of it with ease. Pulling out his mobile, he gets the address within seconds, giving the directions of Great Titchfield and Margaret St. before realizing that he could have just as easily walked there. Ah well, no matter. Settling back in his seat, Sherlock gives up his thoughts and concentration to the problem at hand.
He was told, in no uncertain terms, that if he ever stepped into a Buddhist temple again, he would be struck down. But struck down how? Lightning seems the obvious choice, when it comes to the whims of gods. His head tilts to one side, pale eyes flickering upward toward the unusually blue and cheerfully sunny sky above. For once, London’s weather would be rather thwarting to such a goal, but he dare not assume that a god would care about such trivialities as cause and effect or making a scene, as it were.

He’s still lost in his thoughts when the taxi reaches a red light at Marylebone Road, only peripherally aware of the large black Mercedes Benz with tinted windows that pulls up alongside. It’s when the passenger door opens and a familiar figure steps out that Sherlock’s hand automatically reaches for his own door, only to find it locked.

“Driver, let me out!”

“Sorry sir, can’t do that,” offers the cabbie in a voice that is wholly unapologetic, a faint smile visible as he glances back at Sherlock through the rear view mirror. The rear door across from him opens up and Mycroft slips inside, tutting mildly. “Now, now, Sherlock, unwilling to share a cab? Seems rather petty of you, don’t you think?”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’ll walk the rest of the way. Lovely day as it is. Fine weather, best not to waste it.”

With a soft sigh, Mycroft puts on his best ‘put upon’ voice, singsonging the greeting he would have preferred to receive. “Good morning, brother, how lovely to see you again. How long has it been?”

“Not long enough. What do you want, Mycroft?”

Mycroft settles back into his seat gesturing to the driver to circle the block for a while with a little flick of his finger before he folds his hands across his lap. “Very well, I’ll cut to the chase then. I hope that Dr. Watson is still alive and well despite your ‘experiment’ on him last night? What precisely happened? I only had partial visual and no sound, thanks to your most recent bug raid.” Amazing how utterly unrepentant he sounds at his own confession.

What happened. Yes, Sherlock spent half his time mulling over the cipher and the other half over what happened to John, what went wrong with the spell. The idea that he made some kind of mistake was quickly dismissed. He had performed the spell dozens upon dozens of times before with no ill effects. But he had to confess that he didn’t take into consideration John’s abilities as a Sensitive. A data point for the next time – re-craft the incantation such that only the magic can see the memories and then use the individual as a conduit from which the magic can articulate what was seen and experienced. A delicate process, to be sure, but Sherlock is always up for a challenge. That, however, is not the point at the moment. Getting free of Mycroft is his primary goal right now. Scowling, Sherlock chooses not to answer the question, instead sniping back, “What, spying on me again?”

“I prefer to think of it as ‘keeping tabs’ on you. Since you go to such lengths to avoid my company and never seem to realize that I only have your best interests at heart.”

“Which just conveniently happen to be the same as your best interests…”

“Naturally.”

“And where exactly does John fit into all of this?”
Mycroft smiles, his eyes gleaming with interest. “Ahhh, the mysterious Dr. Watson. He really is rather a conundrum, isn’t he? Seemingly so plain and simple, and yet you and I both feel he is quite a bit something more, don’t we?”

Sherlock stiffens, reminded of his testing of John, of his protests and Sherlock’s own lingering doubts. But he finds himself defending John, or perhaps protecting him. After all, Mycroft still has a passion for ‘collecting’ the unusual and the supernatural. “He’s a powerful Sensitive. Nothing more.”

“Oh, I’ll give him that, certainly…” Mycroft’s tone is introspective, his lips forming a dubious line.

Sherlock’s lips curl into a sneer, his tone disparaging as he senses a potential chink in his brother’s armor. “What’s the matter, Mycroft? Feeling a bit jealous, are we? I dare say, John is probably as powerful as you are, perhaps even more so. And now that I have a Sensitive of my own, it’s not like I need you at all now, do I?”

“Jealous? Certainly not.” But Sherlock cannot miss the faint air of insecurity that touches Mycroft’s face as he thrusts out his chin and works his jaw in irritation. “It’s doubtful that John is a more powerful Sensitive than myself. And even if he is, he doesn’t have nearly the connections or networks that I have access to.” He pauses for a moment, studying his brother pityingly as he murmurs, “It’s such a tragedy. We could do such great work together, you and I. It’s what Mummy always had hoped for, you know. Holmes & Holmes.”

“Piss off.”

With a resigned sigh, Mycroft deftly shifts gears once again, turning the conversation back toward Sherlock’s mistake. “Still, it is curious. Tell me, what spell in particular had such a drastic effect on him such that you had to carry him like a swooning maiden?”

“Mycroft, don’t you have anything better to do with your time? Like start a war?”

“You’ll forgive me if I harbor a certain degree of concern for his well-being as well as your own, and suffer from a certain lack of, shall we say, trust?”

“What, in John?”

“No, in you, Sherlock, and your inability at times to extend the most basic skill of common sense. For example, the fact that you didn’t take into consideration John’s abilities as a Sensitive, which he ended up paying the price for. Or, right now. You’re heading to the Fo Guang Shan Temple, I presume? Bit risky, don’t you think?” Mycroft examines his perfect manicure minutely, as if determined to find some flaw with it, content in the fact that he does not. “If you’d only been able to rein in your sense of superiority for a change, or consider the possibility of making amends.” His eyes lift to capture Sherlock’s, an insincere smile curling his lips. “I think you’ll find an apology can go a long way.”

“Are you speaking of John or Erlang Shen?”

“Both, actually. But since I know you’re too proud, I’ll arrange for an appropriate offering to be made to the latter, to ease his displeasure, and a generous donation to the temple. That should cover whatever you need from them. Luckily for you, Master Tien Da is a good friend of mine. I’ll make you an appointment.” He pulls out his phone, letting it rest in his palm. “It’s not too late to offer John an apology, however, once he wakes up.” And then, after an ominous pause he adds, “If he wakes up.”
The very idea that John would not wake up, that the backlash of the spell might have been powerful enough to actively damage his brain, had not occurred to Sherlock before now. A faint shiver of dismay runs up his spine. No, Mycroft is just trying to rattle him, get under his skin. John was aware after the spell dispersed. Exhausted, yes, but coherent. Wasn’t he? It is with no small sense of consternation that Sherlock recalls that John didn’t actually say anything to him before passing out on the couch. His voice comes out sharply in reaction.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but it was a memory spell. And the only reason it went awry was because John’s Sensitivity is so powerful. A technicality, nothing more.”

Mycroft cannot help but laugh soundlessly, his smile sardonic as he ripostes. “How ironic, that you would use the same spell on John that got you into trouble with Erlang Shen in the first place. And, again, when the case involves the Chinese.” His head shakes from side to side, as he laments, “Really, Sherlock, to make the same mistake twice? You best hope Erlang does not learn of you using Mnemosyne again instead of him.”

Sherlock waves a dismissive hand. “That’s complete bollocks. Erlang Shen may bear the third truth-seeing eye, but that’s beside the point! I was interested in recovering memories. Opening John’s third eye was merely allowing her a point of access and a tool to use, just as it was in the previous case…”

“Which, when offense was taken, you then felt the need to point out, in his own temple, shaming him publicly while working on what was already a very delicate case requiring at least a modicum of diplomacy. Really, Sherlock.” Flipping open his phone, Mycroft presses a number and lifts to his ear.

He can’t tell which is worse; his brother’s superior tone, as if they were children again and Mycroft was admonishing him for breaking a Ming vase in a gravity experiment, or the fact that he is going to once again interfere, as if Sherlock were incapable of solving his own problems. Rolling his eyes in irritation, Sherlock snaps, “Mycroft. I do not need favors from you to speak to the Daoshi of the temple.”

The narrowing of his eyes, the small, smug smile of satisfaction that touches Mycroft’s lips is nearly enough to set Sherlock’s blood to boiling.

“Of course you do. And as your brother, I’m happy to do so.” He offers a condescending smile, emphasizing once again his position as the elder sibling. “You really need to work on saying ‘Thank you’ in addition to ‘I’m sorry’. Just two little words, Sherlock, but they really do go a long way when it comes to ingratiating oneself into the good graces of others.” Mycroft lightly raps upon the glass with one knuckle, the taxi pulling over as the door adjacent to Sherlock unlatches with a soft snick.

Sherlock barely waits for the cab to stop moving before he opens said door and leaps out onto the pavement.

With his hand over the phone, Mycroft leans over the seat and requests, “Please don’t be a child and slam the…”

Sherlock slams the door of the cab and stalks off down the street.

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The taxi ended up dropping him off further away than where he started from, but Sherlock is grateful for the exercise and the time. He hates it when Mycroft can get past his defenses, which
seems to be just about always. The walk helps him regain his perspective and find his center once more.

Standing before 84 Margaret St, Sherlock studies the building with a faint air of displeasure. It’s an awkward blend of Victorian and Edwardian architecture with ecclesiastical details thanks to the fact that it used to be a Protestant institute wherein clergymen were trained. How ironic that it now houses the Fo Guang Shan Temple. From the outside, it couldn’t look any less like a home for a Chinese Buddhist center of faith.

Sherlock walks up the front steps, hesitating only briefly before he passes beneath the sign declaring the temple and through the front doors, shoulders braced for a blow that never strikes. Teeth gritted in irritation at Mycroft’s infernal tampering, Sherlock can only find comfort in the fact that he never asked for his brother’s assistance, therefore the good deed was of his own choice, for his own reasons, and means nothing to Sherlock. There is, after all, no debt to be repaid for a favor unasked. He makes his way through the building with assurance in every step, informing those who think to stop him that he has an appointment with the Daoshi. Ironically, for once, he actually does. He tries not to dwell on the fact that that too is thanks to Mycroft. Insufferable busybody!

He is led to the Guan Yin Shrine, entering in and studying the room quietly as the door is silently shut behind him. It’s an odd blend of Eastern and Western influences, but the overall feeling is one of warmth and comfort. The European wood paneled walls gracefully intermix with the gold statues and brass lamps, touches of red throughout. His gaze comes to rest, however, on the racks behind the altar for Guan Yin or, more precisely, the tablets neatly lined up along each row. Eyes narrowing, his hand slips into his coat pocket to pull out the smashed pieces of wood he found at Soo Lin’s flat, studying them in turn. They are not precisely the same, but similar enough…

As the Daoshi enters the shrine, Sherlock turns and studies him quietly, eyes flickering over his orange and red robes, his shaved pate, noting wryly, “I’m assuming it’s no accident that you’re meeting me here, in the shrine of the bodhisattva of compassion and mercy?”

A very faint smile touches upon the lips of the elderly Abbot, his eyes gleaming with humor as he offers in turn, his voice heavily accented, “Despite your brother’s offerings, Erlang Shen is still very displeased with you. It is very unwise to anger the greatest warrior god of heaven. As such, it did indeed seem wisest to meet here, as Guan Yin will stand in his way and temper his anger.” Turning his head toward the altar, his smile deepens with respect and reverence. “Guan Yin is willing to look past your words to the value of your deeds and forgive.” His offers the pusa a slight bow before turning back to Sherlock. Leading away from the altar, he gestures to a low table and cushions that have been prepared for them and graciously invites, “Please, take a seat. What do you wish of me that your brother has gone through all this trouble?”

Jaw clenching, Sherlock dearly wishes the Daoshi would stop referring to Mycroft in every other sentence. By the hint of mischief in the abbot’s eyes, he’s quite certain it’s entirely on purpose. Damn Mycroft and his networking charms. However, a totally different question than the one intended comes out first. “What are those?” Sherlock’s arm extends toward the altar, gesturing to the racks upon racks of tablets.

Turning his head toward the altar, the abbot replies, “They are called shen zhu pai. They are for honoring ancestors and those who have died. When a person dies, the soul leaves the body, but needs a place to reside. These tablets are built for the soul to inhabit. Some keep them in their homes upon an altar, but others prefer to come here and have their shen zhu pai placed upon the gong de qiang of the temple.” Bemusement colors his features as he asks in turn, “Surely this is not the favor that your brother paid so extravagantly for?”
Sherlock’s barely keeps himself from pointing out where Mycroft can stick his extravagant offers. “No, indeed not. I came to request of you some fu.”

The abbot blinks in surprise, clearly thinking this favor too small for the price paid. “You did not need to see me for such a request. There are many who could supply you with…”

Sherlock shakes his head, his hand slicing through the air as he corrects, “This is quite a bit more than the usual fu required. I’m fairly certain we are facing an èguī that has become a kui. It is an ancient ghost, able to shift easily from spirit form to physical form, very powerful, and so far he has murdered two people here in London, possibly three, and there’s no telling when or if he will stop.”

The light of humor has faded from Master Tien Da’s eyes, his expression quiet and grave now as he nods. “So you want fu, for protection?”

Shaking his head, Sherlock rumbles, “For myself, no. I need fu in order to fight the spirit, should we meet again. To bind it. The most powerful you can craft. I can wield the fu, but I do not have the means to make it myself.” He hesitates then, thinking for a moment. He would ask for an amulet of protection for John, but he didn’t bring anything of his to bind to it. He could request a talisman, but the fu would be more powerful if he’d taken a clip of hair or some of John’s blood to offer. Ironically, he had only thought of using those as evidence against his flatmate. It never occurred to him to use them for his protection. Once again there is a roiling in his belly, a sense of guilt and concern that is as unpleasant as it is unfamiliar.

Sensing Sherlock’s discomfort, the Abbot gives him a moment to himself, rising up and crossing over to the altar to collect the necessary materials. Returning with an ornate box, Master Tien Da takes his seat and begins to prepare the fu requested. It is done quietly, reverently, the elderly man’s hand holding the brush with steady ease, his voice warmly droning the necessary incantations.

To either side of him, sticks of incense burn, the smoke swirling in patterns that have nothing to do with the air currents in the room as he paints the binding spells in red and black ink over long strips of white rice paper marked with yellow symbols.

Sherlock finds his mind shifting from his myriad concerns to the magic being performed before him. Magic is often highly specific – only certain gods can bestow specialized power. In this case, it is necessary for a true Daoshi to perform the rituals, to bind the charms to the paper. Shortly he finds himself lost in observation, his mind quieting and clearing as if he himself were working the magic. The worry, the chaos of his thoughts, all of it drains away till there is nothing left to focus on but the magic and the work, even though his hands lie still upon his thighs, his lips closed and silent. He’s almost startled when he hears the Daoshi inquire, “Will that suffice for your needs?” Silver eyes drift down to the impressive stack of fu, his head bobbing as he comes back to himself, the noise of his mind and the world filtering back in.

Even if Sherlock were a terrible adept, he would have to be truly inept not to be able to bind the ghost with twenty pieces of fu at his disposal. He nods, lips quirking into a smile that is somehow both sardonic and grateful at the same time, and replies dryly, “If I need more than that, I’ll hang up my coat and never cast a spell again.”

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He returns to 221B Baker Street to find John awake and waiting for him anxiously, fingers drumming against the armrest of his chair. It would appear that he has had as frustrating and difficult a morning as Sherlock. John looks wrung out, like a threadbare dishcloth tossed casually aside. At some point he showered and ate, going by the dampness of his hair and the plate of crumbs and empty cup of tea on the table. Good. That should help him feel better. Despite
Mycroft’s implications, John seems utterly himself.

At first there is a rush of relief, then annoyance at his brother, but in the end a lingering sense of guilt and worry remains, swirling in his belly like a poorly developed solution. His voice remains cool and dry, ever calm and in control as he notes, “I gather you did not get enough rest.” He sniffs the air before announcing, “No, clearly not. Which woke you up first? Mrs. Hudson’s cooking or your sister’s unwelcome visit?”

John frowns, pulling at his sweater idly as he replies, “I could have done with a bit more… but how did you know my sister was here and why unwelcome?”

Sherlock narrows a look upon John, as if such a question was truly beneath his answering, but he does so anyways. “It’s a contest which wins out, the smell of Mrs. Hudson’s freshly baked scones or the lingering aroma of alcohol, and then there’s the box of course, which you tried to foist off on her and yet which is back here in our living room. And obviously she was unwelcome; you’ve gone to great pains to avoid seeing her or speaking with her since you moved in.” He unwinds the scarf from about his throat and crosses over to John, his head tilting to one side, his eyes assessing him till John begins to squirm uncomfortably beneath his stare. “Are you alright?”

John blinks and rubs his hands on his thighs, nodding as he replies, “Yes, yes of course. I’m fine. Totally fine.” He weathers Sherlock’s study for a moment longer before he rises up and adds, “Look, if you’re worried about last night, I’m fine. It was unpleasant, yes, but no harm done. I don’t blame you for what happened.”

“Of course you don’t blame me. I didn’t make a mistake, per se, you were just more Sensitive to the spell than expected.” Amazing how he can make it sound like John is the one at fault for being too Sensitive.

John snorts softly, deflecting that shifting responsibility. “Where have you been? Mrs. Hudson said something about you seeing a priest?”

“Mmmmm, yes, an abbot. More precisely a daoshi. I needed to get a few things, in case we encounter the murderous ghost again.”

John’s head bobs up and down, before he turns to the blackboard, gesturing toward it. “It’s funny, I know I wrote all this out, but it’s all Greek to me.”

“Hangzhou.”

“Whatever. So what’s all this mean, then? Did you figure out what the message is? Did you manage to translate the cipher? I see you identified all the numbers.”

“Mmmmm, yes and no.” Lifting his hands up to his lips, Sherlock steeples his fingers as he studies the board and his notes upon it. “Even without translating it, I can determine what the message is for. Due to its location by the tracks, the length of it, it is most likely a message requesting information. As I gathered by the damage done to both Van Coon’s and Lukis’ flats, whatever was stolen was not found there. Whatever it is, they’re still looking for it.” One hand peels away from the other, gesturing at the symbols. “They’re hoping that someone in the community knows something about it. Perhaps they are offering a reward for its return… or a warning. I’m sure after the deaths of Van Coon and Lukis, both of which were prominently noted in the papers and online, those in the smuggling community can’t help but be aware of the danger to anyone who might be thinking of cheating them.”

“But we don’t really know what it says at all. For all we know, it could say, ‘Mind the Gap.’”
Sherlock’s pale gaze flickers sideways toward John disparagingly and then back to the board again. “I was able to identify all of the numbers, but we’re missing the key to the cipher.”

“The key?”

“Yes. Different ciphers have different keys. The system or object used to decode them. Without the key there isn’t much hope of deducing the message, but I’m fairly certain that I’m on to something.”

“Which is?”

“All of the numbers are in pairs. This strongly suggests that the cipher has a book key. The first number is the page, the second the word on the page.”

“A book key. But that means that we need to know what the book is. Sherlock.” Glancing about at the impressive collection of books that are already packed into their flat, he points out dryly, “There are an awful lot of books in the world. How do you propose we narrow it down? And what if you’re wrong? What if the key isn’t a book?” At the dark look that Sherlock flashes him, John shakes his head and points out, “You’re not always right. You make mistakes.”

Sherlock opens his mouth to argue that point, but considering the events of the previous evening he closes it again and simply glares at John a moment longer before turning his gaze back to the blackboard. Grumbling under his breath, Sherlock flexes his fingers in irritation. “We need Soo Lin Yao to solve this cipher. She is the key in this, somehow.”

“But we don’t know where she is. We don’t even know if she’s alive.”

“No, no we don’t. We need to go back to the beginning to find her. There was nothing of her in her apartment, no personal effects, no indication that she even lived there. Perhaps she left something of use behind at her work. If her colleague was correct, and her work was indeed her life, then there should be a clue there as to why she left and where she went.”

“Andy.”

The awkward young man glances up from his desk, eyes widening as he takes in Sherlock’s tall approaching frame. Pushing his chair back, feet scraping against the floor, he asks in a rush, “Did you find her? Did you find Soo Lin?”

Sherlock’s lips twist ever so slightly as he shakes his head. “We went round her flat, but she wasn’t there. No sign of her at all. And obviously you haven’t heard from her either.”

“No.” The young man looks defeated, his gaze shifting between John and Sherlock before dropping to the floor. “I’m supposed to go look at two vases up for auction today, see if they’re something the museum should consider purchasing. But that’s Soo Lin’s area of expertise. She should be the one going, not me.”

Shaking his head at the rank sentimentalism, Sherlock strives to get Andy back on track. “Look, we need more information, anything you might be able to remember. Can you think of anyone she might have gone to stay with? Anyone she might have spoken with? Did Soo Lin leave anything behind? Any personal effects, papers and the like?”

Dark eyes flicker upward, unhappiness spreading over the young man’s features. “I don’t know. I mean, I’ve asked everyone I could think of. Friends, colleagues, I even called around to some of
the other museums and private collectors that are currently hiring, on the off chance she took on a position somewhere else but didn’t want us to know that was why she was leaving. No one has heard from her. She didn’t tell anyone where she was going or why.” His brown eyes sidle over to the bare desk a few yards away, the shape of them softening with worry and unrequited affection. “There wasn’t anything in her desk that wasn’t related to work. I know I shouldn’t have, but I looked through it before Mrs. Leighton collected everything and redistributed her work amongst the remaining staff. No notes, letters, messages. Nothing.”

Gritting his teeth, Sherlock softly curses himself for not following up on that potential lead sooner. What Andy might have dismissed as inconsequential or irrelevant might have pinpointed her exact position instantaneously to Sherlock. But with the work taken and put Gods know where, there is little chance that he would be able to find anything now. Sighing softly, Sherlock rumbles, “Show us once more what she did on her final day.”

“Well, if we find her, we’ll be in touch.” He turns and without so much as a glance at Andy, wanders off toward the case, leaving John to offer the young man an awkward smile and shrug, adding, “Yes, thank you for your time,” before following after his flatmate.

He doesn’t even have to ask, Sherlock’s voice beckoning to him as he draws near.

“John, look.”

John stares at the display case, feeling the pressure of Sherlock’s intellect bearing down on him, demanding that John see what he does. Which, of course, he doesn’t.

“She did her demonstration there,” Andy repeats, pointing to an open space in the center of the room. “She would have performed the tea ceremony. It was something she did right before closing. Then, afterward she would have gathered all of her materials together and taken them down to the storage area…”

But Sherlock has already stopped listening to the young man’s words, his eyes affixed upon a display case to his left. “Mmmm, yes, thank you. Well, if we find her, we’ll be in touch.” He turns and without so much as a glance at Andy, wanders off toward the case, leaving John to offer the young man an awkward smile and shrug, adding, “Yes, thank you for your time,” before following after his flatmate.

He hates this. Coming up short. How is it that an ex-angel can come up short with a human? There’s probably only one man in ten million that could pull that off, and just his luck, he’s standing next to one of them. Releasing a rough breath, John turns his head to stare at Sherlock. “I see pots. Clay pots. Five of them. And cups. Very simple, no designs or details. So what? What is it that I’m supposed to see?”

“You’re right John, they are quite plain. Even their finish, for the most part, is dry and dull.” His eyes lift to John’s, a wicked smile of smug delight curling his lips as he points out, “The last time we were here, there was only one pot shining. Now there are two.”
daoshi = a priest, also sometimes called an abbot
pusa = bodhisattva
shen zhu pai = wooden tablets made to house the souls of ones ancestors and recently deceased
gong de qiang = "karma wall", a place in a temple where one can pay to place shen zhu pai
fu = a type of protection spell made from paper
èguǐ = "hungry ghost", a ghost whose death was violent or unhappy, or that suffered from neglect or desertion
kui = the demon part of the soul (the opposite being shen, the spirit part of the yin-yang balance)

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Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
Carefully she swirls the tea within the pot, circling it around and around, her every move and gesture ceremonial. Reverent. Pour the tea into the cups. Pour each cup over the pot. Refill the pot with more tea. Swirl the tea about. Pour the tea into the cups. An elegant, miniature tai chi session just for her hands. As she swirls the tea in the pot once more, Soo Lin idly turns to the left. A tall pale man with dark hair is somehow standing silently next to her, watching the ceremony.

She lets out a gasp, the teapot falling from her hands. More precisely, it falls through her hands. Fortunately it would seem that the mysterious man is too busy catching the delicate antiquity to notice just how it came to be hurtling down to the floor. He glances up at her, his eerie silver gaze chastising. His voice is deep, a rich timber sardonically tinted. “Hundreds of years old… have a care.” Rising up slowly, he carefully hands the pot back to Soo Lin, who takes it with delicate, small hands, stroking over the surface in apology before gently placing it back down on the table before her.

She’s more startled and confused than frightened. There are two men, she realizes, the smaller of the pair hidden behind the taller one only just now stepping into view. They aren’t with the museum and she can sense instantly that while they are both powerful in their own way, they are not affiliated with the Black Lotus. Which, of course, leads her back to being confused.

The willowy man offers her a small, thin smile and a polite, “Hello.”

Tipping her head to one side, Soo Lin peers at the blond and then back to the dark haired one asking, “Who are you? Why are you here?” Belatedly, agitation starts to well up within her. Looking around suspiciously now, Soo Lin starts to quickly put away the pots she was restoring. Clearly these men are here to see her; that cannot bode well. How did they find her, and why? It is essential for her presence here to remain a secret. If others were to discover her here it would put her work, all of her efforts, at risk. She cannot allow these men to jeopardize her duty by their presence.

“Terribly sorry, where are my manners. I’m Sherlock Holmes, this is John Watson, and we’re here to find out who’s trying to kill you and why.”

Her hands freeze, a confused frown creasing her brow as she turns to Sherlock and echoes, “Kill me?”

Impatience dances over Sherlock’s features as he huffs, “Yes, of course! Clearly you’re involved in this smuggling ring, perhaps even the one that convinced either Van Coon or Lukis to steal something he shouldn’t have. Either that or you know something that has made you a target. Why else would you be hiding here? We’ve been to your apartment, but it’s obvious you don’t live there. So it’s a front to throw people off. A place where you store smuggled antiquities perhaps before selling them off?” He steps into her space, his expression fierce and demanding. “Now, we need to know where you’ve been and what is going on. How are you involved in all of this?”

Soo Lin takes a step back, anxiously glancing about once more. How does he know these things? Who are these people that he speaks of? What does he want from her??

John reaches out a hand and places it on his partner’s arm. “Sherlock….”
“Not now, John…”

Her eyes shift to the smaller man, feeling his energy even as she meets his gaze and sees the comprehension and compassion there. A gentler, steadier power than the gangly one, and, it would, seem a gentler, steadier man as well.

“But Sherlock…”

Snorting in irritation Sherlock shrugs off his friend’s grip and snaps, “Not now, John, can’t you see this woman is either responsible for two deaths or in danger of losing her life?!”

John’s gaze catches Soo Lin’s, the two of the sharing a look, since they both know what she is and why Sherlock’s statement is ludicrous. John’s eyes roll in annoyance, clearly used to being ignored when he has something to say, but not liking it. The deceptively harmless man barks sharply, “Sherlock!!”

Turning about, vexed and aggravated by John’s constant attempts to either delay or restrain him, Sherlock growls in annoyance, “What?!”

Finally he has his companion’s full attention. John glances at Soo Lin, his expression apologetic for a moment before he flicks his eyes back. “Sherlock…” He looks uncomfortable, trying to find a way to graciously say what he needs to be said, but doesn’t know how to phrase this sort of thing delicately. She finds herself for a moment charmed by this kindly báirén who doesn’t wish to offend her.

“She’s… already dead. Soo Lin, well, she’s a ghost.”

Sherlock’s head snaps back toward Soo Lin, eyes widening with surprise for a moment before narrowing in concentration, trying to see what is beyond his capabilities. Soo Lin can feel the artificial flush of a blush rising to her cheeks, years of appearing human causing the reaction to occur automatically.

John looks vaguely annoyed and resigned. “You never listen to me. It’s bloody annoying, do you know that??” Shaking his head, John runs his fingers through his hair and offers Soo Lin another apologetic smile. “You’ll have to forgive my friend here, he can be a little… overzealous at times.”

The look that Sherlock gives John would kill a lesser man. But it seems that he catches his companion’s drift, reining back with visible effort his apparently voracious appetite to see, know, and understand everything instantaneously. “Perhaps we could sit down for a bit and just talk to you?” His gaze sidles over to the pots, his deep voice droll and wry as he jokes, “Have a spot of tea?”

Shaking her head, Soo Lin raises her hand to forestall Sherlock from pressing on. She has some questions of her own first. “How did you get in here? What about the security guards and the cameras??”

Sherlock’s lips quirk into a smug smile as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a security card. Peering at it closely, Soo Lin’s gaze flickers up to his in astonishment as she asks, “Andy… gave you his security card?”

“Gave? No, not precisely.”

“He picked his pocket,” explains John, a frown of disapproval upon his brow.

“I borrowed it,” Sherlock retorts, flipping the card over the backs of his knuckles adroitly. “I’ll place it back on his desk when we leave. He’ll assume that he left there. I’m sure he usually does. Not the sharpest tool in the drawer. As for the rest…” Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Pathetic really. All
the rare antiquities here and the security system nearly as old! We barely even needed these.” He
gestures toward black strips of fabric that are tied about both his and John’s left biceps. His tone is
one of bragging as her bemused gaze prompts him to explain, “An invisibility spell. Deceives both
the eyes of humans and the lenses of cameras…”

The shorter man, John, interrupts, pointing out, “Which really doesn’t do one any good if a certain
someone doesn’t shut up. It’s damn lucky that guard just happened to have earbuds in and that he
didn’t turn around and see whatever it was you were drawing on the floor. What were you doing
anyway? You might be invisible but I’m sure the…”

Sherlock wiggles his fingers dismissively. “Not important,” he interjects to John before continuing
his explanation, leaning forward a bit eagerly. “That last bit is tricky. Technology and magic don’t
tend to play nicely together, so what I had to do was…”

“She looks,” John interrupts again, “I’m sure Soo Lin would rather we get to the point, and we are
on something of a timeline, as I recall? Didn’t you mention that these spells have a limited
duration?” He taps the watch upon his wrist pointedly, the pair of them just standing there, glaring
at each other.

She shouldn’t find it humorous, but a tiny smile quirks her lips as the two men seem to forget all
about her in their bantering with one another. And, more importantly, they haven’t revealed either
their presence or hers to the museum staff. Soo Lin turns to look at the pots and cups, fingers
stroking them tenderly. She can continue her work.

Turning back to them, she reaches a decision. She’s not entirely certain of this Sherlock, but
something in her trusts John implicitly. He’s not a guǐ, but she feels strangely like he is a kindred
spirit nonetheless. Raising her eyes to theirs she offers, “Tell me why you are here and what you
wish to know. I will tell you what I can, but I fear it will not answer all of your questions.”

Nodding, Sherlock cuts straight to the point, after giving John one last snarky look, wasting no
words for a change. “Two men have died violent and unusual deaths – their hearts were crushed
from the inside.” Soo Lin flinches, but he carries on without hesitation. “Each of them was given a
message, a cipher code, beforehand.” Sherlock draws out the photographs from the first two crime
scenes and lays them out on the desk for Soo Lin to see. “From their movements and occupations
we’ve been able to determine that they must have been smuggling valuable antiquities out of China
to be sold on the black market. We came here two days ago to ask for your expertise. When we
learned that you had abruptly quit your position, we suspected your involvement and went to your
apartment. But the killer was there, waiting for you. Why?” Sherlock straightens up, staring down
at her from on high, as if he were both judge and jury. “Is he your accomplice or your nemesis?”

Her brow creases in bemusement, wondering at how this man thinks she would confess to being
the mastermind behind two murders and a smuggling ring. But perhaps her denial would tell him as
much as the truth. His eyes have a profound intensity to them, as if they could see through any lie
or deception. Shaking her head, Soo Lin murmurs sadly, “Neither. He is a pawn, a tool, for Hēi
Lián Huì. The Black Lotus Society.”

Blinking in confusion, John interrupts. “I’m sorry, the Black what?”

“The Black Lotus. One of the most ancient Chinese triads still in existence today.”

For John’s benefit, Sherlock adds, “A triad is an ancient crime syndicate, though the term is one we
invented after encountering them in Hong Kong, where they flocked in droves due to the
 crackdowns in mainland China. The Heaven and Earth Society, originally a political organization,
eventually devolved into criminal organizations with five different lodges – red, white, yellow,
green, and black.”

She nods in confirmation of Sherlock’s explanation while reaching for a brush and a bottle of ink. Soo Lin draws a symbol on a piece of paper – a circle surrounding a stylized flower - before pushing it toward them. “Are you familiar with this mark?” Upon the shaking of their heads, she explains, “It is the mark of the Black Lotus. Every foot soldier bears this tattoo upon their heel to ensure their loyalty and service. Through it, their movements and location can be determined. It binds their soul to service, even in the afterlife.”

Sherlock’s eyes flash with a bolt of comprehension, turning to John excitedly. “That was what the number was for! The cosmetic clinic in Bratislava. Van Coon was making arrangements to remove the tattoo. He knew they could find him through it…” His gaze snaps back to Soo Lin’s face. “But that still doesn’t answer the question of your involvement in all of this. Why all those relics are in your apartment.”

Her gaze lifts, encompassing them both as she warns, “It is a long story.” Neither of them budges. So, with a soft sigh, Soo Lin tells them her life story. “When I was a child, I lost my parents. There was no way to live, no way to survive, except to serve the Black Lotus. I accepted the mark and became a smuggler and a thief. One night, many years later, a number of us were robbing a temple. But something went wrong. We were discovered and fighting broke out. I was shot through the heart by a cursed arrow.” Her fingers lift, stroking over her breastbone absently, as if she could still remember the pain. “Instead of leaving this life for the next I was bound to the material world, doubly cursed to suffer my existence as a ghost… a ghost still bound by the mark of the Black Lotus.”

“And they found a way to still use you.”

Soo Lin’s dark liquid eyes shift to Sherlock’s pale grey regard, her head dipping in assent. “The Black Lotus knew that we would grow in power over time. At first they used us as scouts, spies, learning combinations for safes, uncovering secret passageways. They were patient, determined to keep us and to wait until we could be of even greater service to them.”

“Us?”

Soo Lin bows her head and nods, murmuring, “I was not the only one to die that night. And there have been others, like me, over the years…”

“But you escaped. How?”

Her smile is bittersweet. “My soul may have been bound, but my mind was still my own. I had many years to consider what I had done and what my life, and afterlife, had become. I decided, I would be a victim no longer. I served in deceit, feigning allegiance but all the while planning my escape. I sought out a priest at the very temple where I had died. I told him my story and my desire to make amends for my crimes. In turn, he performed a ritual that removed the mark from me, but in exchange I would have to tend to the things that were stolen by me, and others like me. Find them, restore them, and bring them to a place where they once again would be cherished and honored.”

A light of comprehension dawns within Sherlock’s regard. “So the artifacts, the antiques in your apartment…”

“Yes, they were pieces that I had bought off the black market, ones that the museum were not interested in, or able to purchase, but which I knew I had to reclaim.”
“You bought them?” John’s voice is confused as he points out, “But some of those pieces, they must have cost hundreds, thousands of euros…?”

“Yes, but what is money to a ghost?” Sherlock counters dryly. “She has no need for material things – no heat, water, food, clothes, possessions – only a place to store things, a flat for when someone insists on dropping by to visit. The appearance of a real life without the needs of one.” His head turns to Soo Lin, one brow arching. “I imagine you were able to save quite a bit of money over the what, decades? Centuries? Enough, surely, to purchase the occasional artifact.”

Soo Lin bobs her head in assent. “Exactly. As soon as I could, I fled from China and have been traveling all over the world, living life after life, each in the service of restoring that which has been lost; searching out ancient antiquities and restoring them for museums in each country that I called my home.” Her hands lift, gesturing to the space about them with a gentle and grateful smile upon her face. “And so here I am, in England, repeating the process over again.”

Her expression dims, however, as she murmurs, “But now he has found me. I had thought, perhaps, he had forgotten me after all this time. Now he is here, in England, demanding that I return with him to the Black Lotus Society.”

“Who is here? The killer?”

Her head bobs as she murmurs, “Sǐwáng.”

John’s blue gaze flickers back and forth between Soo Lin and Sherlock, blinking uncertainly. He knows what the word means, but not the context. “Sǐwáng? Is that his name?”

Soo Lin’s shakes her head. “It is not the name he was born with, but it is the name that he now claims for himself. The name the Black Lotus Society has given him.” She looks between the two men, her expression grave. “It means death.” She can’t help but reach up to wipe away a drop of moisture from beneath her lid. How strange, to be a ghost, not a creature of flesh and blood, and yet remember how to cry.

“He is now Gū Hún Yě Guǐ; a vengeful spirit who only desires to take revenge for the wrongs done him. It is what they have made him into, not what he was. Over the years, the anger, the rage, it has changed him, twisted him. All he desires now is to inflict pain, inspire fear. To take life from others. In giving him this name, it is yet another way in which they bind him to their will. His own name, his real name, has been forgotten by all but one.” Her gaze lifts from her wringing hands. “He came to my flat; he gave me a choice. Give up my work and rejoin him, help him recover that which was stolen, or he would destroy me.”

“And is that what you have done?” Sherlock asks dryly, his features drawn and calculating.

She shakes her head emphatically. “No. I refused him. I tried to convince him once again to join me instead. To sever his ties to the Triad and regain his honor and his freedom. I offered to help him.” Her eyes drop to her intertwined fingers, the digits twisted about each other almost painfully. “But it is too late. He is too tightly bound by his own rage and suffering. He can no longer see any path before him but that of service to the Black Lotus. He said that I would not betray him again. He said he would give me a day to reconsider and then he would come for me, and there would be no escape.”

John leans in. “Did he tell you what was stolen? What he was looking for?”

She can only shake her head.
Sherlock’s eyes narrow suspiciously. “When we first came and told you your life was in danger, you seemed surprised. If you are not here, hiding from the killer, then why are you here? Why didn’t you just leave? Flee the country, disappear for awhile?”

“In part? Because of the work.”

A gleam of understanding flickers within Sherlock’s gaze.

“This is all I have now. It is everything that I am. The work is important. To restore and protect. These pots need attention. The clay is dry and cracking. I could not abandon them. It is the only way that I can atone for what I did. It is the only way that I can lift the curse that binds me to this world and be released to the afterlife.”

“And the other part?” John quietly asks with interest.

Her eyes drop to the floor. “Sīwáng. Once I saw what he had become, I could not abandon him. Not again.”

John’s voice is soft, apologetic. “It sounds like you know this Sīwáng well then? When you were still in China?”

It should not be possible, but Soo Lin’s can feel her expression becoming even more tragic, her eyes filling with tears of pain and longing that is centuries old. “Oh yes,” she whispers, her damp gaze lifting to John and Sherlock. “He is my brother. That is the other reason I cannot just leave and start again somewhere else. I have to try to save him from his slavery.”

Sherlock stares with eyes like chips of ice as he asks bluntly, “Why?”

“What?” Both Soo Lin and John ask the same question at the same time, the first in astonishment, the second in outrage.

Sherlock studies them both before calmly pointing out, “As you said yourself, he is Gū Hún Yě Guǐ now. The Black Lotus Society is probably the only thing keeping his murderous rage in check, focusing it to their will, their victims. If you release him from his bonds, he will be free to wreak havoc and destruction.” His eyes pierce her, pinioning Soo Lin to the spot as he asks in an almost accusing tone, “Do you have the ability to return him to himself? To make him your brother once more?”

Soo Lin meets that gaze unflinchingly, her answer honest, but uncertain. “I do not know.”

“Then I ask you again, why?”

Drawing herself together, Soo Lin’s gaze shifts between the two men, studying Sherlock first, then lingering on John for a long time before she answers cryptically, “Sometimes you have to look hard at something to see its true value.” Her words seem to impress Sherlock little, his gaze cool and emotionless, hidden, though he does follow her eyes to peer at John in turn. In contrast, John’s expression is torn and easy to read. Emotionally he understands where Soo Lin is coming from, but logically he understands where Sherlock’s point of view.

Reaching into his pocket, Sherlock pulls out the fragments of the wooden tablet that he found in Soo Lin’s apartment. “Is this what I think it is?”

Trembling fingers reach out to accept the pieces, her head bowed, nodding. “Shen zhu pai. For my brother. I had hoped that through some miracle he might find release through some other means over the years. I kept a shrine for him, just in case, so that when his soul was freed, it would have a
place to come and rest.” Her fingers gently trace over his name and the blessings carved into the wood. “I see that he found it, but not in the way that I had hoped and prayed that he would.”

Pulling out the print out of the blackboard with the symbols written upon it, Sherlock places it on the table before Soo Lin. “We need to decipher this.”

Grateful that he has let the matter drop, even if in her heart she has not, Soo Lin turns toward the cipher. Her expression sharpens, focusing back to the here and now. Putting aside the broken shards, she leans over the photograph. With one delicate finger she slides the piece of paper closer and stares at it. Her fingers run over the surface as she explains, “These are numbers.”

“Yes, we know that already, but what do they mean?”

“It’s the smugglers code.” Her gaze lifts to flicker between them once again. “Anyone who bears the mark can read them.” She turns the paper slightly toward John and Sherlock to illustrate her point. “The numbers are in pairs, see? Each pair of numbers creates a word.”

“Right, right,” Sherlock urges her on, “it’s a book code. But what’s the book?”

Her head shakes infinitesimally, replying, “It is not so simple as that. The code, it is enchanted…”

Her words are abruptly cut off as the lights of the building clack sharply, plunging them into darkness. For a moment nothing can be seen, only breath heard, before Soo Lin whispers. “He’s here. He’s come for my answer…” Her eyes are wide, frightened as she turns to look at Sherlock and then John in turn. “I am not ready to face him. I do not have all the materials I need…”

Sherlock turns to John for confirmation, the smaller man understanding his questioning look without words. It takes him only a moment of reaching out before he too feels what Soo Lin feels. That endless, voracious, all-consuming hunger. The man’s eyes snap open and turn up to his partner, a silent nod given.

Soo Lin’s eyes widen again as Sherlock reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wad of fu. Shoving a handful of them at John he rumbles, “Stay here and protect Soo Lin. If Sǐwáng appears, throw these at him like you would throw a playing card,” and he demonstrates briefly, miming holding a card sideways between his first two fingers and then flicking his wrist outward, fingers opening to release the imaginary card. His gaze flickers to Soo Lin as he cautions, “Make sure she’s not in the path of the charm.” The smaller man is already starting to protest, but Sherlock has leapt to his feet and is dashing out of the room, heedless to the calls of his name.

“What is he doing?” Soo Lin asks in confusion and fear, staring uncertainly at John’s back.

“He’s going to try to capture your brother,” is John’s grim reply, “with these,” he notes, turning around and holding up the blessed charms in his left hand.

“But he is not like you! Powerful yes, but he cannot see. How will he know where my brother is??”

John looks worried. “Damn good question.”

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Dashing out of the doors, Sherlock doesn’t bother to tell John to close and lock them. What would be the point? It wouldn’t be a deterrent to a ghost who can just walk right through them. Reaching into his left pocket, he pulls out a small stone, soft and smooth from centuries of handling, no larger than the size of a robin’s egg. He curls his fingers around the cool object and keeps on running, waiting for the change to come.
Much to his relief, the stone begins to warm. Not because it’s absorbing his body heat, but because he is getting closer to Sìwáng. It’s a bit like that children’s game, where one person searches for an object that another has hidden, the hider calling out either ‘hot’ or ‘cold’ depending on whether the seeker gets closer or farther away from it. The closer Sherlock gets to Siwang, the hotter the stone will become. He just hopes there aren’t any other ghosts or spirits lurking about the museum tonight.

He finds himself moving farther and farther away from where John and Soo Lin are hiding. Good. Though it is likely he followed them here, it would seem that Siwang is unaware of exactly where his sister might be.

Every so often Sherlock turns down a corridor, running half a room before jerking to a halt and changing direction as the stone becomes cooler. It isn’t until he’s in the Wellcome Trust Gallery that he comes to a panting halt, the stone so hot it’s nearly burning his hand. His eyes scour the room, unsurprised to find nothing. He didn’t see the vengeful spirit back at Soo Lin’s either. But he as a solution for that.

Whipping one of the fu out of his breast pocket, Sherlock holds it out before him, repeating the spell given to him by Master Tien Da.

“Jiēlù zhēnxiàng!”

The magic shudders out from the fu, the slim piece of paper nearly vibrating before it spontaneously bursts into flame and vanishes, smoke curling up lazily into the air.

Within a second, Sherlock has another piece of fu in his hand and is turning about rapidly in a circle, coat fluttering about him, searching the dimness for what should now be a fully visible ghost.

Nothing.

He rolls the stone about in his hand, but the temperature never shifts. This has to be it! This has to be the right place! “Where are you, where are you? I know you’re here!” His body tenses as he continues to move and circle the room, checking anything that Sìwáng might be hidden behind before he suddenly stops.

“Oh.” Straightening up Sherlock closes his eyes for a moment, muttering to himself. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

His eyes open again as his body tenses and shifts. “Gravity doesn’t pertain to ghosts.”

Looking up, Sherlock finds Sìwáng directly above him, transformed into his true kui appearance. The demon ghost hurtles down with an unrestrained snarl of rage and hunger, long talons reaching out, a mouth full of sharp, pointed teeth bared in a rictus of excited anticipation, his eyes bulging from their sockets.

Fear, Sherlock assures himself, is a reasonable reaction.

*****

She watches John Watson pace, his steps deliberate but his expression anxious. She cannot blame him for worrying. She knows just how powerful her brother is. But then, so is Sherlock.

“He is a very powerful mófāshī, and yet you are worried about him.” It isn’t a question, but a statement.
After his friend left, John fingered the fu left him in frustration, his right hand flexing restlessly, as if he desired a wholly different weapon. It seems strange to both of them to just stand here and wait, but there doesn’t seem to be anything else for them to do. For a moment John took command of the situation, tried to herd Soo Lin over and down behind a bookcase before he seemed to realize the folly of it. There would be no hiding from a ghost. There would be no escaping Siwang if he came looking for them.

He pauses for a moment, glancing over to her before glancing toward the door. “I am. Yes, he is strong, but sometimes Sherlock, well, he forgets that he’s not invincible.” He starts pacing again, clearly uncomfortable with being relegated to the position of her protector. Or with being left behind. Suddenly his features twist, brighten as a realization belatedly strikes him and he turns to her. “You should go. Shift to your spirit form. Leave here. You could be miles away in no time. There’s no reason for him to find you.”

She shakes her head. “No. I am staying with you.”

John’s expression is one of frustration and confusion. “Why?”

“Because your friend. He was right. If I perform the ritual, if I release my brother from his duty to the Black Lotus Society, he will be freed, but not free. He will not be healed, or forgiven. He will not cease in his rage or his desire for vengeance. And while perhaps he would exact his revenge on those who have chained him to this afterlife of servitude, there is no guarantee that he will not simply lash out at innocent people. I do not have the right to release him when he is Gū Hún Yě Guǐ.”

John stands there uncertainly, features creasing as he asks, “Then what will you do?”

“I will stay here and help you translate the cipher. And, if he finds me, I will face him, as I should have centuries before. I will make right what has been made wrong.” She crosses back over to the desk, fingers pulling the photograph closer.

He doesn’t understand, that much is clear, but suddenly there is an inexplicable change that comes over the man. His right hand lifts to his left shoulder, massaging it, a look of dismay and desperation crowding his features. “I’m sorry, Soo Lin. But I have to… Sherlock. Sherlock is in grave danger and I have to…”

He’s torn, torn between protecting her and protecting his friend. But his indecision lasts only a second. “I have to go help Sherlock.” Crossing over to her, John grabs her arms and shakes her lightly. “Go, Soo Lin, leave! You don’t have to face him today. You don’t have to face him alone. We’ll figure out how to save his soul, I promise. Just give me the time to figure out what needs to be done, but I can’t, I can’t stay… I need to…” But whatever is calling him, compelling him, is too powerful to be resisted. His hands release her and turning, John runs out the doors after Sherlock.

It is only once he is gone that Soo Lin notices that he left the fu he was given behind on the table.

*****

He chafes at the restrictions, pulling against the oath that binds him like a dog on a leash, practically choking himself with the effort to be free. To kill. To maim. To destroy. Patience is difficult. He knows they are here. He knows she is here. Why else would they have come? So foolish, leading him right to his sister. So foolish, that she thought she could hide from him for long. But he must wait. In order to face Soo Lin, to demand her answer, he needs to lure them away. To remove the threat of them.
For the first time in over a century, he is uncertain. Perhaps even a little afraid. The tall gweilo is no match for him. He is strong, yes, but he is still only human. The smaller one though. He is something else. Something more. Human and yet not human. And that sword. That sword held power. Such power. It would rend him, burn him, reduce him to ashes and breath and then nothing at all.

Nothing. Would not nothing be better than this? He paces restlessly; itching such that he wishes he could tear his own flesh off, save for the fact that he is no longer flesh and blood. This endless, burning hunger, this fiery rage that twists and bites over his soul like sickness? He cannot bear it, cannot endure it, and yet he does. Perhaps he should face the small one. Perhaps he should let the small one destroy him. He will never have peace, but if he cannot have peace, he would rather have nothing than this eternal torment.

No! No, all he needs is Soo Lin! Once he has her back again, it will be better! It will be like it was before! Soo Lin is the answer, and she will give him her answer, and her answer will be yes. She will come back to him and they will be together again and then all will be as it should. She will soothe his soul and cool his burning rage. She will heal his wounds and make him whole again. Only Soo Lin can do this. Soo Lin is his! She belongs to him!

His head cocks to one side. It is time to make his presence known.

It takes so little, just a concentration of power, to cause the main bank of lights to blink out as his hands run over the fuse box. Emergency lights come on automatically, but he cares not for those. They will be of little comfort to them. What’s important now is the panic. The fear. If he could, he would be salivating, waiting to feed on the fear as it rises off of them. He gives way to his hunger, his rage, his hatred, knowing that they will sense him. The small one. Soo Lin. They will know that he is here. And then they will come. The tall one, full of bluster and magic. Headstrong and foolish. He will come for Siwang and leave the small one to look after Soo Lin. Because the small one is the strong one.

Strong, but also weak. Because he cares. Stupid to care. Everyone uses you. Everyone betrays you. Even Soo Lin, his own sister, turned against him. Left him. If he didn’t need her so desperately, he would gladly destroy her soul with the hatred of his. Yes, he will draw away the tall one, strike him down, and that will bring the small one, just as it did before. Lure. Distract. Demand. And then either he will get what he deserves, or he will destroy the source of all his pain. And perhaps then, he will have peace.

He can feel the tall one drawing closer, feel his hunger sharpening, his spirit form changing. Talons extend, his face stretches and contorts, jaw hinging like a snake’s, fangs descending, lengthening. Ohhhh, he cannot wait to taste his terror. To shower in his blood and drink his soul down. He lets go of the weight of the earth and slowly rises up to the ceiling, settling there like a spider, watching, waiting for his prey to enter his web unknowing.

He almost laughs, hovering overhead, moving as the human moves, waiting for him to realize his mistake. To attack before then would be to lose that moment of pure terror. To look up and see the worst nightmare imaginable, as if you had put it there yourself. And then it comes, and for all the gweilo’s cocksure certainty, there is indeed a flare of fear that comes rushing up to greet him even as he rushes down.

The man flings himself out of the way. He laughs again at the fu thrown at him. Inconvenient, but insufficient. His claws rake the air, power extending through them to tear the charm asunder. Flimsy bits of paper, yet still dangerous. They must not touch him. But he is centuries old and born to bring death and destruction. Avoiding mere pieces of fu is no challenge to him. Like an eel he
twists and turns, avoiding some, destroying others.

He does give the human credit. He fights well, flinging multiple pieces of fu at him like a true master of the art, but he is unprepared. Perhaps if he were not alone. Perhaps if he had brought more fu. But his supply is dwindling fast and his fear is rising despite his efforts to control it. The man spins, feet sliding on the smooth marble floor, desperate. Out of options. And when his prey turns and runs, Sǐwáng laughs with the joy of a predator and chases after.

Chapter End Notes

báirén = white man
guǐ = ghost
Hēi Lián Huì = Black Lotus Society
Sǐwáng = death
Gǔ Hún Yě Guǐ = a wandering ghost of the dead, including vengeful spirits
Shen zhu pai = a wooden tablet in which the named soul can inhabit until it is time to move on to the underworld
Jiēlù zhēnxiàng = reveal the truth
mófǎshī = a wizard or sorceror
gweilo = an offensive term for a white man

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! Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice, beta and Brit picking, and to 99everafter, folha5eca, and neonbiscuits for making sure my Chinese dialog/culture/references are correct! :D
Sherlock scrambles, making his way through the dimly lit halls and rooms, hands catching on cornices, doorways, stairwells, anything to help him turn faster, propel him forward. He uses the fu in his hands sparingly now, grateful for the fact that the ghost is living up to his expectations. He wants to savor the moment, savor the chase, because who knows the next time he’ll be allowed a kill? Like a cat with a mouse, Sǐwáng’s more interested at the moment in playing with Sherlock than actually killing him. For now. Still, it’s a close thing from time to time.

He dashes past the reading room, through the great court and then abruptly swerves left. Bursting into the changing museum room Sherlock runs over the chalk drawing there, trying to be careful not to step on any of the sigils or symbols written within the circle’s edge, turning back around when he reaches the other side.

Sǐwáng is only a few yards behind him and bracing himself, Sherlock cocks his wrist and flings his last piece of fu at the ghost. Dodging the charmed piece of paper slows him down for a moment, bringing him fully into the circle.

Whereupon Sherlock cries out, “Bǔzhuō!”

The circle comes to life, powered by pieces of fu laid carefully at each point of the compass, combined with Sherlock’s more traditional binding spell. Sǐwáng slams against the faintly glowing barrier only to bounce off of it lightly, snarling in rage.

Sherlock straightens up, a smug smile of satisfaction curling his lips. He takes a moment to straighten his clothes and run a hand through his hair before stepping up to the pale blue edge. Skimming a finger along the field of power, the light glows more strongly under the pressure of his touch, his pale silver gaze lifting to the demon ghost’s bloody red one.

“Who’s laughing now?” he asks the monster dryly, eyes watching as Sǐwáng continues to slam against the walls of his cage, testing its strength. He waits till the spirit slows down, circling and pacing the limits of his mobility. “I have a few questions for you.” Sǐwáng stops and glares, hideous and transformed, the air about him crackling red and orange, like an electric storm on the verge of exploding.

Sherlock on the other hand, is cool and collected now that he has the upper hand once again. He leans forward, his voice demanding. “Who is your Master? Who controls you? What is it that you are seeking?”

Sadly, since the ghost was trapped and not summoned, Sherlock doesn’t actually have the power to make it speak, but he does have leverage against it.

“Answer me, or I will collapse this field around you until you beg for mercy or it destroys you.”

The demon ghost snarls, slamming his body against his restraints, thrashing about until he abruptly stops, hovering silently. Turning, Sǐwáng stares at Sherlock, his mouth splitting until it is too wide, too sharp, pointed teeth glistening within the wet maw. Despite himself, Sherlock feels a shiver of trepidation creep up his spine.

The air within the circle begins to glow, flickering shades of fire, from yellow, to orange, to red
and back again. Sǐwáng swirls, his body stretching like a snake circling about, arching up till his neck nearly touches the ceiling. So tall… Sherlock has rock his head all the way back in order to look into those blazing eyes.

And then, the kuí guǐ begins to laugh. It is the deep, thunderous, terrifying laughter of a creature with nothing to lose and everything to gain.

This is most definitely not the answer Sherlock was expecting.

*****

How quickly the tide turns: one moment predator, the next moment prey. Sǐwáng’s wrath swirls up within him, all consuming. To be thwarted just when he was on the verge of the kill! To be mocked! His body continues to morph and change as the kuí within him takes over, filled with hate and malice and the pure desire to destroy the man before him. To rip that mocking smile off of his lips with one slash of his talons.

He hears the questions, but they are like buzzing gnats in his ears, stinging bees upon his flesh, unimportant save for the fact that they are spoken upon one side of the barrier whilst he is trapped within it. But as he flings himself against the glowing field that contains him again and again, he suddenly senses something wrong. Something nearly lost beneath his fury. A crack. A flaw. A weakness. His gaze drops to the floor, and that is when he sees it.

A violent flood of pleasure fills him, knowing what is to come. Knowing that soon he will bathe in this man’s blood. Soon he will rip him asunder, shred him into such fine pieces that they won’t be able to even tell that he was once human. He glares down at the mófǎshī gweilo, watching as confusion sets in, doubt and fear begin to flourish, and he laughs. Sǐwáng glories in this moment of triumph before he extends his power out and down, into the chalk markings beneath him.

The human made one mistake. He should have been more careful. He didn’t destroy the sigils in his panicked rush, but he smudged them. And it is enough. A chink in the armor of this prison cell. Sǐwáng applies power to the flaw and presses into it. The walls of his cage begin to flicker and flare, the human stepping back, shielding his eyes from the suddenly blinding light as arcs of energy, the shield against Sǐwáng’s, fill the air. And then it happens. With a powerful outward rush, the barrier releases. No, better: it explodes.

The whiplash of energy causes every exhibit case in the room to shatter, knocking pedestals to the floor, tipping over statues and relics. The force of it lifts the human off of his feet and flings him like a rag doll into the nearest wall.

Free! Free! Blind with hate and a desire for vengeance, Sǐwáng rushes at the downed man, savors the terror in his eyes that struggle even now to stay open, to hold onto consciousness. Yes. Yes! Stay awake, little rénlèi, stay awake as I peel your flesh from your bones and muscles, as I pluck out each of your eyeballs, one at a time, and devour them. I want you to feel every ounce of terror and pain possible before I take your life as tribute…

One taloned hand reaches for Sherlock’s chest, claws set to rake him open from clavical to colon when Sǐwáng feels the constriction about his throat, strangling his power, his body suddenly paralyzed.

NO. DO NOT KILL. DO NOT HARM. IT IS FORBIDDEN.

No! He cannot kill him? But… but he must kill him! He needs to kill him!
But the power that binds him holds him powerfully within its grip, staying his hand. He has his orders, and his orders prevent him from doing the one thing he desires more than anything in the universe. His head falls backward, a bloodcurdling, inhuman scream released as he trembles over Sherlock’s form, a mad slavering dog brought to heel by its Master.

He can feel the man’s eyes dazedly staring at him. He can feel the human’s terror and helplessness. It’s like a drug, so utterly delicious and yet unattainable. Síwáng presses his face into the crook of Sherlock’s neck, embracing him, breathing him in, feeling him tremble and gasp, feeding on his fear while slowly the rage begins to recede beneath the power of the orders that bind him.

When he rises up once more, he appears human again, staring down into Sherlock’s semi-conscious face coldly. His English is rough, broken, thickly accented as he informs the mófāshī: “You live. For now. Do not interfere…” A ghostly hand reaches out, fingers penetrating Sherlock’s mind, brushing away his consciousness with a flick of his wrist.

The man’s eyelids flutter, his gaze rolling into the back of his head before his body finally gives up the fight and slumps bonelessly to the ground.

The building has awoken. There are the sounds of feet upon ground, voices of humans calling out to one another, moving closer this way. Good.

He has his true purpose to complete, after all…

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Indecision holds her tightly in its grasp after John Watson leaves. Should she follow him? Should she try to assist them? Do they need her help?

Frowning with uncertainty she takes a step toward the door before shaking her head. No. It is not them that her brother wants, it’s her. Of that she feels certain. The most she can do for them now is to hurry and answer the question that they came for.

Turning back to her desk, Soo Lin picks up the photograph of the blackboard, studying it quietly before putting it down again and picking up her brush.

Though it has been centuries, she remembers the ritual. The trappings, the offerings… there is no time to gather such materials. But words and a simple offering will suffice. The rest is merely pomp and ceremony. She picks up a cup of tea and pours it upon the ground, intoning the binding spell as she paints upon her skin.

When it is done, Soo Lin’s lips curve into a bittersweet smile. How ironic that she has done what her brother wanted of her all along. She cannot imagine what the Black Lotus would think if they knew. But it matters not. She will not be bound long enough for them to notice.

As she works on deciphering the code, noting down each word as she translates it, Soo Lin realizes that in truth what she is really doing is waiting. Waiting for Liang. No, not Liang. Not any longer. Síwáng. She is waiting for Síwáng, both literally and figuratively. And when he enters into the room, though she doesn’t react, she knows it instantly.

Putting down the brush she turns to him, eyes calm and peaceful as she studies the hard planes and lines of his face. Even though his skin is not of this world, is nothing but a construct, he has aged. The centuries, the curse, and the burden of his choices weigh heavily upon him. But his eyes are sharp, demanding, boring into her as if he could likewise see past this façade of flesh. His words
are simple and to the point, spoken in their native Mandarin.

“Have you made your choice?”

She nods, stepping closer, her gaze flickering back and forth between his dark eyes, searching for any sign of her brother within.

“Liang. My brother, I am sorry. But I cannot help do this. I cannot return with you to serve. I follow a new path – one of redemption and forgiveness.” Her lips curl gently, her gaze one of love and regret, tranquility and acceptance. “But, I will free you. I will release you from this anger that consumes your soul and help you find peace.” Her hand caresses his cheek lovingly, her gaze brimming with unshed tears as she whispers, “Just know this. I forgive you.”

Her words bring a terrible rage to his features, power and hatred rising up, boiling over, until there is nowhere else for it to go but out.

By now John has come to recognize the signs of impending peril with regards to Sherlock’s well being. His shoulder aches on occasion, the injury suffered by John Watson was significant, after all. But there’s something subtly different about the ache that starts to form whenever Sherlock is getting in over his head. He can’t understand how the reaction is triggered. There is, with a few rare exceptions, no such thing as ‘destiny’. Decisions, choices, catalysts, reactions, interruptions, quirks of timing and coincidences - so many ways in which the future can be changed and altered. And yet, somehow, fate seems to know when the odds are decidedly stacked against Sherlock.

At the moment his shoulder feels like it’s on fire, and John keeps rubbing at it, clutching it and waiting to feel the press of the hilt against the palm of his hand, so he can draw free the burning sword sheathed within his flesh.

So, when the pain suddenly slackens off and the sense of danger suddenly vanishes, John stops in his tracks, his brain befuddled and confused. His hand continues to rub at the injury, sensing Sherlock ahead of him. He shifts his focus, eyes closing as he reaches out to Sense as far as he can.

He can still feel Soo Lin, her spirit cool and soft to the touch, just as he can still feel Siwang, fiery and hot. His eyes blink open, confused.

If Siwang is not here to finish the job he started back at the apartment, then why is he here?

It only takes John another second to realize the truth. What they have unwittingly done.

Oh God.

Soo Lin was safe, hidden away where her brother would not think to look for her, and what did they do? Led him right to her.

Spinning on one heel, John charges back from whence he came, turning corners and running up stairs till he reaches the back office. The door is still wide open and bursting into the room he jerks to a shocked halt. Soo Lin is facing her brother, fingers caressing his cheek, her gaze soft and loving - unafraid and surprisingly strong with resolve. In contrast, John can actively see the odium and tempestuous power rising up from her brother like smoke off a raging fire. Her eyes shift past her brother’s shoulder to meet with John’s, a soft smile of serenity touching her lips just as Siwang thrusts one ghostly hand into her chest.

For a moment, John is frozen in disbelief. This can’t be happening. She’s not alive. She no longer has a body. But Soo Lin’s form shudders violently, head snapping back, hair flying in a fluid arc as
her ‘body’ jerks painfully and spasms in reaction. Her arms fling out to either side, her hairwhirling wildly, as if she had been caught in a squall. The fire of Sǐwáng’s rage suffuses her, fills her, blazing out of control, burning her very essence. Her mouth opens in a silent scream as the inferno consumes her, her soul disintegrating into millions of glowing, miniscule fragments. Her entire being explodes outward from where she once stood, like a spiritual firecracker of light and color, flickering, fading, bit by bit, until there is nothing left of her.

John stands there for a moment, shell-shocked, while Sǐwáng slowly withdraws his hand, staring at it as if he too is stunned by what he has done. John recovers first.

Growling in outrage, the ex-angel surges forward, reaching toward his left shoulder to draw his blade. It doesn’t matter that Soo Lin was not his soul to protect or care for. Sǐwáng had no right. He had no right to take that last piece of her as his own and burn it to nothing. Beloved brother or not, Sǐwáng will pay for what he has done. John will see to that. John will smite him.

But his fingers encounter only fabric and flesh, his steps coming to an abrupt halt. His power, it would seem, will not respond to his commands or desires. Belatedly, John remembers the fu Sherlock gave him, hands scrambling through his pockets, eyes scouring the room till he espies them lying upon the floor a few feet away. Blown there by the explosive power of Soo Lin’s ultimate demise.

The ghost had turned at John’s raging approach, but the expression on his face is that of a lost soul, one horribly confused and frightened. He stares at John with a look of utter despair. Opening his mouth, Sǐwáng unleashes the scream that his sister could not, one of anguish and horror, before whirling up into the air. John lunges for the blessed pieces of paper, rolling to snatch them from the ground. But by the time he rises, Sǐwáng has already shifted from tangible flesh to intangible spirit. John’s wrist snaps, flinging all of the fu at the fleeing spirit, but the charms flutter uselessly to the ground once more as Sǐwáng passes through the wall and vanishes from sight.

Within seconds, there is no trace of him within the building.

Walking over to where the siblings last stood, John searches the ground. But there is nothing to see. No body, no dust, no trace of Soo Lin whatsoever. Sadness and horror slowly suffuse John, and the weight of it is too heavy to bear. He sinks down to his knees.

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Sherlock comes to with a start, a loud noise cracking through his skull, reverberating through his medulla. His eyes snap open as he realizes he’s not alone. Two guards are searching the room, talking on their security radios. The screeching in his ears is the alarm that has been set off.

John! They have to get out of here!

He jerks himself to his feet, not bothering to make an effort at being quiet. The alarm is taking care of covering any noise his feet might make quite nicely. He notices, with a hint of relief, that in destroying the circle, Sǐwáng also destroyed any traces of the markings Sherlock had drawn. The last thing anyone needs is for it to come out that Satanists and occultists had tried to vandalize the British Museum.

He runs, pounding up stairs and rounding corners, making his way back toward the Chinese Ceramics room.

When Sherlock returns, he finds John on his knees, staring down at nothing, hands clenched into fists on his thighs, features haggard. It only takes a moment for him to determine that John isn’t
injured in any way. At least, not physically.

Crouching down next to his flatmate, Sherlock studies him quietly before speaking his name firmly. “John.” The utterance means many unspoken but implicit things. Look at me. Tell me what happened. We have to get out of here.

John’s eyes snap up, meeting Sherlock’s gaze for a moment before flickering away, filled with complicated and convoluted emotions. His jaw is tightly clenched, such that his words come out short and choppy. “He destroyed her. Destroyed her very soul. The others he killed, murdered, but they still had their souls.” He shakes his head, appalled. “I just stood here and watched as he… burned her into nothingness.” He looks back at Sherlock, pain and distress clearly marking his features. “I couldn’t do a thing to stop him…”

Emotions. Feelings. These things do not come naturally to Sherlock and as a result he simply stares back, holding John’s gaze until his flatmate turns away, rubbing at his face now, as if he could wipe the pain away.

One brow lifts as he turns his head toward the door and then back, repeating once again, more insistently, “John...” Again, implicit in his words – we need to leave. Now. But John doesn’t move, just continues struggling to pull himself back together, turning away from Sherlock now, presumably because he doesn’t wish to be seen like this. Which is logical. This is not like John. Soldier. Doctor. He is stronger than this.

Sherlock doesn’t understand. Soo Lin was a stranger, so why would John feel her death – even an ultimate death – so keenly? Pale silver eyes study the back of John’s head silently, as if his gaze could burrow beneath hair, flesh, and bone to reveal the workings inside.

It must have something to do with being a Sensitive. Something about what he saw that was so terrible, so primal, as to reduce a soldier to this. Sherlock sighs deeply, frustrated in his own inability to understand this, and frustrated with John. He can’t understand what it is that a Sensitive sees and experiences, so he cannot understand this reaction. Or perhaps it is simply John himself – steady, trustworthy, kind John. Yes, that must be it. Because Mycroft is a very powerful Sensitive, but Sherlock has never seen him react to anything he has witnessed like this.

A second later, cursing softly to himself, John rises up and turns around, muttering darkly. “Sorry…” Whatever this momentary weakness was about, it seems to have passed now. He looks himself once more. A bit older, a bit more worn, but now angry and determined, his jaw clenched tightly.

Deep, fathomless blue eyes lift to Sherlock’s pale gaze, John’s mouth a thin, bitter line as he rumbles, “There’s nothing for us here now. Let’s get the hell out.”

Chapter End Notes

fu = charmed/blessed pieces of paper
sǐwáng = death
bǔzhuō = capture
kuí = demon
guǐ = ghost
mófāshī = a wizard or sorceror
gweilo = an offensive term for a white man
rénlèi = human

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Chapter 14

He didn’t sleep much last night. Hours of darkness were spent tossing and turning, tearing his bed apart as he fitfully dozed only to wake up abruptly from nightmares where this time it was Sherlock’s soul being destroyed by Siwang, John helpless to do anything but watch in horror.

Shuffling down the stairs in his robe, John passes by where Sherlock is sitting dressed and looking remarkably well rested, practically brimming over with energy and impatience. In comparison, John looks exhausted and worn out, rumpled and untidy, with shadows under his eyes.

When John walks by and ignores him, Sherlock frowns and calls out, “John.”

“What?”

“Why aren’t you dressed?”

“Because I had a crap night and, with any luck, I’m going to sleep all day today.”

“You slept poorly? Was it something you ate? I warned you that the curry was off.”

Walking back into the living room, John just stares at Sherlock. Sherlock in turn stares back at John with a look of impatience and an utter lack of comprehension.

Shaking his head, John counters pointedly, “Sherlock… a woman died last night!”

“Well, technically she was already dead and had been for some time, so I really don’t see that the problem is…”

“You don’t see what the…?” John’s words taper off because the shock and outrage in him have surged up such that they are apparently blocking off his larynx. He rolls his head to loosen the knots in his shoulders and coughs to clear his throat. “You mean to say, if she had been alive and murdered, like the others, you would feel differently? But because she was ghost, she doesn’t matter?”

Frowning, as if John were speaking in tongues, Sherlock backpedals slightly. “John. I realize that as a Sensitive what you saw, what you experienced, must have been a bit of a shock to you. But it’s not like she was still alive. She wasn’t a human any more; she was a ghost. She should have dissipated centuries ago.”

John’s hands have begun to flex and curl into fists. He has to physically restrain himself from not hauling off and punching Sherlock in the face. His voice comes out sharp and terse, his words bitten off.

“So, what? You think that’s it? A person dies and that’s it? You don’t believe in souls continuing on? What is a ghost then? Just a collection of memories wrapped up in some kind of energy field?”

“That is one theory,” Sherlock returns mildly. “Others include that some minor supernatural creature, often a demon, will take up that energy for strength and, in doing so, gains the appearance and the memories of the one who had died. But it’s just energy, John. Nothing more.”
A tic flares up in John’s cheek, his jaw tightly clenched as he glares at Sherlock, who blithely continues on.

“It seems highly unlikely that we continue on after this mortal life. It’s far more likely that such fantasies are merely the comforting trappings of religion which promises that if you are ‘good’ you go to heaven or get reborn into a better situation, but if you are ‘bad’ you go to hell or come back as a cockroach.” Sherlock sniffs disparagingly. “Emotional claptrap to control the masses.” His silvery gaze comes to rest upon John, taking in his apparent disapproval, one brow arching superciliously. “I’m honestly surprised you believe in such sentimental nonsense.”

The anger within John is monumental and all he wants to do is yell at Sherlock and tell him how wrong he is. About everything. But what would be the point? It wouldn’t change his opinion. John cannot offer any sort of proof without revealing what he is, or was. It would be the wistful beliefs of a man fooled by the manipulations of religion and the Church in Sherlock’s eyes. Nothing more. So John bites his tongue and continues into the kitchen. Tea and toast. Perhaps delving into the simple ritual will help disperse some of the rage that is coursing through his body.

“It is unusual though,” Sherlock adds after a thoughtful moment, “to find two ghosts who believed so completely that they were brother and sister. It would have been interesting to determine how that came to be. Perhaps they were demons or spirits that were related and that was where the bond originated from? Or perhaps Soo Lin’s story was the truth, two siblings who died, their energy and memories continuing on or taken over.” There’s a thoughtful hum as Sherlock adds, “More likely taken over, considering Sǐwáng’s strength. It’s a pity that the trap didn’t work. And now, with Soo Lin gone, there’s nothing to bait another with.”

John drops his spoon with a clink, turning around to stare at Sherlock in shock. “Wait. What? You knew? You knew Sǐwáng would follow us? You deliberately used Soo Lin as bait so you could trap him?”

“Oh of course. There was a high probability that he was shadowing us, either on his own recognizance or per orders, just as it was obvious that Soo Lin was somehow involved in all of this and he was connected to her.” His shoulders shrug negligently as he points out, “Of course it was still just a gamble. But it seemed as good an opportunity as any to draw him out and capture him.”

He can feel Sherlock’s gaze, his honestly puzzled regard and tone as John’s hands grip the countertop before him so tightly that his knuckles have gone white. “It was obviously the logical thing to do. We need answers and Sǐwáng needs to be stopped before he kills anyone else.” There’s a gusty sigh as his hands wave through the air in frustration. “No telling where he is now or how we might be able to find him. With his bond to the Black Lotus, I cannot summon him. Their mark will supersede any pull of mine…”

The tension is broken as the bread pops out of the toaster with a soft clang. John lets out a breath and releases his grip on the counter to pick up a knife. He considers, for a brief moment, using it on Sherlock. After another deep breath, he automatically butters the toast and indulgently spreads a generous amount of strawberry jam on top before carrying both it and his tea to the couch. Since his change, John has discovered that he enjoys sensory experiences more than most of his human counterparts. The sense of touch, smell, sound, and taste are heady experiences to one who has lived for centuries with limited access to such sensations. Hence the indulgence in jam and the small bit of pudge that has begun to form about his middle. The pleasure, however, will tragically not be enough to improve his current mood. John puts his breakfast down carefully before dropping onto the cushions with a whump, hand reaching for the remote to flick the telly on, his gaze decidedly not looking at Sherlock.
There’s a moment where nothing is heard but the inane chatter of some morning talk show before Sherlock announces in bemusement, “You’re angry with me.”

Glancing up, John snipes, “Oh, did you deduce that all on your own? Bully for you then.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrow. “Why?”

“Why?” John flicks the channels a few times before dropping his hand and glaring up at Sherlock once more. “Because you’re wrong, that’s why.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes, wrong.”

Sherlock frowns, stating clearly, “I’m never wrong.”

“Well, see, now you’re wrong again.” John’s chin juts out as he turns the volume up on Some Show, folding his arms over his chest.

“Are you going to explain why?”

“No, no I am not, because you never listen and there’s a good chance that if you say anything more I’m going to punch you in the face.”

There’s a moment of silence before Sherlock points out, “Violence is not the answer.”

“No, no it’s not, but right now it will feel damn good.”

Sherlock stands for a moment, at a loss before bustling about the flat once more, deciding, apparently, to leave John to his little strop. A few minutes later he has emerged from his room and reaches for his coat, pulling it on before asking, “I’m going down to the morgue, are you coming?”

“No.”

Sherlock stops in his tracks, almost shocked, turning around and actually asking John, “No?”

“No, Sherlock. No, I am not coming. No, I am not going to the morgue with you. I’m tired and cross and I’m staying here. You don’t need me and I don’t want to do anything but put up my feet, eat my breakfast, and watch the telly.”

The very idea is clearly beyond comprehension. Go to the morgue to examine dead bodies for telltale signs of magical coercion, or stay home watching some inane programme? There’s no competition! “There’s nothing but crap on the telly.”

John doesn’t so much as glance back at Sherlock, his gaze rock hard and determined as his head bobs up and down. “Mmmmm, yes, that’s why I’m watching it.” Because for the first time since he found Sherlock again, the last place John wants to be is at his side.

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Humans. Strange, bizarre, inexplicable creatures they are. Full of noise and nonsense and strange ideas about how the world should work. Sometimes their shenanigans and upsets are entertaining, but other times they prove to be more annoying and disruptive compared to the blissful, simple pleasures of a Brownie. Because life really is dreadfully simple. Leave it to humans to have to muck up the works and make it so complicated. Why, for example, do they worry so much when they have food in their bellies, a warm bed to sleep in, and a roof over their heads? What more does
a body need? Feh! Some might scoff at Brownies, call them stupid, simple creatures, but as far as Tup can see, there isn’t a creature in the world more happy than his kind.

When Wingless and Sherlock returned rough and disheveled, Tuppence saw the value of spending the night elsewhere for a change. Neither man would be sleeping, that much was clear, and Tup had no desire to get caught in the middle of their mutual and yet exclusive frustrations. He’d much rather be up all night with Teaspoon and Twaddle if it came down to that.

Come morning Tuppence returns to the upstairs room, opening the window and sliding in. The bed, blanket and sheets pulled free and wildly twisted about, confirms his suspicions. Creeping down the stairs, one ear lifts and cocks as he listens in on the conversation of his two humans, the back and forth of sharp tones and sharper words. He flattens against the railing as the tall one comes out, feet thundering down the stairs in a mix of temper and impatience. He ponders for a moment going back up and slipping into Wingless’ bed or laundry basket, but an disgruntled growl from his belly makes the tiny Fae descend the stairs and slip into the living room.

The cheerful noise from the big box makes him grin and hop in excitement. Ooooh! Telly! Scurrying over, he climbs up the arm of the sofa and plops himself down next to John without so much as a hello or a by your leave. He can tell that the ex-angel is not in the mood for conversation, which is just as well. Neither is Tup. He watches with bright shining eyes, his gaze flickering back and forth between the magic box and the plate and teacup sitting on the table, barely touched. Finally, he can stand it no longer.

“Yeh gonna eat that?”

John glances over at the cold toast, shaking his head and offering disinterestedly, “Have at it.”

Tup squeaks softly in his excitement, scampering over on all fours before sitting himself upon the table, picking up the massive piece of toast awkwardly before taking a bite out of one corner, licking at his muzzle so as not to lose a drop of the sweet, sweet strawberry jam. Bliss!

Standing up, Tup peers at the tea and sighs. Milk and sugar, just how he likes it. Now if he only had a straw, everything would be perfect. In the end, he has to dunk a piece of toast in, letting it soak up the sweet liquidy goodness, before gulping it down.

He continues to munch contentedly until out of the corner of his eye, he catches a glimpse of Wingless. The angel is angry. His lips are a thin, disgruntled line, his forehead creased. His arms are folded over his chest defensively and it’s clear that the bright box, which rarely fails to entertain Tuppence, holds no allure for the man next to him. After studying him a bit longer, Tup can see the other emotions lying beneath the anger. Guilt. Unhappiness. Frustration.

Thing is? It’s hard to be happy and content when someone else isn’t. No matter how determined one might be to remain cheerful, a person who decidedly isn’t tends to poison the stream and ruin the banquet. At least, that’s how it is for this Brownie. Already Tup can feel his good mood starting to curdle about the edges and that simply will not do.

It’s not so much a great desire to help others that brings Tuppence to play counselor so much as it is the great desire to have a good time. He crams in another tasty handful of dripping jam, speaking with his mouth full.

“So, wot ‘e do this time?”

The man sits quietly for a moment, resisting the question before answering. For a moment Tup thinks his words will simply be ignored, but like a tired, old balloon, the ex-angel deflates slightly
and replies. “A woman lost her immortal soul last night, and Sherlock… he acted like it was nothing.”

Tup waits a beat before realizing that that’s it. Scratching his head absently, his mouth opens and closes a few times as he nearly says one thing before thinking better of it. It takes a bit before he carefully offers, “At the risk of pissin’ yeh off even more, I dinnae see what the problem is?”

“What the…” Turning, John glares down at the tiny Fae, his temper reignited as he hisses, “You don’t see the problem with losing your soul?”

Taking another bite of tea-soaked toast, Tuppence meets that angry gaze steadily, his own hard and unyielding in turn. “Frankly? No, I don’t.” A tiny long-fingered hand is lifted, cutting John off before he can begin his rant. “T’aint really fair, is it? The ‘ole ‘souls’ thing. I mean, only ‘umans get to ‘ave ‘em. There ain’t no soul fer me is there? Ain’t no souls fer all sorts of creatures, but yeh don’t see us whinin’ fer ‘em.” He glares back at man in turn, waiting for him to explain the fairness of that.

It does seem to catch the human off guard. He blinks and considers that point before offering his counter argument slowly and cautiously. “No, but you have long lives, endlessly longer than human ones.”

“True, but we don’t last ferever. At some point even a Fae will pass, by means natural or other, while yer precious souls carry on and on, apparently.” His hands drop to his hips, nose jerking emphatically. “My point is, not ‘avin’ a soul ain’t the end all, be all. And, well, makes it a bit ‘ard to value one if you ain’t got one, no? So I guess wot I’m sayin’ is, per’aps you should cut ‘im a little slack. It’s ‘ard to value somethin’ yeh don’t believe in in the first place. ‘E’s not meanin’ to be disrespectful or callous. It jist dinnae mean anythin’ to ‘im. And, t’be fair, it means a great deal more t’you than t’most. After all, bein’ a Guardian Angel and all, yer ‘ole life was dedicated to the perfection and carin’ of souls. The ‘uman understandin’ of a soul can’t compare to yer perspective on ‘em.”

As the angel’s body language shifts, Tup can’t help but feel a tiny glow of satisfaction. Ain’t many that will bother to listen to what a Brownie has to say about much of anything, but for some reason, this man, this ex-angel not only listens, he learns. Already Wingless has softened, his body leaning into the soft cushions, accepting their support, his eyes losing their hard edge. His mouth isn’t smiling, but it’s no longer a thin line of anger but an uncertain one of contemplation.

The telly rattles on cheerfully but silence holds between the two supernatural beings. But it’s a good silence. A peaceful silence. And Tup is more than content to allow the angel some time to think over what he’s said. After all, there are crazy shenanigans to be watched on the magic box!

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As his anger and frustration begins to dissipate in the wake of Tup’s input, John starts to genuinely enjoy his quiet morning to himself. He heads back into the kitchen, fixing himself a second order of tea and toast, rejoining Tup on the couch for some quality lazing about. It isn’t long, however, before his mobile starts buzzing.

John glances at it briefly, scowling at it without any real heat before he deliberately ignores the device. He doesn’t have to look at the screen to know it’s Sherlock texting him. No one else ever calls or contacts him and in a moment of distraction John realizes that it’s just another symptom of his condition – of how not human he still is. Lord, he’s nearly as friendless and anti-social as Sherlock.
The small Fae’s belly is rounded with John’s first breakfast, eyes shut as he rubs it soothingly. But his eyelids pop open at the sound of the mobile, gaze sharpening with interest as he asks, “Ain’t you gonna answer it?”

“Nope.”

John’s eyes flicker over to Tuppence, whose fingers are now twitching eagerly with interest. He can’t help but wonder just how many lives these creatures have. Over the centuries, curiosity has killed far more brownies than cats. That’s part of why they’re drawn to live with humans in the first place. Humans live such short little desperate lives, everything always moving, happening, and changing. It’s a bit irresistible really, to a creature made up of almost pure curiosity.

Tup doesn’t ask for permission, just snatches up the phone and lugs it over to where he was sitting, prying the thing open and using his tiny hands to push the buttons until he can see the texts. It’s ironic really how he is more skilled with using John’s phone than John is. The tiny head tilts this way and that curiously as he reads before glancing up at John.

“SH? ‘Oo is SH?”

“Sherlock Holmes.”

“Ohhhhh.”

Tup’s mouth curls into a smile. “Does ‘e do that every time ‘e sends one of these?”

“Does what?”

“Puts ‘is initials like that?”

“Oh. Yes.”

Both human and fae rolls their eyes a little. “Like yer mobile dinnae already tell you ‘oo it is, right?”

“Exactly.” John glances over before he apparently reminds himself that he’s not interested. Turning back to the telly he asks instead, “What’s he going on about?”

“Some lass called Molly is givin’ ‘im an ‘ard time?”

John’s lips curl into a smile that is a bit not nice. “Bout time.”

But eventually, curiosity gets the better of John as well, his hand reaching over to pluck the mobile away from the giggling Fae, thumb toggling through the various messages waiting there.

_Molly is being unreasonable. SH_

_Am forced to bribe Molly to see bodies. What is the world coming to? SH_

_When did Molly become so intractable? Normally she’s so much more pliable. SH_

_Finally! We’re off to see the bodies. More later. SH_

_John? SH_

_Are you still angry about the Soo Lin thing? SH_
Anger rises up again at the mention of Soo Lin, causing John to toss the phone back down and this time Tup leaves it alone as it goes quiet once more. But it’s only a question of time. So when the phone starts actively ringing, it comes as no real surprise. Clearly Sherlock is tired of waiting for John to reply or, better yet, show up.

With an annoyed sigh John snatches up the mobile without so much as looking at it, flicking it on and lifting it to his ear, pinching the device against his shoulder as he reaches for his cup of tea. He starts talking immediately, cutting off any greeting, complaint or observation his flatmate might wish to share. “Look, Sherlock, stop texting me. Stop pestering me. I’m having a very nice cuppa after a very long night and I’m perfectly comfortable sitting here in my dressing gown and pants and nothing else. So no, I’m not going to get dressed and no I’m not going to meet you down at the station to watch you preen and strut in front of Lestrade with whatever you managed to discover at the morgue.”

A familiar and decidedly female voice answers. “My, my, Johnnie, I had no idea it was like that between you two. How about you show up at the police station in your dressing gown and give him a strip tease?”

John chokes on the mouthful of tea he was drinking and sits up, his hand scrabbling for the remote to hit the mute button. His voice shifts from irritation to embarrassment. “Harry? Sorry ‘bout that, I thought you were Sherlock. He’s been hassling me all day.”

“And all night it would seem.”

Rolling his eyes, John counters firmly, “Not in the way that you mean.”

“Pity. Look, I was calling because I’m free tonight and I thought that maybe we could do something? See a movie, maybe catch a show or just have dinner?”

The familiar sensations of dismay and uncertainty rise up as John hedges, “I don’t know, Harry. I have no idea where this case is going next. Sherlock might need me…. But his voice trails off quietly as he considers, his mind reviewing the events of the previous night and this morning, a sense of guilt resolving into a plan of action. Belatedly, he realizes that Harry is talking to him, though he missed most of what she said.

“… his mother or his lover?”

“What? No, Harry, neither. Look, the answer is yes. Sherlock can fend for himself for one night so yes, lets do this.”

“Really?” The change in her tone alone confirms to John that he made the right choice. She sounds surprised and pleased, almost excited. His lips curl as a burst of affection that is wholly Watson spreads through his chest.

“Yeah, really. But Harry, there are rules…”

“Joooooooohn!”

“No, I’m serious. No drinking okay? I’ll line up something fun for us, but you have to promise me
that you won’t drink tonight, alright?”

There’s a long pause before Harry replies, a bit too earnestly. “Alright, fine. No drinking while we’re out tonight. Anything else?”

John shakes his head. “Nope, that’s it. I’ll ring you later to give you the details, okay?”

“Okay. And Johnnie? Thanks. I’m looking forward to spending some time with you, baby brother.”

For a moment, all John can see is Soo Lin and Sǐwáng, her eyes filled with such love for her brother before he destroyed her. He manages to swallow past the lump in his throat, his voice a bit rough as he replies, “Yeah. Me too.”

*****

Which is it going to be? The pasta or the pork? Pasta or pork? Molly’s eyes are slightly glazed and her feet feel like they’ve been nailed to the ground. She came in yesterday to cover the night shift after a colleague called in sick and now she has a whole day stretching out ahead of her as well. Dear God it’s going to be a long one if she can’t even make as simple a choice as this.

“Molly.”

She can’t help it. She actively squeaks and startles when Sherlock’s deep rumbling baritone murmurs her name right next to her ear. Cheeks instantly flushed, Molly Hooper turns her dark brown eyes up to stare into his cool silver ones, mouth slightly agape, both flustered and caught off-guard by his sudden presence at her side. And that voice! Dear God that voice should be illegal. Does he realize what he can do with that voice? No, wait, of course he does. He’s Sherlock bloody Holmes. When it comes to manipulation, the man is a master. He probably spends hours practicing, recording his voice and then listening to figure out the exact pitch and tone required to cause someone’s toes to curl.

“I’d go with the pasta.”

“What?” she asks, a little dazed. Sherlock smiles slightly and inclines his head first to her empty plate and then to the pasta before her. “The pasta. The meat looks a little tired.” He kindly doesn’t offer the same assessment about her. He must want something.

“Mmmmm, I see your point.” She doesn’t really care, honestly, but his suggestion at least breaks her out of the stalemate she had found herself in, her hand reaching out for the large ladle and scooping out a portion of chicken fettuccine alfredo onto her plate. Her gaze sidles over to his lanky frame, most definitely not admiring the way his shirt clings to his chest or the fine, slender line of his neck. Bugger her overactive libido!

“So you remember those two bodies you were working on?”

Ahhh, here it comes. “Sherlock, I work on a lot of bodies,” she points out irritably. “Could you be a little more specific?”

The smooth seductiveness of his tone shifts to something more practical as he elaborates, “Van Coon and Lukis.”

Ahh. Those bodies. Yes, how could she forget them? Her final autopsy report is still without reasonable explanation for what happened to them, though at least with Van Coon she can keep it simple and process him through. Lukis is going to take a bit longer. “Yes, of course. Why?”
“Could you wheel them out for me? There’s something I need to check on.”

She turns to look at him coolly. Damn, he’s tall. Why couldn’t she have been born tall and leggy? What she wouldn’t give to make Sherlock have to look up at her for a change. “Is this for the police?”

He hedges with ease. “In a manner of speaking.”

She’s sharper than he gives her credit for, her eyes narrowing as Molly counters, “So, in other words, you have a theory, they think it’s bunk, and you want to show them up? Again?”

A hint of a genuine smile touches his lips and eyes for a moment before Sherlock shrugs and makes a disgusted face. “I can’t help it if they’re idiots who can’t see what’s right in front of their face.”

Look at him, so self-assured, so certain of himself. Time to pop that little bubble. “Well, the answer is no. They’ve already been processed, bagged and tagged. They’re due to be picked up by the crematoriums later this evening.” And then she waits for it, availing herself to some broccoli in the meanwhile.

“Your hair. You parted it on the right.”

Right on schedule. “So?”

“So, it looks better that way. More… feminine.”

Molly just barely resists the urge to roll her eyes, even if a tiny part of her is squealing in delight that he said she looked pretty.

He said no such thing. More feminine? So what, I don’t look sufficiently feminine? What sort of backhanded compliment is that? But you’re totally going to cave into him, aren’t you? Yes, I can feel it. It’s his voice again, isn’t it? God damn hormones…

With a hefty gust of breath, Molly reaches up to tuck a bit of her side-parted hair behind one ear and asks bluntly, “Sherlock, cut the crap. I’ve been on my feet for 10 hours, catching up on a backlog of autopsies and lab work. I’m tired, I’m cranky, and I got several more hours ahead of me. What do you want?”

A small moue of feigned hurt touches Sherlock’s lips. Yeah, right, like he feels guilty about any of the things that he cajoles her into doing.

“I’m hurt, Molly. After all the years we’ve been friends…”

Her eyes grow hard as Molly pushes the tray into Sherlock’s belly, stepping into his space. “Friends? Don’t make me laugh. We’re only friends when you want something. Friends don’t show up only when they want favors and body parts. Friends don’t flirt for eyeballs and spleens and then bugger off without so much as a thank you or an offer of dinner.”

He’s at a loss, confusion flickering over his gaze as she stands up to him before frustration and acceptance slide into place. “Fine, fine, I’ll pay for your meal,” Sherlock concedes, gesturing carelessly at the tray in her hands.

Wow. He really doesn’t get it. Molly shakes her head firmly. “No. If you want to see Lukis and Van Coon you’re going to have to make it worth my while. You’re going to have to take me out…”
Molly closes her eyes for a moment and conjures up the courage before finishing bluntly, “…on a date.” She manages not to wince and congratulates herself when her hand is steady as she reaches out for the Caesar salad and places it firmly on her tray before turning her head to stare up at him determinedly. He owes her this. She’s not fooling herself that it’s going to make a jot of difference. Well, not entirely. Maybe, if they’re not in a situation where he needs something from her he might see her differently. And if not, well then at least she’ll know for sure, right? If nothing else, he owes her a nice dinner.

By the look on Sherlock’s face, she apparently just asked him to step in front of a firing squad. “A date?” At least this time the moue of distaste is for the idea of a date, rather than specifically a date with Molly. She’s not really sure how she can tell. Perhaps it is because he isn’t looking at her in horror and dismay, but at some unseen point of memory and mind. “I don’t… date.”

Molly straightens her back and turns away from Sherlock once more, reaching out for a piece of bread and putting it on her plate as she coolly informs him, “Well, if you want to see Van Coon and Lukis, you do now.”

Forty-five minutes later, Sherlock is nearly twitching with impatience as Molly wheels the bodies of Van Coon and Lukis out, settling the two men side by side. It was actually rather pleasant, watching Sherlock squirm for a change, even if the reasons were impatience and a desire to study the dead men’s bodies, rather than excitement and a desire to study her body.

‘Baby steps,’ she tells herself silently. After all, she got herself the promise of a date before the week was out, didn’t she? That’s more than all the flirting and makeup has managed to gain her. Why on earth did she never think of this sooner? With all the favors Sherlock is constantly asking her for, she could have been wined and dined for weeks on end!

“I really don’t know why it was necessary for you to eat so slowly.”

“I wanted to enjoy my meal, and the body digests food better if you eat it slowly, rather than gulping it down.”

“And the research paper you just had to read while you were eating?”

“Research, obviously.” Reaching up to the top of the bags to start and unzip them, Molly’s hands fall still as Sherlock grumbles in a huff, “The feet! I just need to see the feet!”

Her head tilts and lifts, staring at him quizzically as she repeats, “The feet?” only to see that familiar flicker of annoyance and impatience flutter over his features. “Alright, alright, fine, the feet it is. Keep your shirt on…”

Or better yet, take it off…

Hush you.

Unzipping the bag, Molly pulls the material out of the way so that Sherlock can crouch down, one hand reaching out to press Van Coon’s toes upward, staring at his heel, a small smile curling his lips. “And now Lukis?”

The pattern is repeated, and the expression on Sherlock’s face more than makes up for all the sullen looks and pointed stares he gave her and the clock on the wall of the cafeteria. Pulling out
his phone, he directs her hand to hold the feet upright so he can take a clear picture of the tattoos that both men seem to have there. Huh. Interesting. Same tattoos. Well, it looks like he got the proof he was looking for…

Molly startles again when she feels the softness of a pair of lips brushing against her cheek in a casual kiss, her face flaring up bright red as she turns to look at Sherlock. But the consulting detective is already striding out of the morgue, calling over his shoulder, “Molly, you’re a star! I recommend you keep both of those bodies available, I’m sure the police will be by this shortly, wanting to take a look.” And just like that, he’s gone again, vanishing with a dramatic flare of his coat.

She leans against one of the tables, insisting to herself that it’s the long hours that are making her feel slightly faint and unsteady on her feet. Yes. Most definitely a combination of working all night and the fact that all of her blood has gone to her stomach to digest the meal she just ate. Nothing at all to do with Sherlock and his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice, and Brit picking!

Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her initial encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bursting into the station, Sherlock waves his phone in the air and just starts yelling. “Lestrade! Lestrade!” The man in question pops his silver head out of his office with an incredulous look on his face before hurrying over to Sherlock and snapping, “Look, I’m not your dog. You can’t just come in here and start shouting my name and expect me to come…”

Smirking, Sherlock points out dryly, “But you came, didn’t you?” He can see the shift come over Lestrade’s features, from exasperation to personal affront, quickly turning into get-the-fuck-out-of-my-station-you-irritating-git. As much as he enjoys winding Lestrade up in revenge for his occasional ‘drug busts’, he can’t afford to piss him off too much. Sherlock forestalls the angry rant on the tip of Lestrade’s tongue by shoving his phone in front of the DI. “I come bearing proof. Irrefutable proof that Van Coon and Lukis are linked, thus connecting their already obviously linked murders.”

A frustrated groan rumbles past Lestrade’s lips rather than the colorful curses he was intending as he takes the phone and stares at the images, toggling one to the next to the next. “What am I looking at here? Feet? Tattoos?”

“The feet of Van Coon and Lukis, to be specific, and the tattoo is the mark of a Triad known as the Black Lotus. Which I’m sure you can verify through Interpol” He slips his hands in his pockets and watches as Lestrade continues studying the images, the slight tilt of his head indicating that he’s still listening. “John and I were able to catch up with the mysterious Soo Lin Yao at the British Museum last night and she drew us this.” His fingers curl about the slip of paper, pulling it out to proffer, but it would seem that something else is wrong now. Lestrade is having none of it, a halting hand lifted between them, the other pinching his brow.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. The British Museum? You were there? Last night?” Grey eyes go narrow and hard as Lestrade bites out, “How curious. Because there was a break in there last night resulting in the near destruction of an entire exhibit room. I don’t suppose you know anything about that?”

“Of course I do. I know everything about it.”

The smile that Lestrade offers is tight and anything but pleasant. “Right. So you’ve come to turn yourself in then?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lestrade.”

Arms fold over his chest as Lestrade tilts his chin up and his head back in authority. How tedious.

“But you were at the museum? After hours? What time exactly, and how did you get in?”

Sherlock stares down his nose at Lestrade. “We were invited.”

That sardonic smile is back as the Detective Inspector shakes his head sadly from side to side. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t see the names of either Sherlock Holmes or John Watson on the guest list…”

Sherlock shrugs slightly and rolls his eyes at Lestrade’s attempt at some sort of joke. “Fine, I borrowed a security card from one of the staff. Can we move on to what’s important? And no,” he adds, as Lestrade opens his mouth once more to say something stupid, no doubt, “it wasn’t John
and I who destroyed that exhibit, it was the ghost.”

Several staff members and officers, who had already been listening to the conversation between their superior and the overly superior Sherlock Holmes glance up at the word ‘ghost’, peering at the two men with a mixture of disbelief and disapproval.

“Christ, come on and get in here,” Lestrade hisses, grabbing Sherlock by the arm and all but dragging him into his office, closing the door and drawing the shades to boot. For once Sherlock allows the gesture, just so long as they don’t have to waste any more time talking about the museum’s exhibit. There are much more important and exciting things to discuss! His words come in a rush.

“It’s all coming together, Lestrade. Soo Lin and her brother both used to work for the Triad. Soo Lin got out and came to London. Her brother did not. Van Coon and Lukis were both men who had business reasons to be in China on a regular basis – a perfect cover for smuggling. They each joined The Black Lotus Triad but one of them stole something. Something valuable, and they both paid for that mistake with their lives. You have an illegal smuggling group right here in London, working right beneath the nose of Scotland Yard. And now two men are dead and there will likely be more unless they find what they’re looking for.”

Holding up a hand again, Lestrade wearily asks, “Right, first thing’s first. Who’s Soo Lin Yao?”

God, why is everyone so slow? Huffing, Sherlock answers brusquely, “Ms. Yao is, or I should say was, a Chinese antiquities expert who until recently worked at the British Museum. At first we thought she was involved with the smugglers, but it turns out they wanted her assistance which she refused to give.”

“And this thing, this valuable object that one of our two vics stole from this… Triad? What is it?”

This time it’s Sherlock’s turn to jut his chin up a trifle defensively, eyes flickering away as he confesses, “Still working on that bit…”

Lestrade sighs deeply, hands on his hips, head tilted down, eyes staring at the floor as he tries to sort out all this new information in his head. “Right, I’m going to need to speak to this Soo Lin then.”

“You can’t.”

His head snaps up warily, hovering on the edge of vexation. “What do you mean, I can’t?”

“Because she’s dead.”

“What? When?”

“Last night. Her brother killed her, because she wouldn’t help him.”

“What?” Lestrade stops himself, reining in his ever-growing exasperation and temper. A hand lifts to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Alright Sherlock, this has gone far enough. Why didn’t you report this and where is her body? There were no reports of a murder victim at the museum.”

“No, there wouldn’t have been because there isn’t one. A body, that is. Because she was already dead when he killed her.”

The look on Lestrade’s face is priceless, and Sherlock can’t help but wonder for a moment if his face could actively get any redder than it currently is. Indubitably, if he were hanging upside down
with all the blood rushing to his face, that would do the trick. Still, it’s a rather virulent color and redder than he’s ever seen the Detective Inspector get before.

“Lestrade, have you taken your blood pressure medication today? You’re turning a rather alarming shade of red…”

“You do realize,” Lestrade bites out, each word sharp and pointed, like the tip of a knife, “that I only started needing to take blood pressure medication when I began letting you help out with cases from time to time?”

Sherlock waves an airy gloved hand. “Don’t be so dramatic. High blood pressure runs in your family. The most you can claim is that I am an occasional catalyst, but certainly not the cause. If anything, my assistance should lower your blood pressure - all those pesky unsolvable cases suddenly solvable.”

How intriguing. It seems that he was wrong after all. Lestrade’s face is most definitely redder now. “Sherlock. The dead woman who was already dead? Explain.”

With an irritated huff of breath, as if Lestrade had not been paying attention in class and as a result could not provide the correct answer, Sherlock explains, “Soo Lin and her brother were both ghosts. That is how your killer is able to kill in the way that he does. Locked doors and barred windows mean nothing to a spirit who can walk through walls. If you look closely at the two autopsy reports, you’ll see that the pattern of how Lukis’ heart was crushed matches the ‘inexplicable’ bruising marks on Van Coon’s heart. If Van Coon hadn’t suffered from congenital heart disease and had a heart attack before Siwang could finish the job, their conditions would have been identical I suspect.”

Lestrade takes in a breath, holds it, and then releases it slowly, his color dropping as he considers what Sherlock has told him. “This is going to be a bitch to write up a report for. I have no idea how I’m going to be able to explain any of this rationally.”

“Well, never mind that now. I’ve given you something, so now I need something in return.”

“Oh God. Alright, what?”

“Their books.”

“Excuse me?”

“Their books. Lukis and Van Coon’s books.”

“Their… books.”

“Yes. All of them, delivered to 221B Baker Street just as soon as possible.”

Lestrade stares at Sherlock for a moment but then shakes his head as he concedes, weary of the struggle. “Right, okay. Why?”

“Why?” Sherlock’s eyes gleam with devilish delight. “To catch a killer, of course.”

*****

When Sherlock returns to the flat, he finds John sitting in his usual chair, the television blessedly off. A quick glance tells him that while John is still not entirely happy, he’s not nearly as angry as he was when Sherlock left. Good. No need to get into that whole ridiculous mess again.
He strolls into the kitchen, lifting the kettle to see if there’s any water left, asking mildly, “Looking for something?” That much is clear, by the way John’s eyes are scanning, rather than reading, the newspaper in his hands. “By the section you’re perusing, I gather you’ve decided to venture outside, despite the fact that you’re still in your dressing gown.”

“Mmmmm, yes. I told Harriet I would do something ‘fun’ with her.” John glances up from the paper with a vaguely harried expression on his face. “I’m trying to find something ‘fun’.” Apparently without much success.

“Mmmm,” is the only reply worth giving to such a mundane idea. Boring.

There’s a knock at the open door before Mrs. Hudson pops in her head with a cheerful ‘whoo-hoo’ to catch their attention. Both men turn to look at her, their landlady turning to Sherlock and asking, “Are we having a charity drive?”

“What?”

“Well, there are some men downstairs with crates and crates of books.”

Sherlock rubs his hands together and grins while John’s expression slowly fills with dread. “How many crates?” he asks with an awkward swallow.

Mrs. Hudson offers him a sympathetic look and murmurs regretfully, “Lots and lots of crates.”

“Excellent! Send them up, Mrs. Hudson, and a light lunch if you don’t mind. John and I have a great deal of work ahead of us.”

With a small huff, she waves Sherlock off and begins to make her way down the stairs, calling out for what could easily be the hundredth time, “Not your housekeeper!”

“Sherlock. Why are we getting crates of books delivered?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Not to me.”

A huff of exasperated breath. “The code is a book code. Soo Lin died before she could tell us what book was the key. But we know that both Lukis and Van Coon were able to crack the code, so what does that tell us?”

John sits for a moment before venturing uncertainly, “… that they must have each had the necessary book?”

“Exactly! And, if we compare their collections and cull out the books they have in common, we will be able to narrow it down until we find the right book!”

Turning, Sherlock begins making room as one by one the boxes of books are brought upstairs and stacked one upon another until there are towers of them everywhere, Lukis’ to one side and Van Coon’s to the other. He’s pleased to see that John has rolled up his sleeves and pitched in and is now standing in the middle of their living room, his expression doleful, but ready to get to work. Whatever that nonsense of this morning was about, it’s clearly passed now.

John’s eyes lift to rest upon Sherlock’s face, a short, decisive nod proffered as he asks, “Right. How do you want to go about this?”
“You take those boxes, I’ll take these. Stack everything in alphabetical piles first. Once the books are all sorted, then we’ll go through each pile and pull any books that are the same and run them through the cipher.”

“Sherlock,” John interrupts, his tone gentle, but firm. “Soo Lin said it was more than just that. She said the code was enchanted…”

“Yes, yes, I was there. First things first, John. We need to find any and all matches first, determine which books they held in common that might be the key to the cipher. If they’re enchanted, then it’s merely a question of reverse-spelling them, pulling up the structure and shape of the magic performed upon them and rebuilding it, then enacting it.” Of course, in reality reverse-spell work is very difficult to do, but Sherlock isn’t concerned about that now. He doesn’t doubt for a moment that he can manage such magic.

John, however, looks dubious. But Sherlock cuts him off with a wave of his hand and reiterates, despite his dislike in doing so, “First things first.”

*****

Hours have passed. The light from outside has shifted, rising up, falling down, parting through the curtains of their flat before disappearing once more and still they are no closer to breaking the cipher than they were before. A few plates holding mere crumbs of the sandwiches Mrs. Hudson did, in fact, bring up for them rest on the table. Numerous cups of tea with varying levels of liquid still inside them are littered amongst the massive piles of books.

They did manage to find fifteen matched sets of books between the two men, but not a hint of magic residue exists upon any of them. Despite this hitch in their proceedings, Sherlock and John studiously went through and ‘decoded’ the cipher fifteen times using the fifteen books. Nothing. Meaningless gibberish. Which means that the spell is the key.

In a fit of anger and frustration, Sherlock chucks the copy of London A-Z currently in his hand across the room. The book raps one horn of the bison skull hanging on the wall, knocking it askew and causing the headphones sitting on it to tumble off and hit the floor. His hands rub aggressively through his already finger tousled hair.

It’s tempting to tell him ‘I told you so’, seeing as John, well, told him so. But the angel isn’t so petty as to rub salt into the open wounds in Sherlock’s pride. He looks about the devastation of their flat and sighs, trying to think of something, anything that might help his friend and ward. Sherlock thwarted is a dangerous mix of tetchy, determined, and unpredictable. “What about a book that everyone would own?”

Hunched over, elbows resting on his knees, fingers intertwined before his face as he broods, Sherlock looks like he would happily crush someone’s heart himself at the moment. At the uncertain suggestion, Sherlock’s head lifts, eyes angrily stabbing John from over his knuckles. “Such as?”

“Well, the dictionary, the Bible…”

A derisive snort is all the reward John receives. “Your ideas are quaint, but illogical. Even if, in this age of the internet, people bothered to have actual dictionaries and even if everyone were Christian and owned bibles, there’s no telling which version or edition they might have. No, it can’t be something as obvious as that. There has to be a specific book that both men have. We just have to keep looking until we find it.”
Stinging a little from the rejection when he was only trying to help, John glances at his watch and rolls his eyes. “My, my, look at the time. Right, well, you keep searching then. I’m going to take a shower and get ready to meet up with Harry.”

Sherlock’s voice is derisive and disapproving. “Oh yes, your ‘date’. How dull.” The subtext is obvious – how could John leave him now when they are at such a crucial point in the investigation? Sherlock might as well throw himself on the couch and start sulking right now.

“It is not a ‘date’. And it will not be dull. In fact, seeing Harry might be many things – annoying, frustrating, pointless, aggravating, drunken - but it is never, ever, dull.”

“So, what is your plan then?”

Running his hands through his hair, to straighten rather than skew, John sighs. He really still isn’t quite sure what humans like to do to entertain themselves. The options seem all at once far too numerous and far too limited and repetitive. “I don’t know. See a movie? Go out to eat somewhere? I’m too out of touch with Harry to know what she likes other than alcohol, and that’s definitely off the menu. I figure I’ll let her pick a film and a restaurant…”

“Booooring!” Leaning over, Sherlock starts rummaging through the seemingly random collection of notes, diagrams, drawing, and papers on the table in front of him before finding what he’s looking for. “Here, why don’t you take her to this?” He hands over a torn advertisement from the newspaper.

John peers at it curiously before lifting his head to peer at Sherlock. “A circus?”

“Yes, a circus! Why not? It’s different, it’s unusual, it’s exotic…”

“It’s Chinese…” John notes with no small amount of suspicion tingeing his voice.

Sherlock waves a dismissive hand, pointing out, “Coincidence.”

“Sherlock, I am not doing research or investigating or anything else either with or for you tonight. I am going out. With my sister. Because it’s important.”

“Yes, yes, you’ve made that abundantly clear already John. And I’m not asking you to do any research, investigating or anything else. Go on, have a good time. But if this is, in fact, so very important to you, wouldn’t it be better to take Harriet to something special and unusual? Dinner and a movie? How utterly trite.”

John stares at the piece of paper in his head, glancing back and forth between it and Sherlock, who is still stacking and sorting books with a distracted and oblivious air, comparing the collections once more in the hopes of finding something that they missed before.

“Right. Okay, fine. Good.” And after a belated moment of uncertainty, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

It’s only after John has headed down the hall to take his shower that Sherlock allows a small smirk to curl his lips.

*****

Waiting outside the venue, John peers at his watch again before looking around the street. The theater is smaller than expected, and rather run-down, which suggests that this particular circus is
perhaps not one of the more famous ones from China. That earlier niggle of doubt is starting to bloom into a full-out flower of suspicion.

“John! Johnnie!”

His head snaps up, eyes darting through the dimness until they fall upon the familiar face of his sister. Well, Watson’s sister. He pushes off the wall, a smile dawning on his lips until Harry draws close enough for him to see the over-brightness of her eyes, the flush on her cheeks and nose, and the familiar scent of peppermint. A rush of memories and resentments crowd in and he cannot help but feel at once disappointed and defeated.

“Oh Harry, you promised.”

Her expression is confused for a moment before comprehension and irritation slip into place. “What? Oh. Jesus, John, I said I wouldn’t drink tonight, not that I wouldn’t have a drink all day. And I won’t.”

“Right, and so instead you went and drank a whole bottle of, what, peppermint schnapps? Did you think I wouldn’t notice?” He gestures to the people passing them and heading into the building. “Maybe they’ll just think it’s some gum or a sweet fetish, but I know better. It’s the same trick you played all through secondary school.” This is why he didn’t reach out. This is why Watson stayed away for all these years. Because it doesn’t matter how much he tries or how much she wants it to be different, it never will be.

“Damnit all, Harry, I thought you were serious about this.” He scrubs at his face and starts to turn away, half tempted to just leave right now. This isn’t his place. He’s not her brother. Hasn’t he already interfered in John Watson’s life enough? Who is he to assume the man’s mantle? But as he turns, his eye catches upon Harriet’s Angel staring at him. There’s a brief rush of panic, wondering if somehow she suddenly sees him for what he is. But after a second it is clear that she only sees him for what he could be, silent hope in her eyes. John’s gaze quickly sidles away lest he accidentally reveal his awareness of her.

Harry’s hand darts out, taking advantage of his sudden doubt and grabbing John’s arm as she blurts, “Come on! You think this is easy for me? Look, I’ll be straight with you. I’m… nervous.”

He stops, his body still turned away, his eyes resting upon the ground so as to not stare at Harriet’s Guardian, but he’s listening. Harry rushes on, seeing the opportunity and not giving him a chance to change his mind.

“This is hard for me too. It’s been so long, and there’s been so much anger and fighting and misunderstandings between us over the years. I just… I just needed something to settle my nerves.” His arm tenses beneath her fingertips and in turn she squeezes tightly, not letting him go. “I’m not drunk, okay? I just needed something to take the edge off.”

Her voice turns soft, wheedling, and in response something deep within John gives way. “Come on Johnnie.” Her hand tugs on his sleeve. “I’m really excited. I can’t remember the last time I went to the circus, and this looks really interesting. How did you hear about it?”

Turning his head, John relents a little, his body losing its tension. “Sherlock suggested it. Said a movie and dinner would be ‘trite’”

She laughs, the sound open and honest in a way John hasn’t heard since they were children. Well, since Harry and John Watson were children. “He’s a real arse, this flatmate of yours, isn’t he?” She wraps her hands affectionately around John’s bicep, leaning into his side. “A movie and dinner
He stares into blue eyes that match his own and the corner of his mouth quirks upward. She’s not his ward, he’s not her Guardian, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care, that he can’t try to help. Perhaps he owes this to John. In a strange way, perhaps he owes it to Soo Lin as well, to make amends between Watson and Harry as she could not between herself and Siwang. “Well, then we best get inside before it starts without us, shouldn’t we?”

They climb the stairs of the building, past cheerful red Chinese lanterns and beneath a large banner that reads, “One Night Only – Tiandihui Circus” The inside of the venue is even more tired and old than the outside, with walls that are peeling paper and paint, the poor lighting improved by a continuous string of paper lanterns that help make the dilapidated condition of the place seem charming rather than shady.

Stopping at the ticket collection window, John waits his turn before smiling with casual friendliness. “Yes, hello, I’m here to pick up some tickets, under the name John Watson?”

The young man behind the counter smiles and dips his head, fingers sorting through a box of pre-printed tickets before pulling out a paperclipped bundle. “Ah yes, four tickets. If you’ll just sign here?”

One brow lifts in confusion. “Four? No, I think there’s some mistake. I only reserved two tickets.”

And then the familiar voice of his flatmate replies, “Mmmmm, yes, and then I called back and reserved two more.”

John turns to stare, mouth opening wide to berate him and then shutting once more as he espies a woman at Sherlock’s side. “Uh, hello there.” He scrambles to remember whether he knows her from his time as Sherlock’s Guardian Angel or whether he’s met her or not in the flesh, so to speak. Fortunately she solves John’s dilemma by reaching out a hand.

“Hi there, I’m Molly. You must be John?” She’s given Sherlock a sideways glance that is not the least bit pleased. It seems that as much as John wasn’t expecting them, she was not expecting him and Harry.

“Ah, yes, yes, John Watson. Sherlock’s told me all about you, Molly,”

“No I haven’t.”

John gives Sherlock a vicious glare, unable to miss the brief flash of pleasure that came over Molly’s face at that news, the cheerful smile dashed against the rocks of reality as Sherlock tactlessly corrects him. “Yes you have,” John replies through clenched teeth with a little too much emphasis on his words, hoping that Sherlock will get the hint.

He doesn’t. Sherlock just stares at John bemusedly as he reiterates, “No, I haven’t. Nothing to tell.”

John can’t keep the wince from his face and immediately reaches out to grab Harry, dragging her forward. “Right, well, this is my sister. Harriet.”

Harry, it would seem, is highly amused by the terrible awkwardness of it all, a sardonic smirk upon her lips. She lifts her gaze to Sherlock offering him nothing more than a scathing glance and an offhand, “Git.” Men in general and Sherlock in particular hold no interest for her. Sherlock’s ‘date’ on the other hand, well, that’s another story. Her blue eyes are drinking in the diorama of emotions on Molly’s face with predatory and calculated interest. Ignoring Sherlock’s affronted look, she reaches past him and offers her hand to Molly, giving the poor laboratory technician a dazzling,
warm smile. “It’s Harry, actually. Hi, it’s nice to meet you. What a lovely dress you’re wearing. Very elegant. And those shoes… where did you get them?”

It takes John a moment before he realizes what’s going on. Oh dear God. She’s not just giving Sherlock the cold shoulder, she’s flirting with his date!

Molly flushes at the compliments, her gaze flickering over wistfully for a moment toward Sherlock before turning back to Harry and offering a little shyly, “Really? Thanks. I’ve been saving them for a special occasion and, well, this seemed like it was going to be pretty special…” Except for the part where her date with Sherlock ended up becoming a group outing and not special at all.

“Come on,” Harry offers impulsively, pushing past the two men and curling a possessive hand about Molly’s arm. “Let me show you where you can put your coat…” Harriet practically drags Molly off, the brunette looking back uncertainly before allowing herself to be led away. John blows out a rough breath, before glaring up at Sherlock. The detective has already dismissed Molly’s presence and Harriet’s commentary, turning toward the stairwell only to halt as John steps into his path. It takes a moment, but Sherlock eventually realizes that he is once again on the receiving end of John’s displeasure.

“Is there a problem?”

“Yes, there’s a bloody problem! What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like? I’m going on a double date with you.”

“With me? A double…?” Glancing about, John points a very pointed finger toward his ‘date’ who is currently standing too close to Molly for someone who has only just met her, the pair of them studying the various beverages and treats available. By the vaguely annoyed expression on her face, Harry is clearly regretting her promise not to drink, eyes fixated on the alcoholic offerings. Not that she hasn’t already predosed, he reminds himself.

“Sherlock… that’s my sister!”

“Obviously. Your eyes and nose are very similar, though hers is a bit more delicate and she doesn’t have the cleft in her chin like you do, but other than that the resemblance makes it quite clear that you’re siblings. What is your point?”

“My point? My point is that she is not my date! I’m not out on a date with my sister. As a result, this,” he hisses, gesturing to himself, Harry, Sherlock, and Molly, “cannot be a double date!”

“Semantics. The precise terminology in this case is irrelevant. You’re here, I’m here, they’re here. We’re here.”

“Exactly, which brings me back to the question, why are you here?”

“Well, you said you weren’t going to do any research, investigating or deducing. I was always going to come, but your reluctance to make yourself useful made it imperative.”

The sound of a high pitched drum, begins a slow, steady beat, the lights in the lobby dimming and then brightening.

“Come on John, the show is starting.”

The women return, Molly laughing nervously at something Harry said, clearly a trifle unnerved by her brash and forward behavior, but not precisely sure how to extricate herself from it. She reaches
for Sherlock’s arm, but the man has already turned and started heading into the theater without her. Bastard. John turns to offer Molly one arm and Harry the other, but Harry it would seem has plans of her own. Already she has taken Molly’s arm, leaning over to whisper something in the younger woman’s ear. Watson’s sister has a silver tongue when it isn’t barbed, forked, or otherwise shaped. Molly hesitates for only a moment before nodding and conjuring up a happy smile.

In the end, John isn’t sure who he’s more annoyed with – Sherlock for treating Molly so poorly or Harriet, for getting him into this mess in the first place and then blowing him off at the first sign of a potential shag. Shaking his head, John makes his way up the stairs alone.

There are no seats, only a circle designated upon the main floor by a ring of candles around which the audience gathers uncertainly. More casually dressed individuals hunker down while others remain standing. Within the center of the circle sits a large rectangular object, not unlike a phone booth in size and shape, swathed in blood red silk.

John finds the others close to the front, though Molly has managed to escape Harriet’s affections for the moment and is standing next to Sherlock; she doesn’t make the mistake this time of reaching out for his hand or arm. In turn Sherlock continues to ignore her in favor of studying their surroundings.

Nudging Harriet’s arm with his own John gives her a stern frown. Laughing softly, Harriet bumps his arm back. “Sorry Johnnie, but you know how it is. Girls will be girls…” No repentance. Ah well, what did he expect?

They take a moment to look about at what used to be a grand old theater, now fallen into disrepair. The crowd as a whole seems confused. In fact, Molly and Sherlock seem to be the only ones unphased by the proceedings. With a soft huff of bemusement and wariness, John rumbles, “This is… weird…”

Harry nods, her voice laced with dry wit. “Certainly not the sort of circus I was expecting. Look.” Her finger points toward the candles. “Only one ring. I thought it was required that they have three. Outrageous. Where are my tigers? And no high wire act?” She pinches her brother’s arm. “John Watson, you owe me a proper circus, the kind with cotton candy and prancing horses with young scantily clad women standing on their backs and soaring through the air.”

John rolls his eyes. “Or just scantily clad women, yes? Give it a rest, Harry, this isn’t Ringling Brothers. This is about culture and… art. I think.”

Sherlock smirks at their assessments and counters, “Well, I don’t think it’s their day job…”

Harry gives Sherlock and then John a confused look as John tries to ease her misgivings with a jokingly cheerful smile. “Right, cause they’re not a circus at all, are they? Bet they’re a gang of international smugglers! Ta very much for the recommendation, Sherlock.”

Tipping his head as if genuinely accepting the gratitude, Sherlock offers John a smirk. “You’re welcome. Keep your eyes open. Let me know if you see anything unusual.” His emphasis is subtle enough to go over Harriet’s head, but obvious enough for John to know exactly what Sherlock wants of him. Ah well, he’s going to be watching the show anyways. It’s not like he wouldn’t point out anything unusual to Sherlock if he noticed it. For a moment his attention sharpens, Guardian Angels and spirit guides coalescing from out of the shadows and the in-between spaces as he scans the crowd. So far, nothing obviously strange or supernatural.

A seated group of musicians at the base of the stage begin to play traditional Chinese instruments – the two-stringed Erhu and Jinghu fiddles singing the melody as the high pitched Biangu continues,
mixing with the deep base notes of the Dagu drum. As they do a woman emerges from behind lush velvet curtain of the stage, crossing over and then down the small flight of stairs before turning toward the ring of candles. She fails to meet Harry’s requirements on all grounds. She’s not riding a horse, she’s not young, and she’s anything but scantily clad. Dressed from head to foot in an elaborate Chinese outfit of red and gold, with stylized makeup adorning her features, she looks like she’s stepped out of a historical photograph or some expensive period film. Following in her wake are three demon masked individuals, two in simpler clothes flanking a third ornately dressed in a heavily embroidered black and gold robe.

As the four individuals draw closer to the center of the circle and the object waiting there, drums and strings hover on a single vibrating note. The woman reaches up and with a sweep of her arm, snatches at the cloth, whisking it free. Dramatically the music spirals up into a pinnacle of sound as the fabric falls away to reveal an elaborately decorated box, a mix of metal and wood and primarily glass.

At the great reveal, Sherlock chuckles softly, causing John to frown and peer up at him.

“What’s so funny?”

“This is. It’s a classic escapology act called the Chinese Water Torture Chamber.”

“So?”

Leaning in close, Sherlock’s voice is pitched low so as not to disturb the other patrons, his breath tickling against the shell of John’s ear. “So, it isn’t even remotely ‘Chinese’. This trick was created by Harry Houdini in 1911.” Sherlock lips curl wide, pleased and delighted by the irony. “They might be killers and smugglers and one of the most powerful Triads in China, but someone in this company has a sense of humor…”

The performers bow to the audience and then the masked man and the woman bow to each other before he lifts his hands to untie the catch at his throat, the robe encasing him falling away to reveal a fit and barely dressed figure. The other two demon-masked assistants begin to bind him with chains, the man struggling against his bonds to prove their strength. They lift him up and place him inside the case, whereupon he begins to struggle all the harder as water begins to swirl up about his ankles, rising faster and faster as he tries to free himself. All that can be heard now is the sounds of his thrashing as he hits either side of the tank, his grunts and shouts as he fights his bonds. The water level continues to rise until it finally floods over his head.

“Obviously,” Sherlock murmurs on while the audience gasps and leans in, “he must free himself before he drowns. But that isn’t necessarily so very impressive. After all, the current record for holding one’s breath is a whole nineteen minutes and 21 seconds.”

Flashing Sherlock a look of astonishment, John counters, “Nineteen…?”

“Of course, that involves a certain amount of cheating. Hyperventilating before the attempt to purge the body of as much carbon dioxide as possible, breathing in from an oxygen tank, and the water of course actually helps matters.”

“No?”

Sherlock’s head bobs. “The water, especially cold water, triggers a primitive reaction known as the diving reflex. The body shunts circulation to the heart and brain. But of course this is a little different, since he needs to still be able to move and function to free himself. At most, I would estimate he has trained himself to last for approximately eight minutes, 52 seconds.”
The men on either side have picked up an axe each, suggesting that perhaps they will be required to use them. And, indeed, the man inside the tank has begun to move more slowly, his struggles weakening. But then, with a mighty heave and an eel like shift of his body he manages to free himself from one bond, and from there the others follow more quickly until he is able to push himself up from the bottom of the tank with a violent gasp for air and an explosion of water. The audience bursts into applause as the performers deeply bow.

Harriet shifts closer to John and drolly comments, “Well, that was exciting.” But it’s clear she has other things on her mind, they way her eyes keep drifting sideways. “So tell me, what’s the deal with Molly?”

John turns and stares at her for a moment before shaking his head in disbelief. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“It looks like you’re hitting on Sherlock’s date is what it looks like!”

“Oh, come off it. She’s smitten with him, but he doesn’t have the slightest bit of interest in her so why should you care if I…. oh.” A look comes over Harriet’s face as she does a little deducing of her own. “Oh ho ho, don’t tell me you’re jealous little brother!”

“What?!” John is fairly certain his eyes cannot open any wider than they are, though at least he manages to keep his voice down. Of course it helps that the music has risen up once more as the stage hands remove the tank and clean up the water that spilled, the audience gushing at one another over the act they just saw.

“Why else would you care?”

“That’s not the point! Do not hit on Sherlock’s date. It’s… it’s… tacky! Besides, I’m fairly certain that she’s straight.”

Harriet waves an airy hand that is disturbingly similar to the one Sherlock waves when he’s dismissing someone’s idiotic reasoning. “She just hasn’t met the right woman yet. Come on, John, it’s fine. We’ll just alter the arrangement, shall we? I can be Molly’s date and Sherlock can be yours. There, everybody’s happy and Sherlock gets to have his double date after all.”

John’s face as grown quite red by this point, but whether that’s due to embarrassment or outrage is unclear. Quite likely both.

Noticing Molly’s confusion and bereft expression leads Harriet to glance around and notice just who in their little party is missing. “Oh look, Sherlock buggered off and left poor Molly behind. How awful. I better go give her some ‘sisterly’ support and affection…”

“Harry, don’t you dare…” but before John can finish the whisper, Harry has sidled over and caught Molly’s wrist to forestall her search for Sherlock, whispering God only knows what in her ear. Molly looks confused at first, then considering a moment later, nodding before standing pat at Harry’s side.

John lifts his eyes to heaven. Dear God, why couldn’t he have got the body of an orphan? 

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It is a simple feat to slip free of the crowd, following the empty, outside hall back until he reaches the stage door. Slipping inside, Sherlock waits for his eyes to adjust before stealthily creeping
through the darkness. There are all sorts of paraphernalia scattered about – racks of fancy clothing, equipment, instruments – everything needed for the rest of the performance. But none of this interests him. He’s looking for something a little more illegal than props and costumes.

He pauses for a moment to study a masked suit of armor resting on a pedestal, wondering what that costume could be for. The music has struck up again and taking a careful peek out of the curtain, he can see that an acrobatic silks performance is now under way, the audience gasping as the performer in question whisks down from the ceiling via cleverly wrapped fabric around his body, spinning and twirling as it unravels from his frame only to jerk to a sudden stop just before hitting the floor, a flurry of applause rewarding his risk.

Quickly, carefully, Sherlock begins searching for anything that could tie the circus to the Triad. His eyes devour every object, search for every clue, but so far it’s all frustratingly ordinary and expected. The sound of a woman’s voice drawing closer, however, has him abruptly ducking behind a rolling rack of costumes.

The door opens and two people enter. A woman’s voice, older, angry, asks, “Tā zài nǎ lǐ?”

“Zhū zǐ, wǒ men bù zhī dào.”

The silence that follows is ominous, her voice breaking it with the threat of dire consequences. “Nǐ zěn me bù zhī dào tā zài nǎ lǐ? Jiào tā. Tā bì xū děi lái.”

“Wǒ men jiào le, zhū zǐ, dàn Sǐwáng hái méi huí lai.”

Sǐwáng. Sherlock silently curses his inability to understand what they are saying, but that name alone proves their connection.

“Suàn le, wǒ zì jǐ jiào tā. Nǐ zhè méi yòng de dōng xi, jīn tiān nǐ jiù shì Sǐwáng de wăn cān.”

The door marks their departure but Sherlock waits a moment longer to ensure that both individuals have left. His gaze drops, a hint of yellow catching his eye, his hand reaching into the bag on the floor near him to pull out a can of Michigan spray paint.

Rising up he crosses over toward one of the makeup tables, shaking the can a few times before popping off the top and spraying a line across the mirror there. Same color. Same line. Sherlock’s lips curl into a smug smile. “Got you.”

It is only a flicker of motion in the mirror that warns him before the sword comes whistling past his ear, cutting into the wood of the table with a hefty thud. Whirling about, Sherlock brandishes the only weapon he has and sprays the yellow paint into the eyes of his masked attacker.

He expects the man to be blinded, cursing or crying out in pain as he stumbles about haplessly. As such it comes as quite a surprise when he has to dodge and duck to avoid the whirling blade coming at his head. Sherlock crashes into the makeup table as the costumed figure continues to attack, utterly indifferent by the paint that should have crippled him.

It’s only then, with the openings of the mask highlighted in yellow, that Sherlock realizes how much danger he’s in.

Because behind those cut out holes? There are no eyes.

Chapter End Notes
"Tā zài nǎ lǐ?" - Where is he?
“Zhū zī, wǒ men bù zhī dào.” - Chief, we don't know.
"Nǐ zěn me bù zhī dào tā zài nǎ lǐ? Jiào tā. Tā bì xū děi lái." - How can you not know where he is? Call him. He must come.
"Wǒ men jiào le, zhū zī, dàn Sǐwáng hái méi huí lái." - We've called, Chief, but Sǐwáng has yet to return.
"Suàn le, wǒ zì jǐ jiào tā. Nǐ zhè méi yòng de dōng xi, jīn tiān nǐ jiù shì Sǐwáng de wǎn cān." - Forget it, I will call him myself. You useless thing, today you're Sǐwáng's dinner.

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Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John considers whether he should go after Sherlock. Despite everything he said earlier, it’s not a terribly unreasonable thought.

First, he told Sherlock that he was taking the night off. He deserves a night off. But who is he kidding? He still lives for Sherlock — to guide him, support him, protect him. It’s his whole purpose and meaning of existence. Over the months his devotion to his ward has shifted into something more personal — his choice rather than his duty. But the affection and love he feels for Sherlock is as strong as ever if not more so. Agape — pure love, the kind of love that only God and his Angels can express and experience has expanded to include Philos — the love born of friendship.

Second, he came here with Harriet and for Harriet — to help heal the rift between her and John Watson. To make peace and perhaps to assuage some of the guilt he still feels for failing to protect Soo Lin. But Harriet seems to have decided that trying to seduce Molly is the more entertaining prospect of the evening. Whenever it seems like Molly might wander off in search of Sherlock herself, Harry catches her hand or her arm, murmurs something in her ear or coos in delight at the performance, forestalling any chance of escape.

So really, why shouldn’t he just cut to the chase before there actually is one? But, then again, why shouldn’t he take some time for himself for a change? Despite everything, he is, in fact, enjoying the music, the performance, the strange atmosphere and even the antics of Watson’s sister to an extent. The urge to just stay and experience a social, theatrical event the way an ordinary human would — that’s not something he’s allowed himself to enjoy before.

His eyes lift to the talented silks acrobat, who uses the flowing red fabric to fly through the air with surprising grace and beauty for a human. For a brief moment, John feels a flash of regret, of loss. His wings. He… misses them. Misses flight. It was a given for centuries, a simple means of transport, of convenience. But now? He feels the weight of gravity and humanity heavy on his shoulders, a soft wistful sigh feathering past his lips.

His shoulder twinges, as if sympathizing with his loss, and John raises his hand to gently massage and rotate the injured joint. His gaze catches on the curtain beyond for a moment, eyeing it curiously as it shifts and shimmies slightly. Someone preparing the next act perhaps?

“Hey.”

He turns, surprised to find Harry standing next to him again, her eyes surprisingly sober and concerned as they flicker to his shoulder and then back again. “You alright?”

“What? Oh, yes,” he murmurs softly, distracted and confused for a moment before shaking his head and dropping his hand away as so not to worry Watson’s sister. “It just aches sometimes. It’s nothing.” He gives her a warm smile meant to soothe any worries away.

But Harry’s expression doesn’t lighten at his reassuring words, her hand lifting instead to lightly rest against the back of his left shoulder, palm warm against the entry point of the wound. She slowly circles her hand there. A gesture of comfort. Of tenderness. She knows what happened, of course. She was sent a letter and a report. But knowing and understanding are two very different
things. He can see by her eyes that she’s imagining it now, how the bullet struck him, piercing flesh and shattering bone, entering from behind and exploding out the front. She bites her lip and blinks. Then, with a soft sigh, her hand trails down his arm before wrapping around it, her cheek pressing into his shoulder as her gaze shifts back to the performance.

John glances past her to where Molly stands, quietly enraptured by the flying figure before them, before returning his gaze to the spectacle.

It’s easy to get lost in the beauty of the human form, the flowing lines of blood red silk, the graceful battle against gravity. But after a few minutes, his shoulder is starting to throb. John briefly ponders the value of asking Harriet to stop hanging on his arm versus the concern his request will engender before deciding he can live with a little discomfort.

Her head tilts as she straightens up a little. “Did you hear that?”

Blinking, John glances over at Harriet. “Hear what?”

A frown has creased her brow, but her tone is light and wry. “Well, I know that Chinese music can be a bit… discordant at times, but that clanging going on? See? There!” Her hand points, even though there is no obvious source for the odd metallic crack. “I mean, it isn’t even following along with the rest of the music…”

The pieces fall into place. His aching shoulder, the rippling curtain, and now the strange sounds…

Shit. Sherlock!

At that very moment, as if he sensed his name being thought so fervently, John’s ward falls through the curtain and onto his back, the air in his lungs exploding out of him in a violent whoosh, leaving him gasping like a trout on a riverbank. The audience gasps and looks up, thinking this is part of the show, not noticing the obvious surprise of the musicians who trail off playing uncertainly.

The curtain parts dramatically as the masked suit of armor steps out and raises its sword high. Sherlock just barely manages to roll off the stage before the hefty blade takes a bite into the floor where he just was.

“Stay here.” John starts to push his way past the patrons who seem determined to stand in his way leaving a wide mouthed Molly and a frowning Harriet in his wake. Now that the figure has drawn closer, he can sense the power of it, the magic. Not a being. No, it’s not alive nor a spirit. A spell? A protection spell. Like a guard, triggered by motion or intention or word. And now it’s attacking Sherlock.

“Excuse me, excuse me!” He struggles to get through the crowd that has turned to watch the new ‘act’, hemming him in. He needs to get to Sherlock before this gets completely out of hand. Can he disarm it as just John Watson? Stop it? Perhaps he won’t have to. Perhaps the creator will realize the risk they are putting everyone in and have it stand down before it actually kills anyone. Because if it doesn’t stop, if it tries to kill Sherlock? Dear Lord. He can’t transform here. Not in front of all of these people. Not in front of Sherlock.

The audience is now murmuring and shifting in confusion as Sherlock feebly flails on ground. The illusion of an act is falling away. The suit of armor, unable to wrench the sword free, gives up on the weapon and drops down to the floor, closing in on Sherlock. John’s left hand falls upon the shoulder of the armor and jerks back, spinning it around before curling his right hand into a fist and throwing a roundhouse straight into the nose of the mask with a mighty cracking sound that might
be the mask breaking, but feels more like John’s hand.

He had no idea. No idea at all just how much throwing a punch hurts.

John yelps, clutching his hand and circling the suit, which apparently has decided that he is its new target rather than Sherlock. His eyes rove over the form, searching for a literal chink in the armor – some kind of weak spot that he can take advantage of. Which of course is exactly when the delicate looking Erhu player takes her stringed instrument and whacks him across the back of the head, causing John to stumble and fall.

Gasps of awe and pleasure have been replaced with cries of fear and confusion as the theater floor devolves into chaos, patrons fleeing the violence. Most of the performers are running as well, but a few, members of the Triad no doubt, have chosen to close in on Sherlock and John.

“Back off, bitch, that’s my brother you’re messing with!”

Down on one knee, shaking his head, John glances up to catch a glimpse of Harriet as she grabs and twists the young Chinese woman’s arm, delivering a brutal punch to the solar plexus that robs the woman of breath and then stepping in, forcing the woman backward and off balance she delivers another blow to the throat. The takedown takes only seconds.

Memories shift and shuffle themselves to provide an answer. Oh! Right. Harry studies Shotokan karate.

Meanwhile Molly, it seems, has taken position over Sherlock who has managed to get to his hands and knees but is still struggling for breath. She holds a shoe in each hand and as one of the performers heads towards her, she chucks it right at his head, clocking him just over the eye.

Spinning around, John just barely manages to get in another punch straight into the face of one of the demon-masked assistants. This one, at least, goes down. He hears Harry’s laugh as she takes down another attacker, calling out, “Aim for the soft spots, baby brother!” Good advice. John shakes his hand and seriously wonders if he’s broken it. Give him a sword and he’ll fight off a hundred demons. Give Watson a gun and he’ll take out an army. This hand-to-hand stuff doesn’t seem to be their forte.

The ensorcelled armor seems to gravitate toward the greatest threat, which, in this case is clearly Harriet. She’s already managed to take down two of the performers herself and is currently sizing up the suit of armor. It rushes her, but she slips to the side elegantly, catching one arm and using the figure’s momentum against it to spin it around, twisting the limb to the point where she would dislocate or break a human’s arm. She doesn’t realize of course, has no idea that she isn’t fighting a person but a magically created machine that won’t stop until someone turns it off.

Wait. Turns it off? Focusing on the figure intently, it only takes John a few seconds to pinpoint the central point of the spell – a gem centered upon the chest plate of the armor. Glancing about, John reaches for one of the chairs recently vacated by the musicians and picks it up, calling out, “Harry!” Glancing at him, Harriet just barely dodges another swing from the armored figure, dropping to one side and sweeping its legs with one of hers, felling it once more.

Stepping in quickly, before the automaton can rise up once more, John brings the chair down onto the chest plate as hard as he can. The crystal cracks under the impact and the spell abruptly releases, dispelling, the body falling limp. For a second brother and sister look at one another, sharing a crazy grin of adrenaline and pleasure before John remembers that Harriet is not his sister. The grin remains. Bumping his shoulder with a fist, Harry compliments, “Not bad, little brother.”
“Well, I did invade Afghanistan.”

“Yeah, yeah, but you weren’t alone.”

John quirks a brow and points out, “Not alone now.”

Harry grins, baring her teeth.

A soft clearing of a throat turns their attention back to Sherlock who is casually dusting himself off as if nothing had happened. He seems oblivious to poor Molly, who is retrieving her shoes and awkwardly putting them back on, looking flustered and disheveled. He crouches down next to one of the unconscious attackers that Harriet dispatched, slipping off a shoe to confirm the now familiar tattoo inked on the heel. One dark brow lifts, superciliously.

“I suggest we leave before they return with reinforcements.”

Unsurprisingly, everyone is good with that plan.

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Entering into the flat, John wearily hangs up his coat and flexes his hand before heading into the kitchen to run some cold water over it and ponder the events of the evening, leaving Harriet and Sherlock to sort themselves out.

Their report of the incident and subsequent sojourn to the police station was less than satisfying. Lestrade was off for the night, which meant they had to deal with Dimmock who was less than pleased with the prospect of paying overtime for a raid that was, in his humble opinion, not going to find anything. He listened to Sherlock’s explanation of Triads and smuggling rings and murder with barely restrained disbelief. He seemed especially unimpressed by the fact that they didn’t bring any evidence with them and had no idea what the smuggled object in question might be.

Sherlock left the station even more disgruntled than when he arrived. Molly decided she’d had enough excitement for one night after Sherlock asked her tetchily if she still expected him to take her to dinner as well, and found her own way home. The rude slight earned Sherlock another pronouncement of ‘git’ from Harriet and served as a catalyst for a final attempt to get Molly’s number. The disappointed and flustered woman merely fluttered her hands and made some excuse before hopping into the nearest cab.

Harriet, however, was unfazed by the failure - still riding the high of the fight. She paid no heed whatsoever to Sherlock’s pointed looks at both her and John as they grabbed the next cab. Instead, all throughout the ride to Baker St. she indulged herself in good old-fashioned ribbing on how she could ‘take’ her brother in a fight and how he clearly needed to come to class with her and get himself ‘back in shape’, poking at the softness of his belly.

Once back at the flat, she stares around in a mixture of curiosity and wry amusement. Hands on her hips, she prowls the floor, what little of it is available, looking at the various piles of books in askance. “Planning to start your own library?”

Huffing in annoyance, his eyes rolling back in his head, Sherlock retorts, “Yes. And as such I’m sure you remember the rule that there’s no talking allowed.”

“I see your lips flapping.”

Sherlock dismisses her, his eyes flashing with aggravation as they seek out his flatmate instead. “John, make her go away.”
Arms fold over her chest. “You make me.”

Cool silver eyes narrow at the challenge. “I will if I must.”

Harriet’s chin lifts defiantly, her gaze turning dangerous. “I’d like to see you try…”

Walking out of the kitchen, carefully drying off sore hand, John snaps at them both. “Christ, can you two just stop for two minutes?”

Harriet points at Sherlock in manner both imperious and childish. “He started it.”

Rolling his eyes now, John grumbles, “I don’t care which of you started it, I’ll crack both your heads together.”

For a brief moment Sherlock and Harry both turn their heads toward him and stand united against John, glaring at him as if daring him to.

Flinging his hands into the air, John retorts, “Fine. Have at it. Kill each other if that’s what you have to do. In the meanwhile, I’m starving. I’m going to order takeaway.”

Sitting down at the desk, Sherlock calls over his shoulder, “Indian, please,” just as Harriet asks, “Oooh, can we have Chinese?” Sherlock gives her a withering look.

“What? It’s thematic!”

Now the two are glaring at each other again.

Eyes lift to heaven. “Lord, give me strength…” John murmurs as he heads off to the kitchen to look for menus.

Sherlock turns around dramatically and picks up the photographs of the graffiti once more, staring at them in frustration. He found nothing of use at the circus. Nothing that brings them any closer to translating the cipher. He glares at the symbols, as if he could make them morph into English just by focusing his anger at them.

He can hear the sound of John’s sister wandering about the apartment, looking at this, picking up that. At the creak of one particularly squeaky floorboard he grumbles without even looking up, “Don’t touch that, it’s perfectly calibrated!” An annoyed huff is all the response he gets, but she moves away without touching the delicate piece of equipment. A few seconds later he calls out, “Put the skull down.”

“Jesus, you got eyes in the back of your head?”

“No, just a keen sense of observation and razor sharp senses. Now stop fussing about and be quiet.”

Harriet does neither. “So, now that you and the police are onto them, won’t these Triad criminals just go back to China?”

Sherlock sorts through the photos pointlessly, hoping that this time he’ll notice something he’s missed before. Some sort of clue.

“No, they won’t leave until they’ve found what they’re looking for. If they’re willing to kill two people for it, it is likely quite valuable. The only solution now is for us to find them first.”

“Hmmm, and just how do you think you’ll be able to do that?”
Sherlock lifts up the photo of the blackboard with John’s writing on it, waving it over his shoulder. “Somewhere in this message, they must note a contact point. A rendezvous or hideout of some kind.”

The photo is plucked from his fingers, the insufferable woman at his shoulder now. “So, this is what you do for a living then is it? Solving puzzles? John’s a doctor. How did you get him mixed up in all of this?”

Sherlock’s irritation evaporates for a brief moment, a smile touching his lips. “He’s surprisingly useful. Doctor. Soldier. Less idiotic than most people I have to deal with. But in the end? I told him it might be dangerous, and there he was.”

She wiggles the paper in her hands, asking, “So what’s this?”

Sherlock just barely bites back the retort on his lips. How does any one put up with such prattling? Clearly it’s not genetic. John doesn’t seem to find the need to ramble on and on, distracting and interrupting him when he’s trying to work. It must be part of Harriet’s personality. A flaw. A defect. The woman seemed to be designed for the sole purpose of being annoying.

“They’re numbers. An ancient Chinese dialect.”

Her voice takes on an annoyed, faux-posh veneer as she sneers back, “Oh, right. Of course. I should have known that, what with my degree in ancient Chinese dialects and all…”

She shifts closer, her body pressing against Sherlock’s arm, impeding his freedom of movement as she leans over his shoulder to bring the photo in her hands into better light. “So these numbers, they’re a cipher.”

“Exactly.” God, why does she have to touch everything? Doesn’t she have eyes?

“And each pair of numbers is a word.”

Sherlock’s body goes still as a reluctant flash of respect trickles through him, his eyes flicking up to Harriet’s openly interested expression. His voice is soft and low as he asks, “How did you know that?”

“Because two words have already been translated? Here.”

She leans over him again, her body soft against his. Most men would find such a gesture provocative. Sherlock is quite certain in this case it’s completely incidental. For one, she’s a lesbian. For another, she seems to take a certain delight in trying to wind him up. Either way, it doesn’t matter. Sherlock isn’t most men.

“And look, this one’s been translated as well…” Harriet tugs on the photograph from Van Coon’s office, Soo Lin’s neat handwriting floating above the yellow markings: “Dead Man”.

“John? John!”

“What?”

Phone tucked between his chin and shoulder, menu in his hands, John pops out of the kitchen, peering at the unexpectedly cozy tableau before him.

“Look.” Sherlock thrusts out a hand, waving the photograph that Harriet had been holding at him. “Soo Lin. She started to translate the cipher!”
John takes the photograph, peering at it. “Nine mill. As in million?”

“Nine million quid. That’s the value of whatever was stolen. And dead man,” he adds, picking up the second photo. “See, I was right. It was a threat.” He pushes back from the desk and jumps up, plucking his coat from the couch and pulling it on hastily. “The book, it must have been on Soo Lin’s desk and we didn’t see it. I have to get to the museum.”

“Sherlock, I don’t think… it wasn’t her desk any more. I don’t think there was anything on it other than the pots she was working on.”

“Nonsense, John,” Sherlock counters, snatching the two photos from John’s hand. “Otherwise how did she do this?”

“Well, they’re not going to let us into the museum at this hour. Especially after the mess we made.”

Sherlock doesn’t so much as hesitate, grabbing his phone from his pocket and quickly texting. “I’ll get Lestrade to let me in.”

The expression on John’s face says clearly without words just how incredibly unlikely that will be.

Dashing out the door, Sherlock pauses and stares at John with a mixture of bemusement and impatience. “Why aren’t you putting on your coat? We have to go!”

“Are you kidding? You want me to come and get yelled at with you by Lestrade for something that can wait until morning? You said so yourself, they’re not going anywhere.”

Sherlock almost bounces with impatience, “Yes, but that doesn’t mean that someone won’t show up with the item in the meanwhile.”

John stands resolute. “Tonight I’m spending time with my sister. You’re on your own on this one.”

Flinging his scarf about his throat, Sherlock pockets the photographs. “Fine. Stay here and eat your Chinese. I’ll be back later. I suspect I’ll have cracked the case by then. Don’t wait up!” He doesn’t understand why he feels disappointed. He should be filled with adrenaline and determination. This is it! The break he’s been looking for! Once he gets the book from Soo Lin’s desk and translates the cipher, they’ll have their quarry. His feet drum down the stairs as he practically flings himself out of the door and flags down the nearest cab. He’s so close to solving this case, he can taste it.

So why does he feel so empty?

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“That was nice.”

John turns about, confused. “What was nice?”

“You. Choosing to stay here with me rather than dashing off with him.”

“Yeah, well, I said I would do something with you tonight.”

“Yeah, but you’d rather be running all over London with him.”

John opens his mouth to deny it, but Harriet chuckles and holds up a hand. “Better to tell nothing than tell a lie.” Something their mother used to always say to them. Well, Watson’s mother. John shuts his mouth.
Harriet leans in, one hand brushing the nape of John’s neck. “How’s your head?”

“Hard as ever.”

Harry smiles at the quip, fingers reaching up until they brush against the bump there, John hissing softly as he ducks forward to escape her probing fingers. “Lay off.”

“Don’t be such a baby. You’re not bleeding. It’s barely swollen.” She slips away and heads into the kitchen as she asks, “Is there anything in the freezer that I should know about before I open it?”

“Lord, I hope not…”

The freezer door opens and there’s an uncertain moment before Harry calls out, “All clear!” She closes it again and returns with a bag of frozen peas in her hand. “Here.” She pushes the bag against the back of John’s head, waiting until he reaches back to hold it in place before letting go.

She takes his hand up and examines the swelling and bruising there. “Did a number on your hand too, I see. Quick tip, little brother. When fighting someone wearing armor and a mask, do not punch them. Because they’re wearing armor. It’s meant to stop things a lot harder than your dainty little hand.”

John shakes off her grip good-naturedly and retorts, “Oi, who you calling little?”

“You, little brother. Cause you’re younger than me and shorter than me.”

“Half a fucking inch.”

“Still shorter.” She grins at him impishly before her expression soberly thoughtfully. “I still can’t figure out how he was able to come at me again. That move, it should have broken his arm, but he just twisted out of it and counterattacked…”

Think fast. “Well, they were also circus performers.” John bluffs. “Perhaps he was a contortionist?”

Harriet mulls that possibility over, nodding thoughtfully as she concurs uncertainly, “Maaaaaaybe.”

Picking up the phone, John passes Harriet the menu. When in doubt, distract. “Pick out what you want.” A short call later and the two of them are seated on the couch comfortably, waiting for their dinner to arrive.


Harriet rolls her eyes. “I’ve seen the way you look at him. I might be an alcoholic, but that doesn’t make me stupid y’know. You’re totally into him, aren’t you?”

Blinking owlishly, John tries to wrap his mind around the idea, around his feelings for Sherlock. Shaking his head, he murmurs, “It’s not like that. It’s not about… sex, or sexual attraction. I mean, yes, I guess in a way you could say I’m ‘totally into him’, but it’s not in the way that you mean. But yes, Sherlock’s important to me.” Essential to me. “I want to be with him and I can’t imagine not being with him.”

Clearly this sort of relationship is not one that Harriet has a lot of experience with, her brow twisted with bemusement. Her voice interrupts his reverie, taking his silence as confirmation. “What’s the
appeal?"

How does he explain it? Look, Harry, I’m not your brother but a centuries old angel who stole his body and the reason I’m glued to Sherlock’s side is because I’m his Guardian Angel and I cannot do anything but love him and care for him, even when he pisses the ever living snot out of me because I would die for him in a heartbeat and give everything I have to keep him safe and alive and will do so until death do us part and can only pray that I’ll die before him, because I don’t know how I will survive if the only reason I’m living dies before me.

Hmmm. No, better not. John’s shoulders shrug as he turns the question over to Watson instead. There’s a moment of contemplation before he hears himself say, “He’s a good man. For all his flaws and rudeness, and God knows he’s full of them, he fights the good fight. Being with him makes me feel alive. The cases, the excitement, the unknown. Sherlock Holmes is an adventure, and every adventure has its fair share of bumps and bruises. Wouldn’t be an adventure without them. You wear them with pride. They’re the marks of your journey. Sherlock is… unique. I respect and admire him and can’t think of anyone I would rather spend my time with.”

“Wow, that’s deep.” Her voice has a mocking edge to it. Some bitterness there; jealousy perhaps? Watson nearly rises to the bait, but John pushes the instinctive reaction down. Until… “So have you fucked him yet?”

“Harry!”

“What? I mean, I’m a lesbian and even I think he’s gorgeous. A complete and utter prat, but still gorgeous. Give him a pair of tits and high heels? I’d do ‘im.”

“Christ. You know? Not everything about life is booze and sex.”

“Should be. And speaking of booze, you got anything to drink in this place?” Harriet pushes off the couch and wanders into the kitchen, haphazardly opening up cupboards and cabinets.

“No!”

“Bloody hell. What are you two, teetotalers? How about the bathroom? Any isopropyl alcohol? Tastes like shit, but any port in a storm, eh?”

“Harrrrrr-ry.”

Her head pops out of the kitchen, giving her brother an evil smirk. “Fuck, John, I’m just kidding. What happened to your sense of humor?”

“It got shot in Afghanistan.”

She pulls out a pack of cigarettes and taps it against her wrist idly before sliding one out and pulling out a lighter. “So, why aren’t you and Sherlock doing it yet?”

“You can’t smoke in the apartment and, wait, what?”

“You heard me.” But apparently Harriet didn’t hear him because she blithely lights up and takes a deep draw, tilting her head back to blow out the smoke.

“Damnit, Harriet, I said no smoking. Sherlock is trying to stay off of them and coming back to a flat reeking of cigarettes is just going to set him off.” He rises up and tries to snatch the offending article from her hand.
“Piss off. If I can’t have a drink, the least you can do is let me have a smoke.” She crosses over to one of the windows and props it open, letting the smoke drift outside. “There. Better? And stop avoiding the topic. You didn’t answer my question.”

With a soft sigh of defeat, John lets the cigarette go this time. There really isn’t a lesser evil between smoking and drinking, not with the quantities of each that Harriet indulges in. But this is a battle he’s not equipped to win.

“I told you, we’re just friends. Besides, what makes you think I fancy him? Or, for that matter, that he has the slightest interest in me?”

Harriet’s head cocks to one side. “Well for one, he’s definitely not interested in women. I leaned on him, pushed my boobs right against his arm and he looked practically disgusted.”

“Which has nothing to do with the fact that you were annoying the crap out of him…”

Harriet smirks and shrugs. “It’s the way you look at him. The way he looks at you when you’re not looking at him.”

Blinking, John swallows hard before asking uncertainly, “How do I look at him?”

“How does he look at me?”

“Hmmmmm. That varies. Sometimes like you’re an idiot. Other times like you’re his man slave. But every once in awhile, like he can’t believe you’re standing next to him willingly.” The conversation is blessedly interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell. “Buggery fuck, that was fast.” A negligent hand is waved in John’s direction as Harry reminds, “Your treat. Go fetch.”

Wincing, John mutters, “You have the mouth of a lorry driver, and I’m not your damn dog…” but he’s too grateful for the interruption to make much of a stink about paying. He heads down the stairs of the flat and opens the door as he fishes his wallet out of his back pocket, catching a glimpse of a young Chinese man before he looks down to peer inside the leather pockets, asking, “How much?”

“How much?”

“Do you have it?”

“What?” The question throws him off and John looks up, half expecting the person at the door to be someone mistaking him for Sherlock or something. The deliveryman standing there simply asks again, “Do you have it?”

Comprehension dawns and without a second of hesitation, John starts to push the door closed. The man catches him off guard by pulling the door toward himself only to then slam it violently inward. Falling forward as his weight and momentum are overwhelmed, the door crashes right into John’s forehead.

Dazed and stunned he falls backward into the vestibule, the man pushing his way in and crouching over John. “Do you have the treasure?”

John struggles to get up, his hand reaching over for his long-forgotten cane, the only readily available weapon.

He never gets the chance to use it.
Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice, beta and Brit picking and to numberthescars for her amazing beta work.

Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her initial encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
“I’m sick of it Greg. I know that the promotion means more money, but it’s not worth it. Not at the cost to our family. It’s always work with you. We never see you any more. You’re not a father. You’re barely a husband.”

The words are all the more cutting for how quietly they are spoken by the petite brunette standing at the bottom of the stairs, one hand resting on the railing. Only the tight grip of her fingers belies the calmness of her tone. A loud hammering at the door timed with yet another bleating of Lestrade’s phone - the fourth one since they started arguing - causes them both to tense up.

“You know what? Just answer your damn phone and the damn door!” Her hand waves through the air, angrily now. “I hate this Greg! I hate the fact that you’re always going off at all hours for work and that I don’t even have the right to be angry because you’re out there catching criminals and protecting the streets of London.” He opens his mouth to respond, but her hands flies up, palm out, cutting him off. “No, I’m done talking about this.”

Lestrade, hands resting on his hips, watches his wife climb up the stairs before he sighs and opens the door of their flat. He peers out blearily, eyes squinting into the darkness before he grumbles, “Christ, Sherlock, what do you want?”

“I need to get into the museum.”

Irritation prickles along Lestrade’s skin. “Right. Well, I suggest you get a cab over there first thing in the morning, then.”

Sherlock is the last thing Lestrade wants to deal with. Not now. He doesn’t have the time for this now.

Sherlock makes his ‘annoyed’ and ‘don’t be stupid’ face before correcting, “I need to get into the museum now.”

Rubbing at his tired face, Greg glances uncertainly over his shoulder toward the stairs before turning back to the tall, angular, pain-in-his-ass. “Look. You can’t just barge in at all hours, come to my home, snap your fingers and expect me to jump up and give you whatever you want. That’s not how the world works. And now is really not a good time for me.”

Sherlock’s eyes rake over his disheveled hair and clothes, narrowing and assessing before he points out, “The fight with your wife is already over.” His head tilts to one side like some strange bird, listening to sounds coming from the room above before adding, “She’s already packing a bag. A large one by the sound of it. Going to her sister’s then?”

Cursing under his breath, Lestrade’s eyes turn hard and brittle. “The kids are visiting there. She’s just joining them.” Which is a lie. That was not the plan. The plan was for them to talk about their marriage, to try to fix things. Not for things to fall apart faster. “Don’t push me Sherlock. Not tonight.”

For once Sherlock shows a modicum of tact and doesn’t call Lestrade out on the lie. Instead he shakes his head and changes tactics. “I need to get into the museum. I’m close, Lestrade. I just
need the book to break the cipher. Soo Lin started translating it while I was fighting the ghost. The book must be on the desk where she was working.”

Lestrade’s shoulders slump, his hand lifting to pinch the bridge of his nose as he takes a deep breath and leans his other hand against the doorjamb. Sherlock must see it as a sign of weakness or defeat, or he is just incredibly determined. Maybe both are true. The consulting detective presses on, pushing at Lestrade’s pride. “Nothing you say now is going to change her mind. Do you really want her to walk out on you first? Wouldn’t it be more satisfying to beat her to it?”

He lifts his head to glare at Sherlock. “And prove her right at the same time, by going off on police business with you?”

Sherlock’s head tilts, a faint smile touching his lips before he notes, “She doesn’t have to know it’s for work. You could be going out for a beer. With your mate.”

A rough snort of laughter escapes the DI, his eyes lifting to Sherlock’s with a faint glint of bitter humor. “You and me? Mates?”

Sherlock’s nose lifts slightly, all the more so he can look down it at Lestrade. “It’s not inconceivable.”

“Right.” It must be compelling, or he must be crazy, because Lestrade finds himself turning to yank his jacket off the hook, pulling it on as he calls up the stairs. “Going out for a pint!” He doesn’t even wait for an answer, but steps out and shuts the door. It feels kind of good to be the one who leaves first, rather than being left. Lestrade will just have to hold onto that delusion when he returns home to an empty flat. He takes a deep breath, in and out, before shoving his hands into his pockets and turning his gaze to Sherlock. “I don’t lie to her. Not ever. So you owe me a pint, ‘mate’.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes and leads the way, calling back over his shoulder, “Fine, fine. What is it with you all these days? Dinner? Drinks? I’m not some ruddy escort service…”

A tiny smile graces Lestrade’s lips as he murmurs in reply, “Thank God…”

Getting into the Museum isn’t as difficult as one might think - The Board is eager to have the break-in solved, and happy to oblige the Detective Inspector. Lestrade’s just grateful that it isn’t his division though he feels just a little bit guilty over the fact that he isn’t really there to solve the break-in. He already knows the answer to that question, just as he knows that no one will ever get caught or arrested for it. Not unless he decides to bring Sherlock in as an accessory. He seriously doubts the consulting detective has any idea just how tempting a prospect that is to the DI. A smile curves his lips at the very thought.

Sherlock, however, is less pleased.

“Nothing. There’s nothing here!”

Folding his arms over his chest, Lestrade rumbles, “Well, I told you that, didn’t I? With the massive damage done to the rotating exhibit hall, they did a check of the whole museum. Noted the ceramics left out here, had us come in, check for prints, take photographs, the full shooting match. Nothing out of the ordinary found.”

“I’m not looking for out of the ordinary. I’m looking for a book! Most likely a very ordinary book!”
Glancing about Lestrade gestures at the various and sundry desks surrounding them. “There are plenty of books.”

Shaking his head, Sherlock points to the desk where Soo Lin had been working that night. “No. We found the pictures here. This is where she did the translations. If she was translating them here, then here is where the key for the cipher had to have been.” Sherlock begins to scour the area, crouching down, peering this way and that, only pausing when something catches his eye. He has to kneel on the floor and reach beneath the desk to snag the small scrap of paper, turning it over and staring at it.

Stepping over to the madman as he rises to his feet, Lestrade looks down at the blank piece of paper and then up to Sherlock’s frowning face.

“What? What is it?”

He can’t understand why this has caught Sherlock’s attention. There’s nothing there. It’s just a piece of scrap paper; the sort one might jot a note down on. But Sherlock stares at it as if it were the most relevant and important clue in the world, if he could just string together why. Silvery eyes lift to Lestrade’s before Sherlock pockets the slip of paper and shakes his head. “Something. Not sure exactly what yet…” His deep voice trails off as the man retreats inside the confines of his head, his expression one with which Lestrade is well acquainted with. It usually precedes a breakthrough in a tricky case.

He waits a moment before clearing his throat. “Are we done here?”

Sherlock’s eyes return to the here and now, focusing on Lestrade for a sober moment before he nods. “Yes. All done here.”

“Right. Good. Well, I’m off for a pint then.” He never said he was going with his mate. Just as well, since it looks he’ll be drinking this pint alone.

*****

The cabbie is a bit puzzled by the request to just ‘drive around’ and ‘stop talking’, but he flips the meter on and bites his tongue before commenting on nutters in his taxi. Getting all kinds these days it seems.

Sherlock couldn’t care less. He needs to remember something. Remember something exactly. The white noise and motion of the cab will help him delve into his mind palace in order to do so.

Closing his eyes, he focuses, envisioning the structure, unlocking doors to unlock the memories carefully and methodically stored behind each. He moves through rooms in his mind, sorting through time, images and data until he reaches the night when he confronted Soo Lin and Siwang at the British Museum. The scrap of paper. Even blank, there’s something about it that tugs at his memory. The shape of it, the ragged edge where it had been torn off from something else. It’s hauntingly familiar.

Carefully he reconstructs the experience, images surfacing and coming into focus as he examines his memories in slow motion, searching for that piece of paper. And then he sees it – Soo Lin’s hands picking it up, taking up a brush and ink, drawing a symbol, the Black Lotus symbol, upon the blank surface. Her words, and his, ring in his mind.

*It’s the smugglers code. Anyone who bears the mark can read them."

*Right, right, it’s a book code. But what’s the book?*
It is not so simple as that. The code, it is enchanted…

His eyes snap open and reaching into his pocket, Sherlock pulls the piece of paper out to stare at it again. It’s the same piece, but the symbol is gone. Leaning forward with newfound eagerness and determination, Sherlock nearly gives the cabbie a heart attack as he barks, “221 Baker Street! Now!”

His fingers drum against the upholstery with impatience and excitement and he literally tosses money at the driver as he flings himself out of the vehicle once they arrive. Taking the stairs two at a time he calls out triumphantly, “John! I’ve figured it out! It’s not a book! It’s the mark! The mark allows members of the society to read the encoded messages! John!”

But there is no reaction from above, no banter between siblings, no shouted out greeting in return or compliment of “brilliant” or “fantastic”. The brief supposition that John and Harriet went out is immediately dismissed, seeing as the door of the flat has been left wide open. His steps slow, uncertain as he steps through the doorway.

“John?”

Sherlock stops dead, eyes narrowing as they take in the overturned coffee table and knocked over books. But when his gaze lifts to the wall, they widen. There, across the windows, is the familiar yellow cipher. The words that Soo Lin translated for them.

Dead man.

*****

A fist is hammering upon her door, hard and determined it would seem to break through to the person on the other side. Between that and the incessant ringing of her doorbell, Molly is awoken from a dead sleep, dazed and disoriented and severely put out. She doesn’t know who it could be, but when she finds out she is really going to let them have it. As such, when she flings it open and barks, “What?!?” she’s aghast to see Sherlock standing in front of her.

Oh God. What is she wearing? A quick fluttering of her fingers reveals to Molly that she’s in her pajamas, wearing a pair of tatty slippers, with her terrycloth dressing gown haphazardly pulled on and still not quite settled over her left shoulder. No makeup, hair tied back in an unkempt ponytail. Her eyes are probably crusty. Oh God. Her face instantly flushes. Embarrassment. Him, seeing her like this? The worst.

“Sherlock?”

For all her fretfulness, Sherlock seems wholly unaware of her casual state of dress. Or perhaps, and reasonably so, he expects it. It is after midnight. “Molly, I need you to come to the morgue and pull out Lukis and VanCoon’s bodies one last time.”

Oh. Of course. His work. That’s all it ever is. That’s all that ever matters to him. She thought he was actually thinking of her tonight, not just taking her out to dinner, but also to the circus. But she was just a cover. Just a convenient foil for him to use, killing two birds with one stone, as it were. All for the work. And here he is now, not to apologize but because he wants something from her. For his work. Again.

Well, enough is enough.

Molly’s eyes roll back, her hands folding over her chest in an attempt to seem tougher and hide the fact that she’s wearing her nightclothes and looks like hell. “No. Sherlock, enough. They’ve been
processed and are due to be picked up tomorrow. If you want to see them again, you’re going to need a warrant from the police.” There. She’s stood her ground, stood up to Sherlock and all of his requests and demands. She feels a tiny flicker of pride at the achievement, but it is short lived.

Sherlock never touches her. Never touches anyone. So when his hands reach out to grab her arms, shaking her, Molly gasps in surprise, eyes opening wide.

“There’s no time! I don’t have time for the police, I need to see those bodies now!”

When has she not heard this before? Despite the frustration on his features and the fact that he is still gripping her arms too tightly for comfort, Molly lifts up her chin and refuses him again.

“You’re going to have to make time.”

He releases her and Molly tips backwards slightly at the abruptness with which he nearly pushes her away, hands lifting to drag through his hair as he spins around on her doorstep before turning back to her. “You don’t understand. There. Isn’t. Time! John and Harry have been taken by the same people who killed Lukis and VanCoon. If I don’t see those bodies right now, John might die. Harry too.”

Molly’s hand lifts to her mouth in horror, eyes wide as her heart kicks into overdrive, pounding as a sudden rush of fear and adrenaline spikes through her system. And just like that she reaches over to the side and grabs her keys off of the hook she keeps them on by the door, switching her bathrobe for a proper coat as she asks him, “Do you have a cab already?”

“Yes, of course!”

She closes and locks the door, pushing a strand of hair from her face as she lifts her gaze up to his.

“They then go.”

*****

They get a few odd looks when they arrive. Well, Molly does. Her coat is long enough to hide most of her unorthodox outfit, but there are still fleece kittens peering out from beneath the hem and slippers that have seen better days on her feet.

She quickly and methodically ditches the coat once they are alone in the morgue, pulling on a lab coat before going to bring out the bodies. Sherlock can’t keep still it seems, pacing and circling and bouncing on his toes with a desperate kind of impatience. She hurries.

“I just need one of them!” he calls out after her belatedly. That’s good. One will take less time to pull than two. She chooses Lukis, since his cause of death is still listed as “undetermined”. More like “inexplicable”. If need be, she can use the complications of the case to defend pulling out the body once more.

As with the last time Sherlock has her unzip the bag by the feet, pulling on a pair of nitrile gloves before ordering her.

“Molly turn around.”

Blinking, startled and a bit unnerved by the request, Molly asks, “Why?”

Sherlock’s body has gone still and steady now that he has what he’s come for. His gaze is sober and serious. “Because if you see what I’m about to do, you’ll feel obligated to report it and you’ll get in trouble. And I think we’ve all had more than enough trouble for one night, don’t you agree?”
Molly hesitates for only a moment before nodding and turning away. Whatever it is that Sherlock does, it doesn’t take very long. She hears the zipping of the bag, the clink of the scalpel being placed upon the tray from which it was picked up, the soft snap as he pulls the gloves off and disposes of them. A hand lands on her shoulder and squeezes. She turns to look at him, her eyes deliberately not turning to Lukis’ form, her mind deliberately not trying to guess what Sherlock has done.

The nervous energy is back. He’s ready to move again, to do whatever it is that he has to do to hopefully find and save John and Harry. Dear God, please let them be all right. Please let Sherlock find them in time…

“Thank you Molly. You may have just saved two lives tonight.”

She says nothing, just offers a timid nod and lets Sherlock go. Not that she could stop him even if she wanted to. Taking in a deep breath, trying to calm her pounding heart, Molly looks around the morgue for a moment, hands rubbing over her arms as she murmurs to no one, “That would be nice for a change.”

*****

He now can do what Soo Lin did. What he has to do.

After he replayed the memory in the cab, he understood. He tried to replicate the transfer himself, back at the flat, but it took him only a few tries before he realized that he did not have the skill or the artistry to properly draw the symbol as she had done. Or perhaps there was something more to it that he could not replicate. A ghostly power or a prayer to an ancestor or sympathetic God. Unfortunately, the discovery of their ransacked flat, the threatening cipher and John’s absence meant he didn’t have the time to replicate Soo Lin’s methods.

But Sherlock doesn’t need prayers or ancestors or Gods. Fortunately, Sherlock has Molly. He doesn’t have to draw the mark or imbue it with magic. He only needed to harvest it from its source to access the magic imbued within.

The spell is a relatively simple one – a binding spell used to bring two objects together. Traditionally it’s used to fix things that have been broken, or to bind two materials together for sake of building something. It was never meant to bind flesh to flesh. Fortunately Sherlock is neither squeamish nor constrained by certain expectations of decency. He also never backs down from a challenge.

A few words changed, a few ingredients added, and the altered spell is complete. On occasion he almost finds himself asking John to pass him something, or beginning to explain to him what exactly he’s doing. After a few times of doing this, he brings over the skull to talk to instead. It helps him focus.

He lays the carefully cut piece of flesh against the inside of his forearm. He’s not precisely sure what will happen once he makes Lukis’ flesh one with his own. The tattoo, or more importantly, the magic bound into it, will be his key to understanding the code. But conversely, it also, ties him to the Black Lotus Society. To access the benefits of the mark, he must also risk the dangers of it. The only thing that protects him is the fact that the original binding spell, the one that bound Lukis to the Black Lotus, was meant specifically for Lukis, not Sherlock. Still, he rather hopes no one is paying attention to the roster of members, on the off chance they notice that they have suddenly, and inexplicably, gained a new member by the name of Sherlock Holmes.

First he needs to find John, and in order to find John, he needs to translate the text. And in order to
translate the text, he needs the tattoo. How to remove it is a problem to be solved later. He has more than enough problems to deal with at the moment.

A dab of his blood, a whisper of words, and the cold scrap of flesh resting against his skin shivers, the edges blurring, blending. He takes a deep breath in through his nose, hands clenching into fists as the pain hits him. By the lack of screaming, he deduces that it’s not as painful as branding - more akin to the sensation of stubbing out a cigarette against flesh. When the pain passes, his eyes flicker open and drop down. It’s an ugly thing, slightly raised, the heavier, rougher and darker skin of Lukis’ heel in sharp contrast to the soft, pale skin of Sherlock’s inner forearm. It itches intolerably. His nose wrinkles slightly at the sight before he quickly rolls down his sleeve to hide the mark.

Now, to see if it has worked.

Picking up one of the photographs, Sherlock stares at it. At first there is a flicker of dismay as nothing happens. The Chinese symbols remain Chinese symbols. But while the symbols remain steady, their meaning becomes clear in stages. First, he can read them as numbers without referring to the numbers he’d already written down. Second, the pairs of numbers suddenly gain meaning and become words in his mind.

*Nine mil for jade pin dragon den royal tramway.*

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice, beta and Brit picking and to numberthescars for her amazing beta work.

Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her initial encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I prefer not to do warnings, because I think they are spoilers. But for those who are sensitive, I've put a warning in the end note. That way you can choose to read unspoiled or protect yourself as needed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pain. That’s what registers first. A terrible, throbbing pain in his temple that seems to radiate across his skull in a hard pulsing rhythm. The doctor within him catalogs the injury methodically - head trauma, bleeding laceration, loss of consciousness, probable concussion. The second thing that registers is the cold and the damp. It’s only early spring and the night air still has a definite bite to it, but it’s strangely musty and stale. Somewhere outside, but not outdoors?

John’s eyes open slowly. Ironically, he’s grateful for the darkness. It’s light enough to see, but still dim enough not to send painful spikes through his skull. Gingerly, John raises his head, wincing slightly before his eyes can focus enough to take in his surroundings.

He’s in some sort of tunnel, dank, dripping and dark. A few honest-to-goodness torches lighting the area around him. A light shining from further down the tunnel is mostly cut off by a large pile of what looks like construction materials, perhaps for storage or repairs? It’s too dark to tell for sure. A woman stands before him - the matron of the circus he realizes after a moment - though she looks quite different out of her elaborate traditional dress. Her clothes are simple and practical now: black trousers, shirt, and jacket, her makeup nonexistent.

His eyes shift past her, flickering between assistants and lackeys before finding another seated figure, struggling and cursing loudly around the gag in her mouth. Harriet. She clearly didn’t go down without a fight. Her clothes are mussed and slightly torn and there’s a nasty looking bruise forming on one cheek, but the two men flanking her clearly did not escape Harriet’s wrath. They are also sporting bruises and one of them, a limp. Pacing behind them, Harriet's Guardian is visible, her concern for her ward breaking past John's usual ability to cloud his sight to his kind.

A sickly sensation of dread pools at the base of John’s stomach as he tries to pull his thoughts together, to focus on what is happening and how he’s going to get Harriet out of all of this before his attention is reclaimed by the woman in black.

“Where is it?”

Blinking dazedly, John mumbles, “Where’s what?”

“The treasure. That which was stolen from us.”

John starts to shake his head, only to think better of the idea when his brain protests with a wave of dizziness. He closes his eyes, trying to regain his equilibrium, but doesn’t get the chance. The woman reaches out to grab a fistful of his hair, dragging his head up and back sharply, causing him to hiss softly in pain.
“Where IS it?!”

Blue eyes meet black, the woman’s gaze hard and hostile as she demands an answer, John’s confused and unfocused. “I don’t know what you’re talking about…”

“Oh you don’t? I don’t believe you.” She releases John’s head with a snap of her wrist, causing his vision to go spotty for a moment, and prowls a slow circle around him, arms folded over her chest.

“We’ve been watching you, Doctor Watson. You and your tall companion, Sherlock Holmes. We know that you have been looking for it. One of them double-crossed us, took something that did not belong to them. Something very valuable. But you already know this. Perhaps they stole it for you and then double-crossed you as well for a better price? Either way, you know exactly what I am talking about. Or, if you do not, then your companion, the great detective Sherlock Holmes does. And once he sees the message that we left for him, I’m sure he’ll come running.”

John struggles to keep up, fighting off the nausea and confusion. “Who are you?”

The woman smiles coldly, a wicked gleam of humor coming into her gaze. “Where are my manners? I am General Shan, and you, Dr. John Watson, are my prisoner.”

John struggles uselessly against his bonds, the chair he has been seated upon rocking violently until the cool touch of the barrel of a gun against his temple stops him cold.

All traces of amusement have vanished from Shan’s voice and visage. “Where is it?”

John takes a shuddering breath and brings his gaze up to hers, forcing himself to meet it steadily. “I don’t know.” He can only hope that she is able to hear the sincerity of his words, to see the honesty in his eyes.

The woman studies him calmly, slowly running the barrel up and down his face, from temple to jaw and back again. “You were a soldier who served in war. So was I. You live to serve, as do I. You are a man of honor. But there is nothing dishonorable in telling me where the treasure is. It does not belong to you, and you will save many lives by telling me where it is, starting with your own.” He can hear the click of the safety being flicked off. He can hear Harry screaming at him, or at least trying to, her voice and words muffled and made incomprehensible by the gag, but he knows what she’s saying. It’s perfectly clear. She’s screaming his name. Begging with one simple word, that he tell this woman something. Anything.

Ocean blue eyes meet across the distance between them, Harriet’s pleading for his life, John’s pleading for her understanding. He can’t tell them anything. He can’t risk giving them any kind of lead or edge against Sherlock. In all likelihood, he knows nothing of value, but John can’t take that chance. If this is the only way in which he can protect Sherlock now, then he will do so.

“I will give you to the count of three.” The gun lifts to John’s temple. “One…” Harry starts screaming his name in earnest now, rocking the chair that she is seated upon so violently that it tips over and slams against the floor with a crash, causing her to grunt in pain.

“Two…” John closes his eyes, ever the soldier, ever the angel, ready to accept whatever is to come. If he dies now, this will be it. He will suffer the same fate as Soo Lin, his very being dissipating into nothingness, as it should have two months ago at the Archangel Michael’s hand. His lips curl into a ragged smile. Two months. He was given a reprieve of two months and it was more than he could have ever hoped for. Two months of Sherlock’s friendship. Two months of fulfilling his duty in protecting his charge. Two months of learning what it is like to be human, finally beginning to understand these strange and anomalous creatures whom he has been
protecting his entire life.

No, he does not want to die, but if he must, he is glad for the miracle of these past two months.

“Three.”

The word is spoken with firmness and finality. John braces for the impact of the bullet, expecting the roar of it exploding from the muzzle of the gun, the burn of it through his skull, and the endless, boundless blackness that will follow. But all he gets for his anticipation is a flat click. It takes a moment for him to realize that it was a bluff and with that all of the oxygen within him explodes outward in a sudden rush of breath he didn’t even realize he had been holding.

“I am impressed.” And she is. It’s clear from her tone that she respects the equanimity with which John was willing to face his demise. His eyes open slowly as he turns to look at her. “You are a soldier through and through. Your own life means nothing to you.” Her head cocks to one side, cool and calm as she deliberates for a moment before noting, “But you are also a doctor. A soldier and a doctor. You take life and you give it. One might think these two things are in conflict with one another, but they are more the same than different, no? Both occupations are a fight to protect, to save. But not yourself.”

Her hand lifts again, pointing the muzzle of the gun to where Harry lies upon the floor, weeping helplessly in relief. “If you will not speak to protect your own life, will you speak to protect the life of your sister?”

*****

Nothin’ yeh could ‘ave done… nothin’ yeh could ‘ave done…

Those words keep circling around in Tup’s mind as he wanders through the wreckage of his home, eyes frantically darting from side to side even though he knows the danger is past. For possibly the first time in his existence, he wishes he were something more than a mere Brownie. A Spriggan or a Bogie or better yet, a Redcap! None of them would have allowed what happened here to happen.

He should have known. He’s known for days now that something was wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger upon exactly what it was. A prickling at the back of his neck. The uncanny sensation that he was being watched, only to turn and find no eyes upon him. As the programme on the telly would say, his Spidey senses were tingling.

The woman, Wingless’ flesh sister, is truly her brother’s opposite. A real she-devil compared to his he-angel. She put up quite the fight when they entered. Fierce she was, and strong too! Took out one of them, but there were just too many. Too many for her. Too many for Tup.

The sound of feet upon the stairs causes him to dive for cover, gleaming black button eyes peering out to see who would dare trespass on their home once more.

For a moment he is suffused with a sense of relief as Sherlock bursts through the door. How foolish of him! Sherlock is Master of the house, so of course he went and brought back what is his. But, like a deflating balloon, Tup feels the confidence ooze from him as it becomes clear that Sherlock is alone. No Wingless. No screeching harpy. Still, the human is up to something; his motions are deliberate, his gaze burning with intensity. Like a moth to the flame, like a cat to curiosity, Tup slinks through the piles of books and overturned furniture to get a closer look.

He watches, nose twitching as Sherlock performs magic upon his own flesh. He’s seen this man do strange things before, things that others of his kind would find horrific and disturbing, but which
would be perfectly reasonable in the Faery realms. He would make a good Faery, this human. Sometimes Tup can’t help but wonder if there isn’t some Faery blood running through the strange man’s veins. It would explain many things about his magical nature and aloof ways. He even bears the physical markers. But Tup’s ruminations are cut off by a soft curse as Sherlock leaps up and begins searching through the books on a shelf.

“Royal tramway, royal tramway…” his finger traces along a page until it comes to rest, a grim sort of smile touching the angular features of his face. “Of course. Kingsway.” The book is slammed shut and Sherlock digs once more through cupboards in the kitchen, through the shelves in his room, muttering under his breath. Tup only manages to catch snippets of his words.

“Devil’s foot… night vision… where did I put… did I use them all?”

As he ticks off this random litany Sherlock stuffs small objects, some bottles, and a few books into a bag. He is a man on a mission to get back what belongs to him, and damnit all, Tup wants in. Tup was too small and weak to defend his home by himself, but he’ll be damned if he’s going to sit here and cower when he could be out there, helping to bring Wingless back to where he belongs!

It’s quite simple in the end. As Sherlock stands up and storms off to his bedroom once more, Tup scrambles over books and broken shards of teacups, pausing only when he spots a scalpel lying on the floor next to Sherlock’s desk - the perfect weapon. Hefting it over his shoulder, he climbs up the side of the leather satchel and flings himself inside. A few moments later he feels the bag rise from the floor as Sherlock lifts it and draws the long strap across his lean frame. The satchel bumps lightly against his hip as he heads out, feet pounding against the stairs.

Sadly, Sherlock lacks the abilities of a Sensitive, and even Tup cannot see every supernatural creature and being in this world. Some things are simply better at hiding than others. As such, neither of them notices the spirit that has been lurking within the walls of their flat as it slowly emerges from the shattered remains of their home, and follows them as they head off on their rescue mission.

*****

“She’s not my sister,” John insists. “She’s my date. We only just met. She has nothing to do with this. You should let her go. She knows nothing!”

Shan’s smile reminds him of a shark’s – all teeth and no mercy. She calmly loads the gun in her hand, making sure that John can see she’s putting actual bullets inside now. “Do you think me a fool, Doctor Watson? It is readily evident that you are related, looking as similar as you do.” Reaching into her pocket, she pulls out a slim purse and flips it open to study the image there. “Unfortunately for you, her identification clearly shows that she is Harriet Watson.” Her gaze lifts, mockingly sympathetic. “Pity she did not marry. It would have given your claim some small amount of credence. As it is, all it proves is your willingness to lie.” The purse is casually flung away.

“I think perhaps you need some time to consider your options carefully.” She studies the gun in her hand for a moment before handing it off to one of her minions, murmuring something in Mandarin, too soft to be overheard. She turns back to John. “Yes, I think something a little more… dramatic, is required to earn your honesty. I will give you a chance to tell me the truth and, if I am convinced, I will spare your sister’s life. But if I am not, you will watch as your sister dies a painful and horrible death.”

From the shadows beyond the lighted area, a large box is rolled forward and placed next to Harry, who is all attention and sobriety now that the threat is focused on her. The black drapery is pulled
off and instantly both she and John know what is to come next.

“No!” Lunging forward in his seat, John strains against the chair holding him, struggling to break free. “She has nothing to do with this. She doesn’t know anything! Just let her go. Just let her go and I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“Forgive me, Dr. Watson, when I say that I am not convinced of your sincerity. I think you would say anything to protect your sister, no? And if we let her go, there is nothing to compel you to speak the truth. But I think this,” she notes, patting the “Chinese” Water Torture box affectionately, “will change your mind.”

The two men flanking Harriet reach down to lift her upright once more before hobbling away. A rope dangling from a pulley is lowered, the hook fastened onto the top of the chair before they begin to pull on the opposite end, lifting Harry off of the ground and then rolling the chamber beneath her before lowering her down once more.

John continues to struggle against his bonds helplessly, the skin about his wrists becoming chafed and raw in his desperation. “Please. Please, you don’t have to do this. I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Harriet struggles in vain to loosen the bindings around her hands, the chair tipping this way and that, knocking her against the various glass walls of her prison, but there is not enough room for her to actively fall over again. When the water starts to fill the chamber she stops for exactly a second before glaring at John and yelling at him through the gag angrily. That’s good. At least she’s not giving into her fear, she’s fighting for her life.

Turning to Shan, John rasps fervently, “I swear, I don’t know what you’re talking about! I mean, yes, I know something valuable was stolen, but we don’t know what it is or where it is… I swear.”

“Tell me what you know. Tell me everything that you know.”

John’s eyes flicker to the box where the water has just reached Harriet’s ankles before turning back to Shan. He has no choice. Words spill out of his mouth in a torrent, each rushing to get past the next as he watches the water level in the tank steadily rise up and up.

“We know that you are from a Triad in China called the Black Lotus Society. We know that both Van Coon and Lukis worked for you as smugglers and that you suspect one of them stole something that they shouldn’t have. We know that you sent them each a warning and when that didn’t turn up the item in question, that you sent Siwang after them, that he killed them using his unusual abilities as a ghost. We know that Siwang went to his sister, Soo Lin for help, but that she turned him down. We know that you use the numbering system of Suzhou mazi for leaving coded messages for those in your employ. We found one of the messages, but we couldn’t decipher it. We went to Soo Lin to learn how to read the message, but before she could tell us, Siwang killed her. We’ve been trying to decipher the message we found on the building by the train tracks, but as yet have been unsuccessful. That’s it. That’s all I know. I swear.”

The water is now up to Harry’s knees but Shan doesn’t signal for the water to be turned off. Clearly she considers John’s confession insufficient. Her eyes glitter with anger as she swings a hand up, backhanding John across the face and causing stars to flash before his eyes.

“Where is the pin?!”

Glaring up at her, John shouts back, “I’m telling you I don’t know!”
Her hand lifts to strike him again when the air behind John suddenly shivers, displaced as something comes into being and coalesces into shape. John can feel the ghost behind him, taking form, and with a glance over his shoulder he feels a sense of dread in the pit of his stomach. It’s Sǐwáng. But there’s something strange, something different about the spirit. The rage is gone but it has been replaced by a terrifying emptiness.

Shan jerks back in surprise, her hand dropping away. But she recovers quickly, her attention shifting from John to the ghost. “Where have you been? We have been summoning you for days!” Sǐwáng’s face betrays no hint of reaction, but Shan shakes her head dismissively and growls, “No matter. I’ll deal with you later.” Her attention returns to John.

“Look, let her go. You can torture me all you want, but let Harry go. She doesn’t know anything. And neither do I! The answer isn’t going to change either way because I don’t know what you’re looking for or where it is!”

“He’s right, you know. The woman is useless.”

The familiar voice calls out from down the tunnel, words echoing against the brick walls surrounding them. The deep posh tone fills John with a powerful sense of relief and a palpable sense of dread. Oh God, Sherlock.

“Too simple minded to know anything or be of any use. Really, doing away with her would be a service to the world. As for John, he’s slightly more useful but, more importantly, he’s not lying. He doesn’t know. I, on the other hand…”

One of the henchmen overreacts, taking the gun that Shan gave him and pointing it in the direction of Sherlock’s voice.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you…” but his words are cut off by the sound of a shot ringing out, followed seconds later by the terrible zinging of the bullet ricocheting off the walls of the tramway. The members of the Triad duck and flinch, but no one gets struck by the stray bullet which finally finds something to stop its progress. Sherlock’s voice rises out of the darkness once more, chidingly sardonic.

“I tried to tell you. Shooting a semiautomatic in a tunnel with a radius curvature of nearly four meters? Of course the bullet is going to ricochet!” He’s closer now. He used the distraction of the ricochet to advance. There is the sound of something rolling and then a hissing, the air between them suddenly begins to fill with smoke.

Shan takes the gun from the henchmen’s hand with a hissed, “Idiot!” and then gestures to the lot of them, indicating that they should surround and take down their uninvited guest. Her voice is cordial and smooth when she finally speaks again. “Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I presume?”

“Sherlock! Careful they’re…”

Any further warning by John is cut off as Shan turns and points her gun at Harriet. “Another word from you and she dies now.” John’s gaze flickers back and forth from Harriet, the water to her chest now, to the gun and back again. His shoulder is throbbing, a sure sign that Sherlock is in danger, but so is Harriet. Sherlock is his ward, his friend, but Harriet is his sister. In a moment of madness, John finds himself half hoping that Sherlock’s life is truly threatened because then, and only then, can John transform to save him. Maybe, if God has any mercy, He’ll let John hold onto his powers just long enough to save them both.

Sherlock’s arch tones shift Shan’s attention away from John once more. “You presume correctly…
for once. Terribly sloppy work so far, I must say. If you had bothered to approach this situation with a modicum of logic you might actually have your precious pin in your possession by now. But instead you resorted to torture and murder. How very crude and ineffective.”

There’s the heavy sound of an impact and a body falling to the ground before Sherlock’s voice jauntily calls out, “And you continue to be sloppy. Did you really think I would come here unprepared?”

Shan’s jaw clenches, her pride and anger rising. “Tell us where the pin is and you will save your friend’s lives. Otherwise I will kill them both while you watch.”

“If I tell you where the pin is, you’ll kill us all. I have a much better idea…”

*****

John’s cut-off shout of warning was more than sufficient to tell Sherlock what he needed to know. What he already suspected. There are multiple people heading toward him, which is exactly what he wants. He needs to draw them out, away from John and Harriet, and it seems that he has.

Reaching into his pocket, Sherlock pulls out a small ball the size of an orange and rolls it toward the flaming bin. He needs a smoke screen - literally. Fortunately, he has a few of these left over from the Norwood case. Handy little things. Within a few feet of the bin, the ball starts to deflate, spinning round and round frantically, spewing out a thick dark smoke that obscures the light from the fire, covering the area in which he is hiding into almost pure darkness. He takes out a second, rolling it towards the opposite side of the tunnel for good measure. Slipping on a pair of magically enhanced glasses, for when torches are ill advised, Sherlock smiles as the inky blackness of the tunnel shifts to become perfectly clear.

First distraction, then deception. Now, it is time for some misdirection. Slipping a small disc into his mouth and tossing a matching one across the way, Sherlock starts taunting them, something John is continually telling him that he is far too skilled at. For once, he has the impression that the complimentary words are not actually meant as praise. John can be so contrary at times. It’s a strange sensation, to feel your mouth moving, forming words, but to hear them emerge a good five feet away. Picking up a two-by-four, Sherlock has to wait only a few seconds before the first henchman comes into a view. Coat swirling, he steps out from his hiding place and swings his makeshift bat, the man collapsing without uttering a sound. Quickly Sherlock picks up the disc on the ground and tosses it again.

“I think you should just give up now. Turn yourselves over to the authorities. I’m sure they’ll be far more lenient than your superiors will be when they find out that you’ve failed your mission.”

The next member of the Triad comes into view, and Sherlock clocks him over the head as well, felling him in an instant.

The impact against his legs comes as a surprise, causing Sherlock to topple, the board flying out of his hand. Time for more drastic measures. Reaching into his pocket as he struggles to his feet, Sherlock just barely manages to pull out a small vial before another blow knocks him backward, the bottle shattering upon the ground. Quickly he pulls out a bottle from his breast pocket, pouring the contents out onto a handkerchief before placing it over his mouth. His back against a pallet of wood, he takes quick deep breaths as his opponent approaches him warily, blinking against the darkness. The smaller man stares up into Sherlock’s face, a strange look of horror coming over his features. But instead of running away in terror as expected, he lunges at Sherlock, hands curling around his throat.
This was definitely not the plan.

****

The sounds of fighting emerge from the darkness, but the entire matter is taking much longer than Shan is willing to wait. She turns back to Śiwáng and gestures with one imperious finger. “Get him! Bring Sherlock Holmes to me now!” The ghost says nothing, his head turning toward Harriet and then back toward John before he heads off into the smoke.

Whatever Shan was expecting to follow, however, the horrified screams of her men was not one of them. Gun raised, eyes narrowed, she heads into the fray.

****

They are forgotten. In the chaos of the battle, John and Harriet are both helpless captives that don’t even require a guard. Which would be fine except for the fact that no one has thought to stop the flow of water into the chamber where Harriet is still tied and struggling. It’s up to her neck now, her head tilted back, her eyes wide and terrified as she tries to breathe in and out as hard and as quickly as possible through her nose. Oh God, with the gag in place she can’t even properly hyperventilate to prepare for holding her breath.

On the other hand, having no guard means John can do as he pleases. The ropes binding him have no slack within their grip, and his wrists are bleeding now from struggling against them. Rocking back and forth frantically, John tips himself over, trying to angle his body such that the weight of it will be sufficient to break the chair. He crashes to the ground heavily, his head cracking upon the hard earth, his vision blacking out for a brief moment. He struggles against the void, resisting the urge to slip into unconsciousness, and forces his eyes to open.

Bloody hell! The chair is still fully intact and Harriet is staring at him now, the water above her head, her body holding unnaturally still in an attempt to not waste any of her oxygen.

The throbbing in his shoulder has dulled to a mild ache, suggesting that Sherlock is relatively safe. A blessing and a curse. He can’t do this. He can’t just lie here and watch Harriet die. His will calls out to his power, demanding that it rise up, that it answer his need, but, as with Soo Lin, his power remains dormant and untouchable. His eyes flutter closed.

Dear God, please. Please help me. Please help me save Harry. You can destroy me after but please, please let me save Harry. Give me this one last act of defiance…

“Wingless!”

Is it possible that a miracle can come in the form of a tiny Brownie?

“Tup!” His voice is barely more than a croak. “Tup, I need your help! Find something sharp!”

The small Fae comes into sight with a fierce grin on his pointy face, wielding a scalpel in his hands like a spear.

“Tup, hurry!”

The Brownie scrambles over John and within seconds is sawing at the rope bonds, warning, “Don’t try t’pull free yet or yeh’ll bowl me over! Waits until I tells yeh to move!”

John can do nothing but lie there. Lie there as he watches Harriet drown.
Drowning is not the wild, flailing, violent sort of death that most people imagine it to be. It’s disturbingly quiet, quick, and unspectacular. Harriet’s eyes are wide open and filled with terror, slowly becoming glassy and empty, unable to focus. Her body twitches and jerks as the urge to breathe starts to overwhelm her determination to hold her breath. She starting to release her breath, bubbles escaping her mouth as she tries to relieve the pressure building up inside of her.

“God, Tup, hurry…”

She can’t hold on. No one can. Eventually the increasing levels of carbon dioxide building up in her body trigger the reflex to take a breath. John watches as Harriet’s mouth opens and breathes water in. Instantly her body jerks and tries to cough, to expel the water, only to inhale more involuntarily. Her guardian is with her, one arm wrapped about her middle, the other stroking through her floating hair, as if she could somehow give her dying ward comfort in this moment of terror. John grimly watches as Harriet’s body begins to shut down, as her struggles weaken and then eventually… stop. Over the centuries he’s seen countless numbers of things die. It is the way of the universe that everything is born and that everything dies, but this is different. This is… personal. The truth of what it is to be human, to be so emotionally open and vulnerable, hits John like a speeding car.

Something inside of John cracks open within his chest. Fear along with adrenaline, pure and brutal, floods through his system, stripping away any lingering vestiges of calm resolve or reason, leaving him a creature of primal reactions. What do you do when neither fight nor flight are available choices? His eyes widen, his mouth falls open as raw, potent emotions threaten to overwhelm him.

“Now, Wingless!”

John’s arms flex and pull, the ropes straining and breaking beneath to power of his desperation. “Tup, the knife!” His fingers are numb and weak and he has no time to struggle with knots. Tup scurries over and passes John the small blade, which is blessedly sharp. Under his strength, the cutting goes much faster, the ropes around each ankle giving beneath the efforts of both his hands and feet. Immediately leaping to his feet, John reaches for the largest and heaviest object he can find – a piece of metal pipe. Nothing else matters. Not Shan, not Sherlock, not any of the chaos still going on around them. The only thing that matters is saving Harriet.

He slams the pipe against one side of the container again and again and again. He tries not to focus on Harriet’s still and lifeless form inside or the vacant, open stare of her eyes, but instead puts all of his energy and focus on hitting the same spot over and over again, weakening it.

As the safety glass gives way to a crumbling hole, water begins to pour out. John continues to hammer away, chipping at the ever-expanding edges of the opening to make it large enough to pull Harriet through. Suddenly, there is another pair of hands, Sherlock’s, helping him reach for his sister and pull her free. John’s voice is rough and shaky as he gives Sherlock instructions.

“We need to turn her over, get the water out of her mouth, nose and throat. We need to cut her free. I can’t…. with the chair… Sherlock…”

Laying Harriet on her side, John is joined by Sherlock only seconds later, a knife in the detective’s capable hands quickly cutting away at the ropes holding Harriet captive.

There’s no breath. No pulse. God willing, most of the water is in her stomach, not her lungs. Her larynx would have constricted and closed off at the first introduction of water entering her airway. He needs to resuscitate her. God, how long has she been without oxygen? Time has compressed and expanded, lost all meaning since he saw the water level rise above Harriet’s head. But it doesn’t matter, none of that matters. Bringing her back, that’s what matters.
John works frantically, compressing Harry’s chest and breathing for her in the pattern Watson knows by heart, but it is both John and Watson’s heart that is breaking as Harry continues to lie there, still and unresponsive, her lips and face turning blue despite his efforts to revive her. He doesn’t even notice the tears running down his cheeks or the expression of dismay and worry that is starting to overtake Sherlock’s features as he watches John’s futile attempts to save his sister. He is blind to the sorrowful gaze of Harriet's Guardian Angel, kneeling at her ward's side, patiently waiting for the inevitable.

After ten minutes, John slumps backward onto his heels, arching his head backward, only to find Sherlock’s eyes affixed to his face, grave and guilty.

“I, I…” Between the overwhelming emotion and the lack of oxygen from giving Harry all of his breath, John can barely speak. “I can’t… I can’t save her. I can’t save my own damn sister, Sherlock! God, oh God, please… Why give me the ability and then deny it? Why did you do this to me…? I should be able to save her. I should have the power to save her, dammit!” But that power remains locked within John’s scapula it seems, for Sherlock and Sherlock alone. He curls over Harry, tears splashing on her slack pale features, trailing down and vanishing as he strokes her wet hair and whispers the only thing he can, over and over and over again.

“Oh God, Harry, I’m sorry. God, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry….”

It’s an endless, choked litany of grief that only comes to an end when a hand comes to rest on his shoulder, squeezing gently in support.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: minor character death

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Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He drifts aimlessly through the building on Baker Street, wandering up and down the stairs, flickering through doorways and walls like a guttering candle in the wind. Occasionally he slips outside, into the world of London, but no matter where he roams it is always the flat on the second floor that calls to him. 221b. He hovers for a moment by the open doorway before slipping inside once more.

The place is a shambles. Tables overturned, books knocked over, shelves raked clean, drawers pulled open, their contents scattered to the four corners. He drifts through the wreckage, searching for the one piece of it that belongs to him. It calls to him softly, like the gentle crackle of a warm fire or the soft soothing murmur of a parent to a frightened child after the nightmare has passed.

He finds it on the floor, in the lee of a tipped over chair, the broken fragments of the tablet much like this shattered apartment. Uninhabitable. Soo Lin made him this – a beacon for when he was finally free of his bonds. She prepared a place for him, where he could either come to rest or to simply find her and join her once more.

He didn’t understand its purpose when he first saw it. Instead he destroyed her offering in a blind rage. Its call led him here, to the home of the mufashi who picked up the pieces from where they laid. It can no longer lead him to his sister, nor can the fractured piece of wood offer him shelter or rest. But still it has given him something; a precious thing that he had lost. His ghostly fingers trail over the remains of his shen zhu pai, tracing over the letters of his true name. His forgotten name. Liang.

The soft sound of movement amongst the wreckage causes him to slip away. Since he cannot possess the tablet, he has come to possess this place instead. His soul slips into the walls of the flat, shifting beneath the flocked wallpaper restlessly.

The tiny one is here, looking around with those bright eyes, sniffing the air as if he could scent Liang. The Fae creature is the only one so far to realize that something here has changed. He is sensitive enough to perceive the possession but the Fae’s magic is not a challenge to Liang’s power and ability to become truly invisible to eyes both mundane and mystical.

The furry one scrambles over books and papers, sadly picking up a broken teacup as his gaze flickers over the destroyed remains of his home. Liang’s gaze silently scans over the chaos in turn.

It’s been an eventful night.

First they all came back: the protector, his sister, and the mófǎshī. He had been forced to withdraw. Whenever the small one was in residence, the guardian, Liang kept his distance, blending into the background noise of magical energies, spirits, and angels that flowed through the city of London in countless numbers. He idly listened as they argued and talked about the cipher and translations and food. Despite the fact that until recently all of this had been integral to his life and purpose, Liang found that none of it mattered to him any more. Instead, he found himself wondering if he need bother to hide. Would the small one even recognize him without his signature rage?

Ever since that night at the museum, Liang is merely a witness to the lives of others, observing
with empty eyes, unfeeling and hollow save for the pain of sorrow and regret at the core of him. He watched as minions of the Black Lotus Society invaded his temporary home and kidnapped its inhabitants. He idly registered the lack of anger he felt towards those who held him bound and tortured. But there is no anger left within him. Soo Lin took it all.

The men he once worked along with stormed the place, taking out the small one and finally subduing the woman before ransacking the apartment, looking for the treasure. Liang drifted across the ceiling fixtures and lights like lazy smoke upon the air as he watched them. He had no desire to make his presence known. They were no longer his kinsmen. He had no interest in either helping or hindering them. It didn’t matter that he knew the treasure wasn’t here. It didn’t matter that he knew that the two men here were of no real threat to the Society that once held him in its thrall.

In fact, nothing matters to him any more.

He watched as the tall one arrived to the shattered remains of his home to find his friend taken and the yellow message left for him, scrawled over the windows of the flat. Horror and dismay colored the human’s features as he rushed off yet again. It’s been quiet since then, save for the rummaging and sniffing of the tiny faery. Already Liang can feel the emptiness of his existence building up within him again, the pressure of nothing almost unbearable.

There is a slamming of the door downstairs and the sound of feet pounding up before the tall one bursts into the room once more. But this time is different. This time he carries with him something strangely familiar that causes Liang’s non-existent flesh to crawl and itch.

He drifts down, hovering over the dark tangle of hair without fear of discovery. The mófāshi is blind to him, oblivious. He has the power of destruction, but lacks the ability to aim. When the square of cloth pulled from his pocket is opened, a piece of raw flesh revealed within, Liang understands his reaction.

The mark.

Even though it is not made for him, it repels and revolts him. Recoiling up and away, he lingers instead upon the ceiling, watching with quiet curiosity as the man begins to work.

The mófāshi crafts his magic with determination, hints of anger mingling with fear within him. But not for himself. Despite the risky nature of the binding spell, the fact that he is preparing to face the dragon’s den, there is no fear for himself. Only for his friend. The risk, the danger, the willing sacrifice taken. The man is filled with purpose, but one that is not terrible or inspired by fear or riches.

There are invisible bonds that tie people to one another. Children and parents, brothers and sisters, and the love between friends. These bonds are at once fragile and fierce. They are far more precious than treasure or power, yet so often taken for granted, forgotten or neglected. Liang once had such a bond and it is only now that he truly realizes what it is that he has lost.

The man before him cares for his stolen companion, perhaps more than he’s willing to admit, even to himself. It is this bond that awakens a slow thrumming need within Liang, drawing him to Sherlock. The ghost flutters in his wake, irresistibly compelled by the man’s daring and determination. He will see how this piece of the story, that he was until recently so inextricably entwined, with will end.

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Liang studies the tall one as he impatiently rides in the cab, his fingers drumming restlessly against the satchel at his side. His gaze is cool and calculating, but concern is etched on the man’s face, in the creases at the corners of his eyes and creases upon his brow. As they draw closer to the dragon’s den, Liang floats free of the cab to scout ahead, leaving the mófǎshì behind.

Upon his arrival it takes only seconds to comprehend the scene before him. His invisible gaze comes to rest upon the struggling sister as the water rises up higher and higher. She will die. Her fate is written upon her, plain for him to see. Shan’s words are lies. There will be no mercy, no releasing her even if the brother tells her what she wants to hear.

Liang turns toward the Guardian, bound by more than just the ropes around his wrists and ankles. As in the museum, his power to protect, to avenge, comes with limitations. His determination, however, will not yield as he fights both his physical and spiritual constraints. His courage is undeniable, as is his willingness to sacrifice himself without hesitation. He struggles, desperate to protect. Desperate to save.

A pang of remorse and guilt surges and suddenly, Liang can only see Soo Lin within his mind’s eye. She too was courageous, desperate to protect, desperate to save… and willing to give everything. He can see her true purpose so clearly now. After years of trying to free him and failing, she did the only thing she could and lovingly prepared a place for him. And when she realized he was too far gone to save himself she gave the ultimate sacrifice to free him from the hatred that held him captive.

She could have fought him. She was strong and powerful. It would have been a magnificent battle of spiritual fu. But instead she used gentle words of forgiveness to draw from him all the seething pain and rage boiling within him. Soo Lin drew the bitterness and violence out of him like a poison and then held onto that conflagration that had consumed his soul. She took it within herself, allowing it burn her, and itself, into nothing.

His mind returns to the present as Shan lifts her hand against the bound man, time slowing down to a crawl as a potent realization suddenly dawns.

For as long as he can remember, he has always had purpose, but never one of his own. First, it was pure survival; stay alive. Later, it was servitude, their only option if they were to live. After years of servitude and the loss of his sister, it became destruction. His anger, the need for vengeance - the need to inflict pain, to maim, to kill - became everything. The fact that he was still held within the bonds of slavery only meant an imposed limit upon how much destruction he could manifest. The leash about his soul chafed and burned, but that pain only fed the flames of his mindless wrath.

When he found Soo Lin, his purpose changed once more. There was still the rage, the unquenchable desire to destroy, but the one that he believed to be the source of all his pain, all this anger, was suddenly within his reach again. And with her presence came the belief that if he could only have her back, if she rejoined him once more, all would be well. Her betrayal in leaving him would never be truly healed, but her presence at his side once more would be a balm to the terrible pain that ravaged his soul and drove him mad.

Instead, he destroyed her.

At first the shock of it was unbearable. His shield and armor had been stripped from him, leaving him empty, exposed, and vulnerable. He was no longer Siwáng. He was nothing. No one. He had just destroyed the only thing in the universe that mattered to him, the only soul who cared for him. With the fire burnt out of him, for the first time in his life, he is devoid of purpose or meaning. He is nothing more than a lonely, empty husk of a soul, crying out like an infant that knows not what it
needs, only that it needs.

As Shan’s hand swings toward the bound man’s battered face Liang suddenly realizes that he wants to protect this fragile guardian; to protect that which cannot protect itself or its loved ones. A powerful sense of peace comes over his soul. He can have purpose again. And for the first time in his life, his purpose will be his choice, not someone else’s.

*****

Devil’s foot is a dangerous plant but, like most toxic poisons, the right amount can have useful effects. It’s a common quality found in nature. Pseudoaconitine found in wolfsbane, digitalis from foxgloves, and atropine, extracted from the deadly nightshade plant, all have efficacious usage in medicine, even in this modern age for the latter two. Deadly fugu fish can be carefully prepared as a special delicacy, leaving enough of the poison in to create a tingling, numbing sensation for the lips and tongue without killing the patron. Once Sherlock learned of Devil’s Foot, naturally he had to explore the levels at which it would create terrifyingly frightening hallucinations without actually killing the victim. Of course, it never occurred to him that said hallucinations might endanger his life.

Sherlock’s hands grip the wrists of the man before him, as he’s slammed into the pallet of wood behind him. The grip around his throat doesn’t loosen. Idly he wonders what sort of horror it is that the man thinks he’s facing. A Jiang Shi? Yaoguai? Maybe a Zhayu? Whatever it is, it can’t be good. The man is shrieking something in Mandarin that Sherlock doesn’t understand, and he seems quite determined to kill Sherlock before Sherlock can kill him. Using the pallet behind him as support, Sherlock pushes back, trying to unbalance the Chinese man when he sees someone else approaching.

Ｓǐwáng.

Sherlock’s struggles increase. If he keeps fighting his attacker, Ｓǐwáng will get him. But if he reaches for the fu in his pocket, the hands around his neck will probably choke him to unconsciousness before he has a chance to use the fu. Decisions, decisions! No, wait!

Sherlock braces himself and then uses the moment of the man pushing into him to spin them around. Now Ｓǐwáng is approaching his exposed back, but if only… if only….

The hands about his throat loosen as his attackers gaze shifts slightly then focuses intently on the figure approaching them. And then he does exactly as Sherlock had hoped he might. Screaming in terror at this new approaching horror, he lets go of Sherlock’s neck entirely, pushing Sherlock aside as he turns and flees from whatever frightful manifestation Ｓǐwáng has become.

Reaching into his pocket, Sherlock pulls out a fist of fu, but his hands still as the ghost ignores him completely and instead turns to follow his kinsman. The man screams again as Ｓǐwáng reaches for him, hand shifting to translucence as it passes through the minion’s brow. The screams abruptly stop and an expression of confusion comes over the man’s face before his eyes roll into the back of his head and he falls to the ground.

Slowly the ghost turns his head to consider Sherlock, the consulting detective holding a piece of fu between his fingers, preparing to strike. For a moment they hold a gaze, each studying the other silently before Siwang inclines his head ever so slightly to the detective and moves away. Sherlock hesitates only for a moment before crouching down next to the fallen man, a hand dropping to rest against his throat to find a steady pulse. He pulls one eye open and then the other. Not dead. Not even harmed. Just… unconscious.
Sherlock glances over his shoulder, mystified as he hears another horrified scream that is once again sharply cut off. Sǐwáng is eliminating the threat of his own kind. But why? Eyes narrowing in suspicion, Sherlock rises to his feet. This is not the time to be looking a gift horse in the mouth. He needs to get to John.

Spinning around, Sherlock finds himself face to face with the matron from the circus holding a gun at chest level. At this range, there won’t be any risk of ricochet; she won’t miss her target. Her gaze is hard and clear, unaffected by the hallucinogen. Already the Devil’s Foot is dissipating, or perhaps they are simply too far away from where the bottle smashed. It works much better when introduced through a ventilation system or smoke – something that permeates the air.

“Well, Mr. Holmes. You and your companions have given me quite a bit of trouble this evening.” Another scream is heard from the left, but her eyes barely flicker toward it before she cocks the end of the gun toward him, gesturing him back from whence he came. “I think it’s time that you and I went somewhere more private and had a chat.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrow as he reassesses the situation. The odds that she would shoot him before getting the relevant information are in his favor. “Not without John and Harriet.”

She smiles coldly and shakes her head. “No, Mr. Holmes, I have no more patience for your little games. They will be here when we are finished. They’re not going anywhere.”

There’s something about the way she says those words that causes an icy chill to run down Sherlock’s spine. Could he have miscalculated? In all the confusion, did she decide it would be simpler to just dispatch them then and there rather than use them for leverage against him? He can’t just leave without knowing the truth.

“I’m not going without them. You have two choices. You can either shoot me now and never find out where the pin is, or you can take me to them.”

Her gaze shifts slightly past Sherlock and for a moment her eyes flash with anger and temper. But quickly the mask falls back into place. A cruel smile curves her lips as she retorts, “No, Mr. Holmes, you are mistaken. There is a third choice.” He senses a presence coming up behind him, eyes coming to rest upon the familiar face of Sǐwáng. The ghost doesn’t so much as look at Sherlock, his empty, dark eyes focused upon the woman before him.

“Mr. Holmes is being… difficult. Convince him to come along quietly, Sǐwáng.”

Ahhhh, that explains it. She is displeased with Sǐwáng. She sent him in to ‘deal’ with Sherlock and is angered by his failure to do so, but doesn’t want Sherlock to realize that she might not be in full control of the situation by taking the ghost to task. She doesn’t yet realize. All those screams, all her men, she thinks that somehow Sherlock is responsible and that Sǐwáng is merely slow in enacting his duties.

Sǐwáng’s eyes lift to Sherlock’s, studying him without a flicker of emotion or caring. But he doesn’t attack or even reach for the detective. Instead he turns back to the woman and reaches toward her instead.

Shan takes a step back, the gun wheeling, changing its trajectory from Sherlock to Sǐwáng. “What are you doing? Stop! I order you!” Her words have no effect. The ghost continues to advance on her slowly, patiently, one hand reaching out. “You must obey me! You are a servant of the Black Lotus! You must obey!”

Sherlock can see the shift in her features as comprehension floods in. The summons that were
ineffective, the screams of her men, Ŭáng’s disobedience to her commands. The bound spirit has somehow slipped his collar and chains and is now turning his powers against his masters.

And this master in particular knows exactly what horrific deeds this ghost is capable of enacting.

She panics, gun firing point blank into Ŭáng’s chest. Each bullet hits its mark, causing a slight hesitation in his steps from the force of impact, but the weapon has no discernable effect. This form is not true flesh and blood; it cannot be harmed by mere pieces of lead. Ŭáng keeps advancing and the woman keeps backing away, still frantically firing until the gun clicks, empty of ammo.

Sherlock doesn’t wait to see what becomes of her.

He isn’t prepared, however, for the sight that greets his eyes as he breaks free of the smoke screen. John, bloodied and frantic, beating upon the Chinese Water chamber, water leaking from the top and spilling down the sides as it overflows, Harriet uncharacteristically still and silent within. There’s a flash of irritation at his miscalculation. He didn’t sufficiently scout out the premises. He didn’t see the chamber, the escapology device hidden by the pallets. He made the assumption that Harriet was like John, tied up on a chair. Why use such a ludicrous and awkward device when a gun or a violent beating would suffice?

The inner diatribe lasts for less than a second as Sherlock hurries over. The glass breaks just as he arrives and reaching in he helps John draw Harriet free, a sense of dismay and grim realization overcoming him when he takes in her blank expression and pale flesh. How could he have missed this possibility? How long as she been without oxygen? Can she be revived? If it is possible, will she have full possession of her faculties, or will she suffer irreparable brain damage?

For once he keeps his thoughts to himself, wise enough to know that now is not the time. He follows John’s commands to the letter and tries to ignore the icy pit forming in his stomach as his mind relentlessly catalogs each and every possible outcome and calculates the dour odds of the final result being a positive one.

As John labors over his sister, giving her his breath and willing her heart to restart, Sherlock pulls his mobile out and quickly calls 999, giving them clear and precise information on where they are and what is needed before snapping the phone shut. His fingers dig into his thighs as he watches and waits. As each minute passes, the odds become exponentially worse until it is clear that Harriet will not be revived in time.

John is a doctor and a soldier and one of the most solid, dependable, and rational men that Sherlock has ever known. And right now, he is falling to pieces before him. For the first time in a very, very long time, Sherlock is at a complete loss of how to proceed.

*****

“It’s not your fault.” With a start, John realizes that it is neither Sherlock’s voice speaking to him, nor his hand upon his shoulder, offering comfort. In fact, his flatmate is currently crouched across from John on the other side of Harriet’s body. For an insane moment John considers the possibility that it is Harriet’s Guardian offering him comfort. But no, that’s impossible. He wouldn’t be able to feel her touch physically and her voice wouldn’t have a thick Chinese accent. Besides, he can see her standing off to the side, watching with sad eyes. John stares at Sherlock, his friend’s hand clutching slips of fu at the ready, his expression twisted between awkward concern for John, dismay for Harry, and wariness toward the person standing behind John. There is only one possibility.

Turning his head, John startles and then snarls, his anger and anguish suddenly finding a place to
focus. Șiwang. The ghost is just standing there, staring down at Harry’s sodden, limp figure. Surging to his feet, John fists his hands into Șiwang’s clothes, uncaring that the spirit could tear out his heart or tear open his lungs. Right now that seems like it would be a blessing. He senses Sherlock rising up as well, cognizant of the danger that John is placing himself in, but he can’t bring himself to care or stop

He shakes the ghost, shouting at him in his anger and sorrow, knowing that his words make no sense, that it was not Șiwang personally who did this. The ghost is a symbol, the personification of the Black Lotus Society. “You killed her! You fucking killed her! She was innocent! She had nothing to do with this! Nothing at all! You killed her for nothing! Why didn’t you kill me instead? Why did you have to kill her?!” His own injuries are taking their toll as the adrenaline begins to run out and the grief is dragging him down. John feels his legs wobble and begin to buckle until hands come to grasp his arms, supporting his weight.

Their eyes meet and John can’t help but gasp softly. Those near-black eyes freeze John in place by the sheer power of the grief and empathy shining within them. He looks, not simply at the ghost before him but into him. This is not the same tortured soul - the spirit before him now, and the spirit they battled against at the museum, are two completely different beings. The hate, the rage, is utterly gone.

Suddenly they are one and the same. Beings of great power and age, who did not have the power to save their loved ones. Brothers who have watched their sisters die. They have, both of them, lost their only family through action and lack of action and both of them are in turn suffering the pain of loss, regret, and guilt.

The anger drains out of John just as quickly as it had flared and this time when his legs give way, the ghost gently lowers him to the ground and kneels there himself. As if through thick cotton he can hear Sherlock’s voice, speaking his name as if to caution him, sees him leaning close, body braced for action. He shakes his head and lifts a hand, wondering if Sherlock can understand what he’s trying to say with the silent gesture.

No, it’s okay; he’s not going to hurt me. He’s not going to hurt anyone.

Almost immediately Sherlock eases back, still close enough to reach, but no longer bristling with protective tension, ready to launch himself at Șiwang if necessary. He understood. And then a second later John realizes that of course he understood. He’s Sherlock Holmes and over the past months they’ve been together they can speak more clearly with looks and gestures that most can with words and sentences.

Hands resting on his thighs, shoulders hunched, John’s head drops down low, as if it were too heavy to hold up any longer. His voice is soft and rough when he finally asks, “Șiwang… why are you here? You are no longer part kuí… and clearly free of your curse and your ties. Why come here? Why show yourself at all?” His unspoken accusation lingers on the air between them. ‘You had the power. You could have stopped this.’

Shaking his head, the ghost replies somberly, “That name is no longer mine. My birth name is Liang and I came because of him,” he notes, pointing toward Sherlock. “He bore the mark for you. I had to come and see how this story would end.”

John’s head lifts, brow creasing in confusion as his lips start to move, to ask the obvious question.

Sherlock’s voice, however, quickly interrupts. “But you were not a spectator, nor did you come for vengeance. The men that were threatening me, you dispatched them without harm. And your master? She no longer has any power to command you. Soo Lin told us that she had not yet
managed to find everything she needed for the ritual to release you from your servitude, so what became of the bond that tied you to the Black Lotus Society?"

Liang’s head shakes from side to side, a bittersweet smile just barely curling his lips. “At first, I did not understand either. The summons came, but no longer was there any need to obey. I do not think mei mei, realized that she had done more than free me from my terrible anger. When Soo Lin took my madness into herself, the fire of that rage, along with the purity of her own power, burned the mark away.”

Turning his gaze back to Harry, the ghost bows his head sadly, as if seeing his own sister lying there instead of another’s. Leaning forward, he lifts a hand, brushing a wet tendril of hair from her forehead. In turn, John’s hand snaps out, grabbing the ghost’s wrist as he bites out harshly, “Don’t. Don’t touch her.” His face lifts, anger and sorrow twisting the normally kind features. “You didn’t have to obey. You helped Sherlock and you took out your own men, and for that I’m grateful. But you let Harriet die. You could have chosen to save her, but you didn’t. It would have been nothing to you, to stop the flow of water, to break the glass, to free me, but instead you left her, knowing she would die.” He licks his lips and stares intently before confessing, “I don’t know… if I can forgive you for that.”

Liang removes his hand slowly and turns toward John. “If I had done any of those things, General Shan would have killed you both and there was no certainty that I could stop her. But more than that, I could not save her even if I wanted to at that time. Your sister was marked for death. Her fate was written upon her. It had already been decided. But there is nothing that says she must remain so.”

Liang shifts back slightly and then kowtows to John in a gesture of respect and humility. “Zhēn rén, I have a debt to repay. And since I cannot repay it to the one who deserves it, I shall repay it to you,” and with a nod of his head toward Harry, “and her. I shall reunite brother and sister and in doing so finish the work that Soo Lin began.”

At first there is lack of comprehension. Not even an angel can bring one who has died back to life. There must still be a hint of a spark in order to bring a soul back from the edge. Still, there is a tiny flicker of hope in John’s chest. “You can’t. This,” he says, choking on the words as he gestures toward Harriet’s body. “This is not something you can fix with your powers. You know that as well as I.”

“You are so old, and yet so young,” Liang murmurs to John, his English halting as he searches for the words, but true. “I have nothing left now. No family, no ties to this world or the next. Soo Lin saved me. She took all my anger, all my hatred, into herself and purified it in fire. She gave up her being to release me from the chains that I had shackled myself to. For the first time in centuries, I am free. But without my sister, what does freedom matter?” His head tilts to one side, gazing down at Harriet’s lifeless form. “My mei mei sacrificed her spirit to save mine. I will do the same to save your sister.”

A burgeoning understanding of what it is that Liang is suggesting begins to take shape. In his previous ranks, such interference was not allowed and to his knowledge has never has been done, but logistically it is possible. That small spark of hope flares into a flame. However, what Liang is suggesting goes against John’s very nature as a Guardian Angel. John cannot allow this sacrifice to be made, especially if Liang does not understand the consequences. His deep blue eyes are steady and sober as he cautions, “If you mean to do what I think you mean, you do realize… you will disappear. You will cease to exist. There will be no afterlife. There will be nothing at all.”

Liang’s smile is bittersweet as he replies, “Is there not? There is so much you do not know, zhēn
rén. Who is to say there is not an afterlife beyond the afterlife? Either way, I am content. I go to join my sister, in either oblivion or eternity. There is nothing left for me. I would rather my ending be someone else’s new beginning.”

Without realizing it, John lifts his gaze to Sherlock, seeking out his thoughts on the matter. In turn, Sherlock is uncharacteristically quiet and merely meets his eyes with his own pale, steady regard. For once, no opinion is voiced and suddenly John realizes that it is so out of respect for him. They’ve already had this argument and for once Sherlock is choosing to be tactful and say nothing, rather than remind John that the belief in ‘souls’ and the ‘afterlife’ is nothing more than religious claptrap.

John blinks, his gaze holding Sherlock’s for a moment before turning to Liang. If this action is done willingly, he cannot refuse the offer. John nods to the spirit and shuffles out of the way.

Shifting his position slightly, Liang places his hands over Harry’s chest, resting them there lightly as his eyes slowly close. His form begins to shift and glow, transforming from the physical to the intangible, becoming more than just spirit, but pure energy. The essence of a soul. The spark of life. Everything that Liang is rushes forward, his form curling up into itself pushing up through his legs, his torso, collapsing into shoulders, tunneling down through arms. His hands slip into Harry’s chest as easily as slipping into a pool of water, cupping her heart as the rest of him flows down and around her heart and, like a drop of water in a still pond, ripples of golden energy flow outward through Harry’s body and then vanishes.

There is a moment of perfect stillness, where nothing moves and no one breathes. The space beside John is empty, as if Liang was never even there.

Suddenly there is a violent intake of breath and wracked coughing as Harry surges back to life, curling over onto her side as her lungs heave to push water out and air in, coughing and gasping and struggling, and dear God above, *alive*.

It is Sherlock, for once, who states the obvious. “Impressive.”

Chapter End Notes

shen zhu pai = a wooden tablet in which the named soul can inhabit until it is time to move on to the underworld  
sǐwáng = death  
mófāshī = a wizard or sorceror  
jiāng shí = a type of reanimated corpse in Chinese legends and folklore  
yāoguài = a demon - mostly malevolent animal spirits or fallen celestial beings that have acquired magical powers  
zhàyuǔ = creature of pure yin said to devour evil humans  
kuì = demon  
zhēn rén= literal translation 'real man'

*****

Many thanks to non_canonical for her friendship, brilliant advice, beta and Brit picking and to fay2205 for putting up with a ridiculous number of questions from me regarding the translation of one single word. ;
Special thanks go out to abundantlyqueer. If it wasn't for her initial encouragement, I wouldn't be writing at all.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

I must confess, I never thought this would ever happen - that it would take me four months to post a chapter. Ugh. The convention was definitely part of the reason for that, but I still apologize for keeping you all waiting so very long. I won't blame you at all if you decide to wait until the next story is finished before reading or commenting on it. :)

This story is now complete! Check back in a few months for the next story in the Fallen series. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock leans against the wall, arms folded over his chest, eyes studying the two figures before him. The copious amounts of blood have been cleaned from his face and hair, but John’s clothes are still stained about the collar and down his left shoulder. Head wounds are notorious for bleeding heavily. A bright white bandage stands out starkly against his forehead, his face bruised and puffy from the beating he received. Otherwise, he is undamaged.

Technically he should be resting, not sitting at his sister’s bedside. The doctors at University College Hospital took one look at his pupils and declared him concussed, but John is probably the second most stubborn and determined person of Sherlock’s acquaintance, Sherlock himself being the first. Naturally, John insisted on getting dressed and checking himself out, using his credentials to assure everyone that he knows full well how to take care of himself.

Sherlock’s pale gaze flickers over to where Harriet lies placidly, his regard clinical and dispassionate. Naturally the patient is well sedated, intubated at the moment in an effort to remove the water she aspirated and reduce the serious risk of bacterial pneumonia. Of course, most of the water that was inhaled was actually swallowed, ending up in the stomach rather than her lungs. But there is always some water that is actively inhaled, an essential trigger, before the body’s natural defenses kick in, the resulting laryngospasm effectively sealing off the trachea.

His eyes shift back toward his flatmate. Unsurprisingly, John’s gaze is anything but clinical and dispassionate, despite his profession as a physician. Right now his blue eyes are focused on his sister’s face, his expression one of silent gratitude and dazed amazement that she is alive. His thumb lightly rubs over her knuckles in a soothing gesture that is utterly wasted on the woman in her current unconscious state.

Boring.

Standing around while John’s sister lies in a hospital bed is quite frankly an incredible bore after the exhilarating evening they’ve just been through. Sherlock’s mind is racing over the details of Liang’s spiritual transformation and the ramifications of it. This requires research! In fact, he isn’t quite certain why he’s still here when there is so much to be done. But when his gaze comes to rest upon John once more, he finds himself reluctant to leave just yet. Tonight was a close thing; it could just as easily be John lying in that hospital bed, rather than his annoying sister.

“Bloody miracle.”
Sherlock opens his mouth to correct John’s choice of words. No, not a ‘miracle’. There are no miracles. This is simply a dramatically unique and advantageous confluence of circumstances, timing, motivation, and magical ability, with a gratuitous amount of guilt and sentiment thrown in – all of which have heightened the irrational and spontaneous actions and reactions of most of the parties involved, himself excluded.

Mmmm, yes, that’s better.

But Sherlock keeps his thoughts to himself, his mouth clicking shut once more, his jaw clenching slightly with the effort. He can give his flatmate, no… his friend…. he can give John this. He knows that by John’s standards he’s been ‘good’. Better than good really, keeping his mouth shut and his opinions to himself throughout the conversation with Siwang… no, with Liang’s ghost. It wasn’t easy. He had questions to ask, points to make. The urge to speak his mind is as powerful now as it ever has been. It almost hurt, to keep his thoughts and observations to himself. Only knowing that John has been through something of an ordeal and would find them unwelcome has kept his otherwise sharp tongue in check. Well that, and the knowledge that a punch to the jaw would hurt more. While John is normally quite self-controlled, the stress over watching his sister die is potentially sufficient cause for a lapse in his normally congenial nature.

Yes, he’s been very good, but now John is patched up and Harriet is alive and blessedly quiet for a change, and now is really the perfect time to bring up a few points that he couldn’t help but notice during Liang’s conversation with John. Sherlock takes a breath, his words a statement laced with endless questions.

“He called you zhēn rén.”

Oh Christ, here it comes. He knew it couldn’t last forever but for once John just wishes that Sherlock’s mind would turn off for a change. He doesn’t look up from Harriet’s face, his thumb still gently rubbing over her knuckles, but he does close his eyes for a moment and then takes a deep and fortifying breath.

“I don’t speak Chinese, Sherlock.” God, he’s getting too good at lying. When did he get so good at lying? Occupational hazard, he supposes. If he’s going to take care of Sherlock, protect him, be with him, he has to learn to lie and be good at it. How ironic is that?

Sherlock’s voice is probing, determined, like a hound on the scent of a fox. “He also said that you were ‘so old and yet so young’…”

“Well, I’m no spring chicken,” John grouses softly, feeling every year of his human age at the moment and then some. “In fact, I’ve never felt so old in my whole life.” Lies flavored with truth are always the best. John has always sensed the passage of time, but until he became human he has never felt ‘old’.

“That’s an illogical statement. You’ve never been so old in your whole life than you are now, so of course you’ve never felt this old until now.”

“Sherlock.” John snaps, eyes closing again when the rising volume of his voice causes a small rush of dizziness to pass through him. Softer, he repeats, “Sherlock, I feel older than my age. That’s what I meant, and you know it. It’s obvious.” He can hear Sherlock draw a breath to make yet another accusatory point, which reminds John of a few of his own, his voice cutting Sherlock’s off.
“What about this mark? Hmmm? You bore the ‘mark’ for me? What mark, Sherlock, what was he talking about?”

Sherlock raises one brow, but sidesteps the question blithely. “It’s nothing.”

John knows that he doesn’t need to say anything in response to that. He simply turns his head and stares, his angry gaze versus Sherlock’s cool and defensive one. John is far more patient than Sherlock, which is why in the end he wins this battle. Sherlock huffs impatiently and pulls up his sleeve to reveal the mark of the triad on his arm, noting proactively, “It’s nothing. It’s Lukis’. I just… borrowed it so I could read the cipher…”

His chair scrapes against the floor as John rises up and crosses over, roughly capturing Sherlock’s arm in his hands, pushing the sleeve up higher as he stares at the ugly flesh molded upon his ward’s arm, panic trilling through his system as he realizes what it is and what it means.

“Sherlock. This is still linked to the Black Lotus Society. It’s still infused with magic and Lukis' or otherwise, they can reach you through it.” His eyes lift to Sherlock’s, tired and yet fierce with concern. “You have to get rid of it immediately.”

Sherlock gently disengages his arm from John’s grasp, his tone a bit softer, reassuring as he notes, “And I intend to. They won’t notice anything right away and by the time they would I shall have long since removed it. I’ll attend to it after I talk to Lestrade.”

John is anything but reassured, anger and frustration rising up because they’re apparently easier emotions to work with than fear. “You’ll attend to it now. Jesus. Get it off, Sherlock, or so help me God I’ll get a scalpel and cut it off of you myself, right here, right now.”

Sherlock's lips curl up at the corners in challenge. “Would you now?”

“Yes, I bloody well would, and you know it!”

Sherlock rolls down his sleeve, a strangely pleased look upon his features as he murmurs, “Yes, I believe you would… and you’re avoiding the question. What did Liang mean? Why would he bow to you?”

“Jesus.” It’s a prayer, really. Right? Lying and taking the Lord’s name in vain: this is what Sherlock Holmes has reduced him to without even trying. Pinching the bridge of his nose, John takes a deep breath. “Look, Sherlock, I don’t know, alright? Maybe I have an old soul. Maybe I’ve been reincarnated again and again and again. Maybe he could tell I was a Sensitive and that garnered me some special title or respect. I. Don’t. Know. But right now, this isn’t the time or place, okay? I’m hungry and exhausted and my head is killing me and all I want to do right now is sit here quietly with Harriet until she wakes up. Can you give me that? Can you just let this go for now?”

Sherlock looks like he’s going to say ‘no’, as if the very idea of waiting for answer until a more appropriate time is an anathema to him. But before he can answer one way or the other there’s a short rap upon the door before it opens.

Both men turn their heads toward Lestrade’s apologetic face. John feels a wave of relief flow through him at the detective inspector’s timing. A few minutes earlier would have been better but at least now he is, for the moment, saved from having to argue any further. Sherlock on the other hand faintly glares at the intrusion. Lestrade in turn takes in the scene before him and then, much to everyone’s surprise, weighs in on John’s side rather than Sherlock’s by stepping in and clearing his throat.
“Right. Well, I just wanted to let you know that we’ve taken all of the men at the scene of the incident into custody and are currently waiting on a translator to take their statements, but by the looks of them, they don’t seem particularly inclined to talk.” His eyes shift to John, resting for a moment on the doctor’s face and then flickering over to the chair next to Harriet’s bedside.

“Dr. Watson. I realize that you’re tired and will want to stay with your sister, but I’ll need your report on what happened just as soon as possible.” His eyes turn to Sherlock next. “You, on the other hand….”

“Yes, yes…” Sherlock grumbles, waving a hand at Lestrade as if that could make the man disappear. In response, the Detective Inspector’s stance shifts, hands on hips, legs slightly apart, as if to indicate that he isn’t going anywhere until he gets what he wants.

“Preliminary reports indicate that the arrested men were as you reported, unconscious but overall not seriously injured. We have yet to determine what exactly knocked the majority of them out. Two had blows to the head, but the rest are something of a mystery.” His head tilts to one side as he asks dryly, suspecting the truth already, “You don’t happen to know anything about that, do you?”

Once more Sherlock’s hand flutters through the air dismissively. “I take full responsibility for the two with the head injuries, but the blows were in self defense. As for the others, I doubt they will tell you and it’s probably best I don’t either. Not something you can write up in your report at any rate.”

John sighs softly, empathizing with Lestrade as Sherlock’s lips quirk in smug pleasure as the DI rolls his eyes and grumbles in frustration, running a hand through his silver hair. John’s heart goes out to the man. Lestrade is a ridiculously good sport about Sherlock and his deductions and attitude, but he really does hate having to deal with all this supernatural stuff and it shows.

Behind him, Lestrade’s angel reaches out, laying a hand upon his ward’s shoulder. Although it shouldn’t make a difference, John cannot help but notice how some of the tension in the man’s frame drains away at the supportive touch. More curious, and a little worrisome, is the fact that even though John’s studiously not looking, he cannot help but feel the angel’s regard when it comes to rest upon him, holding there for longer than it has reason to. He shifts his weight from side to side and turns his head away, looking at Sherlock to help avoid the temptation of meeting the eyes he should not, as a human, be able to see.

“Right, well, I can take your statement Sherlock and we’ll want to drop by your flat for pictures and evidence. Anything that can tie the perpetrators to the crime.” His gaze rakes over the pair of them. “You have a place you can stay tonight?”

“I’m staying here,” John insists quietly, but firmly as he takes his seat by the bed once again, his gaze flickering between the two men.

“I’m sure I can turn something up,” Sherlock rumbles in return as he starts to turn toward the door. His steps halt, however, as John adds sharply, “Before Sherlock gives you his account, he needs to see a doctor.”

Both men turn toward John once more, Lestrade in surprise and Sherlock in annoyance.

“Wait, I thought only you and your sister were injured?” But Lestrade might as well be talking to a wall for all the attention either men are giving him, the consulting detective and his doctor having a stare off before Sherlock finally relents. “It’s nothing too serious, just something John insists I

have checked on before I do anything else.”

“I do,” John confirms. Even seated and battered, his words hold a ring of command that will brook no argument.

Sherlock’s lips quirk again in what looks for all the world like fond exasperation. “And everyone knows only a fool argues with his doctor.” His gaze shifts to Lestrade and he assures, “I’ll be with you shortly, right after I have this issue attended to.”

With a gusty sigh, Lestrade glances between the two men before giving up the battle and replying, “See that you do.”

Once the detective has departed, Sherlock crosses over to where John is seated, his hand hovering for a moment before coming to rest on his shoulder. “Do you need anything?”

John stares up at him, surprised by the unusually solicitous offer. Clearly his features telegraph his thoughts, because Sherlock frowns in a mix of annoyance and confusion as he asks somewhat defensively, “What?”

In turn, John’s expression softens into an affectionate smile as he carefully shakes his head. “No thanks, I’m good. Fine. Better than fine.” His smile turns to beaming again. He can’t help it. Sherlock’s alive, he’s alive, and miracle of all miracles, Harriet is alive. You would think being an angel would inure one to the impressiveness of miracles. You would be wrong.

Sherlock’s eyes roll at the joyous grin on John’s face. He withdraws his hand, but not before those long fingers lightly squeeze John’s shoulder.

“Right, I’ll go and take care of this,” he confirms, lightly touching his arm to indicate where he merged Van Coon’s tattoo with his flesh, “and then I’ll go see to Lestrade, appease him with my statement so you can have some time with Harriet.” Turning, he makes his way to the door, pausing there for a moment before glancing over his shoulder. “I know you want to be here for her, just make sure you don’t neglect your own needs.”

John’s expression must devolve into one of astonishment because suddenly Sherlock is scowling again. “Really John. I know it’s hard to believe but I’m not a completely unfeeling monster. I do have a basic grasp of sentiment, even if I find it an utter waste of time to indulge in.” John can’t stop the mocking smile of dubiousness that curls his lips, which in turn only causes Sherlock to roll his eyes once more and lightly snap, “Oh piss off…” before pushing his way through the door.

What John does not see is the broad smile that touches Sherlock’s mouth as he pushes open the door.

Of course, said smile instantly fades once Sherlock steps into the hallway shifting into a close approximation of a sneer.

“What are you doing here?”

Peering for a moment at the tip of his umbrella, as if he might have accidentally skewered something upon the end of it as he entered, Mycroft finally swings the tip down again and offers his brother a disingenuous smile. “What? I can’t show some brotherly concern when a 999 call comes in from you indicating the need for both police and ambulances?”

“Since I made the call, clearly I was not one of the individuals in need of assistance.”
One brow arches. “That isn’t necessarily the case. At any rate, forgive me for actually caring about you. I know you’re above all that. Caring and emotions and all that nonsense.”

Sherlock sniffs and turns to look down the hallway where he knows Lestrade is waiting for him. “Don’t be ridiculous, Mycroft. You don’t give a damn about any of those things either.”

“Hmmmm, yes, well, one can always hope for better. So, Dr. Watson is alright then?”

“A bit battered and concussed, but otherwise he is well, yes.”

“And his sister?”

“Blessedly quiet for once. I’m sure she will revert back to her usual harpy self once the sedative has worn off. Alas. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a statement to give.”

“Mmmmm, yes. I spoke with Detective Inspector Lestrade briefly. It seems that your entire flat is a crime scene at the moment. You are, of course, more than welcome to come and stay with me.”

“I’d rather sleep in the gutter.”

Mycroft laughs, his head rolling back as he shakes his head. “So contrary. What did I ever do to earn such enmity, Sherlock?”

Sherlock sniffs, staring at Mycroft coldly, replying dryly, “You were born?”

“Ah yes. Really, you should be grateful that I am the first-born. So many responsibilities and expectations. If it weren’t for me, you would have been forced to take them on instead of being allowed to run about playing detective rather than doing any sort of real work. Really, in many ways I am your savior, Sherlock.”

Though bristling inside, Sherlock’s voice remains cool and dry. “Well, since you are such a generous person, then perhaps you can save me from the tedium of this conversation as well…” Turning, Sherlock flounces off down the hall until a single question spoken by his brother brings him to a halt.

“So, what is zhēn rén?”

Turning back around, Sherlock stalks over to his brother, glaring. “Where did you hear that?”

Mycroft gives his brother a pitying look. “From you, of course. You were muttering it under your breath earlier.” One brow lifts curiously. “So... ?”

Sherlock dislikes it when his brother spies on him. He dislikes it even more when he manages to do so without Sherlock noticing. Scowling he waves a dismissive hand. “It’s nothing, just something the ghost called John. As soon as I’m finished with Lestrade,” and that pesky little detail John is so insistent about, “I’ll look it up.”

“No need. Since there was time to kill, and I was curious, I asked Anthea to translate it.”

Anthea. The changeling is a master at languages and technology, to an extent that even Sherlock finds he must grudgingly give her some credit. If anyone could ferret out an answer, and quickly, it would be her. Mycroft did well when he saved her and saw to her upbringing and education. A life debt is a much greater motivator to loyalty than blackmail and manipulation. Sherlock does his best to look utterly bored as he asks, “And?”
Mycroft stares at the tip of his umbrella again, sliding it along the hard linoleum floor. “It means ‘real man’.”

Sherlock stares at his brother intently. He can tell when Mycroft is lying, his tells subtle but known to him. But none of them appear. He’s telling the truth. “Real man? Surely there is a better translation available than that?”

“That is the literal translation,” corrects a dry female voice as Anthea comes from around the corner, her signature blackberry in hand. Her attention is fully focused upon the device as she blithely circumvents her way past nurses, patients and equipment without so much as a glance up until she reaches her employer. Then her eyes lift to pinion Sherlock coolly, her Fae nature making her expression utterly blank and unreadable.

“Zhēn, meaning ‘real’ or ‘true’ or ‘sincere’. Rén means person or, in this case, man. So, in short, an honorable person. A true and sincere man.”

Sherlock stares back into her unblinking gaze but eventually he looks away. The changeling could outstare a cat.

Lifting his gaze, Mycroft offers his brother a slight smile. “Well, that does sound quite a bit like our Doctor Watson, doesn’t it?”

Sherlock bristles at his brother’s words. Our Doctor Watson? Since when did Sherlock share John with Mycroft? No. Never. John is Sherlock’s flatmate, Sherlock’s assistant, Sherlock’s… friend. Glaring at his brother, Sherlock mutters, “John is one of the most honorable, true, and sincere people I know. I scarcely think you of all people would be able to recognize those qualities in an individual. Certainly nothing like yourself or the sort that you dally with, Mycroft.”

The smile his brother offers him back is strained and unpleasant, a small part of Sherlock crowing in pleasure that his volley hit the target for once. “Well. And on that note, I do believe the Detective Inspector is waiting for you. Don’t let me keep you.”

“Don’t worry, you couldn’t keep me even if you tried. You never could, and you never will.”

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Mycroft stands, rocking back and forth from heel to toe as Sherlock turns in a dramatic spin, his coat cutting through the air between them. He watches as his younger brother makes his way down the hall and turns the corner. Glancing down at the floor, Mycroft clears his throat delicately. He doesn’t even have to look up to know that Anthea is standing at his side, waiting.

“Real man, hmmmmmm?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” He turns his head, studying the profile of the elegant Fae. She’s impressively human looking, thanks to his help and assistance in that regard. He knows that Anthea serves him out of a sense of debt and loyalty, but on occasion he hopes that she does so because she wants to as well. But if not, well, it’s no matter. “So. What does it really mean?”

Her violet eyes lift from the device in her hands to glance over at her savior turned employer. One eyebrow lifts as she meets her master’s gaze, steady and unemotional as she counters, “It does mean that. Really. But that is merely the literal translation of the words. Not the full meaning behind them.”
“I see.” Sometimes these games of push and pull tire Mycroft, but he’s fairly certain that they are not intentional on Anthea’s part, merely part of who she is. But then again, toying with mortals is part of all Fae. They cannot tell lies, so they are excellent manipulators of language. He often wonders what would happen if she ever turned against him. Fortunately, no matter what inducements he might have to ensure the loyalty and service of his employees, he always has contingencies plans for their potential betrayal. Some more than others.

Mycroft’s lips curl into another annoyed smile as she forces him to ask, “And this full meaning is?”

Ask a direct question, get a direct answer. If only it could always be so simple. “It is a term often used for holy men. It marks someone who is more than a human being but less than a god. A human being that is close enough to be a holy spirit. Some choose to translate it to mean ‘immortal’.”

Mycroft’s head lifts, his eyes meeting hers silently and holding there for a long time. When he does finally smile, it is anything but a friendly expression, a soft considering, ‘hmmm’ escaping his throat.

Turning, he lightly taps the tip of his umbrella against the ground before turning to head down the hallway in the opposite direction of his brother, calling over his shoulder, “Come, Anthea. I do believe we need to arrange a small ‘test’ for our Doctor Watson…”

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The room is quiet after Sherlock leaves, John’s hand resting gently upon Harriet’s, his thumb absently rubbing over the back of her hand, the soft steady beep of her heart monitor irrationally soothing to his soul.

Well, it would be if he had one.

There’s a soft rustle by his feet and glancing down, John smiles wearily as Tup clammers out of Sherlock’s bag and looks up at him. Using the plug of the heart monitor, he climbs up the metal pole supporting the equipment and swings himself to land on the bed, staring at her deeply sleeping face before whispering, “Cor blimey. Enjoy this while yeh can, Wingless, cause I wager this be the only time ‘er lips won’t be flappin’.”

John smiles gently and lifts Harriet’s hand, pressing his lips to the back at it. “She can scream at me for the rest of her life if she wants to, so long as it’s a happy and lengthy one.” Shaking his head, John sighs. “I still can’t quite believe though. That Liang was willing to give his life, his soul, so she could live.” John’s lips twist then as he corrects, “But then I was willing to do the same. Guess it’s different when you’re bound to another person, be it for love or blood or something more. Soo Lin was willing to sacrifice her soul for her brother. I don’t have a soul to sacrifice, but I would have given my life for hers…”

“Eh?” Scratching his head, Tup peers up at John. “I think I musta missed somethin’? What are you talking about?”

“Souls, Tup.” John tries not to roll his eyes. “We’ve had this conversation before. Soo Lin’s soul was destroyed and Liang willingly gave his up to save Harry. I chose Sherlock over myself three months ago without hesitation, fully aware of the fact that it would mean the end of my existence and yet here I am.” Credence, perhaps, to Liang’s words? One can only hope. His gaze shifts to the bemused Fae’s furry face. “If I had died tonight, my fate would have been the same as theirs, essentially, seeing as I don’t have a soul.”
Tup’s nose wrinkles and he shakes his head, waving his tiny hands at John. “But, see, that’s where yeh lose me, Wingless. Yeh ‘ave a soul. So if you died, yer soul would ‘ave gone wherever souls of ex-Winged ones go. Cor, that’s confusin’. Jest ‘ow many different ‘eavens ‘ave you lot got? I mean, why not jest ‘ave the one?”

John stiffens and he releases Harriet’s hand lest he grip it too hard in his shock at those words. “Wait, what did you say?”

Huffing with impatience, Tup places his hands upon his hips, speaking slowly as if John were being particularly dense. “I said, yeh ‘ave a soul. Plain as day, I ken see it. It t’weren’t much when we first met after yeh became ‘uman and all. Tiny little thing it were then. Been growin’ a bit over the past few full moons, but still awfully small by ‘uman standards. ‘Ave to say, ain’t never seen a soul grow before. They start out pure, and over time they get more colorful and complicated, but they don’t grow.” He swivels his head to stare at John’s chest, turning his head from side to side, as if trying to get a good bead on the capricious thing. “Cor. It’s much bigger now, ‘tho. Wot yeh think brought that on?”

Shock. He must be suffering from residual shock from events of the night, because suddenly John feels terribly cold and clammy. Shivering, he pulls the shock blanket they came in with about his shoulders, cocooning himself in its meager warmth.

“Tup. Angels don’t have souls. I can’t have a soul. Not unless… not unless…”

Oh God. The import of this is too horrible to even consider. And there’s only one possible conclusion he can draw. He didn’t just steal John Watson’s body, he stole his John Watson’s soul.

*****

She kneels upon the floor before the statue, candles flickering softly in the small dark room, the smoke from the burning sticks of incense filling the air with rolling, redolent smoke and a sickly sweet scent.

She’s lost all sense of time. Her legs feel slightly numb and her head is bowed, prayers murmured silently over and over again as she waits for her Master to address her and tell her how she should proceed. As the móřāshī said, she has failed him. Failed in her mission. Now she must await instructions and punishment, as is her due.

The statue before her stands silent and still, the figure of a Chinese warrior, halberd held in his left hand, a lush black beard trailing down over his armored chest and a flowing robe draping his figure. His expression is dark and ominous, features carved into a scowl. In striking contrast to tradition, the eyes of the statue before her have been painted in solid black – empty and soulless.

Upon first glance, most people from China – or those familiar with its culture - would think it a desecrated statue of Guan Yu, more widely known as Emperor Guan, worshiped, ironically, by both the police and Triads. In the Western world, Emperor Guan is considered a God of War, but in truth he blesses those who follow the code of brotherhood and righteousness, the former important to the Triads, the latter half the police.

But what use is a blessing when you let your people struggle and starve and be driven from their rightful homes?

Emperor Guan turned against her people. But this God, her God, he saved the Black Lotus Society. Her God gave them protection such that they were able to hold their ground in China when all the other Triads were forced to flee to Hong Kong. Her God has made her people powerful, successful,
the most influential criminal organization in all of China. He is father and brother, leader and
savior to the Black Lotus Society. When all others turned against them, he extended his hand past
the curtain that separates the world of the flesh and the spirit, bringing them greatness that no other
God would or could.

She, like all members of the Black Lotus Society, lives and dies for him. For herself, Shan has
worked for her Lord and Master for over one hundred years, the longevity a reward for her years of
faithful service.

Shivering against a sudden draft, Shan resists the urge to wrap her hands about herself for warmth
and instead keeps her palms firmly upon the ground before her, her position one of humility and
servitude.

“Shàngdì...”

The statue speaks to her in her native tongue, its voice sibilant and slippery, neither male nor
female. The very sound of it makes her tremble with fear and devotion.

“Why do you call to me?”

Shan’s eyes are closed, her head kept low. She dare not look upon her Master. “I have failed to
recover the treasure. Sīwáng has broken free of his shackles. My men are imprisoned and soon the
authorities will be searching for me if they are not already. I pray for guidance and instructions.”

The resulting silence is more terrifying than her deity’s voice. Shan is grateful that her hands are
pressed to the floor. It hides the fact that they would otherwise be trembling.

“I care nothing for your foolish trinkets, but you have lost Sīwáng, a great warrior for our cause
and for that I cannot forgive you, Shan.”

Her eyes snap open at those words, her whole body trembling now as she presses herself to the
floor, prostrate before her God. “He should not have been able to break his bonds to the Society. I
do not know how this was done. I can only assume that it was the mófāshī who interfered. It must
have been him who freed Sīwáng, who shifted his allegiance. Sīwáng fought for the mófāshī that
he was supposed to eliminate.”

The silence is interrupted only by the harsh sound of her breathing, though she is certain her
pounding heart must be equally audible. Taking a deep breath, Shan sinks into her fear, immersing
herself completely until her body and mind slowly come to accept that whatever is to come is
destined.

“This mófāshī. Did he have a name?”

“Yes. He is called Sherlock Holmes.” Her body raises up slightly from the floor, brow still pressed
against wood, eyes staring at the grain of it. Perhaps she can make amends? Perhaps, if she
destroys this Sherlock Holmes she can regain her honor and please her Master? How she will
manage such a feat with her men captured and scattered and without any means available to her she
does not know, but it does not matter. She will not fail again.

“You have served me long and faithfully, Shan. But I think it is now time that you serve me in a
new manner. You have lost Sīwáng. It is your duty to replace what you have so carelessly let slip
through your fingers.”

Shan holds perfectly still, nearly certain that she understands the implication of those words, but
waiting, hoping, praying that she is wrong.
“You know what must be done. It is time for you to complete your service to me.”

Her eyes close slowly, the diametrically opposite feelings of dread and peace coming over her in an all-consuming wave. She knew this day would come. It was her destiny. It is all of their destinies. She is ready. She will serve her God in any way that he commands, for she and the Society owe him everything.

Rising up from the floor to a kneeling position, her eyes lift without fear to the statue before her. The once black eyes are now glowing red as it returns her regard. There is nothing to fear now. This is her God and she will become one with him and sit at his side and serve him, as is her duty and her honor.

“I hear and obey.”

Reaching over to one side, she picks up the gun she left within easy reach should she need to defend herself against the man who defeated her this night. Reloaded, it has sat by her side, ready to serve as her protection. It is destiny that it will serve her in a different manner now.

Lifting the weapon, she positions it beneath her chin, facing upward, her eyes meeting the glowing ones of the statue as she finally call him by name.

“Móliyǎdì, please accept this final sacrifice…”

A single shot rings out into the night.

Chapter End Notes

zhēn rén (真人) - literal translation "real man" - a term used to describe humans who are close enough to being gods/holy spirits
mòfǎshī = a wizard or sorcerer
shàngdì = God
sǐwáng = death
mólìyǎdì (魔戾雅帝) - literal translation "magic perverse elegant god"

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