The Holiday Cycle
by flawedamythyst

Summary

“If we vote to allow you to be an exception to the law, you will celebrate every holiday,” said Father Christmas. “With as much enthusiasm as you can.”

John and Sherlock made a deal so that Sherlock could come home. Now it's time for them to uphold it.

Notes

There will be 10 chapters, each corresponding to a holiday. They will be posted on each holiday until May Day, after which I'll be posting at least once a fortnight, because it doesn't makes sense to wait until October 31st to continue the fic.
Valentine's Day

Chapter Notes

Valentine's Day kindly betaed by Earlgreytea68.

On the first of February, John came out of the bathroom after his morning shower to find Sherlock standing in front of their sitting room wall, squinting at the hundreds of bits of paper that had appeared on it overnight.

“New case?” he asked, moving closer while rubbing a towel over his head.

“No,” said Sherlock.

John was now close enough to see that he was looking at articles rather than crime scene reports and that the predominant colour was pink rather than blood red. He paused to read a few titles.

A Guide To Valentine's Day Grooming

Ten Of The Best Valentine's Day Offers

Valentine's Day Traditions Around The World

A Man's Guide to Buying Lingerie For Valentine’s Day

“Ah,” he said. “Right. Already making plans?”

“We need to get it right, or risk the Council deciding we're not trying hard enough and sending me back to Halloween,” said Sherlock. “It seems rather more complicated than I initially thought. It's possible that I should have started researching weeks ago.”

“It's really not that complicated,” said John. He pulled off the lingerie article and crumpled it. “You don't need that, for a start.”

Sherlock huffed. “John, if it's a tradition, we need to honour it.”

“It's not a tradition and no, we don't,” said John. “Look, we agreed to celebrate as fully as we could, right? That was the deal?”

Sherlock nodded.

“Well then,” he said. “We don't need to do every stupid thing that the retail industry have decided to force on people at this time of year. We just need to celebrate the true meaning behind it, and that's to express our love to each other in a way that's meaningful to us. Lingerie is not going to do that. Trust me.”

Sherlock considered that for a moment. “So, I need to work out which of these things you would most appreciate and then present you with them, along with a declaration of my love.”

“Basically,” said John. He looked back at the wall, at Wine: What To Drink On Valentine's Day next to the picture of a heart-shaped Camembert, and tried to imagine what the hell he could get.
for Sherlock. Christ, he really should have started thinking about this earlier too but it felt like
Christmas was barely over. Sherlock's return was still new enough for them both to be revelling in
being able to be with each other again and not concentrating on much else.

“Right,” said Sherlock with determination. He looked back at the wall and started ripping sheets
off, throwing them over his shoulder onto the floor. John saw Valentine's Day Nail Art go flying
and felt relieved he wasn't going to wake up with hearts painted on his fingernails.

When Sherlock had emptied about half the wall, he stood back and made a considering noise. He
pulled out a notebook and started to scribble notes.

“What's the plan, then?” asked John.

“Can't tell you,” said Sherlock. “My initial research indicated that the level of romance in any
given event is considerably heightened by the element of surprise.”

“Yeah, true,” said John. “But we'll need some level of coordination, right?”

Sherlock gave him a blank look.

“Otherwise we'll both end up making dinner plans, that sort of thing.”

Sherlock shook his head, turning back to the wall. “You don't need to do anything, John. I have it
well in hand.”

“Yeah, no,” said John, and Sherlock turned to blink at him with surprise. “Sherlock, we both
agreed to celebrate holidays fully. Besides, I want to do things for you as well, not just be the
passive recipient.”

Sherlock made a face but reluctantly nodded. “Very well, but I think you should know that I have
no interest in anything that involves a pink, anatomically-incorrect heart.”

John laughed. “You think I don't know that? I have met you, Sherlock. Don't worry, I'll make sure
whatever I do suits you. I'm not a huge pink-hearts person either, you know.”

“Noted,” said Sherlock. He turned back to the wall, tore off a picture of a pair of socks covered
with hearts and discarded it.

That was a close shave, thought John. He looked again at the range of articles in front of him.
“This is going to be a full day event,” he realised.

“Indeed,” said Sherlock.

John tried to remember the last time Valentine's Day had meant more than half an hour buying a
card and maybe some chocolates, followed by dinner and a shag. Christ, he really did need to start
planning. “That's how we'll prevent overlap, then,” he said, his mind whirring. “We'll divide the
day up. One of us gets morning and lunch, the other gets afternoon and dinner? And evening? That
seems like a big chunk, maybe we should change over at mid afternoon.”

Sherlock thought about that. “I want the morning,” he said. “And the evening. You can take
lunchtime and the afternoon.”

“What, you get all morning and then from six to midnight as well? That's not a fair division,” said
John.
Sherlock huffed. “Well, there’s no point in you making me breakfast in bed,” he said. “I don’t eat, and I won’t be in bed.”

He had a point. Being dead made breakfast in bed rather pointless, and John couldn’t think of any other morning activity that would...oh, no, wait.

“Right,” he said. “You get until 10.30, then. That’s enough time for breakfast. Then I get until 6, and then you take over again. If I wake up at 9, that gives us about the same amount of time, right?”

Sherlock jerked a nod and held out his hand to seal the deal with a handshake, as if they were making a formal contract. “Agreed.”

John shook his hand and then pulled him in for a kiss. “Good.”

Bony feet clattered down the stairs and Sherrinford pranced into the room.

“Good morning, good morning!” he sang. “It’s a beautiful day!”

“It’s raining,” said Sherlock, turning back to his Valentine’s wall.

“Exactly!” said Sherrinford. “That means I can pretend that I’m staying in all day because of the weather, not because I’d freak everyone out by being a walking, talking skeleton.”

“I’ll be staying in because everyone outside this flat is tedious,” said Sherlock. “The weather has nothing to do with it.”

“Meaning we’re not tedious,” said Sherrinford to John. He beamed at Sherlock. “You say the sweetest things!”

He stepped over to ruffle Sherlock’s hair, messing up the neat curls. Sherlock ducked away, batting Sherrinford’s hands and scowling. “Get off!”

John left them to their brotherly bonding in favour of making breakfast.

“Sherlock, are you having tea this morning?” he called as he put the kettle on.

“No, no time,” said Sherlock. “I need to concentrate on this.”

Sherrinford took in the wall of Valentine’s information. “Aw, how sweet, are you going to express your love for John through commercialism and generic statements of affection?”

“It will not be generic,” said Sherlock.

“Roses are red, violets are blue, John, your jumpers are awful, but I still love you,” sang Sherrinford.

“My jumpers are not awful,” said John.

“Yes, they are,” said Sherlock. “Nevertheless, I will not be mentioning that on the day. My research has indicated that it is best not to mention any flaws in your beloved.”

“I don’t have any flaws,” said John.

Sherlock just snorted.
The toast popped before John could respond and he gave up on the conversation in favour of spreading butter.

“You’ll have to go to Mycroft’s,” Sherlock said to Sherrinford.

“I'm aware,” said Sherrinford. “I don't want to be dragged back to Halloween by St. Valentine, of all people. That would just be embarrassing.”

Sherlock’s phone started to ring from where it was lying on the desk. Sherlock made a disgusted sound. “Why must everyone distract me? I'm BUSY.”

“Might be a case,” pointed out John, bringing his breakfast in to the sitting room to eat in his chair.

Sherlock shook his head. “Lestrade knows I prefer to text. He'd only phone with a case if I'd already refused it and he was getting desperate.”

Sherrinford looked at the phone's screen. “It's Molly.”

Sherlock made a face and turned back to his wall, clearly intending to ignore it. Sherrinford glanced at his back and then over at John with the closest to a wink that a skull could manage. John had long since given up trying to work out how Sherrinford managed to project his expressions using nothing but bone.

Sherrinford picked up the phone and answered it. “Good morning, the cleverest and most wonderful Holmes brother speaking.”

Sherlock let out a quiet, aggravated noise under his breath, but otherwise showed no sign that he was even listening.

“Mycroft?” said Sherrinford. “Mycroft?! You insult me, dear lady! I said cleverest and most wonderful Holmes brother.” He moved to sit down in a chair, crossing one femur over the other. “Ah, well, that's because I am a closely kept secret. The other two don't like to admit that I exist because I'm so much more impressive than they are.”

Wait, was Sherrinford flirting with Molly? There was no way this was going to end well. John glanced at Sherlock but he was still completely focused on making notes, ignoring everything else around him.

“Are you sure you want to know? With two brothers called Mycroft and Sherlock, you must have guessed it's not going to be Dave,” said Sherrinford. A moment passed and then he laughed. “Well, that's true,” he said. “Sadly, my name can't be shortened to a normal name. Well, not a man's one, anyway. Like Sherlock, I could go with 'Sherrie', if I wanted to confuse everyone.”

“Over my dead body,” muttered Sherlock. Apparently he was paying more attention to the conversation than it looked.

Sherrinford smirked at him before continuing to talk to Molly. “Hah, no, nice guess, but it's not Sheridan. Come on, do you really think it's going to be something you've heard before? Mycroft, after all. I'm sure our mother just picked letters out of a Scrabble set.”

There was another pause. Sherrinford smiled. “Well, okay then. Stand by and prepare to smother your giggles. My name is Sherrinford.”

There was a pause before Sherrinford laughed. “Ah, so sweet of you to be nice, but no need. I'm
resigned to it now.”

“Sherrinford,” interrupted Sherlock. “Find out what she wants and then get rid of her. You're distracting me.”

Sherrinford glared at his back. “Sherlock’s getting whiny,” he said down the phone. There was an outraged huff from Sherlock. “Tell me why you called so I can get him to shut up, will you?” A moment passed, then Sherrinford said, “She's got a death from oleander she thought you might want to look at,” he relayed. “Obviously accidental though, not a murder.”

Sherlock looked tempted. He glanced at his wall of information, clearly torn. “I-” he started, then hesitated.

“I'll come with you,” said John, standing up to put his plate back in the kitchen. “I wanted to see Mike, anyway.”

Sherlock took one last look at the wall and tore himself away. “Tell Molly we'll be there in half an hour,” he said to Sherrinford.

“Did you hear that?” said Sherrinford asked down the phone. “Little Lord Fauntleroy is coming to see you. You're truly blessed.”

John couldn't keep in a laugh at the nickname, which earned him a glare and a sulky silence that lasted until they were in the taxi. He reached over and took Sherlock's hand once they'd started moving, which made Sherlock's sulk relax.

“Having older siblings is rubbish,” said Sherlock.


Sherlock twitched a shoulder in a shrug. “You're meant to take care of your elders, aren't you?”

“So, should I expect Mycroft to move in one day as well?” asked John. “Not sure where we'd fit him. The cupboard under the stairs?”

Sherlock flinched at the idea. “That would never happen,” he said firmly. “I don't care how old and infirm he gets before he dies. He must already be starting to fall apart, you know. His hair's certainly going. I don't understand why he doesn't just kill himself now to stop the relentless march of time ravaging his body.”

John noticed the taxi driver giving them a wide-eyed look. Well, if you didn't know that the Holmeses could survive death as (I am NOT a zombie, John!) undead blokes, you might think that was pretty cold-hearted.

“Maybe he knows he'll never be as youthful and handsome as you're going to remain, so he's decided to go for distinguished instead,” he offered.

He'd meant it as a compliment but Sherlock's mouth flattened into a line and he looked away, out of the window. John gave up.

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When they got to the mortuary, Molly was on the phone.

“...no, really, I think Hank truly loves her, he's just not prepared to trust her yet. Can you blame him?”

She glanced up as they came in and gave a distracted smile. She waved at a sheet-covered corpse on a trolley, but didn't immediately leap up and hover over Sherlock as he examined it like she usually did.

“No, no, that wasn't about her, that was about Kennedy. Hank hates not knowing anything about his family, of course he was going to snoop into it, but that doesn't mean he doesn't love Vee.”

The names sounded vaguely familiar, but it wasn't until Molly made an exasperated sound and said, “No, don't you remember? That was alternate universe Hank!” that John placed them as being from an American TV show that he only knew about because Sherrinford watched it.

Being stuck indoors all day meant that Sherrinford was pretty much willing to watch any old rubbish. Sherlock and John tended to try and avoid it – in fact, John had been wondering about getting Sherrinford a TV for his room so that he could watch Americans angst over relationships and impending apocalypses without disturbing them. He had a feeling that Sherrinford wouldn't use it though. Even if he wasn't a Holmes and therefore genetically disposed to annoy other people as much as possible, he clearly preferred being around others. He only spent time up in his room when he was painting, and he'd only started that to give John and Sherlock some alone time. John had worked that one out rather quickly.

Sherlock threw back the sheet covering the corpse and made a quiet, satisfied sound. “Oleander poisoning is far too uncommon,” he said. “I'm going to enjoy this.”

Molly laughed at whatever the person on the phone had said. “Don't be silly, Sherrinford, that would be a terrible plotline. They won't be doing that.”

Sherlock stiffened and he turned slowly to stare at her. “You cannot still be talking to my brother.”

Molly gave him a wide-eyed look, as if she'd been caught out. “Um, sorry,” she said. She glanced at the clock. “Oh! Oh, I have to get back to work. Sorry, Sherrinford, I have to go.”

She hung up in a panic and wilted under the glare that Sherlock was giving her. John nudged him with an elbow, then did it again harder when there was no effect. Sherlock huffed a breath out of his nose and turned back to his corpse.

John offered Molly a smile. “So, you watch *Timetravellers, Inc.* too?”

She gave a half-shrug. “I know it's stupid. I just like watching something mindless when I get home.”

“I haven't really seen much of it,” admitted John, “but it didn't look that bad.”

That was a complete lie. From the look Molly gave him, she knew that.

“I, uh, didn't know you lived with Sherlock's brother,” said Molly.

“You didn't even know I had that brother,” pointed out Sherlock from where he was inspecting the corpse's mouth.

“Well, no,” said Molly. “I suppose that's true. He wasn't at your funeral.”
Shit. John's eyes widened. How were they going to explain that?

“He knew it wasn't my real funeral,” said Sherlock absently. Oh, okay, that was an easy way.

“Oh,” said Molly. “Right. I didn't- No, okay, right. So, how long has he been living with you? I haven't seen him there.”

She probably had, actually, but it was highly unlikely that she'd assumed that the skull on the mantelpiece was actually Sherlock's brother.

“It's pretty recent,” said John. He hesitated. They really would need some way to explain Sherrinford if he was going to be answering phones and announcing he lived with them. “He's been ill,” he offered, because that was sort of true. Having no body was probably a bit more than 'ill', but it was a nod in the right direction. “He only recently recovered.”

“He was badly disfigured, though,” said Sherlock, picking up a dead hand to stare at the fingertips. “He doesn't let anyone but his family see him.”

Molly's eyes went very wide. “Oh,” she said, glancing at her phone as if expecting to see Sherrinford there. “Oh, how awful. Is he okay?”

“Fine,” John reassured her. ‘Getting better every day. He's just very self-conscious about it. Stays in all day, hides from Mrs. Hudson, that kind of thing.”

That would have to do as an explanation, he supposed. Certainly lacking flesh counted as having a disfigurement, but it still felt like a lie.

“How tragic,” said Molly.

Sherlock snorted. “Oh yes, he's very Gothic novel,” he said. “Or he would be if his jokes weren't so bad.”

“I thought they were funny,” said Molly, and then blushed. “Um, I mean, just from that one conversation.”

This was definitely not going to end well. John managed a smile and turned back to Sherlock. “Going to see Mike. I'll be back in a bit.”

Sherlock nodded absently, focused entirely on the skin of the corpse's stomach. “I'll text you when I'm done.”

A wave of affection passed through John. It was those sorts of tiny things - Sherlock caring enough not to just leave when he was finished without giving John a second thought - that gave away how much he loved John. The big things – the killing-himself-to-save-John things – were all very well, but they tended to just make John feel overwhelmed. Sherlock keeping track of John and making sure they left somewhere together, that was just enough to make John glow with pleasure.

He pulled Sherlock's attention away from the corpse for long enough to kiss him before he left and then went off in search of Mike. He had a Valentine's Day afternoon to organise, after all.

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Mycroft came to pick Sherrinford up two days before Valentine's Day. He sat on the sofa in 221B as if expecting it to rise up and swallow him and gave the new additions to the décor a sharp look.
“Do you like them?” asked Sherrinford.

At some point in the middle of the night a few days ago, Sherlock had taken down a few of his odder wall decorations, such as the cow's skull with the headphones, and replaced them with a couple of Sherrinford's paintings. John now ate his breakfast under a skeletal hand waving through a window and a decapitated head dropping blood onto a vase of white roses.

“They're rather obviously self-portraits,” said Mycroft. “The brushwork is impressive, however.”

Sherrinford smiled. “Thanks! It gives me something to do while I'm skulking about upstairs. Skullking.”

Mycroft winced. John tried not to snigger.

“May we leave soon?” asked Mycroft. “I wish to avoid the lunchtime rush at the Tate.”

“Of course,” said Sherrinford. “Hang on, let me get my disguise on.”

He disappeared upstairs and Mycroft fixed his stare on John instead. “And how are you feeling?”

“Fine,” said John, wishing like hell that he'd thought to disappear before Mycroft arrived, like Sherlock had.

“Fine?” repeated Mycroft with a raised eyebrow. “Just fine?”

John shrugged. “What more do you need?”

Mycroft sighed. “No strange pains, then? No weird symptoms you're neglecting to mention to your doctor?”

John rolled his eyes. “I am my doctor,” he said. “Trust me, if there were something wrong, I'd know. Just because I'm not from a world that doesn't bother with mortality doesn’t mean I'm about to drop dead.”

Mycroft made a disbelieving humming sound. “Well, do take care of yourself.”

“Yep, will do,” said John, turning his attention firmly to his laptop screen, hoping Mycroft would take the hint and leave him alone.

Mycroft mercifully let the conversation die. A few minutes later, Sherrinford came down, dressed in an enormous coat, a bright red woollen hat with an enormous bobble, and a scarf wrapped so many times around his head that any hint of his skull was completely hidden.

“Let's go!” he said in a muffled voice, and he and Mycroft left.

Two minutes later, Sherlock came home. John narrowed his eyes at him.

“You were waiting for them to leave,” he said.

“Of course,” said Sherlock, stepping over to greet John with a kiss. “I've already had far too much Mycroft this month. I come out in a rash if I spend too much time with him, you know that.”

John snorted. “Dead men don't get rashes.”

Sherlock just smirked.
John didn't see much of Sherlock before Valentine's Day, which was actually a good thing. He had no doubt that if Sherlock had enough time to observe John properly, he'd easily deduce what John's plans for his section of the day were and ruin the surprise. As it was, they both carefully avoided asking each other any questions about what they were up to, so that when John went to bed the night before, he had no idea what Sherlock had planned. All he could do was hope that there wasn't going to be anything too terribly tacky.

He was woken up by violin music. He opened his eyes to see Sherlock standing by the bed, wearing a deep red shirt and playing something that managed to be romantic without turning into saccharine. John blinked at him for the moment or two it took for his brain to wake up properly and then pulled himself upright to watch and enjoy.

He couldn't keep the smile off his face at the idea of being serenaded on Valentine's Day morning. It should be cheesy and mildly embarrassing, but from Sherlock it just felt right. It wasn't as if John hadn't spent long evenings listen to Sherlock play while pretending to read a book in the past.

Sherlock responded to John's smile with a quirk of his mouth that told John that they were both on the same page here. It was cheesy, but what did that matter if they both enjoyed it?

He finished with a flourish of his bow and John gave him a round of applause which Sherlock took with a graceful incline of his head.

“And now,” he announced, turning to leave the room.

“Oh, no,” said John, reaching to catch his wrist. “Don't you think you should kiss me first?”

Sherlock paused. “Of course,” he said. “Yes, a kiss.” He stooped and pressed his lips to John's.

John took care to cup his hand around the back of Sherlock's head and hold him still for a moment so that they could have a decent kiss and not just a peck. When Sherlock moved back, he gave John a soft smile.

“Happy Valentine's Day,” said John.

Sherlock's smile disappeared. “Yes!” he said, as if he'd forgotten something crucial. “Of course! Happy Valentine's Day. The greeting is quintessential. Ah, best wishes and salutations on this day, John. I hope you, um, have a good time.”

“As long as I'm with you, I will,” said John easily. This bit, the part where you just said nice things to each other all day, those were easy to get right. He was less certain about the activities he had planned for later.

Sherlock bobbed his head awkwardly, then cleared his throat. “Right. Okay. Breakfast!”

He disappeared.

John let out a sigh and pulled a pillow out to settle behind his back. Sherlock's idea of breakfast should be interesting, given that even when he had been alive, he hadn't been the most consistent eater.

Sherlock returned a moment later with a tray John hadn't even known they owned. He settled it on John’s lap and John regarded it with surprise. The tray held two slices of toast, a croissant, a pot of jam, a steaming hot cup of tea and a glass of orange juice. There was also a rose laid on it, the
same colour red as Sherlock’s shirt. As a romantic offering, John was impressed.

“When did we get orange juice?” he asked, taking a sip.

“At about 3 am,” said Sherlock.

“Right,” said John, with a laugh. “Is that when we got croissants as well?”

“Of course not, John,” said Sherlock. “Patisserie Valerie doesn't open until 7.30.”

Oh, a posh croissant. Of course, Sherlock would never stoop to a Tesco's croissant. That took precedence over the toast, then.

John became engrossed in his breakfast while Sherlock settled on the bed next to him.

“You always enjoy food so much,” observed Sherlock after a while. “It's fascinating to watch.”

John gave him a smile around a mouthful of heavenly croissant.

“I should have got two of those,” said Sherlock.

John gave him an enthusiastic nod.

Sherlock frowned slightly, then his expression cleared. “Next year,” he said. “Love is a process of learning about the other person, and I have just learnt something new about you.”

John swallowed his mouthful. “What, that I'm a bit greedy?”

“That when you appreciate something, you take full advantage of it,” corrected Sherlock.

John took a sip of tea and paused to appreciate the joy that flooded over his taste buds. “That's not PG Tips.”

Sherlock shrugged a shoulder. “I thought you deserved something a bit better.”

John took another sip. “It's incredible.”

Sherlock looked pleased. “There's more in the cupboard.”

“Do I want to know how much it cost?” asked John, turning his attention to the toast.

“Money is immaterial when compared with love,” said Sherlock airily. John had seen how much Sherlock had in his bank accounts when it had all temporarily belonged to him, during those dark months when he had thought Sherlock was dead, so he let that one go.

He took his time with breakfast, enjoying it as thoroughly as possible. They had to be as fully engaged in this holiday as they could be or risk St. Valentine claiming they'd broken their end of the bargain they'd struck with the Holiday Council. It was easy enough to feel bathed in romance and love at this point, when Sherlock was sat watching him eat with obvious pleasure at John's enjoyment, but John couldn't help worrying that they wouldn't be able to maintain this level of romance all day. It felt a bit like a test they had to pass rather than a holiday they were celebrating together.

The moment he finished, Sherlock leapt up to whisk the tray away.

“Hang on!” said John, grabbing the rose before it disappeared with the plates. “I'll keep that, thank
you. Do we have any vases?"

Sherlock hesitated. “We have mugs?” he suggested. “Or beakers? I have a couple without acid in them.”

John laughed. “I think either would be very fitting for us.”

Sherlock nodded and disappeared into the kitchen with the tray. He came back with an Erlenmeyer flask, which John put his rose into and then set on the bedside table.

“Perfect,” he said.

Sherlock regarded it with a frown. “It's not too...not Valentine’s?” he said. “We're not meant to be getting Halloween in this, remember.”

“We're not,” said John. “We're getting us in it. Customisation, Sherlock. It's not romantic unless we find it so, and I find you giving up your chemistry equipment for me very romantic.”

Sherlock frowned, but nodded. He glanced at his watch. “Ten minutes until you take over,” he said. “I have one last thing, hang on...”

He disappeared again. John relaxed, enjoying the fact that he'd been awake for over an hour but was still in bed.

When Sherlock came back, he was holding a red envelope and looking nervous. “My research indicated that this was essential,” he said. “However, most of the available offerings were atrocious, and I could not imagine you enjoying them, so...Well. You'll see.”

He handed the envelope over and John took it. Written on the front in Sherlock's loopy handwriting was John Hamish Watson.

“Usually I'm in trouble if someone pulls out my middle name,” he observed.

“There are a lot of Johns,” said Sherlock, “and even quite a few John Watsons. I wanted to make sure you knew that this was solely for you. Your name may be common but you are unique. Especially to me.”

John smiled. “You're pretty good at this romance thing.”

Sherlock's shoulders relaxed. “My research is paying off, then,” he said, which rather ruined the effect.

John opened the envelope to find a card with a diagram of a heart that could have come from one of his medical textbooks on it. Underneath it, Sherlock had written, I find the popular idea that this organ contains all my love for you erroneous for two reasons. The first is that mine no longer functions, and the second is that it is far too small to encompass the full depth of my feelings.

Right. John opened the card to find a cross section of a brain.

This, on the other hand, is not only the true seat of my emotions, but also the only part of me that functions at a capacity great enough to contain at least a portion of my regard for you.

John laughed. “Only you could give a Valentine's card that includes a reference to your enormous brain.”

Sherlock twitched. “Is it okay?” he asked, and John realised he was anxious about it.
He reached out for Sherlock's wrist, giving his arm a tug to get him to come down onto the bed where John could reach his lips.

"It's perfect," he said, and kissed him. He glanced at the clock. "And now we're into my bit of the day."

Sherlock tried to straighten up. "What do you have planned?"

John kept him exactly where he was. "Just this," he said, and tugged him further onto the bed until he was sprawled out over the top of John. "A nice, relaxed morning in bed, with as much snogging as possible."

Sherlock grinned. He sat up just enough to pull his shirt off, carefully folding it and setting it on the ground to avoid wrinkling it before he crawled under the covers and spread himself over John.

"An excellent plan."

John rested a hand on the small of Sherlock's back and slid the other into his hair. "I thought so," he agreed, and settled in for a long, lazy snog.

Time passed. John didn't really pay attention to how much, given how engrossing the activity he was engaged in was. Kissing Sherlock never seemed to get dull, despite knowing that it wasn't going to progress beyond that. Sherlock was relaxed against him, his hands slowly moving from framing John's face to stroking down over his shoulders and then back up again, while John's wandered all over the length of Sherlock's back, feeling the muscles shift beneath his skin as Sherlock settled in closer. Those sensations, combined with the press of their mouths as their lips and tongues caressed each other, were all John could wish for.

Which didn't mean that his body didn't still get geared up for sex, of course. His erection built slowly but eventually it was impossible to deny its presence. Sherlock shifted his weight away from it, rolling John onto his side and wrapping an arm around him while allowing his cock nothing to rub against. The move only gave John a short-term reprieve from the increasing lust and eventually he was forced to pull away from Sherlock to take a few deep breaths.

Sherlock watched him with the same intent look he always gave John at such times, as if he was hoping to understand this if he just observed John closely enough. Given that John had never felt a single twitch from Sherlock's cock, he didn't think Sherlock would ever get it.

"Other couples would be having sex right now," said Sherlock as John worked on pulling back a bit so that they could return to kissing.

"Some of them," agreed John.

Sherlock frowned. "Sex is considered romantic," he said. "Would you want to engage in it? I could stimulate you manually. Or perhaps I could give the mouth thing a go?" He sounded rather doubtful about that.

John let out a breathy laugh. "No, thanks. I'll do a lot of things to appease the Holiday Council, but that's going too far. Sex is only romantic when both people are into it. Being 'manually stimulated' by someone who doesn't enjoy it and has no idea what he's doing really doesn't fall into that category."

Sherlock's frown didn't go but his shoulders relaxed and John knew he'd said the right thing.

He reached out to comb his fingers through Sherlock's hair. "I want you exactly as you are, doing
the things you like doing,” he said quietly. “When you let me do those things with you – well, that's what I find romantic.”

The frown cleared away and Sherlock smiled again. “I like doing this,” he said, and leaned in to kiss John again.

More time passed. Eventually, John's erection became rather insistent again. His lips were starting to feel a bit numb so he pulled away completely. “Okay, lazy morning of snogging achieved.”

Sherlock propped himself up on an elbow to look down at him. “What do you have planned next?”

“A shower,” said John, sitting up. As fun as the lie-in had been, he was now starting to feel a bit icky from having spent so long in his pyjamas. “After that, we're going out.” He got out of bed and stretched.

“Where?” asked Sherlock, watching him.

John just gave him a grin and turned to walk into the bathroom. There was no point in having kept his plans a secret for the last fortnight if he gave them away now.

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After he'd showered and dressed, John pulled his coat off its peg then thought better of it, put it back, and pulled Sherlock's off instead.

“That will look ridiculous on you,” said Sherlock. “You're far too short.”

“Thanks,” said John. “But I wasn't going to wear it myself.” He held it open for Sherlock to put on. Sherlock just stared at him.

“Helping your other half into their coat,” said John. “Classic chivalry.”

Sherlock snorted, but did turn to put his arm into a sleeve. “Bloody ridiculous,” he said. “I'm perfectly capable of dressing myself.”

John settled the coat over his shoulders and gave them a little stroke. “Of course you are, darling,” he said in his best patronising tone.

He turned back for his own coat but Sherlock was quicker, grabbing it out from under his fingers.

“My turn,” he said, and held it out with a grin.

John sighed but let him help him on with it. The act made him feel like a small child rather than a beloved lover and he decided to take it out of his 'chivalrous' repertoire. Being made to feel like a child was never romantic.

“Do I get to find out where we're going now?” asked Sherlock.

“Nope,” said John. He led the way downstairs, ignoring Sherlock's annoyed noise behind him. He knew Sherlock well enough now to tell when his annoyance was faked.

The first place they went to was Speedy's.

“Hardly worth putting our coats on to come here,” said Sherlock as they went inside.

“We're not stopping,” said John. He gave Mr. Chatterjee a smile. “Got it ready?”
“Oh yes,” said Mr. Chatterjee, pulling a bag out from behind the counter and handing it over. “Didn't realise Sherlock would be with you though, I'd have put a bit more in.”

John took the bag. “Not a problem. I'm sure there'll be more than enough.”

“A picnic,” announced Sherlock as they left Speedy's.

“Yes,” said John. “Very clever, well done. Do tell me every tiny observation that might have led you to such a deduction.” He turned to head towards Regents Park.

Sherlock huffed but didn't say anything. Instead, his hand crept out to slide into John's. John shot him a pleased look and gave his fingers a squeeze through their gloves.

“It's a bit cold for a picnic, isn't it?” asked Sherlock as they walked through the park gates.

“Not for a dead man,” said John. “And don't worry, I put on plenty of layers.”

Sherlock nodded. “I did note the two jumpers,” he said. “Rather obvious that we'd be outdoors, but I was expecting something more active.”

John headed over the bridge to the deserted lawn around the bandstand. “We do active all the time,” he said. “Today is meant to be about taking time to just be with each other.”

He found a suitable spot, close enough to the water to see the ducks but not so close that the ground was nothing but mud, then pulled out the blanket he'd given Mr. Chatterjee to put in the bag last night. He spread it out and gestured towards it with a bow.

“If Monsieur would like to be seated.”

Sherlock snorted. “Your French accent is terrible,” he said, giving the final word its French pronunciation and sounding like a Parisian native. He did deign to sit, though.

John settled beside him, reached into the bag and pulled out a Thermos. “Tea,” he announced.

Sherlock's face lit up. “Excellent.”

John left him to pour out tiny plastic cups of tea while he pulled out a sandwich for himself. He hadn't bothered getting Mr. Chatterjee to put any food in for Sherlock. Now he was dead, Sherlock didn't bother eating unless it was something he was particularly fond of, or a social occasion that he couldn't avoid.

Sherlock handed John a cup of tea which John gently tapped it against Sherlock's. “To the unexpected,” he said. “Because that's exactly what you've always been to me. The unexpected rescue from that bedsit, the unexpected love I can't now imagine being without, the unexpected dead man turning up to rescue me from Moran. You're a constant surprise, and I love every new reveal.”

Okay, so he'd prepared that in advance. He'd realised that he'd have to pull out some romantic words but he was rubbish at ad-libbing such things. Much better to take some time with a pen and paper a few days before and make sure it didn't accidentally come across as insulting or patronising.

From the rather blitzed look on Sherlock's face, he'd succeeded. John smiled and took a sip of tea, turning back to his sandwich.
Sherlock cleared his throat. “The sentiment is entirely returned,” he said. “I never foresaw this at all, or even anything of its kind. You completely blind-sided me, John, far more than I did you. And after far longer spent assuming that my life would hold no surprises, but would follow the roadmap I had laid out for it precisely.”

John frowned. “What do you mean? I thought I had a roadmap from the age of 16, when I decided to become an Army doctor. You were nowhere in it.”

Sherlock shrugged. “I was rather older than sixteen but it'd still have been before that,” he said. John stared at him and got a one-sided shrug for his trouble. “You do know that I'm older than you, John.”

John frowned. Sherlock might be frozen at the age of his death now, but he'd been ageing right up until last year. “You can't be,” he said, trying to remember if he'd ever heard Sherlock's age. “Hang on, why don't I know your birthdate?”

“Because I don't know it,” said Sherlock. “Halloween doesn't use a calendar in the same way that this world does. I was able to calculate the day I was born as January sixth, because I knew it was 299 days to Halloween. Well, it might have been the seventh if it was a leap year, but the probability is the sixth. The year, though – no one pays attention to such things there.”

John gaped at him. “You don't know how old you are?” he repeated. “But surely Mycroft or Sherrinford or, or, your mother counted?”

Sherlock shook his head. “People don't, there,” he said. “No point – it's not as if we've got a limited lifespan that we're counting down. Ageing is very much a matter of choice.”

John didn't know what to say. “So, wait,” he managed eventually. “You don't have even the slightest idea?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I was alive for roughly two decades before Jack tried to take over Christmas, then it was another decade until Sherrinford tried to escape the first time,” he said. “Then there was possibly another decade before we escaped. Might have been two. When we reached this world it was...” He paused and thought for a while, “1991. So I might be between sixty and seventy. Possibly older – I was never very good at keeping track of time when I was in Halloween.”

John was gobsmacked. “I'm dating a geriatric?”

Sherlock scowled. “I'd hardly say that,” he said. “Besides, I'm dead. Surely that should be your bigger concern.”

John let out a long breath. He shook his head and held up his tea cup for another toast. “Still being unexpected,” he said. “Christ, I suppose you always will be.”

“I hope so,” said Sherlock, and he tapped John's cup with his own.

John turned to press their shoulders together, looking out over the water at the ducks. “Do you know why I chose this for today?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Sudden desire for hypothermia?”

“Nope,” said John. “Do you remember the last time we had a picnic?”

Sherlock frowned. “We've never had a picnic.”
“We sat by a pond in Halloween and I ate pumpkin bread that may or may not have made me a cannibal,” said John.

Sherlock’s face cleared. “Oh, yes. I wasn’t aware that counted as a picnic.”

“Close enough,” said John. “Do you know what I thought at the time? I thought that we’d never spent so long just sitting around doing nothing together before. Just sitting and chatting with no other calls on our time. It was- I liked it.”

Sherlock was silent for a minute before nodding. “Yes. Me too.” He glanced at John, then moved so that he could lay his head in John's lap, just as he had in Halloween. “You may play with my hair,” he announced.

“I’d be honoured,” said John, and did just that.

John's plan had been to stay in the park until Sherlock got bored. He'd assumed that would be about ten minutes, which he'd hoped would be enough time for him to eat his sandwich and drink enough tea to get him through the afternoon.

After nearly an hour, Sherlock showed no signs of restlessness. He seemed just as content as John was to stay where they were, talking quietly about a number of things and watching the ducks swim past, looking peeved at the lack of crumbs being thrown.

In the end, it was the cold that made John announce they were moving on. “I really am going to get hypothermia if we stay any longer,” he said, pushing at Sherlock to get him to sit up. “Come on, time for the next thing.”

Sherlock stretched as he stood up. “I'm disappointed,” he said. “I was waiting for a plane to fly overhead and write 'John and Sherlock forever' in its vapour trail.”

John snorted as he packed up the picnic bits. “Exactly how rich do you think I am?”

“You could have asked Mycroft for a loan,” said Sherlock, taking John's hand as they turned to head towards the park exit.

“Oh yeah, I can see that going well. ‘Mycrof, can I borrow an obscene amount of money in order to make an over-the-top romantic gesture to your brother?’ He’d definitely go for that.”

“Surely no gesture is over-the-top when it comes to displaying the limitless depths of your love for me?” asked Sherlock.

John didn't bother responding to that.

It took about forty minutes to get to Barts, but only seven minutes for Sherlock to work out where they were going. Once they were on the Circle line heading towards Edgeware, he spent twenty seconds with the intense look that meant he was mentally running over the Tube map and all the possible places of interest that they could be heading for, and then relaxed.

“Barts,” he said. “Our first meeting. Yes, that's appropriate.”

John just shook his head. “You still manage to amaze me with your brilliance.”

Sherlock beamed.

Going to Barts hadn't been as obvious for John as Sherlock made it sound. He'd waivered over the
idea, very aware that they had more history there than just their meeting. When they arrived, he
couldn't keep his eyes from going to the spot on the roof where he had once seen Sherlock
silhouetted against the sky.

Sherlock's hand squeezed his. “I survived,” he said, softly.

John jerked a nod. “I remain incredibly grateful for that.”

Inside, Sherlock turned to head up to the lab where they'd first met, but John tugged him in a
slightly different direction. “We need to stop somewhere first.”

Sherlock frowned. “The mortuary,” he said. “You've procured some unusual body part for me. No,
no, you wouldn't encourage me to keep dead things in our fridge and besides, I saw Molly
yesterday and she gave no hint of it. She can't lie to save her life.”

“Not even close,” said John, and led them to a small office, filled with books, in which Mike
Stamford was waiting for them.

“John! Sherlock!” he said with a wide grin. “Good to see you!”

“Mike,” said John, shaking his hand. “Have you got it?”

“Oh yes,” said Mike. He pulled a folder off his desk and handed it to John, who tucked it away
before Sherlock could get a close look.

Sherlock frowned. “You have involved confederates in your schemes.”

“You make it sound as if I'm cheating at something,” said John.

The look on Sherlock's face made it clear that he thought that John was. John ignored it.

“I'll see you later,” he said to Mike, trying not to notice the indulgent smile Mike was giving them.

“Oh yes, you two go and have fun,” said Mike, making little shooing gestures with his hands.

John tugged Sherlock out of there, reflecting that Mike really did take too much pride in having
introduced them in the first place.

“What's in the folder?” asked Sherlock.

“Patience,” said John, heading up to the lab where they'd met.

Sherlock huffed. “Not my strong suit.”

John ignored him. Now that he was close to handing it over, he was beginning to feel nervous
about it. What if he'd got it wrong, and Sherlock didn't really want it? What if he'd read too much
into an incident that had been nearly a year ago?

When they got to the lab, Sherlock looked around, then strode over to stand where he had been the
first time John had seen him. “How does this go?” he said. “You walk in, limping and bemused,
and I confound you with my brilliance?”

John laughed. “More like you came across as so close to insanity that I'd get to be the sane one,
even with raging PTSD.”

Sherlock frowned. “You didn't have PTSD.”
John just shrugged. That didn't seem an argument worth having. “I thought I did,” was all he said.

He set the folder down on the desk, watching the way Sherlock's eyes followed it. He'd specifically asked Mike to make sure there wasn't a clue to what was within on the outside, but who knew what Sherlock could tell from a folder? In order to distract him, John reached inside his jacket and carefully pulled out an envelope. It had got a bit battered on their travels, but it wasn't too bad. He handed it over.

“Happy Valentine's Day.”

Sherlock ripped open the envelope without bothering with a response.

“My love for you is like a Phenyl Acetone/Methylamine synthesis,” read Sherlock. “We have a bond that not even an endothermic process could break.” He spared John an unamused look as he opened the card. “In other words, I love our chemistry.”

John had gone through half the internet looking for the worst chemistry-related Valentine's Day card and the pained look on Sherlock's face made every moment of it worth it. He gave up on trying to hold in a giggle.

Sherlock looked up with a black look. “Did Sherrinford help with this?”

“Nope,” said John gleefully. “All my own bad humour, I'm afraid. You know he couldn't help with a Valentine's thing, anyway, not without risking his freedom.”

Sherlock waved that away. “St. Valentine doesn't seem like the type to drag someone back to Halloween against their will,” he said. He set the card down and focused on the folder instead. “Does that contain more puns?”

“No,” said John, “but I do have others, if you're interested.” He took Sherlock's hand, put on his most serious face, and gazed into his eyes. “You must be made of copper and tellurium,” he said, in as heartfelt a manner as he could, “because you're CuTe.”

Sherlock made a distressed noise. “John, this isn't romantic, it's painful.”

John tried to pull himself together. “Sorry, sorry,” he said. “Couldn't resist.” He picked up the folder and took a deep breath. “Well, okay, here you are then. You once said you wanted these. I hope you still do.”

Sherlock snatched the folder from John's hands, flung it open, and then stopped still, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Oh,” he breathed. “Oh, John.” His tone was reverent and John felt his shoulders relax. He'd got it right.

Sherlock flicked through the folder, occasionally stopping to stare.

“This is- When did you? Oh, of course, last week. You said you were helping Mike put together a bookcase, but you were doing this.”

“Yes,” said John. “Is it- you like them, then?”

“Like them?” said Sherlock, finally tearing his eyes away to look up at John. “I love them. They're perfect.”
He put the folder down so that he could step forward and take John in his arms, kissing him soundly. John relaxed into his embrace but it only lasted a second or two before Sherlock tore himself away to go back to the folder. He started to pull the x-rays out, laying them out on the lab bench in front of him.

“Really, your pelvis is the most beautiful thing,” he murmured. “Look at that, it's just- the arc of your ischium!”

John didn't really fancy examining his bones in that much detail, so he just gave Sherlock a nod and a smile.

“I was right,” said Sherlock after another few minutes of intense study. “You have broken your ulna.”

“Fell off my bike when I was eleven,” supplied John.

Sherlock just nodded. It took another few minutes for John to realise that he was laying out the x-rays into the shape of John's body, which would have been creepy even if it wasn't missing a head. John hadn't bothered getting another x-ray of his skull, given that the one Sherlock already had was still in pride of place on their bedroom wall.

“Your ribs...” breathed Sherlock, staring at a chest x-ray and then turning to eye John's shirt with an intent eye. “Hold still,” he commanded.

John dutifully did so as Sherlock pushed his hands up inside John's jumpers and felt around his ribcage with a frown of concentration. His hands were a bit cold but John was getting used to the fact that Sherlock was always room temperature now. It was only disturbing that he was involved with a dead man when he thought about it too much.

“Oh yes,” muttered Sherlock, tracing over John's lower ribs and making him twitch with suppressed ticklishness. “The perfect curve.”

He pulled away and went back to his x-rays.

It took about fifteen minutes for Sherlock to realise that he had been ignoring John in favour of staring at his bones. He spun around, blinking as if coming out of a trance and looking guilty.

“This can wait,” he said, in a voice that wasn't so sure. “What did you have planned next?”

John shrugged. “Honestly? This was pretty much it. I thought that you'd probably spend some time looking at them and there's only an hour before it's your turn, anyway.”

Sherlock glanced at the x-rays again with longing, and then back to John. He straightened. “This day is for both of us,” he said. “You can't be enjoying the romance if I'm fixated on something else.”

John laughed. He couldn't help himself. “Are you kidding, Sherlock? You're fixating on me. More – you're fixating on the parts of me that no one else has ever – will ever – pay any attention to. It's incredibly romantic to have you so interested in the things that make me up.”

Sherlock stepped in close, taking John in his arms. “I'm interested in everything about you,” he said. “Everything that makes you up, both physically and mentally.” He bent to kiss John, and John returned it with interest.

Christ, this was a lot of emotion in one day. He was beginning to feel a bit overdone with
sentiment, and they still had the whole evening to go.

Sherlock gave no sign that he was getting tired of all the emotion, though. Instead, he kept kissing John as if they'd been separated for several days rather than having spent the whole day in each other's company. Not for the first time, John was forced to consider the idea that Sherlock was more suited to extremes of emotion than he was.

Well, it was only one day, right? And tomorrow they could settle back into comfortable companionship, without adding in sentiment all over the place. It wasn't as if John really objected to anything they'd done or said today, it was just that it had all been in one day. It really felt like it could have been spread out a bit.

“You really had no further plans?” asked Sherlock, once they'd pulled apart from each other.

John gave a little shrug. “Well, I thought we might find somewhere to have tea. It's just—” He stopped, and took a breath.

Come on, John, he thought. It's only one day of all this, and then you can go back to the non-verbal expressions of love again.

“It's not as if we really need much more than each other's company in order to celebrate our love,” he said. “I thought too much fancy, overdone stuff would just drown out what I really value about being with you, which is just getting to be with you.”

The look on Sherlock's face was more than worth digging deep to get that out. He held John's hands carefully in his own and said, “I completely agree. Let's find you some tea, then. It's been a couple of hours since the last cup, after all, and you do get a bit tetchy if you go too long without some.”

“I do not,” snapped John immediately.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “Of course not.”

“You looked just like Mycroft then,” said John. Sherlock immediately looked horrified.

“Low blow,” he hissed, and turned away to gather up his x-rays.

John took his hand again as they left the lab. All traces of Sherlock's snit immediately disappeared. If John had known it was that easy, he'd have started holding hands with the man the day after they'd met.

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Tea was at a small café, where Sherlock put his folder of x-rays carefully on the table and then scowled at the waitress whenever she came too close to it.

They stayed there until 6, relaxing together and discussing what sort of disguises Sherrinford might be able to use in the summer when the scarf was no longer believable, how likely it was that Mrs. Hudson would realise that she now had three tenants rather than two, and whether or not Mr. Chatterjee had remembered Valentine's Day.

They were just getting into whether or not they should be encouraging Mrs. Hudson to find a better relationship when Sherlock's phone went off. He pulled it out, silenced it and gave John a beaming grin.
“Six o'clock,” he announced. “My turn.”

“You set your alarm?”

“Of course. I know all too well how easy it is to lose all track of time when with you, John. The speed that Christmas Day went by at was just uncanny.”

John couldn't argue with that. He wasn't sure he'd ever lived through a faster day.

“Okay, then what's the plan?” he asked. “I am in your hands.”

Sherlock jumped to his feet. “Get your coat on,” he said, pulling his own on. “Come on, come on, hurry up.”

John sent him a look and Sherlock relaxed slightly.

“Fine, no rush then. We can saunter, I suppose.”

He was twitchy with impatience though, so John took pity on him. He got his coat on as quickly as he could and followed Sherlock's stride out of the café to the roadside, where Sherlock hailed a taxi.

“In! In!” waved Sherlock, then he ducked by the cabbie's window to give their destination to him in a mutter John couldn't hear.

Well, fine. Time to allow Sherlock his bit of mystery. John relaxed against the seat and smiled at Sherlock as he climbed in, still clutching at his folder of x-rays. Perhaps John should have thought to provide a bag for those.

The taxi started moving and Sherlock turned to John with a serious look.

“Do you remember the first time we were in a cab together?”

John tried to remember. “Going to a crime scene?”

Sherlock nodded. “To the scene of Jennifer Wilson's death.”

“Oh yes,” remembered John. “The pink lady. I thought you were a bit of a nutter at that point.”

“I am a bit of a nutter,” said Sherlock. “So are you. That's a large part of the attraction for both of us.”

John couldn't argue with that.

“It was on that taxi ride that I realised you were more interesting than the average person,” said Sherlock. “The first time I realised that I wanted to spend time getting to know you properly, in complete opposition to how I usually feel about new people I meet.”

“Oh,” said John. He tried to think back, but the memory had blurred into the hundreds of other taxi rides they'd taken together. Bugger his shoddy memory.

“It was also the first time you called me amazing,” said Sherlock, “but I'm sure the two facts are unrelated.”

John laughed and caught up Sherlock's hand in his. “Of course,” he said. “I still do think you're amazing, by the way.”
Sherlock smiled. “And I still want to spend more time with you.”

When the taxi stopped, they were in the middle of Hoxton, in a residential street that John didn’t recognise at all.

“Wait for us,” Sherlock told the driver. “We won’t be long.”

He tugged John from the taxi and down an alley between the houses. He stopped halfway down and turned to John. “This is where I realised that my desire to be around you was going to be problematic.”

John looked around, blinking. “Where are we?”

Sherlock pointed at the house behind them. “A man lived there who murdered his mother in a rather ingenious way, in order to get hold of his inheritance early and pay off his gambling debts. I was standing here, watching him play online poker through the window when you texted me asking if I was going be back for dinner.”

“Right,” said John.

“And I replied 'yes', and left, even though I’d been planning to stay until his creditor arrived to collect. I knew the creditor had helped arrange the murder but not who he was, and yet I found myself heading home to where I could have risotto and the pleasure of your company rather than wait for him.”

John blinked with surprise. “I don't remember that.”

Sherlock shook his head. “There's no reason why you should. It was just another night from your perspective.” He turned away. “Come on.”

John followed him back to the taxi, racking his memory for a night that matched with what Sherlock had said, but there had been too many times when he’d texted Sherlock about dinner and then they'd shared it together. It was only now that he came to think of it that he realised how often Sherlock must have come home just to be with him.

“So, this is a tour of our most important locations, then?” he said once they were back in the taxi.

“In essence,” said Sherlock. “However, there are some exceptions. I’ve skipped Roland Kerr Community College, where you shot a man for me and then giggled about it, and I realised that I could be the kind of man who laughed with a friend. I also thought we'd avoid Barts – even if we hadn't already been there, nothing I realised about my feelings for you there was particularly cheerful.”

“No,” agreed John. “Let's skip that section of our past.”

When the taxi pulled up at the next stop, fifteen minutes later, John wasn't very surprised to find that they were outside a graveyard.

“Oh, I know the relevance of this one,” he said, looking through the fence towards where he and Sherlock had first kissed. The gates had already been locked for the night, just as they had been back then. “You're not going to make me climb over again, are you?”

Sherlock looked as if he was considering it for a moment, then shook his head. “Probably not a good idea, with the cabbie watching us. People tend to get a bit silly about trespassing in graveyards after dark.”
“Can't imagine why,” muttered John. “I can't remember, was it that grave, or that one?”

“Neither. It was that one,” said Sherlock, pointing at one some distance from the two John had indicated. “I let you go in alone because I was worried about getting caught by Jack, and you nearly died because of it.”

“I was fine,” said John.

Sherlock gripped tightly at his shoulder, pulling him around so that their eyes met.

“You very nearly weren't,” he said fiercely. “I stood here and watched you fight that woman, and I did nothing. I could have been standing here as I watched you die.” He stopped and took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment. “This is where I realised that nothing was more important than keeping you safe, not even my freedom.”

John took the hand that wasn't clenched around his shoulder and squeezed it, but he couldn't think of anything to say. Fitting words to these kinds of emotional moments wasn't his strong point.

“It's also where I found myself taking the risk of kissing you,” continued Sherlock after a moment. “I can't pretend much rational thought went into that decision, but I think it was one of the best I've ever made.”

“Definitely,” agreed John. “Certainly better than the one to put a dead fox in our bath.”

Sherlock huffed a tiny sigh of faked annoyance but kissed John anyway. John wrapped his arms around him and pulled him in close, remembering that first kiss and how surprised he'd been by it. That one kiss had made almost as much difference to his life as meeting Sherlock in the first place, and yet it had seemed so simple and obvious. That described most of the relationship, actually. It had all just fallen into place like it was meant to be.

They kissed until the cabbie rolled down his window and pointedly reminded them that he was still on the meter. Sherlock shot him a glare but allowed John to pull away to head back to the taxi.

“Please tell me we're not going to the graveyard where Moran had me now,” John said as he put his seatbelt on.

Sherlock made a face. “No. I have absolutely no intention of reliving that moment. It did not prompt any emotional epiphanies, at any rate. I knew long before then that I'd do anything to keep you alive, even let Jack take me back to Halloween. I thought we might move on to dinner now.”

“I like that plan,” said John. Lunch was starting to seem a very long time ago, especially with all the emotional moments that had happened since. Who knew romance could be so draining?

Dinner was at Angelo's. John let out a laugh when they pulled up there.

“And here I'd been assuming that you'd take me somewhere terribly posh and pretentious.”

“My research indicated that personal sentimental associations trump extravagance in these matters,” said Sherlock as he paid the cab driver.

Angelo greeted them with his usual enthusiasm, the table by the window, not one but two candles to make it 'more romantic', and a bottle of wine on the house. John couldn't help but wonder how it was that Sherlock managed to win such loyalty from people given how rude he usually was to them.
“Do you remember the first time we sat here?” asked Sherlock.

“Yes,” said John, watching their taxi drive off. “We were looking at a taxi then, as well.”

“And neither of us had any idea that we'd end up back here like this, just over two years later,” said Sherlock.

John nodded. “It's been a crazy two years,” he said. “If you'd told me about it back then, I'd have thought you were nuts.”

“If you'd told me I was going to spend a day like today with you, I'd have been horrified,” mused Sherlock. “Wasting an entire day on all this sentimental rubbish, without any trace of crime to justify it? Ridiculous.”

John snorted and raised his glass. “Well, on the note, cheers. Happy Valentine's Day.”

Sherlock raised his own glass and chinked it against John's, and they both drank.

Dinner went by rather quickly. Sherlock deigned to eat, although he didn't manage more than half a plateful and John was forced to help him finish in order to avoid seeing food go wasted. When dessert came though, Sherlock was rather vehement about not letting John have any of his.

“Should have asked Angelo to slip some pumpkin in it,” muttered John.

Sherlock gave him a scandalised look. “It's hardly romantic to conspire with a restaurateur to steal your lover's pudding, John.”

“I would have to agree,” said a voice, and John looked up to see St. Valentine standing over their table. He started.

There had been something a bit ridiculous about St. Valentine when he'd last seen him, but as he'd been standing next to a giant rabbit in a pink sash, it had been rather minimised. Here, in a perfectly normal London restaurant, the fact that he was dressed in a pink toga with hearts and flowers embroidered along the edge really stood out. Over his shoulder, John could see the other couples in the place staring at him as if expecting some sort of floor show.

Sherlock scowled at him. “You're interrupting.”

“I know,” said St. Valentine. “Don't worry, I won't be here long. I just wanted to check up on you and make sure that your love is still flowing as it should. I can see you're doing an excellent job on that, though.”

He raised his hands and a stream of tiny red lights appeared, flowing between John and Sherlock's chests.

“Was that- what did you do?” asked John, his eyes widening.

“Cheap tricks,” muttered Sherlock.

St. Valentine's hands fell. “That was the love that flows between you two. I can see it, you know. I thought you'd like a visual representation.”

“Uh, yeah,” said John, staring at the now-empty air between him and Sherlock. “That was- um.”

“It was lovely,” said Sherlock impatiently. “Thanks so much, really, it was great. Now, please leave.”
St. Valentine raised an eyebrow. “You’re not very good at gratitude, are you?”

“You’re **intruding,**” hissed Sherlock.

“Shut up,” said John. He gave St. Valentine the most sincere smile he could manage. “Thanks. For everything. I'm sorry Sherlock's being a bit of a brat.”

St. Valentine returned the smile. “It’s fine. I can sense his true emotions.” He turned his smile on Sherlock and said, “You're very welcome.”

Sherlock just twitched and glared harder.

“I'll leave you to it, then,” said St. Valentine, sounding amused. “I just wanted to tell you how much I approved of the way you have spent my day.”

John felt as if he'd passed an exam. They'd done it – they'd successfully celebrated this day and got the blessing of the ruler of it. Sherlock wasn't about to get sent back to Halloween for breaking their deal.

St. Valentine gave them one last smile, then turned away to favour the rest of the room with one as well. “Let the love flow,” he announced, then left, looking like a hippy who had partaken of the really good shit.

A few people stared after him, but as John glanced around to ascertain reactions, he saw that most of the couples were now leaning in towards each other, holding hands and smiling as if there was no one else in the room.

“Christ,” he muttered. “Maybe they should send him to Afghanistan.”

“Don't be idiotic, John,” said Sherlock. “Do you really want your ex-colleagues to end up in romantic clinches with Taliban fighters?”

John blinked at the mental images, and shuddered. “Not really,” he admitted. “But I would love to see how the media would try and report it.”

That made Sherlock smile. “Mycroft would get very tetchy about it,” he said. “He hates it when world events are influenced by the bizarre and inexplicable.”

“You'd think he'd be used to the bizarre and inexplicable after growing up in Halloween,” said John.

Sherlock made a face. “That's the **dull** kind of bizarre.”

They finished their meal and Sherlock paid, then conducted John out of the restaurant and hailed another taxi.

“I'm a bit sad that you didn't hire a rose-strewn limo,” said John as they got inside.

A flash of panic crossed Sherlock’s face until he realised John was joking, when it turned to a glare.

“You took me to the park and yet we did not canoodle in a swan-shaped boat,” he pointed out.

“Well, there's always tomorrow,” said John.

Sherlock shuddered. “Tomorrow we will avoid all mention of romance,” he said. “I'm hoping
someone will get killed in a truly gory manner to balance this out.”

John nodded. “I know exactly what you mean. Only so much hearts-and-flowers a man can stand.”

The taxi was heading south rather than towards home. John glanced out of the window and wondered what was coming up next. So far, Sherlock had surprised him by avoiding the most obvious and over-the-top Valentine's Day gestures, and he hoped the trend was going to continue.

The taxi crossed over Westminster Bridge, turned left and drew to a stop. John groaned. “Please tell me we're not.”

Sherlock cleared his throat. “I don't know what you're referring to. Get out of the car.”

John got out with a sigh, turning to stare at the London Eye in front of him, all lit up with red lights. Sherlock had gone for something obvious and over-the-top after all.

Sherlock paid the driver, then took John's hand and pulled him towards the Eye. “Take that look off your face,” he said. “It won't be so bad, and we needed to finish with some form of climax.”

“I suppose we're not going to have the more usual kind of climax,” said John. The entrance to the Eye had been turned into a giant red heart, surrounded by cut-outs of cupids and roses. Vile.

Sherlock shot John a brief look that made John regret the comment. After Sherlock's mention of sex that morning, he really should have been paying attention to not bringing it up as a normal component of Valentine's Day.

They were met at the entrance to the Eye by a man dressed in a black suit, a red waistcoat, and white gloves.

“We have a reservation,” said Sherlock pulling out a piece of paper and pushing it into his hands.

The butler took a moment to glance at it, then smiled and bowed low to gesture at the entrance to the Eye. “Of course, sirs. This way.”

Sherlock swept passed him, pulling John along behind him. They stepped into a capsule that had less Valentine's-themed decoration than John had feared, but not by much. The butler started to follow them, but Sherlock stopped him.

“You are not necessary. We can open the champagne ourselves.”

“I'm afraid that's not permitted, sir,” said the butler, trying to get past Sherlock onto the pod and failing. The pod was reaching the end of the boarding platform, and he looked a bit stressed. “It's mandatory to have an employee on the capsule.”

“Not this one,” said Sherlock decisively and he gave the poor man a bit of a shove, pushing him back just as the doors shut and the capsule began to rise up.

“Sherlock!” John tried to scold, but he couldn't keep in his amusement. Sherlock just grinned at him.

“Champagne!” he announced, and headed to the ice bucket.

John left him to it in favour of wandering over to the windows to actually look at the view Sherlock had paid obscene amounts for them to look at. Given how often he'd walked along this part of the South Bank, he was rather surprised to find it was completely different and far more enthralling to
look out at the familiar landscape from this height. Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament looked really rather beautiful. He realised he'd never really looked at them without seeing a tourist trap that contained a bunch of wankers. Viewed from this height, all he could see was the beauty of the architecture.

“Drink,” said Sherlock, appearing at his elbow and handing him a glass. John took it without looking away from the view.

“Okay, this is better than I was expecting,” he said. They were now high enough to see miles down the river, and he craned to count how many bridges he could see.

“Of course,” said Sherlock, as if anything he organised was naturally going to be perfect. He cleared his throat and added, in the slightly stilted voice they’d both been using all day when they’d been self-consciously romantic, “When I first came here from Halloween, I thought there could be nothing more perfect than London. And then I met you, and was proved wrong.”

John grinned at him and raised his glass to tap against Sherlock's. “That was a good one,” he said.

Sherlock nodded with acknowledgement, shooting John a smirk as he drank.

“How about this one,” said John, looking over Horse Guards and out towards St. James's Park. “I always knew London was the only place I could stand to live, but I was never truly alive here until I met you.”

“Oh, very nice,” said Sherlock. They chinked glasses again. “There's chocolate as well, if you want, but it could never be as sweet as you.”

John nodded his appreciation. “Being in your company is far more intoxicating than this champagne,” he added, winning himself a grin from Sherlock.

They'd reached the top of the wheel and John took the chance to look around in every direction, sipping the champagne as he did so. No point in wasting it, after all.

“I did consider proposing while we were up here,” said Sherlock. For a moment John thought it was just part of the game they'd been playing, and then he took in the look on Sherlock's face.

“What?” he asked, rather dumbly.

Sherlock shook his head as if to dismiss the seriousness of such a statement. “It seemed rather pointless, though. We both already know that this is a lifetime commitment, and I'm not sure dead men are meant to get married anyway. Mostly, though, I didn't want to treat such a thing as just another romantic moment to appease St. Valentine with.”

John nodded. “Well, I'd have said yes,” he said. “And then we'd have been stuck organising a wedding, which is a whole load of bollocks. We're better off as we are, really.”

“Yes, I had considered that a wedding would be appalling,” said Sherlock. “Given how stressful this day was to prepare for, a wedding could only be worse.”

John reached out to take his hand. “Well, we know we consider ourselves married. I think we can skip the rest of it.”

Sherlock squeezed his hand and beamed. “To the rest of our lives, then,” he said, and raised his glass.
John toasted him again, but had to point out, “The rest of mine, you mean. Your life has already ended, and yet we're still together.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Pedantic. To the rest of your life, then. Or, no, to the rest of our existences. I have already considered the matter, and my existence will not last beyond yours. There would be no point in continuing without you.”

John stared. “What?!”

They were descending back down toward the South Bank, but John wasn't looking at the view at all now.

"Sherlock, you can't-"

"On the contrary," interrupted Sherlock. "I can, quite easily. I am already dead, after all. All I have to do is let go of my grip on the world."

"That's-" started John, but Sherlock carried on talking.

"If you mean that I can't because you don't want me to, well, you'll be gone, and so will no longer have a say. At any rate, I don't think this is a conversation we should be pursuing on a day when we're meant to be celebrating our love." He paused, and then added in a low voice, "I really don't enjoy talking about your eventual death, John."

John took a moment to let out a deep breath. "Yeah," he agreed, turning back to look out the window. He wasn't really eager to talk about growing old and dying either. Christ, Sherlock wasn't going to age with him - how long could they stay living in London before someone noticed that? How long before John was celebrating Valentine's Day with someone who looked young enough to be his son?

He stared out at the view, but he wasn't really seeing it now. Behind him, Sherlock stepped close and put both his arms around John, resting his chin on John's shoulder. They stood like that in silence until the capsule reached the ground.

The butler was waiting for them, looking rather angry.

"Don't panic," said Sherlock as he and John stepped out. "We haven't hurt your precious tourist trap."

The butler glared at him and then looked around the capsule with very narrow eyes, as if looking for any tiny sign of damage.

"And we didn't have sex in it either," added Sherlock, taking John's hand and pulling him away. "Although we did get married."

John couldn't hold in a giggle. "Oh god, we did too," he said as they strode out of the exit. "Jesus Christ, we got married on the Eye. We're the worst cliché ever."

"That's the deal we've made," Sherlock pointed out. "Ten days a year, we will be appalling holiday clichés. This one was relatively painless; I am in love with you and I don't particularly mind celebrating that fact. Some of the others, I'm not as keen on."

John put on his best fake Irish accent. "Ah, to be sure, are you not looking forward to the wearing of t' green?"
The horrified look Sherlock gave him was well-worth it.

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There wasn't a lot left to the day after that. They strolled along the South Bank, hand-in-hand, like a hundred other couples who were out braving the cold in the name of romance. Eventually John grew cold enough to suggest going home for a cup of tea, and Sherlock hailed them a cab.

Back at Baker Street, John made the tea and they drank it side-by-side on the sofa, leaning in towards each other for support.

“Who knew romance could be so exhausting?” said John with a yawn.

“He’s the only response he got from Sherlock. He'd put aside his tea in favour of shuffling through the x-rays. He glanced up at the walls with a calculating look.

“No,” said John firmly. “Do they have to go up at all? Can't you just keep them in a drawer?”

Sherlock responded to that with a scowl. “Do you really think my feelings for you can just be stored away like that?”

“Oh no,” said John. “You don't get to invent that metaphor. Those x-rays aren't representative of anything other than what my bones look like.”

Sherlock subsided with a grumble.

“Anyway,” added John, stretching, “I'm off to bed. You coming?”

Sherlock looked up from the x-rays, clearly considering it. Most of the time he did go to bed when John did, although usually not for longer than it took John to fall asleep. If something else was occupying his attention though, he didn't bother.

“It's not vital for our Valentine's Day celebrations,” said John. “I rather think we can declare those over, and a success. If you want to keep looking at those, I'm not going to get upset that I've missed out on my evening cuddle.”

“Just for a few minutes,” said Sherlock, setting down the x-rays. “It would be foolish to neglect the reality in favour of the image.”

Fifteen minutes later, John was on the edge of sleep, Sherlock's arm carefully tucked around him, when he more felt than heard Sherlock whisper against his hair, “My husband.”

John managed to find enough energy to pat at Sherlock's hand. “My husband,” he repeated in a tired slur, and then fell asleep.

****

John woke up the next morning to the voices of multiple Holmeses. He buried his head under the duvet and pretended he was still asleep, but eventually his bladder drove him out of bed and into the bathroom.
He tried to escape back into the bedroom rather than having to face all three of them before his morning tea, but Sherlock wasn't about to let that happen. He flung open the bedroom door as John was raising the duvet to crawl back under it.

“John, you can't leave me alone with Mycroft. I need you to dilute some of his awfulness.”

John turned and gave him a beseeching look, but Sherlock ignored it. He grabbed John's arm and propelled him out of the room.

“He’s your brother as well now, after all,” he said with great satisfaction.

Christ, John hadn't considered that.

“Oh, Sherlock,” said Mycroft, giving Sherlock a very pitying look. “Please tell me that doesn’t mean the obvious.”

Sherlock beamed at him and slung an arm around John's shoulders. “We agreed that we consider ourselves married. He's your brother-in-law now.”

Sherrinford had pulled off most of his disguise but was still wearing a woollen hat with an enormous bobble on top. His skull projected disapproval. “That's not how marriages work. You need to have a ceremony and a party, and a horrendous amount of alcohol, and terrible speeches, and all that jazz.”

Sherlock made a face. “We skipped that rubbish. Unimportant.”

Sherrinford made a groaning noise. “You can't just skip—”

“Yes, we can, and yes, we did,” said Sherlock. “It's done, get over it.”

Sherrinford made a despairing sound, but they were spared from further disapproval by Mrs. Hudson's footsteps on the stairs. Sherrinford immediately went floppy, collapsing back against the sofa as if he was incapable of supporting his bones.

“Oh, Mycroft,” said Mrs. Hudson as she came in. “I thought I heard more than just John and Sherlock up here.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Hudson,” said Mycroft.

“I've got some rock cakes downstairs if you want something with your tea,” she said, apparently not noticing that none of them had tea in her firm belief that every visitor was an excuse for a fresh pot. She glanced over at Sherrinford and made a face. “Oh, Sherlock, I do wish you wouldn't play around with that thing. Gives me quite a turn, it does.”

She stepped over and pulled the hat off Sherrinford's head, then rubbed her sleeve over the dome of his skull, as if wiping away a smudge. “It's just macabre. I found it posed in front of that easel upstairs the other day, as if it was painting. Why would you want that around the place?”

“You were upstairs?” said Sherlock. “Why were you upstairs?”

Mrs. Hudson gave him a look. “It's my house, dear. I wanted something from the attic. I must say, I didn't know you were such a painter. Seems a shame that you've used John's room for it, though – the poor man doesn't have any space to himself at all.”

“I'm alright,” said John. “I don't mind.”
“John uses my bedroom far more than I do these days,” said Sherlock, which was true, but only because John slept and Sherlock didn't. “It's only fair I get his in return.”

“Well, perhaps,” said Mrs. Hudson doubtfully.

“They are not Sherlock's paintings, at any rate,” said Mycroft. “They were painted by our brother. Sherlock doesn't possess anything resembling artistic ability.”

“Except his music,” John put in.

“Your brother?” said Mrs. Hudson. “Oh, I didn't know there was a third one! Is he here?” she glanced around, looking straight past Sherrinford.

“Not at present,” said Sherlock, glaring at Mycroft. “He is extremely shy, I doubt you will ever actually see him in person.”

“Oh, the poor man,” said Mrs. Hudson. “Mrs. Jenkins has a daughter like that. Can't leave the house at all, just sits inside with the curtains shut. Terribly sad. Well, I'll leave you to it then, I just wanted to remind you two that the window cleaners are coming this afternoon, so you'll want to keep all your clothes on when in view of the windows.”

She gave John a bit of a wink that made his blood go cold, then disappeared again.

Sherlock immediately turned to glare at Mycroft. “Why would you tell her about Sherrinford?”

Mycroft let out a sigh. “Think, Sherlock. How long do you think you can conceal the presence of a third person living in this flat? I am merely setting up for the eventual reveal.”

“What reveal? 'Here's my brother the painter, by the way, he's also a skeleton'?” said John. He snorted. “That'll go down well.”

“We could just tell her I went through a minimalist phase and took it too far,” said Sherrinford cheerfully. “I was trying to get down to the bare bones of who I am as an artist.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of 'my brother was terribly disfigured in an accident and now cannot bear to be seen by strangers.' It has the added advantage of being technically correct,” said Mycroft. He stood up and collected his umbrella. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get to work. Good day.”

“Bye,” said John, but he was the only one who bothered.

Mycroft left and Sherlock let out an exasperated sigh and collapsed into a chair. “I hate it when he's right,” he grumbled.

Sherrinford grinned at him. “If it helps, I prompted that with some of the things I said last night.”

Sherlock brightened. “It does help. I like it when you manipulate him.”

“I know,” said Sherrinford indulgently, and John turned to go into the kitchen and make tea.
St. Patrick's Day

Chapter Notes

Apologies for any inaccurate Gaelic. I stole it from a very green website.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John often teased Sherlock over his 'melodramatic tendencies', but Sherlock knew he enjoyed a sudden reveal at the end of a case just as much as Sherlock did. As such, it was in order to eke out the most amount of enjoyment for both of them that he paused in a way designed to heighten anticipation before announcing, “And so, you see, he is not a beggar at all.”

He wiped the damp sponge across Hugh Boone's face, wiping away both dirt and false scar. “He's an extremely successful conman who has been pretending to his wife that he was a banker.”

“Neville St. Clair!” realised Lestrade with gratifying shock. Sherlock looked at John to see the expected look of awe. Excellent.

“I'm not a conman,” protested St. Clair. “Begging isn't a con.”

“Pretending something you are not in order to coerce money out of people is,” said Sherlock. “Not to mention the lies you have told your wife. Only the very lowest sort of person would perpetuate a deception that large on someone they claimed to love.”

St. Clair's face fell. “I didn't mean to lie to her, I just didn't know how to explain.”

Sherlock had already lost interest in him and the lies he told himself. He turned away to grab John's hand. “Bored now. Let's go home for tea, and you can tell me how brilliant I am.”

“Right,” said John. “That's my role, is it?”

Sherlock shrugged. “One of several,” he said, and tugged him out of the prison cell.

“Hang on,” said Lestrade, following them out. “I need a statement.”

“No, you don't,” Sherlock called over his shoulder. “Just pretend you saw through the disguise on your own. It's strains the imagination that you would be so perceptive, I suppose, but I doubt any of your superiors will question an outcome that actually implies the police can do their jobs with some degree of competence.”

Lestrade muttered something that Sherlock chose not to hear.

A thought struck him just before he and John left. “Oh, and if you get anything complex tomorrow, you'll have to try and solve it yourself. I'll busy all day – no time for cases.”

“Busy?” repeated Lestrade. “Since when do you put anything ahead of solving cases?”

“It's St. Patrick's Day,” explained John with an unnecessarily wide grin. “He's going to dress up as a leprechaun.”
“Leprechauns are purported to be short,” Sherlock pointed out. “You make a far better candidate.”

John gave him the half-hearted glare that comments about his height always garnered, as if he knew he should be pissed off about them but he couldn't really be bothered.

“If either of you are dressing as leprechaun, I definitely want to see that,” said Lestrade.

“We'll probably be going to an Irish pub in the evening,” said John. “I'll text you when we know which one and you can join us.”

Sherlock wasn't sure how he felt about having to share the humiliation of celebrating St. Patrick's Day with Lestrade, but he had a worrying feeling that St. Patrick would appreciate them involving their friends in the ritual. It was important that they did all they could to please him, given how tenuous their link with Ireland actually was. At present, all Sherlock's research had indicated was that a truly unnecessary amount of drink was involved, along with all manner of tacky accessories. Why were none of these holidays at least a little bit elegant?

Lestrade shook his head. “I'm a bit old and English for St. Patrick's Day,” he said. “Not sure I can cope with the drunken crush at an Irish pub.”

“Well, you're more than welcome to stay at home being boring,” said Sherlock, with relief.

When they got home, Mrs. Hudson was inspecting their curtains. “Oh Sherlock,” she said, apparently already in scolding mode. “How have you managed to stain these so badly? I'm going to have to get them cleaned.”

“There was an unexpected chemical reaction,” said Sherlock. Sherrinford was propped against a bookcase, dressed in a paint-splattered labcoat, and Sherlock saw his amusement at that. If he truly knew anything about science he'd know that chemistry wasn't nearly as controllable as popular opinion would have people think.

Mrs. Hudson tutted. “Honestly, you two are terrible for my furnishings. If it isn't unexpected chemical reactions, it's criminal masterminds, and if it's not them, it's paint all over my carpet.”

John frowned. “Paint?”

“Up in your bedroom – well, your old bedroom,” said Mrs. Hudson. “Splatters all over the floor. Is it too much to ask that you put some kind of cloth down before you do something messy like that?”

Sherrinford's expression had morphed to guilty.

“I apologise,” said Sherlock, because saying that was the easiest way to get Mrs. Hudson to shut up and go away when she was in this mood. “My brother was using that room. I didn't realise he'd been so careless.”

Sherrinford gave him a glare that would have almost certainly come with a poked-put tongue, if he still had a tongue.

“And that's another thing,” said Mrs. Hudson. “I'm not stupid, you know. You go out all day but there are still footsteps and noises up here, things get moved around and that bedroom is definitely being used, but not by either of you. When were you going to tell me that I have a third lodger?”

Ah. Mrs. Hudson was often more perceptive than people gave her credit for, but Sherlock didn't
usually make that mistake.

“It's not-” started John, and Mrs. Hudson turned her glare on him.

“Don't give me that. I don't mind, you know – I'm not going to put the rent up or anything. Well, not unless paint ends up in more places. I just want to know what's going on below my roof.”

Time to come clean. “Mrs. Hudson, I apologise,” said Sherlock. “It's merely that Sherrinford really can't stand to be seen by strangers. We thought it would be easier to keep that from happening if no one knew he was here. He was in an accident and it's taken him a very long time to recover. It's left him rather, ah, altered in appearance, and he can't bear for anyone to see him.”

That was enough to make Mrs. Hudson soften. “Oh, the poor dear. Well, he needn't worry on my account – I don't care what he looks like.”

“But he does,” said Sherlock. “I'm sorry, Mrs. Hudson, but he really can't stand to be seen.”

She nodded understandingly. “Well, given how good he is at hiding, I don't suppose there's much danger of that. I've heard noises up here and come straight up to look around, but there's never any sign of him.”

“He is rather adept at concealing himself,” agreed Sherlock, glancing over at where Sherrinford was standing in plain sight.

A mobile began to ring somewhere in the room. John turned around to locate the source of the sound, putting his hand on the pocket he carried his phone in to check it wasn't his. An automatic reaction, clearly, as the noise was coming from nowhere near him.

“Is that you, Sherlock?”

“No,” said Sherlock, raising an eyebrow at Sherrinford.

“Mrs. Hudson?” asked John.

“Oh no, dear, I don't have one of those fiddly things.”

She and John started hunting around after the source of the music, which Sherlock realised after a moment was Molly Malone. Oh, good lord, what Sherrinford done now?

“Here it is,” said Mrs. Hudson, reaching into the pocket of the lab coat Sherrinford was wearing. “What a place to keep a phone!” She glanced at the screen. “It's your friend Molly, Sherlock.”

Sherlock took the phone from her but didn't answer it. Molly Calling, it said, next to a photo of Molly that she had clearly taken herself, smiling self-consciously.

“It's not for me,” he said, just as the phone stopped ringing. He looked up at Sherrinford, who had the grace to look sheepish.

“Mrs. Hudson, would you like some tea?” asked John, cutting off any further questions.

“Oh no, dear, thank you. I should be getting on. I'll arrange something about those curtains, and if you could sort out the paint, that would be good.”

John nodded, holding open the door for her. “We'll make sure Sherrinford is more careful in future.”
“Sherrinford,” muttered Mrs. Hudson as she left the room. “Those parents have a lot to answer for.”

The minute she was gone, Sherrinford straightened up and plucked the phone from Sherlock's hands. “I'll take that, thank you.”

“When did you get a phone?” asked Sherlock, and then his brain kicked in. “Ah, of course. Mycroft got it for you.”

“No one has to see what you look like over a phone,” pointed out Sherrinford.

“And you're using it to talk to Molly Hooper,” said Sherlock. “You realise that sooner or later that will backfire, right?”

Sherrinford took a surprising amount of umbrage at that. “What's wrong with having a friend?” he snapped. “We're not all antisocial misanthropes, you know.”

He swept out of the room, heading upstairs to his room.

“Clear up the paint splatters,” Sherlock called after him. “I'm not having my rent put up because you're careless!”

“If your rent is put up, it won't be because I'm careless, it'll be because you're destructive,” shouted back Sherrinford. Damn him, why did he always have to have the last word?

“We should get him a computer,” said John. “No one has to see what you look like online, either.”

“He uses yours when you're asleep,” said Sherlock throwing himself into his chair. “He belongs to a worrying number of art-related forums, and at least two that centre around cybersex with strangers.”

John went wide-eyed. “Cybersex? But- I thought people from Halloween weren't interested in sex.”

“Not all of us,” said Sherlock. “But our mother is very interested in it. Sherrinford seems to have inherited that from her.” He shuddered at the thought.

John frowned. “But he's a skeleton. How does he-”

Sherlock held up a hand. “John, please. If you love me, don't finish that sentence.”

John stopped and then nodded. “Yeah, fair enough.” He looked over at his laptop. “We are definitely getting him his own computer, though. I don't really fancy the idea of him using mine for that kind of thing.”

“I'll persuade Mycroft to do it,” said Sherlock, just as his phone beeped with a text message. He pulled it out and made a face at the sender. “Ugh, speak of the devil.”

*I will be an hour or two later picking Sherrinford up than I previously intimated. My meeting is going on far longer than I had anticipated. MH*

He must still be in the meeting if he was texting rather than phoning. Dull. Why on earth Mycroft subjected himself to such petty, useless pointlessness was beyond Sherlock.

“He's going to be late. Affairs of state or some such rubbish,” he told John.

John walked over to stand over Sherlock as if intending to see the text for himself, but instead he
settled himself over Sherlock's lap, knees braced on either side of him. It was the kind of position that used to make Sherlock nervous because it hinted at things that Sherlock wasn't able to give, but he'd realised by now that John wasn't ever going to ask for them. He put his hands on John's waist and raised his head to accept a kiss.

"We'll just have to occupy ourselves for a bit," said John. "I'm thinking tea and a cuddle."

"Your rubbish car show will be on," acknowledged Sherlock. "And the sofa is an excellent place for a cuddle."

"Exactly," said John, and he kissed Sherlock again.

****

Sherlock was practising playing his violin in the manner of an Irish fiddle when John made it out of the bedroom on the morning of St. Patrick's Day. He was wearing a green jumper with a shamrock on it and looking as pleased about a day spent celebrating a culture neither of them had any real links with as Sherlock was.

"Morning," John said, heading for the kettle.

Sherlock didn't bother responding. He was at a particularly tricky bit of the tune, and-

"Bugger," he said, breaking off his playing as it went wrong. He'd spent the last week practising these tunes and he still wasn't managing them as they should be played.

"It's a different bowing technique," he said as John glanced over at him.

John nodded in the way that meant he had no idea what Sherlock was talking about. "Tea?"

"Please," said Sherlock, laying the violin to one side for now. "Unless you're intending to do something troublingly Irish to it."

John shook his head. "I'm not going to mess with my morning tea for anyone, not even St. Patrick."

Sherlock smiled. One of the things he'd missed most when he'd been trapped back in Halloween had been the importance that John attached to tea. He moved into the kitchen so that he could be close to the process, sitting down at the table to watch as John went through his morning routine.

"I like the shirt," added John, nodding at Sherlock's outfit.

Sherlock smoothed his hands down the emerald green shirt he'd bought for the day. "It's a little garish."

John ran his hand over Sherlock's shoulder. "I like it," he said. "Suits you."

Sherlock took a moment to bask in the praise, and then glanced at John's jumper. "That monstrosity doesn't suit you in the slightest."

John shrugged, turning back to the tea. "I'm just getting in the spirit," he said. He brought the tea over to the table, and sat down. "Well, I will be, once I've woken up a bit."

"How early do you think we have to start drinking alcohol?" asked Sherlock.

John shook his head. "I'm not touching a drop before at least four. We'll have to celebrate in sober ways until then."
“I've got shamrocks,” said Sherlock, gesturing at the handful of leaves he'd put in a bowl of water to keep them fresh for today. “Present them to our acquaintances?”

John nodded. “And some sort of Irish food for lunch.”

“My research indicated that the chief stable of the Irish diet is the potato,” said Sherlock. He nodded towards the counter. “I bought you a bag.”

John turned to look at the sack of potatoes that Sherlock had carried all the way home from the supermarket for him last night. He failed to look appreciative.

“Sherlock, I'm not eating nothing but potato.”

Sherlock frowned. “My research indicated—”

“I don't care. I'm not a starving peasant. I'll have Irish stew or something, I'm not just eating a plate of potato.”

Sherlock sighed to indicate his intense displeasure at John's unwillingness to involve himself whole-heartedly in the day but relented. Perhaps eating a meal of nothing but potato was like eating nothing but pumpkin, a fate he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy. “Fine.”

They started the shamrock giving at Mrs. Hudson's, where she insisted on gushing over the plant as if it was a present that was actually worth receiving.

“Oh, it's so lovely that you're celebrating,” she said. “My aunt married an Irish man, you know. He was a lovely man; he built stage scenery.”

Sherlock had no idea how that was related to anything but he managed a grimace that would hopefully pass as a smile. Thankfully, John was there to step up and take over the social interaction for him.

“My Great-Grandfather was Irish, so I thought it might be nice to celebrate,” he said, as it was nothing but a whim. “Any excuse for a Guinness, right?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “Maybe I'll be a bit naughty later and have a whisky and ginger.”


“Do try to stick to only one or two,” said Sherlock. “You make terrible jokes when you're drunk.”

“Cheeky!” she exclaimed. “I'll have you know I was drinking whisky on St Patrick's Day before you were born.”

Sherlock sincerely doubted that, but the fact that he was almost certainly older than Mrs. Hudson was one that he had been avoiding thinking about for years so he was practised at dismissing it. “We have to go and spread Irish cheer elsewhere now.”

“Happy St. Patrick's Day,” said John to her before he followed Sherlock outside.

They got a taxi to Scotland Yard, where Sherlock strode through the building, ignoring the looks that John's jumper was garnering. He flung open Lestrade's office door to find him nodding off over some paperwork.

“Lestrade!”
Lestrade sat up with a jerk, looked at them and blinked. “Who ordered the leprechaun-o-gram?”

Sherlock held out a shamrock. "Happy St. Patrick's Day."

Behind him, John started laughing under his breath.

Lestrade was clearly wondering if he was still asleep. “God, this is a bit much, isn't it?”

“Ah, to be sure, we're feeling the craich,” said John in his terrible Irish accent.

“'Tis a day to be full of Gaelic joy,” added Sherlock in a far more realistic one.

“Are you high?” asked Lestrade.

“Certainly not,” said Sherlock, giving up on Lestrade ever taking the shamrock from him and setting it on top of his computer instead.

“Christ.” said Lestrade, eyeing it as if it were a bomb. “I thought you were kidding when you said you were celebrating St. Patrick's. Did you lose a bet or something?”

John cleared his throat. “There may have been something like that,” he said. “Seriously, though, come to the pub with us tonight. Sherlock's going to take his violin.”

Sherlock stared at him. “I am?” He had no intention of doing anything of the sort.

“What was the point of learning all those jigs if you aren't going to play them for drunk people?” asked John.

“I don't play for people,” said Sherlock. “Drunk or sober.”

“Play for me, then,” said John, which was unfair and underhand. “Just do it in a pub.”

Sherlock let out a long sigh. He supposed that if he was playing, he wouldn't have to make conversation, or join in with any other kind of social interaction. “If you insist.”

The look of pleasure on John's face was worth the capitulation.

“You've got to come and join us now,” John said to Lestrade.

“Beginning to think I might have to,” said Lestrade. “I'll bring a camera.”

“You most certainly will not,” snapped Sherlock.

Lestrade just grinned. “Text me the details,” he said to John and they shared a conspiratorial look.

Unacceptable. John was only allowed to conspire with Sherlock. He stalked out of the office and headed for the exit, fast enough that John didn't catch up with him until he paused on the pavement outside.

“Calm down, it's not that bad. Greg's a mate, he's only teasing.”

“I am perfectly calm,” said Sherlock, violently throwing an arm up to signal for a taxi. “This conversation is over now.”

John let out a long sigh, but didn't pursue the subject as they climbed into the taxi.

The next stop was Barts. Molly was in the mortuary, frowning at the liver of a cadaver that was
sliced open on her table.

“Sherlock!” she tutted when he entered. “You're not meant to come in while I'm doing autopsy.”

“Sorry!” said John, coming in a moment behind Sherlock. “I tried to catch him, but you know what that's like.”

Sherlock ignored them both. “We've brought you a shamrock, and wishes of Irish goodwill,” he said, holding the shamrock out.

Molly looked at it, then at the liver she was holding with blood-stained gloves. “Uh, could you-?”

“We'll put it in your office for you,” said John, grabbing Sherlock's arm and pulling him out of the room.

“Sherlock, you know you can't do that,” he scolded as they headed for Molly's office.

“Yes, we can't possibly have a dead man at an autopsy.”

John scowled. “Not the point, and you know it.”

Sherlock didn't bother responding. John knew how he felt about being told he couldn't do things when there was no good reason for it.

They left a shamrock in Molly's office for her, then hunted down Mike Stamford, who was teaching a lecture-hall full of dull-eyed medical students. Again, John tried to stop Sherlock outside the door, but Sherlock wasn't having it. He threw him off and strode in.

“Happy St. Patrick's Day,” he said to Mike, cutting into his stream of drivel about the central nervous system. Sherlock held out the shamrock and Mike took it automatically, gaping at him.

“Sherlock, what-?”

Sherlock turned to the students. “Be sure you all celebrate the greatness of the Irish today,” he told them.

There was a deafening silence. If this was the calibre of the next generation of doctors, then Sherlock was extremely pleased that he was dead and so would never need to be treated by one of them.

He spotted one particularly gormless one wearing a t-shirt that read 'Kiss Me, I'm Irish'. Was he really going to reward such inanity? He glanced back at John, who was glaring at him, and thought about being trapped back in Halloween without him. It was more than worth all this Irish nonsense to have escaped that.

“Happy St. Patrick's Day,” he said, and set the last shamrock down on the startled student's notes. “Keep the joy of the Irish in yo-” His eyes managed to decipher one of the scrawled notes. “What? Oh Oh Oh To Touch A Female’s Vagina Gave Victor A Hard-on?” He spun around. “Mike, what on earth are you teaching these cretins?”

“Right,” said John. “That's it.” He grabbed Sherlock's arm and pulled him towards the door, exerting an impressive amount of force. “Bye, Mike. I'm sorry about this.”

Sherlock waited until John had pushed him through the door before complaining. “That was unnecessary. I wasn't intending to interrupt for long.”
“Interrupting at all is too long,” said John. “The poor man is trying to teach.”

Behind them, Sherlock heard Mike tell the lecture hall, “Most hospitals aren't like TV shows and don't have an antisocial genius stomping about being rude to people. Barts is an exception, not a rule. That was Sherlock Holmes. If he ever asks you to help with an experiment, run away as fast as you can.”

Sherlock was half-tempted to go back in and defend his reputation, but he could tell from John's face that it wouldn't be a good idea.

“That's all our friends shamrocked,” he said instead. “What comes next?”

“Lunch,” said John, very firmly. John was always very firm on the subject of food. “Or, at least, me going to the shops to find something to go with all my potatoes.”

Sherlock made a face. Buying the potatoes had been enough of a chore without having to worry about what might go with them as well.

“You don't have to come,” said John. “In fact, I strongly encourage you not to. I know what you're like when you're bored in a supermarket and I don't have the patience for that right now.”

“Fine,” said Sherlock. “I will find some other way to celebrate the Irish culture.”

“Excellent,” said John. “See you back at the flat.”

He turned to go, but he was clearly still irritated and Sherlock didn't want him to leave in that mood. He grabbed his wrist and reeled him back in so that he could kiss him.

It only took a few seconds for John to relax against Sherlock in a way that signalled his forgiveness, but Sherlock made sure to keep kissing him for a while longer, just to make sure it took. When he finally, reluctantly, pulled away, John gave him a soft smile.

“I shouldn't let that work as well as it does.”

Sherlock shrugged, returning the smile. “Surely your current emotional state is better than the previous one? What does it matter how you went from one to the other?”

John snorted. “Yeah, okay.” He pressed a swift last kiss to Sherlock's lips. “See you back at the flat,” he said again, but this time he sounded as if that was something to be looked forward to rather than endured.

Sherlock let him go and then contemplated his options. They had already done everything obviously Irish, or they were planning to do it later today. Or it was so hideously tacky that he had discarded it as an option during the planning phase.

He wondered if Molly was still doing that autopsy and went to find out. St. Patrick could wait for the moment.

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Disappointingly, Molly had finished the autopsy and was in her office, typing up her notes.

“Was it exciting?” asked Sherlock.

She looked up, startled. “Um. Oh no, not really. Heart disease.”
Sherlock made a face. How appallingly common.

“I meant to say earlier,” said Molly. “Thank you for the shamrock. I didn't know you were Irish. Does your whole family celebrate?”

“I'm not Irish,” said Sherlock. He threw himself into a chair and stared up at the ceiling before answering her real question. “And no, Sherrinford does not celebrate. He doesn't celebrate any holidays.”

“Oh,” said Molly. Sherlock didn't need to look at her to know she was looking at her mobile.

Perhaps he should try and nip this thing between Molly and Sherrinford in the bud now before it all got out of hand and unpleasantly messy.

“You are setting yourself up for unhappiness,” he informed her.

“What?” she said.

Sherlock turned his head away from the ceiling to look at her. “With Sherrinford. I presume he has told you that you won't ever meet him. What is the purpose of a flirtation when there can be no resolution?”

Molly looked gutted for a moment, but then set her jaw defiantly. “You don't know I'll never meet him. He might let me, one day.”

Sherlock snorted. “He won't. What you have now is all he can offer. Feel free to be friends with him – he likes being friends with people, god knows why – but don't go pinning your hopes on some unlikely romantic finale. It's not going to happen.”

“Isn't that what you used to think about John?” asked Molly.

Given that Sherlock hadn't been completely sure that he wanted a romantic finale with John until he kissed him and everything suddenly made sense, she was only half right. Besides, the situation was completely different. “John and I live together,” he pointed out. “You and Sherrinford have never even met face-to-face. And never will.”

Molly shrugged but she looked less certain than she had done. “Faces are over-rated,” she said. “Jim had a nice face, but behind it was—” She finished the sentence with a look of distaste. “Sherrinford would never be like that.”

“Ah,” said Sherlock. “You're using the long-distance nature of this relationship as a way to feel secure after the disaster of dating a mass-murdering criminal mastermind.”

She scowled at him. “That's not what I meant.”

“Of course it is,” said Sherlock. “I suppose it's fair enough. Sherrinford is a very safe option from that point of view, especially as he wouldn't hurt a fly. No secret murder sprees there.”

“Oh good,” said Molly. “I mean, not that I thought there were anyway. It's hard to imagine anyone who tells so many jokes killing people.”

“Moriarty told a few jokes,” said Sherlock, wondering if he shouldn't have invented a criminal past for Sherrinford after all. “None of them were really funny, but then none of Sherrinford's are either.”
Molly looked at him with earnest eyes. “Oh, I think lots of them are funny.”

Oh god, it was far too late. Sherlock gave up. He stood up. “This is dull. If you're only dealing with mediocre deaths today, I'm going home.”

“Right,” she said. “Um, it was good to see you.”

Sherlock gave her a nod. Of course it was nice for her to see him.

He was halfway out of the door when she spoke again.

“And, Sherlock? Um. Thanks. I know you're trying to protect me by warning me about Sherrinford. You don't have to worry, I'm not going to be hurt.”

Sherlock glanced back at her, noting the way her hand was already resting on her phone, as if she couldn't wait to start texting. *Yes, you are,* he thought, but he didn't bother saying it. She clearly wasn't listening.

John wasn't back when Sherlock got home, so he got his violin out for some more practise. If he was going to have to play in a pub, he'd have to be of an acceptable standard. God forbid any drunken louts should notice a false note.

John came back a bit later with bags full of food. He ate a sandwich that seemed to be rather lacking in potatoes for a St. Patrick's Day meal, then set about making yet more food. Sherlock was always flabbergasted by just how much time and effort John dedicated to the dull, routine task of nourishing himself. He sliced a great deal of vegetables, which seemed to take ages, then pulled out some sort of meat.

Sherlock lost his ability to bit his tongue. “How much food can you possible need? You just had lunch!”

“It's Irish stew for tonight,” said John, not looking up from the pan he was heating up. “It takes hours to slow cook. Greg's coming over before we go to the pub to have some with me.”

Sherlock scowled. He didn't like it when John bought people over to invade their home. “He better not be expecting me to eat any,” he said. “Looks hideous.”

John tutted. “Don't let St. Patrick hear you talking like that.”

Sherlock made a face, but continued with his violin practise rather than make a rude comment.

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“I bought Guinness,” said Lestrade, holding up a bag.

Sherlock hadn't stopped playing when he'd arrived but he did let his eyes cut over to the clock. It probably was time to start with the drinking part of the festivities. That wouldn't be all bad; John tended to get rather handsy when he was drunk which Sherlock rather enjoyed.

“Excellent,” said John. “Let's get a couple open.”

“Whisky,” said Sherlock, sparing the briefest of moments from his playing to speak.

“You know where it is,” said John, turning away to usher Lestrade into the kitchen. “I'm not your barman, dear,” he added in a passable imitation of Mrs. Hudson.
Sherlock was amused enough by that to let his irritation at having to get his own drink go. He finished the song he was playing, then set the violin back in its case. That would have to be enough practice.

His phone beeped as he headed for the whisky and he detoured to check it.

_Mycroft has a whole bookshelf of DVDs of Prime Minister's Question Time. He thought he could hide it from me, but I am far too clever for him._

Sherlock winced at the thought. He poured himself a drink as the phone beeped again.

_And by 'clever', I mean I tripped over a rug and fell into a tapestry that turned out to hide a door._

He sat down at the table with John and Lestrade, who were already tucking into the stew.

“This is very good,” said Lestrade. “I didn't know you cooked.”

John shrugged. “There's not usually much point when it's just me.”

Lestrade frowned and glanced at Sherlock, then at the empty place in front of him where a plate should be. Sherlock took a sip as he waited for brain cells to move at the pace of glaciers.

“Sherlock doesn't eat with you?”

“Eating is dull,” said Sherlock. He got another text and pulled his phone out again.

_I wonder what's behind all these other tapestries._

“Well, I don't agree,” said Lestrade, “but even if I did, it's pretty necessary.”

His eyes darted down Sherlock's body, clearly looking for signs of starvation. Sherlock sighed and tipped his head back.

“Before you start contemplating eating disorders, may I remind you that I live with a doctor who has no concerns over my eating habits?”

“I'm a bit concerned that you watched me spend hours making this bloody stew, but you won't even try it,” said John.

Sherlock suppressed a smile. Lovely John, changing the course of the conversation without a single sign that he was pushing Lestrade off the subject of Sherlock's overall diet into the specifics of this meal.

“Surely the fact that I watched it be made is reason enough to avoid it?” he said. “What's the saying? If you like laws and sausages, you should never watch either one being made.”

John glared at him. “It's hardly a sausage, Sherlock, there's nothing disturbing in it!”

“I'm very relieved to hear that,” said Lestrade.

Sherlock shrugged, just as another text message arrived.

_Jackpot! I found a cake stash! Now, if only I had a body so I could eat it all._

“Well, I found it disturbing,” he said, finally replying to the stream of texts.
John snorted. “Right. Stew's disturbing, but watching an autopsy is fascinating.”

“Precisely,” said Sherlock.

“Given he finds you fascinating,” said Lestrade to John, “doesn't that worry you a bit?”

John shrugged. “Given the choice, I suppose I'd rather be an autopsy than stew.” He paused. “That's not something I ever thought I'd say.”

Lestrade laughed as Sherlock's phone beeped again.

"He's got some blazingly important work thing going out of control. He's locked himself in his office with a telephone that doesn't stop ringing and a large bottle of scotch."

A considerate brother would bring him cake to make him feel better. SH, replied Sherlock, unable to keep the smirk off his face.

“Rather you than me, mate,” said Lestrade. “I'm pretty happy with being stew.”

“You're not stew,” said Sherlock, not looking up from his mobile as Sherrinford replied.

"Oh! Yes! Of course he would. I'll make up a tray for him, and leave it outside the door."

“You're too dull to be disturbing,” he finished. “You're more like one of John's stupid car shows. Dull, but I can manage to sit through it if I've got a distraction.”

He keeps Belgian chocolate in the vase on the mantelpiece. SH

“Flatterer,” said Lestrade.

“Watch it,” said John, giving him an amused look that Sherlock made sure to look away from his phone to enjoy. “Or I'll think you're flirting with him, and get jealous.”

“No need for that,” said Sherlock. “He's not an autopsy, after all. You're the only one I've ever met.”

John blinked and then gave him a smile that made the ridiculous metaphor worth it.

“Christ, that shouldn't be sweet,” said Lestrade, shaking his head. “Did I ever mention how messed up you two are?”

“Yes, often,” said Sherlock.

A photo message arrived. It showed a tray piled high with all manner of cake and chocolate on the floor outside Mycroft's study.

Getting ready to knock...

A moment later another photo came through, of Mycroft's face as he opened the door. Sherlock couldn't hold in a snigger.

“Oh god, what on earth would make you laugh like that?” said Lestrade. “Is someone sending you crime scene photos?”
“Those would only make me laugh if they included Anderson's attempts to pretend he's a real forensics technician,” said Sherlock. He handed the phone to John to show him the photo.

John laughed. “Oh god, you two are the worst brothers,” he said.

Sherlock took his phone back with a shrug. “He's left Sherrinford to get bored. He brought it on himself.”

“Are your brothers joining us tonight?” asked Lestrade.

RUNNING, came through on Sherlock's phone.

“No, they hate holidays,” said John, replying for Sherlock. That was one of Sherlock's favourite things about having a boyfriend – whenever something was too dull to be answered, he just had to ignore it, and John would reply for him.

ANGRY MYCROFT RUNS FASTER THAN YOU'D THINK.

HIDING WITH QUESTION TIME

HE'S RIGHT OUTSIDE. DON'T TEXT ME.

Sherlock smiled and flicked his thumbs over the keys for a moment.

No texting? Is that to avoid any tell-tale beeps? SH

“Ah, right,” said Lestrade. “Got to be honest, I thought Sherlock did too.”

“I've turned over a new leaf,” said Sherlock. No new texts had come through. Was Mycroft disarticulating Sherrinford?

John glanced at his watch. “Time for another one?” he asked, nodding at the empty beer cans. “It's still a bit early for the pub.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Lestrade.

“I'll need more whisky,” added Sherlock.

John sighed, but when he got up for two more Guinnesses, he brought Sherlock's bottle over as well.

He filled Sherlock's glass and then raised his can. “Sláinte!”

Sherlock made a face. “Your pronunciation is awful.”

“Fluent in Gaelic, are you?” said Lestrade, raising a sceptical eyebrow.

Sherlock raised his glass. “Lá fhéile Pádraig sona dhaoibh,” he said, then took a gulp.

“You actually learnt Gaelic?” asked John.

Sherlock shrugged. “I had a spare few hours.”

John shook his head slowly. “Amazing,” he said in the breathless voice that Sherlock never tired of.

Ten minutes passed before Sherlock heard from Sherrinford again, and then it was just a text
saying, *YOU UTTER BASTARD.* Sherlock suppressed a smile, tucked his phone away, and turned his attention back to Lestrade's rather dull anecdote about a serial flasher.

By the time they made it to the nearest Irish pub, both John and Lestrade were showing signs of tipsiness. Sherlock carefully imitated them so that his own sober state didn't raise any questions, although he doubted that Lestrade would notice that Sherlock was suspiciously sober and immediately realise that it was because he was dead. He wasn't nearly observant enough to reach that conclusion.

The pub was packed. Drunken hoards, many of whom were wearing terrible faux-Irish hats, spilled out onto the street. Sherlock swept his eye over them and deduced that very few of them had ever even been to Ireland. This really was the silliest holiday. How on earth had St. Patrick made it on to the Holiday Council?

“More Guinness,” said John with determination.

“Christ,” said Lestrade. “Good thing I don't have any work tomorrow, then.”

Sherlock followed them into the pub, pushing through the crowd to the bar, where John shouted his order to the barman over the racket of what the proprietor – who definitely had no links with anywhere further west than Hounslow – thought was representative of Irish music.

*She is handsome! She is pretty! She is the belle of Belfast City!*

John turned around from the bar and pressed a tumbler into Sherlock's hand, then turned back to pick up his own pint. Sherlock looked at the drink and frowned. He couldn't play the violin with that in his hand. He downed it.

The song ended and another one started.

*Some people say I look like me da.*

“Christ!” shouted John. “Haven't heard this for years!”

Enough was enough. Sherlock turned to the bar and set his empty glass down. “Turn the music off!” he demanded of the landlord, who just stared at him blankly. Sherlock raised his violin case so he could see it. “I will provide your tacky pretence at a true Gaelic gathering with some genuine Irish flavour.”

The landlord did not look convinced. “How do I know you're any good?”

“He's incredible!” said John. Sherlock stopped himself from beaming with pride at the compliment so as not to appear to be a brainless moron.

The landlord gave them both a narrow look. “You get one song to convince me.”

One song would be more than enough. It was clear that this man had no concept of true musical brilliance. Sherlock nodded his agreement and turned away to scope out the best place to set himself up.

There was a raised platform at the back of the establishment with two tables crammed on it. Sherlock pushed his way through to it and then glared at one of the crowded tables until the people on it obediently dragged the chairs away from him, giving him enough space to move his arms. He set the violin case down at his feet and opened it, just as the abysmal song came to a sudden end, mid-chorus. There was, shockingly, a faint cry of disappointment from somewhere in the crowd.
He straightened with the violin in his hands and several of the people around him began to take notice. He ignored them. He fixed his gaze on the only man here he needed to impress – the landlord - raised the violin, and launched himself into the fastest jig he could manage.

It took less than three bars for the landlord's worried frown to relax into a grin. Sherlock immediately lost interest in him and turned to look at John instead, who was beaming proudly at him. Excellent. Time to pretend that John was his only audience and no one else was here, listening to his music as if they had any right to it.

The evening passed faster than Sherlock had thought it would. The pub became increasingly crowded as the night passed, but that didn't stop people trying to dance to Sherlock's music. John and Lestrade continued to drink large amounts of Guinness, helped, in no small part, by the landlord's decision that friends of Sherlock's deserved to drink for free, given how much Sherlock's music had enlivened his pub. John felt that Sherlock should share in this largess, and so kept bringing Sherlock whisky that he was forced to down so that he could get back to playing.

As the pub filled up, he found himself with less and less space to play in. John and Lestrade tried to protect him from the press of the crowd, but the third time Sherlock elbowed someone halfway through a note, he lost his temper.

"For god's sake!" he bellowed at the idiot-faced boy, giving up on getting through the current song. "You-"

"Yes!" interrupted John, before Sherlock could lay in to the wretch properly. "Okay! This clearly isn't working." He glanced around and then grabbed at the back of the nearest chair. "Up!" he demanded. The woman sat in it got up.

John put the chair down in front of Sherlock with a flourish. "Stand on that."

Sherlock stared at him. "Are you insane?"

"Nope," said John. "Bit drunk maybe, but totally sane. Get on the chair. Come on, you'll get out of the crowd, everyone will be able to gaze upon your brilliance and you'll be taller than everyone. You'll love it up there."

Sherlock attempted to look disdainful but stepped up on to the chair. It really was a much better position. He raised his violin again and someone in the crowd cheered.

"Go for it, random violin dude!"

Sherlock twitched, but opted to continue with the song rather than react to that.

Standing on the chair did keep him out of the way of the mass of humanity, but it also made it harder to watch John's enjoyment of his playing, especially as John had stationed himself right next to Sherlock so that he could glare at anyone who might knock the chair. Lestrade had already left, citing his age and general exhaustion as excuses. He did tell Sherlock that his playing was 'fucking incredible, mate' before he left, so Sherlock decided to view his departure with some charity.

Sherlock was only half paying attention to the rather simple tune of *Kitty Come Down to Limerick* while eyeing a couple in the corner and wondering if they knew they were both having an affair with the same person when he became aware that his was not the only music playing. Near-by, and getting closer, he could hear what sounded like a full Irish ceili band. He stopped playing, frowning at the interruption.

A moment later, the bits of the crowd that were nearest the door turned around to stare at
something in the street, and then moved to one side to let in a procession of... Well, Sherlock supposed that 'revellers' was probably the most accurate word. About half of them had instruments – Bodhrans, guitars, flutes, uilleann pipes and, most irritatingly, fiddles. Sherlock glared at every single fiddler who was daring to steal his thunder.

They were all dressed exclusively in green, the woman all in embroidered dresses while most of the men were in tartan kilts. There was a small minority of half-height ginger-haired men in green suits and tall hats that Sherlock absolutely refused to categorise as 'leprechauns', even in his head. All of them had shamrocks everywhere – in their hair, garlanded around their necks, tucked into belts and socks.

They surged into the pub, swirling the bewildered but enthusiastic crowd into rigorous dancing. Sherlock let out a tiny sigh and glanced down at John, who gave him a bit of a shrug in return.

Sherlock stepped down from his chair, just as the crowd of Irish revellers parted to allow St. Patrick to enter in through the door, lurching slightly with either excitement, drunkenness or, most likely, both.

“A pint of Guinness for everyone who can claim the blood of Ireland runs through their veins!” He bellowed. “Or anyone willing to fake it for this one night!”

There was a general cheer and a panicked look on the barman's face as half the room converged on him.

St. Patrick spotted John and Sherlock and flung his arms wide. “Go Sabhála Dia Éire!”

Sherlock took a moment to consult the internal Gaelic glossary that he had memorised last night. “Eireann go Brach,” he responded. This was a man he needed on his side, after all.

John cleared his throat, pointedly. St. Patrick turned to him and threw him a beaming smile. “My Irish great-grandson!” he said. “You have been celebrating amply today, I see.”

John blinked at him and then grinned. “I'm a bit drunk,” he admitted.

“Excellent!” announced St. Patrick. He reached into his cassock – which was, of course, green – and pulled out two shamrocks, which he presented to John and Sherlock. “Keep the love of Ireland alive in your hearts!”

Sherlock took the shamrock and managed a smile in return. “Thank you.”

“That's very kind,” said John.

St. Patrick leaned in close enough for Sherlock to smell the whisky on his breath. “Ah, 'tis grand to see how you lads have found the gold at the end of your rainbows,” he said and gave them a broad wink.

Behind him, three of his revellers had cleared a space and were putting on a display of Irish dancing, to the crowd's delight and Sherlock's secret horror.

“Um,” said John. “Yes. Thank you. We're very happy.”

“I can see that,” said St. Patrick. “And your happiness has inflamed this whole pub with joy for my holiday. Go raibh mfhle maith agat!”

He didn't wait for a response before turning back to the pub and giving a broad gesture to his
followers. “To the next pub!” he announced.

There was a loud cheer and a general movement towards the door, to Sherlock's great relief.

“Thank god we impressed him,” said John.

Sherlock nodded his head. “That's two holidays successfully completed.”

“Only eight more to go,” said John. They both winced at the thought.

The crowd was somewhat thinner after St. Patrick and his entourage had left. Sherlock noticed that a few of the people who had been in the pub had gone along with them, and wondered where they'd find themselves in the morning, once they'd sobered up.

As the ceili band's music faded into the distance, the pub began to feel rather quiet. Sherlock took a deep breath and climbed back onto his chair. There couldn't be long left until closing time, could there?

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If Sherlock had still been alive, his arms would have been killing him by the time that the landlord sidled over to let him know that he was about to announce last orders. Not for the first time, he counted the many advantages of being dead, then his eyes fell on the grey strands in John's hair and all such benefits were immediately out-weighed by the one, horrific truth that Sherlock was going to remain young while he watched John grow old and die.

“Just one more tune, then I'll need to start shuffling people out,” the landlord said to him. “Make it a good one, yeah? Maybe something slow so they all calm down a bit?”

“Do one that will make them all long for the green, green grass of home,” suggested John with obvious amusement and a bit of a slur to his words.

“Your wish is my command,” said Sherlock, giving him a little bow. As the pub had begun to empty towards the end of the night, he'd taken the chance to climb off his chair so that he was at the right height to see John properly again.

John let out a laugh that was probably more snort than he really wanted. “Dare you to make at least one of them cry.”

Sherlock raised one eyebrow and raised his violin one last time. “Child's play,” he said, and started in on the slowest, most sentimental lament in his repertoire. As he played, he shut his eyes and pictured, as perfectly as he could, the cottage he had lived in when he had been back in Halloween. He remembered lying on the sofa, being unable to do anything more than miss John, as if it was an all-encompassing activity. He wove every moment of lose and despair into his music, until the memory of his emotions at being kept away from everything that really mattered to him was beaming out into the room, touching the hearts of everyone listening.

He had two months-worth of memories to utilise, weaving the smaller loses – the taste of tea, the affection in the way Mrs. Hudson tutted over the state of the flat – with the bigger ones – the look on John's face whenever Sherlock did anything he deemed particularly clever, the pure rush of exhilaration that came from solving a case that everyone else had been stumped by. Channelling it all through his music felt almost cathartic, as if he was clearing out a room in his Mind Palace that was full old junk that had just been weighing him down.

When he finally played the last, long note, there was not another sound in the room to disrupt it as
it faded away. He opened his eyes to see that at least ninety percent had tears running down their
faces. Unacceptable; he should have been able to score a clear one hundred.

“I miss my mum,” he heard someone behind him say in a broken voice.

He wasn't interested in them. He was too distracted by the look on John's face.

“Oh god, Sherlock,” John forced out and then fell on him, engulfing him in a hug that Sherlock
struggled to catch without damaging his violin. “You git,” John whispered damply into his neck.
“Fuck. That's exactly how much I missed you, too.”

Sherlock put his arms around John and clung on to him, oddly affected by the emotion in a way he
hadn't expected. “We are together now,” he pointed out.

“And we always will be,” said John fiercely. “Never letting you go.”

“Me neither,” agreed Sherlock. His thoughts turned again to the future, and how one day John was
going to be dead and gone, leaving Sherlock behind. “I will follow you everywhere,” he vowed.

John just clung on tighter. “I want to be at home,” he said. “I want tea, and the sofa, and lots of
cuddling.”

“Yes,” agreed Sherlock. “Let go of me and I'll pack up my violin.”

John didn't let go. “Just... give me a minute.”

Sherlock was more than happy to.

****

He stayed the whole night in bed with John for once. He spent a few hours watching him sleep,
then let his own eyes shut and drifted off into the state that came the closest to sleep for him now.
He wandered through the corridors of his Mind Palace, idly going into rooms and picking through
cupboards to see what he could find before, inevitably, finding himself in the wing he used for
information about John. There was so much in there now and yet he couldn't seem to stop himself
from adding more every day.

John slept in rather later than he usually did, presumably a consequence of the late night and the
excessive amount of alcohol he had consumed. He shifted in Sherlock's arms a few times, then
slowly blinked his eyes open with a tiny frown that made Sherlock want to kiss the crinkles of his
forehead.

“Morning,” he said, and then gave in to the impulse.

“Morning,” returned John, shuffling closer to Sherlock so that he could press his face into his neck.
“God, remind me not to drink that much again.”

“Not until next year,” agreed Sherlock. John groaned in response.

Despite having spent hours lying still, doing nothing, Sherlock found himself agreeably content
with John's very slow start to the day. That boded well for when John's body and mind inevitably
began to slow down, once he passed into old age.

Stop thinking about it, Sherlock told himself, without much hope that he'd manage that. It seemed
like he spent more time fixating on John's eventual dotage and death every day, no matter how
much he tried to tell himself just to live in the moment. There was no sense in borrowing trouble from tomorrow.

Mycroft brought Sherrinford home just as John was making his post-lunch cup of tea. Annoyingly, he didn't just drop him off and then go, he insisted on sitting on Sherlock's sofa and engaging Sherlock's John in conversation. Sherlock scowled at him.

“I do hope you don't intend to endanger your liver like that on a regular basis,” Mycroft said to John.

John rolled his eyes. “My liver is fine. Once again, can I just remind everyone that I'm the one with a degree in precisely what the human body can and can't handle? A normal human body, not a dead one or a- a Halloweeny one.”

Mycroft gave a little sniff. “I was merely expressing concern for your health.”

Sherlock gave him a narrow look. “You look tired,” he said. “Did you stay up all night eating cake again?”

Mycroft twitched, and he turned a glare on Sherlock. “I know you and Sherrinford think that my concerns begin and end with my waistline, but I do actually have a great deal of other things to contend with. Running a country isn't as simple as solving a crime, or painting a picture. There are rather more factors to consider.”

“We played Ludo till dawn,” said Sherrinford.

A faint, pained look crossed Mycroft's face. “We only started after you had completely distracted me from my work.”

John came in with two mugs of tea, one of which he handed to Sherlock and the other, distressingly, he handed to Mycroft. “Want a biscuit with that?”

Mycroft threw him a narrow-eyed look and then bit out. “No, thank you.”

John looked taken aback at the vehemence of that. Sherlock wondered how long it would take him to realise that Mycroft had taken his innocent offer as part of Sherlock and Sherrinford's teasing over his eating habits. So many factors were at play that he couldn't even begin to estimate. John's ability to make connections was so endearingly unexpected – sometimes it took him weeks to figure out these tiny nuances of social interaction, and sometimes he knew before Sherlock did.

Mycroft cleared his throat, clearly realising his error. “Just the tea is fine,” he added in a far milder voice.

“Right,” said John. Sherlock watched as he sought a way to clear the air and ended up back on the previous conversation topic. “I always found Ludo a bit dull,” he said, and he headed back into the kitchen.

“You haven't played with the Holmes Family Rules,” said Sherrinford with a grin. “It gets a bit...long-winded.”

“Not to mention messy,” put in Sherlock as John came back from the kitchen with his own cup of tea and then, finally, settled down.

“Surely you don't still hold a grudge about that?” asked Mycroft.
“I’d been saving those rabbit hearts,” said Sherlock. “And getting my hair clean took hours.”

“It was pretty bloody funny though,” said Sherrinford. “Bloody funny. Get it?”

Sherlock scowled. “You are not a comedian. Stop trying.”

“Not sure I ever want to play this version of Ludo,” said John. “Even if it is more interesting than the normal one.”

Mycroft gave a tiny sniff. “I sometimes despair of how plebeian your tastes are, John.”

John raised his mug in a toast. “Think I'll take that as a compliment, thanks.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. Sometimes he despaired. “You're both idiots. How could any man in a committed relationship with a corpse be described as plebeian. Honestly!”

“Well, as corpses go, you are rather generic,” said Sherrinford. “I mean, it's not as if he went for the unique, outlandish, fascinating skeleton who he also lives with, did he?”

An surge of blinding anger rose up in Sherlock's chest. “If you ever even think about John in that way-”

He was interrupted by John's hand on his arm “No need for jealousy,” he said. “There's only one dead man for me.”

Sherlock sent a final glare at Sherrinford, who had the gall to just look amused, and then turned to fix his gaze fully on John. “No one else,” he hissed, and swept him into a kiss that he hoped would press the point home.

“Oh, must you?” he heard Mycroft sigh in the background. Sherlock ignored him.

When he and John separated, John looked just as amused as Sherrinford had. “Seriously, Sherlock,” he said. “As if I could even imagine being with anyone else.”

Sherlock forced himself to be satisfied by that.

John pressed a final kiss to his lips and then pulled away, clearly feeling rather self-conscious in Mycroft's presence. Sherlock turned to glare at him with all the rage he felt at the fact that his presence meant John was no longer touching him.

Mycroft rolled his eyes, but did set down his mug and stand up. “As enthralling as this is, some of us have work to do. Particularly as they weren't able to get it done last night.”

Sherrinford made a rude noise. “All work and no play makes Mycroft a dull boy.”

“All play and no work makes Sherrinford a drain on society,” Mycroft returned and then, thankfully, left.

Sherlock let out a sigh of relief. “John, I forbid you to offer Mycroft tea ever again.”

John snorted. “Yeah, that'll work.”

“If you're not allowed to offer him tea, maybe you should offer him sexual favours instead,” suggested Sherrinford.

To Sherlock's deep disgust, John seemed to find that funny. “Oh yeah, I can just see that. 'Sorry,
Mycroft, can't offer you any Earl Grey, but how about a blowjob? You can still have a biscuit with it, if you want.”

“No biscuits!” Sherlock insisted.

“But the blowjob is fine?” said John.

Sherlock waved that away. “He has even less interest in them than I do. You may offer all you like, it will only confuse and discomfit him.”

“I miss blowjobs,” said Sherrinford in a dreamy voice.

Sherlock couldn't keep the disgust off his face.

“Yeah,” agreed John.

Sherlock turned to look at him, feeling stung. Did John miss all those sexual antics more than he had been letting on? Was this going to be the thing that came between them and pulled them apart? Should Sherlock be providing him with such things in order to prevent him going elsewhere for them?

John rolled his eyes at whatever look was on Sherlock's face. “Oh, don't panic, you idiot. I don't miss them even a tiny bit as much as I missed having disgusting experiments all over the place when you were gone.”

“You hate my experiments,” Sherlock pointed out.

“Exactly,” said John. “One of my least favourite bits of living with you, and yet I wouldn't trade it for a lifetime of daily blowjobs. What does that tell you?”

“I don't know what it tells Sherlock, but it tells me you're a crazy person,” said Sherrinford.

Sherlock was too busy trying to push down the warm glow of affection and gratitude for John to even glare at him.


“Mrs. Hudson?” suggested Sherrinford, doubtfully.

Sherlock snorted. “Mrs. Hudson is the one that rents the place to us. She's clearly the maddest of the lot.”

“I'm beginning to think that it's all part of a cunning scheme,” said Sherrinford. “She's waiting for you to burn the place to the ground so she can claim it on the insurance.”

Sherlock considered that. “Possibly,” he allowed.

John just sighed. “Just let me know before you do, yeah? I've got some stuff I'll want to take out first.”

“Sherlock does too,” said Sherrinford. “If you ever see him leaving with his violin, that manky blanket and a devilish smile, grab your favourite jumper and run after him.”

“Maybe we should chain the violin to the wall so he can't take it out, and therefore can't burn the place down?” suggested John.
Sherlock flapped his hand. “Violins can be replaced.”

In fact, there was only one thing in the entire flat that he would bother rescuing in a fire. All his belongings could be replaced, and Sherrinford had already survived one fire and only become more flame resistant. The only thing Sherlock couldn't stand to see engulfed in flames was John.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: April Fool's Day, April 1st.
April Fool's Day

Chapter Notes

This chapter betaed by 72Gowerstreet. Thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April Fool's Day came hard on the heels of St. Patrick's Day. It felt like John had only just got over the hangover before he had to start contemplating how to pull an April Fool's prank on the most intelligent and observant man he had ever met.

He spent hours desperately searching the internet for ideas and then furiously deleting his browser history. It seemed like a lot of effort, but he couldn't help remembering just how maliciously contrary The Fool had been. If any member of the Holiday Council was going to suddenly declare that Sherlock and John hadn't kept their side of the deal and pull Sherlock back to Halloween, it would be him. John and Sherlock couldn't give him any excuses.

“We only have until noon,” said Sherlock, two days before. He was curled up on the sofa with a notebook he was making furious scrawly notes in and hiding with suspicious eyes whenever John came near. “There is no information on when the day is considered to begin, however.”

John held up a hand. “It begins when I'm awake,” he said. “Absolutely no taking advantage of the fact that I need sleep and you don't, Sherlock. I do not want to be woken up by anything unpleasant.”

Sherlock let out a sigh and crossed something out. “Fine. The day begins once you are awake. Do not think I will go easy on you, though. Any hint of mercy will be a black mark against us.”

“I never thought you would for a second. I certainly wasn't going to.”

Sherlock snorted. “As if your commonplace mind could come up with any way to trick me.”

John set his jaw and resolved that no matter what it took, he'd fool Sherlock more times than Sherlock fooled him. It was a matter of honour.

****

When John woke up on the first of April, he schooled himself to lie still with his eyes shut to give himself time to prepare. He knew Sherlock well enough to know he'd begin the moment John was awake, without allowing him any breathing space.

After a minute or two, he opened his eyes and the first thing he saw proved that his instinct to mentally prepare had been correct. There was a large rubber spider hanging from the ceiling, directly in front of his face.

“Amateur!” he called out to Sherlock as he sat up.

“Just getting warmed up,” said Sherlock, appearing in the doorway. He was wrapped in the same dressing gown that he'd been wearing last night when they'd put things in place in Mrs. Hudson’s kitchen. John eyed him carefully, noting all the signs that said he hadn't showered yet. Excellent.
“What are my chances of getting a good morning kiss without an unpleasant surprise?” he asked.

“High,” said Sherlock, moving towards him to provide just that. “I wouldn't risk putting you off kissing me, after all.”

He sat on the bed to kiss John, leaving his dressing gown pocket perfectly situated for John to carefully sneak his hand into, under the guise of giving Sherlock a bit of an embrace.

“What have you heard anything from downstairs yet?” he asked, sitting back and withdrawing his hand from Sherlock's pocket.

Sherlock shook his head. “Either she hasn't had her morning cuppa yet, or she's playing it stealthily.”

“I'll have a shower and then we can go down and see if she's got any milk,” said John with a grin that Sherlock returned.

****

There had been a time when Mrs. Hudson would have been shocked by the idea of not being fully clothed for any meal, even breakfast, but these days she felt she was too old to worry about any of that nonsense. Age had to come with some perks, after all, and getting a cup of tea while she was still in slippers had to be one of them.

She put on the kettle and set out the teapot with the ugly cosy that Marie, bless her heart, had made for her last Christmas. Poor Marie, she just had no eye for beauty. Mrs. Hudson opened the fridge for the milk and stopped in surprise, starting a little.

Every single item in her fridge was staring at her with plastic eyes. They were stuck on every bottle of milk, carton of juice, every individual egg – even the carrots had each been given their own set of googly eyes.

Mrs. Hudson raised her eyes towards the cause of so many of her daily trials. “Oh, those boys,” she muttered to herself. This couldn't go unanswered.

****

John wasn't an April Fools rookie. He knew all the usual traps to check for. He was eyeing the toilet with suspicion even before he noticed the strange quality of the light as it hit the water in the bowl. He bent to examine it closer. Sure enough, there was a layer of clingfilm over the top of it.

John had done something similar with the toaster once when he was a boy, and had found trying to get the clingfilm to lie without wrinkles so that it went unseen almost impossible. Sherlock had done an incredible job at that – if John hadn't known to look, he wouldn't have seen it at all.

“I'm impressed by your clingfilm skills!” he called through the door to where he knew Sherlock would be lurking, waiting for a reaction.

There was an audible sigh. “That stuff is even more frustrating than Anderson,” Sherlock called back. “The least you could have done was be taken in by it after all the hassle.”

“Sorry!” said John, unrepentantly, stripping the clingfilm off so that he could pee.

He showered very carefully, checking everything before he used it. When the shower failed to do anything other than produce hot water and the soap proved to be precisely as it had been the last
time he'd used it, he turned suspicious eyes on his shampoo bottle.

He opened the lid and tipped a small amount out onto the side of the bath. His suspicion proved to be accurate when it turned out to be a great deal redder than he remembered and left a pink stain on the white ceramic.

He eyed Sherlock's shampoo, but merely replicating the joke would be too obvious. Sherlock would be on his guard. Instead, he picked up Sherlock's shower gel. He measured precisely how much was left in it, then emptied out half and replaced it with whatever Sherlock had put in his shampoo bottle until it was back at the same level as before. It wasn't foolproof, but it would have to do.

He left the bathroom with a towel on his head so that Sherlock couldn't see that his trick hadn't worked. “Shower's free,” he said, heading into the bedroom.

“Obviously.” Sherlock hovered behind him, clearly trying to catch sight of John's hair.

“Hurry up, then,” said John, keeping the towel in place while doing his best to make the move look natural. “I'm going to have breakfast, but then we need to get moving. Lots of pranks to play before noon.”

Sherlock was unable to keep the scowl off his face at being denied the sight of John's hair dyed pink but he gave a curt nod and shoved his hands into his dressing gown pockets.

There was a buzzing sound and he jolted, whipping his hands back out again. John cracked up.

“Oh, well played,” said Sherlock with only a hint of sourness, as he reached – gingerly – back into his pocket and pulled out the hand buzzer.

“April Fools,” said John. “That's one to me, I think.”

Sherlock eyed the towel on John's head. “Yes,” he said. “One to you.”

As John turned back towards the bedroom, he thought that Sherlock really could have tried to sound convincing about that.

****

John was very aware that he only had a very limited amount of time to put his next plan into place. He had purposefully left the door from the bathroom into the bedroom ajar, knowing that Sherlock wouldn't bother shutting it while he showered. As soon as the water started running, John moved to rig up a plastic cup that would fall when the door was pushed. Sometimes the classics were the best.

He then tried to get dressed, only to find the task harder than he'd been expecting. He pulled open his underwear drawer to find it stocked with bras rather than boxers, then his t-shirt drawer to find corsets and finally flung open the wardrobe to find that his half had been fully stocked with dresses. He was contemplating the sequinned six-inch heels that had taken the place of his boots when there was a bellow of annoyance from the bathroom.

“John!” shouted Sherlock. There was a thump and several quick steps, then he pushed open the bathroom door, stark naked and wet.

The container of glitter tumbled onto his head, covering him in sparkling dots that stuck instantly to his wet skin. John couldn't have hoped for it to go better, especially as he caught sight of the wash
of pink across Sherlock's chest where he had clearly started to wash himself with the dye-adulterated shower gel.

“April Fools!” he said again.

Sherlock glared at him, then tried to wipe the glitter off his shoulders. John could have told him that wouldn't work.

“I'm using your shower gel to get this off,” said Sherlock in a dark voice, and turned back towards the bathroom.

“Fine,” said John. He looked back at where his clothes used to be. “Also, can we talk about your worrying desire to see me in women's clothing?”

“April Fools!” called Sherlock. “I'll tell you where your jumpers are once I've got the glitter out of my hair.”

John's eyes widened and he crouched to yank open his jumper drawer, then sat back on his heels. Feather boas. Plural. Christ, there was no way Sherlock was getting that glitter out until at least six months had passed – John had had enough experience with the stuff to know that. How the hell was he going to get his jumpers back? And, more to the point, what the hell was he going to wear today?

****

Lestrade sat down at his desk, cradling his coffee. Time to check his email to find out what fresh memos had been sent down from On High for everyone to ignore.

He double-clicked the Outlook icon on his desktop. The computer took a moment to think about that, because god forbid the Met should have anything that moved quickly, and then the screen went black.

Lestrade blinked. That wasn't-

The screen lit up to show green scrolling code. His eyes widened. Oh god, what had he done?

The screen went red.

SYSTEM FAILURE IMMINENT

Lestrade began desperately hammering the Escape key and then, when that did nothing, every other key.

HARD DRIVE WIPE IN PROGRESS

Oh God, was Lestrade going to have to contact the IT department? They were bloody terrifying. They'd invade his office and say things that made no sense, and then announce the whole thing was his fault for doing....something.

The screen flashed again.

INITIATE SYSTEM RESTORE Y/N?

Well, that seemed slightly better. Lestrade took a deep breath and glanced out at his colleagues. Should he ask one for help? No, they were also much younger and more technologically knowledgeable than him. They'd come in and do the face they always made when he needed help
with something they thought obvious.
Tentatively, he pressed Y.
The screen went a more calming blue colour.

CONFIRM USER NAME

GLESTRADE he typed, feeling more sure of himself. User names he could do.

PLEASE ANSWER SECURITY QUESTIONS TO INITIATE SYSTEM RESTORE.

HOW MANY YEARS HAS IT BEEN SINCE YOU PASSED YOUR DETECTIVE'S EXAM?

15 typed Lestrade. This was good, he was going to fix this, and no one would ever know that he'd messed it up in the first place. This wasn't going to become another of the Tales Of How The DI Can't Use A Computer that he heard being circulated every so often.

TYPE THE FIRST LETTER OF YOUR MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME.

A he pressed, with confidence. The screen went black, then immediately lit up again with a few lines of code that looked reassuringly like the usual start up screen.

TO BEGIN SYSTEM RESTORE, TYPE F TO OPEN FILE, THEN 001 TO START WITH THE FIRST ONE.

Well, that made sense. Lestrade followed the instructions.
The screen started to flash at him, words and background alternating between white and black. His answers so far all appeared on screen, then merged together into a line.

GLESTRADE15AF001

The numbers turned to letters and the words separated out until Lestrade was left staring at:

G LESTRADE IS A FOOL

The letters blinked at him a bit longer, then the screen went purple, tiny fireworks burst in the corners of it and rainbow-coloured letters spelt out.

HAPPY APRIL FOOL'S DAY!!

The screen cleared, revealing his usual desktop again. Lestrade stared at the computer for a long moment, and then his mobile buzzed.

Use the Start Menu to access Outlook. SH

Lestrade's hand clenched around his phone and for a moment he was tempted to throw it across the room. He took a deep breath. No, no need to overreact. Just a prank, he could live with that. Just meant he had to come up with one to get the bastard back. Something really bloody good.

****

Sherlock's complete ignorance about housework meant that he hadn't thought to take John's clothes out of the laundry basket, or off the drying rack. John ended up wearing a mixture of clothes that were either still a little damp from the washing machine or that he'd already worn a couple of
times. If he didn't have to wear anything that had been designed for a woman, he could count it as a win, right?

“Lestrade has triggered the program,” said Sherlock, looking down at his phone.

John couldn't keep the smirk off his face as he poured the water for their tea. “I wish I could be there to watch that.”

“You can watch it later,” said Sherlock absently, typing something. “I set up a camera in his office to catch his reaction.”

“Isn't that a bit illegal, inside Scotland Yard?”

Sherlock shrugged. “As if I care about that.”

John rolled his eyes, fished the teabags out of the mugs and added milk. “You might care a bit more when you're arrested.”

“As if Mycroft would let me go to prison,” said Sherlock, taking the mug from John. “Sherrinford would never let him hear the end of it.”

He took a sip of tea, still looking at his phone, then immediately spat it out, gagging. John cracked up.

“April Fools!” he managed through his sniggers as Sherlock stood up, marched to the sink, and poured the entire cup away.

“I had no idea you would stoop so low,” he hissed at John when he turned back. “You know how I feel about pumpkin tea!”

“Well, yeah,” said John. “It wouldn't be nearly as funny if you liked it.”

Sherlock glared at him, which wasn't really that effective when John could still see glitter twinkling in his hair.

“So, that's three to me, and one to you,” he said cheerfully.

Sherlock scowled. “Get your coat. We're going to Barts.”

****

The skeleton in Lecture Room 4B had been the target of student pranks since before Mike had been a student himself. Once he'd become a lecturer, he'd got in the habit of glancing at it as he entered the room so he had time to remove any silly hats, 'hilarious' poses or political signs from it before most of the students arrived. When he'd been a student, he'd thought the addition of a placard reading This is How Thatcher Would Like To See The Miners had been edgy and cool, but now the whole thing just made him roll his eyes.

Given that today was April Fool's Day, he was pleasantly surprised to see that the skeleton was in its proper place, with its arms sedately by its sides and without any costume elements. He glanced at the blackboard to make sure that hadn't been a target and was reassured by the familiar scrawl of Doctor Lindenhaus, who had the room before Mike.

The students filed in, finding seats and trying to look as if they were going to stay awake through the whole lecture. Mike allowed them to believe he was the slightest bit convinced.
The first part of the lecture went about as well as it ever did. Mike spoke and most of the students took notes. A few who had clearly given up all hope of passing the semester and were just treading water until they were thrown out snoozed quietly in the back, while the arrogant pair who thought they could sail through everything without applying themselves just because they always had before passed notes in the third row. Mike ignored them. They’d get their nasty little wake-up call when they got their end-of-year results.

It was as he drew into the middle section of his lecture that he became aware that suddenly everyone was paying far more attention than they had been. For a moment he allowed himself to daydream that it was because they were riveted by embryogenesis, but when one of the students at the back nudged his neighbour awake and gave a less than subtle gesture, he allowed reality to reassert itself.

He turned around to find that the skeleton had raised its arms above its head, straight up towards the sky. He let out a sigh. “Very clever,” he said, moving towards it to put it back into the correct position.

The skeleton’s arms dropped again, then rose up above its head again, this time angled out towards the sides. Mike squinted at them and spotted the wire that was manipulating the bones, just as the hands sank towards the skull, bending at the elbow to form an ‘M’ shape. A sudden, horrific premonition came to him just as they moved again, one raising to curve over the skeleton, the other dropping to complete the bottom part of a ‘C’.

The arms raised again, meeting above the skeleton’s head in an inverted-V. Or, Mike let himself admit with a sigh, in what passed for an ‘A’ when you were dancing to a particular song.

A particular song that had started playing, quietly to start with but rising in volume as the whispers in the room turned to laughter.

The intro ended just as the music reached full volume, and the skeleton’s arms dropped so that one appeared to be resting on his hip and the other was pointing out at the lecture hall. Mike let out a long breath and resigned himself to letting the prank play out.

Young man, there's no need to feel down.
I said, young man, pick yourself off the ground.
I said, young man, ’cause you're in a new town
There's no need to be unhappy.

A handful of girls in the second row stood up and started to dance along, but it wasn't until the first chorus started that most of the rest of the lecture theatre joined in. The skeleton continued to dance every move perfectly. Mike would have been impressed with the unknown puppeteer's skills if he wasn't having a flashback to one of the most drunken nights of his life. Surely the choice of song was a coincidence, though?

Young man, I was once in your shoes.
I said, I was down and out with the blues.
I felt no man cared if I were alive.
I felt the whole world was so jive.

Oh, thank god, it was drawing to an end. Mike would wait for it to play out, then detach the strings from the skeleton so he could get on with his lecture, and that would be an end to it.

Just as he was thinking that, the overhead projector flickered into life and the already raucous crowd of dancing students let out a chorus of shocked giggles. With a sense of foreboding, Mike
turned to the screen to see what was being projected, just as the song went back into the chorus.

It's fun to stay at the A photo of Mike from his student days, hair down to his shoulders and the fervent light of a very drunken man in his eyes.

Y. A photo of young Mike throwing his arms in a wide V, clearly having just smacked the girl beside him in the face while doing so.

M. A photo of young Mike forming an M with his arms and sticking his tongue out at the camera. C. Young Mike had clearly lost balance while trying to make a C, and was half stumbled over onto the man beside him, arms still trying to make the shape.

A. Young Mike had managed to straighten up in time to get to the A, but the man beside him was clearly not amused, if the fist he had formed and aimed at young Mike was anything to go by.

Happily, that was where the sequence of photos ended. Mike knew that was because the photographer had put the camera away in order to throw himself into the ensuing fray. John had always been more interested in brawls than Mike had been.

At least that answered the question of who had orchestrated this, thought Mike as he tried, valiantly, to ignore the looks his students were giving him as the song began to wind down. He walked to the desk and found a pair of scissors, then went over to the skeleton and cut through the threads that were still making the skeleton dance. Its arms fell to its sides and the music cut off as if it had been attached to the strings too.

“Right,” said Mike, turning back to his class. “If we could all take our seats again, we can get back to the formation of the early nervous system.”

There was a general air of disappointment, but the class settled down again. Mike picked up his lecture notes but paused before beginning.

“Not all of you are paying attention to the coalescence of the neural folds,” he said, “but I hope all of you learn something valuable from this lecture, and that is that embarrassing things you did when you were drunk may well come back to haunt you years afterwards, especially if you let someone document them. It is vitally important to take all cameras away from your friends before you start on the tequila.”

One of the students at the back who hadn't written down a single word of the lecture so far bent forward to scribble that down. Mike nodded to himself. Well, at least he'd taught him something.

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“Lestrade is threatening us with an arrest for wasting police time,” said Sherlock, reading his texts as they headed away from Mike's lecture.

John snorted. “That would be more believable if we didn't know how much he hates paperwork.”

“Or if it wouldn't involve him revealing his stupidity to his colleagues,” added Sherlock, tucking his phone away. “It's nearly eleven. I need to go and fool Molly, and then we'll have the full set.”

“And then it'll be noon, and too late for them to get us back,” said John. “Perfectly timed.”

“Of course,” said Sherlock. “I planned it.”

John rolled his eyes. “We both planned it,” he reminded him. “And who's winning on pranks between us right now, Twinkle-Curls?”

Sherlock twitched and his eyes narrowed. “The more you call me that, the less likely I am to ever
give you back your clothes.”

“You will the first time I go to a crime scene in a corset.”

Worryingly, Sherlock looked more intrigued than disturbed by the suggestion. John moved the conversation on quickly, before any bad ideas could be hatched. “Right, well, I'm going to get some tea while you're fooling Molly. Come and find me in the cafeteria when you're done?”

“Of course,” said Sherlock. He stepped in for a hug and a kiss, which had become a normal gesture for them on parting. It was only when John felt the faint pressure on his back that he remembered to be suspicious.

“Oh, nice try,” he said, fishing one hand up his back to pull the sign off. “Kick Me, I'm A Doctor. How original.”

Sherlock shrugged. “They say the old ones are the best.”

John crumpled the paper and chucked it in a nearby bin. “Right, well, the problem with the old ones is that they're also the most well-known ones.”

“Says the man who put a bucket over a door.”

John raised an eyebrow. “Says the man who fell for it.”

Sherlock scowled. “I'll see you in the cafeteria,” he said, and marched away.

John watched him go with amusement, then turned to head down to the cafeteria. He ordered himself a tea, then reached into his pocket for his wallet. Instead of the usual feel of leather, his fingers instead grazed plastic. He pulled it out to find that Sherlock had replaced his wallet with a Wombles purse, which contained toy money.

“That's a pound,” said the woman at the check-out.

“Um,” said John. He searched his other pockets, but his real wallet had completely disappeared. “Sorry, I seem to have been the victim of a prank.” He dug one of the fake coins out of the purse and offered it to her. “Do you take plastic?”

She gave him an unimpressed look. “No.”

John gave the tea a last look as she took it away, then reached to pull his mobile out so he could text his annoyance at Sherlock.

The mobile he pulled out was made of some kind of foam that was clearly designed to be chewed on by a baby. On the back, Sherlock had written, One more to me.

The score was still only three-two, though. John was still winning, and Sherlock had less than an hour to change that.

****

There was a body waiting for Molly when she got back from her mid-morning tea break. What wasn't waiting was any kind of paperwork or information about it. Typical. Molly was beginning to think she'd have to write a polite email to the porters' supervisor about how often this was happening.

Perhaps the paperwork was under the sheet with the body. She went over to it and pulled back the
sheet, and then stopped in shock.

Oh god.

It was Sherlock's face that lay beneath the sheet. Pale and faintly blue, his eyes staring blankly at nothing and his chest horribly still.

“No,” she gasped. She felt at his neck for a pulse, hoping that this was just some kind of mistake. Surely he had to be alive. Someone would have told her if he'd died, wouldn't they? She wouldn't have just been left to find out like this.

There was no pulse. Worse, the skin was cold and had a clammy sensation that she recognised all too well. Only dead skin ever felt like that. She put her other hand on his chest, desperately hoping to feel the reassuring thud of a heart beating, but there was nothing.

She stumbled back a step or two, tears springing to her eyes. Sherrinford. She had to contact Sherrinford. He'd need to know – or he'd already know, and he'd be able to tell her what had happened. She couldn't see any obvious signs of what might have killed Sherlock. There seemed to be a faint red rash on his chest and, for some reason, glitter in his hair, but she couldn't bring herself to pull the sheet down further so that she could see any more. Even seeing his shoulders uncovered, naked and vulnerable, seemed like an enormous invasion.

She turned away to fumble for her phone, unable to keep looking. Her hands were shaking enough to make getting her phone out of her pocket into a challenge and she nearly dropped it once she'd managed it.

Before she could dial, there was a faint groaning noise from behind her. She froze.

*Dead bodies sometimes make strange noises,* she reminded herself, but in all her years of working with them, she'd never heard anything like that.

There was another sound, slightly louder. Very, very slowly, trying desperately to remain calm, she turned around.

Sherlock's body had sat up. *He's alive,* she thought, but that couldn't be right. She'd felt his neck, put her hand on his chest. There had been no pulse, no heartbeat. He'd been dead. And now he was moving.

His mouth dropped open and he made that groaning noise again, but this time she could hear it as a word.

“Brraaaaiiiiiiiinnnnnnsssssss.”

His head jerked around, a horrifyingly blank look on his face as his eyes barely focused on her.

She screamed, and then ran for it.

****

John was in the corridor when Molly came racing out of the morgue and crashed right into him.

“You okay?” he asked, steadying her.

She give him a white-faced look of shock. “John! I- Oh god, John. It’s-”

The door of the morgue swung open behind her to reveal Sherlock, wrapped in a sheet. “April
Fools, Molly,” he said.

She froze at his voice, then turned, very slowly. John glanced from the look on her face to the sheet Sherlock was clearly naked beneath, and a horrible suspicion began to dawn.

“Sherlock,” he said very carefully. “What prank did you play on Molly?” Why the hell hadn't he thought to ask that question earlier?

“You. Utter. Bastard,” hissed Molly, which pretty much confirmed John's suspicion. Molly pulled herself away from John, stalked over to Sherlock and slapped him with more force than John would have expected. “Don't think you'll ever be welcome in my morgue again,” she said. She disappeared back inside, slamming the door behind her.

Sherlock watched her go with a concerned look. “My clothes are in there.”

John ignored him. “Sherlock, tell me you didn't just pretend to be dead in front of Molly.”

“I can't pretend to be dead, John,” said Sherlock. “I am dead. I pretended to be a zombie.”

John gaped at him. “As a joke?!”

Sherlock frowned at him as if he was being particularly stupid. “Of course as a joke, John. It is April Fool's Day, that's rather the point of the whole thing.”

John gaped at him. “You- Jesus! She's right. You're an utter bastard.”

The look on Sherlock's face showed that he had no idea why John was reacting like that. John found himself remembering all too clearly just how it had felt to believe Sherlock was dead when he wasn't and had to clench his fists to stop himself punching him.

“Right,” he bit out. “We're done here, yeah? I'm going home.”

He turned around and then stopped at the faint sound of jingling from above. He looked upwards just as a shower of tiny bells came from the ceiling, dropping to the floor with a rattle of clappers. They were followed by The Fool, somersaulting from nowhere and landing between John and Sherlock with a flourish of jazz hands.

John very nearly let out a groan at the sight of his ridiculous outfit and smirking grin, but he forcibly kept it in. Just because he was furious with Sherlock didn't mean he wanted him to get swept back to Halloween.

“Boys!” said The Fool. “Oh, you have done well today! So many lovely tricks!”

John plastered on a smile. “I'm glad you think so.”

“I particularly liked the dancing skeleton, that was a nice touch,” continued The Fool. “It's just a shame it wasn't quite enough.”

John froze. Oh god. How had it not been enough? They'd put everything into this, surely it had to be enough to keep Sherlock safe?

“Don't be ridiculous,” said Sherlock. “Of course it was. We played pranks on all our acquaintances, as well as several on each other. We embodied the spirit of the holiday perfectly.”

“Oh, well, John did,” said The Fool. He turned and tipped his hat towards John as if it were a Stetson, making the bells jingle. “Nicely done. You kept things just the right side of malicious
while successfully pulling more pranks on Sherlock than he managed to pull on you. Sherlock, though...” The Fool turned back to him, tutting.

John met Sherlock's eyes helplessly, the bottom falling out of his stomach.

“You just kept missing your target,” said The Fool. “I really thought an ex-Halloween boy would do better.” He shook his head sadly. “And that last one, on poor little Molly Hooper! That was not in the right spirit at all. I'm afraid I'm going to have to fail you on your efforts on this one.”

“No,” said John. “No, you can't take him back!” He found himself stepping around The Fool in order to put himself between him and Sherlock, as if he had any hope of stopping a Holiday Ruler doing precisely what he wanted on his holiday.

The Fool let out a long sigh. “I hate to do this, I really do, but a deal's a deal...” He reached out a hand towards Sherlock and John braced himself for a fight.

A heartbeat passed, and then The Fool burst into laughter. “Oh, the looks on your faces! April Fools!”

John gaped at him. “What?”

“Of course I'm not going to take him, silly,” said The Fool, slapping John's shoulder hard enough to hurt. “Not when you've been so inspiring! Do you know how many of your friends are already plotting their revenge? All of them! People who haven't spared a thought for my holiday in years!”

John felt like he was recovering from a heart attack. “Right,” he said, numbly.

“I'm glad you're pleased,” said Sherlock with a bite to his voice.

“I'm ecstatic,” declared The Fool with a beaming smile. “See you next year!” He waved his rattle in their faces and capered off along the corridor.

John watched him go with a glare that he hoped he wouldn't turn around and see. “What a dick.”

“Yes,” agreed Sherlock.

John turned to face him. “Not that what he just did was any worse than what you did to Molly.”

Sherlock blinked. “Don't be silly, it was-”

“No,” John cut him off. “It was over-the-line, Sherlock. By miles. You need to apologise.”


John shook his head. “It needs to be at least a card,” he said. “Maybe flowers.”

Sherlock made a face but John ignored him. He started off down the corridor towards the exit. “I'm going home,” he said. “I need tea.”

“Yes,” agreed Sherlock, following him. “I can still taste the pumpkin.”

“I hope you don't think I'm making you any,” said John.

Sherlock let out a long sigh. “Honestly John. Don't you think you're being a bit over-dramatic?”

“Nope,” said John.
When they got home, there was a diorama waiting for them in the middle of the kitchen table. A soy sauce bottle wearing a tiny blue scarf was stood next to a jar of piccalilli that had a beige knitted cosy around it with a vaguely Aran pattern to it. They both still had the googly eyes stuck on that John and Sherlock had put on late last night, when they'd been in Mrs. Hudson's fridge, and tiny suitcases propped beside them.

There was a notecard with a limerick on it in front of them.

*There once were two silly boys,*  
Who inflicted their landlady with ploys,  
Said she, “That's enough,”  
And threw them out by their scruff,  
Leaving them with no home for their toys.

Sherlock inspected it. “It's an empty threat,” he announced after a moment.

John rolled his eyes. “Yes, I know,” he said, picking up the piccalilli to examine its little jumper. “Do you think she had this lying around, or did she knit it this morning?”

Sherlock frowned. “Why would she have had one lying around?”

John shrugged. He opened the jar and was pleased to find it mostly full. “I think I'll have some for lunch. Do you think she'll mind?”

“She did evict it,” Sherlock pointed out.

Below them, the front door was thrown open with enough force to make it bounce off the wall and then heavy footsteps thundered up the stairs. John and Sherlock spun to face the door, John shifting the jar in his hand to hold it ready to throw, in case he needed to defend them from a violent criminal.

A figure in a burka rushed through the door, stormed up to Sherlock, and slapped him with all the force of his bony palm. The sound of metacarpals against Sherlock's skin made John wince but he didn't bother interceding. He wasn't about to protect Sherlock from the consequences of playing a nasty trick on his older brother's only friend.

“You shit,” hissed Sherrinford. “How could you do that to her?”

Sherlock rubbed at his cheek. “It was just a prank,” he said. “I don't understand why everyone is over-reacting so much.”

“Because it was incredibly cruel,” said John. Mycroft had followed Sherrinford up the stairs and was standing in the doorway, regarding his brothers with a faintly amused expression. John caught his eyes and then twitched his eyebrows in the direction of the kettle. He got a nod in response.

“She spent twenty minutes crying down the phone at me,” said Sherrinford. “You made her cry, Sherlock! What on earth did you think her reaction was going to be?”

Sherlock was frowning in the way that meant he was aware that his position was indefensible. “I didn't—”

“He's going to buy her flowers,” said John as he pulled out the teabags.

“He most certainly is,” said Sherrinford. “And chocolate.”

Sherlock let out a long sigh. “Oh, come on, isn't that-”

“No,” snapped Sherrinford. “It's not. You'll do it, or I'll go and live with Mycroft, and you will never see me, or hear from me, again.”

He spun around and headed upstairs to his room, black material floating behind him.

Sherlock looked rather stunned, although he tried to cover it with a cleared throat. “Right,” he said. John picked up the mugs of tea and Sherlock reached out for one. “Well, I suppose-”

John ducked around him, keeping the mug out of his grasp, and then handed it to Mycroft. Sherlock cut himself off with a choked sound of pain and betrayal.

“I told you,” said John. “No tea until you apologise to Molly.”

Mycroft gave him a smile. “Thank you so much, John,” he said, settling on the sofa with his mug. He held out a handful of letters as if in exchange. “I picked these up on my way upstairs.”

John took them and headed to his chair, ignoring Sherlock's spluttering. “I suggest you start looking up florists,” he said. “I think she likes daisies.”

“And forget-me-nots,” added Mycroft, settling on the sofa. “Well, according to the file my people have put together.”

John frowned. “Why did your people-” He stopped speaking and held up a hand. “No, you know what? I don't want to know. Just tell me there isn't one on me, even if it means having to lie.”

“Of course there isn't one on you, John,” said Mycroft smoothly. “Why on earth would I find it important to have all the information available on the one person that my brother has chosen to let his entire emotional stability rest on?”

Sherlock threw himself into his chair. “You don't have all the information,” he said grumpily as he pulled his laptop onto his knees.

“I have more than enough to know just how fragile your happiness is if it rests on the frailty of a human,” said Mycroft.

“I'm sitting right here,” said John, starting to open the post. Tesco Clubcard points, phone bill, junk from Virgin Media... Oh. Huh.

“Dear Doctor Watson,” he read out. “It has been brought to our attention that you have not accrued enough CPD points over the last 5 years to be re-accredited. As such, you are being referred to a fitness to practise panel of the General Medical Council for consideration of whether your licence to practise medicine should be revoked.”

He snorted and tossed the letter to one side. “It's past noon. Too late for an April Fool.”

Mycroft frowned and retrieved the letter. John ignored him in favour of glaring at Sherlock. “You better be ordering nice things for Molly.”

Sherlock let out a long sigh and tipped the laptop so that John could see the Interflora logo on the screen. John rewarded him with a smile.
“Do I get tea now?” asked Sherlock.

John shook his head. “As if you wouldn't just show me the website and then navigate away as soon as I let it go,” he said. “Order flowers. Then we'll negotiate over tea.”

Sherlock let out a very long sigh, and bent back over the laptop. “Dictator,” he muttered.

“This isn't an April Fool,” said Mycroft, still looking at the letter.

“What?” said John. “Of course it is. I have enough CPD points – it's a bit of a hassle to get them, what with Sherlock sulking every time I go to a seminar – but I've been keeping track of them to make sure. Besides my five year re-accreditation isn't until next year. Why would they send that to me now?”

A dark look passed over Mycroft's face. “No reason at all,” he said. He pulled out his phone and stood up. “Excuse me, I need to make a phone call.”

He went out to the hallway and shut the door behind him. John glanced over at Sherlock. “Is he winding me up?”

Sherlock was looking after Mycroft. He shook his head. “He wouldn't,” he said. “Not today. It may be after noon, but that doesn't mean The Fool might not still pop up at the slightest hint of him celebrating the holiday.” His eyes flicked to the letter, which Mycroft had left on the sofa, and he held out his hand. “Show me that.”

John glanced from Sherlock to the sofa and back again, then let out a long sigh, stood up, and walked the few paces to pick the letter up and pass it to Sherlock. “It must be a fake,” he said, but he could hear the uncertainty in his voice.

“Put it this way,” said Sherlock, examining the letter. “I didn't send it. Who else would play such an elaborate prank on you?”

John tried to come up with a name, and failed. Until this year, he hadn't thought about April Fool's Day since he was a child and he didn't know anyone else who did either. It had arrived through the post, so it must have been sent in advance. It couldn't be Mike getting his revenge for the YMCA. “Oh god,” he said, looking at the letter again with new eyes. “What am I going to do?!”

Sherlock shook his head. “Nothing. Mycroft will make it go away. That's what he's for.”

John rolled his eyes. “I can't just rely on Mycroft to sort out everything, Sherlock. This is-”

Mycroft walked back into the room, tucking his phone away. “It's resolved,” he said. “There's no further threat to your professional standing, John. It was sent out by a slightly over-enthusiastic employee, and he has been...dealt with.”

John stared at him and then back at Sherlock, who gave him a little shrug, as if to say 'I told you so'.


Mycroft gave a little shrug. “He was allowing outside influences to affect his work,” he said. “That has been rectified.”

John turned to Sherlock for some sort of help understanding this, but he had gone back to frowning
at his laptop screen. “You're sure about the daisies?” he said. “Wouldn't a cactus be more interesting?”

John gave up. Apparently, Mycroft was there to solve all his problems now as well as Sherlock's. As long as that meant he didn't feel he had the right to meddle in his life as much as he tried to in Sherlock's.

“Just get daisies,” he said, and turned to get out of the room before the sheer amount of Holmes-ness in it made his head explode. “And roses. Women always like roses,” he added as he left. Molly deserved something a bit pricier than just daisies, after all.

He headed upstairs to his old room. Sherrinford had taken it over but John still tended to use it as a refuge when he needed a breather from all the insanity that filled the flat. Despite being an animated skeleton, Sherrinford was often the most normal person around. John had taken to carefully not thinking about what that said about his life.

Sherrinford was on the bed, propped up on about a hundred cushions with his laptop on his knees. When he'd taken over John's room, buying all the cushions had been the first step of his redecoration. *I'm just bones,* he pointed out. *I need many soft, squishy things to sink down into.* Privately, John thought Mycroft's spiteful muttering about the pointlessness of cushions might have had more to do with the purchase, but he couldn't deny that Sherrinford tended to use them all when he was sat in bed, all carefully arranged under and around him into a soft cradle for his bones.

A voice was coming from the laptop speakers as Sherrinford looked at the screen with what might have been a small smile. Given that his mouth was nothing but teeth and jawbone, John didn't always find it easy to recognise his smiles.

“Am I intruding?” John asked from the doorway.

Sherrinford glanced up. “I'm just talking to Molly.” John noticed that that was neither a yes or a no, and didn't move to come any further into the room. He wasn't sure what was going on between Molly and Sherrinford, but it had clearly reached a stage where they might prefer privacy for their conversations.

“John?” said the laptop with Molly's voice. “Oh. Sherlock isn't there, is he?”

“Don't worry,” said John. “I left him downstairs.”

“Oh good,” said Molly with obvious relief. “I mean, I don't—”

“It's fine,” said John, moving into the room to where he could see the laptop screen. “I get it. I'm furious with him, by the way. I'm so sorry he did that to you.”

Molly was on screen, sitting in what looked like her sitting room with a cat on her lap. John started to give her a wave and then realised that she wouldn't be able to see him. Sherrinford and Molly's video chats must only go one way, given that he could never let her see his face. The square box at the bottom that should have contained the image he was sending to her was black.

“It's fine,” said Molly, even though it clearly wasn't. She still sounded shaken. “I suppose I'm silly to be so upset by a joke.”

“It wasn't a joke, it was a terrible trick,” corrected Sherrinford. “I told you, you should be furious. Don't go being all nice about it.”
“We're making him apologise,” added John. “Don't forgive him until he's grovelled a bit, yeah? It's the only way he'll learn, and it's best for all of us that he does.”

Molly managed a watery smile. “Got it. Grovelling is key to Sherlock's emotional development.”

“Exactly,” said John. “You should see the lengths I make him go to when he does something unacceptable to me.”

“If we all work really hard at it, maybe one day he might even develop enough to have the emotional maturity of a drunk toddler,” added Sherrinford.

John blinked at the mental image. “How many drunk toddlers have you met?” he asked, with curiosity.

Sherrinford gave a loose shrug that made his shoulder joints click. “I have an imagination.”

Molly laughed. “It's so strange hearing you both on here,” she said. “Strange to think of you being in the same place.” She paused and then added, in a quieter voice, “Strange to think that John's looking at your face, when I never have.”

Sherrinford's mandible clenched. “You're not missing much.”

“I don't know,” said John. “The green skin is a bit startling.”

Sherrinford gave him a black look. “Don't be idiotic, that's cousin Verdigris.”

John wasn't sure if that was a joke or not, but Molly found it funny enough to let out a quiet giggle. “Verdigris seems like almost a normal name in your family.”

“We've certainly never been able to use the phrase 'Bob's your uncle' with a straight face,” said Sherrinford.

Molly laughed. “Whereas I actually have an uncle Bob.”

“Really?” asked Sherrinford. “Is he disgustingly normal?”

“Not exactly. He's a taxidermist.”

“That seems pretty normal to me,” said Sherrinford.

“It would,” put in John. He was beginning to feel more than a little like he was a third wheel. “Any way, I'll leave you two to it,” he said. “I should probably go and glare at Sherlock a bit more, or he'll forget to feel ashamed.”

“Oh, I'll make sure he remembers,” said Sherrinford darkly.

“The 'no fratricide in the flat' rule extends to you as well as Sherlock and Mycroft,” said John firmly. “See you later, Molly.”

Molly gave the screen a wave. “Bye, John.”

John went back downstairs to find that Mycroft had left and Sherlock had commandeered the remainder of John's tea.

John glared at him. “Did you order those flowers?”
Sherlock huffed a sigh. “Honestly, John, there's no need to nag me.”

“Of course there is. It's the only way to ever get you to do anything.”

“You could try rewarding me instead,” Sherlock. “I enjoy kisses, you know.”

“Yes,” agreed John. “Fine, then. I won't kiss you until Molly has accepted your apology.”

Sherlock gaped at him. “John! You wouldn't!”

“I just did,” said John, and headed into the kitchen to make lunch, content that Molly would get a generous apology in the very near future.

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Sherrinford didn't come down from his room until that evening, when John was watching the news on the sofa and Sherlock was trying to initiate a cuddle, despite the fact that Molly hadn't accepted his apology yet. John was doing his best to ignore him and stick to his resolution.

Sherlock took one look at Sherrinford and said, “Ah, they arrived then.”

Sherrinford sank into Sherlock's chair. “Yes. She was very pleased. Well done on going extravagantly over-the-top.”

Sherlock shrugged. “In my experience, the more over-the-top the apology, the less likely it is to ever be brought up again.”

“Don't you think that it would be better to learn how not to upset people in the first place, rather than making notes on the best ways to make apologies?” asked Sherrinford.

“That would involve me changing who I am,” said Sherlock. He adopted a fake wounded expression. “I thought you weren't meant to want to change the people you love.”

Sherrinford scoffed. “That relies rather heavily on me loving you after you do something like this to someone like Molly.”

Sherlock just rolled his eyes and looked at John. “Are you going to kiss me now?”

John kept his eyes fixed on the TV screen. “Not right now this second, no. I'm watching the news.” He wasn't all that interested in the latest recommendations that the media regulation committee had announced were going to be in their report, or the reactions of the CEOs of various media companies, but he wasn't going to give into Sherlock the minute Molly got the flowers. She hadn't indicated that he was forgiven yet, after all. He might need to coerce Sherlock into a more extravagant expression of regret.

Sherlock huffed. “Then what was the point?”

“The point was that you did a terrible thing, and now you've done something to balance that out,” said Sherrinford.

“But no one appreciates it,” said Sherlock. “John hasn't kissed me for hours!”

A man who owned a tabloid that had called for prison sentences for extremist Muslim 'hate-preachers' was complaining that the government was threatening his right to free expression. John did not look away from his uninspiring face for a moment, because he knew that if he saw Sherlock's pout as he said that, he'd end up giving in and kissing him just to make him smile.
“Sucks to be you,” said Sherrinford. “If it helps, he hasn't kissed me either, but you don't see me complaining.”

John looked over at him and gave him a wink. “Any time you want, just say the word.”

Sherlock exploded off the sofa. “No! I forbid it!! You can't-”

John and Sherrinford started laughing. Sherlock cut himself off to futilely glare at them both and then collapsed down again. “I hate you both.”

“No, you don't,” said John.

Sherlock's phone beeped before he could respond to that. “Ha,” he said as he read it. “At least someone forgives me. She's even thanked me.”

“Maybe you should go and see if she'll kiss you then,” said John.

Sherrinford cleared his throat. “I'd rather he didn't.”

“So does John, he's just being facetious,” said Sherlock.

There was a tiny thread of doubt in his voice though, and John couldn't stand that. He looked away from the telly to catch Sherlock's eye. “You can kiss Molly the day I kiss Sherrinford.”

Sherlock smiled. “It's a good thing you're only attracted to dead men who still have their flesh.”

John made a face. “Not sure making me feel like a necrophiliac is going to get you a snog.”

“Oh please,” said Sherlock. “Necrophilia requires a sexual act. A kiss doesn't fall into that category.”

“It can if you do it right,” said Sherrinford, wistfully.

Sherlock's phone beeped again. “Oh for-,” he said, reading it. “She's said I'm still not allowed in the morgue for a fortnight. So much for forgiveness!”

Sherrinford laughed. “Oh, good girl,” he said, pulling his own phone out and clacking his distal phalanges over the keys. “Just what you deserve.”

Sherlock huffed. “I don't know why you care so much about this,” he said. “You're over-reacting.”

“No, I'm not,” said Sherrinford. “Do you have any idea how upset she was? She was crying so much that she could barely speak when she called me. How would you react if someone did something that made John that upset?”

“That's different,” said Sherlock. “That's John. He's unique – you can't use him as a hypothetical comparison with other, normal people.”

John couldn't stop himself from reaching out to squeeze Sherlock's thigh at the tone in his voice. It was hard to stay angry when Sherlock spoke like that about him, even if it did worry him slightly to be put on such a pedestal. What would he do if Sherlock one day realised that John was just one of the 'normal' people?

“Well,” said Sherrinford, “Molly's unique to me.”

There was a moment of silence as both John and Sherlock looked at him. The set of Sherrinford's
jawbone was defiant, as if he was expecting derision. Instead, John just felt sympathy well up. If Sherrinford really felt that strongly for Molly, then the fact that he would never be able to actually see her face-to-face must be killing him.

“Oh, Sherrinford,” said Sherlock. “Are you sure that was a good idea?”

Sherrinford snorted. “Now you sound like Mycroft.” He turned towards the TV screen as if he had an interest in the football results. “I don’t see the point in talking about it. Just take more care with her feelings, Sherlock.”

Sherlock was quiet for a moment and then said, “I will,” in a low voice. John squeezed his thigh again, and a moment later Sherlock's hand found his and clung to it. John wondered if he was remembering what it had been like to be separated from John and thinking that it would be forever. John certainly was.

Remembering those terrible few months made John realise just how ridiculous it was not to take every chance to kiss Sherlock now that he could. Who knew when they might be parted again? They had Easter to get through in a week’s time, and the Easter Bunny hadn't been very sympathetic to their cause.

He put his hand on Sherlock's cheek and pulled his face towards him so that he could kiss him. Sherlock made a happy noise and relaxed into it, tension John hadn't realised was running through him melting away.

“Finally,” he murmured against John's lips, as if it had been months rather than hours since they'd last kissed.

John pulled away before it got too involved. There was reassuring your partner and then there was making his brother feel like shit by showing off what he could never have, after all.

“They're showing one of the Bourne films tonight,” he told Sherrinford, who brightened.

Sherlock groaned.

By the time Jason Bourne was running through a city while gunmen in black chased him, Sherlock was stretched out with his head in John's lap, eyes half-closed as John raked his fingers through his hair. He was clearly paying no attention to the film and John had the feeling that if he could, he'd have dropped off to sleep by now. As it was, he was so deep into his contented daze that when his phone buzzed with a notification, it took him nearly a minute to blink and reach out to pick it up.

John watched three cars run into each other during a high-speed chase and then promptly all explode as Sherlock read whatever it was on his phone.

“John,” he said in a slow voice just as Bourne got away from the gunman. “I have three questions for you.”

The film looked as if it was going into one of the dull scenes where they tried to shoehorn some plot in to explain the next lot of explosions, so John said, “Go ahead.”

“The first is why, given that your intelligence is meant to be higher than the average person's, do you use the same password for everything? It makes it very easy for you to be hacked. The second is why you thought it would be a good idea to use drunken photos from your University days in a prank aimed at someone who had drunken photos of you that are just as damning.”

John was already moving to grab the phone from Sherlock's hand as Sherlock finished his little
“And the third is, why didn't you tell me this morning that you already had ample experience with wearing women's clothes?”

John stared at the latest entry on his blog, which consisted of three photos and the title 'Meet Joanna Watson!'

“I'm going to kill him,” he growled, frantically pressing buttons, hoping to delete the entry before too many people saw it. By the look of the comment count, he'd already failed at that.

“April Fools, John,” said Sherlock with a grin. “After all, it's all just in good fun.”

John made an inarticulate noise of rage.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Easter, April 5th.
Easter

Chapter Notes

For the record, I really love Penelope. The Holmes's opinions do not represent my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was barely a week after April Fool's before Easter arrived.

“Why do these holidays all have to come on top of each other?” Sherlock complained as he scrolled through websites detailing Easter traditions and wondering why everything was so alarming yellow. “There's no time for anything else!”

John sent him an unwarranted black look. “We spent all last night under a lorry, hiding from exotic animal smugglers. The day before, we spent six hours interrogating zookeepers.”

Sherlock wasn't sure what his point was. “That case is finished,” he said. “And instead of looking for the next, we've got to fuss about with bunnies and eggs and all that rubbish.”

John twitched. “Try not to be rude about the holiday before we've managed to get the ruler's blessing,” he said, glancing about as if expecting a giant rabbit to be hiding behind the curtains, eavesdropping.

Sherlock's eye was caught by a sentence on his screen. “In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, it's traditional for men to spank women with a special handmade whip,” he read out, then glanced up at John with a smirk. “Molly?”

“No,” said John firmly. “Let's keep to the British traditions, shall we? The ones that don't involve getting charged with assault.”

“Spoilsport,” muttered Sherlock, closing the page and moving on. “An egg hunt, then? It appears a family lunch is traditional as well, perhaps we should have some friends over?”

“Right,” said John. “I'll roast some lamb, you hide some eggs, we give everyone some flowers...anything else? Easter bonnets? We could stick some decorations on your deerstalker.”

Sherlock glared at him. “I believe it's only traditional for women,” he said. “If you'd feel left out, though, I'm sure I could create something for you.”

Sherrinford came clattering down the stairs and Sherlock shut his laptop.

“What are we creating?” asked Sherrinford. “A towering monument representing Sherlock's love and devotion to you?”

John snorted. “I have a feeling that's what the pile of washing up in the sink is meant to be.”

“Tea has always been symbolic within our relationship,” said Sherlock. “It only fits that the empty mugs should be as well.”
“Yeah, no,” said John. “Not even close.”

Sherrinford threw himself onto the sofa with a rattle of bones. “You mean you don't serve Sherlock up a hot mug of Earl Gay every morning?”

Sherlock flinched. “No puns,” he commanded.

“I wish you brothers would just get Oolong,” said John, which seemed a rather cruel betrayal given that he claimed to love Sherlock.

“Oh, nice one,” said Sherrinford.

Sherlock clenched his teeth and reopened his laptop. “I hate you both.”

“Looks like we're in hot water,” commented Sherrinford. John laughed.

Sherlock winced as he logged into his email, hoping there would be something in it interesting enough to occupy him for a few seconds. “When's Mycroft coming to take you away and give us some peace?”

“No idea,” said Sherrinford cheerfully. “He's been all busy and stressed with work recently. You'd think running a country was important from the way he carries on.”

“Completely pointless activity,” muttered Sherlock.

“Whereas digging through tiger shit for clues is completely worthwhile,” said John.

“The tigers we saved from being chopped into parts would certainly say so,” Sherlock pointed out.

“Mycroft's been pretty busy for a while,” said John. “Is there something in particular he's working on? God, we're not about to be plunged into World War Three, are we?”

“Not unless his favourite cake shop has been shut down,” put in Sherlock. Nothing in his email was the least bit interesting. He deleted a frantic message from a woman too stupid to realise that her son was stealing from her. Dull, dull, dull.

“It's this report on media standards, I think,” said Sherrinford. “That's what he was working on the morning of April Fool's Day.”

Sherlock frowned. “That's been dragging on for months. How on earth hasn't he got it all wrapped up and done with by now?”

Sherrinford shrugged. “I think some of the media companies are getting a bit underhand with trying to influence the recommendations that the committee makes.”

John made a face. “Tabloid bastards,” he muttered darkly. Apparently he hadn't bothered forgiving them for their role in Sherlock's death. That was good: Sherlock hadn't forgiven them, either. If the newspapers had been a bit more careful with what they printed, it would have been harder for Moriarty to manipulate them, and he might still be alive and ageing at the same rate as John. Their life spans would be running alongside each other, rather than John moving on ahead, leaving Sherlock behind.

Sherrinford's phone started playing *Good Golly, Miss Molly* and he grinned as he answered it. “Molly-molly-oxen-free!” he said, standing up. “How's your day going? Carved up any exciting corpses?”
He left the room, heading up to his bedroom. “Wash your mouth out!” Sherlock heard him say as he went upstairs. “I sound nothing like Sherlock. If anything, as I'm older, he sounds like me.”

Sherlock reopened the website detailing Easter traditions. “Right,” he said. “Where were we? In Bermuda they fly kites and eat fish cakes.”

“We're not having fish cakes,” said John tiredly. “Let's just stick to what we know, yeah?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I don't really know any of this,” he said. “I didn't grow up with any of it, and I've been hiding from it ever since we made it to this world.”

John gave him a long look, then gave the little nod that meant he'd made a decision. “Right then,” he said. “We'll stick to what I know. Which is a massive meal, an egg hunt, and an orgy of chocolate eating. Hand out a couple of bunches of daffodils and hopefully the Easter Bunny will be happy.”

Sherlock considered that, then closed his laptop. “That sounds easy enough.”

“Easier than coming up with pranks was,” said John. He pulled out his mobile. “Who am I inviting? Molly, Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson? I suppose Mike will be with his family.”

Sherlock shrugged. “Whoever you fancy,” he said. “How many people do you want to have to cook for?”

John made a face as he tapped out a message on his phone. “Do you think we could get Mrs. Hudson to do the cooking?”

“Oh, easily,” said Sherlock. “Problem is, would the Easter Bunny see that as shirking our responsibilities?”

John sighed. “Probably. He didn't really seem that keen on us. Okay, fine, I'll be cooking then. Great.”

“It will be good practice for Christmas,” said Sherlock. For some reason, that made John let out another groan.

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Sherlock hadn't yet decided how he felt about John's need to sleep every night. On the one hand, it meant he spent hours and hours every day without a conscious John by his side, but on the other, it gave him a chance to do all sorts of experiments that John would have disapproved of if he'd known about them. It also meant that he had the chance to lie down with a warm, sleepily affectionate John every night, which he found far more enjoyable than he really wanted to admit to.

The night before Easter Sunday, Sherlock spent an hour or two in bed with John, watching the minute changes on his face as he slept, then slipped out, into the sitting room. He read a few articles about the latest forensic research, rewrote some of the coding for his website forum so that he could track IP addresses more easily, and then found himself clicking through the Easter Traditions websites again. Was there anything vital that they had missed?

It didn't seem so, unless John changed his mind about sticking to British cultural traditions and let Sherlock light an Easter Fire. He could use the very worst parts of John's wardrobe as firelighters.

When the sun began to rise, slowly filling the sitting room with daylight, he turned his focus to breakfast. Was there something John should be eating this morning?
The answer was rather obvious. Sherlock glanced at the clock, and then Googled 'how to boil an egg'. He could prepare breakfast for John and gain valuable relationship points that would hopefully counterbalance some of the ones he had lost last week on April Fools Day.

Taking John a tray with a boiled egg, a slice of toast cut into strips that the internet had told Sherlock were meant to represent soldiers although he wasn't sure how, a daffodil and, of course, a cup of tea just as he was stirring turned out to be an excellent plan. Sherlock got a pleased smile and a kiss, followed by the chance to settle beside John and watch him eat.

“This is what Mum used to make me when I was sick,” said John. “Oh, the yolk is perfect – just runny enough for dipping.”

That had taken rather a lot of Googling. There seemed an unexpected amount of debate over the perfect length of time to boil an egg for.

“Happy Easter,” said Sherlock.

John nodded. “Happy Easter,” he said.

Sherlock noticed that neither of them sounded particularly happy as they said it. John sounded determined, as if he was going to force Easter into being happy. Sherlock gave him a nod of agreement, feeling as they were making a pact before going into war. Whatever it took, they were going to conquer this holiday. Together.

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Organising an egg hunt was more fun than Sherlock would have expected. He took over the sitting room to do it while John turned the kitchen from an organised area of scientific research into a chaos of food-related faffery.

He stood in the centre of the room for a while, just observing the familiar lay-out of it with a view to hiding eggs. There were an excess of choices, but he needed to pitch this hunt to the skill level of their guests. If it was too easy, there wouldn't be any point, but if it was too difficult, they could easily be there all day, and John would become annoyed that they weren't eating his lunch.

So, who were his targets? Lestrade was a detective - he should be better than the average person at seeking eggs. Molly was cleverer than she came across, but didn't have a lot of experience with finding hidden things. Mrs. Hudson might be trickier. On the face of it, she wasn't a particular expert at detection but on the other hand, she had dusted the room several times and would be familiar with its nooks and crannies.

He had twenty eggs. He took one careful turn to set the full picture in his head, then got down to business.

By the time the guests arrived, he was content that the hunt would provide a challenge for Lestrade without being too difficult for Molly, and that he had minimised Mrs. Hudson's home advantage.

John came out of the kitchen when the doorbell rang, wiping his hands on a tea towel. “I hope you haven't made it too tricky,” he said, running his gaze around the room.

“I have carefully calculated for the relative levels of stupidity in our guests,” said Sherlock.

“And a Happy Easter to you too,” said Lestrade as he came in, followed by Mrs. Hudson.

Sherlock just rolled his eyes. “This is not the holiday of lying to people,” he said, and then threw a
daffodil at Lestrade to distract him. “Happy Easter.”

Lestrade gave the flower a puzzled look. “Uh, right. Thanks, mate. What am I meant to do with this?”

Sherlock shrugged.

“Buttonhole?” suggested John. He handed Mrs. Hudson a larger bunch of flowers. “Happy Easter, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Oh, they’re lovely,” said Mrs. Hudson. “Thank you. I’ll take them downstairs and get them in some water straight away.”

She disappeared as Lestrade succeeded in attaching his daffodil to his jacket lapel. “Your new obsession with holidays involves a lot of plants,” he said. “Are you funding a local florist or something?”

“You could show a bit more gratitude,” said Sherlock.

Lestrade snorted. “Yeah, maybe if you’d skipped April Fools. How far does this thing go? Should I be expecting a Father's Day card?”

“That is a ridiculous, commercialised invention of the card industry,” Sherlock informed him. “Besides which, you are not my father.”

Lestrade shrugged. “Sometimes it feels like everyone around you ends up in a parenting role.”

Mrs. Hudson came back up before Sherlock could do more than scowl in response to that, followed by Molly.

“Excellent,” said Sherlock. “Now you’re all here, we can start the hunt.”

“Give them a moment to come in,” said John.

Sherlock scowled and twitched with impatience as John faffed about taking people's coats and getting them drinks and other such rubbish. Molly got given her bunch of flowers and then there was a flurry of polite nothings that made Sherlock grind his teeth.

“Are you playing anything for us today?” asked Mrs. Hudson, nodding at his violin.

Sherlock stared at her blankly. “There aren't any Easter songs.”

“What about Vivaldi's Spring?” asked Molly. “That's sort of themed, isn't it?”

Sherlock considered that and then went to get his violin. Playing something was far better than sitting around trying not to scream at the inanity of small talk.

Spring wasn't one of his favourite pieces but it was one he'd played often enough to be able to run through now without having to concentrate too much. He got the usual round of applause when he was finished and bowed in acknowledgement.

“So, what's this hunt then?” asked Lestrade, who Sherlock knew was not a fan of classical music. Clearly he was hoping to head off a full concert.

“It's an egg hunt,” said Sherlock, putting his violin away. “Obviously. I have hidden twenty eggs around this room for you three to search for. The person who finds the most will be the winner.”
“And what does the winner get?” asked Molly.

Sherlock stared at her blankly. “They'll have won.”

John cleared his throat. “Sherlock believes a smug sense of satisfaction is all anyone could ever want as a prize.”

“She tried that on my kids, but it didn't go down so well,” said Lestrade. He stood up. “So, they're just in this room, then?”

Sherlock nodded. “I shall give you a countdown,” he said, and Molly and Mrs. Hudson got to their feet as well. John backed out of the way into the kitchen. “Three... two... one, go!”

The resulting action was intensely feeble. It took Sherlock less than two minutes to realise that he had severely over-estimated their intelligence and then it became actually physically painful to watch. Lestrade lifted all the sofa cushions but didn't open any of the covers to look inside, Mrs. Hudson wandered about peering behind picture frames and knick-knacks without any real strategy and Molly seemed to think that Sherlock would be simple-minded enough to hide eggs behind the curtains.

“Oh god, are you all braindead?” he asked in despair.

“Right, okay,” said John. “How about you come in here and give me a hand, Sherlock? Rather than glaring at them and spitting insults, which isn't really the most hospitable behaviour.”

He grabbed Sherlock's arm and dragged him into the kitchen, shutting one of the doors behind them so that the sitting room was partially blocked off.

“How can three people, one of them a Detective Inspector, be so appallingly-”

“We can still hear you!” Lestrade called.

Sherlock shut his mouth tightly and gave John a look that he hoped effectively communicated his frustration.

John gave him an amused smile and then kissed him, which went a long way to making up for everything. “Calm down,” he said. “It's meant to be fun.”

“Watching idiots bungling-”

John held up a hand. “Stop,” he said. “Enough. Lay the table.”

Sherlock took a deep breath and nodded. “Fine,” he said. Any distraction would be welcome.

“Give everyone a chick on their place setting,” said John, handing Sherlock a box of fluffy yellow toys. Sherlock regarded them with disgust, but took the box. “And cheer up,” added John. “Get in the spirit. If the Easter Bunny turns up now-”

“I know, I know,” said Sherlock. He took a deep breath, fixed his eyes on John's face, and pulled out the emotions that were attached to having him in his life. After a minute or two, a smile grew on his face.

John nodded. “Better,” he said, and turned back to the stove.

Sherlock did his best to concentrate on laying the table, but he couldn't completely block out the sounds from the other room.
“How many have you got?”

“One.”

“I can't even find one.”

“Perhaps next year we should persuade John to do the hiding. Then we might have a hope.”

“I've found another one!”

“Oh, well done!”

At this rate, it was going to take them all day. Sherlock clenched his hand around a fork and then forced himself to relax it. This was a happy occasion. He was filled with joy. He was not going to stab one of their friends with a fork.

“So how many do we have all together now?”

“Four.”

Sherlock felt his eye twitch.

John let out a sigh. “Keep an eye on the food,” he said to Sherlock, then went back into the sitting room. He closed the other door behind him, shutting Sherlock completely out of the hunt.

Sherlock glanced at the pans on the stove, then looked back at the table. Cutlery, glasses, plates, tiny fluffy chicks...maybe some flowers in the centre?

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John reopened the doors ten minutes later, by which time Sherlock had, perhaps, got a bit over the top with the table.

“You can come through now,” he said.

Sherlock came back in to find Lestrade, Molly and Mrs. Hudson lined up as if in a parade. “How did you do?” he asked.

“I got five,” said Mrs. Hudson, holding her hands out to display them.

Sherlock gave a nod and directed his gaze at Molly.

“Seven,” she said.

Lestrade cleared his throat. “Six.”

Sherlock frowned. “That's only eighteen.”

“Yeah, we gave up,” said John. “Which I guess means you won on those two.”

Sherlock considered that. “And how many did you find for them?” he asked John.

“None,” said John. “I just made suggestions.”

“Very helpful suggestions,” said Mrs. Hudson. “He really knows how your mind works, it's sweet really.”
“Yes,” agreed Sherlock. Once again, John had proved that his brain was a cut above the average.

“Which means it's definitely time to have lunch,” said John, heading back into the kitchen. “Come and sit down.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Hudson as she came in, staring at the table. “Oh, that looks lovely.”

“Got a bit bored, did we?” asked Lestrade, eyeing the napkins, which Sherlock had folded into the shape of bunnies.

Sherlock shrugged. “It just sort of...happened.”

“I love the centrepiece,” said Molly, staring at the centre piece Sherlock had created out of daffodils, eggs, leftover chicks and origami rabbits.

“And you've got us more eggs,” said Lestrade, picking up the one nearest to him to look at it.

“That's not yours,” snapped Sherlock, taking it from him and putting it back in the precise centre of the place setting.

“Right, sorry,” said Lestrade, glancing at the others around the table. “Let's see- Galaxy's not mine, I'm guessing the one with lavender flowers isn't either, so...the Lion one?”

“Excellently deduced,” said John in a voice that Sherlock was horrified to realise was meant to be an imitation of him. He turned to glare at him, but John just give him an unrepentant grin.

“Obviously, the Galaxy one is for Molly,” said Sherlock. “The chocolate of single women everywhere.”

“Sherlock!” hissed John.

“No, no, it's fine,” said Molly sinking into the chair in front of the Galaxy egg. “I mean, it's not- I'd rather be single than with the wrong person.”

“Oh, yes,” agreed Mrs. Hudson, sitting beside her. “Trust me, spending a bit too much time alone is far better than spending it at a police station, waiting for your husband to be released on bail.”

There was an awkward pause. Lestrade gave Mrs. Hudson a concerned look that made Sherlock worry that there was about to be some form of sympathetic reaction.

“Well,” said Molly after a moment. “I suppose I am alone a lot, but it doesn't really feel like it. I mean, I've got Toby, and I talk to Sherrinford a lot in the evenings.”

“Sherlock's brother?” said Mrs. Hudson. “I didn't know you knew him. He's so shy – can you believe I've been living in the same house as him for months, but I've never seen so much as a hair?”

Lestrade glanced around, as if expecting to see a figure hiding behind the door. “He's not here now, is he?”

Molly's head whipped around. “Oh! Is he?”

“He's at Mycroft's,” said Sherlock, sitting himself down at the place he'd left without a plate or cutlery.

“Oh yes, I remember him saying,” said Molly, deflating. Sherlock watched the look on her face
and wondered if she realised just how obvious she was about her emotions. He wondered if he should say something to highlight why she should perhaps consider putting some emotional distance between herself and Sherrinford. That hadn't gone particularly well the last time he had attempted it though, and he was rather wary of anything that might upset her again, after the reaction from John and Sherrinford to his prank last week.

John interrupted the moment by starting to serve dinner and the conversation moved on to discussion of the food. It was the kind of inane polite babble that Sherlock hated, but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to endure it.

“Are you not eating, Sherlock?” asked Molly once everyone had been given a plate except him.

Sherlock shrugged. “Not today.”

She frowned. “You really should eat better, you know. It's probably why you're so pale all the time – you're not anaemic, are you?”

“I'm fine,” said Sherlock in a tone of voice that he hoped would end the conversation.

It didn't. “You didn't eat last time I had dinner here either,” said Lestrade. “You don't have some kind of weird eating in front of people phobia, do you?”

“It seems such a shame for John to have cooked all this lovely food and you not to eat any of it,” added Mrs. Hudson.

Sherlock struggled to contain a sigh as he met John's eyes. John was doing his best to hide his amusement, but to someone who knew him as well as Sherlock did, it was easy to see.

“Might almost be considered not to be in the spirit of the holiday,” he said.

Sherlock gave in. “Fine,” he said. “I'll have a bit, if it will make you all leave me alone.”

John stood up to get another plate.

“That's the spirit,” said Lestrade. “I've got to be honest, knowing you and your experiments like I do, if you weren't eating, I might suspect you'd done something to the food.”

Sherlock snorted, accepting the plate from John and wondering how little he could get away with putting on it. “I wouldn't risk John's wrath like that.” He took a single potato, glanced at the mound of them on Lestrade's plate, and reluctantly took another one.

“If you're not hungry, that's your fault for deciding this was the morning for a massive cooked breakfast,” said John. “Don't force it down if you're not going to enjoy it.”

Sherlock gave him a grateful look and put back the second potato. He didn't mind nibbling on the occasional bit of food, especially if it was one of Mrs. Hudson's biscuits, but being dead meant he was never hungry. Eating a full plate of food would become rather uncomfortable, not to mention incredibly dull.

Mrs. Hudson had made Simnel cake for after, which Sherlock had a slice of. It was only polite, after all, and besides, Mrs. Hudson's baking was always excellent. Not long after that, their guests made their excuses and left, which made some of the tension in Sherlock's spine relax.

“Thanks so much,” said Molly as she left. “I had a lovely time. And thank you for the flowers and the egg – I'm sorry I didn't get you anything, I didn't think.”
“You could let me back into the morgue,” suggested Sherlock. There was still a week to go on his ban, and he was itching to get his hands on a liver or two.

“Oh no,” said Molly. “Sorry, I really can't. Sherrinford made me promise not to give in before I said I would.”

Of course. Bloody Sherrinford.

“It’s such a shame he couldn't be here,” said Molly. “I mean, I understand why he went to Mycroft's, but- Well. It would have been nice if he could join in a bit. I know he gets lonely.”

Did he? Sherlock contemplated that. Sherrinford saw him and John, and Mycroft occasionally. What more could he want? Well, maybe not to see Mycroft at all.

“He is rather isolated for such a social person,” agreed John. “But his injuries are- well, he really couldn't have been here. He can't bear the idea of people seeing him.”

“Oh, I know,” said Molly. “He's made that very clear to me. It's just- well, we're all nice people aren't we? He could have just covered up somehow. A balaclava or something. We wouldn't have minded and then he could have joined in.”

“It would take a lot more than a balaclava for Sherrinford to have Easter lunch,” said Sherlock, trying to make the tone of his voice forbidding enough to end the conversation.

“I suppose,” said Molly, sounding despondent. “It's just- Well. He says he finds one-way Skype chats as frustrating as I do, but he doesn't seem to want to come up with any solutions.”

“It's a hard situation,” said John. “You just have to respect his wishes, really.”

Molly made a face. “They're not his wishes, they're his fears,” she said. “And they'll lead him to spend his whole life locked up, away from everyone, like, like some kind of princess in a tower.”

“I'll give you a hundred pounds if you buy him a pink Princess cone hat with a long, sparkly veil,” said Sherlock, trying to change the subject.

The problem was that Molly was right, if the story they'd presented to her had been true. If Sherrinford really did just have bad burn scars, then the best thing would be for him to try and work his way back into society. Being a skeleton, though, wasn’t something that even the most understanding normal person would let go without asking a lot of questions.

“Sparkly to match your hair?” asked John.

Sherlock glared at him. The glitter John had covered him with on April Fools Day was still visible in his hair, despite all his efforts to wash it out. Sherrinford made sure to point that out after every single one of Sherlock's unsuccessful sessions with every shampoo and conditioner in the flat.

Molly looked at Sherlock's hair and Sherlock knew she was focusing on the tiny dots of glitter in it. He turned his glare on her instead. “Is Sherrinford's hair the same colour as yours?” she asked, which was not what Sherlock was expecting. “Dark hair looks best with glitter, I think.”

Sherlock thought of the shiny white dome of Sherrinford's skull. Glitter would just slide right off that. “All my family have dark hair,” he said, and then wondered if that was true. He had no idea what colour his father's hair had been, although he was willing to assume that Mycroft's had been at least a bit ginger.
“Oh,” said Molly, her eyes going distant as she, presumably, added that to her mental image of Sherrinford. “And is he tall like you as well?”

“I’m not that tall,” said Sherlock, rather than answer that question. “I just look tall when stood next to John.”


“Oh, yes,” said Molly. “Goodbye. Thanks again.”

She finally left, and Sherlock let himself relax. “How many other holidays involve group meals?” he asked.

John sat down in his chair with a sigh. “Just Christmas,” he said. “Months and months away. By the way, I did all the cooking, so you’re clearing up.”

Sherlock stared at him in shock. “I barely ate any of it!”

John shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.”

Sherlock thought fast. “I’ll do it,” he said, “but only if you can find the last two eggs hidden in this room.”

John turned to look at him, then glanced around the room. “Right,” he said, and stood up.

He went straight to the fireplace and crouched down, staring up the chimney. There was a grating sound as he moved aside the loose brick, then he emerged with the egg that was in there. “One,” he said, tossing it at Sherlock.

He then picked up Sherlock's violin case, set it gently down on the table and opened it, pulling the egg out of the pocket for sheet music. “Two,” he said, throwing that one at Sherlock as well.

Sherlock scowled. “If you knew where they were, why didn't you direct the others to them?”

John shrugged, closing the violin case again. “I didn't really like the idea of them messing about with your violin. I know how much it means to you.”

Sherlock considered the idea of Molly or Lestrade fumbling with his violin while searching the case and had to admit that he found the idea rather uncomfortable. How strange that John would have known that he'd feel that way when Sherlock hadn't considered it when hiding the egg.

“And the fireplace?”

John shrugged. “I like having a couple of hiding places around the flat,” he said. “Especially ones Lestrade doesn't know about. I mean, he's a good bloke, but he is police.”

“Your gun,” said Sherlock, nodding to himself. “Of course. It's currently under a floorboard in the bedroom, but you like to move it around different hiding places.”

“Probably stupid,” said John. “Not as if anyone really even knows to look for it. Anyway, I won, the washing up is all yours.”

He sat back down in his chair and Sherlock stood up with a sigh. A deal was a deal, after all.

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After Sherlock had cleared up, he brought the centrepiece he had created into the sitting room and set it on the mantelpiece where Sherrinford had used to sit when he was nothing but a skull. He reached inside it, pulled out a crème egg and presented it to John.

“I believe I owe you this from last year.”

John looked confused for a moment before his face cleared and he laughed. “Not feeling the urge to throw it out the window?”

“Not this year,” said Sherlock, sitting down in his chair. “A lot has changed since then.”

“Yes,” agreed John, turning the egg over in his hands and looking at it. “God, that feels so long ago. I just thought you were a bit eccentric back then.”

“I am a bit eccentric,” Sherlock pointed out.

“Yeah, true,” said John. “So am I, really.”

One of the most interesting things about John was that he never seemed to realise just how abnormal he was, compared to the tediousness of every other person on the planet. ’A bit eccentric’ didn't begin to cover it when you were in a relationship with a corpse and sharing a flat with a skeleton, and barely batted an eyelid over your boyfriend revealing that he was originally from another world.

Sherlock was overcome by a wave of affection and couldn't stop himself from expressing it with a smile, which John caught and returned. For a moment, everything was blissfully perfect.

There was a thump from the landing. Sherlock tore his gaze away from John's face in order to glare in that direction. “What now?”

The door opened and in hopped The Easter Bunny. Sherlock caught the sigh before it could escape and plaster a smile on instead, standing up in greeting.

“Happy Easter,” he said.

The Easter Bunny looked around the room, staring at the centrepiece on the mantelpiece for a long time before replying. “Happy Easter,” he said, coming further into the room.

John stood up as well, giving a nervous little nod. If Sherlock hadn't already deduced just how unnerved John was by a giant talking rabbit, that would have told him everything. “Happy Easter.”

The Easter Bunny's beady black eyes fixed on the crème egg in his hand and then he gave a little nod. “I am here to see if you have fulfilled your part in our bargain.”

“We've celebrated with our friends, and had an egg hunt,” said Sherlock.

The Easter Bunny nodded slowly. “You have covered an impressive number of local traditions.”

Relief washed through Sherlock.

“Although, you have missed out at least one major aspect,” continued The Easter Bunny.

Sherlock frowned. What on earth could they have missed?

“There are hot cross buns in the kitchen,” said John, quickly. “I'm going to have some for tea.”
The Easter Bunny stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. “Fine, then,” he said. He reached into the basket he was carrying and pulled out two eggs, which he handed to each of them. “May your basket be full of joy and peace,” he said, rather formally.

“Uh, thanks,” said John. “You too.”

The Easter Bunny looked at Sherlock. “Perhaps next year, you should bear in mind that the point of an egg hunt is the fun of the search, not the difficulty of the hiding.”

“I overestimated the intelligence of my audience,” said Sherlock. “It won’t happen again.”

The Easter Bunny nodded, then turned and hopped out of the room.

John let out a long breath. “Christ,” he muttered. “He freaks me out.”

“I know,” said Sherlock. He took him in his arms and pressed a kiss to his lips. “We made it, though! Another holiday down.”

John smiled up at him and returned the kiss. “We're nearly at the break for the summer.”

“God, I'm really looking forward to that,” said Sherlock.

“I know,” said John. He pulled away to look at the egg that The Easter Bunny had given him. “Are these magic or something?”

Sherlock inspected his own. “No,” he said. “They're Cadbury's.”

John tutted. “Easter has become so commercialised.”

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Mycroft didn't return Sherrinford until Monday evening, by which time Sherlock and John had wiped all traces of Easter from the flat and John had gone off to do something boring, like buy food.

Sherrinford slumped onto the sofa as soon as he came in, pulling out his mobile and tapping away at it.

“Good to see you too,” said Sherlock.

Mycroft let out an over-dramatic sigh. “He’s been like that since yesterday,” he said, moving to sit down as well. Sherlock had to work out a way to get Mycroft to just drop Sherrinford off and then leave. “Constant texting. It was similar to what I assume living with a teenager must be like.”

“You can hardly talk,” said Sherrinford. “You spent the whole time on your laptop doing work things. Just like you did last week as well. We used to actually do things together.”

Mycroft scowled. “It's a rather trying time at work,” he said. “There are things going on that require my full attention.”

Sherrinford snorted. “Right.” His phone beeped and his attention returned to it.

“Honestly, Mycroft,” said Sherlock. “You've been running this country for years. Surely you've set it up so that all you need to do is give gentle nudges every so often?”

Mycroft glared at him, which Sherlock enjoyed.
“As simple as it may seem to an outsider, there are thousands of complexities to consider,” said Mycroft. “And, unlike the ease of hunting down cut-throats, it is not always easy to decipher what the correct course of action should be.”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows. “Are you admitting to not always knowing everything?”

“Even I am not infallible,” admitted Mycroft. “There are chinks in my armour. Occasionally they can be manipulated.”

He sounded grimly resigned to that, and Sherlock wondered if he really was in some sort of real trouble.

Sherrinford set his phone down and patted Mycroft’s knee. “Do you want to tell us about it? Get some brotherly advice?”

Mycroft shook his head stiffly. “It is not a matter I can speak about.”

Sherrinford shrugged. “I think you can trust us. It’s not as if we have any interest in the state of this world, or its political intrigues.”

Mycroft shook his head. “Some things are best kept to as few ears as possible.”

Sherrinford let out his own version of Mycroft’s overly-dramatic sigh, which Sherlock thought was probably the original. He wished he could have seen Mycroft and Sherrinford together when Mycroft was young, before Sherlock was born. He had the strong impression that Mycroft had spent several years doing his best to become Sherrinford 2.0, which must have been hilarious to watch.

“Fine. Then give us the vague outline. Come on, spill all your troubles to big brother, just like when you were a kid being teased by the vampires for having ruddy cheeks.”

“He had ruddy cheeks?” asked Sherlock.

Sherrinford grinned. “Either that, or some kind of weird rash.”

“You are not convincing me that you are the right people to discuss my problems with,” said Mycroft.

“Probably not,” said Sherrinford, “but, really, who else do you have?”

“God, that’s depressing,” said Mycroft with a sigh.

“Not really,” said Sherlock. “Who else would you find to talk to who would be as intelligent as us, and know you well enough to provide salient advice? Really, we are the best possible choices.”

Mycroft was silent for a long moment and then he made a pained face. “I suppose it can be condensed down to an attempt to manipulate Government business by using personal leverage against me.”

“And you didn’t just laugh at them?” asked Sherrinford.

“As I said,” said Mycroft. “I do have a few chinks in my armour.”

“What on earth could they be?” asked Sherlock. “I thought you were a stone-cold rock.”

Mycroft completely ignored him. “I suppose I’m just looking for the line I should tread between
protecting my personal interests and doing what is right for the country.”

“Well, if someone is trying to blackmail you,” said Sherrinford. “Surely the answer is obvious? No matter how serious the threat is, you can't give in to them. Otherwise they'll just keep coming back every week with some new demand, and they'll be the ones running the country instead.”

Mycroft slumped. Sherlock hadn't known he could do that - he'd never seen his posture be anything other than completely straight. Whatever threat that was being used against him, it must be serious.

“I'm aware of that,” said Mycroft. “I suppose I'm allowing fear to rule my actions.”

“Don't let it,” said Sherrinford. “Come on, Mycroft, you can stand up to them. You made those vampires pay when you were a boy, you can show whoever this is too. Holmeses don't let themselves get manipulated.”

“What did you do to the vampires?” asked Sherlock with interest.

Mycroft allowed himself a smile. “I put garlic powder in their umbrellas. When they opened them, it was a bit like acid rain.”

Sherlock returned his smile. That must have been interesting to watch.

“You see?” said Sherrinford. “That's how we deal with threats. We don't give in to them.”

Mycroft hesitated, then nodded. “You're right. I am letting myself get caught up in the hysteria of other people.”

“We are not other people,” Sherlock pointed out.

Mycroft pulled out his phone and stood up. “Excuse me, I have to make a phone call.”

He was already dialling as he went out into the hallway.

“We're going with version one,” he said as the door shut behind him.

Sherrinford's mobile beeped again and he picked it up, read the text, and sighed.

“Did you speak to Molly about me yesterday?”

“Only very briefly,” said Sherlock. “You are not the fascinating subject you perhaps imagine you are.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” said Sherrinford. “I'm the most exciting thing anyone could ever talk about.”

He stabbed an answer out on his phone.

Sherlock snorted. “Yeah, only to the braindead.” Like Molly, he wanted to add, but given Sherrinford's reaction to his April Fool's prank, it seemed better to bite his tongue on that one.

Sherrinford's phone beeped again and he scowled at it. “Seriously, did you tell her it would be okay for me to meet her, as long as I was just wearing a big sheet or something?”

“No,” said Sherlock. “She did mention something like that, and both John and I attempted to pour cold water on the idea.”

“She didn't pay any attention,” said Sherrinford. “She's been nagging me about it ever since. Surely if you wear a balaclava it will be fine. You know I don't care about your appearance, I just want to
watch Timetravellers, Inc with you.” For a skull, Sherrinford was extraordinarily good at broadcasting emotion. The melancholy glint in his eye was enough to tell Sherlock just how much he wanted to be able to say yes to Molly.

“Well, you do go out in public swaddled up,” Sherlock said.

Sherrinford shook his head. “That's in public. No one bothers looking at strangers in public, not properly. Molly would be watching me, though, she'd notice that there's not actually a nose in place behind the balaclava, that there's nothing but eye sockets. There are enough small details for an observant person to notice that there's nothing normal about me.”

“There is nothing normal about any of us,” said Mycroft, coming back in. “Luckily, there are very few truly observant people in London. How long did it take John to notice Sherlock was not of this world? He didn't; he had to be told.”

Sherlock couldn't tell if that was meant to be a dig at John or not, so he erred on the side of caution and glared at Mycroft anyway.

“'From another world' is a bit different from 'is a skeleton','” said Sherrinford. “Sherlock wasn't even dead at that point.”

“No for want of trying,” said Mycroft.

Sherlock stood up. “Right, okay, time to leave,” he said. “Your welcome is officially worn out.”

He started to usher Mycroft out of the room and got him most of the way out when John came up the stairs with the shopping.

“Hello, Mycroft,” he said, far more cheerfully than Sherlock through was justified. “I was about to make tea, did you want some?”

Sherlock let out a groan.

“That would be lovely, thank you, John,” said Mycroft, side-stepping Sherlock to go back into the flat and shooting him a malicious grin as he did so.

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Three days later, Sherrinford was still moping about, fielding constant texts from Molly and occasionally letting out angst-ridden sighs. Sherlock was very close to snatching his phone off him and putting it in a blender.

Of course, he'd have to buy a blender first.

He Googled 'best blender to liquidise a phone' and found himself watching a playlist of Youtube videos that made him want to run a whole experimental series on the question.

He was debating whether or not the sound of blending was too loud for John to sleep through when John handed Sherlock a cup of tea, sat down on the sofa beside him, and turned on the telly.

“Turn your laptop speakers off, will you?” he asked. “It's time for the news.”

Sherlock did so, but made sure to make an annoyed sound at the same time. It wouldn't do for John to realise how much he could get Sherlock to do just by asking.

John patted at his thigh. “Thanks.”
“Tonight's top stories: A tsunami warning has been issued after an 8.6 magnitude earthquake hit off the coast of Indonesia.

“A Florida special prosecutor has charged George Zimmerman with the murder in the second degree in relation to the death of Trayvon Martin.

“A draft of the preliminary report of the Leveson Inquiry has been leaked, revealing strong recommendations for the regulation of the press.

“And in North Korea, Kim Jong Un has been named First Secretary of the North Korean Workers Party.”

Sherlock let out a long sigh and stopped listening. Why was there never any interesting news? Would it be too much to ask for the occasional serial killer? Perhaps with crime scene photographs and a brief summary of any autopsies?

Could he solve a murder in the length of time that a news programme dedicated to each news segment? He found himself timing how long the presenters spent talking about each pointless, inconsequential bit of news. If they were showing case files instead of wittering on about tectonic aftershocks, would he be able to solve, say, the Black Dahlia case?

Probably not, he acknowledged to himself when the presenters moved on to Florida before he'd had time to access all the files in his Memory Palace on the case. Perhaps he should use a more average case as an example. He started to consider the files from a case he had solved three years ago in Woolwich, but then John let out a quiet sigh and moved to lean against Sherlock. The warmth and weight of his body broke through all Sherlock’s attempts at concentrating and he found himself moving his laptop aside so that he could put his arm around John and pull him in close.

Well, it was a pointless exercise anyway. Television news pandered to completely the wrong sort of people to ever show anything interesting.

Sherrinford let out a long sigh and put his phone to one side. He turned to one side so that he could collapse back across the arm of the chair, hanging his skull down. “Why can't this just be easy?” he asked in almost a whine.

“Interpersonal relationships?” asked John. “Can't imagine. They've always seemed simple as hell to me.”

Sherlock snorted. “Yes, I remember that from back when you used to have girlfriends.”

John shifted enough to dig an elbow into Sherlock's side. “Oh, and who was it who made sure those relationships were complicated?”

Sherlock felt nothing but smug satisfaction as he remembered how easy it had been to monopolise John's attention until the latest woman who was trying to pursue him lost her temper and went away.

“Maybe I should follow Sherlock's method and try just sulking like a toddler until she gives up on reasonable behaviour from me,” said Sherrinford thoughtfully.


If Sherlock had known how much time Sherrinford and John would spend mocking him, he'd never have suggested Sherrinford live with them in first place.
“True,” said Sherrinford. “The last thing I want is for her to start babying me by nagging me to eat and sleep all the time.”

“John doesn't do that,” Sherlock pointed out.

“Because you don't need to eat or sleep,” John said. “If you were still alive, I'd probably still be spending all my time and energy trying to get enough daily calories into you to make sure you didn't keel over.”

“Good thing I'm dead, then,” snapped Sherlock. “If I'd known you found it that much of a bother, I'd have jumped off a building much sooner.”

John stiffened, then sat up, pulling away from Sherlock's arm. He didn't say anything, but a tense silence filled the room which made it very clear just how badly Sherlock had misstepped with that one.

“...draft of the preliminary part of the Leveson report today. The first official version of the report will be released on May 1st, and will give a clear overview of just how the final report, due to be published in November, will deal with the issue of media ethics.”

No one was breaking the silence. Sherrinford had his eyes fixed on the TV screen, but he was clacking his phalanges on his patella in a pointed way.

“This leaked draft reveals that the proposed guidelines for the media are to be wide-ranging and enforced by an independent board with the power to issue official reprimands, fines, and even, in extreme cases, imprison journalists and editors who breach them.”

Sherlock broke. “Obviously, that was a joke and I'd never do anything that would upset you that much again unless I really didn't have a choice.”

John gave a nod and relaxed back against Sherlock, tucking himself back under his arm. “And don't you forget that.”

Sherlock pulled him in close.

“Never do anything like imitating a corpse and then acting like a zombie to one of your closest friends,” remarked Sherrinford.

Sherlock let out a sigh. “I have apologised. I bought flowers. Molly has entirely forgiven me. You can't keep bringing it up to score points.”

“Of course I can,” said Sherrinford. “I'm your family. I don't have to ever let anything go if I can keep using it against you.”

“You know,” remarked John, “there's a reason I never see any of my family.”

Sherrinford muttered something under his breath, but gave in. “Fine. Fine! I'll shut about it. Unless Sherlock does anything that terrible again.”

“Don't worry,” said John. “Next year, I'll make him run each and every prank past me first.”

Sherlock frowned. “How am I meant to fool you then?”

John shrugged, his shoulders pressing momentarily closer into Sherlock. “Well, you barely managed that this year, so I don't-”
“I was deliberately dumbing down,” said Sherlock quickly. “I didn't want to upset your delicate sensibilities.”

“Right,” said John sceptically. He reached up and ruffled Sherlock's hair. “Whatever you say, Twinkle-Curls.”

Sherlock clamped his teeth together and glared at the fat dictator waving on screen. Next year. Oh, next year, he was going to pull out all the stops. John wouldn't know what had hit him.

The news finally finished and Sherlock eyed his laptop, wondering if he could go back to watching things be blended.

“Is there anything worth watching on tonight?” asked John.

“I sincerely doubt it,” said Sherlock, hoping John would agree. If the television went off, he could play the violin later, and both Sherrinford and John would look at him with pleasure and awe. He did enjoy it when they admired his talent.

Sherrinford cleared his throat. “Uh, Molly sent me a film that she wants me to watch. Some personal favourite. It's called Penelope. I could stick that on if you didn't mind watching it with me?”

“Sure, why not?” said John, and Sherlock sighed. God only knew what kind of drivel Molly thought was worth watching.

They were approximately six minutes in when Sherlock started sniggering.

“Shut up,” hissed Sherrinford.

Sherlock waited another four minutes, then couldn't help commenting. “It's very revealing about how Molly thinks of you, isn't it?”

Sherrinford hunched over without replying.

John jabbed a sharp elbow into Sherlock's ribs. “Just watch the film.”

Sherlock did. It took quite a lot to keep quiet as the lead character discovered that with the power of a large scarf and good friends, she could find happiness despite a physical appearance that she had thought required total seclusion, but he just about managed it. When the curse was lifted by her learning to love herself, he barely stifled his laughter with a cough that fooled no one. It was only when true love came through and provided a happy ending, however, that he couldn't keep it any longer.

“Should we be more worried that Molly has cast herself as a rogueish gambling addict or that she might decide to start wearing that kind of hat?”

Sherrinford shot a glare at him and stood up in a flail of clicking joints, pulling his phone out as he stormed out of the room.

“Sherlock,” scolded John.

“Sssh,” said Sherlock, holding a hand up.

Sherrinford had stayed outside on the landing, as Sherlock had suspected he might. If they sat very still, they could hear every word of his conversation with Molly.
“What the hell was that?”

“The film! I'm not some insipid rich kid with a complex about a single defect, and I don't just need self-confidence or true love or whatever in order to realise my inner bloody beauty!”

“Of course I'm angry! I thought you were my friend. I thought-”

“No, no you're not. A friend would respect my boundaries. I have been completely clear and honest with you, from the start. Sending me stupid feel-good romance films in order to manipulate me is low.”

There was a long pause.

“Fine,” said Sherrinford eventually, and the anger had faded from his voice and been replaced by weariness. “Okay, fine. But, you see, this is all there is. I can't ever offer you more than a voice down a phone line. And that's- that's not fair on you. On either of us. I do care about you, Molly. Far more than I should. I do wish I could be the man who could actually be with you, take you out to dinner, cuddle you on the sofa while time-travellers in tight jeans have emotional issues on screen. But I'm never going to be. I can't be.

“No, Molly, just- listen. I can't be that for you, but I can get out of the way of anyone else who might be able to be. You're a great woman, you deserve someone who can give you all that. That's why I'm going to stop contacting you, and ask you to do the same.”

Sherlock hadn't realised what an emotional impact it would have to hear such sad resignation in his brother's voice. He thought about the moment last Easter when he'd thought John wasn't going to keep Easter eggs and such things out of the flat, and he'd have to move out or risk being caught. The idea of leaving John behind, even after only a couple of months, had been enough to make it feel as if his internal organs were being crushed. Hearing Sherrinford walk away from the person he claimed was his John brought exactly the same feeling back.

“No, Molly, this is exactly how it has to be,” said Sherrinford, with leaden weight. “Goodbye. I- I hope the rest of your life brings you more joy than I have.”

There was a click as Sherrinford rung off. John met Sherlock's eyes and then leant in for a brief kiss. “Be kind,” he hissed under his breath.

Sherlock was mildly insulted. Anyone would think he had a history of saying what turned out to be entirely wrong thing to people who were emotionally distraught.

Sherrinford came back into the room without looking at either of them and settled back in his chair.

“Does this mean you won't need that phone any more?” asked Sherlock. “Because there's an experiment I've been meaning to try.”

John slapped the back of his head.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: St. George’s Day, April 23rd
Sherrinford spent the next week moping. John did his best to tread lightly around him, wishing he could make him tea to cheer him up, although it was clear that Sherrinford wasn't in the mood to be cheered up yet. John knew what he was going through well enough to just leave him to it, but Sherlock very swiftly ran out of patience.

“It was bad enough when Sherrinford was receiving texts constantly and sharing embarrassing stories of our childhood but this is worse,” he moaned to John one night when they were tucked up in bed together. “He's constantly rereading her texts, you know. That's why his phone is always in his hand.”

John had a suspicion that Sherlock was mostly just annoyed that he hadn't been allowed to blend the phone. “You just have to give him time.”

Giving people time wasn't Sherlock's strong suit.

“Oh, for God's sake,” he snapped the next day when he caught Sherrinford staring at Molly's Facebook page. “Would you just-”

“Sherlock!” snapped John, glaring fiercely enough to shut Sherlock up.

Sherlock shut his mouth and stalked off to their room. Sherrinford looked at John with sad eyes—or, well, sad eye sockets, although how John was able to tell that was something he wasn't going to examine too closely. “I suppose I should pull myself together.”

“Don't rush yourself just because Sherlock is annoyed,” said John.

Sherlock wouldn't have spent so much time snapping at Sherrinford if there had been any interesting cases, but there seemed to be a sudden drought. Naturally, that sent Sherlock into a tailspin of frustration that wasn't at all helped by the fact that Lestrade kept bringing Sally with him when he came to retrieve evidence.

John knew exactly why he did it. Sherlock hated having Sally in the flat and so handed evidence over as quickly as possible to get rid of her. It made complete sense from Lestrade's point of view, but it also meant that any time John got Sherlock's mood to lift a bit, Sally would turn up, make a couple of derisive comments, and bring on a fit of irritation that lasted hours after she'd gone.

John was in their bedroom, putting laundry away and wishing almost as much as Sherlock probably was that there would be a murder so he could do something more interesting when he heard Lestrade and Sally arrive one afternoon.

“Oh, what now?” he heard Sherlock say. “Haven't you pinched enough of the things in this flat already?”

“It's not 'pinching' if it's police property,” Lestrade pointed out.

John put down the stack of jeans in his hands and headed out into the sitting room.

“We'll only 'pinch' your stuff if it turns out to be evidence against you,” said Sally. John came out
into the kitchen in time to catch her giving Sherrinford a look of distrust where he was leant stiffly against a wall.

Sherlock let out a long sigh. “What kind of idiot would I be to have kept the bones of a murder victim and to parade them in my living room, in front of the police? Honestly, think.”

“An arrogant one,” shot back Sally. “That doesn't sound like you at all, does it? Oh, wait.”

“Oi, enough,” said Lestrade. “Look, Sherlock, we just need the crime scene photos you took from the Marion Littleton case.”

Sherlock frowned as if he had no idea what they were talking about. John could see this turning into a saga, so he headed it off as quickly as he could. The last time he'd seen them, Sherrinford had been using the blood splatters as inspiration for one of his paintings.

“They're in Sher- the upstairs bedroom,” he said. “I'll get them.”

Sherlock shot him a betrayed look that John ignored as he headed towards the landing.

Downstairs, there was a loud bang as the front door crashed open and then feet thumped up the stairs. John got out onto the landing just in time to see black-masked men rushing up, guns clutched in their hands.

“Everyone stay still!” the first one commanded as he reached the landing, gun lowering to aim at John.

John twitched with the desire to thump him one. “Who the bloody hell are you?!”

“Oi!” said Lestrade, coming out. “Police! Put the weapon down-”

“Silence!” said the leader as his comrades came up behind him. One of them headed straight for John and he realised, too late, that he had a syringe in his hand.

It was plunged into John's arm before he could stop it. “Oh, you fucker,” he gasped, fumbling to pull it out.

The man grabbed his wrist and yanked it away as the drug hit John's bloodstream, making everything go fuzzy.

“John!” he read Sherlock say, as if from a great distance, and he looked over to see that he was in the doorway of the sitting room, surrounded by gunmen.

“Shhher-” he started to reply, but he didn't get the word out before everything went black.

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When he woke up, he was lying on something soft with a warm shape next to him and a soothing, repetitive sensation on his head. He hear himself make a quiet humming sound.

“John?” said Sherlock's voice. “John, wake up. Immediately, please.”

It was the please that made John's eyelids flutter open. Sherlock was only ever that polite when he was terrified.

Sherlock was lying next to him, bent close over John's face and stroking a hand through his hair. “Oh, thank god,” he said. “You have been unconscious for far too long.”
John blinked at him and reached out with a clumsy hand to touch his cheek. “Awake now,” he managed.

Sherlock snorted. “Not really,” he said. He ducked his head to press against John's lips.

John let himself enjoy that for a moment before his brain struggled to life enough to remember the circumstances he'd been in before blacking out. “Where we?” he asked, trying to raise his head to look.

Sherlock's hand kept it in place. “Nowhere interesting,” he said. “A cell. Nothing's happening, it's fine to take time to wake up properly. There's water, do you want water?”

Water might make John vomit right now. He shook his head.

“Right, okay,” said Sherlock. “Then just lie there and recover. No need for any heroics, not yet.”

There was a note in his voice that it took John a few minutes of staring up at his face to place. Fear. *I terrified him,* he realised.

John's back was against the wall and Sherlock's body was curled around his, blocking it off from the rest of the room, almost like a shield. John felt his heart throb with love and had to take a moment to compose himself. It wouldn't do to babble out how besotted he was just because a drug had lowered his inhibitions.

Sherlock's hand was still stroking through John's hair. John took another minute to get most of his brain back in gear and then sat up enough to kiss Sherlock. “I'm fine,” he said.

Sherlock nodded curtly. “Of course.”

John pulled himself up enough to see the rest of the room. It was, as Sherlock had said, a cell, with white-painted concrete walls and a steel door that looked strong enough to keep an elephant contained. There were four beds, two heavy metal bunks that were bolted to the walls and two camp-beds. John and Sherlock were on one of the bunks, Sally was on the other and Lestrade was on one of the camp-beds.

John groaned. “They got them too?”

Sherlock glanced over his shoulder as if only just becoming aware that they weren't alone. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose we should be glad Mrs. Hudson was out.”

John struggled to sit up fully. “Are they still unconscious? I should check them over.”

“They're fine,” said Sherlock, holding him down. “Just a little slower coming out of it. Lestrade's breathing has already changed, he'll come around soon. Sally has a smaller body mass, it will take her longer.”

John frowned at Sherlock. “Were you drugged?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “I'm dead,” he reminded John in a quiet voice, and then added, louder, “My history means I have built up quite a resistance. I woke up a while ago.”

John nodded. Of course, they could be listening. Whoever they were.

“How do you know who has us?”
Sherlock's face shuttered over. “No,” he spat out. “But once I get hold of them, I'll-”

Lestrade let out a long sound that might have been a groan.

“He's waking up,” said John, pushing Sherlock aside so that he could sit up. “I'll check on him.”

Sherlock moved aside with a sigh. “He'll be fine.”

“Drugs have unpredictable effects,” said John, struggling to get his legs to bear his weight.

“Such a doctor,” said Sherlock, as if it was an insult.

He helped John over to Lestrade's bed though, and even checked on Sally when John asked him to.

Lestrade and Sally woke up more slowly than John. By the time they were sitting up, Sherlock had got bored and started to go over the entire cell with a fine-tooth comb.

“All right,” said Lestrade, loosening his tie and undoing his top shirt button. “Go on, genius. Where are we, and who the hell were those men?”

Sherlock had crouched to examine the floor in front of the door. He glanced back, then stood up in a swift movement. “They're certainly professionals,” he said. “I suspect they were hired by a third party, although I couldn't say who at this point. Someone with a great deal of money and a large grudge.”

Sally snorted. “So, any rich bloke who has ever met you, then.”

“Why kidnap, though?” asked Lestrade. “Don't people with a grudge against Sherlock usually just try and kill him?”

“Or me,” said John, which earned him a look from Sherlock that was probably meant to be a glare, but contained too much wounded fear for that. Right, perhaps John shouldn't mention how often people tried to kill him so soon after Sherlock had watched him collapse, unconscious, into a kidnapper's arms.

“Why bring us along?” added Sally. “Unless it's some sort of anti-police thing?”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, this was aimed at me and John. They came to our address, after all. They were only expecting to kidnap two people – look at the beds in here. This room has clearly been prepared in advance for us, but only had two beds. The camp-beds are afterthoughts, put in when the team contacted their support to let them know they'd snatched an extra two people. Not to mention that there are only two glasses on the sink. That said, there was no hesitation at the flat. Their instructions were to go in and grab everyone in the flat. There was no conversation or debate with us, they just came in, drugged us, and got out. Very professional. And this room,” he looked around, let out a long sigh and then returned to the bed to collapse on it. “There's no way to escape it. We're going to have to just sit tight and hope they make a mistake.”

Sally looked around at the room. Other than the four beds, the only other furniture was a stainless steel toilet and sink pushed into one corner.

“Seriously?” she said. “The great Sherlock Holmes, and the only plan he has is to just sit about waiting?”

“You are welcome to come up with a better one,” said Sherlock, putting an arm over his eyes.
Sally made an aggravated noise. “I'm going to the cinema tonight.”

“I really don't think you are,” said Sherlock.

“Right,” said John quickly, trying to stop an argument. “Okay, so, what? We're in the hands of professionals who have been hired by an unknown enemy. Who do we know who could have done this, and has the motive?”

Sherlock shrugged without moving. “No idea.”

“Come on,” said Lestrade. “If this is aimed at you, you must-”

“Not necessarily,” interrupted Sherlock. “I can't even work out why they would kidnap us. The most common motives for kidnapping rather than murder are for ransom or to obtain information. There is no one who would pay a ransom for me that would be worth the time and the energy of all this, and I can't think of any information I currently have that warrants it either. We'll just have to wait and see.”

John sighed and went to sit down on one of the other beds. “Great,” he said. “Aimless waiting.”

“Maybe they'll decide to torture me,” said Sherlock. “That would speed things up.”

John had a sudden vision of Sherlock tied to a chair, blood dripping from multiple wounds as a masked man tried to wring out all his secrets. He shuddered. “Sherlock,” he said in a low voice. “Don't.”

Sherlock pulled the arm away from his eyes and looked at John. John looked back, letting his horror at the mental image show in his eyes. Sherlock gave a little nod.

“I apologise,” he said, and then waved a hand at John. “You're on the wrong bed. Come here.”

John went over to him and was pulled down to where Sherlock could wrap an arm around his waist.

“Oh great,” groused Sally. “Not just stuck in a jail cell with Sherlock Holmes, but he's also snuggling his boyfriend.”

Sherlock turned on his side in order to nuzzle his face into John's side. “I didn't know you were so homophobic,” he said in a muffled voice.

“I'm not,” she snapped back. “It's only you that turns my stomach.”

“Okay, right,” said Lestrade. “Enough. If the four of us are going to be stuck in this room together for a bit, we're going to act civilly, or it's going to be hell. Sally, apologise.”

“What?” she said. “Sir!”

“Apologise,” he repeated. “You too, Sherlock.”

“Why would I do anything you say?” asked Sherlock.

“Because I'll get up and move to the other bed again if you don't,” said John. He nudged Sherlock with his elbow. “Come on, I don't want to be trapped with you and Sally snarling at each other.”

Sherlock let out a long sigh. “Fine. Sally, I apologise.”
Sally made a face, but wilted under the glare Lestrade turned on her. “Fine. Me too,” she said.

“Right then,” said Lestrade. “Let's just stick to ‘if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all' for a bit.”

“Good idea,” said John.

There was a long silence.

“Oh, this is going to be hell,” muttered Sherlock.

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Less than an hour later, John was in complete agreement with him.

“Maybe we could play Charades?” asked Lestrade with an air of desperation.

Sherlock made a pained noise and clung tighter to John, who he still hadn't let go of. John couldn't work out if he was still reacting to the shock of John being drugged or if he was using him as a prop to hide behind. Possibly both. Either way, John wasn't really complaining.

“God, no,” said Sally. “That's definitely a last resort.”

John sighed and patted at Sherlock's hair. “I went to the market and I bought a tangerine.”

“No,” said Sally decisively. “We're not playing that either.” She stood up and took a deep breath. “Actually, I need to pee. Rather badly. So if you could all just turn your backs and, uh, perhaps hum something.”

“Right,” said John, sitting up to swivel around. Sherlock didn't move, so he poked him until he made an annoyed noise and reluctantly sat up, turning his back to the corner with the toilet in it.

“What are we humming?” asked Lestrade.

“Mendelssohn's Spring Song?” suggested Sherlock.

Lestrade snorted. “As if I have the first clue how that goes.”

“I don't care what it is, but you better hurry it up,” said Sally behind them.

“Something we all know,” said John. Given Sherlock's knowledge of popular music, and Lestrade's knowledge of classical, there were very little choices. “Happy Birthday. On the count of three. One...Two...Three.”

It was a very ragged chorus of Happy Birthday but it did the job, even if Sherlock somehow managed to put contempt into his humming.

“Right, all done,” said Sally, and they came to a stop, turning back around.

“Well, there's something you can do to keep yourself entertained,” said John to Sherlock.

Sherlock frowned. “What?”

“Use your genius and the limited number of things in this room to create some sort of screen for the loo,” said John.
Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Pointless.”

Sally finished washing her hands and turned to raise an eyebrow at Sherlock. “Afraid you can't do it?”

Sherlock twitched beside John.

“I should have know you'd be the kind of genius who can't managed practical innovations,” she added.

Sherlock let out a frustrated noise then sprang to his feet. “Fine,” he hissed. “Get out of the way.”

Sally sent John a smirk as she headed back to sit on her bed, one that John couldn't help returning. As long as Sherlock had a problem to solve, he wouldn't be whining. Besides which, it was something like performance art for the rest of them.

Sherlock started with a careful examination of the area around the toilet, then turned back to the room and stood still for a moment with the expression that meant he was cataloguing and evaluating.

A minute passed.

“He can't do it,” said Sally in a sing-song voice.

Sherlock turned a glare on her then stepped forward and ripped all the sheets off the camp bed that Lestrade wasn't sitting on.

“Aren't we going to need that tonight?” asked Lestrade.

“No,” said Sherlock, turning around to dump them on the floor then coming back for the bed. “John will be sleeping with me.”

He pulled the pillow off and chucked it at John, and then put the camp-bed on its end and pushed it across the floor with a harsh grating noise.

“If you guys have sex-” started Sally.

John laughed. “I can't imagine wanting to have sex while trapped in a prison cell with two other people while unknown criminals may or may not be listening it.”

“It does seem a special kind of kink,” agreed Lestrade.

Sherlock had got the camp bed into a position against the wall where it screened off half the view of the toilet. He turned aside to pick up the sheets he’d dumped on the floor.

“Did you build dens as a kid?” asked Sally. “This all looks a bit familiar.”

“Of course not,” said Sherlock, setting to work on turning the sheets into a draped curtain across the gap. “What a moronic thing to do.”

“Oi,” said Lestrade. “My kids used to make dens.”

“Ah, and a Lestrade would never do anything moronic,” said Sherlock. He finished with the sheets and took a step backwards, then turned to John with a flourish of the hands. “One screen, complete with entrance.” He pulled back one of the sheets to reveal a gap.
“Well done,” said John.

Sherlock beamed and headed back over to sit next to him. “Do I get a kiss now?”

That wasn't a question that John bothered answering with words. He kissed Sherlock, ignoring the faint sigh from Sally.

There was a faint scrape from outside the door and John pulled away from Sherlock to look at it, getting to his feet. Sally and Lestrade stood up as well as there was a sharp click, then a metal flap at the bottom of the door opened and a tray was pushed through. A moment later the flap shut again.

Sherlock glanced at his watch. “Apparently, it's dinner time.”

John went to retrieve the tray. It held four plastic packets of sandwiches and four bananas. “Oh, this is exciting,” he said with a sigh, putting it down on the end of Lestrade's bed.

Lestrade made a face. “I should have had more than a Pot Noodle for lunch.”

Sally made a face. “I don't know why you eat those anyway. They're vile.”

Lestrade shrugged. “They're easy.” He picked up a sandwich and contemplated it. “Cheese and tomato.”

John checked the others. “It's that or egg mayonnaise.”

Lestrade sighed. “Too much to hope for a BLT, I suppose.”

“They seem to have gone for the cheapest sandwich choices,” observed Sherlock. “Which shop are they from?”

“Tesco,” said John. “Which do you want, Sally?”

She sighed. “Egg, I suppose,” she said. He handed one over with a banana then picked up a cheese and tomato for himself.

He glanced at Sherlock, who shook his head. “Feel free to share mine between you.”

Lestrade frowned. “We don't know how long we're going to be here, or how often we're going to get food. You should eat.”

“I had a big meal just before you came around,” lied Sherlock.

“Yeah, feels like I hear that a lot,” said Lestrade.

Sherlock let out a long huffy sigh. “Please tell me you're not going to start nagging me over my eating habits when you've just admitted to consuming Pot Noodles. They're hardly even categorisable as a food substance.”

“He has a point,” said Sally.

“Besides which,” added John, “Sherlock is an adult and capable of making his own choices.”

That made Lestrade snort with amusement.

They ate their sandwiches in depressed silence, washing them down with water from the sink,
sharing the two glasses between them. Sherlock did have some water, but only enough for Lestrade to notice he was drinking. John wondered how long they could stay locked in here before either Lestrade or Sally noticed that Sherlock's biological processes were no longer functioning. Probably about as long as they could stay locked up before Sherlock went mad with boredom.

“Well, that killed ten minutes,” said Lestrade with a sigh once all the food had been consumed and John had put the rubbish back on the tray and put it back by the door. “What now?”

“God,” muttered Sherlock, sprawled out on a bed with his hands clenched in his hair. “I would kill you all for my violin right now.”

“Charming,” said Sally. “That include John?” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Not sure I'd be in a relationship with a psychopath.”

“I'm not,” said John tiredly.

“Of course I wouldn't kill John,” scoffed Sherlock. “If it's this boring with him here, how incredibly tedious would it be without him?”

John felt a warm glow in his chest and leaned over to kiss Sherlock's forehead. “You say the sweetest things.”

“Oh god, please don't get romantic,” muttered Sally.

John ignored her, sliding down to lie next to Sherlock, one arm draped over his chest. “How long have we been here?”

Sherlock glanced at his watch. “It's been six hours and twenty minutes since we were taken.”

John asked the question that he'd been putting off, knowing it was only going to piss Sherlock off. “How long before Mycroft notices?”

Sherlock made a grumbling noise that John felt reverberate through his chest. “He'll already know,” he said, reluctantly. “Sherrinford will have told him. It's more a question of when he'll get here which, frankly, I'd have thought would have been hours ago. He's slipping.”

“Or they've hidden us well,” said John.

Sherlock gave a small, unhappy nod.

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It was an hour later when Sherlock cracked. John had been waiting for it for a while, ever since Sherlock had started twitching next to him, his body going completely tense and then being forced into relaxing.

Lestrade and Sally were gossiping about work colleagues, something that Lestrade seemed far more interested in than John would have guessed. John had mostly just been listening, trying to match names up with the faces he vaguely knew, and stroking a hand over Sherlock's side in a way that he hoped was soothing.

“No, Keith's got a thing with Beth. He spends half the day sending her texts – you can read them over his shoulder if you come up behind him quietly enough.”

“Beth, really? I thought she had better taste than that.”
“Bear in mind she had that fling with Rob last ye-”

“My GOD! How am I meant to stand it?!” Sherlock catapulted himself to his feet with a move that John would have said was physically impossible, leapt off the end of the bed and strode to the door. “Let us out! I will go insane, and then there will have been no point in kidnapping us at all!”

“Sherlock,” started John, getting up.

Sherlock whirled around and fixed an intense look on him. “No! You don't get to Sherlock me! We have been here for hours.” He turned back around and kicked the door. “If you're trying to soften us up, consider me softened! Come and tell me what you want with us! Get on with the interrogation or the blackmail or whatever! Just don't bloody leave me like this!”

There was no response from outside the room. Sherlock let out a cry of frustration and bent down to pick up the tray from the floor, dumping all their rubbish on the floor.

“Oi!” said Lestrade, standing up. “Calm down, Sherlock.”

Sherlock ignored him. “Let me out!” he demanded, and then hit the door with the tray. “Let me out! Let me out!” he punctuated each sentence with a slam against the door, making the room ring with the banging.

“Stop it!” commanded John sharply, stepping forward and grabbing the tray from Sherlock. There was a bad moment when John thought he was going to have to fight him for it, then Sherlock let go in favour of running his hands up to his hair and grasping tight clumps of it in his fists.

“I can't cope with this, John! They're discussing office politics!”

John tossed the tray aside so that he could step in and run his hands over Sherlock's shoulders. “Calm down,” he said firmly. “Come on, slow, steady breaths.”

“Don't mollycoddle me,” hissed Sherlock.

“I'm not,” said John. “I get it, I do. You're bored and frustrated, but this isn't going to help. Come on, deep breaths.”

Sherlock managed two before he snapped again, pulling away from John. “It's infuriating. Just sitting and waiting. We don't know who they are, why they have us - I don't know that. I hate not knowing.”

“I know,” said John, stepping forward again. “I hate it too, you know I do.”

Sherlock nodded. “I know everything about you.”

John found a smile. “You know almost everything about me,” he corrected.

Sherlock returned the smile. “Just enough mystery to be interesting.”

John didn't fool himself that that meant the storm was over. There was still something wild about Sherlock's eyes that could snap at any moment. He needed to find a way to engage his brain for a bit, otherwise all he'd done was put off the breakdown.

The problem was, how the hell were you meant to engage the brain of a genius when all you had were four bare walls and a locked door?

He glanced around at Lestrade and Sally. “Either of you got a notebook?”
Lestrade nodded, pulling one out of his jacket pocket, along with a pen. “Are you thinking it's time to start writing help notes and attaching them to the tails of mice?”

Sherlock made a pained noise. “There are no mice here,” he said. “Why do you never observe?”

“We could wrap the notes in the plastic from the sandwiches and flush them down the loo,” suggested Sally.

Sherlock stared at her. “To what possible end? So it can be found by a tosher? We're not living in Victorian London, you know.”

“A what?” asked Sally.

Sherlock waved a dismissive hand. “Sewer hunters. Men who used to enter the sewers at low tide in order to scavenge whatever rubbish had fallen in there that they could find some value in. Not important.”

“You really are just a fount of obscure information,” said Lestrade, handing the notebook to John.


He was beginning to look twitchy again, clenching and opening his fists and glancing back at the door. John held the notebook out to him. “Here,” he said.

Sherlock just looked at it. “Why would I want that? Oh god, you're not going to make me play Noughts And Crosses, are you?”

“God, no,” said John. “You're going to design a Sudoku.”

Sherlock made a face. “Why on-”

“A Sudoku,” John carried on firmly, “that I will solve in no less than eight minutes and no more than ten.”

Sherlock looked intrigued, and John allowed himself an internal sigh of relief. “Those are very specific times.”

John shrugged. “You know me very well,” he reminded him. “I'm sure you can manage it.”

Sherlock took the notebook and pen, keeping his eyes on John. “It would need to be completely tailored to your specific level of intelligence, taking into account your current emotional state and the impact it has on your concentration.”

“Yes,” agreed John. “Go for it.”

Sherlock's eyes descended to the notebook. He took it back over to the bed, pulled himself into the corner, and set to work. John let out an actual sigh of relief, and went to sit on Lestrade's bed instead.

“Nicely done,” said Lestrade in a quiet voice to him, settling back beside him.

John shook his head. “It won't last long,” he warned him. “I'm sure you can manage it.”

“Should we start plotting murders for him to solve?” asked Sally.

“Nothing you could come up with would take me longer than thirty seconds,” said Sherlock.
Sally gritted her teeth. “Bet it would if you were the victim,” she muttered.

Sherlock had already solved his own murder once, if you counted being coerced into jumping off a roof murder, which John bloody did. Probably best not to mention that, as Sherlock had solved it by turning the tables on Moriarty so that he killed himself as well. That wasn't exactly in the Met handbook.

Lestrade sighed. “What do you think it says about me that all I can think about is how much paperwork is building up while we're in here. I was intending to get a whole stack of it done this afternoon.”

“You'd have done three bits, then wandered off for a coffee and got distracted by something else,” said Sally.

Lestrade made a face, but didn't deny it.

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John solved Sherlock's Sudoku in nine minutes and four seconds.

“Okay, that has to be a fluke,” said Sally, who had been keeping time.

Sherlock made the expression that meant he was deeply impressed with himself but trying to hide it. “I just know John extremely well.”

Sally shook her head. “Fluke,” she insisted. “No one knows anyone that well.”

“Fine,” said Sherlock, taking the notebook back from John. “You pick the times.”

Sally's eyes narrowed. “Between eleven minutes and twenty seconds, and twelve minutes and—-and four seconds.”

Sherlock gave a tight nod, then retired to his bed again.

“That's pretty tight,” said Lestrade.

“I bet he manages it anyway,” said John, who had finally learnt not to underestimate Sherlock. Not when it came to feats of intelligence, anyway.

Lestrade shook his head. “He got the egg hunt wrong, didn't he?”

“That was you and Mrs. Hudson and Molly,” said John. “He knows me a lot better.”

Lestrade looked sceptical for a moment, then smirked. “Bet you a tenner he can't do it.”

He held his hand out and John didn't hesitate before shaking it. “Deal.”

“Your faith in me is touching, John,” said Sherlock, not looking up from the paper. “Try not to gamble away all the rent money.”

“Betting on you?” asked John. “How could I ever lose?”

Sherlock snorted, but when John glanced over he could see a pleased smile on his face. Excellent. As long as he was feeling flattered, he wasn't going to have a breakdown. John just had to hope this Sudoku game would keep his attention for long enough for John to come up with another plan.
The game actually managed to last several hours, especially when they started mixing it up a bit with wordsearches and crosswords. Sherlock found it harder to accurately judge John's knowledge and retention of words.

“How on earth did you get stuck on *maceration*?” he asked when John came in at thirty seconds longer than he was meant to. “It's simple! Everyone knows it!”

“I don't,” said Sally.

Sherlock glared at her. “Yes, but you're a-”

“Stop!” said John. “We're saying nice things only, remember.”

Sherlock stopped and made a face as if he was sucking a lemon. “A far more simple soul,” he finished after a moment.

“Right,” said Lestrade to John. “So, I win that one, so that makes us, what?”

“You owe me sixty pounds,” said John helpfully.

“Right,” said Lestrade with a sigh.

“We take cash or cheque,” said Sherlock helpfully.

“Fine, okay,” said Lestrade. “You two have proved you know each other disgustingly well, well done.”

“Well, Sherlock has proved he knows John,” said Sally with a glint her eye. “Does it go both ways?”

A slow grin dawned on Lestrade's face and he held the notebook out to John. “I bet you can't write a crossword that it takes Sherlock between, oh, nine and ten minutes to solve.”

Panic rose up in John and he glanced at Sherlock, who just grinned. “Of course he can. Child's play.”

Oh god, and now he was going let Sherlock down by messing it up. He took the notebook from Lestrade and went to sit on the bed. How on earth was he going to come up with questions that Sherlock wouldn't immediately know the answers to, but which he would end up being able to fill in? Sherlock either knew things or he didn't, there was no middle ground of trying to remember things, or-

Oh. A memory came to John of watching Sherlock search through his Memory Palace. That took time, even for things that were relatively easy to access in the structure. John looked back down at the notebook and started plotting.

It took him a lot longer to put together than Sherlock had taken to do his, but in the end he was confident that he'd be at least close. Privately, he'd already decided he'd count between eight and eleven minutes as a win.

“Okay,” he said. “Ready, Sally?”

Sally pulled back her sleeve to look at her watch and gave a nod.
“No cheating, Sherlock,” said Lestrade. “Don't slow down if you think you'll get it before the time.”

“Of course not,” said Sherlock, as if the very idea was ridiculous. John kept his mouth shut about all the other times Sherlock had twisted the rules so that he could come out on top.

“Okay, ready?” said Sally. “Go.”

Sherlock took the notebook and pen and stared at it for a moment before letting out a huffing laugh and sparing John an amused glance. “Very clever.”

John smiled back, and then Sherlock turned to get completely stuck in.

The next few minutes were rather tense. Sherlock filled in more clues than John had been expecting without pausing to think, then started going through the ones that required him to stop and shut his eyes, clearly accessing his Memory Palace.

“Honestly, John,” he muttered at one point. “You're lucky you were wearing that blue shirt I like that day, or I wouldn't have bothered recording that event at all.”

John glanced over to see which clue he was on.

_What did I get Mrs. Hudson for her birthday last year?_

He rolled his eyes. “It was technically from both of us,” he reminded him.

“Pointless sentimentalism,” said Sherlock, filling in the answer. _Earplugs_.

John hadn't looked at his watch when Sally had started him, and so had no idea how many minutes had passed when Sherlock set down the pen and looked up.

“Done.”

John and Lestrade's eyes flicked to Sally, who hesitated for a dramatic pause. “Nine minutes and three seconds.”

“Yes!” exclaimed John, unable to keep it in.

Lestrade made a face. “Only just.”

“I never doubted you,” said Sherlock, leaning over to kiss John.

With a loud thunk, the lights went out.

There was silence for a moment as they all tried to adjust to the sudden pitch black.

“I suppose that's bedtime, then,” said Lestrade's voice.

Sherlock let out a groan. “_Sleeping_,” he hissed with frustration.

“Let me guess,” said Lestrade. “You had a long sleep just before we arrived as well.”

John groped for Sherlock's hand in the dark and squeezed it. Sherlock gripped back with knuckle-crushing force.

“Come on,” said John. “Help me get back to our bed without me walking into anything. I know
you've memorised all the furniture by now.”

He heard Sherlock stand up and then he took John's other hand as well and pulled him to his feet. “It's not as if there's a lot of it,” he said.

“Enough to stub a toe on,” said John, letting Sherlock lead him through the blackness until they hit the softness of their bed.

Lestrade let out a loud sigh in the darkness. “I should have peed when the lights were still on.”

Sherlock pushed John down onto the bed, and then manhandled him until he was pushed back against the wall with Sherlock wrapped around him, shielding him from the rest of the room.

*This is the position I woke up in,* he thought.

There was a bump and a muffled swearword. “Why does it have to be so fucking dark?” said Lestrade.

“Because there is no light and no windows,” said Sherlock.

There was another thump. “Dick,” muttered Lestrade.

John pretending that she was aiming that at whatever he'd just walked into.

Sherlock let out a long sigh that whispered against John's neck. “This is going to be really dull,” he said, too quietly for anyone other than John to hear.

“I know,” replied John just as softly, reaching out blindly until his fingers found Sherlock's hair. He was actually beginning to feel reasonably tired but that didn't mean he was happy about nodding off and leaving Sherlock to lie awake in the dark for hours, with nothing to entertain him.

“I won't even be able to watch you sleep,” added Sherlock, sounding far more miserable about that than John thought was called for. It wasn't as if watching someone lie unconscious for hours was any more interesting than just listening to it.

“I could stay awake and talk to you,” he offered.

There was a movement that felt like Sherlock shaking his head. “We don't know what tomorrow will bring. You should be well-rested for it. Besides, you were drugged into unconsciousness today. Your body will need to recover.”

The toilet flushed, then there was a clang and another muttered swearword from Lestrade.

“Have you fallen in?” asked Sally.

“Piss off,” said Lestrade. Apparently he got sweary when he was tired.

Sherlock's words prompted a question in John's mind that he voiced, keeping his voice quiet. It felt very intimate, lying wrapped in Sherlock like this and whispering to him in the dark, keeping their conversation out of the ears of Sally and Lestrade.

“How did they get you?”

“What?” whispered back Sherlock.

“The kidnappers,” said John. “The last I remember, they had me, and were close to Lestrade and
Sally, but you were in the sitting room. You could have run, got away down the fire escape. It isn't as if they'd have been able to stop you by shooting you.”

There was a silence, broken only by the clink of mattress springs as Lestrade finally made it back to her bed.

When Sherlock spoke, it was with the tone he used when someone was being particularly dense. “They had you. You were unconscious and in their arms – they started taking you down to the van as soon as you passed out. You can't possibly think I would have abandoned you?”

“No, but surely it would be easier to help me from the outside? Follow them and rescue me, rather than walking into the same trap,” argued John.

Sherlock let out a disbelieving half-laugh. “And risk that they would hurt you or kill you and I wouldn't be near enough to stop them? Not a chance.”

“They have us locked in a cell,” John pointed out. “If they marched in here right now and announced they were going to shoot me, you wouldn't be able to do anything more than if you were on the outside, with Mycroft, working on getting us out.”

“Of course I could,” said Sherlock. “You saw what happened to Moran.”

That struck John dumb. In the mess of everything that had happened last Halloween, he hadn’t really spent much time thinking about how Sherlock had unleashed some kind of shadow power which removed all trace of Moran from the planet. He certainly hadn't thought that he might be able to do it again.

“You can do that?” he asked, frowning, thinking of the many, many times that one or both of them had been in danger without any hint of the shadows coming to life.

“You can do that?” said Sherlock. “It wouldn't be as easy or impressive in here as it was in a graveyard at midnight on Halloween, but I could take out someone who was about to kill you.”

“Then, why-?” started John.

“What I couldn't do,” continued Sherlock, “is stay here afterwards. The Holiday Council would immediately yank me back to Halloween if I killed someone using holiday powers. That would be it, no negotiation. We're very lucky that Jack didn't tell any of them about Moran, or none of them would have voted for us.”

“Oh,” said John. He reached out for Sherlock, fumbling in the dark, and clutched the first bit he found, which turned out to be his wrist. “You can't ever do that, then.”

“If there is no other way to keep you alive, then I'll do it in a heartbeat,” said Sherlock. “One of yours, obviously, not mine.”

The joke was too weak to distract John from the image of how Sherlock had looked when he'd been in Halloween, bored and frustrated in a way that had worn him down to the bone. “You can't do it,” he hissed. “I won't let you give up being where you're happy-”

“Idiot!” replied Sherlock. “You're what makes me happy! It wouldn't matter where I was if you died and I could have prevented it. Everywhere would feel like- like a barren desert.”

“Are you too going to whisper sweet nothings all night?” asked Lestrade's voice, boominly loud after the whispered conversation that John and Sherlock had been sharing.
“Better whispering sweet nothings than shagging,” said Sally. “But yeah, would you shut up?”

Sherlock pulled his wrist out of John's grip and resettled himself. John let out a long breath and let the argument go for the moment. Only for the moment, though. He wasn't going to let Sherlock sacrifice himself for John. He was worth so much more than that, particularly as he had so many more years ahead of him than John did.

That made him remember what Sherlock had said on Valentine's Day about not living on after John died. John wasn't having that, either. With any luck, he'd have a good few decades to talk Sherlock into some sense, so that when he died, he'd do it knowing that he wasn't condemning the greatest man he knew to death as well.

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John woke up when the lights in the cell came on in a blinding burst, jolting slightly. Sherlock was still wrapped around him, one arm around his chest that tightened reassuringly.

“Finally morning,” he said into John's ear.

John couldn't keep in a groan. “You mean this wasn't just a nightmare?”

“I'm afraid not,” said Sherlock. He kissed John on the side of his neck. “Do you often wake up like this in nightmares?”

John snorted. “Not usually,” he agreed.

There was a noise on the other side of the door, then a scrape as another tray was pushed through the hatch.

“Breakfast,” announced Lestrade.

John pulled away from Sherlock to sit up, making Sherlock grumble with irritation under his breath.

“Let me guess,” he said. “Full English, with a big pot of tea and warm pastries for afterwards?”

“Oh god, don't,” said Lestrade. “I'm so hungry.”

“It's a packet of croissants,” said Sally, who was already out of bed and investigating the tray. “One each.”

Lestrade groaned. “I'm going to end up eating my bloody notebook.”

“Don't,” said John. “It's the only thing we've got to entertain Sherlock with.”

“You make me sound like a small child,” said Sherlock.

“Yeah, funny that,” said Sally, opening the croissants and taking one out. “Must be something to do with your personality.”

She handed the packet to John who took one out, then caught Sherlock's eye. Lestrade and Sally were going to start asking some serious questions if Sherlock didn't eat something this morning.

Sherlock gave a small, rueful nod and took a croissant for himself.

John turned to throw the last one to Lestrade and caught him scrutinising Sherlock. Apparently
Sherlock's reluctance had been noted.

Lestrade caught the packet and pulled out the croissant with a sigh. “Of course, the one time I really want Sherlock to announce that he doesn't want his and I can eat it, he chooses to actually act like a normal person and need sustenance.”

“I'd apologise,” said Sherlock, “but you brought this on yourself. Really, a Pot Noodle. You should be ashamed.”

“Fuck off,” said Lestrade, and took a bite of his croissant. “God, these really aren't very big.”

“You're the one who's always going on about the stone he wants to lose,” said Sally. “Think of this as the perfect chance to do so.”

“I really hope we're not stuck here long enough for me to lose a stone,” said Lestrade.

“How long are we going to be stuck here?” asked Sally, looking at Sherlock. John wondered if she knew how much she was betraying by automatically assuming that Sherlock would know the answer. Apparently, despite all her antagonism, she still thought Sherlock had all the answers.

Sherlock just shrugged. “I still haven't worked out who has us,” he said. “I think I have some idea of why, however.”

“Oh,” said John. Somehow, he'd already finished his croissant. He didn't feel the slightest bit satisfied, though, probably because there was no tea. God, he'd kill for some tea right now.

Sherlock nodded. He gestured at the corners of the room. “There are no bugs,” he said. “Nowhere that they could have hidden some without me having found them by now.”

Lestrade and Sally glanced up at the ceiling, following his gesture. John did as well, but looked down in surprise as Sherlock shoved his half-eaten croissant in John’s hands, taking advantage of the distraction.

“That means they're not interested in us,” he carried on. “We're not the target.”

“You said you were,” said Sally. “They came to your flat, remember?”

Sherlock nodded. “Yes. They wanted me and John, and whoever else was in our flat and, therefore, presumably close to us. They've done nothing with us, though. We're just being kept. This is for the benefit of someone else. Someone on the outside who might care if Sherlock Holmes's well-being is threatened.”

“Who the hell would that be?” asked Sally. “I mean, let's face it, you're not exactly swimming with devoted friends and family. John's here with you, so it's not him, even if he was the type to have those kinds of enemies.”

“Tell me, Sally,” said Sherlock. “Have you ever met my brother?”

Lestrade let out a groan. “Oh god, is this some kind of fucked up MI5 shit?”

John swallowed the last of Sherlock's croissant. “Mycroft? Isn't this a bit hardcore for someone trying to get back at him?”

“It won't be revenge,” said Sherlock. “It'll be for leverage. A week or two ago he told me and Sherrinford that someone was attempting to blackmail him in order to influence Government
policy. We encouraged him to ignore them. Clearly, this is their next move.”

“We've been kidnapped as part of a plot to manipulate the Government?” said Lestrade. “Blimey.”

“So, we're relying on your brother to cave to these people in order to be set free?” asked Sally. “Christ.” She slumped back against the wall behind her bed. “If he's anything like you, we'll be here forever.”

“Actually,” said John, “the main thing he has in common with Sherlock is that he hates to lose. He'll get us out.”

Sherlock sat and sat back. “He might take his sweet time, though. He doesn't like rushing into things.”

Sally sighed. “God, I wish there was a shower in here, then. Another day, and we're all going to reek.”

Sherlock turned to John. “We have a bigger problem,” he said quietly, as Lestrade pointed out that he already reeked. “Tomorrow is St. George's Day.”

John felt his eyes widen. “Shit,” he said. If they didn't celebrate, St George would turn up and take Sherlock back to Halloween. He glanced around the room. “We need to get out of here today.”

“There's nothing we can do,” said Sherlock. “It's in Mycroft's hands.”

“Oh god,” said John. It was going to be a very long day.

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The day was made even longer by the fact that nothing happened. They got another lot of sandwiches at around lunchtime and then a couple of takeaway pizzas in the evening, but their captors didn't acknowledge their existence other than that. Sherlock swiftly got bored of the Sudoku game and took to just lying on the bed, apparently catatonic, while John and the others tried to come up with ways to pass the time. The levels that they stooped to did end up involving Charades.

“I can't take any more of this,” said Sally as the game drew to a natural stop, prompted by the fact that none of them could stomach continuing. “Your brother better get us out soon, or we're all going to go nuts.”

Sherlock didn't bother answering. John sat down on the bed next to him and started running his fingers through his hair. Sherlock blinked his eyes open.

“You with us?” he asked.

Sherlock nodded. “I was in my Mind Palace,” he said. “Going over our options for tomorrow.”

“Well, it's not as if there's many actual traditions associated with it,” said John. “So it's a bit free rein.”

Sherlock's eyes went distant. “In Catalan and Aragon, it's traditional to give a rose and a book to a loved one, while other parts of Spain have pageants with re-enactments of key events of his life, usually focusing on the dragon incident. In Bulgaria they eat lamb and wash their faces with dew in the morning. In this country it used to be traditional to wear a red rose, but that has waned. There is a tradition of singing *Jerusalem* in Church services. The main recognition these days comes in the
form of flying the English flag, although there are also local festivities in some places that focus on such things as Morris Dancing and Punch-and-Judy shows. It has also become tangled up with the anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and possible birth, especially as UNESCO have declared the 23rd of April to be the International Day of the Book.”

“Sorry, what are we talking about?” asked Sally.

“St. George's Day,” said John.

Lestrade groaned. “This isn't part of your new holiday obsession, is it? Do you know how long it took me to get over the hangover from St. Patrick's Day?”

“Well, the good news is that St. George's Day doesn't involve any alcohol,” said John.

“Traditional English food and drink,” said Sherlock, as if reading something. He blinked and his eyes focused on John. “The one holiday when you could get away with drinking tea as a celebration.”

“And it's the one where we're locked up without any tea,” said John with a sigh. “God, I'd kill for some right now.”

“Coffee,” said Sally, in tones of deep longing.

“God, don't,” said Lestrade. “I think this is the first day I haven't had any coffee in about thirty years.”

“I say again,” said Sally. “Your brother better get us out of here soon.”

“I'm sure he's doing his best,” said John. Sherlock gave him a look that said he didn't agree, but he didn't say anything.

“Right,” said Lestrade after the silence began to stretch out. “I spy with my little eye something beginning with C.”

Sherlock groaned and shut his eyes again.

By the time the lights went out, John was curled up in bed with Sherlock again, stroking his head and wishing there was something he could do to alleviate Sherlock's obvious distress.

“We'll just have to do the best we can tomorrow,” he said quietly as Lestrade and Sally settled down in their beds.

Sherlock made a despairing noise. “We've only had four months,” he said. “I wanted so much longer with you.”

“You'll have it,” said John fiercely. “St. George seemed an alright bloke. He won't penalise us for this, we just have to celebrate as much as we're able. He'll be understanding.”

Sherlock snorted. “Seems a bit much to hope for. This is going to be pitiful.”

John couldn't argue with that. He stroked his fingers through Sherlock's hair, holding him close, and wondered if this time tomorrow he'd be alone again.

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John was woken up the next morning by both the lights going on, and Sherlock declaring “Happy
St. George's Day," loudly in his ear.

"Happy St. George's Day," he replied, kissing Sherlock before he sat up.

"Oh great, croissants again," said Sally with a sigh, picking up breakfast.

"How disgracefully French," said Sherlock. He locked eyes with Sally. "Happy St. George's Day."

Sally looked confused and glanced at John, who repeated Sherlock's words.

"Happy St. George's Day, Sally." It didn't seem to clear up her confusion.

"Right," she said. "Same to you, I suppose, although good luck finding anything to be happy about stuck in here."

"Maybe we'll get out today," said Lestrade. "In which case, this would be a very happy St. George's Day, especially as I can't remember ever paying attention to one before."

"You'll pay attention to this one," said Sherlock. He held out his hand. "Notebook."

Lestrade sighed and passed it over. Sherlock turned to a fresh page and then hesitated. "If I use my blood as ink-"

"I'll lose my temper, yes," said John, taking a croissant from Sally.

"The pen is black," Sherlock pointed out. "I need a red one."

"Use your imagination," said John.

Sherlock scowled, but started drawing, muttering quietly to himself. Sally tried to offer him a croissant but he waved it away irritably. John took it, tore it as well as he could into three, and passed it around.

"How the hell is he not malnourished?" asked Sally, eating her bit.

John shrugged. "Nutrition is more complicated than most people think," he said, which was both true and irrelevant. Sally didn't like convinced.

Sherlock finished and held the notebook up. "Completely wrong."

John glanced at it. A stark black cross stood out against the white background. He made a face. "It's not the most convincing," he agreed. "But it's all we've got."

Sherlock sighed, tore the page out of the book and then went over to attach it to the bed-and-blanket screen that blocked off the toilet. "The St. George flag."

Lestrade tipped his head to one side. "Yeah, not even a little bit."

"I really don't get the sudden obsession with St George," said Sally. "I thought the only people who celebrated were nationalist skinheads?"

John felt himself twitch, hoping like hell that St. George didn't hear that. "There is a difference between patriotism and nationalism, you know," he said. "I think we should be able to be proud of being English without coming across as fascist bastards."

"Yeah, good luck with that," said Sally.
“This isn't going to work,” said Sherlock, stepping back to look at his makeshift 'flag'.

John looked at it and sighed. “It's the thought that counts?” he suggested, with some doubt.

Sally let out a long sigh. “I have a red lipstick,” she said, with a tone of self-defeat. “My mum keeps insisting I'll never get promoted unless I wear make-up.”

Sherlock spun and stared at her. “Perfect,” he said and held out a hand.

“Not so fast,” she said. “First, you tell me why it's so important we celebrate a minor holiday whilst trapped in a prison cell.”

“Well, I'm not entirely sure.”

“Would you prefer to spend another day like yesterday?” asked Sherlock. “At least this is slightly different.”

Sally thought about that for a moment, then sighed and delved into a jacket pocket. “Fair enough,” she said, sounding tired, and handed over the lipstick.

Sherlock immediately ripped down his 'flag and set to work on another one.

“You know,” said Lestrade, “I never wore make-up, and I still got promoted.”

“Yeah, I told Mum that,” said Sally. “She went into a rant about the Patriarchy.”

John wasn't touching that with a ten-foot bargepole. From the look of Lestrade's face, he wasn't either.

“The gender bias in hierarchical organisations like the police force is a particularly illogical holdover from the past,” said Sherlock absently, which earned him a surprised and pleased look from Sally that he entirely failed to notice. He was too engrossed in completing his second flag and hanging it up.

“Much better,” said John.

“Oh yeah,” said Lestrade. “All hail England, St. George and whatnot. Here's to the slaying of dragons.” He raised the cup of water he was drinking in a mock toast.

Sherlock cleared his throat and moved closer into the centre of the room. “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; Or close the wall up with our English dead,” he started, and then carried on into the whole speech.

John had no idea when he'd memorised it, but he'd cleared been either practising, or preparing for this, because it was an astonishing performance. By the time he was halfway through, John, Lestrade and Sally were all captivated, and John could feel adrenalin start to pump in his veins, as if he really was about to storm a keep under Sherlock's command.

“Follow your spirit, and upon this charge, Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'” finished Sherlock, and John had to stop himself from leaping to his feet.

“Bloody hell,” said Lestrade. “That was good.”

“Thank you,” said Sherlock, giving a little bow.

“You don't strike me as the Shakespeare type,” said Sally.

Sherlock, who had started work on another flag, just gave a shrug. “It seemed appropriate for the
“I don't really know much about St. George,” said Lestrade. “Other than the dragon thing, obviously, but I'm guessing that didn't actually happen.”

“He was a Roman soldier,” said Sally. “The dragon is a metaphor for paganism. Sort of.”

Sherlock tuckéd the edge of his second flag into the gap at the top of the door and stepped back to admire it.

“Ah,” said Lestrade. “Of course. A metaphor. Takes some of the fun out of the story if he's not hacking at a real dragon, though.”

“I think the idea is that you use him as inspiration to fight your own metaphorical dragons,” said Sally. “That's not quite in the middle, Sherlock. Move it a bit to the left.”

Sherlock moved the flag slightly to the left, then gave a nod. “Thank you.”

“Can't say I'm exactly beset by metaphorical dragons,” said Lestrade.

“We all are,” said Sherlock as he started on a third flag. “That's the point of them being metaphorical.”

“Yours would be your pride,” said John, earning himself a dark look from Sherlock.

“My pride is precisely in line with my achievements and abilities,” he said. “There is no need for it to be 'slain' at all. Unlike your tendency towards tidying away important experiments.”

“If it looks like washing up, it's going to get washed up,” said John. “Especially if you leave it in the sink.”

Sherlock glowered at him. “It was essential to-”

“Nothing,” interrupted John. “There wasn't even a case!”

“Do you know what metaphorical dragon I'm feeling beset by?” said Lestrade, interrupting before John and Sherlock ended up in yet another version of an argument they'd already had three times. “These bloody bastards who've kidnapped us.”

Sherlock had completed a third flag and was looking around for somewhere to hang it.

“Does that makes us the princess in the story then?” asked John.

Sherlock stopped for still, then turned to look at John with eyes alight with realisation. “Yes, precisely. We are exactly that. And what we need,” he said, enunciating his words with care, “is for St. George to come and rescue us from the dragon of these terrorists.”

Lestrade snorted. “St. George represented by special forces, then? Or your-”

There was a loud crash from elsewhere in the building, followed by wild gunshots.

John sprang to his feet, followed a moment later by Lestrade and Sally.

“What's that?” asked Sally.

Sherlock beamed. “The cavalry.”
“Thank fuck,” said Lestrade.

Loud, clanging footsteps sounded from outside the door, then a loud voice called, “Stand back!”

A moment later, the door burst in. St. George stood outside, beaming. “My friends!” he announced. “I have come to free you!”

He was dressed in full medieval armour and carrying a lance, and surrounded by a faint halo of light. John risked a glance at Lestrade and Sally to see what they made of this, but they didn't look as surprised as he thought they should be.

“You're a sight for sore eyes,” said Lestrade. “Are there any kidnappers still around?”

“I have vanquished them all,” St. George assured him, then stood back to gesture at the corridor. “Come, let us leave this foul den!”

They followed him outside to find they were in an industrial estate. In the unit opposite, a group of men loading a carpet on to a van gave them a funny look.

Sally glanced about with a frown. “ Aren't there any police with you?”

“I work alone,” said St. George.

Lestrade glanced back over at the men. “Time to use police privilege to borrow a phone, then,” he said, and headed over to them.

St. George turned to Sherlock and John and gave a small bow. “Your freedom, as requested.”

“Thank you,” said John, reaching out to shake his hand. “Seriously appreciate it, mate.”

“There is no need for thanks,” said St. George. “Just go forth and drink tea in my name.”

There was nothing John wanted more than to drink a whole pot of tea, unless it was to have a shower. “That really won't be a problem,” he assured St. George.

“And get some proper flags,” St. George added, looking at Sherlock.

“I already have them,” said Sherlock. “As soon as we're home, I'll hang them up.”

“Good man,” said St. George. He clapped Sherlock and then John on the shoulder with a heavy force that nearly made John's knees buckle. “I shall leave you to celebrate my day in style.”

He bowed again, then clapped his hands. A white horse galloped up from around the corner and St. George launched himself into the saddle while it was still moving in a move that John was pretty sure only a holiday ruler would be able to manage without serious injury.

“For the glory of England!” he cried loudly as he galloped off, out of the industrial estate.

“Wow,” said Sally. “That has to be the most English special forces guy I've ever seen. And I really wasn't expecting him to be actual cavalry.”

“He's very top secret,” said Sherlock. “ Probably best if you don't give too many details about him to anyone.”

Lestrade jogged back over. “Right, there's a couple of squad cars on the way,” he said.
Sherlock refused to hang around to give statements to the police. He insisted that they called him and John a taxi, and they escaped as soon as they could, leaving Lestrade and Sally to try and sort out the mess.

John sat back in the taxi with a sigh, letting himself start to relax. “Thank god that's over.”

“Indeed,” said Sherlock. His hand crept over the distance between them to take John’s. “The whole thing was just tedious in the extreme.”

‘Tedious’ was not the word John would have used to describe it, but he had a feeling that that wasn’t quite what Sherlock meant.

“Yeah,” he agreed, and gave Sherlock's hand a squeeze.

A few minutes passed in silence, and then John asked a question that had been bothering him. “Why didn't Lestrade and Sally seem more surprised by St. George?”

Sherlock shrugged. “They didn't see him the same way we did,” he said. “Most people aren't equipped to see the reality of holiday creatures, so their minds show them something they can handle. I suspect that what they saw was a slightly eccentric member of special forces.”

“Sally saw the horse,” said John.

“A horse is difficult to imagine away,” acknowledged Sherlock. “She will not have seen the armour. Or the lance.”

“I'd have thought a bloody great lance was hard to imagine away as well,” said John.

Sherlock just shrugged. “The human mind is a strange thing.”

When they got back to Baker Street, Mycroft and Sherrinford were in the sitting room. Sherlock let out a loud groan at the sight of Mycroft. “Oh god, how to make a bad day worse.”

Mycroft looked almost as rumpled as John felt, and he took a step towards Sherlock when he saw him. “Sherlock!” he said, and then blinked, fitting his usual mask back over the moment of relief that had lightened his face for a moment.

“Are you okay?” asked Sherrinford, not bothering to hide his emotions like Mycroft was. He stepped up to Sherlock, patting his shoulder with a bony hand as if reassuring himself that he was really there, then turned and did the same to John. “Both of you?”

“We're fine,” said John. “Just tired. And dying for a cup of tea.”

“Let me guess,” said Mycroft to Sherlock. “You were so annoying that they begged you to leave?”

“We had help,” said Sherlock. “The kind I can't really mention to you today. And he was a lot more use than you – I take it you know precisely who took us and why?”

Mycroft gave a stiff nod. “It won't happen again,” he said. “I have seen to that. Even if you had not had other assistance, you would have been released without harm by next Wednesday.”

“Next Wednesday?” repeated John. “That's over a week away!”

“And I'd have been taken back to Halloween then for not upholding my part of the bargain,” added
Sherlock.

Mycroft looked uncomfortable. “It was the best I could do. They were not particularly interested in negotiation, and it's not as if I could explain the importance of this day.”

“The best you could do?” repeated Sherlock. “You get us mixed up in your business – you get John mixed up in your business, and that's all you can say? Anything could have happened to him!”

“I am aware of that,” snapped Mycroft. “I did not expect this, Sherlock, or I would have protected him better. Protected both of you.”

Sherlock snarled at him. “Get out. I'm about to get some flags out, and you'll want to be well out of the area by then, although it would serve you right if you did get dragged back there.”

“Be nice, Sherlock,” said Sherrinford. “He really did do all he could.”

Sherlock glared at him. “And yet we still had to rely on other assistance.”

“Come on, Sherrinford,” said Mycroft, heading for the door. “You know he won't listen to reason until he's had his little tantrum. We'll come back tomorrow.”

Sherrinford gave Sherlock another pat. “It really is good to have you back,” he said, and then followed Mycroft out.

John let out a long breath. “Definitely time for tea,” he said.

“I could not agree more,” said Sherlock. “The biggest, most English pot of tea you can manage.”

“I'll break out the nice tea set,” said John, heading for the kettle.

***

They drank tea together, then John had a shower and Sherlock hung flags around the flat, including two large ones out of the window.

John went into the bedroom to get changed while Sherlock took his own shower, which was when he discovered what else the kidnappers had taken from the flat.

“Shit!” he said, loudly enough for Sherlock to hear and call out a query from the shower.

Rather than shout the conversation, John went into the bathroom. “They took my gun.”

Sherlock stuck his head out of the water. “Ah.” he said, and then was silent.

“Is that it?” asked John.

Sherlock shrugged and moved back under the water spray. “What more is there to say?

John let out a long breath and left. For all that he loved Sherlock, he really was the most annoying person in the world.

John made himself the largest sandwich he could make with the contents of the fridge, which he was still trying to get through when Sherlock came out of the bedroom, fully dressed.

He rested a hand on John's shoulder for a moment. “Mycroft can get you another,” he offered, and John's annoyance faded.
He shook his head. “Probably best not to.”

Sherlock made an unconvinced humming noise, but didn't push the matter.

Once John had finished eating, they took a red rose down to Mrs. Hudson.

“Happy St. George's Day,” said Sherlock as he gave it to her.

She gaped at him. “Is that all you have to say? After being missing for days, worrying your brother sick – probably both brothers - not to mention your poor landlady!”

“What else is there to say?” asked Sherlock, which John could have told him was a terrible idea.

“Oh, you!” said Mrs. Hudson. Her fingers griped the stem of the rose and for a moment John thought she was going to hit Sherlock with it. “Honestly!” she exclaimed instead, then stepped back inside her flat and slammed the door on them.

“That went well,” said John.

Sherlock sighed. “I have one for Molly as well.”

“Probably not a good idea,” said John. “She's still bit upset about things with Sherrinford to be accepting flowers from a Holmes brother. Maybe just text her.”

Sherlock made a face, but nodded his agreement. “Right then,” he said. “What else?”

“Walk in the park? I could do with some fresh air and a chance to stretch my legs.”

“It's hardly in keeping with the holiday,” said Sherlock.

John shrugged. “We could find an English oak while we're at it?”

Sherlock considered that, then gave a quick nod. “Good enough,” he said. “And then dinner somewhere that will serve you steak and kidney pudding or shepherd's pie.”

John started to head back upstairs to get his coat. “You know, this holiday is a lot easier than some of the others.”

“It's rather a relief,” agreed Sherlock. “I suspect May Day won't be as simple, especially as we have barely a week to prepare.”

“And then nothing until Halloween,” said John with satisfaction. Months and months without having to celebrate a holiday. It was going to be bliss.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: May Day, May 1st
Sherlock began May Day shortly before dawn by waking John with Vivaldi's *Spring*. Trite and rather obvious, given the occasion, but it made John smile once he'd woken up enough to pay attention.

“That was nice,” he said, and then frowned at the closed curtains. “Hang on, it's still dark. What time is it?”

“You won't want to know,” said Sherlock.

John grabbed the clock from the bedside table. “Four AM! Jesus, Sherlock!”

“I did say that you wouldn't want to know,” said Sherlock. One day John would learn that he was always right but until then, he would have to continue to be extremely patient. “Put your clothes on. We need to go to the park.”

“At four AM?” asked John, not moving. “I don't think so.” He was only half upright, leaning against the pillows and swaddled in the duvet, and Sherlock was severely tempted to join him and sod this whole holiday thing.

He shored up his willpower. “Get up,” he repeated. “Dawn on May Day – we need to wash our faces in fresh dew.”

John groaned. “Oh god, we probably do. Fuck it.”

He pushed the duvet aside and swung his legs over the side of the bed as if every tiny movement was an enormous exertion. Sherlock rewarded his activity with a kiss and then went to put his violin away before they went out.

For all his complaining - and sometimes there was an awful lot of complaining – John was a dab hand at getting dressed and ready to leave quickly. They slipped out of the house together into the hazy pre-dawn light and walked up Baker Street. It was about as deserted as it ever got in central London, which Sherlock rather enjoyed. As much as he enjoyed having such a mess of humanity surrounding him, committing crimes for him to unravel, he rather liked the feeling that he and John were the only people anywhere. He slid his hand into John's as they walked.

“The park's going to be locked,” John said.

Sherlock shrugged. “It's not a difficult fence to climb. Even for someone your height.”

There was a huff of irritation that Sherlock ignored. If John didn't want to be teased about his height, he should have grown taller during his teenage years. It was too late to start getting upset about it now.

Hopping over the fence was easy, but working out how to wash your face in dew when it didn't form convenient pools was harder. In the end, Sherlock smeared his hands over the grass until they were wet, then rubbed them over his face.

“This is not the most elegant ritual,” observed John, copying Sherlock's actions. “Ugh, that's cold.”
Sherlock stood back up. “We have plenty of time before the next thing. We can go home for tea.”

“And toast,” added John. He raised his arm towards his face and then hesitated. “Is it negated if I wipe it all off?”

“I think you have to let it dry naturally,” said Sherlock. The dew had half-dried on his face, leaving it feeling clammy and unpleasant.

“Right,” said John with a sigh, lowering his arm again. “Of course. God forbid we mess up the ritual to make ourselves beautiful for the year.” He rolled his eyes as he said it. “Ridiculous – as if you need any help being beautiful.”

Sherlock tried not to preen.

“Or staying that way indefinitely,” added John, which ruined the mood. The last thing Sherlock wanted was to be reminded of his unchanging status when next to him walked a man who grew closer to death with every beat of his heart.

“I could probably use a bit of help,” said John. “'Beautiful' has never really been a word for me.”

“Nonsense,” said Sherlock. He couldn't let such an outrageously erroneous statement pass without comment. “You are very beautiful, and grow more so every day.”

“Right,” said John, clearly taking Sherlock's words as a joke. “I'm right up there with Angelina Jolie.”

They had reached the fence again. Sherlock climbed over, wondering how John could be so wrong about something. John's beauty was in the way his hair changed just enough each day to be continually interesting to look at without changing the key elements that Sherlock enjoyed the most. It was in the way the lines on his face mirrored his life experiences, and the fact that his laughter lines were deepening at a faster rate than his frowned lines.

He didn't say any of that, though. Instead, he carefully memorised it for use next Valentine's Day. He might be able to work it into some kind of theme of proving to John that he was the only person with a face that Sherlock wanted to look at for the rest of his life. That would provide good fodder for filling a day with romantic sentiment. It was important to think ahead for these things, or he'd risk getting caught without a plan.

They didn't have tea when they got back. Instead, John glanced at the clock, which had not yet ticked around to five. “We've got nothing to do until a sensible time, right?”

Sherlock nodded. “I have calculated that the earliest we can distribute the flowers without incurring the wrath of the recipients is after nine.”

John nodded. “Right. I'm going to sleep for another couple of hours, then. Wake me at eight.”

He headed back to the bedroom and Sherlock watched him go with disappointment. As much as he respected that John needed to sleep for an unbelievably long period every day, he still found it a source of constant, mild irritation that he had to spend that time essentially alone. Time spent without John just wasn't of the same high quality as time spent with him.

Sherrinford texted while Sherlock was contemplating whether he should join John so that he could listen to him sleeping or stay out here where he could tinker with one of his experiments.

Are you seeing Molly today?
Sherlock let out a long sigh. There was nothing interesting or novel about Sherrinford's on-going infatuation and endless pining, and yet he refused to just pull himself together and stop.

*That is the plan. SH*

*Let me know how she is.*

Sherlock tried very hard not to roll his eyes, but couldn't hold it in.

*You could always text her and find out for yourself. SH*

He hadn't yet completely decided on how he felt about Sherrinford's decision to cut Molly off completely. On the one hand, it made perfect, logical sense. On the other, if it had been John, Sherlock couldn't imagine being able to do it. Even the small crumbs of texts and one way Skype calls were better than nothing at all.

One thing he was very certain about was that he wanted Sherrinford to do whatever caused the least amount of truly irritating emotional displays from both him and Molly. After the lack of enthusiasm that Molly had shown for the corpse who had been strangled with her own hair last week, Sherlock strongly suspected that would involve Sherrinford getting over himself. Sadly, that was not a character trait generally associated with Holmeses.

Sherrinford didn't reply to the text. Sherlock turned his attention to his experiments, and put his brother and his ridiculous attempt at a love life out of his mind.

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The next time Sherlock woke John up, he didn't bother with the violin. John woke up a bit quicker but he insisted on having a shower before making tea, which Sherlock found deeply irritating. He'd been waiting for a cup of John-made tea for hours now.

John hesitated on his way into the bathroom. “Having a shower isn't going to mess up the dew thing, is it?”

Sherlock shook his head. “That's all done with now,” he said. “Feel free to scrub yourself all you wish.”

“Fantastic,” said John, and continued into the bathroom. Sherlock went to lie on the sofa for a bit, feeling rather hard done by. What kind of man prioritised personal hygiene over making tea for his beloved?

By the time John finally made tea, nearly twenty whole minutes later, Sherlock was starting to consider some form of binding pact that meant making tea had to be John's first act every day upon waking.

“Here you are,” said John, holding a mug out to Sherlock.

Sherlock sat up and took it from him. John sat down beside him, patted his knee, and said, “Not a trace of pumpkin, I promise.”

Sherlock's mood instantly rose to a general feeling of contentment. It was not the first time he'd experienced such a drastic shift and he wondered if mood swings like that were related to some kind of worrying problem. Given that he was dead and therefore immune to all physiology and most psychological problems, probably not.
"Are those the flowers?" asked John, looking at the three bunches Sherlock had prepared last night. "They're good ones."

"Thank you," said Sherlock.

"Why are there three?" asked John with a frown. "I thought we agreed to only give them to our female friends?"

"I have buttonholes for the men," said Sherlock, avoiding the question. "In fact-" He plucked one of them from the table and held it out to John. "Happy May Day."

"Thank you," said John. He glanced down at the shirt he was wearing and made a bit of a face. "Am I going to have to wear a jacket for this?"

"Not at all," said Sherlock. He took the bouquet from John and, with the aid of three pins, attached it to his shirt in such a way that it would stay secure throughout the day.

"Great," said John. He smiled at Sherlock in a way that melted the last of Sherlock's irritation over having to wait for the tea. "Where's yours?"

Sherlock nodded at his jacket, which was draped over his chair with the buttonhole already attached.

"Ah, of course," said John. "God forbid you ever dress down."

Sherlock ignored him. His clothing style both had classic elegance, and meant he never really had to consider what outfit to put on, only whether or not he could be bothered to get dressed on any given day.

He drained the last of his tea. "Hurry up," he said. "We've got a lot of places to get round before our train."

John nodded and finished up his breakfast. "Almost makes you wish we had fewer friends."

"I've been thinking that since St. Patrick's Day," said Sherlock.

They started with Mrs. Hudson, who was still in her dressing gown when she opened the door. "Oh!" she exclaimed at the sight of the flowers John held out to her. "Oh, how lovely!"

"Happy May Day," said Sherlock.

"Oh, of course!" she twittered, taking the flowers.

She looked at them, her eyes catching on their buttonholes and then, for some reason, she gave them the smile she adopted when she assumed that some manner of sexual antics were imminent. "Are you two off a-maying, then?"

"In a manner of speaking," said John.

"How lovely! I wish I were still young enough for that kind of thing."

"You are never too old to dance," Sherlock informed her.

She laughed as if he'd suggested something scandalous. "Ooh, naughty!"
They got a taxi to Barts next. Mike was in his office, which Sherlock was vaguely disappointed about. He probably shouldn’t admit to John how much he enjoyed disrupting lectures.

“Happy May Day,” said John, handing Mike a buttonhole.

Mike regarded it with complete confusion. “Uh. Right. Um. Is this some sort of gay thing?”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “How on earth would that work? Are you suggesting we’re propositioning you?”

“No,” said Mike quickly. “No, god no. Just...I don’t usually get flowers from my mates. Um. Ever.”

“How many of your other mates celebrate May Day?” asked John.

Mike acknowledged the point. “Okay, none of them.”

“They should,” said Sherlock, just in case Queen May was listening in. “Lots of fun.”

Mike frowned at him for a moment before it morphed into a look of utter horror. “Oh god. You’re not- John. Mate. Please tell me you’re not closet morris dancers.”

John winced. “Sorry,” he said, and leant forward slightly, as if about to confide in Mike. “I’ve been wearing bells under my clothes since second year.”

Both Mike and John thought that was hilarious. Sherlock was increasingly worried that Queen May was going hear and be insulted, especially when Mike told John that he’d lend him his hanky if he needed it.

“Enough!” he said. “John, we have places to be.”

“Places with clashing sticks?” suggested Mike, with a wink.

Sherlock glowered at him.

John took his hand and Sherlock experienced another sudden mood change.

“He’s right, we really should go,” John said to Mike while Sherlock was trying to hide it.

“Thanks for the flowers, then,” said Mike. “Uh. Happy May Day, I suppose.”

Sherlock managed a smile for him as they left. Well, that was one person who would never have said those words if not for him and John. Queen May would appreciate that, if not the mockery of morris dancing.

Molly was in the morgue but she wasn’t in the middle of an autopsy so Sherlock didn’t bother knocking before going in.

“Happy May Day,” he said, and thrust the bouquet at her.

“Oh,” she said, fumbling to take them. Sherlock let go without waiting for her to get a proper grip and watched the awkward way she clutched at them. Why was she so clumsy with things like this when the cuts she made on corpses were always perfectly straight?

“Thank you,” she said, staring at the flowers. Sherlock had accessed a memory from after the incident on April Fool’s Day in which Mycroft had claimed daisies were her favourite flowers, and used that information when ordering the bouquet.
Molly gave a little laugh and then looked up. “My third bouquet of flowers from Sherlock Holmes since Easter. Funny, this time last year I'd have been beside myself about that.”

“If it helps,” said John, “I think he’s now bought you flowers more than he’s bought them for me.”

“The rose on Valentine’s Day and the buttonhole you're wearing right now,” counted Sherlock to himself. He frowned. Presumably the shamrock on St. Patrick's Day didn't count. “The bouquet Molly got on April Fools was really for you,” he said. “I wouldn't have bought it if I hadn't wanted to make you happy.”

“Sherlock!” hissed John, his eyes darting to Molly with the twitched eyebrow that meant Sherlock had said something that might upset someone.

“Oh, don't worry,” said Molly. “I had realised that he only got them because you and Sherrinford nagged him into it.” A shadow passed over her face at the mention of Sherrinford and she turned away to hide it, under the guise of putting the flowers somewhere. Sherlock wasn't fooled and he didn't think John was either.

“How is he?” she asked after a moment of faffing about with water in the sink.

Sherlock sighed. “Asking me the same thing about you,” he complained. “I really do have better things to do than act as a go-between, you know.”

“It's not my fault that I can't just ask him myself,” said Molly, with more anger than Sherlock would have expected from her. “He still won't respond to my texts.”

Sherlock wasn't sure how he was meant to respond to that without causing further upset. Luckily, John took care of the problem for him. He really was invaluable.

“I know it doesn't seem like it, but he's just doing what he thinks is best.”

Molly rolled her eyes. “Bloody men,” she said. “Always deciding what they think is best without bothering to consult anyone else. What's best is not both of us spending all our time nagging Sherlock for information about the other.”

“Definitely not,” said Sherlock, with feeling.

“What are you going to tell him about how I am?” asked Molly.

Sherlock had no idea. Just looking at her, he could see at least nine signs that she was miserable, but he didn't think passing that on to Sherrinford would do anything other than make both of them even more miserable.

“What do you want us to say?” asked John.

Molly considered that for a moment and then looked at Sherlock. “You can observe stuff about me, right? My recent behaviour and what it says about my mood and stuff?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock. “I can see you've put on nine pounds, which implies you've been eating your misery and probably lounging around rather than being active. It's hard to define a change in muscle tone accurately over such a short period of time, but I am almost certain that you haven't been to the gym since Easter. Your hair is in the easiest style, and your clothes like as if they are-”

“Yes, okay, thank you,” cut in Molly. “You can stop now. I've been sitting around doing nothing but eat ice cream and watch appalling romance films.”
“But not Timetravellers, Inc.” said John, which must have been a guess, but she ruefully nodded.

“First time in three years that I haven't watch a new episode the moment it aired,” said Molly.

“Sherrinford hasn't watched it either,” said John.

Sherlock hadn't even noticed that. He wondered what was more appalling, that his observation skills had let him down, or that he knew what the television program was to start with.

“I take it you don't want me to tell Sherrinford any of that,” he said.

Molly looked thoughtful. “I'm not sure telling him would have the right impact.” She glanced down at herself, then up at Sherlock. “He can observe like you can, can't he? You all do it.”

“It is a family trait not to walk through life with our eyes shut like the rest of the planet,” agreed Sherlock.

“Right,” said Molly. She gave a determined nod. “Send him a photo of me, then.”

Sherlock considered that. What would Sherrinford's reaction be when he made the same string of deductions that Sherlock just had? What would Sherlock's reaction be if it was John looking exhausted and miserable because Sherlock had decided to stop contacting him?

That was easy to answer. He'd immediately do anything and everything he could to make things better, even if it meant changing his mind on a decision he had thought was for the best. Would Sherrinford react any differently?

Which lead Sherlock to another question. Did he want Sherrinford to change his mind? He could appreciate exactly why he had felt it was best to cut off all contact with Molly, and it did make logical sense.

Logical sense wasn't the only kind of sense, though. It had taken meeting John for Sherlock to realise that.

He pulled out his mobile. “Mess about with the flowers some more,” he said. It would look best if Sherrinford didn't know this was Molly's idea.

Molly flashed a brief smile at him and did as he said, turning back to the sink. Sherlock took a picture of her turning the tap on and sent it to Sherrinford.

See for yourself how she is and stop pester ing me. SH

John quietly cleared his throat. “Just to let you know, you don't look that bad to someone who isn't a Holmes.”

“Thanks,” said Molly, not looking for a moment as if she believed him.

“We need to go,” said Sherlock. “We have a train to catch, and we still need to stop at Scotland Yard.”

“Yeah,” agreed John. He eyed the bouquet that was left, along with the buttonhole for Lestrade. “Uh, tell me again who that one is for?”

Sherlock ignored him. “Happy May Day, Molly,” he said, and left the morgue, confident that John would follow.
There was a crime going on, so Lestrade was in an incident room rather than his office.

“Sherlock, maybe we should wait-” started John as Sherlock ignored him entirely in favour of marching right in.

Lestrade let out a groan at the sight of him and several other officers let out audible sighs.

“Sherlock, you can't just barge in on an investigation.”

Sherlock glanced over at the wall of photos and notes about the crime. It was very tempting to go over and take a proper look, especially when he could immediately spot three possible avenues of investigation that he was certain they'd have missed. That was not why they were here, however.

“Happy May Day,” he said, and handed Lestrade his buttonhole.

Lestrade stared at it for a moment, and then rubbed at his face as if exhausted. “Oh Christ,” he said. “And you can't just turn up and give me flowers, either.”

There was an amused snigger from somewhere in the corner of the room.

“Don't worry, sir,” said Sally. “I'm sure it won't start any rumours about your private life.”

Lestrade made an aggrieved sound.

“And these are for you,” said Sherlock, and handed the last bouquet to Sally.

There was complete and utter silence. Sally looked as pole-axed as if he'd presented her with a dead fish and it took her a few moments to take them from him. Sherlock could feel John stiffen in surprise, and then start to vibrate with suppressed amusement as the silence stretched on.

“They're from both of us,” he added. “Happy May Day.”

That did not relax the atmosphere in the room. Sherlock found himself catching John's amusement at the reaction and had to dig his nails into the palm of his hand to stop himself from starting to laugh.

“Well, that was all we came for,” he said. “Have fun with the murder. Do make sure you examine the wheelbarrow.”

He took John's hand and dragged him out of there before they both collapsed into laughter. They made it as far as the corridor before John let out a giggle, at which point Sherlock lost it as well.

“Her face!” John got out between sniggers.

“Not just hers,” said Sherlock. “Did you see Anderson's?”

They both lost it at that.

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They caught a train from Victoria to the nearest station to Nether Walford, which was not close in any meaning of the word. Apparently it was perfectly acceptable in the countryside to expect people to walk ten miles from the nearest train station. Sherlock mentally noted it as yet another reason to avoid the whole unpleasant place as much as possible.
Sherlock had thought ahead and had pre-booked a taxi to meet them there and take them the rest of the way, but he hadn't factored in the unpleasant chattiness of the taxi driver.

“You're from London? Can't say I've ever much liked the place myself – too many crowds, you know. None of that round here, not usually, although you've come at the only time we get close. Going to the fair, are you?” He didn't wait for an answer before continuing. “It's lovely, always such a treat. Everyone comes out, you know, all the villages around. Even Charrington Lee, and they generally pretend we don't exist. Nasty, inbred sorts they are there. Still, they all come out, and send over their morris dancing teams too, which is nice of them. Always good to have more dancers, although I think we could do without Mike Kebble. Last year he got drunk before the dancing even started, shocking it was. His bells were completely out of sync with the others.”

Sherlock had already worked out seven ways to kill him without anyone even suspecting a murder had taken place when John's hand settled on his knee and gave a tight, warning squeeze that meant he knew the path that Sherlock's thoughts had taken.

“Think May Day thoughts,” John said in a murmur.

Sherlock took a deep breath. Right. Queen May was unlikely to be impressed by a murder. It wasn't really in keeping with the theme of the day.

“And here we are,” said the taxi driver, finally drawing up next to a field that was swarming with people. “Oh, lovely, the maypole's already up.”

Sherlock exited the taxi with as much speed as he could manage, leaving John to pay the man. He paused to take in a view of the field and work out a plan to tackle the highlights.

The maypole dominated the top end of the field, ribbons flying around it as a handful of teenage girls fluttered about, possibly preparing to dance. There was a stage beside it that a handful of musicians were setting up on. Spreading out from there all the way to the other end of the field was a host of stalls and tents, all of them clearly desperate to hawk cheap, rural tat to the gathered idiots.

John's hand slipped into Sherlock's, arresting his attention. “No need to look like we're going into battle.”

“It would be best to have a plan of action,” said Sherlock.

“No, I think we'll be best just wandering,” said John. “That's what everyone else is doing. We can get a feel for the place. It's not as if there are any vitally important activities, right? Just being here and having a good time is enough.”

Sherlock hesitated, but forced himself to break the bad news. “We'll need to dance.”

John stiffened. “I am not dancing around a maypole, Sherlock, I don't care-”

“That almost certainly won't be necessary,” said Sherlock. “However, some form of rhythmic motion to music will be. It's a key element, I'm afraid.”

The truth was that he was rather looking forward to it, as long as it didn't involve a maypole. He rather enjoyed dancing and he didn't think he'd ever have any luck persuading John to dance with him on any other occasion.

John took a deep breath. “Right. Okay. Fine, we'll have a bit of a sway later on, then. But first, let's see what kind of alcohol they serve at a country May Day fair.”
The answer to that question was long and varied. John's mood perked as they discovered all the choices he had when it came to getting drunk. When they found the mead stall, Sherlock found his own mood improving as well.

“One day you'll have to explain your honey thing to me,” said John as Sherlock examined the hue of the mead and decided it must have come from a clover-based honey. Or a sage one. Not for the first time, he wished he'd found some time to dedicate to properly studying honey.

“It's not a 'thing',” said Sherlock, took a careful sniff and then a slow sip of the mead. Ah, definitely clover. Not the most exciting choice. “I merely appreciate the taste, and the many variables involved in the production of it. The involvement of the bees is fascinating, John.”

“Of course,” said John. “Right, well, at least I know something I can put in your stocking when we get around to Christmas, then.”

Sherlock frowned. “Why do I have to wait until Christmas?”

John sniggered. “You sound like a small child,” he said. “I'm torn between, 'because I said so' and 'you know Father Christmas only comes once a year'.”

“The latter would be the truer one,” said Sherlock. He glanced around at the stalls surrounding them. “Should we see if we can find any appalling tat to buy for our other acquaintances as Christmas presents?”

“Seems a bit early,” said John. “Might as well take a look though, I suppose.”

They wandered around the fair for longer than Sherlock would have thought he'd be able to stand it. As usual, John's presence made everything infinitely more bearable, even staring at stall after stall of wood-carved bowls and over-priced leather work. There was an archery stall, where John proved his superiority at all things involving marksmanship and Sherlock entirely failed to mind, given how John's shoulders looked when he stretched back the string. Next to it was a falconry display, which made Sherlock wonder why more people didn't train birds to commit murder. The only crime he had encountered with a trained bird had been the one at the lighthouse with the cormorant, and that hadn't been murder. Not unless you counted the fish.

John bought himself some form of grilled meat wrapped in bread after that. They sat on the grass while he ate it and Sherlock entertained him by telling him about the case, which ended with the usual, gratifying exclamation of, “Brilliant, Sherlock.”

“Yes,” agreed Sherlock. John had finished eating and wiped the grease off his hands with a napkin, so Sherlock lay down with his head in John's lap. “Feel free to expand on the subject.”

John snorted as his fingers found their way exactly where Sherlock wanted them, carding through his hair. “You're the most wonderful, intelligent man I've ever met,” said John, with a healthy dose of sarcasm. Sherlock knew he meant every word though, so he ignored the tone.

“What time is it?” he asked.

John glanced at his watch. “About half one.”

“The announcement of the May Queen is at two,” said Sherlock, letting his eyes drift shut so that he could further concentrate on the feel of John's fingers. “We should be present for that.”

“Sounds like fun,” said John. “So, there's that, and some dancing a bit later. What else do we need to tick off?”
Sherlock had at least one plan, but he wasn't sure it was the sort of thing that should be announced ahead of time. “Not much.” Certainly nothing that was more interesting or important than their positions right now, at any rate.

They wandered over to the stage area at around ten to two and stopped to watch the end of the local Guide troop's attempt at a coordinated maypole dance, which only ended in two collisions and one odd knot halfway up the plaited ribbons. They finished to a smattering applause from the crowd, largely coming from their parents, and then the music came to a stop and a self-satisfied village official stepped on to the stage.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to the Nether Walford May Day Fair!”

There was more applause. One man even went so far as to cheer, which made Sherlock assume he'd drunk even more cider than John had.

“As usual, there are huge thanks for everyone involved in...” carried on the man, and Sherlock allowed himself to tune out. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and found two texts waiting for him.

*You utter bastard. I should have sent you a video of John crying into his tea after you died.* from Sherrinford, sent just after Sherlock had sent him the photo of Molly.

That was a mild overreaction. Sherrinford must know that reminding Sherlock about that awful time was a low blow. He glanced sideways at John, who was paying far more attention to the speech than he was, and carefully noted all the signs that he was blissfully happy with his life at the moment. He wouldn't be crying into his tea any time soon, or ever again, if Sherlock had any say in it, which he felt he did.

The second text had a different tone, and had been sent several hours later.

*Thanks for sending that photo. He called me and we talked it all out. I think things are going to be okay.*

Sherlock was more than sure that things weren't going to be okay but he supposed he should allow her some optimism. It wasn't as if she actually knew the problems that she and Sherrinford would face if they continued down this path.

“And now, the part you've all been waiting for!” announced the man on stage, and Sherlock pulled his attention back to him. “The crowning of our May Queen!”

A beaming woman in a twinset came up behind him, holding a cushion on which rested a crown of flowers. The man took it and held it up as if offering it to the crowd. Sherlock wondered if the vicar who was stood behind them, with the other village dignitaries, realised just how very pagan this whole thing was. Perhaps it was all just a front and the May Queen would end up sacrificed to ancient gods in return for agricultural success. That would be interesting.

“This year's May Queen is... Rosie Wade!”

There was applause, which Sherlock joined in with when John dug his elbow into him. A flushed teenage girl walked up to the stage and accepted the crown, a sash and a sceptre, then turned and grinned at the crowd.

“And her attendants are Felicity Merchant and Flora Braithwaite.”

Oh god, more clapping. Sherlock wondered how long it took for repetitive strain injury to kick in.
Two more girls went up and received sashes and smaller crowns and then stood next to the May Queen, clearly not sure what they should be doing next.

“And on that note, I think it's time for the dancing to get properly under way!” said the official. “Bring on the morris dancers!”

The morris dancers were terrible. Sherlock wasn't sure how they could call what they were doing dancing given the complete lack of style and grace involved. He gritted his teeth and endured it. After a minute or two, John's hand took his and he leaned over to say, “I'm having a flash of doing this every year for decades into the future. It's not pleasant.”

Sherlock considered that. On the one hand, the idea that he was going to be forced to watch morris dancers for thirty or forty years was deeply troubling, but on the other, John was beside him, holding his hand, and presumably would be every other time as well. It was hard to dread decades of having John by his side.

“Happy May Day,” he said, instead of voicing that. It wasn't Valentine's Day, after all.

John snorted and turned his attention back to the morris dancers, who had moved on to a handkerchief-related dance that they clearly didn't realise looked ridiculous.

After they had finally, blessedly, finished, the official events appeared to have come to an end. Most of the crowd dispersed back to the stalls. The band kept playing and a handful of people stayed to dance. Sherlock wondered if he had a hope in hell of getting John to join in with them. It seemed unlikely, so soon after he'd been traumatised by the morris dancing.

“Another drink?” John suggested.

The drunker John was, the more likely he was to dance. “Good idea,” said Sherlock.

Before they could head away, Sherlock heard a sound coming from the woodland behind the stage. He paused, frowning. It sounded like an echo of the music that the band were playing, but it was coming closer. Were there more musicians on the way?

“Someone loves tambourines,” observed John.

A minute or two later, Queen May arrived. She was riding a white horse, crowned with flowers, and surrounded by an entourage, some of whom were playing instruments and all of whom were carrying white blossoms.

“Right,” said John. “Of course it's her.”

Queen May dismounted by the stage and raised her arms to the crowd. “Let the dancing begin!” she announced.

The musicians she'd brought climbed up on stage to join the band, while her other followers spread out to form into a circle, grabbing the hands of any close enough and pulling them into it. The dance begin, a country dance that involved a great deal of weaving in and out, and which everyone, even the normal people, seemed to know the moves to without needing instruction. Sherlock felt his feet twitch with the urge to join in but he resolutely stayed in place, next to John, Queen May danced over and gave them wide smiles. “Happy Maying!” she said, and handed them each a flower.

“Uh, thanks,” said John, looking at the flower and clearly wondering what the hell he was going to
do with it. “You too.”

Queen May looked at Sherlock. “You wish to dance,” she said, and held out a hand. “Come with me.”

There was nothing Sherlock could do to resist that. He took her hand and she led him into the centre of the dance. The music seemed to be flowing through his whole body rather than just his ears, taking control of him, and he found himself joining in with enthusiasm. There was no need for him to worry about the moves because the next one was obvious, his feet taking him into it without his brain having to intercede. He was aware of nothing outside of the dance, not even John, as everyone stepped together, promenading and do-si-doing and finally falling into an intertwining circle that ended with Sherlock facing a completely new partner as the dance began again.

He lost track of time in a way that would have made him furious if he had been aware of anything outside the music. They went through dance after dance, attracting more and more couples to join in until it seemed that the whole field was dancing. It might have been minutes or hours when Sherlock came back to himself enough to realise that the partner forming up with him for the next dance was John.

“The Lover's Knot!” announced Queen May somewhere in the distance, and the band played the single note that was the signal to honour your partner. Sherlock managed a smirk at John before bowing, and then realised that he was the one who had ended up in what was technically the ladies row. That hardly seemed fair, given that John was the short one.

They danced through it twice, then the music finally, thankfully, paused. Sherlock looked over to see Queen May was mounting her horse again, her attendants already starting to jig back towards the woods. She gave them a cheery wave as they went, which Sherlock took to mean that she was pleased with how they'd celebrated her holiday.

“Christ,” said John. “I'm exhausted.”

“That was rather more vigorous than I was expecting,” agreed Sherlock.

John had sagged against him and he wrapped an arm around him to keep him up, feeling the way his lungs were moving in and out from the exertion. His heart would be pumping as well, blood shooting around his circulatory system, sending oxygen to every cell. Every part of him was completely, one hundred percent alive right now. It was a lovely thought.

“Come on,” said Sherlock, pulling John in the direction of the woods. “One last thing to do and then we'll have covered the full celebration.”

“Please tell me it involves a sit down,” said John, but he followed along readily enough.

Sherlock led him out of the field and into the woods, going far enough to be out of sight and sound of the fair, and then stopped him, turning to back him against a tree.

“It is traditional for couples to sneak off into the surrounding countryside and engage in amorous activities,” he said, and kissed John.

John let out a half-laugh against his lips and snaked an arm around Sherlock's shoulders to keep him in close. “Amorous activities,” he repeated. “I'm guessing you mean a bit of a snog rather than anything else.”

“We are both meant to enjoy it,” said Sherlock. The full tradition involved sex, but given John's unwillingness to take Sherlock up on his offer on Valentine's Day, he was reasonably certain that it
wouldn't upset him if they just stuck to what they were both comfortable with.

“It's pretty hard to enjoy sex in a wood,” said John. “Twigs end up in the worst places.”

Sherlock made a face at the thought and bent in to kiss John again. A nice snog against a tree for a bit, perhaps one last drink, and then they could go home, another holiday ticked off.

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It was dark by the time they got back home. John was clearly exhausted and collapsed straight into his chair without even making a move towards the kettle, so Sherlock went and turned it on for him.

“Thanks,” said John, with enough heartfelt emotion to make the physical exertion worth it.

There was the clatter of metatarsals from upstairs and Sherrinford arrived in the sitting room.

“Sherlock!” he thundered, in the same tone of voice that he had used when Sherlock stole from his poisons collection when he was a child. “Why did you think you could interfere in my relationship with Molly?”

“I'm not sure,” said Sherlock, taking mugs down for himself and John. “Perhaps because the two of you kept trying to involve me, possibly because I'm an incurable busybody, maybe because it felt like payback for the times you've got involved in my relationship with John.”

“That's completely different!” said Sherrinford. “I've only ever helped-”

“And I've helped you and Molly,” interrupted Sherlock. “Or, at least, Molly seemed to think so.” He gave Sherrinford a smug smile that was carefully calculated to infuriate him.

Sherrinford let out an angry, growling noise, then turned away to throw himself dramatically on the sofa. "She's made me agree to meet up with her."


“She hasn't cursed you to obey her every command, has she?” asked John. “I've told her not to do that. It's not very medically ethical, you know.”

Sherlock was overcome with a wave of love for him. How had he ended up with this perfect man who joined in with teasing his brother? He took the tea over to John and gave it to him with a smile, while Sherrinford made more aggravated and over-the-top noises.

“I hate you both,” he said sulkily. “You'll have to help me. I don't care what you're doing tomorrow, you need to help me disguise myself. And then get out, I don't want you in the flat while she's here.”

“Remind me,” said John to Sherlock. “Whose flat is this again?”

“Mrs. Hudson's,” snapped Sherrinford. “I'll need a false nose. And, I don't know, some sort of bandaging. Something that a medical woman will accept as necessary, even after the length of time it's been since my so-called 'accident'. And something over my eyes - sunglasses, but we'll need to make sure there's no gaps around them, or that they won't move at all and reveal bone, and-”

“Or,” interrupted Sherlock, “given that she already knows you'll be hiding your face, we could just
There was a pause as Sherrinford considered that. “I'm going to look like a Victorian widow.”

“Better than looking like you should be decorating a catacomb,” said Sherlock.

“What are you planning to do with her?” asked John.

Sherrinford twitched his skull in a way Sherlock recognised as him trying to pretend he wasn't embarrassed. “We're going to catch up on *Timetravellers, Inc.* together.”

“What a terrible idea for a date,” said Sherlock.

Sherrinford glared at him. “We don't all enjoy bonding over a bloody murder, you know.”

“Which is a relief, otherwise we might have to book in advance,” said John. “Do you want me to pick up some popcorn for Molly when I go to Tesco tomorrow?”

“Please,” said Sherrinford. “And other things, I suppose. What else do living people require? Oh, some sort of wine. I'd like to see her get a bit tipsy.”

“She'll get very giggle,” Sherlock warned him.

“God, I hope so,” said Sherrinford in dreamy tones.

Sherlock made a face. “I'll definitely make sure to be out, then.”

“We can go to Angelo's,” said John, “and celebrate not having any more holidays to get through until Halloween.”

Sherlock considered that. “That sounds acceptable,” he said, picturing John's face lit by the candle Angelo always brought them.

“You can get John giggle instead,” said Sherrinford. “I know you enjoy that.”

Sherlock ignored that. Just because it was true didn't mean he had to admit to it.

By the time John got back from the shops the next day, Sherrinford was working himself up into the most pointless state of over-reaction.

“What kind of veil did you get?” he asked, pouncing on John the moment he got through the door. “Are you sure it's thick enough? What if she can see through it?”

“I'm sure it's thick enough,” said John, trying to get past Sherrinford to the kitchen.

Sherrinford started pawing through the bags he was holding before he could get anywhere. “What kind of popcorn is this? Do you have to do anything to it? Where's the wine? Please say you didn't forget the wine.”

“Stop!” said John. “Enough! Out of the way and let me get through before I drop your bloody wine.”

Sherrinford stepped back enough for John to get past him, then trailed after him to the kitchen. “You did get Sauvignon Blanc, didn't you? Oh god, you didn't get red, please say-”
“No, I didn't bloody get red,” said John. “Because you texted me three times to remind me not to.”

He pulled a newspaper out of a bag and tossed it at Sherlock, who immediately opened it. There was unlikely to be anything of interest in there, but anything was better than listening to the banality of John and Sherrinford's conversation.

*First Draft Of Media Report Shows Complete U-Turn*, blared the headline. Sherlock stifled a sigh. Oh god, politics. Why couldn't someone be dead?

“What if she doesn't like this kind of chocolate? I don't know her chocolate preferences, oh god, why don't I know that, I'm a terrible friend.”

“'Friend'?” queried Sherlock, turning to the next page. A photo of a smug man in a suit who showed all seventeen signs of being a politician, and all nine signs of being in opposition. He seemed to be accusing the Prime Minister of a heinous crime. Interesting.

“It would seem a bit presumptuous to call myself more at this point,” said Sherrinford. “Now, John, are you sure this is enough popc-”

“Yes!” snapped John. “I am very sure. Which of us actually eats and drinks? It's *fine*. And it's not going to matter anyway, Molly's not coming here for the cuisine.”

Sadly, the terrible crime turned out to be nothing more interesting than letting himself be manipulated by media moguls. Given the opposition politician's tie, Sherlock didn't think he was really in a position to criticise. He turned the page. Oh, some orphans were starving to death in a war-torn third world country. Dull.

“No, she's coming here for me,” said Sherrinford. “Oh god, what if I'm not-”

“If you don't stop panicking, I'll text Mycroft and tell him you're interested in hearing about the precise differences between the Swedish and Norwegian political systems,” interrupted Sherlock, which shut Sherrinford up for long enough for John to finish putting things away in the kitchen and put the kettle on.

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By the time Molly arrived, Sherrinford was swaddled up in several layers of clothes, topped with a hoodie. He'd tucked the veil underneath the hood to keep it in place, which made him look a bit like he was wearing a headless executioner costume, but Sherlock judged it best not to mention that.

He tugged on John's thickest winter gloves while Sherlock carefully observed him from all angles to make sure that there wasn't a single flash of white bone showing through between his layers.

“Right,” said John, holding his hand out. “Shake my hand.”

Sherrinford gave him a violent handshake. “Exceedingly pleased to meet you, my good sir.”

“Yeah, you're good,” said John. “You feel a bit skinny, but not obviously fleshless.”

“As long as you don't do anything vigorous, your clothing should hold up,” added Sherlock.

“Unfortunately, I no longer have the equipment needed for 'vigorous','” said Sherrinford, and then gave a rather vulgar hip thrust. “Nothing but bones, but missing the one bone that might be useful.”
Sherlock felt his lip curl with distaste and turned away so that Sherrinford wouldn't spot it and continue the line of conversation in order to wind him up. Luckily, Sherrinford was too distracted for that.

“How do I look?” he asked, stepping a bit to display himself to John. “Now, be honest. If you were a sexy, adorable pathologist, would you want to jump my bones?”

John gave him a long look that made Sherlock begin to twitch. "You should hope she doesn't, or all this disguising will have been in vain."

The doorbell rang. Sherrinford started as if he'd been electrocuted.

“Oh god, it's her. It's her! I'm not ready! I don't-“

John put a firm hand on his shoulder. “Calm down,” he said. “Remember, it's just Molly. Just...say hello and offer her a drink, yeah? Keep it casual. She's probably just as nervous."

Downstairs, Mrs. Hudson opened the door and Molly's voice could be heard. Sherrinford froze, then visibly forced himself to relax. “Yes, right,” he said. “Of course. Easy. People do this all the time.”

“And generally with a lot less drama,” observed Sherlock. Sherrinford's veiled face swung towards him, no doubt in order to glare at him. Sherlock just smiled.

“Don't make me tell John about how dramatic you were about him before you finally snogged him,” said Sherrinford.

The smile disappeared off Sherlock's face.

Footsteps started up the stairs and Sherrinford was distracted again. “What do I- where do I stand? Or should I be sitting? Is that more casual?”

“I wish I was taping this,” said Sherlock.

“Be nice,” said John. He stepped forward and opened the door just as Molly reached the top of the stairs. “Hello, Molly. Come in.”

Sherrinford made an almost inaudible high-pitched noise.

Molly came in with hesitant steps, her eyes fixed on Sherrinford. “Um. Hi,” she said.

“Molly,” said Sherrinford. “Good evening.”

There was a long, awkward pause during which they just stared at each other. Or, rather, Sherrinford stared at Molly, and she stared at his veil.

“O-kay,” said John once it had been going on for a while. “Well, Sherlock and I were just heading out. Sherlock, get up.”

Sherlock stood up. Anything was better than standing around watching the train wreck of this social interaction.

“Your coat!” said Sherrinford. “I should take it for you.”

Molly blinked and then let out a nervous laugh. “I took it off downstairs.”
“Right yes. Of course. Should have spotted that,” said Sherrinford.

Sherlock briefly mourned the illusion that the Holmeses were all highly intelligent. “I'd try John's suggestion, if I were you.”

“Yes!” said Sherrinford. “Molly. Molly-”

“Yes?” she asked.

Sherrinford clutched his hands together. “Would you like a drink?”

She smiled. “I'd love a drink.”

Sherrinford looked as if he was going to collapse with relief.

“Well done,” said Sherlock, heading for the door. “One day you may even make it as far as a conversation.”

“Be nice,” said John. “See you later, Sherrinford, Molly. Have fun.”

Sherlock was halfway down the stairs by the time John had finished his pointless round of social niceties.

“It feels a bit like leaving a teenager with their first date,” said John when he finally followed.

“Well, it is his first date, even if he's nowhere near a teenager,” said Sherlock. “Not that that's any excuse.”

John huffed out a laugh and took Sherlock's hand as they stepped out into the street. His touch instantly brought a warm glow to Sherlock's chest that he hadn't yet managed to fully analyse.

“He's not doing any worse than you did on your first date,” he said.

Sherlock frowned. “Which first date?”

“The one on which you told me you were married to your work and then ran off with a serial killer,” said John.

“That wasn't-”

“Of course it was,” said John. “It just took us both a while to realise it. We're going back to the same restaurant on this date, aren't we?”

Sherlock considered that and decided he didn't have enough legroom to really argue it.

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John insisted that they stay out as late as possible, so after dinner they went for a walk. Sherlock had been in the habit of walking through London for years, taking in every minor change so that his Mind Palace maps would be kept up-to-date. Having John by his side was a more recent development, and one that transformed a necessary activity into a pleasure.

The sitting room was deserted when they got back to 221B, but there were several signs that the evening had gone well for Sherrinford and Molly. The only seats displaying signs of wear were on the sofa, so they had been sat in close proximity for their tedious television show. On the floor next to it was an empty bowl that had clearly once contained popcorn as well as a half-full wine glass.
John looked at it and sighed. “I'm not clearing it up,” he said. “I'm going to bed. Make sure he's
tidied by the time I wake up, yeah?”

“If he emerges from his room,” said Sherlock. “It seems likely that he's up there having some kind
of emotional flail over the experience.”

“God, he really is having the full teenage experience,” said John. “Probably best to leave him to it
or we might end up getting sappy love songs quoted at us.”

“Indeed,” agreed Sherlock. “That would be terrible.”

“Are you coming to bed?” asked John.

Sherlock considered it. He had been intending to spend the next few hours experimenting on the
pancreas that John hadn't yet noticed was in the fridge, and he was pretty eager to start that now.
He could watch John fall asleep tomorrow. He shook his head. “Not tonight.”

John stepped closer to press a kiss to Sherlock's lips. “Good night then,” he said. “See you in the
morning.”

Sherlock had started on his experiment by the time John had finished in the bathroom and settled
into bed, but it turned out that he hadn't thought ahead. The pancreas was going to need to reach
room temperature before he could gain any worthwhile experimental data. For a moment he
considered heating it briefly in the microwave to speed the process, but there was a change that
would distort all his results. Also, John would be furious.

He spent a moment or two wondering if he should fill the time by reading the medical journal that
had come yesterday before he stopped kidding himself and headed up to Sherrinford's room. Of
course he was going to go and tease him about whatever had happened that evening. He was a
younger brother, after all. It was his duty to be as annoying as possible, and one he had always
taken very seriously.

He reached the top of the stairs and reached out to open Sherrinford's door, but paused when a
noise hit his ears.

It was the quiet moan of a woman. Sherlock froze in place.

“Yeah, just like that,” came Sherrinford's voice through the door. “Do it a little harder.”

“Christ,” gasped a voice that was unmistakable Molly's. “Sherrinford, I need- You have to touch
me.”

“Oh no,” said Sherrinford. “I'm just watching, you'll have to do all the touching. Move your left
hand to the other nipple now.”

“Oh!” said Molly, as if she'd been surprised.

Sherlock very quietly turned around and went back downstairs.

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He was deep into the pancreas several hours later when Sherrinford came downstairs. He was still
wearing all his layers of disguise, but he was walking with a bounce that made Sherlock roll his
eyes.
“Sherlock!” exclaimed Sherrinford. “Isn't the world a wonderful place?!”

“Save me the post-coital exuberance,” said Sherlock.

Sherrinford snorted and collapsed into a chair. “Just because you've never experienced it doesn't mean that it's to be slighted,” he said. “This is such a lovely feeling, I refuse to stifle it for you.”

“Are you going to explain just how you managed it without giving away your status?” asked Sherlock.

Sherrinford tutted. “You're so pedestrian in your assumptions about sex. There are plenty of ways to make a woman very, very happy without taking your clothes off. Or even really touching her. It seems that Molly really enjoys the sound of my voice. Really enjoys it.”

“That would put her in a very small minority,” said Sherlock. He stuck a needle into the pancreas with slightly more force than was necessary.

“No need for snark,” said Sherrinford, rocking back on the chair so far that Sherlock wondered if he was going to fall backwards. “Not today! Today, when I have made a woman come for the first time in years! And not just once, either, she came-”

“Stop!” demanded Sherlock. “I have no interest in hearing this.”

Sherrinford shrugged one shoulder. “No need to be snappy.” He let out a long sigh, tipping his head back and making the chair wobble on the two legs he had it on. “You sound just like Mycroft, by the way. You know how you hate it when he's dismissive of your relationship with John.”

Sherlock gritted his teeth. “That's different,” he said, setting the needle aside on the old newspaper he'd put down so that John wouldn't get upset about the state of the table. “That's about love, not sex. Mycroft's inability to experience love is far more annoying than my lack of interest in sexual fumblings.”

Sherrinford straightened, bringing the chair back down to all four legs. “You think he doesn't experience love?”

Sherlock frowned at him. “You know he doesn't.”

“He doesn't experience romantic love,” corrected Sherrinford. “I think it's obvious that he feels other forms of love a lot more strongly than he would chose to. Look at all he does for you and me.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “Meddles in our affairs and tries to control us?”

Sherrinford shook his head as if frustrated. “Are you really so blind to it? He sat in this flat and told us both that he was being blackmailed, that someone had discovered the 'chinks in his armour'. What on earth do you think those are?”

Sherlock hadn't really spared the matter much thought. He was getting the uncomfortable feeling that that had been a mistake. “I presume he had some unsavoury peccadillo that had become common knowledge.”

Sherrinford snorted. “Yeah. He loves his little brother and he's done enough for you that other people have noticed. Do you really think it was a coincidence that you and John got kidnapped after we told him to ignore the blackmail? You didn't see him while you were gone, either, he did everything he could to get you back. Including giving in and sacrificing something he'd been
working for a long time.”

Sherlock stared at him. “He told you the details,” he said. “What did he tell you?”

Sherrinford let out a long sigh. “He didn't really need to. It became obvious. It would be to you too, if you paid any attention to current political affairs.” He stabbed a gloved finger at the headline on the newspaper that Sherlock had spread on the table.

Sherlock twisted his head to read it.

First Draft Of Media Report Shows Complete U-Turn

The official release of the first draft of the Leveson Report shows that the government has completely reversed their position since the version that was leaked over Easter. The strict system of regulation that was proposed in that document is nowhere to be seen in this new version, which favours the freedom of the media with only a few guidelines, and a code of conduct that it would be optional for media companies to agree to.

Sherlock frowned. “Why would Mycroft care so much about what the paparazzi get up?”

Sherrinford groaned and put his head in his hands. “Honestly, Sherlock! Think! Because they were used to hound you to your death, of course. Mycroft has been the force pushing this report through, making sure that it's going to be strong enough to prevent anything like that happening again. And he gave it all up because your safety was threatened.”

Sherlock considered that with a frown. A discomforting sensation was slowly descending down through his stomach. “That makes no sense,” he decided in the end, with some relief. “Why would Mycroft worry about my safety? Those kidnappers may have thought they could threaten me with injury or death, but Mycroft knows better than that. I'm already dead.”

“No, John's not,” said Sherrinford, and Sherlock immediately stiffened. “Do you really think Mycroft so stupid that he wouldn't know exactly how much it would destroy you if something happened to John? Why do you think he spends so much time worrying about his health?”

“Because he's a controlling bastard?” suggested Sherlock.

Sherrinford acknowledged that with a tilt of his head. “Well, that too. He's also very aware that if John died, you'd be a mess.”

Sherlock shook his head. “I wouldn't be a mess,” he said. “I'd be gone. I won't stay once he's not around, Sherrinford.”

Sherrinford reached out and took Sherlock's hand in a tight grip. “Don't say that,” he hissed. “There will still be so much for you-”

Sherlock pulled his hand free. “Not compared to the misery of facing it without John,” he said. “Don't try and persuade me, Sherrinford. If John couldn't manage it, you won't. I've made the decision. It's not as if I haven't already lived a lifetime, or that I don't expect to have a good few more decades with John. What's the purpose in just going on forever with no end in sight? I can't imagine anything worse than existing perpetually, particularly when John can't do the same.”

Sherrinford took a deep breath. “Then Mycroft's actions make even more sense,” he said. “He loves you, Sherlock. He's doing everything he can to protect John, and you, because of that. If you can't see it-”
Sherlock turned away, shaking his head. “What am I meant to do about that? I'm not the one blackmailing him.”

“Just be nicer to him,” said Sherrinford. “I know you love to hate him, and you do both enjoy all the sniping, although I've never really worked out why, but at least spend time with him. Don't run away every time he comes over.”

Sherlock considered that, then dipped a nod. “Agreed.”

“Good,” said Sherrinford.

There was silence, during which Sherlock tried to turn his attention back to his pancreas and away from the nasty mess of emotions that the conversation had brought up.

“Anyway,” said Sherrinford after a moment. “I really only came down to tidy the sitting room before John wakes up and gets all snappy and sarcastic about always having to clear up after the two of us. I've got a beautiful woman asleep in my bed, I'd be a fool to hang around down here with my brother and his disgusting glandular organ.”

Sherlock looked at the pancreas. “It's actually a rather attractive glandular organ, as they go.”

Sherrinford shook his head. “Oh, Sherlock. Sometimes, you're so very Halloween.”

He headed into the sitting room while Sherlock tried to stop himself from throwing the pancreas at him in retaliation. He still needed to get data from it, after all, and the resulting splatter on the carpet would probably upset John. Sherlock didn't really want to risk his sarcasm either.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Halloween, October 31st. Posting date: May 23rd
They arrived at the crime scene early on the morning of Halloween. Sherlock took one look at it and was hit by a wave of relief that he wasn't having to spend the day hiding away with Mycroft and Sherrinford, because then he would have missed this.

“Christ,” said John, looking around the room. “This is something else.”

“Isn't it spectacular?” said Sherlock, turning to take it all in.

The room was decorated for a Halloween party, with paper pumpkins strung across the room and fake cobwebs clinging to the walls. To one side there was a long table with three pumpkins down the middle, surrounded by buffet food. Someone had already blown the candles in the pumpkins out, but Sherlock could visualise how it would have looked with light flickering through the screaming faces carved into the pumpkins.

The main feature of the party, however, was that all the attendees were corpses. Three dead women sat by the buffet table, carefully propped up in chairs in a way that suggested they were in the middle of a conversation. They were dressed as a vampire, a zombie and a black cat and their dead hands held plates of food that must have been glued on to get them to stay. On the dance floor, a man and a woman were propped up in each others arms, one draped with a white sheet while the other wore a long black dress and a pointy hat. A pirate and a mummy were on a near-by sofa, apparently watching them with sightless eyes.

“It's a whole new level of creepy,” said Sally. “Jesus, just when I thought I'd seen it all.”

Sherlock ignored her in order to examine the corpse dressed as a cat. The dress it had been put in was short-sleeved, so he was able to examine the cuts on the fore-arms without impediment.

“What do you know?” he heard John ask Lestrade behind him. He spared a tiny percentage of his attention to hear the answer.

“Not much. The flat's been empty for a while – bank foreclosure – but a neighbour heard the music and called us in, thinking there were squatters.”

“Music?” asked Sherlock, pulling out a magnifier to examine the condition of the skin.

“Yeah, creepy as hell, isn't it?” said Lestrade. “It's on repeat, but we haven't been able to turn it off, because it's coming from inside that one.”

Sherlock raised his head and turned to follow Lestrade's gesture at the dancing ghost.

“Inside?” asked John, and he went over to look. He pulled up the sheet to reveal a chest that had been roughly cut open and then restitched with something bulky inside it. Sherlock noted the difference between the skill of that cut and the ones that he had just been looking at. Definitely performed by a different hand.

“Oh god,” said John. “Someone stitched speakers into the lung cavity?”

“Yep,” said Lestrade. “I mean, I thought the buffet was bad enough, but that- this guy is clearly a
“What tune is it?” asked John.

“No idea,” said Lestrade. “Sherlock? Sounds like something you might play.”

Lestrade would never have heard Sherlock play this particular song. Sherlock felt his pleasure at the crime scene sour and he stood up. “It's *Danse Macabre* by Saint-Saëns.”

It had been his favourite tune until Oogy-Boogie tricked him into wagering it on the outcome of his rigged game, when Sherlock lost it to him. His favourite tune playing at the best crime scene he'd seen in years, and he couldn't hear a single note of it because of that cheating bastard. Old rage swelled up in his chest and he choked it back with difficulty.

“*Danse Macabre*,” repeated Sally. “Right, of course. Whoever this guy is, he's got a strong sense of theme.”

“And easy access to a University with a medical department,” added Sherlock. “One that still does proper, hands-on dissection classes.”

Sally looked around. “They're medical students' corpses? I thought he must have just poached them from a mortuary.”

“Cadavers,” corrected Sherlock. “And yes, obviously. You can see that they haven't just opened the body cavity, but also dissected the forearms to look at the ligaments and tissues. The cuts are reasonably competent, but not what you'd expect from a fully-trained professional. In addition, you can tell from the discolouration of the skin, as well as the smell, that they have been preserved using a mixture of formalin and gluteraldehyde, rather than by any of the methods that a funeral home or mortuary would use. Only bodies that are going to be used for anatomy lessons are preserved like that.”

“That's what the smell is,” said John, as if in realisation. Sherlock decided to ignore what that said about the speed that his brain worked at. “I should have got that one - takes me right back.”

Lestrade let out a long sigh. “Simpson, put out a lost-and-found on seven medical cadavers. Phone around the Universities and get them to have a count up of their dead bodies.”

A constable gave a nod and scurried off.

“I should imagine your most likely suspect for this is going to be someone who had access to them as part of their job,” said Sherlock. “Probably worked there for years, doesn't have any friends, definitely got a chip on his shoulder about that. There may well be a Halloween party that he's not been invited to.”

“So he decided to create his own?” asked Sally, with disgust.

Sherlock shrugged. “Just be glad that he had access to already-dead bodies rather than creating his own.”

“The media are going to have a field day with this,” said Lestrade glumly, with the voice of a man who's just realised he's going to have to lead the press conference.

“Have fun with that,” said Sherlock. “Come on, John, I think we're done here.”

John looked surprised. “Already?” he asked. “I'd have thought you'd want to stay and have a proper
Sherlock had, right up until he found out he was surrounded by notes of a song that had been stolen from him. “We should really be concentrating on celebrating the day.”

John made a face but nodded. They’d agreed that there wasn’t much to be done for Halloween until later in the day, but that didn’t mean they should ignore entirely. “Yeah,” he agreed. He looked at Lestrade. “See you later, mate. You’re coming to Molly’s party, yeah?”

Lestrade nodded. “Unless this drags on,” he said, gesturing at the room.

“It won’t,” said Sherlock. “The culprit will be easy to track, once you’ve discovered where the cadavers came from. He doesn’t seem to be capable of much subtlety, after all.”

“That’s a bit of an understatement,” muttered Sally, looking around at the room again.

“Should we have some kind of Halloween-themed lunch?” asked John as they left.

Sherlock made a face. “I am not willingly eating pumpkin for anyone. Not even Jack.”

“Fair enough,” said John as Sherlock hailed a taxi. “Maybe I’ll just have a sandwich at home, then. I’ll cut it into the shape of a bat or something.”

“We probably don’t need to be too concerned about making every part of today themed to the holiday,” said Sherlock, holding the door of the taxi for John and then following him into it. “After all, I’m a dead man who grew up in Halloween, our flat is filled with bones, body parts and other such themed items, and you’ve killed people. I think we manage a base level of Halloween-ness that we didn't with, say, Easter.”

John gave the taxi driver a bland smile that meant he'd caught the horrified look that had been directed at Sherlock as his speech went on. “Baker Street, ta.”

“Besides which,” added Sherlock, “Jack is not only well-disposed towards us, but knows that if he takes me back to Halloween, I will spend the rest of my existence getting my revenge on him.”

“True,” said John. “Still, given how he helped us by calling the council, it does feel like we should be making an effort to celebrate, to repay him.”

“He also dragged me away in the first place,” Sherlock pointed out.

John shrugged that away. “It’s not as if he had a lot of choice in the matter.”

Sherlock let out a hum, but didn't reply. He didn't really want to think about the fact that this was the anniversary of the beginning of his exile. Or, at least the beginning of his exile from this world. He had been exiled from John long before that, when Moriarty made him jump.

Sherlock pulled out his violin while John made lunch, but didn't immediately play it. Instead, he spent some time just looking at the strings, trying to remember at least the first note of Danse Macabre. A sick feeling settled in his stomach when he couldn't even say what key it might have been in.

John sat down in his chair with a sandwich. “Are you going to play?”

“How do you remember how the tune at the crime scene went?” asked Sherlock, even though he knew...
it was a mistake to dwell on it.

“My memory isn't that feeble,” said John. “It was on repeat the whole time we were there, and it was pretty loud. Who knew that a lung cavity would make such a good echo chamber?”

“I did,” said Sherlock. “Hum it.”

John raised an eyebrow, but did as requested. His lips pressed together, his chest expanded as he drew in a breath, and his throat vibrated as he engaged his vocal chords.

Sherlock heard nothing.

Knowing that John was making a noise that Sherlock couldn't hear was worse than having lost the song in the first place. He wanted to be able to gather every tiny piece of information about John, but he'd never know how it sounded for him to hum this tune. “Stop,” he said, in a choked voice. “Please, John, stop.”

John's face creased into a frown. “What's wrong?”

Sherlock shook his head, trying to shake away the unnecessary emotion. He had no idea how the tune went, after all. It was entirely possible that it wasn't worth this level of emotional investment in it.

“*Danse Macabre* used to be my favourite tune,” he said. “I think I told you about the bet I lost as we were escaping Halloween.”

“In the tale of the three brothers?” asked John, his frown deepening as he tried to remember. “Uh, there was a bad man who made you gamble – oh. He won your favourite song.”

Sherlock dipped a nod. “I haven't been able to hear it since. I have no idea how it goes.”

John looked gratifyingly horrified. “God, that's awful,” he said. “Is there no way you can get it back?”

Sherlock shrugged. “A bet is a bet. I'd have to go to Halloween and somehow win it back from Oogy-Boogie, which would not be an easy task. The only person who finds defeating his games easy is Jack.”

John was silent for a moment, then looked up at Sherlock. “If it helps, I think I prefer a few of the tunes you play,” he said. “What's the one that goes...” He hummed a brief phrase and Sherlock smiled.

“Sarasate's *Zapateado*,” he said, raising his violin to his shoulder. “I suppose there are worse choices.”

He launched into it, watching as John's face lit up with pleasure. Perhaps he didn't need to mourn the loss of his old favourite when he had a whole range of new ones, chosen entirely because of the effect they had on John.

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Mycroft texted Sherlock later that afternoon.

*Have you seen Sherrinford?*

Sherlock frowned.
He should be with you. SH

When they had first escaped to this world, they'd found the least-Halloweeny holiday cottage they could and then proceeded to spend several days there every October. Mycroft had come to pick up Sherrinford to go there yesterday morning.

He was, but he disappeared while I was having a shower. He left a note.

There was a photo of the note attached.

Dear Bro,

There's something I've got to do, I'll see you later. Try not to spend the whole day hunched over your laptop.

Sherrinford

Sherlock frowned. Why would Sherrinford risk leaving the safety of the Halloween-free zone they'd created at the cottage? What could he possibly need to do that would be so important he'd risk being dragged back to Halloween by Jack?

I'll keep an eye out for him. SH

“If I promise not to put pumpkin in it, will you have tea?” asked John.

Sherlock looked up with a nod. “There are gingerbread ghosts in the tin.”

John's face lit up. “Oh, just the thing.”

He went into the kitchen to put the kettle on and Sherlock trailed after him, still trying to puzzle out Sherrinford's behaviour. “John, did Sherrinford say anything to you about this holiday?”

“No,” said John. “I was under the impression that discussing it with him was a bad idea, in case Jack somehow managed to track him down.”

“Yes,” agreed Sherlock. “Jack, as the Holiday Ruler, is attuned to all hints of Halloween celebration. Because we used to be Halloween citizens, there's a much stronger link already, so it would be far easier for him than the other Holiday Rulers to track Sherrinford down. All it would take would be one slightly celebratory action or sentence and he would have an instant fix on him. Anything that leaned towards a costume, or a love of the occult, or even giving out sweets.”

“Right,” agreed John. “When he was talking about going away with Mycroft, he just called it That Day. He made me talk to Molly about it, so she wouldn't mention it.”

“Did he?” asked Sherlock. Molly and Sherrinford had maintained a surprisingly close relationship over the last few months, despite the layers of disguise that Sherrinford had to wear just to be around her. The amount of sex they managed to have was frankly unnecessary, as was the number of sex toys that Sherrinford had bought in order to assist with it. Sherlock had had a nasty surprise when he opened a parcel addressed to 'Mr S. Holmes' to find an unnecessarily large purple dildo.

“Yeah,” said John. “It didn't go down so well. Molly was hoping to persuade him to come to her party tonight - with a costume on, of course. I'm not entirely sure that that isn't the whole reason she decided to have a party in the first place.”

Sherlock considered that. It had been an overwhelming relief when Molly had announced she was...
having a Halloween party, because it meant that he and John didn't have to hold one. He hadn't once stopped to wonder why she'd bother, but then he'd never really understood why anyone would willingly hold a party without the threat of exile hanging over their heads.

“Speaking of,” said John, setting the tea down in front of Sherlock, along with the gingerbread, “we should probably get into costume after this.”

Sherlock made a face at the thought.

John snorted. “Please,” he said. “As if you don't love dressing up. Any excuse on a case and we both end up dressed as ninjas.”

“That was once,” protested Sherlock. “Besides, assuming a role for a case is completely different from dressing up for what is meant to be fun.”

“Tell that to someone who doesn't know you spent weeks going through every costume shop in London to find the perfect costume.”

“You know how important it is to commit fully to the holiday, John,” said Sherlock. “Costumes are a crucial part of the celebrations.”

“Right,” said John, badly hiding a smirk behind his teacup. “Nothing at all to do with getting to dress up as your favourite historical figure and indulging your childhood fantasies.”

“My childhood fantasy was to escape Halloween and live here,” said Sherlock. “I already achieved that. Years ago.”

“All right, show-off,” said John. “Well, mine was becoming a soldier, so I did too. Unless you count before that, when I wanted to be a Womble.”

“Perhaps you should have dressed as Uncle Bulgaria tonight,” suggested Sherlock.

“Yeah, I'm not six any more,” said John. “Thank fuck.”

Sherlock had chosen their costumes but John had required very little persuasion to agree to them, at least not once Sherlock had told him that he wasn't allowed to dress as James Bond. That was hardly in the Halloween spirit, after all. A proper Halloween costume needed some element of either occult or macabre to it, and preferably a great deal of fake blood. Just putting on a suit and a bow tie hardly counted.

Sherlock had both their costumes waiting on hangers in their bedroom.

“You'll have to tie my cravat,” said John once he'd put on the brown suit and waistcoat. He'd got the cravat looped around his neck, but that seemed to be as much as he was capable of.

Sherlock rolled his eyes as he stepped forward to assist. “How disappointing to find that I'm married to a man who doesn't know how to dress properly.”

John snorted, lifting his chin to allow Sherlock access. “I don't know if you've noticed, but cravats aren't really my style.”

Sherlock tied a loose knot in John's cravat, finding the intimacy of the task rather pleasing. He didn't tuck it fully into his collar but left it a little dishevelled. “I suppose you'll need me to do your sideburns as well.”
John stared. “My what?”


John let out a long breath. “Yeah, but I assumed we'd be skipping that detail. That was probably a bit naïve, in hindsight.”

“Accuracy is essential to a costume, John,” said Sherlock, pulling out the stick-on sideburns he'd found on the internet after an exhaustive search to find the closest match to John's hair colour. He took a lot of care sticking them on, taking care to get the correct angle while John stood very still and rolled his eyes at him.

“I don't see why you're not the one wearing fake facial hair,” said John when Sherlock took a step back to admire his handiwork.

“Two reasons,” said Sherlock. “The first is the physical resemblances are closer this way around, and the other is that I can't play a dead man, not when I am a dead man. Halloween is about dressing as something you're not.”

“I hate to break it to you,” said John, petting at the sideburns as if wanting to scratch at them. Sherlock glared at him until his fingers dropped. “But dressing as Victorians means that neither of us are playing living men.”

“Georgians,” corrected Sherlock. “1828 was during the reign of George IV. And that's not the point. You are famously dead, where as my death is an unknown matter. And,” he added, holding up the make-up he had ready, “your death will be part of your costume. Sit down.”

John eyed the make-up, then let out a deep, resigned sigh and sat down. “Next year, I'm choosing the costumes.”

“If you want,” said Sherlock. There was a whole year to change John's mind about that. He eyed John's cravat and collar, then loosened them even more. There would need to be plenty of neck on display for this to be worth it. Besides, he rather enjoyed the sight of John's neck.

John let out a tiny sigh, tipping his head back. “Yeah, like it'll be that easy.”

Sherlock smiled. John knew him so well. He bent to press a kiss to his Adam's apple before beginning to paint a vivid red line of bruises across it.

Sherlock gave them both a final inspection before they left and was pleased with the results. His own costume was a black suit with a bow-tie and he'd slicked his hair down as flat as it would go. John's look was rather more dramatic now that he had the bruising across his throat and the noose that would have caused it looped around his neck. They both had small bottles labelled **POISON** in their top pockets in place of a pocket square and long, curved knives which were, sadly, plastic. Apparently it wasn't a good idea to take actual knives to a party that was likely to have several police officers at it.

“We look pretty good,” said John, readjusting his waistcoat in the mirror.

“Yes,” agreed Sherlock. He hesitated. “It's not too obscure, is it?”

“No, for a party held by a pathologist,” said John. He tried to fit his knife into his pocket, then gave up and tucked it into his waistband instead. “Mind you, if they really dressed like this, it's a wonder no one realised what they were up to a lot earlier. The poison is a bit of a give away.”
Sherlock tucked his own knife into a similar position. “The knives and poison are inaccurate,” he said. “They got people drunk and then smothered them but that doesn't come with a prop, so I improvised.”

“Yeah, good idea,” said John. He turned to Sherlock with a bright grin and a little bow, holding out his arm. “Shall we, Mr. Hare?”

Sherlock returned the smile and took John's arm. “I believe we shall, Mr Burke.”

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Molly had solved the problem of trying to fit a party into her tiny flat by making it a joint party with the woman who lived on the same floor as her, so as John and Sherlock came up the stairs, the landing was already starting to fill with costumed party-goers. Both flats had their doors wide open and a table had been dragged out for people to put their coats on. Sherlock wasn't sure he wanted to leave his there, where anyone could do anything to it, but John pulled it off him and dumped it with his before Sherlock could come up with another plan for it.

“Come on,” said John. “I need a drink.”

They headed inside Molly's flat, which had been liberally decorated with black crepe paper, plastic bats and enough pumpkins to make Sherlock twitch in case it was a sign of the cuisine that would be available. Molly was in the kitchen, putting cupcakes decorated with spider webs on a plate.

“Oh, hello!” she said, excitedly. Her eyes slipped to the space behind them and Sherlock knew she was hoping for Sherrinford, despite everything. Her attention flicked back to them a moment later though and, to her credit, her disappointment was barely obvious. “Your costumes are wonderful! I couldn't begin to imagine what you might come as.”

“I am Mr. Hare,” said Sherlock, “and my colleague is Mr. Burke.”

“Oh!” said Molly. Her eyes ran over them both, taking in details, and then she gave them a rather ghoulish grin. “That's excellent.”

“I had to talk him out of bringing a cadaver as a prop,” said John, which wasn't true but made Molly laugh.

“Molls!” called someone from the other room, and Molly excused herself and disappeared.

John headed for the clutter of bottles grouped on one of the surfaces. “What are you having?” he asked. “What's the most Halloween-y drink? I'm guessing it's something with pumpkin in.”

Sherlock shuddered. “I will have red wine,” he said, firmly.

“And pretend it's blood?” asked John, pouring Sherlock a glass.

Sherlock frowned. “Who would be fooled by that? The consistency is completely different.”

Three women came into the kitchen, clearly also in search of alcohol. John stepped away from the makeshift bar to allow them access, moving next to Sherlock.

“Oh!” said one of them, staring at Sherlock. “Sherlock Holmes!”

Sherlock twitched. He didn't enjoy being recognised, particularly not by her sort. They had a worrying tendency to attempt to flirt, which never ended well. “Not tonight,” he said. “Tonight, I
am William Hare.”

She frowned. “Uh, right,” she said. She gestured down at her costume. “I'm a zombie kitten.”

“It's a great costume,” said John while Sherlock was still staring at her outfit, which left a great
deal of flesh on display in a way that seemed appropriate for neither a zombie nor a kitten. “Come
on, Sherlock, I think I can see Mike.”

He took Sherlock's arm and led him away. Behind them, Sherlock heard one of the other women
ask, “Who the hell is William Hare?”

“I'm Googling,” said the other one. “Let's see...oh, whoever he is, he's got the same cheekbones.”

John snorted and Sherlock glared at him.

“Sorry,” said John. “It's just, I've been trying not to point that out for the last week, ever since you
showed me the pictures.”

“I did say that the physical resemblances were closer this way round,” said Sherlock.

Mike was dressed as a vampire, which didn't really suit him. His wife was with him, wearing a red
dress and devil's horns. Mike caught Sherlock's eye and gave him a bit of a wave. John and
Sherlock went over, whereupon the other three immediately launched into small talk. Sherlock
sipped at his wine and tried to work out what one did at a party if one didn't want to spend the
whole time chatting about dull inanities. He had a horrible feeling that the answer was 'get drunk',
which didn't help him at all.

He looked around the room, noting how many people had put an effort into a costume, how many
couldn't be bothered, and how many had failed to realise the point of a Halloween costume as
opposed to a normal one. Why was that man dressed as an astronaut? What was scary about that?

He hadn't properly looked at Molly's costume earlier. She was in a tweedy brown skirt and a white
blouse, and she had a pair of pince-nez hanging from her neck. Over the top of that was a scarlet
cloak that ended at her waist and, most puzzling of all, an enormous pocket watch hanging from
her belt. Sherlock wondered why the outfit looked both completely strange and yet also faintly
familiar, but it was only when she turned to greet someone and he caught sight of an hourglass logo
on the cloak that he realised why. She was dressed as one of the characters from the terrible time-
travelling TV show that she and Sherrinford insisted on watching every week.

Lestrade turned up at Sherlock's side while he was still staring, wondering how he had become so
familiar with the show to know the name of her character. Agatha Charleston, the agency's
archivist, who occasionally killed Nazis with her pince-nez. Sherlock was disgusted with himself.

“I suppose that outfit makes perfect sense to someone,” said Lestrade. “I thought it was some kind
of Red Riding Hood thing, but she just laughed at me.”

Sherlock eyed him. “You're in exactly the same suit you were wearing at the crime scene this
morning,” he said. “I don't think you get to judge anyone's costume when you haven't bothered
with one at all.”

“Ah!” said Lestrade, tapping his nose. “But I have. I'm dressed as someone pretending to be a DI.”

Sherlock winced. “That's terrible. You should be ashamed.”

A worrying smile spread over Lestrade's face. “I have a back-up.” He reached into his jacket
pocket and pulled out a deerstalker. “I could also be you.”

Sherlock ripped the hideous thing from his hands. “No!” he hissed.

Lestrade shrugged. “Your choice.”

“You can't dress as Sherlock unless you've got a shorter friend to dress as John,” said Mike.

“Fuck off,” said John. “I'm taller than you.”

Mike shrugged. “I don't spend all my time standing next to Sherlock, so no one notices.”

“No, you stand next to me,” said his wife, who was an inch or two shorter than Mike. Sherlock wondered if he should have bothered memorising her name. “I'm sure you only married me because I'm shorter than you.”

Mike shrugged. “Well, it seemed like as good a reason as any.”

“Jesus, now that's a costume,” said Lestrade, his eyes flicking over to the door. Sherlock turned to look. A tall, thin man dressed in a black robe with a long black cloak over the top was standing in the doorway. His head was covered with a black executioner's hood that hid all his features and there was a large silver pocket watch slung around his waist. Sherlock frowned at it, then glanced over at Molly, specifically at the similar watch around her waist.

She had caught sight of the new arrival and was staring in surprise. Sherlock glanced back at him, trying to work out if he knew him.

“Evening, Molls,” said the new arrival.

Sherlock felt every muscle in his body tense. Oh god, it was Sherrinford.

“Oh!” gasped Molly. She rushed towards Sherrinford, hands held out. For a moment Sherlock thought she was going to hug him and was hoping Sherrinford's costume was bulky enough to hide that he was nothing but bones underneath it, but she caught herself at the last moment and just patted his arms instead. “Sherrinford! You came! And you dressed as medieval-era Keffle!”

“Well, that was the best episode of season three, right? Happy Halloween!” said Sherrinford, with far too much joy for a man who was about to lose his freedom.

Sherlock strode over to him, shouldered Molly out of the way and grabbed at Sherrinford's arm. “What the hell are you doing here? You should be with Mycroft!”

Sherrinford shook him off. “I decided I’d rather be at my girlfriend's party. It seemed rude not to come,” he said, sounding far too blasé.

“You decided you'd rather be dragged home?” snapped Sherlock. “I suppose at least this way I get my spare room back.”

“Shut up, Sherlock,” hissed Sherrinford through his mask. “I did think this through before doing it, you know, and this was my choice. I'm sick of constantly hiding.”

Sherlock was so angry that he felt sick with it. “Fine. I hope you have a lovely time with Mother.”

Sherrinford flinched backwards as if he'd been slapped, then purposefully turned his head away from Sherlock to Molly. “Being Agatha suits you,” he said.
Molly ignored the comment. She looked from him to Sherlock with a worried frown. “What's going on? What's that about having to go home?”

“Nothing,” said Sherlock and turned to march away. John was standing behind him and he grabbed for his hand, meaning to take him with him. Instead, John clenched his fingers around Sherlock's and refuse to move, holding Sherlock in place.

“Hello, Sherrinford,” he said, in a deceptively cheerful voice, given his iron grip on Sherlock. “Good to see you.”

“Happy Halloween, John,” said Sherrinford. Sherlock could hear the grin in his voice and knew he was rather enjoying the drama he'd created. Frustration made him grind his teeth together.

“Indeed! Happy Halloween, one and all!” announced Jack, stepping through the doors with his arms raised as if to embrace the room. Sherlock's heart sank. “Sherrinford Holmes! How lovely to see you after all these years.”

Sherrinford turned to look at him. “Hello, Jack. I thought I might come and talk to you and the Council later on tonight.”

“Later on?” repeated Jack. "You know that's not how it works, Sherrinford. I have to take you now.”

Molly stepped forward. “What? No!” she said. “I don't know what's going on, but he's not going anywhere. He's only just got here!”

“Don't worry, Molls,” said Sherrinford. “I didn't spend all the time on this costume for only five minutes. I'm staying.”

Jack pulled an exasperated face. “If I get caught waiting-”

“Everyone knows how busy you are on Halloween night,” interrupted Sherrinford. “I'm sure they'll understand if you wait until, say, dawn.”

Jack raised his supraorbital ridge. “And if you disappear again?”

“I won't,” promised Sherrinford. “I'm going to stay right here and celebrate your holiday with my girlfriend.”

“And us,” added John. He gave Jack the bland smile he used when he was trying to hide his steel core. “Just a group of friends having lots of Halloween fun.”

Jack met his gaze and let out a sigh. “Oh, fine,” he said. “I don't enjoy being the bad guy, you know.”

“You love being the bad guy,” Sherrinford pointed out. “How many people have you made scream today?”

A proud smile grew on Jack's face. “Hundreds,” he boasted. “That's the fun kind of bad guy, though. All these rules and regulations aren't really my style.”

“Style is important,” said Sherrinford earnestly. “You shouldn't go against your nature.”

“My nature?” asked Jack, with a widening grin that reminded Sherlock of a childhood spent following him around to see what crazy genius plan he was going to come up with next. “Oh, I'm
definitely going to be true to my nature tonight.”

He gave a little spin and the Halloween decorations all rippled, shifting their forms. Hanging bats came alive, flapping their wings and looking out at the party with burning red eyes; wall displays of ghosts shimmered and became 3D, shaking ghostly hands out at the nearest reveller; the spiders on Molly's cupcakes all stood up and barred sharp fangs. There were a handful of scattered screams and then Jack came to rest again, and everything returned back to their previous states.

“Happy Halloween!” announced Jack. “I'll be back at dawn - don't keep me waiting, or I'll set the bogeyman on you!” He darted back out the door and disappeared.

Sherrinford snorted. “The bogeyman is a wimp.”

Molly turned on him. “Who the hell was that? What was that all about? Please, please tell me you're not involved in the Mafia or something.”

“Of course not,” said Sherrinford. “It was just a family matter. Nothing to worry about.”

“A family matter?” repeated Molly. “A family matter is 'oh dear, Auntie Sybil's had one of her turns again and we have to go and collect her from up a tree by the duckpond'. That was not just a family matter.”

John tugged on Sherlock's hand and they quietly slipped away, leaving Sherrinford to try and explain.

“Will he tell her the truth?” asked John as they moved back into the kitchen so that John could get another drink.

Sherlock shrugged. “I doubt it. It's not exactly easy to explain.”

“Not unless you're in a graveyard and have just melted a man with shadows,” said John. “Did I ever tell you how impressive that was, by the way?”

Sherlock preened. “No. You should do that now. At length.”

John laughed. “It was brilliant,” he said, and pressed a kiss against Sherlock's lips

“That was hardly at length,” complained Sherlock. If he was going to put aside his anger at Sherrinford for endangering his freedom like this, the least John could do was show proper appreciation for how spectacular Sherlock's Halloween powers were.

John rolled his eyes. “I'll write an ode or something for you later.”

“See that you do,” said Sherlock. He glanced out of the kitchen door at the groups of people standing around, all of them engaged in casual conversation. Ugh. “It'll give me something to look forward to during this dire experience.”

“It's not that bad, surely?”

“It's exactly that bad,” said Sherlock grimly. He took a deep breath and plastered on a smile. “But, obviously, I'm having a great time and enjoy everything about celebrating this holiday. And, indeed, all holidays.”

“Very convincing,” said John. He picked up his drink. “Come on, then. Once more unto the breach.”
He sounded far too cheerful for a man who still had several hours to spend at this party, attempting to have fun. Sherlock didn't think he'd ever understand the part of John that made him actually want to spend time with people who weren't Sherlock. Still, it was probably good that at least one of them wouldn't be faking having a good time tonight.

Sherrinford and Molly had disappeared somewhere together, no doubt so that Molly could interrogate him and Sherrinford could do his best to come up with an explanation that didn't make him sound like an idiot. Well, no more like an idiot than he usually sounded.

“What happens next at a party?” asked Sherlock, glancing around. Mike and his wife was on a sofa talking to a couple of other people that Sherlock recognised from around Barts. Lestrade was in a corner talking to a woman dressed as a witch who had her back to them. He didn't know the names of anyone else present, and he'd already run out of things to say to those two.

“Chatting, mostly,” said John. “If people get drunk enough, maybe some dancing. The casual swaying to pop music kind, not the sort you like.”

Sherlock frowned. “Sounds excruciatingly dull. Why-”

The woman Lestrade was talking to turned slightly so that Sherlock could see her profile, and he cut himself off abruptly. Oh god, it couldn't be.

She let out a tittering, flirty laugh, and all doubt was removed from his mind.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded, striding over with John behind him.

Mother turned and gave Sherlock a smile that reminded of him of long, sharp knives. It felt like a flashback to his childhood.

“Darling! How lovely to see you!”

“It's not lovely,” corrected Sherlock. “Get out.”

Lestrade made a quietly resigned noise. “I suppose I should be used to the fact that you seem to know everyone I talk to.”

“She's his mother,” said John, with a note in his voice that was far too amused for the situation.

Lestrade's eyes widened and he glanced back at Mother, eyes darting up and down her figure. “Oh, come on, there's no way she's old enough for that.”

Mother gave him a fond smile. “That's so sweet of you,” she murmured, and reached a hand out to pat Lestrade's cheek.

Sherlock grabbed her wrist before she could make contact. “Don't,” he gritted.

She rolled her eyes at him. “You worry too much,” she said. “Poor little Sherlock. You always did have a tendency towards anxiety.” She patted his cheek instead, which Sherlock allowed, feeling the tingle on his skin that meant she'd coated her palm with aconitine. As a child, he'd considered that a fairly tired trick, but with John barely a metre away from her, so human and vulnerable, just the thought of it made his heart clench with fear.

“What the hell?” asked Lestrade.

“Don't let her touch you,” John advised him. “She likes poisoning people.” He seemed to be
keeping his distance, which Sherlock was grateful for.

“What?!” repeated Lestrade. “Christ!”

“Oh, that's just a rumour,” said Mother. She gave Lestrade a seductive smile, shifting her stance imperceptibly in order to emphasise her cleavage. “Besides, don't you think a little time with me might be worth some risk?”


“Right, game over,” said Sherlock, putting his hand on Mother's shoulder and trying to push her towards the door. “Time for you to go somewhere a long, long way away.”

“Nonsense,” she said, holding her position. “Why would I go anywhere before I've seen my first-born? I know Sherrinford is here.”

Cold rage surged through Sherlock. “You can't possibly think I'm going to let you talk to him after what you did.”

She threw her head back and laughed, drawing attention from all around the room. Men's eyes lingered on her. “How exactly are you intending to stop me?”

Sherlock scowled, feeling helpless and hating it. Halloween was not the night to try and make Mother do anything, especially not when she was in her element, surrounded by men who were both equally attracted and afraid of her.

Mother smiled with triumph. “As I thought.”

“You know, the more of your family I meet, the more I wonder how you turned out so normal,” Lestrade said to Sherlock.

“My sons are all disappointingly mundane,” said Mother with a put-upon sigh that put Sherlock's teeth on edge.

“We do enjoy making a special effort to disappoint you,” spat Sherlock. He grabbed for John's hand, squeezing it rather tighter than he probably should.

John squeezed back with just as much force. Sherlock concentrated on his grip, letting it distract him from the frustration of dealing with Mother and the sick feeling in his stomach when he thought about how close Sherrinford was, and how much he didn't want the two of them to come face-to-face. He could still vividly remember Sherrinford's screams as she'd burnt the flesh off his bones.

“I suppose I should be grateful that you do at least one thing well,” said Mother.

“Right,” said John. “Okay, I think that's enough familial love for now. Come on, Sherlock, let's go into the other flat.”

“Yes, that's a good idea,” said Mother. “You're rather cramping my style here.” She glanced around the room, her eyes lingering on several men, most of whom were John's age or younger. One of them caught her eye and she gave him a wink.

Sherlock wasn't having that. He gave her a tight smile and then turned to the room. “It may interest everyone to know,” he announced, loudly enough to cut through the other conversations and gather the room's attention to himself, “that this woman is not only cruel and malicious, but also a health
Mother let out a long sigh. “Oh, Sherlock. Do you have to?”

“And, she's much older than she looks,” he added without looking back at her. “Practically geriatric.”

“That's just childish,” she muttered.

Perhaps, but it made Sherlock feel a lot better.

“It seems you're not really welcome here,” said John. “Maybe you should just leave.”

“Oh no,” said Mother. “Not until I see my oldest son.”

“Fine,” said Sherrinford's voice from behind them. “Take a glance, and then piss off.”

He was standing in a doorway near-by, which Sherlock could see was Molly's bedroom. She was hovering behind him, one hand gripping at his sleeve.

“Sherrinford!” beamed Mother, starting towards him with her arms open.

Sherrinford flinched back. “I don't think you get to touch me, Mother. In fact, I'd quite like it if you left now, and then I never saw you again.”

“Oh, don't be so silly,” said Mother. “I'm your mother.”

“You mutilated me,” said Sherrinford. There was a break in his voice that Sherlock only heard because he knew him so well. It was the final straw.

“Enough,” he said, grabbing Mother's shoulders and propelling her towards the door. “Fuck off.”

She tried to evade him. “Oh darling, don't be so-” Sherlock gave her a shove towards the door.

“Sherlock!”

“Go away,” he said. “Find another party.”

“Yes,” said Molly, appearing beside him and looking uncharacteristically fierce. “Go away. You're not welcome in my home.”

Mother tutted. “So inhospitable.”

“Don't make me call Jack back here,” said Sherlock. “You're breaking the rules tonight.” He glanced down at her poisoned hand. He'd been present when Jack had told her, in no uncertain terms, exactly what he would do to her if she killed any more humans on Halloween.

She let out a sharp sigh, but did leave after that.

“Christ, I wish I could drink,” said Sherrinford. “I could do with a stiff one.” He paused and then added, “And I'm not the gay Holmes, so don't think I'm getting euphemistic.” Sherlock was distracted from his fierce hatred of Mother by the bad joke, and sent him a glare.

“That was your mother?” asked Molly. “And she mutilated you?”

“The fire was her fault,” said Sherlock, trying to make it clear from the tone of his voice that there would be no further discussion on the subject. From the look on Molly's face, it wasn't going to
work. He cast around for a way to move the conversation on before there was an interrogation about their family business.

“There's no call for that kind of joke, Sherrinford, don't be vulgar.”

“I thought vulgarity was the point of parties,” said Sherrinford. “I've been rather looking forward to it.” His voice had regained the cheerful note that Mother's presence had chased away. Sherlock suspected he was just as eager to move the conversation on as Sherlock was. Whatever he'd told Molly about Jack's visit, he wouldn't want to have to try and explain their mother as well tonight.

Molly sent him a long look, that made Sherlock think she was as aware of that as Sherlock was. A beat paused when he could clearly see her indecision over pursuing her questions and letting Sherrinford change the subject. “Not one happening in my flat,” she said. “We'll be keeping it classy, thank you.”

“The plastic bats are particularly classy,” said Lestrade, earning himself a glare, and that was that. They all moved away from the door and back to the party, keeping the conversation on unimportant topics until the blot of Mother's presence had largely been forgotten.

The party went on for far longer than Sherlock wanted it to. At one point, they had to bob for apples, which turned out to be a wet and infuriating activity that Sherlock, to his great annoyance, wasn't very good at. John, on the other hand, was skilled at it.

“Have you been practising?” Sherlock accused him.

John just gave him a smug smile and bit into the apple that he'd retrieved in seconds, with a minimum of dampness. “I suppose it just comes naturally to me.”

Sherlock scowled. “What a useless talent,” he muttered and went to find a towel to soak up some of the water saturating his shirt.

By the time the party finally wound down enough that it was just Sherlock, John, Sherrinford and Molly left, John was exhausted. He was slumped on the sofa, all boneless and pliable and clearly fighting off sleep. Sherlock sat next to him, enjoying his sleepy warmth and wishing they could go home so he could get out of his costume. The gel sticking his hair down was beginning to make his scalp itch.

“Parties always seem like such a great idea until you have to clear up,” said Molly, half-heartedly collecting some glasses from around the room and then abandoning them on a table. “Still, it was good fun, right?”

“Let me help,” said John, starting to stand up.

Sherlock was not having that. “No,” he said, and lay down on John's lap, pinning him in place.

“Uh,” said John. “Apparently I'm trapped.” His hand found its way into Sherlock's hair, grooming out some of the gel. That was both a relief and a mild worry. It would probably look rather silly once John was done, but Sherlock found the sensation too soothing to mind that much.

“You know, I'd never have thought Sherlock could be so sweet in a relationship,” said Molly. “You two are rather lovely together.”

Sherlock couldn't decide if he was offended by that or not, so he shut his eyes and concentrated on John's hand instead.
“Thanks,” said John shortly.

“Molly, Molly, stop faffing about and come and be sweet with me instead,” said Sherrinford, holding out his arms. He was on Molly's armchair, surrounded by cushions that he'd stolen from every other seat in the flat. Sherlock wondered if they should be staging an intervention over his obsession with cushions.

Molly looked uncertainly at him. “There's not really room for me as well on there.”

“Of course there is,” said Sherrinford. “We'll just have to go vertically rather than horizontally.”

He put a cushion on his lap and propped another against his stomach, then gestured towards her. “Let me be your chair, my good lady.”

“Are you sure?” asked Molly. “I wouldn't want to hurt you.”

“No fear of that,” said Sherrinford. “I'm made of strong stuff.”

Molly headed over to him and gingerly sat down. Sherrinford wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer against him. Sherlock eyed the arrangement, wondering just how much clothing Sherrinford had under his costume to pad his bones. The cushions would only do so much to keep Molly from asking difficult questions.

Molly let out a little sigh and sagged against Sherrinford. “I can't believe you came,” she said. “I'm so glad. Did you have fun?”

“I had a great time,” said Sherrinford. “It's been a very long time since I was at a party.”

“You had the best costume,” said Molly.

Sherlock found the energy to make a noise of protest.

“Yes, okay, yours were good as well,” said Molly. “Although it did mean I had to recap the history of dissection for some of the girls from my kick-boxing class.”

“They should have already known it,” said Sherlock.

The stroke of John's hand turned slightly firmer, as if in warning. Sherlock refrained from the rest of his rant and shut his eyes again instead. He wasn't really in the mood for righteous indignation.

“Are you falling asleep?” asked Molly. “You can stay the night here, if you want, although I don't have anything more than the sofa to offer you.”

“I won't sleep,” murmured Sherlock, feeling his muscles relax under John's hand. “We'll wait for Jack.”

“You don't need to bother hanging about with me,” said Sherrinford. “Don't be silly. Take John home – he won't stay awake until dawn.”

“I will,” protested John.

He wouldn't, but Sherlock wasn't interested in exposing him to that harsh reality right now. “We're staying,” he said, cracking open an eye so that he could glare at Sherrinford.

“Does John know whatever dark family secret it is that you won't tell me?” asked Molly.

There was an awkward pause.
“John is family,” said Sherlock, when it became clear that Sherrinford didn't know how to break it.

“Right,” said Molly, sounding resigned.

Sherrinford sighed. “Molly, Molly,” he said. “My jolly border collie. Trust me, you're better off not knowing. It's nothing but complexity and pointlessness.”

There was quiet for a few minutes. John's hand fell still, resting on Sherlock’s hair, and Sherlock thought he would probably nod off soon. In a minute, he'd sit up and rearrange them so that John was the one stretched out and comfortable.

“I don't keep anything from you,” said Molly, so quietly that Sherlock knew he wasn't meant to hear it. “But it seems like most of your life is a mystery to me.” She stood up, pulling away from Sherrinford.

Sherlock and John had had an argument like this one once. John had left and not come back for hours. When he had, there'd been a tired, resigned look in his eyes that hadn't faded even when Sherlock made him tea. It hadn't melted until Sherlock had taken a leap and given up a few details about his childhood, things that Sherrinford had insisted he shouldn't mention.

If Sherrinford hadn't wanted Sherlock to open up that much to John, he'd never open himself up to Molly. Sherlock considered the misery Sherrinford had exuded when he had been avoiding Molly, and the effect that the change in relationship status would have on a repeat of that situation. He didn't really want to have to live with Sherrinford when he was like that.

“We grew up in bizarre, secluded community,” he said. “It is impossible to explain the details to an outsider – John had to see it to believe it.”

“I'm still not sure I believe it,” muttered John.

Sherlock ignored him. “It was considered the worst betrayal to leave, so we had to run away in secret. Jack was the leader of the community. He doesn't want us to go back, not really, but there are some loose ends that need tying up. I went back there while I was away last year and settled up all my business with them, Sherrinford just needs to go back with Jack today to do the same.”

“That's all it is?” asked Molly. “Why didn't you tell me that earlier?”

Sherrinford sent a glare at Sherlock. “Secrecy is one of the things they value most highly. If they find out I'm going around telling people all about it, I'll find it a lot more difficult to sort things out with them.”

“Oh, you’ll get the sympathy vote,” said Sherlock with more confidence than he felt. “None of the people you need to convince will be on Mother's side, you know.”

“They know she hurt you?” asked Molly. “And they let her stay?”

“It's not that simple,” said Sherrinford.

“Yes, fine. Complex and pointless, I get it,” said Molly. “So complex that Sherlock can sum it up in a few sentences.”

“A few very vague sentences,” protested Sherrinford. “Anything can be summed up in a few sentences if you leave out all the details.”

“Having a framework, however vague, is better than having a blank space,” said Molly.
“Especially when there are so many spaces already. You won't tell me exactly how you got hurt, or what your injuries really are – I didn't even know your mother was involved until today! What's next? Tomorrow I discover that the man who serves me coffee every morning is your father?!”

“My father is dead,” said Sherrinford. “He died when I was a child. All I really remember about him is his beard, and that he used to whistle when we went for a walk.”

“You remember your father?” asked Sherlock, sitting up with surprise. Sherrinford had never once mentioned his father before.

Sherrinford's head didn't turn to look at him. “Our mother was unhappy when she realised I wanted to leave,” he continued. “She tried to keep me there in a variety of different ways. One of them ended with a fire which I was caught up in. Sherlock and Mycroft got me out, and have been looking after me ever since. It's thanks to them that I am as recovered as I am right now.” He paused to think, then shrugged. “I don't know what else you want me to share, but that's all I have for now.”

Molly had her hands clenched together. She gave a little nod, then stepped forward, took Sherrinford's gloved hands and pressed a kiss to the back of one of them. “Thank you.”

Sherrinford glanced over at the clock, then back to her. “Come on,” he said, standing up. “We've got a couple of hours. I want to find out if your bed really is more comfortable than mine.”

“I wouldn't lie about a mattress,” said Molly. She glanced at the pile of cushions on the chair. “I suppose you'll want to bring those with us.”

“Of course,” said Sherrinford, starting to gather them up.

Molly took a couple as well. “Is there such a thing as a cushion fetish?”

“Is there such a thing as a mattress fetish?” returned Sherrinford. They disappeared off into Molly's bedroom.

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John went to sleep within minutes of Molly and Sherrinford going into the bedroom, leaving Sherlock with several boring hours to fill alone in Molly's flat. He poked through a few hiding places for her secrets but found nothing worth remembering, then looked around at the detritus left over from the party. Was there some sort of experiment to be run on half-eaten cupcakes and empty glasses that wouldn't wake John up?

An hour of tinkering proved that there wasn't, but that it was possible to make an even bigger mess than the one that the flat had already been in. Well, at least he'd made sure that Molly would have plenty to do tomorrow. He wouldn't want her to get bored.

By the time Jack came back, Sherlock was slumped on the floor, leaning against the sofa John was quietly snoring on and editing the Wikipedia article on the Salish Sea foot discoveries.

“Little Sherlock!” announced Jack, bursting through the door with a bang that woke John up with a startled gasp. “Fetch your brother!”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” muttered John, pressing a hand to his chest.

Sherlock glared at Jack, who beamed unrepentantly. “Don't have a heart attack, John.”
“I'm trying not to,” said John, sitting up. “Christ, is it even dawn?”

“It's close enough,” said Jack. “The Eastern sky is lightening. People are getting over the fears of the night, and it's time for me to head off home. With Sherrinford. Probably best if you fetch him, Sherlock, I'll get into trouble with Sally if I go bursting into another woman's bedroom.”

Sherlock pulled himself to his feet with a sigh and headed towards Molly's bedroom.

Molly didn't wake up when Sherlock opened the door. Sherrinford was lying beside her with one arm draped over her and still swathed in his costume. If Sherlock hadn't known better, he might have thought he was asleep as well.

“Jack's here,” he said, quietly.

Sherrinford nodded. He carefully pulled his arm free of Molly, then gave her arm a little pat before he got out of bed.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Sherlock asked. “I could distract Jack while you escaped out the window.”

“We'd both get caught and sent back,” said Sherrinford. “Besides, I want to do this. I will win myself at least this much freedom, even if I have to spend my life swaddled up in layers every time I share a bed with my girlfriend.”

Sherlock wasn't so sure about that. He'd spent the last few hours counting and recounting the votes that Sherrinford could count on and too many remained a mystery. Jack, Sandy Claws, St. Valentine and probably Queen May would vote for him, but the Fool, 2012 and the Easter Bunny would definitely vote against. Sherrinford wasn't a soldier or a defender of the state, so there was no incentive for St. George to vote for him and St. Patrick had only voted for Sherlock because of John's Irish ancestor. Sherrinford lacked even a faint hint of Irish blood so it seemed most likely he'd vote against him. As for Guy Fawkes, well, who the hell knew what he might take it into his head to do on any given day? There were far too many variables for Sherrinford to have confidence about the outcome.

“I still think you should have stayed with Mycroft,” said Sherlock, rather than point all that out. No doubt Sherrinford had been making his own calculations while lying beside Molly.

Sherrinford made a face. “He's so wound up about the media report, he's no fun to be around at all.”

“Is that still dragging on?” asked Sherlock.

Sherrinford sighed. “Oh, Sherlock. Do you pay no attention to the world around you? The final report, with all the recommendations that the Government will put into practice, will be published the day after tomorrow. There's a lot of pressure on him, from both sides.”

“Oh,” said Sherlock. Ever since the conversation he'd had with Sherrinford on May Day about how Mycroft had been allowing himself to be manipulated by people who knew about his affection for Sherlock and were prepared to use it against him, Sherlock had done his best to be nicer to him. Or, at least, not left the room in a huff whenever he came over. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to stop insulting him without cutting out his tongue.

“He's prepared two completely different versions of it,” said Sherrinford. “I think he's still torn as to which one is going to be published.”
The idea that Mycroft had spent months worrying about Sherlock's welfare made Sherlock's stomach sour. “John and I don't need him to mollycoddle us.”

Sherrinford shrugged. “Caring for people doesn't work like that,” he said. He glanced over his shoulder at Molly, who was still asleep. When he turned back, he gripped Sherlock's hand. “Sherlock, can I trust you- If I don't come back, please promise you'll be nice to her. She'll need you to be her friend – I know you don't find that easy, but please try. For my sake. Just- just think about what you wanted someone to do for John while you were gone.”

Sherlock found himself nodding. While he'd been gone, both Mycroft and Sherrinford had tried to be there for John. It was only fair that he returned the favour. “I'll promise, but it's unnecessary. You'll be back by lunch time,” he said with confidence that he didn't feel.

“Of course,” said Sherrinford, forcing just as much false certainty into his voice. “Come on, let's not keep Jack waiting.”

John was talking to Jack when they re-emerged, which made Sherlock want to take him away and put him somewhere safe, where nothing Halloween could ever touch him again. He was so very done with the day and all the reminders of his childhood that it brought with it.

“Ah!” said Jack, spreading his hands out to Sherrinford. “My dear eldest Holmes! Shall we take a trip?”

Sherrinford gave a sharp nod. He glanced over his shoulder at Molly's shut bedroom door, then tugged off his hood, revealing his skull. “Lay on, Macduff.”

Molly had put up a large poster of a graveyard scene on one wall for the party. With a wave of Jack's hand, it shimmered and became a portal through to Halloween. He and Sherrinford stepped through together.

Sherlock watched them go, feeling an itch along his spine when the poster went back to 2D normality. That could well be the last time he saw Sherrinford. Well, unless he went to visit him in Halloween, but he really didn't want to have to do that.

John's hand crept into his and a kiss was pressed against his cheek. “Come on, let's go home.”

Sherlock let out a long sigh and nodded. There was nothing more to be done here and it was probably best that they left before Molly woke up and saw what he'd done to her kitchen.

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John went straight to bed when they got home, despite the fact that the sun was coming up. He muttered something about being too old to sleep on a sofa but Sherlock wasn't really listening.

There was a lot more to occupy Sherlock in 221B than there had been in Molly's flat, but somehow he couldn't settle to any of them. He found himself wandering up to Sherrinford's room, looking at his half-painted canvases and wondering when they'd know if he was going to be back to finish them. The council's decision had taken less than half an hour for him and John. Surely he should be back already?

The room became lighter and lighter as the sun came up, bringing into focus all the little things that Sherrinford had cluttered the room up with once it had become his. There wasn't just all the art supplies and the cushions, but also a stack of books on a range of subjects, some of which Molly had lent him. There was his laptop, still propped up on the bedside table from a late-night Skype chat with Molly, and a whole wardrobe full of costumes that covered every inch of his skeleton.
It was going to be annoying to have to clear everything out if Sherrinford didn't come back. Sherlock could probably find a use for the costumes, on one case or another. A spare laptop was always a good thing, he'd be able to do twice as much at once. John might like the books, but Sherlock really had no idea what they'd do with the artist's paraphernalia. Maybe they could palm it off on Mycroft.

When Sherlock went back downstairs, Mycroft was waiting on the sofa, clutching his umbrella and frowning at the wall.

"Bit close to the day for you to be out of the cottage, isn't it?" asked Sherlock.

Mycroft turned the frown on him. "How could you let him do this?"

Sherlock barked out a laugh. "How much control over Sherrinford do you think I have? About the same amount as you, and you're the one who let him leave the cottage. Jack would never have got him there. There are still doilies, right?"

Mycroft flinched at the mention of them. "Yes," he gritted out. "This year there were new curtains. Lace ones."

Sherlock winced in sympathy. "Is that picture of the puppies and the baby-"

Mycroft held up a hand, shutting Sherlock up. "I prefer not to spare any thoughts for that monstrosity, thank you. I have a whole year before I have to see it again, after all."

Sherlock could understand that. He glanced at his bedroom door, which was still shut firmly on a sleeping John, and gave in to the inevitable. "Tea?"

Mycroft looked taken aback, although he hid it immediately. "Please. I suppose there's nothing to do now but wait."

Sherlock headed for the kettle. "My favourite," he said, with a sigh.

Another couple of hours passed. Sherlock managed a conversation with Mycroft that didn't descend into sniping for nearly fifteen minutes, then gave up on the effort. There didn't seem much point when neither Sherrinford nor John were there to notice the effort he was making. Instead, he broke out the board games and challenged Mycroft to a dual which passed the time nicely, even if it did make a bit of a mess.

John eventually emerged, rubbing at his hair and looking entirely too lovely for Sherlock not to jump up to touch him.

"'Lo, Mycroft," said John, once Sherlock had found it in himself to let him go. "What are you-Jesus, what did you two do?" He looked around the sitting room with dismay.

"I'm winning," said Sherlock, with great pleasure.

"Only just," snapped Mycroft.

"Winning which game?" asked John, still staring at the boards and game pieces scattered liberally around the room.

"All of them," said Sherlock. "Why would you only play one at a time? How dull."

John shook his head. "I'm too tired to ask for a proper explanation," he said. "Although I probably
should—“He caught sight of something. “You do know that my stethoscope isn't a toy, right, Sherlock?”

Sherlock glanced at it. “One of the games is Operation,” he explained.

For some reason, that didn't clear the tiny frown from John's face. “I'm making tea,” he said, with a sigh. “Do you want some?”

“Of course,” said Sherlock.

“Yes, please,” said Mycroft. “Sherlock, if you're not going to buy Leicester Square, you'll need to go down the snake.”

“I'm buying it,” said Sherlock quickly, stepping back over the games to settle into his position. “Here, I'll pay with my yellow History wedge.”

“You're both deranged,” muttered John as he headed towards the kettle. Sherlock ignored him in favour of taking three scrabble pieces and then handing the dice to Mycroft for his go.

Mycroft had pulled ahead marginally by the time they'd finished the tea, but Sherlock was confident he could take the lead back once he played his Royal Flush. John was watching them from the sofa, and it wouldn't do for him to think Sherlock wasn't good at anything.

“Every time I think I've got my head around it, something completely unexpected happens,” said John as Mycroft laid out Crumb over a Triple Word Score and used the resulting bonus as a Get Out Of Jail Free card.

“Much like life, really,” said Mycroft.

Sherlock rolled his eyes but before he could come up with a suitably snarky comment, the door slammed open.

“BOOM! I'm back!” announced Sherrinford, posed in the doorway with both arms spread wide. “Holmes Brothers two, Council nil!”

Sherlock scrambled to his feet. “They voted for you? What was the result?”

“Seven-three!” crowed Sherrinford. “They fucking love me!”

“Seven of them 'fucking' love you,” corrected Mycroft, and was ignored.

“Jack, Sandy Claws, St. Valentine, Queen May, St. George,” counted Sherlock. “St. Patrick?”

Sherrinford nodded. “I told him my father was Irish.”

“Was he?” asked Mycroft.

Sherrinford shrugged. “Who knows? Mother is the only one who would ever have known, and she won't remember now.”

“Who was the last one?” asked Sherlock.

Sherrinford beamed. “Guy Fawkes,” he said. “That was easy – I mentioned having been mutilated and burnt, and suddenly he was all about the solidarity between torture victims.”

Ah, yes. Sherlock hadn't considered that. “So you're safe, then?” he said.
Sherrinford nodded. “I'll have to join you two in your quest to be the worst holiday cliches ever, but essentially, yes.”

Mycroft let out a sigh and stood up. “Congratulations, I suppose,” he said. “I can't pretend I understand why you bothered, but I suppose as long as you're happy...”

“Thanks,” said Sherrinford. “Very big of you, Mycroft.”


“I'm not,” said John. “God, I hope whoever it is doesn't want milk in their tea. We're running a bit low.”

“You don't have to make everyone tea,” Sherlock pointed out, but John didn't look convinced.

Downstairs, Mrs. Hudson opened the front door, and footsteps came upstairs.

“Sherrinford,” said Mycroft, pointedly.

Sherrinford sighed, but obediently moved over to the corner in order to fake being inanimate.

Four men in black suits came in and Mycroft let out a tiny exhale, and stood up. “I apologise, Sherlock,” he said. “It seems this visitor is for me.”

Sherlock scowled as the men trampled over the scattered board games. “You do have your own house, you know,” he said. “And an office.”

“I felt it was more appropriate to meet here,” said a voice with a Scandinavian accent from the doorway. “Just a little reminder to Mycroft of what he stands to lose.”

Sherlock made a disgusted noise. Mycroft sent him a sharp, darting look that warned him not to speak and Sherlock sullenly obeyed it. The quicker Mycroft dealt with this, the quicker he could get everyone other than John and Sherrinford out of his flat.

“And have you considered what you stand to lose?” asked Mycroft.

Magnussen ignored him. He looked around the flat and then met the eyes of one of his men. “Bathroom?”

The man gestured. “Through the kitchen.”

Mycroft cleared his throat, clearly irritated at the lack of attention. He didn't do well when he thought he was being ignored. Sherlock had spent years winding him up using that fact. “I'm not sure why you're here. You know that I'm aware of your, ah, proposal. As soon as I've made a decision-”

“Is it like the rest of the flat?” interrupted Magnussen, still talking to his man.

“Yes,” said the man.

“Perhaps not, then,” said Magnussen.

Sherlock bristled at the implied slight. “No one asked you to come here.”

Magnussen spared him a brief glance. “I do enjoy your family,” he said to Mycroft. He clicked his tongue against his teeth. “English with a spine.”
Mycroft glared at him but didn't respond, which was when Sherlock realised just how much control Magnussen had over him. Mycroft didn't hold his tongue for anyone.

“The best thing about the English,” carried on Magnussen, sauntering over to the corner where Sherrinford was propped and eyeing him with interest. “You're so domesticated.”

There was the sharp sound of zip being lowered and then the splatter of falling liquid. It took Sherlock a few moments to realise that Magnussen was peeing on Sherrinford, which he blamed on how unexpected it was.

“Oh, Jesus fucking Christ,” said John, with disgust. He made a move towards Magnussen but stopped when the nearest man stepped forward to block him. Sherlock caught his hand and squeezed it. If Mycroft was that scared of this man, then he wasn't risking John in a confrontation with him.

“Of course, we know what happens when the domesticated get out of control, don't we? When a dog attacks its master, it is put down.” Magnussen finished peeing and did his flies up, then took a wet wipe that one of his men handed him to clean his hands. “You should consider that, Mycroft. It's so easy to put a pet down, if you know the right people.” He eyed Sherlock and John pointedly, then looked back at Mycroft with a raised eyebrow. “Well, I look forward to your report,” he said, and tossed the wet wipe on the carpet. “I trust it will be... worthwhile reading.”

He left the flat, followed by his men, and there was a still, shocked silence for a second or two. Sherlock felt his teeth grind together in rage and he could see, from the white-knuckled grip that Mycroft had on his umbrella, that he felt the same way.

“Right on my bloody shoes!” exclaimed Sherrinford, breaking the moment. “Ugh!” He picked at his robe, holding it away from his bones with delicate phalanges. “Oh god. That's just...UGH.”

“The bathroom,” said John, moving into action. “Hang on, I'll get a towel to, um, mop up the worst of it.”

“Just...who pisses on someone? Even someone dead?!” spluttered Sherrinford. “Oh god, that's just so vile.”

Mycroft took in a deep breath, then released it very slowly. Once his lungs were empty, his shoulders slumped and when he looked up, Sherlock saw the defeat in his eyes.

“No,” he said, before Mycroft could open his mouth. “No, not a chance. You're not doing what that bastard wants.”

“Sherlock, he's not wrong about-”

“No,” said Sherlock again, and then, when that didn't seem to go in, he repeated it. “No! He's a jumped-up little shit and- and he peed on our brother, Mycroft. How can you give in to him?

“Because I don't have a choice!” snapped Mycroft. “I will not let you come to harm, Sherlock.”

“It's not your decision,” said Sherlock. “I accept the risk entirely, if it means getting back at him.”

Mycroft shook his head, pulling out his mobile. “I'm putting out the version he wants.”

“Don't!” said Sherlock. He wasn't going to let Mycroft be manipulated like this. Apart from anything else, it was humiliating to be the weak little brother that needed protecting. He sprang forward and grabbed the phone from Mycroft's hands.
“Give that back!”

He was going to need a few moments in order to work out who he should text and what he should be sending – Mycroft would have reduced the whole thing to a code, he loved codes. Sherlock wasn’t going to have a few moments, though. Mycroft hit at him with his umbrella and Sherlock was forced to duck away, clutching at the phone.

“Sherlock, don't be such a brat!”

He had one advantage. Time to use it. He sprinted across the room to the window and dove straight through it, broken glass shattering in front of him. He landed on the pavement with a force that would have severely injured, if not killed him, if he hadn't already been dead.

Mycroft appeared in the empty window frame. “Sherlock! Get back here!” He didn't jump, though. He couldn't, he was still too alive.

Sherlock grinned up at him and then dedicated his attention to the phone.

Mycroft had already unlocked it and selected a contact who was only labelled A. That was the one Sherlock needed to contact now. He flicked his fingers over the phone until he had a list of text messages received from that number. Ah, bingo. One that was less than an hour old.

Sir, I will need the go ahead on which version by 3, or things won't be in place for the publication tomorrow. A

Which version. Sherlock remembered over-hearing a phone call Mycroft had made months and months ago. We’re going with version one. He’d meant the proper, ruthless version then. He wouldn't have changed the numbers over, Mycroft was far too much a creature of habit for that.

Sherlock’s fingers danced over the keys. It will be version one. Put everything in place.

He sent it just as Mycroft hammered down the stairs and came bursting out of the front door.

“Too late!” said Sherlock.

Mycroft glanced at the phone in his hands. “Do you really think I can't just contact her and tell her that wasn't me?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock. “Come on, are you really going to admit to your minion that your brother was able to steal your phone from you? Your phone that doubtless contains hundreds of state secrets?”

Mycroft winced and Sherlock knew he had him. He grinned and tossed the phone back to him.

“Don't panic. Once it's been published, this will all be done with. What would be the point of him bothering with revenge when he'll need to dedicate his energy to adhering to the new regulations?”

“You underestimate him,” said Mycroft with a sigh, slipping the phone away. “I really hope this doesn't end as badly as I fear it will.”

“It'll be fine,” said Sherlock, glancing back up at the broken window. Hmmm, he might need to offer Mrs. Hudson some form of apology for that. Flowers, perhaps.
Next Chapter: Bonfire Night, November 5th. Posting date: June 7th
Bonfire Night

Chapter Summary

Possible trigger warning for anyone with fire-related phobias and apologies for the anti-Catholic sentiment that is traditional on November 5th.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Remember, remember,” said a voice somewhere the other side of sleep.

John made a grumbling protest as he began to wake up. “Go 'way.”

There was a sigh. “Remember, remember,” repeated the voice, which John was now awake enough to identify as Sherlock's, “the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot.”

John cracked his eyes open and squinted at him with annoyance.

“I see no reason why gunpowder treason should ever be forgot,” continued Sherlock. He pushed something into John's hand that he took automatically.

“It's too early for this,” he mumbled, starting to sit up.

Sherlock pulled out a box of matches and lit one, which was when John realised that what he was holding was a sparkler.

“Jesus Christ!” he said, dropping the thing before Sherlock could light it. “Are you insane?”

Sherlock frowned. “Some might say so.” He shook out the match.

John sat up properly, now fully awake. “No fireworks in the flat, Sherlock! No fireworks inside any building!”

“It's just a sparkler,” said Sherlock.

“Just a flaming stick that you're trying to hand to a man who is half asleep and in bed, surrounded by flammable materials!”

Sherlock glanced at the duvet as if seeing it for the first time.

“Just because you're dead already doesn't mean you should ignore basic safety,” continued John. “Or did you want me to burn to death?”

A moment of hurt crossed Sherlock's face, which made John feel like a bastard for about two seconds, right up until Sherlock opened his mouth. “As that would end my existence too, not really.”

Rage shot through John at the reminder that Sherlock was going to limit himself to John's lifespan when he could have so much more. He threw the duvet aside and got out of bed. “Then you might think about taking better care with me,” he snapped. “Or did you think that an impromptu bonfire
might be in keeping with the holiday?”

He stormed out of the bedroom without waiting for Sherlock's response. Sherrinford was in the kitchen, tying a hangman's noose in a bit of rope.

“Look!” he said, holding it up to John's eyes. “A rope, a rope, to hang the Pope,” He gestured at the table, which held a slab of cheddar and a bottle of London Pride. “A penn'orth of cheese to choke him, a pint of beer to wash it down, and a jolly good fire to burn him. The fire will be provided later, by Regents Park.”

“Or by Sherlock, right now,” said John.

Sherrinford blinked at the bitterness in his voice. “Ah...”

“It was a mistake,” said Sherlock, who had followed John out. “Let it go, John. Or do you want to ruin this holiday so that I get sent back to Halloween?”

John took a deep breath. Sherlock had a point. “Fine. I'm going to have a shower.”

He went to the bathroom. God damn Sherlock and his stupid, stubborn plan to die with John. What was the point of him limiting himself like that when he could do so much more?

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By the time he was out of the shower and fully dressed, he had managed to push the angry, sick feeling back down in order to concentrate on the holiday. Guy Fawkes was going to take more winning over than Jack had last week. It made sense to concentrate on that for the day, and then resume this argument with Sherlock tomorrow.

He went back into the kitchen to find Sherlock making tea. “I thought gunpowder green might be appropriate,” he said, and held a mug out to John.

There was a look on his face that was probably meant to be apologetic. John took the mug and gave him a nod. “Thanks.”

Sherlock's shoulders relaxed. “Right. Good.”

Sherrinford emerged from the sitting room. John wondered if he'd been hiding there in case of further argument. “Look!” he said, holding up a V For Vendetta-style Guy Fawkes mask. “I'm ready to come along with you guys later. And Molly's joining us, of course.”

He seemed a lot more excited about this holiday than John felt. He'd enjoyed Fireworks Night as a child. He'd looked forward to being bundled up in knitwear and taken to a park to eat jacket potatoes and watch the fireworks. The best year had been the one when his dad had bought fireworks for them to let off in their own garden and John had been allowed to lit one of the rockets. He could still remember the exhilaration as it shot up and exploded in the air while he thought, I did that. Maybe he should try and recapture some of that excitement.

“Did you get jacket potatoes?” he asked.

Sherrinford nodded. “Yup! And sausages. Molly's coming over early so she can help you eat them.”

“There doesn't seem to be much we can do until then,” said Sherlock. “Unless you felt like making an effigy of a long-dead domestic terrorist and exhibiting it on the streets, but that appears to be a
ritual mainly observed by children.”

“Do children even still do that?” asked John. He and Harry had made a guy once, and sat on the street corner by the local shop for most of a Saturday morning with it. They’d made less than a tenner, at least five of which had come from their parents. Still, it had felt like a fortune at the time.

Sherlock shrugged. “I've never been outside on Bonfire Night. You tell me.”

John struggled to remember when he'd last seen anyone doing it, and failed. He shrugged.

“I'd make an excellent guy,” said Sherrinford. “You could stuff me with old clothes, put a mask on me, and I could give a wave every time someone gave you money.”

John pictured the terror that would create and shook his head. “Not a good idea.”

Sherrinford shrugged. “I offered.”

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Sherrinford had bought all the newspapers as well as Bonfire Night food when he'd gone out earlier, wrapped up in a disguise. John flicked through them, wondering how many more days would involve headlines about reactions to the media report. He wasn't sure he could take one more privileged billionaire whining about how the country was heading towards fascism just because he wasn't going to be able to print gossip about C-list celebrities without some sort of proof to back it up.

He and Sherlock had spent the last few days looking over their shoulders in case Magnussen decided that he did want to exact his revenge on Mycroft using them. They'd stayed in the flat as much as possible which was starting to make John feel a bit claustrophobic. Neither they nor the men Mycroft had assigned to watch them had noticed anything out of the ordinary. It was beginning to look as if Magnussen wasn't going to bother going through with his threats now that it was too late for them to have any impact on the recommendations in the report.

It wasn't until John tried to make lunch that he realised that Sherrinford hadn't bought any kind of vegetables to go with the potatoes and sausages.

“Why would you need vegetables?” he asked, in the perplexed voice of someone who hadn't had to worry about getting his 5-a-day in several decades, if ever.

“John has this worrying obsession with a 'balanced diet','” said Sherlock from the kitchen table, where he was doing an experiment that involved a large number of bubbling, coloured liquids. “I'm not entirely sure it's not the start of some kind of eating disorder.”

“Or maybe I'm just trying to look after my health,” said John, and then couldn't help adding, “I'd have thought you'd realise the importance of that, if I'm not going to be the only shuffling off the mortal coil if I have a heart attack at 50.”

Sherlock's eyes darted over to John's with a dark look. “I've already shuffled off the mortal coil,” he pointed out. “I'm dead, John. You don't seem to understand what that means, so perhaps it would help if I put this in terms that a child could understand. After you've gone, I will not be killing myself, or limiting my lifespan, or anything like that. I have already killed myself, my lifespan is long over. Right now, I'm just holding onto existence and the main reason I am holding on is you. If you're gone, there's no reason for it. I'll just be letting go and moving on like I should have when I jumped. Or would you prefer that that really had been my end?”
“Of course not,” snapped back John. “I'd prefer it if you didn't have an end. Why the hell do you think I should be okay with knowing that if I cross the road without looking properly and end up getting knocked down, it's not just me that's going to pay for the lapse?”

Sherlock gritted his teeth. “Even if I was a normal human, and alive, it still wouldn't be only you paying if you died suddenly,” he said. “I will not be emotionally undamaged by that event – in fact, quite the opposite. It will devastate me. Why on earth should I maintain a grip on a world that doesn't have you in it?” He knocked a row of glass beakers off the table with a violent movement. “Why are you so determined that I should hang around to be miserable, John?!!”

“Because I hate the idea of you dying!”

“And I hate the idea of you dying!” shot back Sherlock. “And yet you keep bringing it up! Why do we have to keep talking about it?”

John sucked in a long breath through his nose. “Fine. Fine. We don't.” He grabbed his coat and left, storming down the stairs loudly enough not to hear anything else Sherlock might have to say on the matter.

He went to the supermarket and bought salad, which made him feel calmer. As he walked back, he told himself firmly that he wasn't going to bring it up again today, no matter how tempting it was. He knew Sherlock's stubbornness well enough to know that the more he tried to persuade him, the less likely Sherlock would be to listen to reason. What he really needed to do was find a new angle, something that would make Sherlock stop and actually think.

It started to rain just as he turned onto Baker Street and he hunched his shoulders, ducking his head. That's why he didn't see the man dressed in black waiting for him under Speedy's awning until he stepped out, eyes fixed on John and his hands reaching out for him.

John started back, only to stumble into another man behind him who grabbed his upper arms with a grip of iron and held him in place. The man in front jabbed John with a needle and there was just enough time for John to hear his shopping fall to the pavement and think Oh, for fuck's sake, not again, before everything went black.

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Waking up was a slow process. He was somewhere dark and cramped, and he couldn't move. In the distance, he could hear the sea.

He struggled to open his eyes. His muscles refused to respond to his commands and he panicked, putting every bit of effort he could summon into prising them open. There wasn't much to see. It was dark, but there was enough dim grey light coming from somewhere in the distance for him to make out stacks of wood surrounding him on all sides. It wasn't neatly done, and he was trapped in the middle of it as if he'd been caught in a cascade of off cuts and old bits of pallet.

He pushed his body to move and managed to twitch his fingers, brushing the tips against wood and catching them on splinters. He tried to move more to push it all aside and get free, but the drug still had him paralysed.

It was cold. He was still wearing his coat, but it was no real protection. Was he outside? Through the gaps between the wood, all he could see was vague movement and shapes, so he concentrated his other senses. The sound of waves came into focus and he realises that it was actually a crowd, somewhere close by. He tried to cry out for help, but his throat refused to move and nothing more than a choked groan came out.
There was a flicker of light from somewhere close by. The stacks of wood were silhouetted against it in black lines. It was driving the cold out, which John appreciated until he smelled the bitter stench of smoke and realised that it was a fire.

The wood all looked old and dry, and it wouldn't take longer than minutes for it all to burn. He tried to kick out, to signal his presence, but his muscles were held firmly in the grip of the paralytic he'd been injected with. He tried to shout again, but his voice still wouldn't come. All he managed was panicked breathing that did nothing but draw the smoke into his lungs faster.

*It's the smoke that will kill me,* he thought, desperately trying to do more than twitch his fingers. *Long before the flames reach me, I'll be dead of smoke inhalation.*

Fuck, he couldn't let that happen. He couldn't die now, not when he hadn't won the argument with Sherlock. If he burnt to death here because he couldn't escape, he was as much killing Sherlock as he was himself.

He could hear fire crackling, moving towards him, and the smoke was growing thicker. Panic began to take control and he tried to thrash, but nothing worked. His body was still refusing to do more than vibrate as he tried to lash out and knock apart everything holding him in place so he could escape out into the free air.

“John!”

Sherlock. Oh god, that was Sherlock's voice. He was close.

“John! Hold on!”

He could hear wood being moved, but it was too far to the right of him. Sherlock was in the wrong place. John tried again to shout, scream, *anything* so that Sherlock could hear where he was. He managed a choke that might have formed Sherlock's name, if anyone had been close enough to hear it.

“He's here,” said a voice he didn't recognise. “Under this bit.”

“John, I'm coming!”

A piece of wood in John's vision was moved aside, letting in bright torch light that made him blink.

“Oh god! John!”

Sherlock's voice was closer. If John could just move his damn head, he'd be able to see him, but his neck was still locked in place.

More wood was thrown aside. John could hear the crowd's voices turning worried, people calling out to ask what was going on.

“There he is,” said the unfamiliar voice, and then the wood right in front of John's face shifted and disappeared. Sherlock's face came into view, pale and terrified and so very welcome.

“John!”

John tried to move, tried to speak, tried to do anything. All that came out was a gasp that drew more smoke into his lungs and a bob of his head that could have meant anything.

“I'm getting you out,” said Sherlock.
Hands gripped John under his arms and with a fierce tug, he was pulled free of the stack of wood and onto cold grass instead.

“John, John,” said Sherlock urgently, taking John’s face in his hands and leaning in close to his face, as if he could make him able to move just by staring hard enough. “God, John, don't you dare do that to me again.”

“I'm very impressed,” said the other voice and John darted his eyes over to see Guy Fawkes standing over him. “You've really thrown yourself into celebrating my holiday if you're willing to re-enact being burnt alive. As far as I'm concerned, you've passed with flying colours.”

Sherlock sent him a glare but didn't bark an insult at him like John was half-expecting.

A moment later, Guy Fawkes was pushed aside by paramedics. John let his eyes go back to Sherlock, who took his hand and gave it a squeeze that John did his best to return. From the look in Sherlock's eyes, it wasn't anywhere near strong enough to make him feel reassured.

The drug wore off slowly but by the time he was at the hospital, hooked up to oxygen and putting up with a range of medical professionals fluttering around him, he was able to turn his head and see Sherlock hovering near-by. By the time it had been decided that he was going to be kept overnight for observation, he was able to take Sherlock's hand properly whenever the nurses let him close enough.

By the time they were finally left alone together, John was able to pull aside his oxygen mask and actually talk to him.

“What happened?”

Sherlock took the mask from him and put it back over his face. “You already know. Or have guessed.”

Okay, yes. John had already worked out that this must have been Magnussen's revenge. That didn't explain how Sherlock had found him, though.

He pulled the mask away again to ask, but Sherlock didn't give him time to speak before pushing it back on. “I know they say black goes with everything, but it's not a good colour for lungs, John. Keep breathing the oxygen.”

John gave up on trying to speak. Instead, he glared at Sherlock with a look that he hoped made it very clear that he expected some answers.

Sherlock let out an exhausted sigh. “Honestly. Isn't it obvious? I didn't find you. Guy Fawkes did. It was obvious that something had happened to you when you didn't return within the expected time frame, but Magnussen's men are irritatingly professional. Mycroft's men are not – they didn't have the faintest idea where you were, or who had taken you. It was a pitiful display from a force that claims to be elite. Guy Fawkes knew immediately where you were, of course, and he came straight to me. For all he appreciated your solidarity, he seems to have decided that follow-through was unnecessary.”

“Nice of him,” John started to say, but he barely got through the first syllable before Sherlock's glare shut him up. He let out a sigh and relaxed back against the pillows, wondering how long it would be before Sherlock's over-protective instincts died back down to their usual levels.

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They kept John in the hospital for observation for twenty-four hours, so it wasn't until the following evening that John and Sherlock arrived home. Sherrinford was waiting for them and he pressed a cup of tea into John's hands as soon as he sat down.

“Are you okay? You must be okay, they let you out of hospital. Your lungs are recovering, yes? They must be, Sherlock would be in pieces if you were permanently hurt. Well, in more obvious pieces.”

Sherlock growled at him and slumped into his chair. “Where's my tea?”

“I only make tea for people who have had near-death experiences,” said Sherrinford. “Oh, and Molly, of course. But then, she works with corpses so she's constantly having near death experiences. Near to death, that is. In close proximity to death. Well, and also she's sleeping with a skeleton, although she doesn't know about that bit, of course. Huh, she really does spend a lot of time close to death. I wonder if her parents are proud?”

Sherlock had ignored most of that speech in order to give him a wounded look, but his eyes had narrowed by the end of it. “Ah, of course. The babbling gives you away. It's actually that you only make tea when you feel guilty.”

Sherrinford twitched and then sank back onto the sofa. “I should not have encouraged your observational skills,” he muttered.

John had been quietly enjoying his tea and the familiar sound of Holmes brothers bickering, but he frowned at that. “Why do you feel guilty?”

Sherrinford sighed and sat forward. “John, I'm sorry. I should have come to rescue you with Sherlock and Guy Fawkes. I just- I am not a big fan of fire, and I couldn't face it. I'm sor-”

“No,” interrupted John. “Don't be silly, I'm not listening to you apologise about that. I'm fine, and Sherlock and Guy Fawkes managed perfectly without you having to relive unpleasant memories.”

Sherrinford's face made it clear that he wasn't accepting that. “I didn't used to be a coward.”

Sherlock snorted. “Having a phobia prompted by a traumatising event doesn't make you a coward,” he said. “You don't see me spending a lot of time on top of buildings, do you?”

“I better bloody not,” said John, pushing down the sharp pang of old fear in his stomach.

“My point exactly,” said Sherlock. “I'll stay away from tall buildings for John's sake, and let you keep away from fires for yours. Now, if John would just stay away from men with needles for mine, we'd be sorted.”

“Trust me,” said John tiredly, “I do try to. We can't keep relying on holiday rulers to save the day for us.”

“No,” said Sherlock. “It might be time to go right to the root of the problem.”

John gave him a careful look. “By which you mean...?”

Sherlock steeped his fingers. “I think it's time for Magnussen to stop being Mycroft's problem, and start being mine.”

John wasn't sure what to make of that, but he was too tired to really think about it too much. He was really looking forward to getting to curl up in bed, hopefully with Sherlock, and just put the
Sherlock did go to bed with John, holding him close and tracing gentle fingertips over his skin.
John was half-way asleep when Sherlock spoke.

“I don't want you to die while we're arguing.”

John blinked his eyes open. “We're not arguing,” he said.

Sherlock let out a sigh that tickled John's skin. “We were. And then you were gone.”

John considered that. “Neither of us are likely to know in advance when I'm going to die, so you'll just have to never argue with me again,” he said. “Which means you'll have to agree not to kill yourself, or whatever you want to call it.”

Sherlock was silent for a few heartbeats, during which John let his eyes shut again. He hadn't slept well at the hospital at all and he was looking forward to a long night in his own bed, with his husband beside him.

“No,” said Sherlock, decisively. “That's not it. I'll just never mention it again. If we don't speak about it, we can't argue about it, and by the time it becomes relevant, you won't be able to stop me any way. Which is rather the point.”

“Do you really think I'll just forget about it if we don't talk about it?” asked John.

“Not at all,” said Sherlock. “I am merely saying that we now both know each other's viewpoints and so there is no longer a need to discuss it. You will not change my mind, and I see little point in attempting to change yours.”

John was wide awake and angry now. He turned over so that he could look at Sherlock. “Of course you don't! Sherlock, I'm not going to just quietly allow you to kill yourself just because I won't be around to see it. You've got the chance to do so much more, to, to solve crimes and play the violin and watch London change and all the things that matter most to you. You could have them indefinitely, why-”

“Those are not the things that matter most to me,” interrupted Sherlock. “Don't be ridiculous, John. You're the thing that matters most to me, you know that. Those things are important, yes, and before I met you they were enough, but now... If you're not around to share them with me, they're nothing. It was hard enough being without you when I knew you were still here, living your life. It will be impossible once you are completely gone.”

John let out a frustrated huff. “Look, Sherlock, I'm not saying it will be easy, but if you just allow yourself some time-”


John couldn't argue with that. He slumped back down with a sigh. “I didn't kill myself, though,” he pointed out.

Sherlock shrugged. “I won't either.”

John made a rude noise. “Whatever you call it, it amounts to the same thing.”
One of Sherlock's hands settled on John's back, gently stroking up his spine. “This conversation is pointless, and you need rest. Go to sleep.”

Sherlock was right about one part of that. There was no point in having this conversation while John was exhausted and needed to recuperate. “I'm not letting this go,” he promised as he obligingly shut his eyes and settled down for sleep “We'll keep having this conversation.”

“Something to look forward to,” said Sherlock. He pulled John in close and kept up the gentle motion of his hand until John had let go of his anger enough to drift away to sleep.

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Sherlock was gone when John woke up but that wasn't unusual, so it wasn't until John had dressed and left the bedroom in search of tea that he questioned it.

“Is Sherlock out?” he asked Sherrinford, who was sketching on the sofa. “His coat's gone.”

Sherrinford glanced over at the coat hooks as if seeing them for the first time. “I thought he was in with you,” he said. “I haven't seen him all night. I figured he was doing some you-nearly-died snuggling.”

There was the gentle tap of an umbrella handle hitting the door and Mycroft entered. “Good morning,” he said, giving John a careful once-over. “You look better than I had feared.”

“Thanks,” said John absently, picking up his mobile and sending Sherlock a quick text. 

*Where are you? I'm making tea. Are you close enough to want one?*

There was a beep from the mantelpiece. John turned to see Sherlock's mobile sitting there. He froze.

“Is that Sherlock's?” asked Sherrinford, sitting upright.

“Yeah,” said John, with a dry throat. Sherlock never went anywhere without his phone. “You're positive he's not in the flat? He didn't pop down to Mrs. Hudson's?”

“I spoke to her before I came up,” said Mycroft, eyeing the phone on the mantelpiece as if it were a nuclear bomb. “He wasn't there.”

John whirled around to stare at him. “You have men following us, don't you? Security? Where the hell is he, Mycroft?”

Mycroft pulled out his own mobile and dialled a number, raising it to his ear. “Location of my brother,” he snapped.

There was a long pause which seemed to stretch into eternity and then Mycroft's forehead creased into a look of pained despair that told John everything.

“They've lost him.”

Mycroft spared him a nod and said, “Find him. Immediately,” to whomever was on the other end of the phone before snapping it shut.

“If Sherlock doesn't want to be found, they won't have a chance,” said Sherrinford.

“We're sure he left of his own accord?” asked John. “He hasn't been taken?”
“His coat's gone,” Mycroft pointed out. “Besides, he wouldn't let anyone take him away from you, not while you're still recovering. He does have other skills, you know.”

“The shadow thing,” said John, his mind reeling. “Fuck it, where has the bastard gone, then?” He was so accustomed to being dragged along everywhere by Sherlock in the time since Christmas that he'd forgotten the terror when Sherlock took it into his head to run off alone. Every single time he'd done it before that, it had been because he was about to do something ridiculously stupid and dangerous.

Mycroft glanced around the room. “What clues are there?”

“He took his coat but left his phone,” said Sherrinford, standing up. “He doesn't want to be found or communicated with.”

“Because he thought John might be able to change his mind on whatever he's up to,” said Mycroft. “What else? Where's his laptop?”

John blinked. “On the bedside table,” he said, and rushed to get it.

He was already turning it on when he came back into the sitting room but he hit a snag. “It's password protected. How the hell are we meant to guess that? He's not exactly the kind to use his mother's birthday.”

“I know his password,” said Sherrinford. “I spent years on that mantelpiece with nothing to do but watch him type, you know.”

“Go on,” said John, sitting down at the desk so that he could type easier.

“Juliet Hotel seven, four, eight, five, one, six, eight, seven,” recited Sherrinford. “No spaces.”

John typed that in and was rewarded with the desktop screen. “Of course it would just be random numbers,” he said, opening up the browser to check Sherlock's history. “Where's Juliet Hotel, though?”

“It's not a place, it's a person,” said Mycroft. “That's obvious enough, but the numbers are...” he drifted off, a frown creasing his forehead. “Oh, obvious!” he said. “And rather disturbingly sentimental.”

“What do you mean?” asked John, only half paying attention. Sherlock had looked at a page of train times just before he left, but it was being excruciatingly slow to load so that John could see where he'd been looking to get a train to.


“The numbers should be separated into seventy-four, eighty-five, sixteen, eight and seven,” said Mycroft. “The atomic numbers of Tungsten, Astatine, Sulphur, Oxygen and Nitrogen.”

“Ah,” said Sherrinford in realisation. “Oh, that's rather sweet.”

The page had half-loaded, but the half that had loaded was the adverts. John twitched with impatience. “I still don't get it.”

Mycroft sighed. “The chemical symbols of those elements are W, At, S, O and N. It's your name.”

“Oh. Right,” said John, looking up at him. “Wait, you worked that out just from a string of
Mycroft shrugged. “It's not the first time that Sherlock's used the Periodic Table of the Elements to hide the obvious,” he said. “When we first got here, he set himself up an online alter-ego called Sulfanyl.”

John had to think about that for a bit. “HS,” he said. “His initials reversed.”

“Precisely,” said Mycroft. “His moments of cleverness are often rather obvious, once you've caught the trick of them.”

“Be nice,” said Sherrinford.

John was no longer listening. The page had loaded. “He looked at trains to Harpenden.”

“That's the nearest station to Magnussen's house,” said Mycroft.

“No,” said Sherrinford. John turned to glare at him and was met by a wide, toothy grin. “But I know what will be. Give me the laptop.”

John passed it over and Sherrinford spent a few moments tapping, then turned the screen towards him to show a section of Google maps. “Look,” he said. He touched the screen. “That's Appledore, Magnussen's house. And that,” he said, moving his finger less than an inch to the left, “right next door, is a church.”

John waited for the revelation, but none came. “And the significance of that is...” he prompted.

Sherrinford sighed. “The significance is the graveyard,” he said. “Come on.”

He headed for the door and John followed him, but instead of heading down to the front door, instead they climbed up to Sherrinford's room.

“What's your quickest disguise?” asked John, looking at the wardrobe.

“I don't need one where we're going,” said Sherrinford. There was a stack of canvases leaning against the wall and he started flicking through them. “Ah,” he said, pulling one free. “Here we go.”

It was a landscape painting over a metre wide and nearly as tall, showing a view of a grey-toned graveyard that it took John a few moments to recognise.
“That's in Halloween.”
Sherrinford nodded. “Spot on!”
John shook his head. “I don't-”

Sherrinford held up his hand. “One moment. Allow me to weave some Halloween magic.”

He waved his hand over the painting and it rippled like water. Something about the texture changed and John realised that instead of looking at a painting, he was now looking at the real thing. “How did you...?”

“Do not question the amazing and eldritch powers of a Halloween denizen,” said Sherrinford. “For they are mystical and occasionally kinda creepy.”

“Right,” said John, feeling a bit dazed.

“Come on,” said Sherrinford, holding out his hand. “You'll need to hold my hand.”

John reached out and took grip on his phalanges. “And this will definitely get us there quicker than Mycroft?”

“Oh yes,” said Sherrinford. “He can't go through Halloween, not without getting caught by Jack.”
He bent his knees slightly. “On my count, jump. One, two...three!”

They jumped together, through the painting and into Halloween.

It was slightly colder there than it had been in London and the morning sun was a pale, washed-out shadow of the one John was used to. Sherrinford glanced around and took in a deep breath, ribs swelling as if he had lungs behind them. “Ah, I'd forgotten how it felt to be here,” he said. “The unearthly edge to the air!”

There was a flicker from one of the near-by graves that made John jump. It shaped into a ghost. “Whoooo is that?” it wailed, swooping closer to them. “Whooo has coooome to distuuuu-”

“Can it, Linden,” said Sherrinford. “It's me, and I don't have time to chat.”

The ghost pulled up in surprise. “Sherrinford? But, I heard-”

“Sherrinford's back?” asked another voice and a second ghost slid out of a near-by crypt. “Sherrinford! We missed you.”


“That one,” said Linden, pointing at a large statue of an angel with her wings spread wide. “Obviously.”

“Right,” said Sherrinford, striding over. “Come on, John.”

The ghosts' attention shifted to John. “Oh, are you little Sherlock's John?”

“He's shorter than I thought he'd be.”

John pressed his lips together and ignored them, following Sherrinford over to the statue.
Sherrinford opened a door in the base. “Through we go,” he said, taking John's hand again. “So much quicker than a car. Or even a helicopter.”

They stepped through the door together and John found himself back in his world, standing under a brighter sun.

“I can't believe Sherlock makes us get cabs everywhere,” he said.

Sherrinford shrugged. “Well, it only works between graveyards,” he said. “And Sherlock does so hate anything to do with Halloween.”

John nodded absently as he glanced around, trying to match the landscape up with the brief glimpse of Google maps that he'd got. “Is it that house?”

Sherrinford nodded. “Yep,” he said. “Good luck! Get Sherlock and drag him back here so I can yell at him. Uh, I mean, sit him down and calmly and rationally explain why he's an idiot.”

“I think he'd hate the second one more,” said John.

Sherrinford considered it. “Yes,” he agreed. “Especially if I had bullet points.”

John rather liked that idea. “I'll make up some Powerpoint slides.”

“Ooh!” said Sherrinford. “With little animations!”


He set off towards Appledore, leaving Sherrinford to hide behind a grave in the hope that any passing cars wouldn't notice a skeleton hanging around in a cemetery.

John supposed he should have realised that Magnussen's house would be large, faintly ugly, and completely over-the-top. It took him almost as long to get down the drive as it did to walk up the lane to it. There was no one around and he couldn't see anyone inside, but that didn't stop him from feeling as if the many, many blank windows were watching him. He was nearly at the front door when he heard a loud voice from the back garden, although he couldn't make out the words. He altered his course to circle the house and came round the corner to find Magnussen and Sherlock standing on a large veranda, Sherlock's back towards John.

John's blood froze as he took the tableau in. They were staring each other down, but while Magnussen was looking coolly amused, Sherlock's hands were clenched into fists and John recognised frustration in the lines of his back.

“You really are a very simple creature, under it all,” Magnussen was saying. “So easy to manipulate! What did you think would be the point of coming out here?”

“I won't let you use John like this,” gritted out Sherlock as John came closer, wondering how long it would take for them to notice him. He didn't want to interrupt just yet, not until he'd got some idea of the situation. His fingers itched for his gun and, not for the first time, he bitterly regretted its loss.

“You don't get much choice in that,” said Magnussen. “Unless you stop feeling so strongly for him, he will remain your weakness. What are weaknesses for, if not to be used? One threat against him and you'll let me do anything you want, won't you?”

“No,” snapped Sherlock.
It was clear that Magnussen didn't believe him any more than John did. “Well, let's see, shall we?” he said. “I have so much information that the police would like to hear about John. Kneel down for me, Sherlock. Well, for John.”

John was close enough now to see that Sherlock's knuckles were white with how hard he was clenching his fists.

“You have until I count to three,” said Magnussen. “One, two-”

Sherlock's knees bent and he very slowly, with a perfectly straight back, knelt down.

“Ah,” said Magnussen. “You see?” His eyes flicked over Sherlock's shoulder to meet John's. “And here's your Achilles heel now.”

Sherlock's head whipped around and he stared at John with dawning horror.

“Morning,” said John, climbing the steps onto the veranda.

“Good morning,” said Magnussen. “I must say, it's turning into a very interesting one.” He looked back at Sherlock. “I wonder, what will I find to do with my pet detective?”

“He's not your pet,” said John.

“Of course he is,” said Magnussen. “Look at him. Brought to heel.”

“John, go home,” said Sherlock through gritted teeth.

“Oh no,” said Magnussen. “I don't think so. He'll stay right here.”

“Yeah, I don't think I'm going to be doing anything you want me to do,” said John. “Come on, Sherlock.”

Sherlock didn't move. He just kept staring at Magnussen with a look of trapped frustration that made John's fists itch to punch the bastard out and get Sherlock back home, where he could make him tea and wipe that expression away so that it never came back.

“He won't move,” said Magnussen. “Will you, Sherlock? You understand now. When they say knowledge is power, most people don't know the full meaning of that, but you do. My knowledge is the ultimate power.”

John shook his head. “I don't understand,” he said, not sure if he was saying it to Sherlock or Magnussen.

“You should have that on a t-shirt,” said Magnussen. John glared at him. “It's really very simple. I have the knowledge of all the things you've done that would make the police very sad - how you killed Jeff Hope, for example – and that puts Sherlock Holmes in my power. Tilt your face up for me, Sherlock.”

Sherlock's jaw clenched, but he did as Magnussen said. John began to feel almost as sick as Sherlock looked. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

Magnussen shrugged. “Deny it all you want. I'm sure the police will be able to find enough evidence, once they know who their suspect should be. It shouldn't really be a surprise to them that the mysterious saviour of Sherlock Holmes was his lover.” He bent down closer to Sherlock, as if to inspect his face. “Will you let me flick your face? For John?”
He didn't wait for an answer. He casually reached out and flicked Sherlock on his cheek. Sherlock flinched but didn't move away or try to stop him, and Magnussen let out a low laugh and did it again. "Oh yes, I just love doing this."

"I still don't understand," said John, because nothing about the scene in front of him made any sense. That Sherlock would just kneel there and let a monster like Magnussen hurt him for entertainment was completely incomprehensible.

"And that's the back of the t-shirt," said Magnussen. "Can you keep your eye open while I flick it, Sherlock?" He flicked at Sherlock's eye, and Sherlock clenched it shut automatically. "Come on, I'm sure you can try harder than that." He flicked at it again.

Frustration surged through John. "Sherlock?"

"Let him," said Sherlock, in a tight voice.

Magnussen made a delighted, amused sound. "Oh yes," he said. "Let me do whatever I want. That's how it works, John. For those who understand these things, Mycroft Holmes is the most powerful man in the country. Well, apart from me. Mycroft’s pressure point is his junkie detective brother, Sherlock. And Sherlock’s pressure point is John Watson. Because I know John Watson's dirty secrets, I own Mycroft. Killing Hope isn't the crime you've committed as part of your special brand of vigilante justice, and I have all that information."

He flicked at Sherlock's eye again. "Come on, you can keep it open. For John, you can do anything, isn't that right, Sherlock? And this is what I do to people, to entire countries, John. Just because I know. Mycroft should have given in to me, I'd have left you alone then. I didn't have much use for a detective and his sidekick but I think I'll find one now. That would upset Mycroft, wouldn't it? His precious baby brother becoming the minion of a villain like me. Maybe you could use your great brain to take down my business rivals. Or maybe you could just kill them."

"We won't do-" started John.

"Yes, you will," corrected Magnussen. "My own little assassins! That sounds lovely. You'll have to get a new gun, of course. I need your old one."

He gestured vaguely over at a table before flicking Sherlock's face again and John looked over to see his gun on it, in a clear plastic bag that looked like an evidence bag.

"So, it's not all just knowledge, then," he said.

Magnussen shrugged. "The police do like evidence. I'm in newspapers, I don't need to prove things. I could splash your criminal activities all over the front pages of my publications without needing anything more than conjecture but if I want to have you arrested, well- that takes a special something. A special something you carelessly left lying around your flat."

"I won't let you do that," said Sherlock.

Magnussen laughed. "Then you'll have to do everything I say, won't you? Now, come on, keep your eye open when I flick it."

He flicked Sherlock's face again and John felt bile rise up into his throat. There was no way he could stand here and watch this, but what else could he do? He looked at the gun again.

Before he could come to a decision, the noise of a helicopter approached. Magnussen straightened and looked up. "Ah, and here's the older brother."
John looked around to see a helicopter hovering over the garden and the shadowy figures of special forces darting between trees.

“Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, stand away from that man,” came Mycroft's voice over a loudspeaker.

Magnussen stepped back, still looking ridiculously pleased. “No doubt he's hoping that he can search this place and find evidence that will put me away. How sad that the only crime here has been committed by you two. I'll be very understanding, though. I won't press trespassing charges. I want you both safe in your dingy flat, after all, where I can use you any time I want.”

“Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, stand away from that man. Do it now,” said Mycroft again as the armed men came closer.

Sherlock stood up, but didn't look away from Magnussen. “You should have done your research,” he said. “I will do anything to keep John safe, no matter what it takes. Jim Moriarty learnt that, and so did his right hand man, Sebastian Moran. To their cost.”

John's eyes widened as Magnussen laughed. “Moriarty was a bungler,” he said. “And I haven't even heard of this Moran.”

“That's because he's dead,” hissed Sherlock, his fists clenched and his shoulders hunched over. John became aware that shadows were forming on the veranda, darkening in the corners where the bright morning sun should have kept them away. “I killed him.”

“So, John isn't the only killer I have control over then,” said Magnussen. “Do try not to threaten me, Sherlock. What are you going to do, kill me here, in front of all these witnesses? I don't think so.”

Except he would, John realised. Sherlock would do exactly that if he thought it was the only way to protect John, and it wouldn't be prison he'd be risking. If he killed Magnussen with his Halloween powers in front of a squad of special forces, the Holiday Council would take Sherlock away. He'd be sent back to Halloween at the very least, and probably punished in some other way. House arrest, possibly.

“Don't, Sherlock,” he said. “It's not worth it.”

“Of course it is,” said Sherlock, and the shadows darkened and heaped higher. Faces began to appear, grinning out maliciously at Magnussen. “I will not let you be this man's puppet.”

John was going to be left alone again. And, worse, Sherlock was going to spend the rest of his existence in misery, trapped in a place he hated with no hope of escape. He'd never solve a case again, he'd never stroll around the streets of London, he'd never get to do the things that made him Sherlock Holmes, the person John loved more than anything. And he wouldn't ever see John again, which he'd been very clear was more important to him than anything else.

Suddenly, John realised what Sherlock had been trying to tell him all along. If Sherlock was trapped in Halloween, imprisoned with nothing that made him happy and kept apart from John, then he really had nothing worth continuing to survive for. John would be equally trapped, unable to go to Halloween and living out his life without Sherlock, but at least he'd have the knowledge of a mortal lifespan to give him a definite ending, not to mention having all of London and their friends around him, still able to pursue his career, if he chose to. Sherlock wouldn't have that. He'd be in Halloween, alone and miserable, with nothing but eternity to look forward to.
And John couldn't let it happen. If they were going to separated, it should be in such a way that meant Sherlock was still free and in London, still able to see his brothers and pursue the things he loved, even if John wasn't at his side. They would at least be in the same world, and prison sentences had an ending. Immortality didn't.

He marched over to the table that held his gun, pulled it out of the plastic bag, turned and shot Magnussen before either he or Sherlock could react.

“John!” cried Sherlock as Magnussen's body fell to the floor.

“Man down! Man down!” shouted a voice from the garden. John immediately dropped the gun and raised his hands above his head. He didn't want to get shot, after all.

“John, what the hell did you do that for?” said Sherlock.

The armed forces were rushing closer now and John could hear Mycroft's voice over the loudspeaker again.

“Do not shoot John Watson!”

“Me in prison is much better than you in Halloween,” said John. “You can visit people in prison.”

Sherlock gaped at him. “You idiot!”

Men rushed up on the veranda and John sank to his knees so that they could cuff him. “I get it now,” he said. “Sherlock, I get it. Continued existence isn't worth anything if you're gone.”

“It's not meant to be this way round!” snapped Sherlock as he was cuffed as well.

“Marriage is an equal partnership, Sherlock,” said John, and allowed himself to be led off.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter, Christmas, will be posted Sunday 2nd August. Apologies for the delay.
Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay on this chapter. It turned out to be a lot longer than I was expecting, and RL swamped me while I was writing it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock was released by the local police after only a couple of hours of pointless questions that he refused to answer. He stormed out of the police station to find Mycroft's car waiting.

“Where's John?” he asked as soon as he'd ducked inside. He didn't bother shutting the door because he wasn't going anywhere until John came out.

Mycroft made an unhappy face that made the furious maelstrom in Sherlock's stomach turn ice-cold. “Unfortunately, we do not live in a country where the government has the power to free someone who has shot an unarmed man in cold blood in front of a dozen impeccable witnesses.”

Sherlock glared at him. “Magnussen was not 'unarmed', not by any stretch of the imagination.”

“I am more than aware of that,” said Mycroft. “However, there is no easy way to explain that this was more akin to self-defence than murder.”

“It wasn't self-defence,” said Sherlock. “You're the one that Magnussen was targeting. John was defending you.”

He'd been defending Sherlock as well, but the guilt that rose up whenever Sherlock thought about that bubbled like acid in his chest. If only he'd taken a bit longer to plan his visit to Magnussen, he would have realised he needed to make sure John was kept far away from the encounter.

Mycroft's mouth twisted but his phone beeped before he could respond. He looked at it and let out a quiet sigh. “They've charged him.”

Anger burnt through Sherlock. “Fix this.”

“Sherlock, I cannot just wave a wand and-”

Sherlock wasn't interested. “Fix it,” he repeated, getting out of the car and then bending down to add, “or don't bother speaking to me again.”

“Sher-” started Mycroft, but Sherlock slammed the door on him. He wasn't interested in listening to Mycroft's attempts to get him to see reason. All he wanted was for John to be there, next to him, safe and happy and not about to be locked up for years where Sherlock couldn't lie next to him while he slept, relax in his arms on the sofa, watch the subtle ways that he changed every day, or do any of the other things that gave Sherlock's life meaning.

He strode off along the road, furious and frustrated and terrified that Mycroft was right. Mycroft's car started to follow him and he turned off the road to get away, into a graveyard. Even if Mycroft could be bothered to get out of his car and actually walk after Sherlock, there was no way he'd follow him into a graveyard. The car hovered in the road for a moment, then sped up and
disappeared.

It wasn't much of a relief. Sherlock couldn't wipe away the image of John locked up in a tiny cell, waiting to be shipped off to prison, to rot there while Mycroft just wrung his hands and did nothing. How was Sherlock meant to bear that after all he'd done to protect John? What on earth had John been thinking? Why had he shot Magnussen when Sherlock could have dealt with him alone? That might have ended with Sherlock under house arrest back in Halloween but at least John would have been okay. He'd have been heading back to 221B for a cup of tea right now, not being interrogated by the kind of idiots who ended up as policemen in a place like this.

“Psst!” came a sharp hiss from behind a mausoleum. Sherlock glared over at the interruption to see Sherrinford gesturing at him, trying to keep hidden from the road.

A deduction came to him, fully formed. “You brought John through Halloween,” he said. “That's how he was able to get here so quickly.”

“Someone had to stop you doing something stupid,” said Sherrinford. “Where is he, anyway?”

Sherlock gritted his teeth. “He did something stupid. He's been arrested.”

“What?! What did he do?”

“He shot Magnussen,” said Sherlock, and was horrified when his voice cracked in the middle of the sentence. He stopped and took a deep breath.

“Oh, Sherlock,” said Sherrinford, and for once Sherlock was glad he was only a skull so that he didn't have to see the pity on his face.

He focussed on his anger in order to push aside all other emotions. “Mycroft won't fix it.”

“Mycroft can't do everything,” said Sherrinford, which was not what Sherlock wanted to hear at all.

“Then what's the point of him?” he snapped. “This is all his fault! He got me and John mixed up in his business, and now look what's happened! I should have stopped having anything to do with him when we got to this world, especially after he let Lock and Shock take you to Oogie and I lost my favourite song!”

“Ah, I'm not sure we can really blame him for that,” said Sherrinford, as if there was any use in the benefit of the doubt while John was in a shoddy country police station, being treated like a common criminal rather than the only worthwhile person on the planet.

“He's a completely useless waste of space,” said Sherlock, “and I've lost John because of him.”

A wave of despair passed over him as he realised how true that might turn out to be. It took a great force of will to push it aside. “No,” he said. “No, this isn't it. I will get John freed.”

Whatever it took, he was going to get John back where he should be, at 221B with Sherlock. Any other outcome was unacceptable.

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Sherlock spent two weeks desperately trying to come up with a plan, any plan, that would free John. Other than freeing him from prison using his Halloween powers and then taking him to live in permanent exile in another world, he couldn't come up with anything. There were times when he
was sorely tempted to just go ahead and do that but John was probably better off in prison that he would be in Halloween. Even discounting the likelihood of the Council punishing Sherlock for using his powers in such a way, there was far too much in that world that was fatal for an ordinary human like John. He wouldn't survive there for long.

The evidence against John was just too cut and dried. Even if the police didn't have the gun he'd shot Magnussen with, there was also the matter of the dozen members of special forces who had witnessed the whole thing. That was where Mycroft should have stepped in, of course. He had spent more than enough time at the heart of the government to have the power to do a simple thing like ordering a special forces unit to keep their mouths shut.

Useless bloody Mycroft. As it became increasingly clear that John was going to have to go through the full horror of a trial and a probable conviction, Sherlock's emotions spun out of control. He shifted between fury at Mycroft, at Magnussen, at himself for creating this mess and then being unable to clear it up, and a deep, grey misery at the future both he and John were now facing. What was the point in doing anything if John wasn't going to be there to share it? Why should Sherlock even bother getting up off the sofa if John wasn't there to nag him into it?

“Tea?” asked Sherrinford.

Sherlock shut his eyes rather than bothering to answer.

“Right,” said Sherrinford with a sigh.

“I'm sure John wouldn't want you to be like this,” offered Molly. She always seemed to be around these days. Sherlock wondered if she thought it was helping, or if she and Sherrinford just couldn't bear to be apart from each other for long. The reminder of how little Sherlock could bear to be apart from John made his throat squeeze uncomfortably. He ignored Molly as fiercely as he could, wanting both her and Sherrinford to just disappear and leave him alone.

They didn't. Sherrinford made Molly tea and they settled in to watch television together. Sherlock suffered through nearly an hour of it before he couldn't take it any more and found the effort to get up and retreat to his bedroom.

Not just his bedroom. John's bedroom as well. His possessions were scattered throughout – a jumper draped on a chair, a book on the bedside table, the photo of the two of them that John had insisted on displaying on the chest of drawers. Even Sherlock's own things were as much to do with John as they were to do with Sherlock: the red shirt that Sherlock had bought for Valentine's Day but continued to wear when John's approval of it became clear; the postcard of an old dissection theatre that John had sent him while off on some tedious medical course; the x-ray of John's skull, hanging on the wall.

Sherlock's eyes lingered on the x-ray, tracing over the lines of it. He felt a sharp stab of emotion in his chest. How long would it be before he was able to trace his fingers over John's head again, feeling out the lines of that skull? John was likely to get thirty years, unless he got a lawyer who was able to present a convincing case that Magnussen had provoked John in such a way as to reduce his sentence. Even then, it wouldn't be reduced by much.

Sherlock got out all the x-rays he had of John and laid them out carefully on the bed, creating the shape of John's skeleton and then topping it with the skull. He sank down on the bed beside it and trailed his fingers over the lines. God, he couldn't wait years. He needed John back now.

He lay next to the skeletal facsimile of John, staring at nothing and running through the facts again and again until the sun came up. Another day had passed and he still had no idea how to get John
There were noises in the kitchen, mugs and plates being moved around, and he deduced that Molly had stayed the night and was now making herself breakfast. He ignored it, right up until he heard a sound that was not at all welcome in this flat.

Mycroft's voice.

He threw himself out of bed and strode out into the kitchen, pointing a finger at Mycroft. “You're not allowed here until you bring John with you! Get out!”

Mycroft let out a sigh. “Sher-”

“No!” interrupted Sherlock. “Out! If you don't leave right now, and go and do everything you can to bring John back, I'll- I'll send you a Christmas card!”

Mycroft twitched, but didn't move. “I am already doing all I can,” he said. “It's not that easy, however. If you would just calm down enough to discuss it-”

“I don't need to discuss it,” said Sherlock. “I've done nothing but think about it. The only person who can help John is someone with substantial Government influence. So go and help him.”

“As I explained before, I am not an all-powerful dictator,” snapped back Mycroft.

“Then get out,” said Sherlock, pointing at the door.

Mycroft visibly took a deep breath. “I am here to give you this,” he said, pulling out a piece of paper.

Sherlock sneered at it. “I don't want useless documents, I want John.”

“I am more than aware of that,” said Mycroft. “However, it is not that easy. This is an attempt to ameliorate one part of the current predicament. Had you yet considered that the legal system will be able to compel you to testify against John?”

Sherlock froze. He hadn't even considered that. “I'll lie.”

“You'll be arrested for perjury, and no one will be better off,” said Mycroft. “This is a far more sensible solution.” He waved the paper again and this time Sherlock took it.

It was a marriage certificate for him and John, dated from the fourteenth of February and signed by three people, with one gap remaining. Mycroft and his assistant had signed to say they'd witnessed the marriage, and found a registrar willing to sign a certificate without overseeing a ceremony, but that wasn't what Sherlock's eye fixed on. John had also signed it, his scrawling doctor's signature splashed out black on the page next to the blank space where Sherlock's was missing.

“You've seen John,” he said.

“Yes,” agreed Mycroft. “He told me to tell you not to do anything stupid, but I fear he was wasting his breath.”

“How was he?” asked Sherlock.

Mycroft pressed his lips together, which told Sherlock more than enough. “He is stoically resigned. He seems to believe that he had no choice in the matter and that this is the best possible outcome from the situation that you found yourselves in.”
“-that you put us in,” put in Sherlock.

Mycroft ignored him. “At any rate, now that you have certification to back up your declaration that you are married, you will not be forced to testify against him.”

Sherlock looked back at the certificate. “So, all he has to worry about is the testimony of you and your men and the evidence of the dead body and the smoking gun. What a relief.”

“My testimony?” asked Mycroft. “Don't be silly, Sherlock. The helicopter was far too far away for me to have seen anything and besides, I believe I was looking in quite the wrong direction when the shot was fired.”

Sherlock snorted. “As if anyone would believe that.”

Mycroft shrugged. “That doesn't matter as long as they can't prove otherwise. Really, you can't expect that I'd testify against my own brother-in-law. Now, will you let me discuss the rest with you?”

“There's nothing to discuss,” said Sherlock, turning away. “You just need to sort it out, and then none of this will be necessary.”

“Sherlock,” started Mycroft with exasperation, “would you-”

“I wasn't kidding about the Christmas card,” added Sherlock. “You have ten seconds to leave the flat before I go out and buy one for you. It may be disgracefully early, but that doesn't seem to have stopped the shops filling up with that kind of rubbish already.”

“Sherlock-”

“Ten, nine, eight-” started Sherlock.

“I'll come with you,” said Sherrinford, cutting in. “Sherlock's too emotional about it, you'd probably be better off talking it through with someone more rational.”

“More rational?” asked Sherlock, stung. “You spent four hours last night watching a television show that claims all you need for time travel is a modified pocket watch!”

“The pocket watches are just the remote controls,” put in Molly. “The time machine is actually kept at the Timetravellers, Inc headquarters. It's called Doxie, short for 'paradox'.”

“No one is interested in your small-minded drivel,” Sherlock snapped at her.

“Sherlock! Be nice,” said Sherrinford. “I know you're upset, but if you take it out on Molly, I'll lose my temper.”

Sherlock sighed and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “I'm sorry, Molly. Hearing what a fictional time machine is called is not at all small-minded drivel.”

“It's okay,” said Molly. “I know you well enough now to ignore your insults.”

What a horrible thing to say to someone. Sherlock scowled at her.

Sherrinford and Mycroft left together and Sherlock tried not to feel betrayed that Sherrinford hadn't backed him up. Instead, he stared at the certificate and then strode over to the desk, picked up a pen and added his signature next to John's. There, now they had proof of what they both already knew to be true.
“Um,” said Molly. “Is that entirely legal?”

“Not in the least,” said Sherlock.

“Right,” she said. “I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.”

Sherlock shrugged. “John and I decided nine months ago that we are married. This is merely just pointless Government frippery.”

She blinked and looked like she was considering that, mug of tea clutched in her hands. Sherlock ignored her in favour of finding an envelope to put the certificate in to keep it safe, then tucking it away in a drawer.

“Do you mind?” she asked, just as he was starting to forget her existence.

“Mind what?” he asked, throwing himself down on the sofa as the energy that Mycroft's existence had provoked in him abruptly ran out.

“That I didn't go when Sherrinford did?”

Sherlock gave a shrug that he hoped conveyed how little he cared who was in the flat with him when none of them were John.

“Okay,” she said, still sounding hesitant. Sherlock shut his eyes in the hope of shutting her out. “Well, I'll just finish my breakfast then. I'll need to get to work after that.”

For a moment, Sherlock considered asking her if she had any interesting corpses in today and then he realised that it would just be habit. He couldn't bring himself to care about unusual deaths when all he could focus on was John sitting in prison.

John got restless and snappy if he didn't go outside often enough. Sherlock had taken to manufacturing excuses for them to go for a walk somewhere if it looked like they were reaching that point. Even if John grumbled about it, his general level of contentment rose by an average of thirteen percent once they were out and about. How was he going to be able to cope with being locked inside without the chance for a stroll through the park?

His thoughts were interrupted by Molly, who didn't have the good grace to just shut up and piss off.

“Sherlock, can I ask you something?”

He grunted in a way that he hoped conveyed his complete lack of interest in conversation.

“It's about Sherrinford.”

Oh god, of course it was. Sherlock let out a pained sigh.

Molly battled on regardless. “It's just- I- well, I was wondering when he was injured.”

Sherlock cracked open an eye and stared at her. “Why?”

“Well, it's just- he talks about it as if he had significant improvement at the beginning of this year, but he won't give me any details, or tell me what his injuries are or- or anything, really. I just wondered if he was still recovering, or if this is how he'll be for the rest of his life.”

Sherlock shut his eye again. “This is how he'll be,” he said. Reuniting his skull and skeleton had
been one thing, somehow managing to restore his flesh was quite another. There was nothing left of it but scattered ashes and even Halloween magic couldn't do anything with that.

“Oh,” said Molly. “Okay.”

There was a note in her voice that Sherlock didn't like. He opened his eyes to glare at her. “I do hope you're not going to suddenly find it too much to cope with and break his heart. You knew how he was when you made the decision to get involved with him.”

“Oh, no,” she said in a rush. “No, I wouldn't. I couldn't, he's everything, he's so great. I just- it's so sad. All the things he can't do, that I know he wants to. I wish there was some hope for him.”

Sherlock tried to think of anything Sherrinford might want to do that he couldn't now. “He paints, he watches ridiculous telly with you, he goes to galleries to Mycroft- I don't think there's much he can't do now that's really important to him.”

Molly cleared her throat. “Ah, well. There's- I mean, we make the best of it, and I'm happy, I just know he wishes he was more of a. Um. Active participant? He just- all those layers he wears, it makes it very difficult. And I've suggested we just black out the room and then he could take them off and I wouldn't see, but he doesn't- Apparently that wouldn't work, but I know he enjoys it, he just- And, well, and. I can't really touch him, so it's not, I don't know, it feels one-sided.”

She was bright red by the time she'd finished sputtering her way through that but it still took Sherlock a few more moments to work out what she was on about.

“Oh god, sex,” he said. “Please, don't talk to me about my brother's sex life. I have enough problems right now.”

“I'm sorry,” she said, “I just- I just wanted to know and he never answers any of my questions. He just changes the subject.”

Sherlock let out a long sigh. Sherrinford probably thought it was a good idea to just ignore the past and pretend that his relationship with Molly could be a clean slate. Sherlock had thought the same thing about John, right up until he had shared everything with him. The difference between keeping that whole side of his life a secret and being able to be completely open with him had been incredible. He'd spent the last year knowing that when John said he loved him, he was saying it with full knowledge of who he truly was. That was a feeling that couldn't be described in mere words.

“I know I'm just being silly,” carried on Molly after a moment. “I'm so lucky to have met him and we have so much more than we did to start with.” She went back into the kitchen to wash up her plate and mug.

Sherlock shut his eyes again. In his mind's eye, John was still sitting, slumped, on a bed in a prison cell. He wondered if he was going to spend thirty years seeing that every time he closed his eyes and emotion clenched at his throat.

“Well, I have to get to work,” said Molly. “Um. Will you be okay?”

Sherlock waved a hand at her in a manner that he hoped conveyed that he was fine and that she should just leave. Immediately.

“Yeah, I didn't think so,” she said with a sigh. “Just- don't do anything John wouldn't approve of.”

She left before Sherlock could react to that. As if John got a say in what Sherlock did after the
stupidity of his own actions.

****

Sherrinford was gone for most of the day. Some time during the afternoon, Lestrade texted Sherlock.

Got a case you might be interested in.

Sherlock didn't even think before responding.

Not interested. SH

Victim was found inside a walk-in freezer at a restaurant.

NOT INTERESTED. SH

The next text was a photo of the corpse, frozen in place. Sherlock glanced at it for a moment then deleted it.

It took a while before Lestrade texted again.

Don't you think it would do you good to get out and about?

No. SH Sherlock sent back.

Lestrade left him alone after that, which was a relief right up until Sherrinford got back. He took one look at Sherlock, still sprawled out on the sofa, and sighed.

“Have you moved at all?”

Sherlock didn't bother responding.

Sherrinford pulled off the veil he'd been wearing as a disguise and tossed it to one side, then ran his phalanges over his skull. “We need to talk.”

“Are you breaking up with me?” asked Sherlock, bothering to make eye contact so that he could quirk an eyebrow at him.

Sherrinford sat down in John's chair. “Mycroft and I have been trying to come up with some way to get John out of this, but it's not looking good.”

Sherlock scowled. “Mycroft just needs to-”

“Mycroft can't do anything,” said Sherrinford. “Trust me, Sherlock, if he could, he would have. We've both been over it, but there is no way for him to organise what will look like a gross miscarriage of justice. If he even tries, he'll lose his position, and his influence, and John will be no better off.”

Sherlock didn't want to hear this. He turned over, curling up into the back of the sofa.

“Sherlock, you can't keep on like this. Moping about-”

“I'm not moping,” said Sherlock, in a voice muffled by the sofa. “I'm thinking. There has to be some way to get John out. I'm not waiting thirty years before I see him again, Sherrinford.”
Sherrinford was quiet for a moment. “We're all thinking about it,” her said, eventually. “All three Holmeses – when we work together, there's nothing we can't do. We'll work something out.”

Sherlock wasn't sure he believed that, but he made an agreeing noise anyway, and then changed the subject. “You need to talk to Molly.”

“What?”

“She tried to interrogate me about your injuries,” he said. “You need to either tell her the truth or make up an elaborate lie that she'll swallow so that she doesn't feel like you're hiding from her.”

There was a silence so long that Sherlock thought the conversation was finally over, then Sherrinford said in a quiet voice, “I can't lie to her, but there's no way to tell her the truth either. Saying nothing is the best option.”

Sherlock snorted. “She started trying to talk to me about your sex life,” he said. “No option that involves me having to hear about that is the best option.”

“She did? What did she say about it?”

“I'm not talking to you about it either,” said Sherlock.

“But if she's not happy about it, I need to know,” said Sherrinford. “I mean, she always seems happy at the time – very happy at certain points, there was a thing last week that made her—”

“Stop!” demanded Sherlock. “She didn't say she wasn't happy, she just implied that she thought it was a one-sided affair in her favour and that she wished to redress the balance. And that's all I'm saying about it, please never speak of it again, I'm going to have to scrub my brain as it is.”

Sherrinford, thankfully, didn't continue the subject. Instead, he sat in silence for a while, leaving Sherlock to go back to his moping. No, not moping. Thinking.

He had nearly half an hour of peace and quiet before the doorbell rang. He groaned and pushed his face further into the sofa. “I'm not in.”

Sherrinford sighed and Sherlock could hear him stand up and move about. “I suppose your dashing older brother will have to suffice, then.”

Sherrinford's footsteps came up the stairs accompanied by two other sets, at least one of which Sherlock recognised. He turned over enough to glare at Lestrade and Sally as they came in.

“I told you, I'm not interested.”

“There's no use playing hard to get,” said Sally. “We know how you feel about murder.”

Sherlock glared at her. “If I was interested, I'd be there. Go away.”

“Come on, Sherlock,” said Lestrade. “We need your help. The ice hasn't left us much information to go on.”

Sherlock highly doubted that. What he meant was that the ice had made things slightly
complicated and his feeble brain couldn't cope. Sherlock didn't care about that. “I have far more important things occupying my attention at the moment, Inspector. You'll have to just do your job yourself.”

Lestrade let out a sigh and glanced at Sherrinford, who shrugged. “Sorry, he's been like this since John was arrested. I can't help.”

“We were all sorry to hear about John,” said Lestrade, giving Sherlock a sympathetic look that made his skin crawl.

“Sorry enough to let me know the best way to bribe, blackmail or otherwise subvert the system to get him free?” asked Sherlock. Lestrade and Sally exchanged cagey looks, and Sherlock huffed. “No, I didn't think so.”

“We'd help if we could,” protested Lestrade, “but it doesn't exactly seem like there's a lot of room for error.”

“Error,” repeated Sherlock, with disgust. “What is an error is to imprison John for shooting someone that was universally loathed. Magnussen's death was of benefit to the whole country. John was doing a public service.”

“That's not really an argument you can present to the CPS,” said Sally.

“I'm not sure murder can ever really be called a 'public service', anyway,” said Lestrade.

Sherlock snorted. “As if there hasn't been criminals you'd have happily seen mysteriously killed. We both know there are terrible people walking about that the police can't touch, either for lack of evidence or because they've got connections, or something else. Moriarty proved that. I suppose that's all a bit above your head, though. You just stick to corpses in freezers.”

Lestrade huffed. “Oh, I'm so sorry that a violent murder is too passé for you. You just stick to lying about on the sofa like a drama queen, that's a much better use of your time.”

He turned to leave, then stopped in the doorway and turned back. “Look, if there is anything I can do to help – anything legal – let me know. But lying about being miserable isn't going to help John, and it's definitely not going to help you.”

He left and Sherlock let out a sigh, shutting his eyes again.

Sally cleared her throat. “The gun John used.”

Sherlock looked at her, wondering why she was still here after Lestrade had gone. Why was she even here to start with? Lestrade didn't usually bring back-up for his desperate pleas for assistance. “Yes?”

“Was it- Uh, I mean.” She paused, then said, very delicately, “They'll do a ballistics test on it and run a comparison with any other unsolved murders.”

Apparently, Sally wasn't as stupid as she looked. “Yes, I'm aware of that,” said Sherlock. “I'm surprised they haven't already.”

Sally shrugged. “Bureaucracy. There's always a waiting list for things like that and as he's already arrested, it won't be a high priority. Just- when they do, is it going to pull anything up?”

Yes. John had used that gun to shoot a taxi driver before he'd even known Sherlock a day. Back
when he'd thought that taking a poison pill would have a detrimental effect on Sherlock's health, rather than just giving him a slight buzz.

“Possibly,” said Sherlock, just as carefully as Sally was being. “The gun was in Magnussen's possession. Who knows what he used it for?”

The problem with that claim was that as soon as it came up that the gun had been used to kill someone who had been threatening Sherlock Holmes's life, no one was going to believe that anyone other than John Watson had pulled the trigger.

Sally nodded, looking tired. “That's shit luck,” she said. “John may have a terrible taste in boyfriends, but he doesn't deserve prison.”

Sherlock allowed himself a humourless smile. “A terrible taste in husbands,” he corrected, and her eyes widened.

“Oh. Right,” she said, glancing at his hand, looking for a ring. Sherlock let her look without offering any explanations.

“Come on, Donovan!” called Lestrade from outside. “Some of us still have a murderer to find!”

Sally gave Sherlock a nod, and left.

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It was nearly a week later when Sally came back, this time alone. Sherlock was, once again, on the sofa in his pyjamas, thinking about John. Part of him was wondering if this was how he was going to spend the next thirty years. Would it matter if he did?

Sally took one look at Sherlock and let out an aggravated sigh, as if his actions were calculated purely to annoy her.

“There's been another frozen corpse,” deduced Sherlock without much effort.

“Yeah, spot on,” she said.

“So there's now twice as much evidence for you to ignore or misinterpret,” said Sherlock. “You're wasting your time coming here. I'm no more interested in this one than I was in the last.”

“I didn't think you would be,” said Sally. “That's not why I'm here.”

Sherlock frowned at her. “Please tell me you haven't come all this way just to irritate me with your presence.”

“No, that's just a bonus,” she said, and then actually went and sat down. Sat down! As if she was going to be there a while! Sherlock glared at her, but she paid no attention.

“Do you know why I became a copper?” she asked.

“Oh god,” said Sherlock, with despair. “Why on earth would I care about that?”

She continued to ignore him. “It's cos I feel strongly about justice. I believe it's the most important thing in a society – if you don't have justice, there's no real point in bothering, right? But justice and the law aren't always the same thing. If I was in Saudi Arabia, the law wouldn't let me drive a car – that's not justice. Or if my parents had been South African, they wouldn't have been allowed to marry when they did, or if this was a hundred years ago, you and John would have been locked
up for being gay. None of that is justice.”

Sherlock put an arm over his eyes. “Scintillating,” he said. “Feel free to shut up and go away at any point.”

“And what's happening to John right now isn't justice,” added Sally, and Sherlock felt himself twitch at how woefully inadequate that was as a way to describe the situation. “Not because the law is wrong – it is wrong to kill people, it always should be. But sometimes, well. Some people need to be stopped, but the law can't touch them.”

Sherlock looked over at her. “You know someone that Magnussen hurt.”

Sally pressed her lips together and then shrugged a shoulder. “His assistant. Janine. We were at school together, I've known her years, and he treated her like shit. He had something on her – I've never asked what, none of my business, but he was an utter shit about it. He used to make her let him flick her face when he was bored. Sick fuck.”

Sherlock had wondered if that had been a special torment that Magnussen had thought up just for him. Apparently, Magnussen hadn't been particularly imaginative. It seemed likely that John and Mrs. Hudson weren't the only people who'd spent an angry few hours trying to get the stench of Magnussen's urine out of a carpet.

“I see,” he said. “So, you sympathise with John's situation. Unless you turn out to have a great deal more sway within the police force than I've thus far presumed, I'm still not sure what the point of all this is.”

“Jesus, you don't make anything easy, do you?” Sally snapped.

“Why would I want to do that?” asked Sherlock.

“Because I'm trying to help,” said Sally. “Look, all right, so I don't have the power to get John off a murder charge when there are a dozen witnesses and a body with its brains blown out the back of its skull lying at his feet. I doubt anyone does. What I do have, though, is a friend at the ballistics lab who doesn't think it's odd for me to pop by for lunch, or even if I help her with a bit of paperwork so that she can finish quicker.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out an evidence bag. Sherlock sat up with surprise, swinging his legs around and leaning towards it. “That's John's gun.”

“Nope,” said Sally. “John Watson doesn't have a gun, remember? Can't imagine the fuss if Sleuthlock Holmes and his sidekick were setting themselves up as vigilantes and running around London with firearms, taking out murderers without any kind of due process. Must be Magnussen's gun. The one they haven't quite got around to doing a ballistics test on.”

Sherlock was rarely this genuinely surprised and certainly not by someone like Sally. “They'll notice it's missing.”

“Nope,” said Sally. “John Watson doesn't have a gun, remember? Can't imagine the fuss if Sleuthlock Holmes and his sidekick were setting themselves up as vigilantes and running around London with firearms, taking out murderers without any kind of due process. Must be Magnussen's gun. The one they haven't quite got around to doing a ballistics test on.”

Sherlock was rarely this genuinely surprised and certainly not by someone like Sally. “They'll notice it's missing.”

“No, they won't,” she said. “Remember the O'Hannagan incident? Must be over five years ago now.”

Sherlock flicked through his Memory Palace for a moment until he had located the name. “Five years and eleven months. O'Hannagan shot his elderly mother, his dog, and himself. Not in that order, which managed to confuse the local force far more than it should have.”

“Right,” said Sally. “Mental breakdown over her declining health and the fact that the vet had just
told him he should get the dog put down. Cut and dried case, nothing interesting about it once it was solved, and no one to prosecute once O'Hannagan's life support was turned off. All the evidence has just been put in a box and filed away, and probably won't be looked at again, at least not for years. Including—"

"Including the gun he used," said Sherlock. "A Sig Sauer P226R. Exactly the same gun as that one."

Sally grinned at him. "Exactly. And that's the one that my mate will be looking for ballistics on tomorrow, and finding no match with any unsolved murders. Certainly none involving serial killer taxi drivers who it would have been a nightmare to convict. 'And then he talked them into poisoning themselves' is the kind of thing that ends up sounding like utter bollocks in a courtroom."

"I see," said Sherlock. "So, in the interests of justice, you have broken the law. Congratulations."

Sally shrugged and set the gun down on the arm of her chair. "It's only blokes like the DI who think the law is the be all and end all. Straight white men who don't realise the whole bloody system is geared towards them and for anyone else it's sometimes a bit of a potluck."

Ah, there was some bitterness there. Sherlock thought about poking at it to see what happened but decided that it was probably best to leave it alone. Instead, he summoned all his will power and took a deep breath. "Thank you," he got out.

"Oh, I didn't do it for your thanks," she said. "I did it for John."

"And justice," added Sherlock.

She nodded "Right. And, well, cos now you owe me. A lot. I reckon you owe me so much that you're going to spend years paying it back. And I reckon you're going to start by getting up off that bloody sofa, having a shower because you clearly haven't for days, getting dressed and coming down to Greenwich to look at a frozen corpse with me."

Sherlock considered that, looked at the gun one more time, and nodded. He stood up. "For the cause of justice, then," he said, and went off to the bathroom.

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Given that Mycroft had already been to see John, it took an unacceptably long time for Sherlock to be allowed to visit. He was beginning to think that he'd have to storm the prison when he finally got permission.

John looked even smaller than usual, sat at a cheap table in the visiting room. Sherlock wanted nothing more than to just grab him and get him the hell out of there. The guards wouldn't be able to stop him if they were surrounded by shadow manifestations of their worst nightmares.

That wouldn't help anything, though. Instead, he forced himself to rein in as much of his emotion as he could and settled for a tight hug instead.

"God, I missed you," said John, clinging on just as fiercely.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't have shot a man in front of a unit of government forces," said Sherlock, almost directly into John's hair.

"Oh good, we are going to spend our time arguing," said John, his hands fist ing into the back of
Sherlock's shirt. “I was worried we might be adults about the whole thing.”

A guard near-by cleared his throat. “That's enough, Watson.”

John let out a sigh and tried to move away from Sherlock. Sherlock didn't let go.

“Don't get yourself kicked out immediately,” said John, and Sherlock made himself let go with a scowl.

“Very well, Watson,” he said, and sat down on the plastic chair instead.

John made a face as he sat down on the other side of the table. “Yeah, I thought I was done with that when I left the Army. No such luck.”

“Well, we are married now,” pointed out Sherlock. “You could always change it so that they bark 'Holmes' at you instead.”

John made a face, which Sherlock was mildly offended by. “Yeah, maybe not. If someone barks 'Holmes', I'm going to expect it to be aimed at you, and–” his voice faltered for a moment, then steadied as he forced himself to finish the sentence, “I'm finding it hard enough not having you with me as it is, without being constantly reminded of it.”

Sherlock allowed himself to look John over carefully, observing every detail. He looked pale and tired, as if he hadn't had a proper night's sleep since he'd shot Magnussen. Sherlock thought about how heavily he'd always slept at home, his face perfectly relaxed and peaceful, and wondered what his sleep was like here, without Sherlock to lie next to him and note every tiny change in his breathing.

“Perhaps I should get myself arrested as well, and then at least we'd be in the same place.”

John snorted. “Right, unless they decided not to put us in the same prison and then we'd not even get visits. Besides, you wouldn't be able to last a week in here – you remember what you were like when Magnussen had us kidnapped.”

John, unfortunately, had a point. Sherlock scowled. “You shouldn't be here either,” he said. “You like to have a long walk at least once every three days or you get all tetchy and irritated.”

John shrugged. “Yeah, well, it's not as if it matters if I'm tetchy in here. There's not really anyone I'm interested in being nice to.”

“So I shouldn't worry that you've found a burly drug dealer to replace me with?” asked Sherlock. “How reassuring.”

“You know you're the only drug addict for me,” said John. After he said it he winced, as if worried he'd struck too close to the bone. Sherlock hadn't realised he'd thought the subject to be a sensitive one.

“They say that once you're addicted, you're an addict until you die,” said Sherlock, as lightly as he could. “No matter how many years clean you are. I can personally attest that death is an excellent way to end any cravings.”

John looked reassured and managed a half-smile at that. “Yeah, not sure I'll pass that on to Harry as a remedy.”

There was an awkward silence as Sherlock did his best not to make any of the comments that were
fought to get out of his mouth about Harry. He really didn't want to argue with John, not if they
only had an hour together.

“So, enough about me,” said John. “Tell me what you've been up to. Take my mind off all this
crap,” he said, waving his hand vaguely at the institutionally grey walls. “Had any good cases?”

For the second time in a short period, Sherlock was in the unusual position of feeling grateful to
Sally Donovan. If she hadn't dragged him off to Greenwich, he'd have had nothing to say to John
now other than that he'd managed to best his personal record for lying on the sofa without moving.

“There was an incident with some frozen corpses.”

John's eyes lit up. “Tell me all about it.”

The hour passed far too quickly. Sherlock laid out every detail of the case for John, hoping he'd be
able to put them together and get the solution before Sherlock revealed it. He didn't, but his
reaction to the reveal was almost worth that worrying lack of intelligence.

“And you worked all that out from a needle hole and an ice axe?” John exclaimed.

“Of course,” said Sherlock, smugly. “Obvious, really.”

“Incredible. And how did the polar explorer react?”

Sherlock shrugged negligently. “He injected me with his concoction and locked me in the walk-in
freezer.”

“Christ!” said John.

“Of course, the formula which killed his other test subjects had no effect on me,” said Sherlock,
“and I was able to escape the freezer fairly easily. Then I called Lestrade and let him know the
details, and went home.”

“You didn't wait for the arrest?” asked John.

“No point,” said Sherlock. He'd fulfilled his obligation to Sally – or, rather, the first instalment of
his obligation to Sally. After that, he'd just wanted to go home so he could map out precisely how
differently the case would have gone if John had been by his side.

“Right,” said John. “Well, sounds like a good one, anyway.”

It was obvious to Sherlock that he was about to add another sentence but stopped himself, and even
more obvious what that sentence would have been.

“I'm sorry you missed it too,” he said. John's lips tightened and he looked down at the table. “If
you hadn't-” continued Sherlock, but John didn't let him finish.

“If I hadn't,” he hissed, leaning forward and glaring at Sherlock, “you'd be in Halloween, or we'd
both be doing whatever Magnussen wanted us to. We wouldn't have solved the case together in any
version of events. For that, you'd have had to just stayed home with me and left Magnussen
alone.”

Sherlock scowled. “Left him alone to continue to threaten your life? Oh yes, we'd definitely have
got involved in the case then. Unless, of course, he'd already found another way to kill you, or we'd
decided it was safer to just stay shut up indoors together all day, slowing going mad with boredom,
or Mycroft hadn't vanished us to another country to keep us safe.”

John made the face he made when he thought Sherlock was being unreasonable, as if having the appalling lack of options they'd been faced with pointed out to him was on the same level as Sherlock leaving his unwashed chemical equipment in the sink.

“Time's up,” announced one of the guards, cutting through the discussion before it became a proper argument.

John huffed out an exasperated sigh. “Of course,” he muttered, then took a deep breath and when he looked up, Sherlock could see that he'd pushed the whole mess of an argument to one side in his head. It was one of the many things that he'd always found fascinating to watch; the way John was able to compartmentalise his anger when needed.

He reached out for John's hand and clung on to it. *I can't stand being told that I've run out of time with you,* he thought, but didn't say. “I'll be back next week,” he said instead.

John nodded, squeezing Sherlock's hand just as tightly back. “I'm counting on it.”

There was a note of desperation in his voice that gave Sherlock an unwanted insight into just how hard John was finding it to adjust to life in prison.

They were allowed another embrace before Sherlock left, which he took full advantage of, holding John as tightly as he could and burying his face in his neck, breathing in the familiar scent of him. It was with great reluctance that he finally moved back.

“I will get you out of here,” he vowed.

John shook his head, his hands still clenched in the back of Sherlock's jacket. “You're not allowed to do anything reckless,” he said. “Well, anything else reckless. I won't leave here if it means you're back in Halloween, or worse. At least this way we're still in the same world.”

“I will get you out of here,” repeated Sherlock, “and we will be together again. In Baker Street.” He didn't have the first idea how he was going to achieve that but he wanted it so much that there had to be a way. “You'll make tea and we'll let it go cold in favour of snogging on the sofa.”


They managed one last kiss before John was taken away again and Sherlock was left alone in the barren emptiness of the visitor's room, with no idea how he was going to be able to make good on his vow. There had to be a way, there was always a way. Why couldn't he see even the start of one?

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The legal system moved hideously slowly. Mycroft found a lawyer for John that he claimed was the best available, although he wasn't good enough to find a legal loophole for John to escape through so Sherlock wasn't that impressed. He did tell them that the ballistics report had been completed and there were no links to any other offences.

“We'll be able to show that this was a wildly out-of-character act for John,” he said. “Other than an ASBO for graffiti a couple of years ago, all his history with law enforcement shows is the numerous times that he has assisted the police. That will work in our favour.”

By which he meant that they might be able to persuade the judge to be lenient in his sentencing. There was no suggestion at all of going for a Not Guilty plea. In fact, at one point the lawyer
mentioned John's willingness to confess and pay the price as another factor that would encourage
the judge towards leniency. Sherlock wondered why he thought it mattered. Whatever sentence
John got, it was still going to be years and years before he'd be released.

Sherlock was in court for John's first hearing, which lasted just long enough for the magistrates to
refer the case to the Crown Court. Outside the court, various reporters had gathered like crows to
the site of a massacre and several of them tried to stop Sherlock for questions. He just snarled at
them and strode on, jumping in a taxi before he lost his grip on his temper and ripped in to them.
Every major problem that he and John had faced seemed to have had its roots in the bloody media.
There had to be some way to get Mycroft to just ban the whole useless establishment.

Back at the flat, he couldn't settle to anything. He started experiments that he lost interest in before
any results could be gathered; he tried reading some medical articles but found himself drifting off
between sentences, wondering what John would think of the latest breakthroughs; he even, in a fit
of frustration, found himself re-organising the filing system he used for his scrapbooks. He
covered the entire sitting room and half the kitchen with bits of paper, then realised he didn't care
what order it was all in and ended up sprawled out over the remnants of his *Kidnappers* folder,
limbs weighed down with ennui.

That was how Sherrinford found him. “Good God, Sherlock, are you nesting?”

Sherlock ignored him. Sherrinford picked his way through the scattered papers to the sofa.
“Molly's coming over in an hour, so I hope you're intending to clear up before then.”

Sherlock had absolutely no intention of clearing anything up. What was the point when John
wouldn't be there to huff out his annoyance and make pointed comments about walking around in
muddy boots?

“Ah,” said Sherrinford. “I see you've gone back to moping.”

Sherlock tried to raise some irritation at the suggestion, but there didn't seem to be any point.
Instead, he shoved the heels of his hands into his eyes in an effort to make everything go away,
especially Sherrinford.

There was a sigh. “I wish I could help, Sherlock. I hate seeing you like this.”

“You could persuade Mycroft to actually do something,” muttered Sherlock.

“I've just come from Mycroft's,” said Sherrinford. “We've both been trying to come up with
something, and failing. Again.”

“We could kill all the witnesses,” suggested Sherlock. “There were only, what, ten or so of them?
Between the three of us we could make them all disappear within a week, and hide the bodies so
well no one would ever know. Or we could just take them through to Halloween and abandon them
there, they wouldn't be able to testify then.”

“I can't imagine John would like that plan,” said Sherrinford, which was cruelly true. Sherlock had
a feeling that slaughtering an entire squad of special forces was one of the few things that might
make John actually leave him, and he couldn't bear that.

“Do you have any better suggestions?” asked Sherlock.

Sherrinford sighed. “You know I don't. The only way we could prevent those men from testifying
would be if there was proof that Magnussen was working against the government – actual, solid
proof. Something that makes it clear that his death was for the good of the country. With that,
Mycroft could persuade the right people to suddenly find a top secret mission for those men, something in a country a very long way away, that went on for long enough for them to miss the entire trial.”

Sherlock raised himself up on his elbows. “Surely the fact that he was blackmailing Mycroft would be more than enough?”

Sherrinford shook his head. “There's no evidence of that. Magnussen was too careful for that. Without evidence, they won't do anything.”

Sherlock sighed and sank back down to the floor. “All this faffing about with legal pathways and accountability is excruciating,” he said. “Why did Mycroft get involved in politics if he wasn't going to implement a dictatorship?”

Sherrinford snorted. “Why did you get involved in solving crime rather than committing it? For all you two like to pretend you're heartless, you are both firmly on the side of right rather than wrong.”


When Molly arrived, Sherlock was still on the floor, and still surrounded by paperwork. He hadn't seen the point in moving.

“Oh!” said Molly, looking around. “That's-”

“A hideous mess that Sherlock should have cleared up an hour ago?” finished Sherrinford. “Yes, I know.”

Sherlock draped an arm over his eyes, wishing there was a more effective way to block them out.


Sherlock had no interest in responding to her. After a few seconds of silence, Sherrinford did it for him.

“He's having a bad day,” he said, which Sherlock thought was an understatement. Finding out a promising case was only a three at best was a bad day, getting caught in the rain without an umbrella was a bad day, watching your husband stand in the dock on a murder charge was considerably more than that.

Molly let out a sigh. “Would it help if I made you a cup of tea?”

“No,” bit out Sherlock. The only tea he was interested in drinking was John's.

“Right,” she said. “Well, maybe I'll just clear some of this up, then.” There was the sound of rustling paper. Sherlock wondered if he should be concerned that she'd get it all out of order but the heavy, black weight that had settled over him wasn't allowing much space for any emotions other than the choking despair that rose up whenever he thought about John.

“Sherlock, we're going to be watching *Time Travellers, Inc*,” said Sherrinford, once Molly had fussed about a bit and made herself tea. “If you're going to stay there, you're not allowed to make any snarky comments about it.”

Sherlock considered flashing a rude gesture at him, but the effort seemed too much. What did he care what rubbish was droning on the telly?
He lay there, his arm still draped over his eyes, and endured nearly forty minutes of weak plots and overly-dramatic dialogue, barely paying attention to anything that wasn't the sick, gnawing feeling in his stomach.

Sherrinford and Molly watched the show largely in silence, although occasionally one of them would make a comment – always quietly, as if afraid to drown out one word of the insipid script.

“Snarky Keffle is the best Keffle.”

“I bet you that guy ends up going through a window. Oh yeah, there he goes.”

“I hope she's about to finally tell him what happened to her in 1066. That's been dragging on forever.”

The last comment was from Molly. Sherlock ignored it as he had the others right up until Sherrinford replied in an awkward, stilted tone.

“She had her reasons for not saying anything. Hank doesn't need to know everything about her past.”

Oh god, this was going to turn into a veiled discussion of Sherrinford and Molly's on-going relationship issues. Why the hell hadn't he found the energy to get up and retreat to his bedroom, where he could have avoided this?

“Not everything, but he definitely should know something that important,” said Molly. “How are they meant to build anything meaningful and long-term together if Vee can't be open with him?”

“The past is the past,” said Sherrinford. “What does it matter to their future?”

Molly snorted. “Are you kidding? This whole show is about how the past keeps coming back to fuck up the future. If she's open with him, they can tackle it together – no secrets, coming at it from a position of solidarity. Everything that goes wrong for the agency starts because someone is hiding something, keeping secrets when they should be sharing information.”

“And what if sharing the information just made things worse? If Agatha had reported Keffle's links to the Luddites, they'd have stopped him going on the Nottingham mission and Vanessa would probably have died.”

“Or maybe they'd have been better prepared so that she didn't end up in danger to begin with!”

Sherlock let out a long, loud groan. “For the love of God, Sherrinford, just tell her already. I doubt it will end in any near-death experiences in a nineteenth century factory.”

“Keep out of this, Sherlock,” said Sherrinford. “No one asked for your input.”

Sherlock found the energy to move the arm covering his eyes. “Holmeses don't wait to be asked for their input.” Sherrinford's veil was aimed at him with an angle to his neck that spoke of a glare. Sherlock was so sick of the sight of it. “Apply some logic to the situation, Sherrinford. If you intend your relationship with Molly to be long-term, you will need to be open with her. If you're too close to the situation to see that, then extrapolate from mine and John's relationship. Do you think it would have been so solid if I hadn't told him everything?”

Sherrinford shook his head dismissively. “Don't pretend he found out because you made a conscious choice. Moran forced your hand.”
“Moriarty forced my hand,” Sherlock corrected him. “I knew the moment I jumped that I'd have to tell him when I came back. Apart from anything else, I couldn't have hidden the physical changes.”

He'd spent almost as long trying to work out the best way to reveal that he was both dead and from another world to John as he had trying to take down Moriarty's web. In the end, Moran and Jack had meant that none of his careful speeches were necessary but that didn't mean Sherlock hadn't been ready for John to know the whole truth about him. Once he'd accepted it as inevitable, it had been an enormous relief. He hadn't realised how much he disliked the whole procedure of maintaining a secret that big from John.

“What physical changes?” asked Molly, frowning down at him.

Sherlock flicked his eyes over to Sherrinford, then flashed a brief, humourless grin at Molly. “You've never asked how I survived the fall.”

“Sherlock!” snapped Sherrinford, standing up. “Don't you dare!”

Sherlock sat up and glared at him. “You've said that you and Molly are like me and John, but I can't see how it could possibly be even a little bit similar if you're willing to lie to her about so much.”

“You're lying to me?” asked Molly. “Sherrinford, please. What are you talking about?”

Sherrinford turned to her and his hands – tucked inside thick gloves – twitched nervously. “Molls, it's nothing. Seriously. Sherlock is just being a dick because he's miserable.”

Sherlock let out a long sigh and collapsed back onto the floor. “I might be miserable,” he said, because there was no way he could deny that, “but at least I don't have any regrets.”

Well, other than the obvious one that John was locked up and Sherlock couldn't help him, but apart from that, there was nothing about his history with John that he would have changed, unless it was to have kissed him earlier, or to have let him in on the truth before he was forced to.

“Sherrinford, please,” said Molly. “If even Sherlock thinks it's something I should know...”

“Sherlock is allowing sentimentalism to crowd out the unavoidable fact that my circumstances and his are very different,” said Sherrinford. “He's never had to wear a mask, after all.”

Sherlock had had enough. He sprung to his feet. “I may be influenced by sentiment, but at least I'm not controlled by fear.”

Sherrinford made a frustrated noise. “Piss off.”

“Sherrinford, please, you can trust me with anything,” said Molly. She stood up and took Sherrinford's gloved hands in her own. “You must know that.” She paused, took a deep breath and flicked her eyes over to Sherlock before looking back at Sherrinford and raising her chin defiantly. “I love you. No matter what you have to tell me, nothing can change that.”

“Oh, Molly,” said Sherrinford, in a quiet, heartbroken voice. Sherlock found himself in the odd position of feeling as if he was in the way, and quietly retreated to the kitchen. He didn't go any further than that, though – he still wanted to hear what was going on, after all.

“I lo-” started Sherrinford, but Molly stopped him.

“No,” she said. “I don't- Don't tell me that until you can say it without a veil on.”
Sherrinford made a quiet, despairing noise and his head dipped. “I can't," he said miserably. “I can't, Molly, you won't - when you see what's under it, you won't want to be with me.”

“Of course I will," she said.

Sherrinford just shook his head. “You're imagining scars and disfigurement, normal things. It's not - You wouldn't - It's -” He cut himself off in frustration, shaking his head. “It's impossible to explain, and nothing a normal person could be in a relationship with.”

“I'm not a 'normal' person,” said Molly. “I work in a morgue, Sherrinford, I'm not an idiot who doesn't know what injuries can look like.”

Sherrinford shook his head. “No, that's not - No. Molly, I just can't.”

Molly let out a very long sigh and let go of Sherrinford's hands, stepping away. “Right,” she said. “Right then.” She paused, staring down at the carpet, clenching her fingers together. “Well, I'd say that I understand, but I really don't.”

Sherlock let out a long, frustrated sigh, making sure that it was loud enough for Sherrinford to hear him. Sherrinford turned to look at him.

“Go away, Sherlock,” he said. “I think you've done enough meddling in other people's relationships for today.”

Sherlock made a face. “I was trying to help,” he said. “Take a moment to extrapolate, Sherrinford. Where do you think you two will be in a year, if you don't open up to her?”

“Go away,” repeated Sherrinford in a firmer voice.

Sherlock gave up and retreated to his bedroom, leaving Sherrinford to flail around in the emotional mess of his own making.

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Molly didn't stay much longer that night and certainly didn't sleep at 221B like Sherlock knew she'd been intending. After she'd left, Sherrinford came into Sherlock's bedroom and glared down at where he was sprawled on his bed.

“Why did you have to do that?” he demanded, pulling off his veil.

“You know why,” said Sherlock. “You'll lose her if you don't open up to her. She may be a bit of a mouse but she won't stay in a relationship that's stalled on whether or not you trust her.”

Sherrinford scowled at him. “I do trust her, of course I trust her, but it's one thing to trust someone and quite another to expect them to accept being in love with a skeleton. It's not like being a corpse – people write all kinds of terrible romantic claptrap about vampires, but can you think of a single thing about a skeleton? There's nothing sexy about bones.”

“I'm sure you could find something on the internet,” said Sherlock. “You can find almost anything on the internet.”

Sherrinford shook his head. “The internet is fantasy,” he said. “This is reality. I know you don't understand these things, but trust me on this. Molly and I – our sex life is unconventional, but we both enjoy it. Do you really think she'll continue to if she knows I'm what remains after decomposition?”
Sherlock shrugged. “I can't say I spend a lot of time caring about your sex life. Is it really more important to you to maintain that in the short term rather than the entire relationship in the long term?”

“You don't understand,” said Sherrinford with a sigh. “How could you? Not everyone is like John, Sherlock. Molly and I both like and enjoy sex – a relationship without that is just as likely to fizzle out as one where she thinks I don't trust her.”

Sherlock considered that. “Then you need to find a third option.”

“Oh, just that easily?” asked Sherrinford.

“Would you prefer it if she was looking at a life sentence for murder?” asked Sherlock, with considerable bitterness.

Sherrinford was silent for a moment, then collapsed onto the edge of the bed. “God, neither of us are doing very well at this, are we? Maybe Mycroft was right all along.”

Sherlock snorted. “Don't be ridiculous. Rule number one: Mycroft is never right.”

“Ah, of course,” said Sherrinford. “Silly me, I thought rule number one was that I shouldn't trust either of you on the subject of the other.”

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December arrived long before Sherlock had any interest in it. The whole city started to seriously indulge in all the over-the-top Christmas rubbish that he'd always loathed and which now made him want to pull down all the tinsel and mistletoe and set it on fire. What was the point of festive cheer if John wasn't there to share it with him? How was he meant to celebrate a day that was about friends and family when his best friend and closest family member wasn't there with him?

And yet, if he didn't, Sandy Claws would take him back to Halloween. The whole thing was insufferable.

“Molly has to go to her parents for Christmas Day but she'll be around on Christmas Eve,” said Sherrinford. Things between Molly and Sherrinford had continued as they had been, although there was an atmosphere of strained tension around them which Sherlock found excruciatingly irritating.

Sherlock made an uninterested noise. Sally had dropped by that morning with a case file and a pointed remark about justice, so he was studying photos of a crime scene in the hope that he'd be able to solve the thing without having to leave the flat.

“I thought we could have a drinks party,” continued Sherrinford. “Me, you, Molly, Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade. Sally, as she seems to have grown on you. The day itself will be just the two of us – I asked Mrs. Hudson, but she's going to her sister's – but I expect we can still celebrate adequately, if quietly.”

Sherlock groaned. “A party? God, do we have to?”

“Yes,” said Sherrinford firmly. “We both need to show willing, Sherlock. It won't be that bad – a few people, a few drinks, you can play some Christmas carols. No one will stay late because they'll all have places they need to travel to for the next day.”

“They'd better not,” said Sherlock. He closed the file with a sigh of defeat. “Fine. Fine! We'll buy- I don't know. Mulled wine and mince pies and that sort of rubbish, and pretend that we enjoy
socialising with the tiresome people who surround us.”

“I do enjoy socialising with them,” said Sherrinford. “You do too, when you're not moping.”

Sherlock glared at him and stood up. “And now I have to go to the morgue, because Anderson's photographer still hasn't learnt to actually focus his camera on anything useful.”

“Tell Molly I said hi,” said Sherrinford.

“I most certainly will not,” said Sherlock, heading for his bedroom in order to get dressed. “You have a phone; text her if you think she desperately needs your meaningless platitudes.”

He shut the door behind him, but not before he heard Sherrinford say, “I do enjoy talking to you when you're in this sort of mood. You're just so filled with love for all humanity.”

“Humanity can piss off!” Sherlock shouted back through the door. He heard Sherrinford laugh.

The corpse was far more interesting than the photos had been. Sherlock bent close and examined the scuff marks on the face.

“Do you want a coffee?” asked Molly, hovering somewhere behind him.

“No,” he snapped without bothering to glance around.

There was a quiet sigh. “You know, I haven't seen you eat or drink since John was arrested.”

Sherlock twitched with irritation at the reminder that John was locked up behind bars when he should be beside Sherlock, offering useful pieces of medical advice and telling Sherlock that he wasn't allowed to try and recreate the scuff marks using a leg of pork and the living room carpet.

“Dull,” he said.

“Right,” said Molly. “Of course. It's just that I spent nearly the whole weekend with you and Sherrinford, and I didn't see either of you eat or drink at all. It was a bit creepy, really. Sherrinford at least has an excuse—”

Did he? Sherlock wondered what reason he had given for his fast. Presumably something to do with his injuries.

“-but you shouldn't let your health suffer like that. John wouldn't—”

“John wouldn't care,” interrupted Sherlock abruptly. He turned around and spread out his arms. “Look at me. Do I look like I've lost any weight? I am perfectly healthy.”

Molly looked him over. There was none of the timid lust she'd used to show when she'd that inconvenient crush on him. This time it was nothing but healthcare professional.

“Well, you do look rather pale,” she said.

“I always look like that,” said Sherlock.

She tipped her head to one side and frowned. “Yes,” she agreed, staring at his face. “That's true. The other day when you were lying on the floor during *Timetravellers, Inc* you were so still and pale that I kept having to remind myself that you weren't dead.”

Ah. Perhaps Sherlock should have found the energy to move occasionally.
“I suppose it doesn't help that I have seen you dead twice now – or pretending to be dead, I suppose,” carried on Molly. She glanced over at the morgue table where Sherlock had laid himself out on April Fool's Day.

“Yes, yes, and I'm terribly sorry about all that,” said Sherlock quickly, turning back to the corpse and hoping to end the conversation.

“I still don't understand how you did it,” she continued. “I felt for a heartbeat, and there wasn't one. How did you fake that? And when you jumped as well, I mean, Mycroft didn't let me do an autopsy but you were still in here for nearly an hour and I didn't once see a sign of life. You certainly weren't breathing."

“Do you have a pair of tweezers?” asked Sherlock. “I think there's something here.”

There wasn't, but he desperately needed to distract Molly before she-

“Actually, that was the thing about the other day. That's why it struck me so much,” she said in the slow voice of someone having a revelation. “You weren't breathing then either.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” said Sherlock, starting to inhale and exhale at regular intervals now, in case she decided to check. “Of course I was. Tweezers, please.”

He held a hand out. Molly ignored it.

“No, no you weren't. God, how did I miss it? Your chest wasn't moving at all. You-” she made a choked noise and Sherlock let out a sigh, turning to look at her. She stared at him with wide eyes as if seeing him for the first time. “You might as well have been dead,” she whispered.

Sherlock let out a loud sigh. “I'm moving and talking,” he pointed out.

“I know,” she said, shaking her head. “Sorry, I'm just- I'm being silly, probably, I just-” She took a deep breath. “Will you let me listen to your heartbeat? It won't take long and then I'll let it go, I promise. I just need something tangible I can use to shut my imagination up or I'll be thinking about it for days.”

Sherlock felt caught. He thought of Sherrinford, trapped behind his veil at home, and the way John had just pressed a hand to Sherlock's chest and said, Well, that'll need a bit of getting used to. Sherlock wasn't sure he had the energy to keep this charade up, and he didn't see that it was in their best interests anyway.

“I'm afraid that won't be possible. I don't have a heartbeat.”

Molly looked as if the floor had just disappeared from behind her feet. “What?” she croaked.

“I have to congratulate you,” said Sherlock. “I underestimated your observational skills.”

She continued to stare at him. “You're- You don't- what?”

“I'm dead,” said Sherlock, helpfully.

That did not seem to calm down her shock. “Oh god,” she moaned, and then a look of desperation flashed into her eyes. “It's another trick. Some sort of December version of April Fools.”

Sherlock shook his head. “Do you really think I'd be so unimaginative as to play the same joke twice? Not to mention that you put the clues together on your own, without any prompting from
“You're not actually saying you're dead,” she said. “Sherlock, please, don't-”

Sherlock flicked open his cuff buttons and held his wrist out to her. She stared at it for a long moment then gingerly reached for it, pressing her fingers to feel for a pulse. When she didn't feel one, she started hunting for it with frantic movements, pressing her fingers into Sherlock's skin hard enough to leave marks.

“You're cold,” she said.

“I'm room temperature,” Sherlock corrected. “Currently, that room is a morgue so yes, I am a bit on the chilly side.”

She let go of him and took a step back. “Oh god,” she muttered. “What- what are you?”

“I'm a dead man,” said Sherlock, doing his cuff back up. “It really is that simple. I died – you remember that, it caused a bit of a fuss.”

Her eyes were so wide that she was beginning to look like an anime character. “You died,” she repeated. “You actually jumped? And then you came back. Oh god, that's not possible.”

Sherlock held his arms out to display himself. “Clearly it is. I am proof of that.”

She blinked several times. “And Sherrinford,” she said. “He's- the fire. That's why he won't let me see him. He died, didn't he? He died in the fire, and however is that you were both brought back left enough scars and, and other proof of his injuries that people would be able to tell that he should be dead if they saw him.”

“Not quite,” said Sherlock. He hesitated. Telling Molly the truth about his status and then letting her draw her own conclusions was one thing, directly telling her exactly what it was that Sherrinford didn't want her to know was another. Would telling her the full details count as betraying his trust? Sherrinford might well think so, but Sherlock had a feeling that the amount he had already told her was enough to make Sherrinford furious. He might as well fully commit to letting her in on the family secret.

“We were not 'brought back' from the dead in the way you are probably imagining,” he said. “Presumably your mind is coming up with images of Doctor Frankenstein, or some other such improbable faux-science.”

“My mind doesn't have the first idea what to come up with,” she said. “Oh Christ, this is- this is ridiculous. We can't honestly be having this conversation.”

“And yet,” said Sherlock. “Here we are. I am telling you, with one hundred percent honesty, that I am a dead man. There is no scientific test you can do that will prove otherwise. And it is not because I have been 'brought back', but because when I died, I merely chose to stay. Sherrinford, Mycroft and I are not from this world. We are not constrained by the same laws of nature that you are. If we wish to remain in existence, despite a body that has expired, all we need to do is refuse to let go.”

He was aware of it all the time; a tiny knot in his chest where he had taken a firm grip on this existence and wasn't prepared to slip away into either some sort of afterlife or oblivion. It was a grip he intending to keep right up until John let his own slip, when Sherlock would give in and follow him.
“Not from this world,” Molly repeated. “The commune you told me grew up in.”

“It wasn't in this world,” confirmed Sherlock. “Jack, who you met, is the ruler of the other world.”

“And your mother, I met her too. I suppose this explains why she looked far too young to have three adult sons,” said Molly. She seemed to have moved into a sort of numb disbelief. “I take it she's dead too.”

“On the contrary,” said Sherlock. “She is all too alive. We also have some measure of control of the ageing process which she has used in order to maintain an appearance that she can use to influence foolish men.”

Molly shook her head. “I can't believe this. I don't even know what questions to ask. This is- John. John knows all about it?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock. “It would be rather difficult for me to hide the fact that I am dead from a doctor that spends a great deal of time in close proximity to me.”

“I suppose,” said Molly. She let out a nervous laugh that did nothing to hide how freaked out she was. “I suppose it makes the sex a bit interesting.”

“We don't have sex,” said Sherlock, with some exasperation. “We didn't even when I was alive.”

For some reason that makes her look almost as surprised as she was when he'd told her he was dead. “Oh. Um, okay then.”

Sherlock waved a hand. “We're getting off-topic,” he said. “My situation with John is irrelevant; you wish to know about Sherrinford.”

She was silent for a moment, pressing her lips together. “Yes,” she agreed, “but I should hear this from him. I want to hear this from him.”

“He has been scared to tell you, for fear you would reject him out of either revulsion, fear or an inability to cope with a relationship with someone so completely outside the realms of what you have always been taught is realistic and possible,” said Sherlock. “I have told you this much because I believe you are capable of broadening your mind enough to move beyond any of those plebeian reactions, and so avoid breaking his heart.”

“I won't break his heart,” said Molly.

Sherlock snorted. “You can't promise that. No one can.” After all, the last thing he'd ever have wanted to do was break John's heart and yet he'd managed it by stepping off a roof and letting John believe that was an ending.

Molly bit her lip. “No, I suppose not,” she said. “Well, I don't intend to have any of those reactions, anyway. I don't really know how I will react, but I can't imagine ever wanting to leave him. He's- I love him, you know.”

“Yes,” said Sherlock. He'd observed that months ago, long before she'd stammered out the words to Sherrinford. “Love is temporary more often than popular culture would like you to believe, however. Sherrinford is far more obviously dead than I am.”

“I've loved him for months while he wore a veil,” said Molly. “I fell in love with his personality, with who he is. If I'm honest, I did it before I'd even met him in person. I can't imagine anything behind the veil having the power to change that.”
Sherlock nodded. “Very well, then I suggest you tell him that. And then tell him what I have told you and ask him to fill in the gaps. But definitely lead with the other bit.”

Molly nodded. “Right,” she said. “Okay.” She took a deep breath. “Oh Christ, that is if I don't manage to convince myself that this is all some sort of bizarre hallucination.”

Sherlock sighed and glanced around the room. He spotted a stethoscope and retrieved it before offering it to her. “Would you like to gather another piece of evidence?”

She gazed at it for a moment then nodded firmly. “Yes, please,” she said, and took it from him.

After Molly had gathered enough evidence to extinguish all traces of disbelief, Sherlock turned back to the corpse. By the time he had finished examining it, Molly's shift was over and he had solved Sally's case.

“Are you heading home now?” asked Molly. “We could share a cab.”

There was nothing Sherlock wanted less than to be in the flat when Sherrinford found out that he'd told Molly that they were both dead. “I need to go to Scotland Yard.”

“Oh,” said Molly. “Right. That's not very helpful, actually.”

Sherlock grimaced. “Luck is a completely illogical concept. The outcome of your conversation with Sherrinford lies entirely in the way you handle your end of it, and how he decides to react. Luck will have nothing to do with it.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “You'll be fine,” he said. “He loves you too, after all.”

For some reason that made her go pink and she ducked her head a few times, awkwardly. “Um. Yes. So he's implied.”

If she'd failed to notice that long before Sherrinford tried to say anything, then perhaps Sherlock's initial estimation of her observational abilities as only slightly above average had been accurate and the fact that she'd noticed he was dead was a fluke. That made him feel better. He didn't like being incorrect in his assessments of people.

When Sherlock got to Scotland Yard, Sally was in the incident room with a constable Sherlock didn't bother glancing at. “It was suicide,” he said. “She deliberately set it up to look like murder, but the nanny is as innocent as she claims to be.”

Sally glanced at the photos on the board. “Right,” she said. “Talk me through it.”

Sherlock let out a sigh but did just that with as much patience as he could manage, which wasn't a great deal. John would have liked this case. He'd have been able to use his medical knowledge, which would have made him feel useful. With enough pointed comments about what to look for on the corpse, combined with a few leading questions, he might even have worked it out himself, which would have made him feel intelligent. There would have been a moment when he'd have realised the truth, when he'd have beamed at Sherlock with satisfaction and Sherlock would have smiled back, and everything would have felt right with the world.

Instead, all Sherlock would be able to do was tell him about it on his next prison visit and hope that he could describe the circumstances well enough for John to come to the right conclusion and produce a pale shadow of that feeling.
“Okay, right,” said Sally when he’d finished. She looked back at the evidence and Sherlock could see her already working out how she was going to write it up. “Got it.” A moment later a frown creased her face and she glanced at him. “That wasn’t complex enough for you to have needed to come down here. Usually you’d just text.”

She sounded suspicious, which Sherlock approved of. It was important to always look for motivations behind uncharacteristic acts.

“My brother and his girlfriend are currently working through their relationship issues in my flat,” he said. “I’m avoiding it.”

Sally winced. “Yeah, don't blame you.” She hesitated, then said, “If you're trying to kill time, I think Dimmock's got a case he's a bit stuck on. If you managed to avoid comparing him to Lestrade, he'd probably appreciate you taking a look.”

Sherlock let out a sigh, thought about how long it was likely to take Sherrinford and Molly to cover all the necessary conversational ground, and reluctantly nodded.

He received a text from Sherrinford as he headed over to Dimmock's office.

_If you weren't already dead, I'd fucking kill you._

Sherlock glanced at the time. Molly must have only been there a few minutes.

_It would be a far better use of your time at this point to come completely clean with Molly. You can waste energy on being angry at me for doing what you were too scared to do later. SH_

There was no response. Sherlock tucked his phone away and pushed the door open to Dimmock's office.

After he'd solved Dimmock's case, Sherlock did a little tour of Scotland Yard, until several hours had passed and he'd solved cases for Bradstreet, Macdonald and Gregson. Before he could wander into Barton's office, Lestrade caught up with him and shepherded him off to the canteen.

“All right, what's going on?” he asked, once he'd sat Sherlock down and got them both a cup of tea. “Are you trying to make the whole building redundant?”

Sherlock shrugged. “It wouldn't be hard.”

Lestrade managed a half-hearted glare. “Oi. None of that. Just tell me why you're wandering about solving cases you wouldn't usually bother reading an email about.”

“Sherrinford and Molly are using the flat for a conversation I don't want to be present for.”

“Ah,” said Lestrade.

“Usually I take John out to dinner when Sherrinford kicks us out for a bit,” said Sherlock. A pang of bitterness and emotional pain stabbed through him and he clenched at the mug, staring down at it and wondering why he was holding it. He wasn't going to bother drinking it, after all. There was no point in drinking any tea not made by John. “Really, the Criminal Prosecution Service has thrown all my routines off with their ridiculous decision to care about the death of a man like Magnussen.”

Lestrade was silent for a moment. He looked down at his own tea with a frown, then let out a short sigh. For a moment, Sherlock was afraid he was going to offer some sort of unwanted and
emotional platitudes, but instead he said, “I can get someone to pull out some cold cases for you if you want.”

“Yes,” said Sherlock immediately. “Do that.”

“Right,” said Lestrade, standing up. “Come on, then.”

Sherlock followed him back to his office, leaving the undrunk tea behind him.

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When he finally made it home, the whole flat was dark and quiet. Excellent, he had successfully managed to miss all the drama. He paused for a moment in the kitchen, contemplating an experiment that one of the cold cases had suggested, then retreated to his bedroom instead. If he made too much noise, Sherrinford might hear and come downstairs. Sherlock wasn't interested in dealing with his indignation just yet.

He had a stack of books on the bedside table on his side of the bed which he had used to read while John was asleep. He settled on the bed with one and tried to immerse himself in the minute details of necrotizing fasciitis, without much success. Somehow it was now impossible for him to concentrate properly on a book without the quiet sound of John's breathing beside him. Every turn of a page seemed to echo in the emptiness of the room.

After little more than a chapter, he set the book down and rolled over to bury his face into the pillow where John's head should be resting instead. It still faintly smelled like him.

There was the knock of bone against wood. Sherlock resolutely ignored it, but a moment later the door opened and Sherrinford came in.

“We need to talk about what-” He stopped when he saw Sherlock's pose, and sighed. “Oh, Sherlock.”

The genuine compassion in his voice was more than Sherlock could take. “Piss off,” he muttered into the pillow, not bothering to move.

Sherrinford sat down on the edge of the bed and put a hand on Sherlock's shoulder. He didn't speak for a while, so Sherlock allowed the contact.

“I should be furious with you,” said Sherrinford after the silence had stretched into several minutes. “I don't seem to be, though. Mostly I'm just relieved that I don't have to keep hiding from her.”

“She worked it out herself, you know,” said Sherlock. “She realised I was dead just from observation, although it took her brain a while to believe the evidence that her senses had gathered. It was moronic for you to think you could have hidden it forever.”

Sherrinford snorted. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Everyone is an idiot, including your brothers.”

“Especially Mycroft,” added Sherlock. “How did she take the skeletal aspect of the situation?”

Sherrinford was silent for a while longer and Sherlock rolled over so that he could see his skull and attempt to deduce some of his thoughts from it. It had been far easier to do that when Sherrinford had had a face. He'd always been unusually expressive for a Halloween denizen, with every thought and emotion displayed for all to see. Sherlock missed that.

“She was shocked at first,” said Sherrinford, “but she came around. She touched my skull and
didn't flinch away.”

“I told you it would be fine,” said Sherlock.

Sherrinford shook his head. “Only time will tell. It's one thing to accept it in the moment, quite another to grow used to and accept in the long-term.”

“You worry too much,” said Sherlock.

“Possibly,” admitted Sherrinford. “Better than not worrying enough, though. At least I'll be prepared.”

“It's a waste of energy,” said Sherlock. “If I'd spent time bothering to worry that John would shoot someone and end up arrested, would that change anything about my emotions now? No.”

“It's not quite the same situation, Sherlock,” said Sherrinford. “John may be in prison, but that hasn't changed either of your feelings for each other.”

That was hardly the point. Sherlock picked up the book he had been failing to read. “This conversation is boring. Go away and let me read.”

Sherrinford laughed. “Okay, baby bro. I'll let you pretend that's what you were doing.”

He left the room and Sherlock immediately put the book back down and rolled over to plant his face in John's pillow again. The smell made his heart ache, but it was better than pretending that John had never been there.

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Seeing John only once a week was akin to Chinese water torture. Sherlock felt like he spent all week just waiting for that hour and then it flashed past in an instant. It didn't help that every week, John looked a little bit paler, a tiny bit tireder and increasingly twitchy. It seemed that a reputation for solving crimes that the police couldn't did not make you well-liked behind bars.

Sherlock came home from his visit three days before Christmas and collapsed onto the sofa. He and Sherrinford had decorated the flat the week before and Sherrinford had left the Christmas tree lights on. Sherlock screwed his eyes shut against the despicably cheerful twinkling and restrained himself from knocking the whole thing over. Sandy Claws wouldn't approve of him taking his rage out on the accoutrements of his holiday, after all.

There was a prickle of Halloween magic and Sherlock opened his eyes to see that the painting of Halloween that Sherrinford had hung on the wall had become real. A moment later, Sherrinford stepped through it.

“Sudden yearning for pumpkin?” asked Sherlock.

Sherrinford made a face. “God, no.” He walked over to John's chair and sank into it with a sigh. “I went to see Doctor Finklestein. I was hoping he could make me some sort of flesh to go over my bones.”

“I wouldn't trust that man anywhere near me with his insane experiments.”

“Yes, god forbid anyone tamper with science that man was not meant to wont of,” said Sherrinford, turning to give a pointed look to Sherlock's collection of chemical equipment.
“My experiments are all entirely based on logic and the desire to pursue knowledge,” said Sherlock. “Doctor Finklestein just spends all his time trying to create at least one person who can stand to be around him for longer than five minutes. Please tell me you haven't agreed to let him tamper with you.”

Sherrinford let his skull tip back against the seat. “I haven't,” he said. “The only thing he could suggest was creating a fabric body for me, like Sally's, and sewing it over my bones. I didn't really fancy that. It seems likely to make Molly more unnerved by me, not less.”

“She's not unnerved, is she?” asked Sherlock with a frown. Last night, Molly had watched three episodes of that tiresome TV show curled up on the sofa beside Sherrinford, occasionally patting his patella at exciting moments. She hadn't looked unnerved.

“Well, no,” said Sherrinford. “Not really. She's coping a lot better than I'd expected. It's just- well. It's one thing to have sex with someone you can't see and be able to project whatever you want onto their face underneath a veil, it's quite another to be okay with shagging a skeleton.”

“Oh god, this is about sex,” said Sherlock. “What did Doctor Finkelstein say he was going to make your penis out of?”

Sherrinford shifted awkwardly. “You don't want to know,” he said. “That's one of the main reasons I turned him down.”

“One would think you had enough fake penises in that box under your bed,” said Sherlock.

“I wish you wouldn't go snooping in my things,” said Sherrinford. “How am I meant to hide your Christmas present from you?”

Sherlock let out a groan. “Oh god, presents. What a horrific and diabolical torture that is. Am I really expected to get them for everyone?”

“Yes,” said Sherrinford. “And at least two for me. No! Three. Five. And a stocking.”

“You'll get one,” said Sherlock. “If you're good. Otherwise I'll just find some coal, I hear that's seasonal.”

“You're not meant to be taking Ebenezer Scrooge as your model of how to celebrate Christmas, you know,” said Sherrinford.

“Bah,” said Sherlock. “Humbug.”

Later, after Sherrinford had wandered up to his room, Sherlock found himself staring at the painting of Halloween and thinking about the desperation it must have taken Sherrinford to go back to that infernal town, where he might run into their mother at any time, to ask a mad scientist for help. Was a body really so important to Molly?

Sherlock tried to imagine what it would like to be in a relationship with John if John was just a skeleton. He could picture what he would look like rather well, thanks to the x-rays he had. Skeleton!John would be a bit shorter and a lot narrower, which would make it easier for Sherlock to completely cover him and wrap him up in his arms. His face would be gone though, his beautiful, expressive face which told Sherlock about every tiny thought and emotion that passed through his mind.

Sherlock thought back to Sherrinford's face, when he'd had one. He hadn't attached much value to it at the time but he supposed he did miss it. It was a shame there was no way to restore it.
Or was there? After all, Doctor Finkelstein wasn't the only person with holiday magic who had experience with resurrections.

Footsteps came up the stairs, there was a tap on the door, and Molly came in. “Hello, Sherlock,” she said, glancing around. “Is Sherrinford upstairs?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock. He sat up as she moved to leave. “Stop. Stay here.”

She turned back cautiously. “I'm not helping you with any experiments,” she said, quickly.

Sherlock let out a sigh. “That was one time,” he said. “No, I want to talk to you about Sherrinford.”

That only made her look more apprehensive. “Oh god, is this the 'if you hurt him, I'll kill you' talk? Because Mycroft already kidnapped me—”

“Don't be silly, why would I say that?” asked Sherlock. “No, this is far more important. He said he thought you were finding the skeletal thing a bit hard to deal with.”

Molly huffed out an exasperated sigh. “If anything, he's the one finding it hard to deal with,” she said. “He's the one constantly worrying that I'm suddenly going to leave him over it, despite everything I've said to the contrary.”

“So, you don't have a problem with a skeletal lover, then,” said Sherlock.

Molly shrugged awkwardly. “Well, it takes a bit of getting used to, but- he's still Sherrinford. Whatever he looks like, he's the one I love. I just wish he could see that.”

Sherlock contemplated for a moment, noting all the signs that she was being sincere. A plan occurred to him. “He went to see one of our childhood acquaintances today,” he said. “He was hoping he'd be able to create a body for him.”

“Was he able to help?” asked Molly.

“No,” said Sherlock.

Molly's face fell and she glanced upstairs towards where Sherrinford was. “Oh dear.”

“So it does matter to you.”

She looked back at him. “Only because it upsets him. He wants to be able to go out and about without hiding, to be able to meet my friends and not constantly worrying they'll notice something odd about him beneath his veil. I want that for him too.”

Sherlock considered that, then stood up. “How badly do you want it?”

Molly blinked. “What?”

“There is another person who might be able to help,” said Sherlock, “but I am not his favourite person. In fact, I have reason to believe he actively dislikes me. You may be able to persuade him, if you were willing to—”

“I'll do it,” said Molly, interrupting him. “I'll do anything. When?”

Sherlock smiled. “No time like the present,” he said. He waved a hand over the picture of Halloween, turning it from a 2D representation into a window to another world. “Give me your hand.”
Molly took his hand without hesitation, then followed him through the portal without more than a faint squeak as they stepped into Halloween.

“Oh,” she said, looking around the graveyard. “Some warning might have been nice.”


He strode off across the graveyard, leaving her behind for a moment before she came trotting after him. “Is this where you and Sherrinford grew up?” she asked.

“And Mycroft, yes,” said Sherlock. “Don't get excited, we won't be here long. And don't touch anything.” Sherrinford would be furious if Molly poisoned herself. No doubt he'd find a way to blame Sherlock.

He crossed through the graveyard, ignoring the whispering of the ghosts as they watched him and Molly pass, then over, through the pumpkin field to the woods beyond.

The walk to the clearing where the entrances to other holidays were was much quicker than it had been last Christmas with John. Back then, Sherlock had been trying to stretch out the day so he could spend as much time with John as possible. Today, he just wanted to get this done and then get Molly home before Sherrinford found out what he was up to and, no doubt, made a fuss.

Molly trotted behind him, head turning to stare at everything as if there was anything more interesting to see than a pumpkin field followed by a wood. “Are we going to see someone you knew when you were children?”

“No,” said Sherlock. “We're not staying in this world.”

“Oh,” said Molly. “Where are we going?”

“This way,” said Sherlock, speeding up a bit to discourage conversation.

When they got to the clearing, Molly looked around with wide eyes. “Oh, wow,” she said. “It's one thing being told that holidays are places, but it's so different actually seeing them. Can we really just step through to any of them?”

“That is precisely what we're going to do,” said Sherlock. He stepped over to the egg-shaped door. “We're going to the holiday that has the most experience with resurrections.”

He threw open the door and a light breeze emerged, chasing a couple of flower petals that he waved away from his face with irritation. “Come on.”

He jumped through the door into the dark column of the tree and fell for a few seconds, surrounded by flowers. Bright sunshine blinded him as he fell out of the tree and landed in a bush on a grassy hillside. A moment later, Molly landed beside him.

“Oh!” she gasped. “That was further than I was expecting!”

Sherlock struggled to escape the bush for a moment before realising there was no way to do it with any elegance and just crawling free. He stood up, brushing leaves and twigs off his clothes and surveyed the scene.

Easter Town was less a town and more a series of gentle hills, dotted with the occasional stand of trees and liberally sprinkled with flowers. There was a collection of wooden huts gathered in the valley below Sherlock and Molly's position, in front of the largest rabbit hole Sherlock had ever
seen. On one of the largest huts was a wooden sign reading '100 Days Until Easter'. It was decorated with brightly coloured eggs.

“Right,” said Sherlock. He glanced back at Molly, who had just managed to extricate herself from the bush. “Are you ready to be extremely persuasive?”

Molly looked around with wide eyes. “The colours are all so bright!”


“I rather like it,” said Molly. There was clearly no accounting for some people's tastes.

The rabbit hole was clearly where they needed to be. Sherlock set off down the hillside, trying to ignore the birds flying over his head and merrily chirping. Everything was so cheerful, he wasn't sure he could stand it.

A crowd had gathered to stare at them by the time they got down to the hamlet. It was predominantly made up of rabbits and bright yellow chicks, all of which were large enough to come to Sherlock's waist, or higher. They stared at him and Molly with undisguised suspicion.

“There you don't belong here,” said a chick, with a frown.

“People should stay where they fit in,” added a rabbit with a pale blue ribbon tied around its neck.

“We're here to ask a favour from the Easter Bunny,” said Sherlock. He tried out a charming smile on them. “And then we'll get right back to where we are meant to be.”

“No, you won't,” said a voice from the giant rabbit hole and the Easter Bunny hopped out. “You belong in Halloween, not London.”

Sherlock kept the smile on his face with effort. “I used to belong in Halloween, but now I belong in London. With my husband,” he couldn't help adding.

The Easter Bunny twitched his nose with disapproval. This wasn't going well.

“This is Molly,” said Sherlock, pushing her forward. “She was just saying how lovely your world is.” He gave Molly a meaningful nudge.

“Oh, yes!” she said. “Just beautiful! The colours especially, and the lovely views! It's really, uh, great.”

The Easter Bunny's chest puffed out a little. “We like to think so,” he said. “It's certainly cheerier than Halloween.” He gave Sherlock a dark look.

“And London,” added Sherlock, with a bland smile. He couldn't imagine anything worse than a 'cheery' version of London. It sounded like hell. Flowers on the pavements and commuters actually smiling at each other, perhaps even whistling...he suppressed a shudder.

The Easter Bunny narrowed his beady eyes at him. “You are not allowed to move here,” he said. “You've moved around enough between the worlds.”

“That's not the favour I want,” said Sherlock. “It's something for my brother, Sherrinford.”

“Another person who is not where they should be,” noted the Easter Bunny.

Molly gave him a wide-eyed look. “Oh, but he is,” she said. “Or he would be, if he could be seen.
He's such a social person, so witty and talkative. London is exactly where he should be, surrounded by people and things to do.”

“Not to mention being with the woman he loves,” added Sherlock. “The woman he engages in the sort of mating behaviour that is generally associated with springtime. Or he would be, if he had the equipment. They'd be at it like rabbits.”

From the look the Easter Bunny gave him, that was a step too far.

“And what is it you want from me?” he asked. “Sherrinford already has the Council's approval to live outside Halloween. I didn't vote for him, you know.”

Sherlock hesitated for a moment, searching his mind for everything he knew about the Easter Bunny, wondering which approach to this would be best.

“But that's the thing,” said Molly, before Sherlock could come to any conclusions, “he's not living. He's dead, and a skeleton. He can't leave the house unless he's wrapped up in hundreds of layers to disguise himself. He can't really have any friends. It makes him miserable.”

The Easter Bunny gave a bit of a shrug. “What can I do about that?”

“You are the Ruler of a holiday whose major theme is resurrection and a new start,” Sherlock pointed out. “We were hoping you had some magic that would help him to come back to life.”

The Easter Bunny frowned.

“We'd be really grateful,” added Molly. “Anything you want in exchange, anything at all, we'd do it.”

Sherlock cleared his throat. “Within reason.” He wasn't moving back to Halloween to satisfy the Easter Bunny's ridiculous need to have everything sorted into neat categories, not even for Sherrinford's sake.

For some reason, that made Molly glare at him.

The Easter Bunny sighed and rubbed a paw through the fur on top of his head. “This isn't really my area of expertise,” he said. “Easter eggs, that's what I do. Flowers. Occasionally chocolate animals. Restoring someone from a skeleton to a living being - that's a bit different.”

“But you're a Holiday Ruler,” said Molly. “Surely you're not saying you're not powerful enough to do it?”

Sherlock was impressed at how sincere she sounded. The Easter Bunny stood up slightly straighter.

“I can do a lot more than I am usually called on to do,” he said, stroking his whiskers importantly. “Easter is the second most important holiday, you know, after Christmas. I have a lot of power.”

Molly beamed. “Then you'll do it?”

The Easter Bunny hesitated. “I don't-”

“Oh please,” said Molly. She did a thing with her eyes that made her look like a kitten pleading for a treat. “You won't just be bringing him back to life, but it will be a whole new start for me as well. I'd be ever so grateful.”

“It would mean a great deal to everyone,” added Sherlock. He had been worried that Molly was
laying it on too thick, but the Easter Bunny seemed to be eating it up. His ears perked upright and his nose twitched as he glanced away, as if in thought.

Sherlock followed his gaze and saw three crosses on top of a distant hill, stark black against the powder blue sky.

“Too many people forget the real meaning of Easter,” said the Easter Bunny, softly. “Rebirth and a second chance. Yes, very well, I will do what I can for your brother, but it will not be easy for me. Wait here.” He disappeared back into the rabbit hole.

That had gone better than Sherlock had expected, although he hadn't factored in a wait. He glanced at Molly.

“Very nicely played,” he said.

She shrugged. “That’s how I used to persuade my uncle to buy me alcohol when I was a teenager. How long do you think we'll have to wait?”

Sherlock shrugged, glancing around the area and finding nothing of interest. The other denizens of Easter had wandered off, back to whatever it is they did all day, and there was very little to see. “Hopefully not too long.”

Molly glanced around as well. “Is that a chocolate shop?”

She headed over to one of the huts, which had a large window filled with a wide variety of chocolate – mostly in the form of eggs, but there was a wide variety of baby animals as well.

“Wow, that's incredible,” said Molly. “Oh, look at the lamb!”

Sherlock spared it a glance. “Fascinating.”

“You know,” said Molly, “I remember when you used to actually be happy at things sometimes.”

“I'm happy the Easter Bunny has agreed to help Sherrinford,” said Sherlock. “Especially as I can tell him it's his Christmas present, so I don't have to go shopping.”

“It will have to be his Christmas present,” said the Easter Bunny from behind them. Sherlock and Molly turned to face him. “I have done what I can, but this is not the time of year for my powers to be at full strength. I can create the power to restore Sherrinford's body and life, but I think it will need Father Christmas to take that power and turn it into something tangible that Sherrinford can actually use. His power is in giving gifts, after all. He can turn intangible forces into items that can be gift-wrapped.”

“Right,” said Sherlock. “To Christmas Town, then?”

The Easter Bunny made a face. “I suppose so. I do hate all the snow there.”

Sherlock made a face. “I know you mean. Unpleasantly wet and cold.” Father Christmas would be easy to win over, though. It seemed Sherlock really was going to get to avoid going shopping for Christmas. Well, other than something for Mrs. Hudson, and perhaps Molly. And Lestrade and Sally, if they were coming to drinks on Christmas Eve.

Four presents. That wouldn't take long to buy, would it? After all, the shops were all packed full of items they claimed were ideal Christmas presents.
“The holiday doors are this way,” said the Easter Bunny, starting to hop up the hill behind them. Sherlock and Molly followed.

Father Christmas was exactly as pleased to help as Sherlock had assumed he would be.

“A truly novel Christmas gift,” he said. “I do like it when people get imaginative.”

He even gave the Easter Bunny a pair of rabbit foot-shaped wellies so that he could hop through the snow in Christmas Town without getting soaked, which made the Easter Bunny happy as well.

When Molly and Sherlock got back to 221B, Sherlock sat on the sofa with a sigh. “That was far more hassle than it should have been.”

Molly smiled at him. “Don't pretend you wouldn't have gone to every holiday if we'd had to. You know, you spend so much time pretending you hate everything, I think you often forget that there are people you love. Like your brothers.”

Sherlock scowled at her. “I love John,” he said. “I tolerate Sherrinford. I don't even do that much for Mycroft.”

Molly shook her head. “You know that's not true.”

There was the tap of metatarsals coming down the stairs and then Sherrinford came in. “Molly!” he greeted her, giving her an engulfing embrace. “I thought I heard your dulcet tones.”

Sherlock took that as a sign that his conversational input was no longer required and collapsed back on the sofa, shutting his eyes. He'd expended more than enough energy for the day. Shopping could wait until tomorrow.

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It took Sherlock approximately seven minutes to realise why shopping for Christmas presents the day before Christmas Eve was a terrible idea. The sheer mass of people, all of whom were unreasonably frantic about getting whatever piece of tat they'd settled on for their nearest and dearest, was almost enough to make Sherlock decide that not bothering and getting sent back to Halloween, was the far superior choice.

Almost. The memory of pumpkin tea was enough to make him soldier on until he'd bought a handful of essentially pointless items that the recipients should appreciate, at least for long enough for Father Christmas to approve. He then decided to avoid the nightmare of either trying to find a cab in the snarled-up traffic jam that London had become, or getting home on the Tube in favour of finding a handy cemetery and going back via Halloween. Really, he should have thought of that method of travel far sooner.

When he stepped back through into the sitting room of 221B, Sherrinford and Molly were curled up on the sofa together. Molly was gently stroking her hand over Sherrinford's skull and saying something in a low voice that she cut off as soon as Sherlock appeared. Thank god, it had looked like it was horribly sentimental, whatever it was.

“You've been shopping,” remarked Sherrinford, eyeing Sherlock's bags. “That was brave of you.”

Sherlock shuddered. “It was horrific. I may never recover.”

“Cunning plan to avoid the traffic, though,” said Molly. “The Tube was a nightmare when I was coming over here. Too many people, all of them with stacks and stacks of bags.”
“If only we could use Holiday magic to solve all our problems,” said Sherrinford. “It's not as if we could.” He stopped suddenly and his eye sockets seemed to widen. “Oh,” he exhaled quietly. “Oh. Of course. That's—” He sprang to his feet. “I'm going to Mycroft's.”

He disappeared out of the room, running upstairs to get his disguise. Sherlock exchanged a look with Molly. “Do you have any idea what that's about?”

She shook her head. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Sherrinford rushed back downstairs, wrapped up so that not a trace of bone was showing. “Come on, Molls, I'll give you a lift through to the graveyard by your house.”

“Oh, thanks,” she said, standing up.

Sherrinford pulled her coat down and helped her into it, which Sherlock found to be a nauseating display of romance, and then they both left, heading back through the picture to Halloween.

Sherlock looked down at his shopping bags. He supposed he'd have to wrap the damn things now. God, why did everything have to be so much effort when he just wanted to go and lie on his bed and remember how it had felt to help John into his coat on Valentine's Day. He'd stroked his hands over John's shoulders, feeling their sturdy reality. When would he get to do that again?

Sherrinford didn't come back that night. Sherlock wrapped the presents and dumped them under the tree, and then glanced at the list of things Sherrinford had decided were essential for tomorrow night. He'd planned almost all of the party, but insisted that Sherlock had to do the shopping for it, using his need for a disguise as an excuse. Sherlock hadn't been fooled for a moment. If Sherrinford could go to the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition at the Tate with Mycroft without worrying about the crowds, he could go to Tesco.

Which was probably the real reason he had disappeared to Mycroft's, thought Sherlock glumly. Sherrinford still wasn't back the next morning when Sherlock reluctantly took the list and headed out.

Tesco was even worse than he'd expected. Were people really so atrocious at planning that they couldn't prepare more than a day in advance for a holiday they had known was coming all year? The queues stretched down the aisles and everyone seemed to have a full trolley-load, some of them more than one. Sherlock was severely tempted to just leave with what he needed and avoid the check-outs all together. The harassed staff certainly didn't have time to notice someone sauntering out with a full basket of unpaid-for goods. A mental image of John's disapproving face slid through his mind and he forced himself to go through it. Sandy Claws better appreciate the horror Sherlock was putting himself through for his sake.

The guests had been told to arrive at 6. When Sherrinford still wasn't back at 4, Sherlock started to tidy the flat by himself, grumbling to himself about brothers who decided they were going to have people over and then disappeared when it became time to prepare for it. Mrs. Hudson came upstairs after about ten minutes of Sherlock thumping things about and took over, which was a relief Sherlock struggled not to show.

“Oh dear, when did you last do any cleaning?” tutted Mrs. Hudson, wiping around with a cloth.

Sherlock lifted one shoulder. “I'm not sure I ever have. Does sorting through newspapers count?”

“Honestly, Sherlock, how have you managed to get to the age you are while still expecting people to just do everything for you?” she scolded. “Do you even know where the hoover is kept?”
"Of course," said Sherlock. "It's in the cupboard in the hall. John wouldn't let me throw it out so I could keep my harpoon there instead."

"I swear, that boy is a saint," muttered Mrs. Hudson, taking her cloth off to the kitchen. "I suppose I should be grateful there isn't a pile of washing up."

There was a very good reason for that, which was that the only person who ever used the kitchen was Molly, who was disgustingly conscientious about clearing up after herself.

"Are you going to put these mince pies on plates?" called out Mrs. Hudson.

"Why?" asked Sherlock. "People will be able to eat them just as easily out of the boxes."

There was a long-suffering sound, followed by some muttering that Sherlock didn't bother listening to.

His phone beeped with a text.

*Turn on the TV. MH*

Sherlock stared at it for a moment, wondering if he could be bothered to play whatever game Mycroft was playing, and then reluctantly found the remote and flicked on the telly. It was always better to be informed when it came to Mycroft's machinations.

There was nothing of interest on any of the channels as Sherlock flicked through, unless one was particularly interested in dire children's films or ageing rockstars trying to pretend they still had a career.

Another text came through from Mycroft.

*When I call you, follow your instincts and say no. MH*

What on earth did that mean?

"Sherlock Holmes, are you really watching the television while I prepare for your party for you?" asked Mrs. Hudson from the kitchen doorway, hands on hips and righteous indignation in her voice. "Turn that off right now and go and find the hoover. I'm sure a great brain like yours can work out how to turn it on."

"Mrs. Hudson," started Sherlock with exasperation, but stopped dead when the singing of the cartoon dogs suddenly cut off and was replaced by a horribly familiar voice.

*Did you miss me?*

Sherlock froze, then turned back to the television, where an extremely-poor animation of Jim Moriarty was on-screen, mouth flapping up and down as the high-pitched repeat of his voice rabbited on and on.

*Did you miss me? Did you miss me? Did you miss me?*

"Oh," said Mrs. Hudson, very softly. "Oh, Sherlock. I thought he was dead."

Sherlock stared at the screen. "He is," he said. "I watched his brains blow out of the back of his skull."

*Did you miss me? Did you miss me? Did you miss me?*
His phone rang and he answered it without taking his eyes off the screen.

“Mycroft.”

“Hello, little brother. It turns out that you're needed.”

Sherlock looked at the screen just as the animation was cut off. There was a black screen for a moment, and then the cartoon dogs reappeared.

Sherlock had never found it easier to follow one of Mycroft's demands. “No, I don't think so,” he said. “I think if the British Government thought I was that necessary, John wouldn't be in prison right now. You can find someone else to solve this problem for you. Perhaps James Bond is available.”

He hung up without waiting for a response and turned off the television. He turned back to Mrs. Hudson with a smile and clapped his hands together. “So, hoovering, yes?”

She gave him a wide-eyed stare but, “You might like to clear off the coffee table as well,” was all she said.

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Mrs. Hudson was in the kitchen when Sherrinford stepped through the picture from Halloween. Sherlock gave her a meaningful nod before Sherrinford could speak and he glanced at her back, grimaced, and crept out of the room before she could turn and see him in his full, bony glory.

It was less than a minute later when he came thundering downstairs, wrapped up in a hoodie and his veil. “Sherlock!” he said excitedly.

“Sherrinford!” said Mrs. Hudson, coming out of the kitchen. “About time! You've left poor Sherlock all alone to get ready for this party, when-”

“Yes, yes,” said Sherrinford, “I know. I'm terribly sorry, Sherlock, I got detained.”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows. “I do hope I'm getting more of an explanation than that.”

“Not just yet,” said Sherrinford. “Just- well. Wait and see.”

Sherlock glared at him. “I hate waiting.”

“I know,” said Sherrinford, merrily. “Now, let's see...Oh, Mrs. Hudson, you don't have to do that, let me help.”

He darted off into the kitchen and took over preparing the nibbles that Sherlock had bought.

“Sherrinford!” snarled Sherlock with frustration, just as the doorbell rang.

“That will be Molly. She said she'd probably come over a bit early,” said Sherrinford merrily. “Do be a good host and let her in, Sherlock.”

Sherlock took a deep breath. Something was going on, something that both Sherrinford and Mycroft were part of, and he wasn't included in it. For a moment he felt every inch the annoying youngest brother, then he let out a long breath and went down to let Molly in. This bloody party would only last a few hours at most and after that he could interrogate Sherrinford until he gave in and told all.
Lestrade and Sally weren't far behind Molly and it wasn't long before they were all stranding around, awkwardly making small talk and pretending to have a good time. Sherlock retreated behind his violin as early as he could, playing trite Christmas carols and ducking away from Mrs. Hudson's attempts to put reindeer antlers on him.

He was reaching the end of *Once In Royal David's City* and contemplating whether the march from *The Nutcracker* was considered Christmassy enough, or if he should just accept that he could only put off *Silent Night* for so long, when Sherrinford, who had been hovering by the windows, let out an excited exhale.

He spun to turn Sherlock. “Your Christmas present is here!” he announced, bouncing a little on his heels.

Sherlock frowned and glanced over at the package Sherrinford had left for him under the tree.

“No, not that one. This one is far better,” said Sherrinford.

Downstairs, the front door opened. Sherlock set his violin back in its case just as beautifully-familiar footsteps began to pound up the stairs. His eyes widened and he felt his heart leap into his mouth.

A moment later, the front door of the flat burst open, and John came in. He took one look at Sherlock and strode over, wrapping him up in a tight hug that Sherlock returned with just as much, if not more, force.

“John,” he breathed into his neck. “Oh god, John.”

“Sherlock,” said John. “God, I missed you.” He pulled away just far enough to kiss him and Sherlock let himself be lost in the beautiful sensation of John's lips on his, in the taste of his mouth and the way it felt like they were the only two people in the world when they were clasped together.

A throat cleared somewhere in the room. Sherlock ignored it. He wanted to get John away into his bedroom where he could lay him down on the bed and then stretch out over him, completely surrounding John's body with his own so that no one else could get to him, so that he could feel every part of him close and warm and entirely belonging to Sherlock. He had a feeling that was bad party etiquette, though.

“How are you here?” he asked in wonder against John's lips, once they had paused long enough for him to get the words out.

John just shook his head. “They just let me go. There was one of Mycroft's cars waiting to bring me here, I think he did something?”

“If you'd allow me to explain,” said Sherrinford from somewhere outside the bubble of Sherlock-and-John.

Sherlock let out a sigh and tore his gaze away from John's face in order to look at him. “I'm listening.”

John tried to move away from him, presumably so he could face Sherrinford as well. Sherlock wasn't having that. He tightened his grip until John gave up, letting out a quiet laugh that sent pleasure surging from Sherlock's head down to his toes. John was back! And here, with him, where he would stay for the rest of his life if Sherlock had anything to do with it.
Sherrinford glanced at Lestrade and Sally. “Actually, might be best if I tell you later, in private.”

“As long as it wasn't completely illegal, I don't care,” said Lestrade. “It's good to see you back, John.”

John tried to turn around again, and Sherlock had to cling to him. “Yeah, you too,” said John, turning his head to crane around at Lestrade instead. “I'll, um. Looks like I might have to stay here for a bit, but we'll catch up sometime, yeah?”

“You're staying here forever,” hissed Sherlock. “You can never go away again, I forbid it.” He stared over at Sherrinford. “You're absolutely certain there's no way they can come and lock him up again?”

“Nope,” said Sherrinford. “We're all good. They felt that, in light of the earlier television broadcast, it might be best to have you on their side. Besides which, they uncovered evidence that Magnussen was involved with Moriarty, which cast his death in quite a different light. All the witnesses have withdrawn their statements and been sent abroad on a very long, very secret mission.”

Sherlock frowned. “Involved with Moriarty?” There hadn't been a single hint of that, and Sherlock wasn't sure how such an alliance would have worked either. Neither Magnussen nor Moriarty were the sort to work well with others.

“Oh yes,” said Sherrinford, with deep satisfaction. “There was conclusive evidence.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him. “Evidence that suddenly appeared, as if from nowhere?”

“Perhaps,” said Sherrinford, with a smile in his voice.

Ah. Yes, very clever. Sherrinford and Mycroft must have somehow faked Moriarty's 'return', and then planted evidence that implicated Magnussen, presumably at Appledore. Ingenious. The only real question was how they had managed to set the thing up so well as to trick the entire British Government when, as far as Sherlock could tell, Sherrinford had only had the idea yesterday.

John tapped Sherlock's shoulder. “I don't mind the possessive cuddling,” he said, “but do you think we could do it with me the other way around, so I can actually see people.”

Sherlock considered that, then dragged John over to his chair, sat down, and pulled John down into his lap, wrapping his arms around his waist and giving him a tight squeeze before relaxing his grip.

“Much better,” said John, smiling down at him and pressing a kiss to the side of his head. He glanced around at the others. “Hello, everyone. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” said Lestrade, who was looking strangely close to laughter. “Here's hoping he lets you go by New Year.” He raised his glass as if in a toast.

“I'll be fine until I need to pee,” said John. Just hearing his voice, so close to Sherlock's ear, was enough to flood Sherlock's whole being with joy. He began to worry that his gift for Sherrinford wouldn't match up with this. How could he ever repay a debt of this magnitude?

“It's so good to see you home,” said Mrs. Hudson. “Let me get you a drink. And a mince pie.”

“Ta, that would be great,” said John. “Thanks, Mrs. Hudson.”
She bustled off to the kitchen just as there was a thump from the roof. Sherlock caught Sherrinford's eye – well, his veil, but he looked as if he was looking at Sherlock.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” said Sherrinford. “We have a special visitor for you tonight!”

“More special than John?” asked Sally.

John grinned at her. “I am pretty astounding,” he agreed. She snorted, which Sherlock thought was a bit rude. John was astounding, after all, and his presence tonight even more so. How had Mycroft and Sherrinford managed to hack the airwaves and plant conclusive evidence in less than twenty-four hours?

Footsteps came down from upstairs.

“If it's Father Christmas-” started Lestrade in a jokey voice, then cut himself off as Father Christmas burst through the door.

“Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas to all!”

“Oh Christ,” said Lestrade in a crooked voice.

“Merry Christmas,” said Sherlock, nodding at Father Christmas over John's shoulder.

“I can see it already has been for you,” said Father Christmas. “Seasons greetings, John.”

John gave him a little wave. “Good to see you again.”

Father Christmas dropped his sack off his shoulder. “I have presents for all!”

“Don’t you think it's going a bit far to get someone to dress up as Santa?” asked Sally to Sherlock. “I mean, this isn't a kids party.”

“Sssh, dear,” said Mrs. Hudson, coming back with a glass of mulled wine and a mince pie for John which he took gratefully. “I think it's lovely.”

Father Christmas gave her a broad grin. “Thank you. For that, you may have your present first.”

“How kind!” said Mrs. Hudson, actually clapping her hands together with excitement as if she was a small child. Sherlock began to wonder how much sherry she'd had.

Father Christmas reached into his sack and pulled out a small present, which he presented to her with a flourish.

“Oh, lovely!” said Mrs. Hudson. She ripped it open to reveal a small glass bottle containing a rich blue liquid.

“It is a special remedy for your hip,” said Father Christmas. “It has long-term benefits – take it now, and it will be a long time before it starts to bother you again.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Hudson, staring at the bottle. “I didn't know there was such a thing.”

Father Christmas gave a shrug. “I have access to many things that most don't. Speaking of-” He pulled another present out of his sack and handed it to Lestrade. “Merry Christmas!”

“Oh, thanks,” said Lestrade, setting down his drink to take the present. He glanced at Sherlock. “I mean, you really shouldn't have. I didn't get anything for you.”
Sherlock waved that away. “This isn’t from me, it’s from Father Christmas. My presents to everyone are under the tree. And, frankly, I’m glad you haven’t got me anything. Given your chronic lack of imagination and frankly bizarre sense of humour, there’s nothing you could have got me that I’d actually want.”

“Right,” said Lestrade. “Course not. Not like I’ve got access to an entire archive of old murder cases, not to mention the Black Museum.”


“Yeah, but it’s not like my chronic lack of imagination might think you’d like an invite to have a poke around,” said Lestrade. “So best if I just don’t bother with a pres-”

“No!” said Sherlock quickly. “I mean- you do occasionally have inspired flashes of insight. This might be one of those times.”

Lestrade gave him an amused grin. “Yeah, thought it might be. Okay, I’ll sort out a date for you to come round. Probably be in the new year.”

“Fantastic,” said Sherlock. The Black Museum. He felt all tingly at the prospect. He squeezed John with glee and pressed a kiss against his cheek, just because he could. John smiled at him and kissed him back. Sherlock lost track of the rest of the room for a moment as they got lost in each other again.

“Oh!” said Lestrade a few moments later. “Very useful, thank you.”

Sherlock pulled himself away to see him inspecting a book that he’d just unwrapped. He tilted his head to read the title. *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Computers But Were Afraid To Ask.*

“About time someone got you something like that,” said Sally. “He called me into his office last week to ask why-”

“Sally, remember I am your superior officer,” said Lestrade. “Unless you want to find yourself doing all the paperwork, I suggest you stop talking.”

Sally smirked. “Right, sir.”

“There’s a little something here for you as well,” said Father Christmas, pulling out Sally’s present and handing it to her.

She shook it before opening it. “Well, it’s not a book,” she said.

“First class detective skills,” said Sherlock.

John poked him gently in the shoulder. “Be nice.”

“What a complete waste of energy that would be,” said Sherlock.

Sally unwrapped the present irritatingly carefully, unpeeling the tape and doing her best to keep the paper from being ripped. Inside was a box, which was opened with just as much care. Sherlock wondered just how long this whole rigmarole was going to go on for.

“Oh,” said Sally, with surprise. “This is- How did you know?”

“I know everything,” said Father Christmas. “One of the perks of the job.”
Sally turned the box to show an old plate with a Christmas wreath on it. “My gran had one just like this,” she said. “We used it every year, then when she died she left it to me. My housemate broke it last year. I was furious.” She turned it back to look at it again. “This is identical.”

“The next present is for Miss Hooper,” said Father Christmas, pulling out a red envelope and handing it over.

Molly stared at it. “Oh! I thought—” Her eyes twitched over to Sherrinford and then back to the envelope. Sherlock completed the sentence for her in his head. I thought my present would be part of the return of Sherrinford’s body.

“Everyone gets their own present,” said Father Christmas. “Joint presents are an irritating cop-out.”

“Oh, right,” said Molly. She opened the envelope and pulled out two tickets, which she stared at with shock. “Oh! Oh, wow! Sherrinford! It’s two tickets for TimeCon!”

“For what?” asked Lestrade, but was drowned out by Sherrinford’s excited reaction.

“Oh my god, Molls! That’s incredible!”

“They’re Diamond tickets! And the flights are here too,” said Molly, pulling out another piece of paper. “Oh! Oh, I’ve been wanting to go for ages!”

Sherrinford grabbed her hands and squeezed them. “Both Katie Harris and Jake Goldberg are going this year.”

“Oh,” breathed Molly, “Oh wow, I’m going to actually meet Agatha and Keffle!”

“Does anyone have a clue what’s going on?” asked Lestrade.

“It’s the main convention for Timetravellers, Inc, fans,” said Molly. “Lots of the cast and crew will be there, signing autographs and giving panels. It’s, it’s huge. Oh my god, I’m so excited!” She glanced over at Father Christmas. “Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome,” said Father Christmas. “Now, let’s see. Sherlock and Sherrinford, I will need to give you your presents away somewhere with a bit of privacy, so that just leaves John.” He reached into his sack again. Sherlock felt John tense with excitement in his lap, although he was clearly trying to keep his childish glee off his face. He ran a hand over John’s shoulder and down his back.

Father Christmas handed John another envelope. Sherlock hoped that he wasn’t going to be expected to leave London to go off on some trip that John had always wanted to go on. He hated holidays.

When John opened it, though, it wasn’t tickets. It was a permit.

“Licence to carry a concealed handgun,” read John. “Oh. I didn’t think you could get these in this country.”

“You generally can’t,” said Father Christmas. “Let’s just say that I have a lot of excellent connections.”

Lestrade sighed. “And here I was hoping that going to prison might discourage you from illegal vigilante behaviour.”
“It's not illegal now,” said Sherlock, tapping the permit.

“Shooting someone is still illegal,” Lestrade pointed out.

“Not if it's self-defence,” said Sherlock.

“I'm not going to shoot anyone,” said John. “Of course not. I don't even have a gun anymore. Uh, not that I ever did.”

Ah, of course. John didn't know that Sally had swapped his gun over and given it to Sherlock. He leaned forward to put his mouth against John's ear. “It's under the floorboard in the bedroom,” he said, very quietly.

“Right,” said Lestrade. “I'm meant to believe that someone would get you a licence like that when you don't have a gun.”

John gave him one of his blandest smiles. “I have a thing for obscure licences. I've also got one to keep a crocodile, but I don't have one of those stashed away in the bathroom.”

Sherlock sniggered.

Lestrade sighed. “One day, you two are going to be the reason I get fired.”

“Don't be silly,” said Sherlock. “We wouldn't let that happen. I'd have to work with Dimmock, and he's a cretin.”

“You hear that, sir?” asked Sally. “He just implied you're not a cretin. That's pretty much the highest accolade you can get from him.”

“I don't think either of you are cretins,” allowed Sherlock, generously. It was Christmas, after all, and he had John back with him and in his lap. “Short-sighted imbeciles on occasion, but not cretins.”

“Maybe you should have stopped after the first sentence,” said John.

“Two more presents,” said Father Christmas, glancing into his sack. “Better to do them in the kitchen, I think. Sherlock, Sherrinford?”

Sherlock got up, wondering what on earth was in that sack for him. In all the nightmare of having to provide presents for other people, he'd forgotten that he'd be getting some back.

He, John, Sherrinford and Molly followed Father Christmas into the kitchen, where Sherrinford shut the doors behind them. In the other room, Sherlock could hear conversation starting up about what could be so mysterious. He ignored it in favour of taking John's hand and then, when that wasn't enough contact, sliding behind him to put his arms around his waist and hold him close against his chest.

“Sherrinford first,” said Father Christmas, which made Sherlock twitch with impatience. If he was getting a top secret present, he wanted it now. He already knew what Sherrinford was getting.

“I can't take all the credit for this, I'm afraid,” said Father Christmas as he pulled out a tiny parcel. “Sherlock and Molly persuaded the Easter Bunny to do most of it. I just added the finishing touches.”

Sherrinford's head swung around to Sherlock. “You went to the Easter Bunny? He hates us!”
“He likes Molly,” said Sherlock.


Molly smiled at him. “There's no need for flattery, I've already got you your Christmas present.”

“Oh well, in that case you're only ninety-five percent perfect,” said Sherrinford.

Sherlock allowed himself to make a disgusted noise. “Enough flirting. Get on with it.”

Sherrinford rolled his eyes but took the present from Father Christmas and unwrap it. “Ah,” he said. “You've got me an egg. How unexpected.”

“It symbolises rebirth,” said Father Christmas. “Take off your veil and hood.”


“Take off your veil and hood,” repeated Father Christmas, with a touch of impatience.

Sherrinford handed the egg to Molly and did as requested, revealing his skull. “What's this about?” he asked. “What kind of rebirth?”

Father Christmas sighed. “I thought you Holmeses were meant to be intelligent. What kind of rebirth do you think there is for a dead man? The most literal kind.”

He took the egg from Molly and then, with a frown of concentration, cracked it on the very top of Sherrinford's skull. “A gift to you, Sherrinford Holmes, from the two who love you most, combining the powers of Easter and Christmas,” he intoned.

The egg cracked and blinding white light bled out, spilling down to engulf Sherrinford's skull so brightly that it couldn't be seen.

“What...?” asked Sherrinford as the light travelled down further, surrounding his entire skeleton until he couldn't be seen at all. John turned his head away to protect his eyes but Sherlock kept watching, his heart in his mouth as he watched the light expand outward, sparkling with the red and green of Christmas and the primrose yellow of Easter.

When the light had faded, Sherrinford was completely restored to how he had been before the fire. His blue eyes blinked for a moment, clearly adjusting after the flood of light, and his lips curled up into a grin as he gazed down at his hands, at the skin and flesh covering his metacarpals.

“Oh,” he breathed. “Oh! I'm back!”

He looked up at Sherlock, joy beaming out of his face, and Sherlock took a moment to readjust to seeing his brother's face again after so many years of staring at a skull. “Sherlock! I'm back!”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Sherlock. “Your hair is still ridiculous, by the way.”

Sherrinford reached up and combed his fingers through his dark, floppy hair, and laughed. “It's perfect, idiot. It's always perfect.”

“I rather like it,” said Molly. She hesitantly reached up and touched it with her fingertips.

Sherrinford turned towards her and gripped at her shoulders. “Molly! Molly, Molly, I can finally-” He didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he leant in and kissed her, wrapping his arms around her and almost pulling her up onto her toes in his eagerness.
Sherlock made a face to himself and looked away. If this was what it was like to watch your brother kiss someone, no wonder Sherrinford had made so many scathing remarks about him and John.

“Sherrinford,” breathed Molly once they had managed to separate themselves. “Oh, Sherrinford. You’re just as handsome as I thought you’d be.”

Sherlock cleared his throat and looked at Father Christmas. “Can we hurry this along before we all end up vomiting?”

Father Christmas raised one bushy white eyebrow. “I do hope you’re fully embracing the spirit of my holiday,” he said. “Otherwise I may not give you your present.”

Sherlock shrugged. “I’ve already got the only thing I wanted this year,” he said, pulling John closer. “I’m not so greedy that I’m desperate for more.”

“A very commendable attitude,” said Father Christmas. “And yet, I do still have a little something I think you’ll appreciate.” He pulled a parcel out of his sack and held it out for Sherlock. Sherlock realised, with some irritation, that he was going to have to let go of John to open it.

He ripped off the wrapping as quickly as possible so that he could go back to having John in his arms.

“A watch,” he said. “I’ve already got a watch. In fact, I have three.”

Father Christmas let out a sigh. “Yes,” he said. “I know. This is not a normal watch, though. While you are wearing it, you will appear to age at a normal rate, rather than your appearance staying frozen at the moment of your death.”

A watch that would ensure Sherlock would age at the same rate as John, so that they could grow old together. Sherlock wouldn’t have to worry about putting into place all the tiny changes of make-up and hair dye he had begun to realise he’d need to plan for. “Excellent,” he said, taking the watch out and strapping it to his wrist.

“You know, most people quite like the idea of eternal youth,” said Sherrinford.

“Most people are idiots,” said Sherlock. “Why would I want to be on a different timeline to John?”

“It will only affect your appearance,” said Father Christmas. “Dead men are immune to age-related health problems. It hasn’t brought you back to life.”

“That’s fine,” said Sherlock dismissively. “I already know when I intend to die.” He regretted it the moment after he’d said it and glanced at John’s face, hoping he wasn’t going to start up the argument over Sherlock’s plan to die when he did again.

John didn’t look irritated, though. He reached out and took Sherlock’s hands. “Many, many decades in the future, I hope.”

Sherlock hesitated. Was this some kind of trap? “It had better be,” he said. “I’ll be very put out if we don’t get to retire together. I want to keep bees.”

John blinked with surprise and Sherlock wondered how he could have missed the shelf full of apiology books in the sitting room. “Bees? Right, well, okay. I suppose the honey will be good.”

“The honey will be excellent,” said Sherlock. “I’ll make sure of that.”
"I'll be able to try some now," realised Sherrinford. "I can eat again! Oh, I am definitely having mulled wine. Lots of mulled wine. And all the mince pies."

"Not just yet," said Sherlock, looking up from his new watch. "You're not going back out there until you tell me how you faked Magnussen's links with Moriarty."

Sherrinford beamed at him. "It was simple. I merely went to the Fool and pointed out what a magnificent trick it would be to convince the British Government that they were involved, not to mention the hilarity of taking over the television networks in order to broadcast that message. He completely agreed."

The Fool. Sherlock found himself smiling at the elegant nature of the resolution. The Fool got to play a trick on a far wider scale than he ever had before, and on a day when no one was expecting it, Mycroft got to show his superiors that he had been right about the danger of Magnussen all along, and Sherlock got John back.

"Very neat," he said.

Father Christmas let out a sigh. "He really shouldn't have come into this world on Christmas Eve. It is my holiday, you know."

"Oh, but you're so generous and kind-hearted that we knew you wouldn't mind," said Sherrinford. "And it was a Christmas present, after all."

"You Holmeses really do take the piss sometimes," muttered Father Christmas.

The doorbell rang.

Sherrinford frowned. Sherlock took an unexpectedly high amount of pleasure out of seeing the lines of his forehead wrinkle, and wondered how long it would be before facial expressions from him felt commonplace again. "Did you invite someone else? Mike?"

"Mike insisted that he had to spend Christmas Eve with his family," said Sherlock.

He could hear Mrs. Hudson going downstairs to answer the door. He ran through all their other possible acquaintances and drew a blank.

"I know who it is," said John, giving Sherlock a sly smile that made him surge with a curious mix of affection and curiosity. How could John have a secret from him? He'd only just got out of prison.

John opened up the kitchen door and Sherrinford flinched back, reaching for his hood and veil.

"Hey, you don't need those now, remember?" said Molly, catching his hands.

"Oh, right," he said. He glanced out at the sitting room then cleared his throat, raised his head high, and walked into the sitting room.

There was a shocked silence, followed by an awkward pause as Lestrade and Sally both tried to work out what reaction was appropriate.

"Behold!" said Sherrinford melodramatically. "The eldest Holmes: unmasked!"

"And revealing to everyone that he was only wearing a veil to hide the fact that his younger brother is better looking than him," said Sherlock.

Sherrinford turned to blink at him. "Well, Mycroft is annoyingly dapper."
“It's the waistcoats,” put in Lestrade.

Before Sherlock could respond to that with a detailed argument on why waistcoats were the second most pointless garment after ties, Mrs. Hudson came in with their visitors.

“Sherlock didn't say he was expecting anyone else, but then he's never very good at that kind of thing.”

“No, he never has been,” said Jack, who was followed in by Sally. “I've known him since he was a boy, you know.”

“Jack,” growled Father Christmas. “What are you doing here, on my holiday?”

Jack gave him a broad grin. “I was invited!” he said.

Father Christmas turned his angry glare on Sherlock.

“No by me,” said Sherlock, quickly. This would not be a good time to earn the wrath of a holiday leader.

“No, it was me,” said John. “Hello, Jack, good to see you. Help yourself to a mince pie.”

“Mince pies!” said Jack, excitedly, letting go of Sally's hand in order to advance on the plate. “How exciting!”

Father Christmas turned his glare on John, who held his hands up defensively. “He's just here for the party.”

“Oh, do calm down, Sandy Claws,” said Jack. “I promise I'm not trying to steal anything, or oust you at all. I just wanted to celebrate your holiday. Is that really such a bad thing? Ooh, is there mulled wine as well?”

“Let me get you some,” said Mrs. Hudson.

“Lovely,” said Jack. “I've always wanted to be at a proper Christmas party! Oh, and before I forget – for you.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a black folder, which he handed to John.

“Ah,” said John, opening it and taking a glance, then shutting it before Sherlock could get a look.

“Show me,” insisted Sherlock, trying to take the folder from him. John pulled it away from him.

“No, not yet. It's your Christmas present. I need to wrap it, and-”

“My present?” interrupted Sherlock, making another grab for it. John stepped swiftly out of the way. “There's no need to wrap it, John, and no need to wait. Just give it to me now. After all, if Father Christmas himself gives presents on Christmas Eve, then it must be the right time to do so.”

John shut a look over at Father Christmas, who let out a sigh. “He's right. Handing it over now is fine.” He picked up his sack. “I must be getting on, though. Plenty of presents still to hand out.” He glared at Jack. “And you, Skellington. You can stay for the party, but the minute it's over-”

“I know, I know. Back home I go.”

“It's okay,” said Sally. “We're really just here for the party. You know how Jack loves your holiday.”
“I do,” said Father Christmas. “I suppose this is a better way to show it than to try hijacking it.” He gave Sally a small smile. “It’s good to see you again, Sally. I really do think you have too much sense to be with him.”

Sally just gave a little shrug, as if to say well, yes, but what can you do? Sherlock was almost certain he had seen John make the same shrug before.

He turned back to him and held out his hands expectantly as Father Christmas left. John rolled his eyes but passed the folder back to him. “Merry Christmas, Sherlock.”

Sherlock beamed at him, then opened the folder. At first glance, all that was inside was blank sheets of paper, but after a few seconds, lines began to fade into view. Staves drew themselves out over the page, and then notes began to curl around them, dropping into place one by one until the page was covered with the first twenty bars of Danse Macabre.

“Oh,” he breathed, seeing the written notation of his favourite piece for the first time in twenty-one years. “John! How did you-“

“I played Oogie for it,” said Jack around a mouthful of mince pie. “It was easy, really. That idiot always thinks he can outsmart me, but no one outsmarts The Pumpkin King. And in exchange John let me come to your party. So kind!”

Sherlock strode over to his music stand, pulling out the sheets and putting them out before grabbing his violin.

The moment he played the first note, he heard the whole tune, back in his head as if it had never left. He played the whole piece through, shutting his eyes once it became clear that his memory made the sheet music irrelevant.

At the end, John gave him a round of applause that the others joined in with, but Sherlock didn’t pay them any mind. Instead, he put the violin down again and moved to take John’s hands.

“You are the most perfect person,” he said, but didn’t have words for more than that as the emotion swelled up in his heart. Instead, he just kissed him, hoping that conveyed everything he couldn’t say.

John kissed him back with just as much force. “I know,” he murmured once they’d broken apart. “I know. Me too.”

The party went on for another hour or so after that. Sherlock handed out the presents under the tree without much interest in whether or not the recipients wanted them. He was just counting the minutes until everyone else buggered off and left him with John so that he could take him to bed, kiss him to sleep and then curl up around him and listen to him breathe until the sun came up.

Lestrade and Sally left first, and they helped Mrs. Hudson, who had drank far too much sherry, down the stairs as they went. Molly and Sherrinford spent another ten minutes kissing, which Sherlock didn’t really mind because he was doing the same with John.

At some point, Jack and Sally stepped back through the picture on the wall to Halloween, leaving them with a merry, “Ho Ho Ho!” that was not even a little bit as jolly as the one Father Christmas had let out.

Eventually, Molly cleared her throat and pushed Sherrinford away, standing up from the sofa. “I should go,” she said. “It’s a long drive to my parents’ house.”
“Right,” said Sherrinford. “Well. Have a good time. Try not to miss me too much. Or spend too much time thinking about all the things we could be doing now that I have a working penis again.”

Sherlock let out a faint cry of despair and buried his face in John's jumper. John gently ran his fingers through Sherlock's hair, which felt simply lovely.

“Right,” said Molly. “Um. Okay, well, I rather think I will be now.” There was a hesitation, then she added, “Unless, of course, you wanted to come with me. I mean, I know you're planning to spend it with Sherlock, but John's back now, and my parents did ask you to come, and you don't need the veil now and...well. The offer is open.”

Sherlock lifted his head to look over at Sherrinford. “You should go,” he said. If Sherrinford wasn't there, there would be no need for Sherlock or John to socialise with anyone but each other. They could spend the whole day cuddled together with John stroking Sherlock's hair.

Sherrinford hesitated. “If you're sure your parents won't mind.”

“Not at all,” said Molly. “They'd be thrilled. They've been wanting to meet you, you know.”

“Right,” said Sherrinford. “Well, then, I suppose. I'll need to pack.”

Molly's face burst into a smile. “Yes!” She leant forward and kissed him again.

Sherlock let out a sigh. “All this young love is very trying.”

John nudged him as Sherrinford pulled himself away from Molly to go up to his room. “You don't get to complain when you're no doubt intending to spend the day doing exactly the same with me tomorrow.”

“That's different,” said Sherlock. “That's you.”

John smiled at him and kissed him again. “Don't worry. I'm looking forward to it too.”

Excellent. Sherlock smiled at his husband and pulled him down into another kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Final chapter, New Year's Eve, (which is more in the nature of an epilogue) will be posted on Thursday 6th August.
New Year's Eve

Chapter Notes

Getting a spot with a good view of the London Eye had involved more elbow-jabbing and foot-mashing from Sherlock as they moved through the crowd than John really approved of but he was still too pleased to be with Sherlock to really care. Their time since Christmas Day had been spent with Sherlock curled up around him as often as possible, as if he needed to catch up on all the physical contact he'd missed out on over the last two months. John knew how he felt. Being in prison had been awful for a number of reasons, but being separated from Sherlock had been one of the top three worst ones, along with the forced inactivity and the company.

Sherlock had also taken John off on what seemed to be a tour of all the places where they were accustomed to spending time together, as if he needed to reintroduce John back into their shared life.

They'd gone to Scotland Yard, where Lestrade had taken John to one side and told him that it was 'a bloody good thing' that he was back, as Sherlock had gone a bit strange without him. John wasn't really sure he wanted to know what that had been like, although the wary looks they'd received as they'd gone through the building made him think it hadn't been confined to just Lestrade's squad.

They'd dropped into Barts and had coffee with Molly, who had been glowing with happiness. She and Sherrinford were spending most of their time at her flat now, so John hadn't seen much of them at 221B. He strongly suspected they were taking advantage of Sherrinford's new body to have sex as often as possible, in as many different ways as possible, but he knew better than to mention that to Sherlock.

She and Sherrinford were following them through the crowd now, with Sherrinford apologising for Sherlock every step of the way.

“Terribly sorry, we're with the shockingly rude man. Sorry, sorry, I have tried to persuade him to be more gentle, oh dear, that looked painful, my apologies...”

They reached what Sherlock decided was the best place, with a view all across the river to the Eye.

“Champagne,” announced Sherlock, reaching into his coat and pulling out a bottle.

John frowned. “How did you fit that in there?” He'd been cuddled up against Sherlock early and hadn't felt a trace of it.

Sherlock gave him a broad grin. “I certainly didn't use Halloween magic, not on another holiday.”

“Me neither,” said Sherrinford, reaching into his jeans pockets and pulling out four delicate champagne flutes that couldn't have possibly fitted in them.

“Oh, you're such a rebel,” said Molly, earning herself a wink. John was still getting used to Sherrinford's face and the myriad facial expressions it could display. After over a year of trying to discern what a skull was feeling, it was a nice change.

Sherlock popped the cork out of the bottle, causing a ragged cheer from a handful of people nearby, and filled the glasses for them all. He handed the rest of the bottle to a stranger, earning himself a gushing thanks that was probably undeserved. John was sure Sherlock had just been trying to get
rid of the bottle because he didn't want to keep holding it.

“To 2013!” toasted Sherrinford.

“Oh, not yet,” said Molly. “Let's toast 2012 first. It's been a good year for all of us, after all.”

Sherlock levelled a glare at her. “John spent 47 days in prison,” he pointed out scathingly.

“Yeah, but the rest of the year was okay,” said Sherrinford. “47 days out of 366 is around 12.8% so that's 87.2% that was pretty good.”

Sherlock huffed. “Take off another 0.8% for the 3 days spent kidnapped over St. George's Day.”

“Oh, that wasn't so bad,” said John. “At least our cellmates weren't drug dealers or rapists.”

Sherlock glowered but didn't argue, and they all toasted the last year.

“And now next year,” said Sherlock. “In which I fully intend to not be separated from John for any reason, and especially not during November and December.”

“We do seem to have bad luck with those months,” said John, raising his glass again. “To not being separated.”

“Ah, speaking of the future, and not being separated,” said Sherrinford, glancing at Molly for a moment then back at Sherlock, “there was something I was going to talk to you about. I'm moving in with Molly.”

Sherlock stared at him in horror. “What?”

“I'm moving in with Molly,” repeated Sherrinford.

Sherlock's stare did not lessen. John poked a subtle elbow into his side.

“That's great news,” he said. “Congratulations.”

“But you live with us,” said Sherlock.

“At the moment, yes,” said Sherrinford. “But from next week, I'll live with Molly. My girlfriend. Whose friends I no longer have to hide from when they pop by.”

“But why would you want to be around them anyway? Normal people are vile,” said Sherlock, sounding utterly dumbfounded.

John plastered a smile on and put his arm around Sherlock with a warning grip. “It sounds great. And just think, Sherlock, it means we'll always get the sofa to ourselves.”

“And all the *Timetravellers, Inc* marathons will happen at mine,” added Molly.

Sherlock's face cleared. “We can kiss for hours without any annoying sarcastic comments.”

“Exactly,” said Sherrinford. “Well, I may text you the occasional sarcastic comment, just so you know I still care about you.”

“And no one will ever have sex in our flat,” realised Sherlock. He brightened and raised his glass. “To getting rid of my older brother.”
“To moving in with my girlfriend,” responded Sherrinford.

“To walking around the flat naked,” said John.

Sherrinford raised his eyebrows. “I've never stopped you doing that. I'd have been fine with it.”

“I wouldn't,” growled Sherlock.

John caught Molly's eyes and waggled his eyebrows. “Maybe I'll come over to yours and walk around naked, then.”

“Looking forward to it,” she said, then giggled when Sherlock made a hoarse noise of rage.

“Good evening,” said an old, tired voice. 2012 was now so decrepit that he needed two New Year revellers to prop him up, but he had a glass of champagne clutched in his hand and was wearing a party hat.

“Happy New Year,” said John, raising his glass in a toast.

“Happy New Year,” echoed 2012. “Or, I assume it will be. I'll be dead by then. I'm rather looking forward to it, frankly. Be nice to have a rest.” He looked over their glasses of champagne and the streamers that Molly and Sherrinford had draped around their shoulders, and gave a short nod.

“You seem to have done an acceptable job of celebrating my holiday.”

“Thanks,” said Molly.

“You could do with being a bit drunker, though,” 2012 noted with a sniff.

“I'm doing my best,” said Sherrinford. “Trust me, I intend to end this evening completely squiffy. After 21 years of being dead, it'll be a novel experience.”

There was a shift of excitement in the crowd and the countdown started. They all turned to look at the Eye. Sherrinford put his arm around Molly and pulled her close.

“...three, two, one!”

There was a loud cheer, fireworks exploded, and Big Ben began to chime. 2012 let out a quiet sigh and folded in on himself, shrinking down to nothing until there was just an old robe lying on the ground.

Sherlock pulled John into an intense kiss that meant he saw nothing more of the celebrations. A few seconds later, a ragged chorus of Old Lang Syne echoed out across the river, punctuated by the strikes of Big Ben and the fireworks. John just lost himself in kissing Sherlock.

They pulled apart just as the last chime of Big Ben rang out across the city. One of the denizens of New Year who had accompanied 2012 reached down into the robe and scooped a baby up, then turned and hurried off into the crowd.

“Happy New Year,” said Sherlock into John's ear. Behind him, John could see Molly and Sherrinford kissing just as passionately, fireworks bursting behind them.

“Happy New Year,” repeated John, and then kissed him again.

Chapter End Notes
And so it ends! Thanks for reading!

Please see the next chapter for a bonus chance to find out about the frozen corpses case that Sherlock solved for Sally in the Christmas chapter.
Bonus Content: The Body In The Freezer

Chapter Summary

A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure game that means you get to play Sherlock as he solves the frozen corpses case from the Christmas chapter.

“I reckon you owe me so much that you're going to spend years paying it back. And I reckon you're going to start by getting up off that bloody sofa, having a shower because you clearly haven't for days, getting dressed and coming down to Greenwich to look at a frozen corpse with me.”

In order to complete the investigation, you will need to gather enough Investigation Points to have an epiphany. However, if you piss the police off too much along the way they’ll throw you off the case. If you spend too much time thinking about John, you may become too melancholy to continue.

The Body In The Freezer

Good luck!

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