The Fabric of Life

by orphan_account

Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.
CHAPTER 1

When Sherlock came back, John went into a shock that was like being underwater. His body felt like it was under siege, was being compressed, being forced in on its own boundaries. Pressure on his lungs, on his ears, a dangerous heaviness on the giving-in strength of his skull, a dull pounding the only sound that he heard, and his sight lined with a shifting blurriness that seemed to fit, in this moment where past and present crashed into each other with the speed of light.

Of course it was just like Sherlock to return from the dead when John had finally got a grip on himself again, and had finally assembled different pieces of his life and had puzzled them into a ground to touch down on, a steadying platform, a floor to the pit of despair he had, at first, in the breathless, sleepless first months after Sherlock's suicide, feared to be bottomless. He had finally been able to peer out over the edge of the hole he had fallen into again, and was back on his feet, scrabbling upright.

And then Sherlock came back, with a light breeziness that he really should have had absolutely no right to, that suggested other places, other lives, other climates. True to form, he was like a hurricane, and he knocked John off his feet, like he'd done since that first moment, when he'd flicked the alien colourfulness of his eyes over John and had enjoyed teasing out everything he could find in the crinkles of John's eyelids and the wrinkles in his jacket, when he had been a swirl of coat and performance and had given John a wink of all things, a thing that he hadn't ever repeated again.

The things that had begun to matter, as soon as anything began to be capable of mattering again – his work, the newness of his flat, Mary and the possibilities that were in her eyes, the hesitant beauty of London in early spring, Greg and Molly with their surprisingly unwavering support, Ian and Sharon and Bill from New Breath and their much-needed harshness and almost clear-cut understanding of such a complex reality – receded from him, small points of light in the shifting fabric of life, of which the stitches unravelled again around Sherlock stepping back into it.

Just like Sherlock. Just like Sherlock to make him lose a grip on everything again.

Sherlock met him on neutral ground; the small, decidedly sad park two blocks from their old flat. John was uncomfortably aware that this was probably to allow John to come and decide in the moment whether he wanted to talk to Sherlock or hide instead. And then he was even more uncomfortably aware of the fact that there was really no way he could know for sure, anymore, because how could he know anything about a man who he hadn't seen in two years, a man who'd been doing things that he was so utterly uninvolved in they might as well never have met.

The text had been, for lack of a better word, earth-shattering. Or maybe world-shattering was more apt, because the earth under his feet didn't suffer one bit, it was as confidently present as ever; Sherlock was many things but an earthquake he only ever was in a proverbial sense. It was just
John's earth that shattered, his personal bit of the universe, his roots that had finally tentatively started looking for new underground waters to tap into, and that were now upended, torn loose harshly. So, maybe, life-shattering, even if his body, traitorous as it was, continued beating and breathing and flowing and working hard to keep his borders closed as always.

And it wasn't even because John hadn't suspected. He'd spent a lot of time trying to clear Sherlock's name when he had finally emerged out of the crush of his depression and got tangled in the mania that followed, at first out of a desperate need to gain a sense of identity again (because who was John, if Sherlock wasn't Sherlock? And that was painful enough in itself, that he needed Sherlock to have been who he thought him to be in order for John to be who he thought himself to be), later because there were clues, there were doubts – *it was a trick, a magic trick*, Sherlock had told him in the phone call that haunted him in his sleep, and after a while he was sure that Sherlock was talking about something else. The jump was the trick. There were clues, he was sure of it. Mike vehemently denied telling Sherlock anything about John before that first meeting, so Sherlock couldn't have known who to research. That night at the pool – and this was speculation, but it felt like evidence – couldn't ever have been performed by anyone; not Moriarty, and more tellingly not Sherlock, because John remembered that look on his face as John had emerged, a blankness that spoke of more shock than he'd ever known Sherlock to display ever after, and he suspected that maybe Sherlock thought for a fleeting moment that *John was Moriarty*. It made him feel better for having thought for a fleeting moment that maybe Richard Brooks was real; because the faith was stronger the more it was challenged, and that was how he comforted himself now. So he'd suspected. And he'd felt inadequate, unable to pull the facts together without Sherlock's gentle or harsh prodding. It was all over the place, it scattered just as he himself did, trying to do too many things at once just so he would have no energy left to lie awake. He wasn't Sherlock. He never pulled it off; though there was the small, bitter victory of convincing Greg, who put more faith in his gut feeling than John thought he fairly deserved. There was also the strangeness of Molly, who needed no convincing, it seemed, but who had still tried to get him to leave things alone. The zeal with which he tried to solve the puzzle had waned over time, as his life rearranged itself bit by bit, and his anger at Sherlock grew into a more distinct, focused form.

Still, despite his suspicions, the text had been shattering.

Because it had said

*Tomorrow 11 A.M., that park near Baker St.*

*SH*

not *John* or *I know this must be strange* or even just *Hello* or *I'm back* or *So I'm alive* or *I hope to see you there* or, though he knew it was irrational to expect from Sherlock, *I'm so sorry, please come.* Not even *that park near Baker St, you know the one. We had coffee there once*, because that would have meant something, that would have meant Sherlock had memories of him at all.

Moving as though through oppressive layers of water, he punched the wall of his beautiful, new, un-bulletmarked, Sherlock-less flat until his knuckles bled, and screamed out his rage wordlessly, feeling as though the sound was stolen from him, and he smeared blood on the wall, and when he stepped back at last he realised with the detachment rolling in to save his brain from burning up that he'd have to redo the painting job on the wall.

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And he did spend an amount of time hiding that became embarrassing, because he was actually acutely sure that Sherlock knew he was there, squatting ridiculously in a bush, peering around the sad form of tree that manages to survive in London.
But he needed this time, this moment. He was trying to persuade his stomach to go back down into his belly instead of trying to fight its way up into his mouth. He was trying to get his brain to believe his eyes as they rested on the dark, thin figure with its hands in the pockets of its coat.

Sherlock was standing with his back to him, appeared to be watching the entrance of the park – and John wished, irrationally, that he'd look around for John, though he knew that Sherlock wasn't doing that precisely to grant him this moment of alone-ness, even with Sherlock there. He just wanted to see Sherlock's face and have the idea, maybe the illusion, that he was seeing Sherlock without Sherlock seeing him in return, just this once, and in his fantasy that could make the difference in either direction, what he'd find there. But then he remembered Sherlock's face. He didn't even know what it was capable of now, and he'd known it was capable of extraordinary things even before, waxen, mask-like, utterly blank, molded into fakeness so easily, so disgustingly easily.

Sherlock's hair was a few shades lighter and a bit shorter than it had been. He was wearing a new coat. Or, maybe not new, but a different one, though the style was similar. It touched John in a way he hadn't expected, because he'd dreamt about this moment, and a new coat had never factored into it. It felt irrationally unfair. Sherlock was still tall, though, still decidedly tree-like. He was smoking, fast puffs that in anyone else would indicate nerves, and John guessed that shouldn't surprise him, but it did, a bit.

He felt like he was going to throw up.

But time was ticking away, and if there was one thing that he'd become more aware of in the past two years, it was that time slips away and never returns (even if Sherlock standing there seemed to contradict that, but he knew that the years between them would still be there, would have to be scaled somehow), so before he had any kind of feeling that was somehow like I'm ready for this he decided that he would simply never be ready for this, never, and got up and walked up to Sherlock, surprising himself in the process.

And Sherlock turned around before he reached him; he must have been aware of him more intensely than John thought. He was wearing glasses, a wiry, thin frame; he wasn't wearing gloves, a cigarette between the pale shock of his fingers like an exclamation mark; and there was a scar over his right eyebrow that looked new, and, and, and

His mouth was tense, but his eyes were so focused behind the newness, the slight barrier of his glasses, and when they made contact with John's, John felt it like a physical slap in the face, instinctively stopped walking and then, spitting in the face of all of his fantasies of this moment, actually did double over, and threw up.

“Christ,” he heard Sherlock mutter, making his way over to him, and it was the first word he'd heard in that voice in two years, apart from keep your eyes fixed on me playing on a loop in his dreams, and John would have laughed if his breath wasn't being stolen away by the violence of his heaving. After a couple of seconds there was the steady grip of Sherlock's hand in his hair.

“John,” he said.

“No,” John managed to get out, and then flinched at himself, because that was the last word he had said to Sherlock two years ago, before Sherlock had stopped listening, and it shouldn't have been the first, it had no right to be the first. He retched a couple of times more, his mouth stinging with acid, spattering his trousers with sick, and probably Sherlock's coat, too, and he couldn't care, but then it was over; his stomach sank back down, and his lungs struggled to get reacquainted with air. He spat a last time, wiped his mouth and took some steadying breaths, trying to tell himself he wasn't doing it to avoid looking up at Sherlock. He was shivering, humiliation now foremost in the mesh of emotions he was caught in. “Don't touch me,” he wheezed, but Sherlock either ignored it or didn't
“Are you all right?” Sherlock asked. His hand was still on John's head, a warm pressure of fingers on skull. It was too unreal. It was too real.

“Yes,” John said, because no had no right anymore, it had to be banished at least for a little bit, and it didn't do anything justice, anyway. And then he couldn't put it off anymore, and he straightened up. Sherlock's hand fell away from him.

They stared at each other for a bit, until Sherlock grimaced at the growing tension.

“I didn't think you'd be quite so disgusted to see me again,” he said, voice almost insultingly level.

John had to stop the chuckle because, really, Sherlock hadn't deserved it yet. He hadn't deserved any of it yet, and it was already unfair that Sherlock got to see how much the simple sight of him affected John, and it was even more unfair that he could probably read with precision how much John's heart was hammering, how much he felt like he might have a heart attack soon.

“Well,” Sherlock said at his silence. Then: “Hungry?”

“Just like you to want to get Chinese after I've just thrown up violently,” John said on their walk there, breaking the solidifying, the congealing silence around them, because if he was honest he couldn't stand it, though he liked that he could tell Sherlock couldn't either.

Sherlock flashed a small smile at him, the small smile without teeth, and for a second it was almost like the past two years hadn't happened. “You haven't eaten anything substantial since – since yesterday,” he said, and John knew the hitch had to cover up what he had been going to say, which was since I texted you, “and now you've thrown up all of the tea, too, so you need to eat.”

“Don't know if dim sum is the best option, though,” John said, but Sherlock ignored him, except for, strangely, his hand coming up to touch John's sleeve, curling around the worn leather. It was that, that one small movement, that brought John to suddenly look at him, and see his face again, and to think I'm actually seeing his face again. Belatedly, tears sprang into his eyes and he blinked rapidly to try to dissolve them.

In the two years that Sherlock had been gone the restaurant had been taken over by new owners, but Sherlock informed him the door knob was still quite satisfactory, and he ordered John's favourite, steamed egg dumplings. It was stupid, but that Sherlock remembered, that Sherlock remembered, Sherlock who deleted the solar system because it didn't matter, was somehow so touching that John hid his face behind his hands for a bit, trying not to cry and not entirely succeeding.

Sherlock was looking at him with a startling earnestness when he removed his hands.

“I'm sorry, John,” he said, and that did it, of course, the sob forcing its way out of John's throat was ugly and loud, and he couldn't even help it.

Sherlock looked uncomfortable, but didn't say anything, just reached across the table and curled his hand around John's, and held on as John tried to stifle his crying for a couple of minutes, and then finally got his breathing back under control.

“For what?” he asked when he'd recovered a bit. He hooked a thumb around Sherlock's fingers to keep them in place, because he suddenly, fiercely, needed them there, he needed something to tell him that it wasn't all just an even more cruel joke than it already was.
Sherlock's surprise showed. “What do you mean?”

A big, shuddering breath. “What are you sorry for?” Because he needed him to say it, this time. John couldn't go on filling all the cracks on his own, not about this.

Sherlock cleared his throat. “I, um,” he began, and then seemed to make a decision, “I'm sorry for not contacting you. I'm sorry I had to lie to you.” He looked pained, then pushed on. “I'm also very sorry for what you've been going through.” He looked at John with some anxiety, as though looking for a sign that it was enough. It wasn't, not really, but it was for now, maybe – and John couldn't say that he was entirely sure that anything that could be said, anything that could be put into words would ever really be enough.

John nodded and some of the tension seemed to bleed from Sherlock's mouth. “Will you tell me?” he quietly asked, after a couple of seconds of silence.

“Yes,” Sherlock said immediately, then looked distinctly distressed for a moment, as though he regretted it, as though it had slipped out before he knew what he was saying. He removed his glasses from his face, and John liked that; it was like one more barrier was vanishing between them.

“Do you really need those?” John inquired casually.

“No,” Sherlock said, glancing at them as though he was seeing them for the first time.

“Then why are you wearing them?”

Sherlock smiled a little, just a little. “It's like with Clark Kent. People forget faces easily, especially if they're just that bit different.”

John couldn't imagine anyone forgetting Sherlock's face, and it took him a moment to realise that he was staring at it, at those austere features, even more pointed than they were two years ago. He realised Sherlock really did need to eat, too. His lungs seemed to have forgotten the concept of drawing in air for a second. He shook himself out of it, while Sherlock just held his gaze, somewhat uncertainly. He tried to aim for levity: “Referencing popular culture? So you're not actually who I thought you were? Wrong bloke returned from the dead?” And he wondered at himself, at the ease with which he delivered it, as though his stomach wasn't doing somersaults inside him, as though he didn't want to bruise Sherlock into a hug of violence and hold him there just so he could be sure this wasn't a dream.

Sherlock's face performed a strange mix of smile and grimace. “It was something to do.”

“What, read Superman?” Sherlock's mouth twitched. It was an alien thing, an impossible thing to try to imagine, Sherlock reading Superman.

And then John remembered that he had absolutely no clue what Sherlock had been doing these past years, where he'd been, who he'd been with, in what kind of circumstances he had existed, what names he'd had, what he'd looked like, what kind of friends he'd had if any, what kind of enemies, what kind of unimaginable hobbies like reading comic books. “Sherlock,” he said involuntarily, as though his mouth was still getting used to saying it again, in this wholly old and wholly new context of actually saying it to Sherlock.

Sherlock looked at him with a focus that was so intense John had to consciously will himself to keep looking at him.

“John,” Sherlock returned, as though he, too, had to get used to it.
“Can you tell me why?” John said under his breath, so softly he was almost sure Sherlock couldn't have heard, but Sherlock's hand tightened on his.

“He was going to kill you,” he said, flatly. The emotion drained from his face, as though he was putting on a mask. It was something that John had seen many times, but now he wanted to scream at it to go away.

“Moriarty?” His throat was dry.

“Yes, Moriarty, evidently,” Sherlock went on, as though John must have known that all this time, as though John had been there for the realisation. And of course, John had known in a sense, but Sherlock seriously treated it as though it was shared knowledge between them. It was so familiar it hurt.

“Kill me?”

“And Mrs. Hudson. And Lestrade.” Sherlock's eyes closed for a moment. A muscle was nervously twitching at the corner of his mouth. “He would have had all of you killed if I hadn’t jumped.”

God. So you saved all of us. You great fucking wanker, you machine, you emotionless automaton, you, of all people, jump off a building and tell everyone you love that you pulled their legs all their lives just so they could continue living, never knowing what you did for them. It was too much, and John couldn't stand Sherlock's gaze anymore for a moment, and closed his eyes to escape the pressure of it, the otherworldly presence. It was too monumental, it was huge as a universe, it couldn't fit inside John Watson, it couldn't fit inside this dingy Chinese restaurant, London itself couldn't hold this. John felt dizzy. He had to consciously resume breathing, feeling a panic attack lurking at the edges of his consciousness, ready to spring if he allowed it. He focused on the buzz of blood in his ears, willing it to ground him in his body somehow. He was here. With Sherlock.

“John, are you all right?” Sherlock's voice was careful.

Their dumplings arrived. John nodded. He wasn't, of course, but no really had no place in this conversation anymore. Sherlock needed yes, and in spite of himself, John felt himself responding to that need. And of course, it didn't make sense yet; because how had he known, how had he survived, but Sherlock was looking at the food, his face a construction of blankness, and John knew that that was it for now. So he picked up his chopsticks, feeling like a pastiche of a human being.

He asked just one more question: “Is it over now?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, and then repeated, as though he'd only just discovered the word: “yes.”

And it was nothing like what John had envisioned – he didn't get to punch Sherlock in the face, he didn't get to scream, he didn't get to say do you even have any idea, he didn't get to walk out, he didn't get to have Sherlock follow him for once, he didn't get to crush Sherlock in a hug that was meant both to pain and to love, he didn't get to be strong, he didn't get to see Sherlock cry for once, he didn't get to tell Sherlock anything about himself, he didn't get to hear any of the real whys. But how they were there, how two years seemed to have receded into background noise somehow, how it insanely felt almost exactly as before, how they ate steamed egg dumplings that were so delicious even Sherlock was making appreciative noises, and how Sherlock hadn't pulled his hand from John's at all, even after John's thumb had released his fingers, how he was clumsily eating with his chopsticks in his left hand, and how it seemed that maybe he needed John's hand to hang onto, too – it was more than enough. For now.
“Where do you live now?” John said as they lingered on the doorstep of the restaurant, slightly awkwardly. Sherlock seemed as unwilling to leave as he was.

“Mycroft's got me checked into a posh hotel somewhere in the centre,” Sherlock responded with a grimace.

“Mycroft?” John asked, taken aback.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, slowly, “he's been... he's been helping me out.”

“He knew? All this time?” The fucker. The absolute wanker.

“Yes.” Sherlock seemed to know what he was thinking, and he frowned. “He's a prat, John, but I quite strongly asked him not to tell you.”

“Okay,” John said, though there was the beginning of anger blooming in his chest; anger, that had been notably absent until now, because Sherlock's presence, his face, his voice, in the end had only just made him want to be in his presence again, but if he knew himself this anger would manifest itself at one point. Not now, though.

After a pause, Sherlock asked, carefully, “Where are you living?”

“Flat in Southwark,” John mumbled.

The silence seemed meaningful. “Would you...” Sherlock said, then stopped for a bit. “If we can find something again, would you maybe –”

“Yes,” John said, too quickly, without thinking because it didn't require any thinking, he said it, though he shouldn't have, because his flat was wonderful, and Mary had been wanting to move in with him, and he had been wanting her to, but that only occurred to him after he said yes, and after Sherlock's face folded into a genuine smile, and relief was actually readable on his face, and he couldn't seem to stop his hands from coming to rest on John's shoulders, and, well. It was far too early, John didn't understand anything yet, didn't know if he would, ever, didn't know if he could live with Sherlock again, didn't know if he could learn to be around something again that he'd had to work at for two years to unlearn. But it was the way it was. He couldn't help himself, like he never had when it came to Sherlock.

The fabric of life remolding itself around Sherlock.

“Great,” Sherlock said, then amended, “I mean, good. Fine. We'll find something. I'll... I'll be in touch.”

“So will I,” John said, and Sherlock squeezed his shoulders.

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On the walk home, which passed in somewhat of a daze, he remembered that he hadn't wanted any of it, that his life had finally been going in the right direction, and that he had come here with the intention of telling Sherlock that he couldn't do it.

He touched his face, as though trying to make sure it was still there.

Apparently he could do it. And something in him had decided that without consulting the rest of him; it was that part that had always come whenever Sherlock called, that had ignored all of his instincts that he was allowing Sherlock too much control for common sense, that didn't care about common
sense one way or the other. He swore quietly, and stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk for a moment, trying to identify the teeming ball of emotion in his chest, and found that he couldn't isolate anything, and couldn't handle anything, so he just took a breath and filed it away for later; like he'd done so often in Afghanistan.

When Mary texted him to ask where he was, he remembered that they'd had a date.

She opened the door for him, smile immediately slipping off her face when she looked at him. He couldn't answer any of her questions, and just fell into her, numb, into her reassuring solidity, the earthiness of her that made his body feel less like an alien territory, that made him feel less like smoke, less like he had been wiped away by Sherlock's eyes.

Chapter End Notes

* gryffindorandproud made a stunning book cover for this story in their series of Sherlockian Modern Classics: here on tumblr

* Digitalwave made a lovely digital artwork, called After the Fall: here on LJ and here on AO3

* labellecreation suggested a list of actors, from whom I selected my favourites, and she made a movie poster for this story! The Fabric of Life Movie Poster on LJ

* Dansamillion painted a wonderful, evocative piece as an illustration for this chapter: Re-emergence on DA

* hechicera has made a lovely Victorian-inspired book cover here on AO3
CHAPTER 2

When Mary quietly, worriedly asked him if he was sure it hadn't been a dream, he couldn't tell her for certain that he was. They were in bed; the morning light was clean and crisp as it fell onto them, and the previous day seemed like it had been a rupture in the time and space continuum, like Sherlock had just fallen in through a crack by accident. The only evidence he could present her was the blood crusts on his knuckles from when he'd almost broken his hand on the wall, just after Sherlock's text. She accepted his certainty, though, with an easiness that made his heart ache.

"Okay, so he's back," she said, and a thoughtful expression sank over her face. "He's... not dead."

"Apparently not," John said, and leaned back against the pillow with his eyes closed, trying to have the sensation of it counteract the confusing jumble of emotions that he was caught in. Mary put a hand on his thigh and that helped, too. Exhaustion was circling him like a predator; he'd barely slept. He'd spent most of the night wondering at the fact that she was sleeping next to him, undisturbed, and at the fact that across London, many people would be sleeping, unaware of the fact that Sherlock Holmes was among them once more. He'd had a moment in which he'd thought of what Sherlock might be doing now – not sleeping, surely, though he'd looked tired; maybe cleaning out as much of the minibar in his hotel room as he could, just to annoy Mycroft, or maybe trying to suss out the sexual kinks of the hotel staff. Or walking around London. Getting reacquainted with it. He'd left Mary sleeping and went to stand in the living room for a bit, just to force himself to feel like he was there, being grounded by the vague shapes of her furniture in the dark, and feeling a weight, heavier than anything he'd ever felt, settle inside him as he told himself that he probably couldn't imagine what Sherlock was doing, because he was someone else now, someone who had been away from more than just London, more than just people.

"Where has he been?" she continued, jolting him from his thoughts.

"Absolutely no idea."

He could hear the cocked eyebrow in the pause. "I thought you talked to him?"

He laughed a small laugh. "I threw up on his feet, and then we had Chinese together." Her hand tightened and he opened his eyes, to find her looking defiant, and worried. "Mary," he began.

"I'd like to meet him," she cut him off, and there was a stubbornness in her voice that he knew well by now.

"I guess that... I guess that could be arranged," he offered, but he knew that it would be a while before he allowed Mary to meet Sherlock, because they were from two different worlds, different times in his life that would now have to sync, impossibly, and he wasn't there yet by any stretch of the imagination.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.
There was a silence between them. “Does he have any idea –” she began, slowly.

But he cut in, with a strange kind of defensiveness that seemed unnecessary at a question that he had been burning to throw in Sherlock’s face just a day ago: “Yes, he does, Mary. He does.” Though John wasn’t actually sure that he did.

“When will you be talking to him again?” she then asked, and he irrationally wished she hadn't, because he didn't know, and he wanted to.

“Soon,” he said tersely, “he said he’d be in touch.”

She made a strange noise. “He comes back from the dead, he – he's put you through hell from what you've told me, and that's probably only one per cent of what really happened, he's let you believe that he... And then he says he'll be in touch?”

“Mary, you don't know what kind of commitment that is from Sherlock. Being in touch. It's... It means a lot from him.” She was looking at him with questions in her eyes, and he hoped she wouldn't ask all of them.

“And then he'll tell you more?” she prodded.

“Yes. Yes, I think so.” He cleared his throat. And after a silence, in which his heart beat in this throat, and he knew that he shouldn't, but he still did, because he wanted to, inexplicably wanted to, though he knew that Sherlock was upsetting the frail new balance of his life far more than he should allow: “He... He asked me to be flatmates again.”

The way her face fell was heart-breaking. “And you said yes,” she said, flatly. She already knew him quite well, though they'd only been together for five months.

“Yes,” he said, feebly, unnecessarily, and closed his eyes again, because he didn't feel up to any of it right now.

She sensed his unwillingness and was unsettled by it. “And you're not even going to talk to me about it.”

“You and I hadn't decided anything,” he mumbled, evading her question in a sickeningly transparent way.

“God, John,” she said, and she sounded sad, so sad.

He sat up at that, because he did owe her this, he did. “Mary, I lived with him for eighteen months and then I thought he was dead for two years. I just feel like... I feel like it's unfinished.” She blinked. “He's my best friend,” he urged, even though he wasn't even really sure what that meant anymore.

She looked even more worried at his explanation, but nodded slowly, and accepted the kiss he gave her as a small peace offering.

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He called in to the clinic and asked if they had any use for him. The answer was no, and then he didn't feel like a real person for a bit, as though what made him him had been stolen away from him in the depth of night and he was just a skin containing the nothingness of gravity. He was full of a restless energy that he had no use for, that only wanted to reach for his phone and tap in Sherlock's number so he could hear Sherlock's voice, and his annoyance at being called instead of texted, and be, if not comforted, then at least reassured that he hadn't imagined it.
He almost did, and then looked at the screen and noticed that he'd used the old number, his fingers having taken the route of least resistance, his muscle memory apparently being even more stubborn than his narrative one. It felt wrong to erase the numbers, going back, eating them one by one, as though he were deconstructing Sherlock with every backspace, bringing him back to zero, and then, even less, not even a space anymore. Death lay in many small things.

And so did life, of course, but life was changing by definition, and that was hard enough – he wasn't sure he could handle death being a changing thing too, after all – after all the sleepless nights and panic attacks and ill-advised drinking that he'd only been able to fully quit after Harry, of all people, had told him she was worried about it. After all the fighting with ghosts, with hopes, with the growing realisation that some boundaries could never be crossed, not even by Sherlock, because even he hadn't been exempt from being a body; he'd emerged from the struggles, the winner in one sense and the loser in another as he had accepted, for his own sake, that Sherlock was never coming back. The whisper that said *a trick, John, a magic trick* had been banished to the realm of dreams, quite literally, playing backwards and forwards, always bleeding into *keep your eyes fixed on me*; because time was a strange, pushing, insistent thing, and two years had put him back together, even if it wasn't in exactly the right order, and if he'd allowed that whisper to persist then there really would have been nothing left for him. It had been more a matter of emotion than ratio – and that's where Sherlock would have laughed at him, probably – after a while, Sherlock had *felt* dead. Truly, utterly.

He cried quite a bit after he'd got back to his own flat, leaving a worried Mary with inane reassurances, and then in the end with one truth: *I need to be alone for a bit.* And then he spent some time being weirdly upset with himself. He'd never been a crier – even in Afghanistan it had only happened a handful of times, usually under a blanket in the depth of night, silent, or hovering over a corpse of someone he knew, a couple of seconds of emotional upheaval before he had to move on, and act, and just *do something already* – and it had taken him six months to cry again after that first, stunted, suppressed time at Sherlock's gravestone. It had taken six months as well as Ian, still a new friend, still someone who didn't know him all that well, punching him in the mouth as he insulted him about his sentimentality about his own grief in a moment of complete and utter insanity. And then the dams had broken and he'd spent some weeks doing almost nothing else, feeling more and more like he was emptying on the inside. It had felt right for a bit, expressing emotion that was enough for him and Sherlock both, but now Sherlock was back, and he wanted... He didn't know. To not cry. Sherlock very likely wasn't.

He hadn't imagined, never, not once, that he would wish that Sherlock hadn't come back, but it happened, because unimaginable things happen all the time, and then they're just another part of reality.

Sherlock sent him a text that evening, 24 hours after they had said goodbye on the porch of the Chinese restaurant almost to the minute, and John wondered if that was intentional, if Sherlock had maybe been counting down the hours – just like he had been – maybe waiting for a weird sort of distance to have formed itself, that made it acceptable to show himself again.

221B available if you're interested.

*SH*

And God, yes, he was interested, almost in spite of himself, and his heart jumped, and he couldn't believe it, *was this even real*, and he didn't even curse at his current landlord when he said he still had to pay the entire contract's worth of rent. The trembling unease laced with a cold fear that had gripped him all day disappeared so quickly it seemed as though he had imagined it, because how
could he want this to not happen, how? Even if it made him feel like an uprooted sapling being tossed around in a hurricane.

Mary said she'd help him move, but he refused – both because it didn't seem fair that she should help him move in with someone else, and also because he really couldn't have her meeting Sherlock yet, it would be too unsettling, it would destroy the tangible hold he'd regained over Sherlock in the past day, a hold that still felt like it was mostly air.

He packed up his stuff with the lack of ritual that was a ritual in itself, and forced himself to not feel too much like a man walking a path that had been picked out for him; the bits that he remembered from his classical schooling forced Orpheus on him, unbidden, but he refused to feel like he'd brought someone back, because Sherlock was no Eurydice accepting the final judgment, he had, in fact, scaled the wall that separated the living from the dying – so no, he wouldn't let it get near him, this feeling of mythology that he had at unexpected moments, because he was no artist, he was nothing, he'd just been on the receiving end of something that was bound to happen at least once in a universe that was made out of probability. He looked at the Britannia pillow he'd saved from Baker Street and that had resided on his new couch after he'd regained the ability to look at it and not want to tear it to shreds, and decided almost impulsively to throw it out; not a sort of cleansing ritual, but an assertion of his own will, the tenuous re-taking of some semblance of control.

Five days later, that had been punctuated by one text a day from Sherlock – short, practical messages that seemed to him to almost hum with things unsaid, he was back at Baker Street, arriving before his stuff did. He still had his old key, and spent a moment looking at it on the porch. He didn't ring the bell – it seemed important that he took this step himself, and reacquainted himself with the flat as its inhabitant, not a visitor, and went up the stairs, trying to believe it was happening. Sherlock had been living there for two days already, and it felt like that first time, when he had stepped through the door and had seen a mess that he hadn't known was Sherlock's, and they had talked at each other like they were both walls of text, bouncing off each other. He knew that it was Sherlock's mess now. He felt a disorienting kind of tenderness when Sherlock was surprised to see him and hurriedly cleared off some of the paper on the table, just like he'd done that first time, as he stuttered out an uncharacteristically uncomposed hello. As though he couldn't be sure that John wouldn't turn around again and leave, and find another flat, another flatmate, someone not crazy for a change, someone who hadn't been dead for two years, someone who hadn't jumped; turn around and go back to the life he had had a week ago. As if that were in any way possible. As if Sherlock didn't make that utterly, utterly impossible just by being there.

Sherlock's smile, as his surprise melted into what seemed like happiness, was wider than usual, and a bit disbelieving. They grinned at each other for a moment that would have been far too long with anyone else, but somehow was just right. All around them the flat pressed at them, new air, maybe, new furniture, but Sherlock was standing there like he'd done so many times, and he looked as if he had been sculpted lovingly into the space he was occupying now, as though it was created for him, as though he was at home.

Sherlock said: “The previous tenant was suddenly quite urgently expected elsewhere.”

And John shouldn't have laughed, but he did.

–

Mrs. Hudson was almost incoherent with joy to have them both there again, and she sniffled into his hug.

“Oh dear,” she whispered, “I'm being so silly, so silly!”
“It's all right,” he said, smiling. And it was.

Although it really wasn't, of course.

“So?” John prompted him, feeling unpleasantly exhilarated for no real reason, as though he'd just scaled a lot of stairs only to find nothing at the top. A metaphor for his life if there ever was any. Sherlock was sitting on their couch, the one that Mrs. Hudson had stored in 221C, as though she'd known they'd be coming back. He was curled over his laptop – it was his old one, the one that John remembered, though it looked badly battered.

Sherlock jerked, uncharacteristically. It was something that John had noticed already, after only a couple of hours back with him. “What?”

John bit down on a twinge of annoyance. He had been afraid Sherlock would have changed, and, well, he had – there were things that John noticed, that were different about him, small ways of moving, of looking, small, protective jerks of his body that suggested that he'd been in a constant state of guardedness for a long time, and John knew that it would be a long time before he would know how or what or why, if he'd ever get to know at all – but he certainly needn't have been afraid of Sherlock suddenly being sensitive to social cues or anything. “Are we going to talk?”

“About?”

“About you, you twit.”

Sherlock looked up at that, his face surprisingly expressive – a frown, a clenching of his jaw. John noticed that the small, new scar over his eye moved when he frowned. “I'm here,” he simply said.

There was an unexpected rush of tenderness in John's chest at that, and he stepped closer to Sherlock involuntarily, hands jolting forward on their own accord. It was a good thing that he was standing across the living room or he might have trapped Sherlock in an unprepared-for hug.

“You are. You're here,” he echoed, and for a second that almost seemed enough of an explanation for all of it.

But a second later, it wasn't anymore, and he realised Sherlock still had that knack of surprising him so much he almost didn't remember what it was he had wanted to say.

“But you weren't here for two years, Sherlock.” He couldn't quite stop his voice from cracking a bit on Sherlock's name. Sherlock's name, that he'd been saying to no one for the longest time, and that could finally be picked up again by its addressee. He needed it to be picked up.

Sherlock closed his laptop with a slow sort of precision, eyes once more averted. “John,” he returned, voice even lower than usual, “it's finally over. Can it be over for a while?” It was about as close as Sherlock ever came to saying please.

John felt something squirming in his stomach. “No,” he blurted out, then reined himself in. “I mean. Sherlock. You don't have to tell me all of it in one go. But –”

Sherlock looked sideways at him, and his face was blank. He was wearing his mask again.

“No. You can't do that to me,” John's sentence switched direction at Sherlock's look, almost without his own knowledge. “You can't shut me out of this. Don't do that.”
“I asked you to come back here,” Sherlock said, and the statement was so flat John took another step towards him, as though a decreased space between them could coax life back onto Sherlock’s face.

“Why?”

Sherlock looked at him with that look; it was the first time he’d had it directed at him in two years. It was the look that said Christ, John, you know. And if you don’t, you don’t deserve to. But he did deserve to, and he deserved to hear it.

“Why?” he pressed.

“Do you really need me to tell you that?” Sherlock gritted out, and something broke inside John, and he took another step closer, hands balled into fists.

“Yes,” he spat out, anger unfurling its tendrils in his chest. “Yes, I fucking do, Sherlock. And you know why? Because you haven’t told me anything for two years. Because I’ve been out of the loop of everything. You knew I was alive. But I didn’t know you were alive. I thought you were fucking dead, you arsehole. I thought you were dead. I had my hand on your wrist, and I felt that you had no pulse. I saw blood running from your cracked skull. I saw that, Sherlock. I need you to tell me everything, every single fucking thing, Sherlock, so I can start maybe thinking about forgiving you.” He’d managed not to shout. Still, Sherlock looked as though he’d been shot.

He held Sherlock’s gaze until Sherlock dropped his eyes, and it felt wrong to think of that as a small victory, but John still did.

Sherlock said without looking at him: “Moriarty has never had feelings for anyone. I have.” And then he did look at John, unexpectedly, eyes flashing brightly. “He picked that up, of course, no matter how I tried to hide it. He was going to kill everyone that meant something to me. Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson.” He blinked, twice, a rare gesture of uncertainty. “And you, John. If I didn’t jump. Do you remember that I asked you to stay put?”

And John nodded automatically, swallowing. Like he would ever be able to forget ever again. Keep your eyes fixed on me, please, will you do this for me. “There was a sniper there. I don’t know where. I tracked him down afterwards, though.” Sherlock’s face blanked again. “He’s dead now.”

God. Tracked him down. Killed him. “How did you... How did you know about all that, Sherlock?”

Sherlock sighed, ran a hand through his curls. “He gave me clues. A lot of clues. So many that I still missed a lot of them, and picked some up that were false leads. But I knew it would be a fall... And I tried to beat him to the punch. I invited him to that rooftop.”

“Shit,” John silently swore.

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed. Then, suddenly, he scowled, as though angry with John for forcing this out of him, and brushed past him, long-limbed, lanky, there. And then not there.

“Wait,” John threw after him, but he was gone, closing the door of his bedroom behind him with a dry, controlled click.

John’s heart continued racing for far too long to be healthy. He tried to fit the different parts of the conversation together for a while, but they resisted each other, pressurised each other at exactly the wrong points, like tectonic plates struggling to find a point of balance. He gave up, deciding that they’d been talking in different directions, throwing words at each other without even seeing each
other, just hoping they'd reach their target. They would need to refine their aim if this was going to work. He'd clearly lost some of the finesse he had developed in talking to Sherlock – *I was too pushy*, he told himself a bit sourly – and Sherlock seemed to have lost even more of his conversation-holding skills.

It wasn't really all right, the silence in the flat. It was almost like Sherlock was gone again.

—

His first night back at Baker Street was extremely strange, laced with dreams of Sherlock's death, as though his mind hadn't quite caught up yet, and there were moments of panic in which he wasn't sure whether Sherlock was really alive, and his sleep was full of interruptions that woke him up but that he couldn't trace to anything real. To say he slept fitfully was an understatement, and when his alarm went off, he felt like he'd spent an eternity between those clammy, too-hot sheets.

When he opened the door, he was startled to find Sherlock sitting on the floor next to it, half-asleep, jerked harshly awake by the opening of the door.

“Christ, Sherlock,” John said, to his knees in an instant, instinctively. “What are you doing here?”

Sherlock's eyes fixed on him a bit too slowly. John looked at him, then said: “How long have you been awake?”

“Eighty hours,” Sherlock murmured. God. John kicked himself mentally for not having seen it the day before; but Sherlock looked different anyhow, more pointed, with deeper shadows, and he didn't know yet what of it was the past two years and what of it was just recent mania.

“Why are you out here?” John's hand found its way to Sherlock's knee.

Sherlock closed his eyes, then opened them again. “Just... making sure,” he whispered.

“What, that I don't leave in the night?”

Sherlock only looked at him, eyes slightly glassy. John felt a stab of realisation that that had probably been it, indeed.

“C'mere,” John said, and with difficulty tugged him up by the armpits. Sherlock was only marginally cooperative, and it took John a couple of minutes to get him to the couch.

“You need to sleep. We'll talk when I get back,” John told his prostrate form, and pulled the blanket over him.

“You have to come back, John, you have to!” Sherlock called after him, already half in the clutches of sleep.

“Don't worry,” John said back from on the stairs, something warm flooding his stomach.

—

John received his first text from Mycroft Holmes in almost sixteen months that afternoon.

*Sherlock's evidence about James Moriarty incorporated into the case. Public pardoning forthcoming. Let my people handle the press.*
and though the content of the text made him happy quite in spite of himself, John stared at the message angrily for a while, because Mycroft was just as big of a wanker as Sherlock was, but he didn't love Mycroft, and it was much easier to be angry at him.

*Why are you texting me?*

he sent, willing for Mycroft to pick up the silent fury that he was sending along with it.

*Sherlock’s gone to exceptional measures to protect his new number. Insufficient, of course, but I don’t want to invade his privacy at this time.*

MH

John almost broke through the skin of his cheek as he chewed on it. Christ, he’d forgotten just how much of an infuriating bastard Mycroft was, just stepping in smoothly as though there hadn’t been a confrontation between them at Sherlock’s funeral that had ended with Mycroft’s nose bleeding and John’s hand smarting in an unbelievably satisfying way, as though there hadn’t been complete radio-silence between them for almost two years. Just picking up John again, with nothing of an *I apologise* or even any kind of inquiry into how John was, who John was, just fitting John back into the slot that had been his when Sherlock had been alive, without bothering to ask if that’s where John wanted to be – but, well, Mycroft was a Holmes through and through, and never did dance to the tune of social convention.

*I’m not your puppet, Mycroft.*

The answer was swift.

*I know, Dr. Watson.*

MH

and then, like an afterthought:

*Maybe you shouldn’t let him see the papers. Might get over-excited.*

MH

and he gave up, because he supposed that that was as close to an apology he was ever going to get from Mycroft Holmes, and instead tried very hard to focus on the patient file in front of him, and tried very hard to not rip it to shreds. The anger was bounding about in his veins. He eventually settled for throwing his phone across the room, and that didn’t really help, at all.

–

When he got home from his shift, Sherlock was still sleeping, face wearing a dark frown in his sleep. It was still a shock to see him lying there.

John observed him for a while, tracing the life shifting in him as he twisted in his sleep, obviously in the throes of a nightmare, his mouth curling and uncurling around sounds that didn’t quite come together into words. And John sat, sipping tea, trying to will away the helpless feeling that everything was coming at him with the speed of a freight train, and he was heading to a cliff with absolutely no idea how to slow anything down.
The newspapers were ecstatic, loud, gaudy, rowdy, and absolutely sickening. Grudgingly thinking that Mycroft might have a point, and out of an entirely selfish desire to keep the fragile calm between him and Sherlock intact for as long as possible, he'd told himself to try to keep the papers out of the flat for as long as possible. But Sherlock was Sherlock, of course, and when John came into the kitchen, Sherlock was already at the table, having cleared away his new microscope and stacks of paper, poring over copies of almost every daily and newspaper in Britain, and some French ones.

“Slept well?” he asked by way of good morning.

Sherlock grunted non-committally.

John came to stand next to him. “So? What do they say?”

“That I was right, and that I'm brilliant,” Sherlock responded, and John heard the frown.

“That make you happy?”

Sherlock folded the Daily Mail closed, shielding off the big picture of himself at one of his final press conferences with Lestrade – not the one where he'd gotten the deerstalker, thank god. “No,” he said quietly.

That was so out of character that John felt almost suspicious when he looked at that head of curls. “Why not?”

Sherlock shifted in his chair. “I don't care what anyone thinks about me.”

And it was patently untrue, so John was about to argue; but something held him back, and it was the knowledge that he didn't know if it was untrue, not anymore. It had been untrue for the longest time. But he didn't have a clue about what it was now. He swallowed, unease pooling in his stomach.

He allowed his eye to wander over the newspapers – giddy, huge headlines, pictures of Sherlock and of himself (still strange) from two years ago, totally unapologetic with the only exception of The Times, which had block lettered BRITAIN FAILS ITS HERO, and, smaller, as though ashamed; We were wrong. There was a big column on the front page, an open letter that began: Sherlock Holmes, you are a miracle. It was a bit unsettling, how that drilled its way into John's gut as his eyes flicked over it; this sentiment, that by all rights should have been uniquely his, his and maybe a few other people's, but mostly his, splattered out over the pages of thousands of newspapers, ending up in the eyes of thousands of people. The Daily Telegraph posited a solemn MORIARTY WAS REAL. The Express screamed out a SHERLOCK HOLMES REDEEMED, and asked the question London a safer place again? The Guardian asked the pertinent question WHERE IS SHERLOCK HOLMES NOW while The Sun focused on the most important thing: SHERLOCK HOLMES AND JOHN WATSON TO REKINDLE ROMANCE? John snorted, and then sobered when he spotted pictures of him that were decidedly not from two years ago, judging by his sagging shoulders and the blue shine of stubble on his face. God, he'd never even noticed that he was being trailed by paparazzi. He coughed as he noticed that of all of them, Sherlock was reading that one.

“I didn't know you spoke French,” he commented mildly, as he picked up Le Monde. The bigger picture was of Moriarty, with Sherlock's face fitted in as though they were in a staring contest.

Dénouement d'une mort et d'une guerre secrète, the paper headlined, and it appeared to be an analysis and a reconstruction of the last two years, complete with dates and small maps. John wished
he knew how to read French in more than just the stunted *je suis tu es il est* way he still had, and had a moment of queasy wonder at how much information was in here that he didn't know, and that random people in France, people who weren't sitting at the breakfast table with Sherlock, did know, now.

Sherlock was looking at him with a cocked eyebrow when he glanced at him.

“Oh, right, of course you speak French,” he muttered, “you speak seven languages.”

“Eight,” Sherlock corrected, “I had to learn Aymara last year.”

John looked at him for a moment, but he seemed engrossed in the Sun article. “Oh,” he said, suppressing the desire to ask: *what for?* because it was too much of a gamble.

“Well, I've got to go,” he said after a silence of a couple of minutes.

Sherlock said nothing as he walked out of the door, remained focused on that ridiculous article.

At least some things were still the same, though the heaviness in his stomach was new.
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

CHAPTER 3

He lingered outside the door for a bit, wondering if he had any right at all to come back here, in the light of new events. They’d all know; they all read the newspapers. He’d even got a text from Ian: *I'm happy for you, doctor sir. Ian*

John could just imagine how long he must have slaved over that text, how many times he would’ve erased it and started again. It was an indecision he knew well, caught between the consistent pressures of their friendship, and the consistent and exactly counterpointed pressures of their grief, that was selfish, that didn't give even the tiniest of fucks about other people's suffering.

He took a breath, and pushed the door open, feet beating a path down the familiar corridor, where the familiar solemn arrow that simply said *New Breath* pointed him in the familiar way. It was incredible to think that he'd been here just two weeks ago, and the world had still been in a different orbit. He felt as though somehow he'd got divorced from time, had been catapulted into a warp of sorts, where gravity had been suspended and an alternate universe played itself out. *Sherlock was alive.*

Most of the members were already seated – there was one new face, a young girl, with red, puffy eyes. Jeannie was talking to her in low, reassuring tones.

Ian hadn't arrived yet, but Sharon and Bill were standing over at the coffee table, leaned close together, locked in an intense conversation. He knew what they were talking about. He drew in a breath and went over to join them, a vague nausea collecting in his gut.

They fell silent when he stepped into their circle of two, and he grimaced at the swiftness with which their faces closed up.

“Please, guys,” he said. He could take it from anyone, but not from them, and it reminded him a bit too much of Sherlock, that automatic tightening of faces, the wiping of the evidence of feelings.

“Hello,” Sharon said after a second. He cracked a smile at that; when she was out of her depth she couldn't help but return to the general schemes of social interaction, which she'd had to relearn the hard way. The fact that he knew this about her was why he responded with a genuine “Hello”.

Bill was staring at him. Then pulled a face that clearly said, *well, fuck this.* John was grateful for the truthfulness of his expression.

Sharon said, unprompted: “We're glad to hear of it, John.”

He nodded, accepting the platitude, because he knew that it was true, though not the only truth by any stretch of the imagination. The truths of people who were grieving were made up out of innumerable elements, often directly opposed to each other – he knew that intimately by now. “I hope you don't mind... that I came,” he said, softly.
Sharon shook her head, a bit too slowly to be wholly convincing, but not insincerely. “It's not like—it's not like it's over for you. It must be... It must be uprooting,” she said, and looked pained.

He wanted to agree, he wanted to say you have no idea, but didn't, because it was painfully, unambiguously true: they really did have no idea, and that was the most horrible thing, the most unfair thing that he could think of. So he held his tongue.

They took their seats. Ian arrived, late, panting, and gave John a wavering smile as he took a seat almost directly opposite him. Jeannie, the moderator, looked around the group, and something sparked in her eye as it landed on John.

The new girl introduced herself with some gentle prodding from Jeannie. Roxanne. 23. So young. Lost her boyfriend three months ago. Referred here by her therapist. She and boyfriend were in a car crash together. Unsaid: the crash was, maybe not in reality but at least in her experience, her fault. Unsaid: she didn't feel like she deserved to live, because he had deserved to, and he hadn't. Unsaid: she was thinking about suicide. He closed his eyes and tried not to think of Sherlock, and tried not to think about himself. He was getting good at reading what people didn't say. Or at least, what people who weren't Sherlock didn't say.

Elisa told the group that she'd visited the grave of her husband, and that talking to him hadn't really helped. They chimed in with their opinions — Nella said that it had never worked for her, either, but that she had made a small kind of remembering place in her home for her sister, where she sometimes went, and that did work at times. Ian said that it had started working for him after a while, but not because he'd thought that someone could hear him, but just because it had felt good to use his voice and not have to take into account anyone else's feelings. Rob told her to keep trying, but to keep in touch with herself, and if it really didn't help, to not feel any obligation to keep visiting the grave. Jeannie seconded it, telling all of them that grief took many forms. The silence around the group was heavy. They all knew the many shapes and sizes of mourning.

Sharon fed them a story that was somewhat hopeful — her nine-year-old had come up to her a couple of days ago, and he'd made a drawing for his little brother, and they had had a really good conversation. “I took him to the grave,” she said, eyes beginning to shine, “and he left the drawing there. I just... I hope it helped him.” John almost involuntarily put his fingers on her arm, and she closed her hand over them in return.

Roxanne was silently crying. Rob, next to her, had a light hand on her shoulder.

Jeannie was looking at him when he looked away from Roxanne. “John,” she said softly, “do you have anything to share?”

And he looked around the group, a heavy lump in his throat. It was hard to feel like he still had a right to be here. “I'm sure all of you know, already,” he said, trying to sound unconcerned, and failing, of course. Elisa fidgeted, obviously uncomfortable. Most of their faces were mild, a bit guarded. Ian gave him another smile from across the circle. “Apparently I... Apparently I've done something to deserve a chance that no one ever gets,” John pushed on, insides squirming, “A chance that we all dream about. I know... I know it must be hard for all of you to see this happening to me.” He looked around the group. Rob was rubbing at his eyes. Sharon tightened her hand over his.

“You've all been there for me in ways that I... that I honestly didn't think people could be for each other. You've let me scream. You made me stay when I wanted nothing more than to never see any of you again. You've punched me when I needed it.” Ian grimaced at the reminder, and John almost laughed. “You've let me say nothing. You've let me say everything. You've let me detail gruesomely what I would like to do to Sherlock, if he weren't— if he weren't already dead.” He swallowed. A headache was developing between his eyes, as though the words he was saying were pushing at him,
impatient to get outside. “And now he's not dead,” he finished, somewhat lamely.

Bill was peering at him from Sharon's other side. He looked a bit angry, and a bit sad, and a bit everything.

It was Jeannie who spoke first, although she seemed as unsure as the rest of them; he supposed that in her entire career as a grieving counsellor, it had never happened that someone did, in fact, return – it probably flew right into the face of all of her training, in which it had been pressed upon her that she gently had to guide people into the direction of understanding that death was insurmountable. And now, it wasn't. “You have a wonderful opportunity to do some of the things that you talked about now, John.”

He pressed his eyes closed. Because things weren't easy, of course, but he couldn't tell them that – he couldn't say: I know I said that if I only had the chance, I'd kiss him until we had no breath anymore, and tell him that I loved him, that I always had, and that I was sorry, so overwhelmingly sorry, that I hadn't told him before it was too late; but now he's back, and I don't think that I can, after all. He couldn't say that to them, not to people who were all looking for the chance he had now, and who would almost certainly never get it. It seemed cruel to be here, all of a sudden; he was only showing them what they could never have, he was only feeding into their futile hopes, hopes that he himself had had to struggle with for almost two years to get under control, and that had only really succumbed to him a couple of months before the impossible had happened, and they had turned out to, incomprehensibly, not be futile.

Sharon seemed to sense some of his anguish. “Don't you dare feel guilty,” she told him. “You've done enough of that.”

He nodded, grateful, though it didn't really help that much in any real sense, and felt the hot press of tears behind his eyelids.

“You've regained what we all lost,” Bill muttered from next to Sharon, “Time. Time to fill. Time to use.” He fixed John with a familiar, heated look. The don't you dare fuck it up remained unsaid.

Ian said in his soft voice: “You know all about the pressures of moving on. All of us do.” There was a small pause in which John supposed he was looking at the assembled group of people, small people, bundles of human, too-fragile, weighed down by so many different stones. “And now I guess you'll know about the pressures of moving back in, or something. None of us know about that. But we've always tried to be a group that was understanding of other people's... development. You need to do this the way you want to, the way you can.”

Ian was actually quite a wonderful human being, John realised with a calm clarity.

“You all mean a lot to me,” he choked out, and though the tears felt like traitors, he didn't stop them.

Nobody flinched. They were all used to grown men and women crying like babies. “I hope you won't stop coming,” someone said, and it was Roxanne, of all people. “You might still need it.”

He thought about Sherlock, back at the flat, still not much more than a wisp of smoke between his hands, and he nodded, thinking that yes, he might.

–

Afterwards, he went out for a pint with Ian, Bill, and Sharon. The dynamic was different, somehow, and it was a bit unsettling, until Ian leaned in and said: “Hey, John, you can talk, you know.”

He grimaced, acutely aware of the fact that the only thing he could really talk about at length was
Sherlock, because it was so consuming, this mess of feelings, so confusing, this jumble of relief, happiness, anger and helplessness.

“Have you fought with him yet?” Sharon asked, would-be casually, picking at the olive in her martini.

“Not really,” he said after a small pause.

“You should,” she simply said.

He took a big gulp of his pint, trying to think of anything to say to that. In the end, he chose honesty, because they had always chosen it, too, when he'd needed it. “I don't know how to.”

“He's not a corpse anymore,” Bill said gruffly. “He can take it again now.”

They all flinched at that, even Bill himself.

“I don't... I don't want to break the tentative peace, I guess,” John said.

Ian was studying him. “How angry are you, John?”

He looked back for a long moment. “When I'm not with him, furious,” he eventually said, “but when I'm with him, not at all.”

“Not at all?” Sharon inquired, stirring her drink.

“Not as much,” he amended, “not enough to tip me over the balance.”

“Peace is nice,” Bill said, curling a hand around his pint. “But it's usually only a cover for more covert warfare.” He looked at John through his lashes, as though challenging him. “You of all people know that.”

He did, but it didn't help. He drained his pint in two big swallows. “Yes, well,” he said meaninglessly, confusion pressing hard against the inside of his skull. Then: “We can talk about something else.”

“Yeah, sure,” Bill said, cuttingly, “we can talk about how depressed Sharon is, or how Ian's girlfriend died eighteen months ago yesterday.” John had almost forgotten how direct Bill could be. He'd also forgotten how much that helped, sometimes. Sharon gave a grim smile, Ian's face was stony. “So yeah, sure, we can talk about how pathetic we all are,” Bill continued. “I can tell you how I felt when I read in the newspapers that you got your best friend back, while mine is still worm food. I can tell you how hard it was to get out of bed this morning. We can rate it, on a scale from one to ten, if you want.” He brought his glass to his lips, looking undisturbed.

John said, sincerely: “Prick.”

“Don't I know it,” Bill said, saluting them with his half-empty glass.

And somehow, it helped. Irrationally, stupidly, it helped.

I can't let this go to waste, he thought to himself, in the kind of private revelation that was like a small birth, as he looked at them, hovering between laughing and crying, prisoners in their body, trying to fight the press and pull of a life that had handed them nothing but indifference.
The next day, he googled *Aymara* in a lull between patients, and then tried to imagine Sherlock in the Andes. He got as far as the image of him in traditional Bolivian dress, and had the dual, confusing sensation of wanting to laugh very hard and wanting to have been there so much.

–

Molly visited three days later.

When she came in and Sherlock took her coat, silently, John already knew. Sherlock never took anyone's coat. Sherlock never looked at anyone with such a solemnity. He'd never been silent before when Molly walked through a door.

He allowed her to get through some small talk – insipid “Wow, it looks totally the same as before!” and totally useless “How have you been, Sherlock?” to which Sherlock didn't actually offer anything, of course. But then she looked at John, and she must have picked up in his face that he was boiling inside.

“John, I –” she managed to say before he cut her off by putting his hand up; it was as simple as that, she wasn't Sherlock, she was stopped in her tracks so much more easily.

“No,” he managed to get out, before his throat closed up.

“Yes,” Sherlock hummed, hovering by Molly's side, almost protectively.

He turned to Sherlock, a deep, black rage igniting inside him. “Molly,” he pushed out, “please leave.”

“John,” she said, startled, hands flapping like tiny birds.

“Please leave,” he restated, the words pushing at his teeth – because he remembered Sharon, he remembered Bill; and Molly wasn't the one who needed to get this from him.

“I'll text you,” Sherlock called after her quickly retreating form, not taking his eyes off John, who was trembling.

“Well?” Sherlock said when the front door had closed, frowning deeply.

“How is it,” he began, then needed a second before he could continue, “how is it that *Molly* got to know, and I *didn't*?”

Sherlock looked surprised. “She wasn't in any risk. You were.”

“Don't give me that bollocks,” John bristled, and he stepped closer to Sherlock involuntarily, jabbing a finger against his chest. “You are *perfectly capable* of getting information to me without anyone knowing. Hell, Molly visited me almost weekly! You could have easily had her tell me! And out of some kind of – twisted loyalty for you, she – I don't know how you got her to do it – but *Jesus, Sherlock*, you threw me down a fucking pit of despair, do you know that?!” His finger was pushing into Sherlock, it was bound to hurt, but Sherlock didn't flinch. “*Do you know* that? Do you know how long it took me to become half-way functioning again? You – you told me that everything that I thought was – was real, *wasn't*, you pulled the rug from underneath me so many times I didn't know which way was up, you utter *wanker*! You made me doubt you, you know that? You made me doubt *everything*. You rang me on my phone and fucking told me that *everything, everything* – was wrong, my whole life, me, you, and I – *God!* How didn't I deserve your trust, Sherlock, *how?* How does Molly fucking Hooper get to know, and I *don't*?!”
Sherlock's pale face was stricken, inflamed with an unfamiliar flush. He didn't look angry, he didn't really look like anything.

“I did it for you,” he said once John had run out of words.

“Oh, yeah, thanks a lot, Sherlock! Thanks for that, really, much obliged.” John pulled his hand back from Sherlock's chest, and wheeled around, needing suddenly to put more distance between them.

Sherlock’s hand on his shoulder pulled him back in, turned him around to get them face to face again. “I did it for you,” he repeated, “all of it.”

“What the fuck does that even mean, Sherlock?” Angry tears were pressing at his eyes, hot, embarrassing.

“It means I –” he was scrabbling for words, eyes casting around wildly.

“What?” John pressed.

“I couldn’t have you knowing,” Sherlock finally said, too-rapidly. “I couldn’t bear to have you here, knowing that I was alive, and not being able to contact me. It was too much to bear.”

John stared at him, jaw working in what he was sure was a very stupid way. “Too much to bear? It was too much to bear for you to have me know that you were alive? What?”

Sherlock’s hand on his shoulder tightened, painfully. “I thought if I... If I just left you alone for long enough, you’d move on, and you wouldn’t have to be... in danger anymore. A clean break, John.”

John’s brain had defused somewhere along the way. There was nothing coherent in the world anymore. “A clean break,” he echoed, tonelessly.

“So you could... you could move on,” Sherlock said, the mask slipping quite spectacularly, and his face almost crumpled with misery. “If you knew I was alive, you wouldn’t be able to... You’d want to...” He was at an uncharacteristic loss for words.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” John spat. “Really, Sherlock, are you pulling my leg?”

Sherlock let out a long breath. “No,” he said then.

There was a silence that was somehow still heavy with the sound of their voices.

“Then why are you back here?” John said, “Why did you come back? If you wanted me to have a clean break?”

He looked pained, his hand falling from John's shoulder heavily. “Molly. I couldn’t help but involve her. She was part of the ruse. She – she kept me up to date. She told me... She told me how hard you were taking it. At first, I thought it was just the first shock, but she kept telling me these things, and it just kept on coming, and I guess I...”

“You guess you realised that I actually cared about you,” John filled in, feeling his face twist. “You fucker.”

“I realised how much.” He leaned back against the wall, as though he needed the support. “I never thought you’d be this shaken up.”

“Because you’re a fucking machine, that’s why,” John bit, and then felt a cold stab in his gut when he remembered that that was one of the last things he had said to Sherlock before his jump. He shook
his head, trying to banish the thought, trying to get a grip on any of it.

Sherlock closed his eyes. “On that rooftop,” he said, almost soundlessly, “I realised how much I cared about you. I jumped off a roof for you, John. I didn't – I honestly hadn't thought the intensity would be so mutual.”

John felt like there was a fire burning in his throat. He had a peculiar sensation of otherness, as though his body wasn't his anymore.

“Fuck you,” he spat, and walked past Sherlock, through the kitchen, and climbed the stairs to his bedroom two at a time.

—

After about an hour, an hour that he spent fuming, then pacing, then simply dazed – there was a knock on his door.

He closed his eyes. Sherlock never knocked. There was so much wrong with all of this.

But he was here now, so it'd have to do. “Come in,” he said, voice dark with hoarseness.

Sherlock opened the door with uncharacteristic carefulness and poked his head in; and that face, those eyes, his lank curls sweeping his forehead – John felt again like the past was playing a cruel joke on him, opening up a window of time and space that was illusory, that would pass, because how could it not, how could it be real?

“Well, come in then,” he said, a bit too forcefully. Sherlock slipped in, and leaned back against the door.

There was a long silence. John felt his anger retreating bit by bit, defused by the sight of Sherlock, folded back on himself, a crumpled ball of lankiness, of limbs that seemed to have outgrown him, gripping at the door. His face was a palette of – of fear, mostly, and that was so unfamiliar it made John's insides twist.

“You regret coming back here,” Sherlock said, and the usual tone of observation was just the tiniest bit inflected by what John saw playing out on his face.

He considered. “Yes,” he then admitted, because what was the use in not saying it; Sherlock knew, and maybe it would be good to say, maybe it would jolt them back to that state where they could say anything and not worry, not really. He almost couldn't remember what that was like, being able to tell Sherlock what an unbelievable tosser he was, and not having to be afraid that he'd be gone the next morning. “Not because I don't want to be here,” he added, as Sherlock closed his eyes. “But... Maybe it's too early, Sherlock.”

“It's my fault,” Sherlock muttered, his voice low and dark. John didn't quite know what to make of that. His fault for dying? His fault for not dying? His fault for not communicating? His fault for approaching John? His fault for asking John to come back here almost immediately? His fault for being so enticing, so entirely Sherlock, that John hadn't been able to help it, and had had to come back here in spite of every other thing in his life?

“Well, fuck you,” he said, conversationally. “I'm actually still responsible for my own actions, despite what you may think in your heroic saving-everyone-mode.”

Sherlock looked doubtful.
“Look,” John said with a sigh, “I came back because I wanted to. I couldn't rationalise it, but I wanted to. You... I've missed this. You can't imagine how much.” He amended, seeing Sherlock’s face: “Or maybe you can, whatever. It's not... I feel like I don't know anything about you anymore.”

“You do, though,” Sherlock spoke quietly.

“Not about what you've been going through,” John insisted.

“Why does that matter so much to you?” Sherlock asked, sounding as though he genuinely didn't understand.

John rolled his eyes. “You have the emotional subtlety of a petri dish sometimes, you know that? Because you've changed. Maybe you don't know it, but you have.” He was silent for a moment, then decided to spit it out, because that's what they would have to do, if this was going to work. “I feel like I have no grip on you. Like you're going to slip away again at any time if I'm not careful. It's... unsettling.”

Sherlock unstuck himself from the door and closed the gap between them. He slowly, purposefully took John's hand from where it was hanging uselessly by his side and pulled it up, guiding it to his shoulder. He closed John's hand over the curve where his shoulder melted into his neck and pressed the fingers in with his own hand. He looked uncertain, awkward, but the gesture made something in John uncurl and melt – you do have a grip on me.

“I keep thinking that you'll be gone too,” Sherlock finally said, mouth twisting as though it was an enormous effort to shape the words. “I keep expecting it.”

John looked at him. “As though I would ever go away,” he said, still a bit snippy, then softened at Sherlock's face. “You're the biggest idiot on this planet, do you know that?” he finally said, unable to keep a bit of wonder creeping into his voice. “You only realised how much you mean to me when you get news of how upset I was when you died? Seriously? You're messed up.”

“I know,” Sherlock said. He closed his eyes, and there was a sound that might have been a small laugh. “I do know that, John.”

John felt cold and warm at the same time. He moved forward until his nose was pressing against Sherlock's shoulder. “You tosser,” he said, and tentatively put the hand that wasn't attached to Sherlock on the other side of him, sliding his fingers carefully around to his back. Without a second's pause, with a stronger intensity than John was expecting, Sherlock pulled him in and threaded his long arms around him.

“Just explain to me the technical details,” John pressed.

Molly looked a bit uncertain.

“God, Molly,” John burst out, unable to contain his impatience, “he's back. He doesn't need your protection anymore. Just tell me how.”

She still looked doubtful, as though she felt that maybe Sherlock did still need her protection somehow. It made him so angry again, so angry, just to see her debate whether she should tell him something that she had known all this time and he should by any count have known too. It wasn't her fault, though, he told himself, trying to convince himself.

“Please, Molly,” he ground out.
She looked pained. “He... Well, I prepared his – his body. It was actually...” She sighed. “It was actually a huge risk. Such a huge risk. It was insane, really. He was so lucky for it have worked. He said that even the fifty per cent chance that it would work was worth it. But it wasn't... It wasn't even fifty per cent, if I'm honest. I didn't want to at first, but he... he convinced me.” John felt his stomach revolt inside him as she seemed to make up her mind and spoke more rapidly. “I made incisions on him, then stitched them close so they’d open on – on impact.” She swallowed, avoiding his eye. “He padded his coat, and was wearing this spine stabilising thing that he’d made... Brilliant, that. I still don't understand how he made it work. And he'd injected himself with lots of stuff, to speed up blood coagulation, to lower his blood pressure, to heighten adrenaline while still keeping his pulse to an absolute minimum, the lot. Didn't want any pain killers until after, though.” She hiccoughed a small laugh, shaking her head. “Said it would cloud his mind.”

John stood there for a moment, trying to process it. “So he... He actually jumped off the roof? It was him?” His throat was dry.

“Yes,” she said. “He was... a mess. He was pretty much broken. There were only about a dozen bones in his body that weren't fractured or injured, and his skull was one of them, and that was all he had hoped for.” Tears were shining in her eyes, and John's anger evaporated at the sight of them – what a terrible, terrible thing to ask of her, and what an extraordinary person she was to have done it.

“Christ,” he said, feeling ill.

She nodded, trying to blink the tears away.

“And then what?”

“He'd had transport arranged. Homeless people. He'd told me that they'd come to pick him up and take him away to a safe place to recover, and then he'd really be off. I only barely managed to set all of his bones and drug him before they were here. He didn't want to me to know where he was going, said it wasn't safe; he would contact me.”

“Did he?”

“Eventually, yes. About seven weeks after. Post card from Helsinki. It was blank, but it had to be from him.”

Helsinki. Not just South America, then. John took a breath, trying to get his stomach to calm down.

“John,” Molly sniffed, “I just – I'm sorry. You have no idea how hard it was to have to watch you, while I knew –”

“It's okay, Molly,” he cut her off gently, his anger folding over into tenderness surprisingly easily at the evidence of her anguish, at the realisation that there had been other people hurting, too. “It's over now.”

She smiled at him through the tears, and he had to restrain himself to not hug her.

–

When he came home, Sherlock was standing by the window, tapping his violin bow against his temple, edges a bit blurred in the unexpected sunlight of the early spring day filtering through the glass.

John spent some moments looking at him, at the diffuseness of him in the glare of sun, and felt a hot surge of protectiveness that he didn't quite know what to do with, because Sherlock was about the
most un-protectable person to ever grace the planet.

“Something wrong, John?” Sherlock hummed without turning around, sounding calm.

“No,” John said, because it would hardly do to say *I just kind of feel like I want to attach myself to you and keep your body safe after all that it's been through, because I've never quite appreciated how important it is to me that you are intact in as many senses as you can still manage after everything that's happened*. Language breaking off, choking on the width of reality. But he couldn't tear his eyes away for another second, as though he needed his senses to accept that this body was still here, probably scarred now under the light lines of Sherlock's sharp dressing, maybe with slight deformations that marked the spots, x and x and x, here and here and here, where he'd broken, where the ground had tried very hard to squeeze the life out of him, a hostile essence rushing up to meet him, utterly unconcerned.

Something prickled in the back of John's throat.

He turned around and went into the kitchen, opened the cupboard and looked for a clean teacup, trying to keep control of his breathing.

Sherlock appeared behind him, unexpectedly, and reached past him, brushing his torso against John's back in a rush of sudden, warm, light contact. “Here,” he said, and pulled out a cup that was too high up for John to reach.

John took it, and then had to take a moment to recover, because God, he was going to have a heart attack one of these days.
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

CHAPTER 4

Greg looked distinctly uncomfortable as John picked his way to him through the rowdy hen's party crowd in their usual pub. The young women were loud and well on their way to drunk, dressed in tasteless dresses and pink boas. John loved it in spite of himself. It was nice to hear normal sounds again, people getting drunk, hitting on others, laughing, pushing at their boundaries just for now, to be forgotten again when their senses were back in place.

Greg gave him a smile as he sat down and passed him his pint, but it was forced.

“What's up?” John asked casually, observing the too-tight curl of Greg's fingers around his glass.

Greg tipped his pint back, taking a big gulp. Then he fixed him with his stare, less mellow than usual. “John, I can't help it, but I want to talk to Sherlock.”

John eyed him, a bit confused and taken aback by the directness with which Greg addressed Sherlock. “Well, why shouldn't you?”

“Because he hasn't contacted me. At all.” Greg took another big sip. “I only know from the papers.”

“Oh,” John said, and he frowned, guilt sparking in his gut – he hadn't thought about contacting Greg, either. It had completely slipped his mind, consumed as it had been with Sherlock.

“That's okay,” Greg said, waving away his unspoken thought. Greg was a lot more perceptive than he sometimes let on. “Not your place. Besides…” He laughed, slightly nervously, “I can imagine it's been quite the roller coaster.”

John drank some of his beer to try to deflect the attention from the answer, but when he put it back down, he thought: oh, why not. If anyone, Greg was a prime choice as a listener. “You can't even imagine,” he said, slowly.

“Did you hit him?” Greg asked, a smile playing around his mouth, looking a bit more relaxed already.

John shook his head. “Wanted to, though. Badly. But then he was him, and you know him.”

“I do,” Greg nodded, “though in most people that would only encourage the hitting.”

John chuckled, and felt himself unwinding bit by bit. It felt good to sit there opposite Greg, and talk for a bit, and be allowed to be normal, and also be allowed to not be normal, because nothing was normal, and Greg understood that. “In me it only encourages the confusion,” he said, honestly.

Greg nodded, still smiling. He really did know more than he let on sometimes. “So you've moved back in together?” he asked, would-be casually.
“Yeah.” He didn’t even ask how Greg knew about that. “Maybe not that good an idea.”

“No?” The nice thing about Greg was that he always prodded at the right times, and then let the silence linger for just long enough so John could decide how much he wanted to offer up to him.

“It’s nerve-wracking,” he eventually said. “I keep thinking I’ll wake up and he’ll be gone again. Even after two weeks –”

“Two weeks is nothing, though,” Greg cut in calmly, “after two years.”

John cradled his beer. “I guess not,” he admitted.

“And how... how’s Mary feeling about it?” Greg asked. His eyes were shrewd.

John cleared his throat. “She’s... She's all right.”

“Does she understand any of it?”

John rolled his eyes. “How can anyone... How could anyone who didn't know him understand?”

“Yeah, that's true, isn't it,” Greg nodded, and John felt a rush of powerful relief that Greg was here, because Greg did understand; Greg did know Sherlock, better than even Sherlock seemed to know, and he also knew John better than John sometimes thought he did. Greg hesitated for a moment. “How much does she...”

How much does she know? Does she know about what you were? Does she know that you had almost merged near the end? Does she know that you spent every hour apart texting like love-sick teenagers? Does she know that he finished your sentences? Does she know that you came to me two weeks after his jump and you were deep in the clutches of hysteria, and you told me that you didn't know how to live anymore? Does she know that you told me that you had loved him in a way you hadn't known existed? Does she know about the extent of your regret, of your grief? Does she know how you had never had anyone who was as impossible, and as unmissable, and as important, and as crucial, and as infuriating, and as inspiring, and as breath-giving as Sherlock, and does she know that you eventually filed those feelings away, never expecting to have to open that vault again, for anyone? Does she know that while you think you love her, maybe even know you love her, you’ve always known it was different?

Greg was good at saying things without saying them, and John had got better at reading what people didn't say, or at least what people who weren't Sherlock didn't say.

“Some of it,” John said, hands tightly gripping his glass. A minimal amount. Actually, not much at all.

Greg grimaced in sympathy, and something else. “And... Sherlock?” he asked, looking a bit pained.

John gulped. Sherlock obviously knew some of those things. But definitely not all. And there was still this chasm that he didn't know how to cross, didn't even know if he wanted to cross, if he even could. “I don't know,” he said, half-truthfully.

Greg was silent for a bit. Then he said: “Does he hate me?”

John looked up at that, surprised. “Why on earth would he?”

“I broke his trust. I shouldn't have arrested him. I should've known.” Greg’s face was a small, very small, mirror of Sherlock's mask.
“You had no choice,” John retorted, sharply. “He knows that.”

Greg sighed. The hen's party women filed out of the pub, shrieking and laughing. The calm in the pub suddenly made John feel as though he was very, very exposed. Greg leaned in a bit, evidently feeling somewhat the same way, but continuing. “The thing is that I did have a choice, John. I just thought that I owed him this, to be the one who made that final step, to at least be consistent in my... attention to him. It had to be me. I had to take responsibility. And, I'll be honest, for a moment, I doubted him, you know.” Greg was looking at him with barely-disguised distress. “But only for a moment. When he took you as his 'hostage', that... that was the moment when I knew that he was for real. I remember your face. And his.”

John coughed. That night. It was a memory that felt brittle from over-handling, one that had inspired so much anguish in him in the years past, and was now something of a wonder, a miracle.

“I don't think he holds anything against you, Greg,” he eventually said, when Greg didn't continue. “I don't know what's happened to him these past two years, but I don't think he has the energy left to hold grudges.”

“I'll text him,” Greg decided, and drained his glass.

“Yeah. Maybe it'll do him good. Besides,” John said, raising his eyebrow, “you have just as much reason to be furious at him, you know.”

Greg waved it away. “I am. I was. Fucking livid. When I read the papers, I mean. Tore the entire Times into scraps not larger than a penny. The fuckwit. Making me lose my job.” He shook his head. “Making you suffer like that. Fucking wanker. It's – there are really no words for how angry I was.”

John looked at him, smiling in spite of himself. He could imagine very well how Greg would have ripped the newspaper into bits, maybe even biting into it as well, shouting abuse at it, then swearing like a sailor at whoever it was to be unlucky enough to talk to him first. “But not anymore?” he prodded.

“Can't say for sure I won't want to shoot him in the face when I actually see him,” Greg said, unconcerned, swirling around the beer in his glass, “but no, not anymore. The radio-silence actually kind of helped.”

“You don't feel...” John hesitated, trying to imagine what it would be like to know that Sherlock was back and not get any message, “neglected?”

“God, no,” Greg said, “if he'd come to see me I would have shot him, just for not being with you. I really didn't have any right to him. Yet.” He looked contemplative for a second, then drained his glass. “Besides, seeing it all spelled out like that made it easier for me. He didn't just up and went because he was bored, or something. He did it to save people.” He laughed a little. “Of all the people to have a hero-complex, I really didn't think it would be him.”

John looked at him, trying to see in his face how much he knew. None of the newspapers had stated who it was that had been targeted when Sherlock had been on the roof. Mycroft's people must have kept that particular tidbit out of the press successfully. He guessed that he himself was pretty obvious even to the most casual observer, but the others? He cleared his throat. “You were amongst the people he was trying to save, you know,” he said, heart pounding at the reminder of the hugeness of what Sherlock had been trying to do.

“Sure,” Greg said, “like everyone in London, I suppose?”
John shook his head, slowly. “No, he... You were specifically targeted.”

Greg stilled. For a couple of moments, he said nothing. “By Moriarty?” he eventually spoke, voice neutral in that way he had that was decidedly not neutral.

“Yes. There were... His snipers were trained on three people.” John swallowed, feeling for a moment as though it really wasn't his place to say this – but he had the sneaking suspicion Sherlock would never tell Greg, would rather keep it as a secret, a hidden weakness that he allowed but didn't need to share. “Me, Mrs. Hudson, and you.”

There was a long, deep pause at that. Greg’s eyes flitted to and fro as he tried to process it.

“Well, fuck me,” he finally said. He eyed his glass, as if he was angry at it for being empty. Then he laughed, softly, resignedly. “Now I'm definitely not angry with him anymore.”

John grimaced. “It does make it pretty hard to keep anger up for long, yes.”

Greg looked at him, and smiled a faint smile that said that he understood at least a little.

“What's he been doing, anyway?” he asked after a long pause, while trying to catch the bartender's eye to get another pint.

John considered. “Nothing much. I don't know, really. He's around a lot, tinkering around on his computer. He's also out for long stretches. I don't... I think he might be just wandering around London sometimes.”

Greg eyed him. “Is he all right?”


There was a silence between them.

“How are you?” John asked, suddenly realising that he hadn't asked.

“Good,” Greg said immediately, “I'm getting re-promoted. They want me on homicide again. Not sure yet about that. I won't just accept anything they offer me, either. I want an apology.” At John's questioning look, he added: “Not to me. To Sherlock.”

John nodded, happy that Greg was here, and that Greg was Greg.

“Sherlock?” he called into the flat, that was dark and quiet and peaceful and therefore, decidedly Sherlock-less. Or that's how it would have been, before; sometimes Sherlock was silent nowadays, finally delivering on that first promise of sometimes I don't talk for days on end. It was a bit new, and at times a bit unsettling.

A grunt came from inside the dark hole that was Sherlock’s open bedroom door. Oh, John realised, Sherlock might have been sleeping. It was three in the morning. But sleeping at conventional hours had never exactly been a thing with Sherlock before.

After a minute, he went over to the open bedroom door. He was buzzing a bit with alcohol, and with Greg's words.

“Sherlock?” he repeated, a bit more softly in case Sherlock was really sleeping.
“Yes,” Sherlock's voice came, gravelly and dark with sleep.

“Did I wake you?”

“Yes.”

Oh. “Sorry.”

“'s all right. Was having a bad dream anyway.” There was a rustle of sheets as Sherlock turned over.

“Why was your door open?” Whenever Sherlock did go to bed, even if it wasn't often, he closed the door.

A slight pause. “Wanted to hear you come home.”

Something was pulling at John's chest, as though there was a rope in the centre of it and someone was tugging on it. He swallowed. “What were you dreaming about?” he finally ventured, a bit uncertainly.

There was a long silence, and he had started to think that maybe Sherlock really, really didn't want to say or had maybe even dropped back into sleep, when the response came: “South America.”

“Is that bad?” John's heart was beating a bit too quickly.

“Not generally. Generally South America is quite nice,” Sherlock said, “but in this case, yes, bad.”

John wasn't sure what to say to that. He wished desperately that Sherlock would just tell him, would just share with him the things that had happened, so he could start to identify the things that sometimes crossed over Sherlock's face. He stood there for a while, feeling a bit helpless, a bit drunk, a lot all over the place, and then started to turn around to go to his own room.

“John?” Sherlock mumbled, sounding as though he had his face half buried in his pillow.

“Yeah?”

“How's Lestrade?”

John was a bit surprised at that. “Good, I guess. They want him back on his old job.”

Sherlock laughed, a soft, low sound. “I hope he makes them beg.”

“I got the impression that was his intention.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock hummed, sounding pleased.

“You should come along next time.”

Sherlock was silent. Probably making a face of disgust into his pillow at the idea of spending his evening having a drink in a plebeian, dull pub full of see-through, excruciatingly boring people.

“Well, good night,” John eventually said, forcing himself to turn away from the small black hole that was Sherlock's bedroom, gently pulling at him.

“Night, John,” Sherlock responded, warm, quiet, still too impossible to believe.
It was when Mary texted him a *Hello, strange doctor.* that he realised, with a guilty shock, that he hadn't communicated with her in almost six days. It was something that he'd promised himself he wouldn't do, but it had still happened, almost without him noticing it – Sherlock had gone back to taking up so much space, so much mental room, that a lot of other things had been pushed aside.

He hadn't expected Mary to be one of them. It made him very uncomfortable. He quickly texted back a

*Hi! So sorry, been submerged for a bit. Want to come up for some air with me tomorrow night?*

Her *Yes please.* was almost reverberating with all the things she hadn't put in.

“What's her name?” Sherlock's low baritone interrupted his thoughts.

He looked over at where his flatmate was sitting, curled up with his computer, looking slightly ridiculous wrapped up tightly in his robe, hair tousled and still drying from a shower, face even paler than usual, highlighted by the laptop's cold glare.

“How did you –” John began, then stopped himself as Sherlock glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. “No, don't tell me, please. It's, um, it's Mary.”

“Going out with her tomorrow evening?” Sherlock had refocused on the screen.

“Yes,” John said.

“Good.”

John waited for a bit, and wasn't sure for what. Maybe for Sherlock asking him why John hadn't mentioned her yet; but John wasn't sure he'd be able to answer that with anything but a spiteful *because you don't ever mention anything from the past two years, either* or a painfully truthful *because I can't bear to have you two meet.*

“Going well, then?” Sherlock eventually said.

John looked at the *Yes please* on the screen of his phone, feeling something unpleasant churning in his stomach. He cleared his throat. “Yeah, actually. Since you weren't around to mess it up.” He'd meant it as a joke, but it didn't quite come out that way.

Sherlock looked at him for a second, flicking his eyes over John's face. But what he found there didn't prompt a response, and he turned back to the computer.

Mary was calm and communicative and all of the wonderful things she always was. “I need to know if you're still in this with me, John.”

“I am. Of course I am,” he told her, picking up her hand and kissing her knuckles one by one.

She believed him, because she wanted to, and because she loved him, and because she knew or at least wanted to believe that he loved her, too, and he willed for that to be enough and for the small bit of coldness in his chest to go away.
He was lying in bed with Mary. She was curled around him, sleeping deeply; their naked bodies were entwined and slightly sticky against each other – they had melted together after their session of sex into which John had done his very best to translate his continuing desire for their relationship, to their mutual satisfaction. Sex with Mary was rather wonderful, it really was.

So he was lying in bed with her, focusing with a post-sex slowness and dazedness on the slightly moist heat of her breath on his chest, on the brush of her nipples against him and on the way her leg was curled around his hip, when his phone buzzed on the night stand.

He was close enough to it to grab it; Mary didn't stir.

_Bored._

_SH_

He had to forcefully suppress the laugh bubbling up in him – Mary made a small moaning sound in her sleep as his chest shook. It was the first time Sherlock had sent him a truly non-practical night-time text since he'd returned, and it was the first time that he'd told John he was bored. It was such a simple, stupid thing and it made John feel a powerful rush of unexpected relief, like Sherlock was finally _really_ back. A Sherlock who didn't get bored at two in the morning just wasn't the same person.

He got his silent laughter under control and took the bait gladly.

_I'm in bed with my girlfriend, Sherlock. Find something to entertain you._

The response was swift. Sherlock was probably doing nothing else than waiting for his texts to alleviate the dreaded boredom.

_I gather you're bored too, then._

_SH_

John rolled his eyes, though the smile on his face widened into a grin.

_No. Being in bed with a sexual partner isn't generally regarded as boring._

His phone buzzed again a couple of seconds later.

_But my sparkling intellectual wit is still more interesting, judging from the speed of your texting. No surprise there._

_SH_

Oh yes, there it was, the bit of Sherlock that hadn't been around lately.

_She's sleeping, you nitwit._

He found himself waiting with a pleasant nervous feeling for the next buzz.

_And you prefer texting with me to watching her sleep, which is, I gather, universally regarded as the pinnacle of romance. I'm flattered, John._

_SH_
John chuckled lightly, and put the phone on the bed next to him, trying to placate the happiness blooming inside him. It was too much for this hour, that should have been peaceful and sleep-filled. Instead it was Sherlock-filled. His phone buzzed again.

*John?*

*SH*

Sherlock, checking if he was still there. He squeezed his eyes shut and thought of the many times in the past years that he'd wished he could just send Sherlock a *Sherlock?*, like he'd always done when Sherlock took too long to respond and he was growing worried, and there would be a *I'm fine. In a taxi. On my way. Solved the case. You took too long to get there. SH* appearing on his screen. There was so much to wonder at in this world. His phone trilled again.

*John, are you there?*

*SH*

And he remembered what Sherlock had said – *I keep thinking that you'll be gone too* – and how he'd put John's hand on his shoulder after that, allowing him to touch the life thrumming inside him.

*I'm here. Not going anywhere.*

He tried to imagine what Sherlock looked like right now, probably in his new robe, not quite as brilliantly blue as the last one, maybe standing by the window, maybe lying on the couch, his phone on his chest when he wasn't texting John.

*It would be awkward if you were, with your girlfriend in bed with you. SH*

John smiled. Before he could respond, Sherlock sent him a new text.

*I think I need a case, John.

SH*

And rapidly, John typed out the:

*Oh thank God.*

–

Ian texted him the day after:

*We're having a pity party dinner. Care to join? Tomorrow, eight, at Sharon's. Ian*

and because they were his friends, and because they had been the most insistent force in his life that had propelled him back into caring about other people again, and mostly because he actually, genuinely liked them, he knew he had to go. Though the 'pity party' descriptor made him feel a bit uneasy, now that things had changed so much – it was honestly like they were inviting him in for something that he by definition couldn't be part of anymore. They were all still in very different stages of grief – Sharon's boy had died a mere eight months ago, Ian's girlfriend of seven years had been dead for a bit over a year and a half, and Bill had already been in the group when John joined, so his loss had been about two years ago. Sometimes John worried about Bill, about his continued mourning that professionally he knew to be drawn-out and a bit too intense; but then he remembered
himself, and how he had been for a while, a long, long while, and couldn't help but feel like a wanker for judging other people's responses to tragedy. And then of course he wasn't really in any stage of grief anymore; though sometimes he had to consciously remind himself of that, and sometimes it felt like he was grieving something, not Sherlock anymore, because the man who was back with him was definitely Sherlock, even with the newness, the dark spots, he was still fully, completely Sherlock – but the life that they had had before, maybe, that had been just that little bit less complicated, that little bit less under pressure. Still, he was lucky, so lucky to get as much back as he had. So immensely lucky a feeling of overwhelming gratitude sometimes sprang on him unexpectedly; only a couple of days ago he'd had to stop for a moment while he was examining a patient's armpit, and he'd come close to crying, and the poor lady had thought for a moment he'd discovered a cancer lump on her.

Sure. I'll bring the tissues. J

he responded, and then felt grateful for Ian, who was still very much struggling, but who had a kind of macabre humour that was nowhere near as cutting as Bill's, but still quite refreshing. It was something the four of them shared – there had been times when they'd been sitting together, all flattened by their respective sorrows, all crushed, all motionless, and then Bill or Ian would make a crack that would probably have made a lot of other people in the same circumstances cry, and it had always helped. Sometimes it had made them cry and it had still helped.

“I'm going out tomorrow night,” he told Sherlock, who was standing in the kitchen, inspecting the sink for some reason.

“With Mary?” he asked, sounding uninterested.

“No. Friends.”

Sherlock turned towards him. “Friends?”

“I do have them,” John said, somewhat annoyed. He didn't want to explain that he'd found these friends through Sherlock, indirectly, because Sherlock really didn't need any more proof that John's life revolved around him. John being there was already more than enough proof for that.

Sherlock studied him for a long moment. “Okay,” he then said, lightly, and turned back to the sink. “There's an interesting mould growing in here, John.”

—

“Hullo, doctor sir,” Ian greeted him as he opened the door. He looked rather terrible; there were dark circles under his blue eyes, and his longish hair was lank and greasy. “Come on in. Sharon's in the kitchen and Bill's being a prick and delivering a running commentary on her CD collection.”

“Nothing out of the ordinary, then,” John smiled.

“Yeah, well, it is a pretty terrible collection, to be honest.”

He followed Ian in; he'd been in Sharon's house once before – they tried to switch around the location of their get-togethers so none of their respective households, if any, would have to suffer four depressed people who liked to make inappropriate death jokes with too much regularity. John thought for a moment about what it would be like to have them come over to Baker Street, and if it would be in any way possible to get Sherlock to go out if there wasn't really any reason for it, apart from not making people from his grief counselling group profoundly uncomfortable by meeting, alive and kicking, the reason he'd been crying and swearing and hitting and scratching and struggling
for the past two years. He doubted Sherlock would just go away if he asked. But he decided to file
those thoughts away for later as he went into the kitchen.

“Oh no you don't,” Sharon was saying as she was pouring a delicious-looking tomato sauce over an
oven tray filled with penne, “you don't get to say anything about Boy George, you hear me. Not a
single word.”

“I'd off myself if I had this in my house,” Bill responded, sounding offended, “not just try to, like I've
done before.”

Ah, John thought with a familiar cynicism, normality.

“I don't have my medical stuff with me, Bill, so do restrain yourself,” he said, announcing his
presence.

Bill shot him a long-suffering look as his hello, and continued leafing through the discs while Sharon
gave John an oven-mittened wave and a rather under-animated smile. She didn't look great.

“I've brought wine,” John said, putting the bottle on the table, “so we can get drunk and be depressed
without our usual inhibitions. Also, tissues.”

“You actually brought tissues?” Ian asked as he came in. “Brilliant.”

“I was going to just order pizza,” Sharon said, inspecting her work, “but then I realised that I have to
pretend to be functional. So I made pasta.” She popped the tray into the oven.

“It smells delicious. But you know you don't have to pretend to be functional around us,” John said,
taking a seat. Bill came over to the table and started uncorking the bottle.

“I'd prefer pizza anyway,” he grunted, struggling with the cork, but he flashed a smile at Sharon to
show her that he didn't mean it. He always softened his regular jokes somehow, without doing
anything at all to take the edge of his sharper ones.

“So, how is everyone?” John said slowly as Bill filled his glass without asking him if wanted any –
there was no need.

“Not great,” Sharon said, frowning. John sent her a sympathetic look, which she accepted with a
half-shrug. “Just really miss him,” she said.

“Well, I'm absolutely spiffy,” Bill said, knocking back a too-big mouthful of wine.

“Suicidal,” Ian spoke quietly, a bit too quietly. They all turned to him, knowing when someone was
a little more serious than just serious.

“Oh,” John said, studying Ian's face.

“You can use the Boy George CD to slash your wrists – you'd be taking down a thing of horror with
you,” Bill said, but his eyes were focused sharply on Ian, which was his version of concerned
listening.

Ian chuckled bitterly. “Yeah, that'd work.”

“Did something happen?” John asked.

“Apart from Ellen dying, you mean?” Even Bill winced slightly. Ian looked unapologetic. “It's our
anniversary,” he finally said.
“Oh, shit,” Bill said after a moment’s pause. He pulled Ian's glass toward him and filled it up to the brim. “Drink it. Now,” he ordered. “Doctor's orders. Because I can read John's mind and he's thinking it too.” John wasn't, not really, but he had learned to leave his professionalism at the door; coping wasn't always healthy, but then it wouldn't be coping if it was. Ian slammed back the glass, tears glistening in his eyes.

Sharon reached over and put an unsteady hand on Ian's shoulder. He smiled a half-smile, lips reddened by the wine. “Last year I was just still so depressed that I almost didn't notice it was our anniversary. She'd only... She'd been dead six months.” He picked at the table cloth. “I was high most of the time. Not really aware of the dates, usually.” They all nodded; all of them could at least imagine what he meant. “Now, though...” He let out a deep, long breath.

“There are no words,” John filled in quietly, after Ian had been silent for a bit.

“There really aren't,” he agreed. John recalled all too well what anniversaries meant; on the first anniversary of the day he'd met Sherlock, a mere four months after Sherlock's jump, he'd got the most pissed he'd ever been in his life and Greg had had to physically restrain him to stop him from breaking all of the things that could possibly break in Greg's living room. It wasn't one of his proudest moments. He gulped, realising once more with a painful clarity that he had been extremely lucky that Greg had come to look for him after John hadn't responded to any of his calls that day. It hadn't even been a date that had had particular meaning to him while Sherlock had been alive, but it had got that much bigger, monstrous even, after his death. After that, Ella had told him she thought group counselling might be a good idea for him. Make some new connections. Find some people down the same rabbit hole. He remembered scoffing at it, at her, at all of it, but then after two more months going anyway, because there was literally nowhere else to go, nothing else to do, and fuck it all.

“Words are absolute shit,” Bill said, earnestly. “Alcohol, though, that works.” And he filled Ian's glass again. He responded to John's measured glance with a look that clearly said to hell with that, John, he needs it right now, and John couldn't argue.

“Food works too,” Sharon said, and got up to get the penne out of the oven, “and fuck you guys if you think you're not going to eat this just because you're crying.”

“We're not crying,” John said.

“Yet,” Sharon said pointedly.

She ladled pasta onto their plates – despite the nervous cramp in his stomach, John dug in. It was delicious; he picked that up even through his worried preoccupation.

“Ian,” Sharon said, softly, “don't kill yourself. If you do, we'll kill you. Revive you, and kill you.”

They all had a nervous chuckle at that. John felt his stomach twisting as Sherlock popped into his head, unbidden. Revive you. Ian wiped his eyes. “Yeah, I... I know. I'll try to...” John could tell that he was looking for a joke to crack, but then he seemed to give up and just said: “Just be around me for a bit.”

“Mate,” Bill said, “it's not like we've got anything else to do.” Ian gave him a watery smile. “Though,” he continued, “I do think there was this thing on the telly tonight, so maybe when you're not suicidal anymore, you can tell us, so I can get back to that.” He smiled, showing his teeth, but he allowed his large hand to linger on Ian's shoulder after he clapped it on, and his fingers squeezed him for several seconds. Bill, hard-edged Bill, rough, rude Bill, letting Ian know I'm here.
“Can we please just watch a ridiculous action movie tonight?” Ian finally asked, after they'd eaten. He looked even younger than his 26 years.

“Only if you want me to die, too,” Bill said.

“We do,” John said easily, “you're a fucking arsehole, you're useless and you eat all of the food.”

“In that case, bring on the machine guns.” Bill said, raising his eyes to the ceiling in a mock-heroic gesture.

The movie was terrible. Ian and Bill improved it immensely by overlaying it with their own dialogue. John revisited his thought that they should form a comical duo, but then remembered that most of the audience would be traumatised by the end of any show of theirs. Sharon's husband joined them, a quiet, mousy man obviously grieving in his own right.

Before he left, as everyone was getting their coats, John went to stand with Ian for a bit, who was standing in the middle of the living room, looking lost. “Do you have somewhere to go tonight?” he asked under his breath.

Ian half-shrugged, then nodded. “I think I'm going to stay with my mum.”

“Yes, do,” John nodded. “We know how shit it is,” he continued, quietly, “and you know in return that you can have it be shit with us. If you need me tonight, call me, all right. No matter what time it is. No offing yourself.” Ian nodded, and the way he looked John straight in the eye was already reassuring. He'd got almost painfully adept at reading signs of actual danger, and it didn't seem like Ian was really desperate; just very depressed and in need of not being alone.

“Thanks,” Ian said.

Sharon gave John a fleeting hug as he said goodbye to her at the door – a rare gesture of physicality. “You haven't said anything about yourself tonight,” she said. She could be quite observant at times.

“Yes, well...” he evaded, then remembered who he was talking to. “Ian needed the attention tonight. Besides, you lot really don't need me talking about getting a new chance.”

“God, John,” she said, “we're not just all people who have lost something. We're also your friends. You know, people who do care sometimes about how you are.”

“You're stronger than I would be,” he said, and meant it. Her pale face folded into a small smile that said many different things all at once. He was struck with a sudden surge of affection for her, as she stood there, a slight, mousy woman with hair the shade of night, blending into the fabric of the evening around them. “I'm fine,” he then added, because he had to offer her something, even if it was so much more complex than that. “Fine.”

“All right.” She seemed to accept it. “Are you coming to the session next week?”

“Dunno. It doesn't seem fair,” he said, truthfully.

“Do it for the beer afterwards.”

He chuckled lightly. “I can have beer with you guys whenever I want.”

“Yes, you can. Whenever we're not having beer with you we're just wallowing in misery, so it's not like we'd ever say no.”
And it was too true, too blunt, too real, and it was perfect. He smiled at her.

“Goodnight, John,” she said, a pale, thin figure full of grief, and full of unspent love.

“Goodnight, Sharon.”

—

Deep in the night, jerked awake by something he couldn't identify, he sent Ian a text: *Still alive?*

While he waited for a response, he listened for a bit to the soft sounds of Sherlock shuffling around the flat, apparently looking for something, talking to himself mutedly, the low timbre of his voice carrying up the stairs even to his bedroom. When Ian's *Yes, doctor sir. Thanks. Ian* had fallen into his inbox, he closed his eyes and felt sleep curling itself around him as he listened to the incomprehensible, soft tones of Sherlock's deep voice coming in at the fringes of his slowing consciousness, filtering into his dreams.
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

CHAPTER 5

Sherlock was out when he came home from his shift at the clinic at four. John spotted his violin lying on the sofa, and smiled a bit – Sherlock hadn't played anything since he'd returned, or at least not while John had been listening, but now there were composition papers scattered over the coffee table and his bow crossed over the violin that clearly suggested that he'd been playing. Good. Bit by bit, Sherlock seemed to be re-emerging.

He went to the fridge, steeling himself, but when he opened it there was nothing out of the ordinary – and not a lot that was ordinary, either. He sighed. He'd need to go to the store in the morning. He stood for a second, debating whether he should call out for some curry, but decided he couldn't be bothered if Sherlock wasn't here. He picked out some eggs that he remembered buying and was therefore relatively sure wouldn't kill him, unless Sherlock had been doing things to them.

As he stood, folding over his omelette in the pan, he couldn't help but think back to Sarah, who he'd run into for the first time since Sherlock's return due to unmatching shifts. She'd offered him a clumsy but sincere congratulations – he didn't really mind that much that people were awkward around the subject, because he couldn't imagine there was anyone out there who had a lot of social experience in saying hey mate, glad your other mate who you thought was dead, isn't. Sorry you had such a shit time for a while. She'd told him he looked good. He wasn't sure whether she meant it. And then there had been something in her demeanor as she said, “So now it's back to the two of you,” and he knew what it was – they had parted ways because of Sherlock, in the end, just like most of his relationships had fizzled out because of Sherlock; Sherlock, who took up too much space, who stole John away from his dates, who didn't bother to remember his girlfriends’ names, who was thoroughly dismissive of them. But in the end it was still really because of John, who allowed all of that, who responded to his incessant texts during dates, who said sorry, but I need to get home usually with only a small twinge of regret, and who easily cancelled plans at the smallest indication from Sherlock that he needed John to come on a case or for something else.

And damn him if he wasn't doing it again – he recalled his date with Mary a couple of days ago, which had been very nice, but of which he mostly remembered that he and Sherlock had texted back and forth for half an hour in the night. There was something seriously wrong with that.

He slipped the omelette onto a plate and stared at it for a bit, as though willing it to explain to him the meaning of it all. Fuck, he was well underway to loving Mary. He wasn't kidding himself when he told himself that. But what Sherlock meant to him was just so different from all the other relationships in his life; it was huge, suffocating at times, it was sometimes unhealthy in how it pushed other things out of the way.

It had been an easy thing to just let be while Sherlock was alive, because his mere presence gave John an energy that he had rarely felt before in his life; and despite the consistent assumptions from other people, that had been enough for him. He'd suppressed his unmistakable attraction to Sherlock surprisingly easily, explaining it away as a side-effect of the exciting life they led and the closeness
they shared. In many ways it had been a relationship, anyway – there was no one else he'd ever shared a bank account with, or argued with over what to have for dinner, or waited up for when they were out. It had been enough most times, especially after he'd progressed far enough to allow himself to have sexual fantasies about Sherlock, kept so carefully under wraps he seriously didn't think Sherlock knew about them – and the fantasy was enough.

But then Sherlock had died, leaving nothing behind but the suspended gravity of a black hole.

And amidst the wreckage of his life, caught in the maelstrom of the shipwreck that had been him, John had realised that he'd lost something that hadn't reached its full potential, that could have given him more if he had just taken the leap. After the guilt, the overpowering guilt at not having seen, came the regret at chances not taken, and the hatred for his own cowardice. He'd shared this with Greg to some extent, almost helpless, in the senseless time just after Sherlock's death, and with Ian, Sharon and Bill to another extent. None of them knew the true scope, but they knew bits of it – and he had told all of them that if only he were to get another chance, he'd do things differently.

But it was hard. Sherlock was real again. He was full-bodied again, he was himself again, he had his quirks and his flaws and his own infuriating way of doing things; and John's fantasies and wishes were in the end all built on just a shadowy mirror of Sherlock, because no one could re-imagine Sherlock with all of his complexities and idiosyncrasies, not even John. It was all built on a shadow of Sherlock that did what John wanted in the deepest of his thoughts – and there was absolutely no way to be sure that the real Sherlock would do those things. It felt like too big a gamble, putting what they were slowly regaining under such pressure so soon. And there was Mary, who he honestly loved, but who, he knew with a raw stab of guilt, was getting slowly but surely overshadowed by the bright, hot glare of Sherlock, that was growing as Sherlock gradually found his way back into life.

When he finally cut into his omelette, it wasn't even warm anymore. He closed his eyes, confusion teeming inside his skull.

His phone pinged. He flicked it open. Sherlock.

*I'm having a drink with Lestrade.*

*SH*

John blinked.

*Are you joking?*

Sherlock was still a fast texter; a second later the response arrived.

*I take offense at your implications*  
*that I'm incapable of social contact*  
*with Lestrade. But yes, I am joking.*  
*Evidently, I'm at the Yard. Case.*  
*Need you here.*  

*SH*

John shook his head at the screen, smiling, feeling a lot lighter all of a sudden.

*Did you seriously just make a crack*  
*about being in a pub with Greg?*

He stuffed the remainder of the omelette into his mouth, and was slipping into his jacket when his phone pinged again.
God, and it made him feel alive, beating down the stairs, shouting out a goodbye to Mrs. Hudson, and hailing the first cab he saw – feeling important again, part of the Holmes-Watson team, someone who worked hard to keep these streets safe, who helped where he could. Sherlock had been a force of nature in his life, upsetting all the balances, uprooting everything in a way that made it possible to experience newness even at the age of 38, and after the fall, when he had finally emerged from the deepest depths of the bare, naked, painful missing of Sherlock, he’d also started missing the John that he had been with Sherlock. His life wasn’t very extraordinary without Sherlock, and that was something that he had accepted without bitterness, and with a whole lot of regret. The feeling he had when sitting impatiently in the cab was like a drink of water after months – no years, two years to be exact – in the desert.

He said hi to the officer manning the front desk at the Yard, who remembered him, and gave him a broad smile. He took the stairs to the homicide department two at a time.

Sherlock was standing in the middle of the office, stoic, tall, still dressed in his coat and scarf. Greg was standing next to him, while Sally Donovan seemed to be in the middle of an exposé to the both of them, gesticulating quite wildly, and as John approached Sherlock cut her off and said coldly: “You're getting old, Donovan. The past two years seem to have destroyed even more of your brain cells, which is quite the feat.” She scowled, then noticed John as he came up to them. He spared her a neutral glance, not entirely sure how to behave – the last time he’d seen her was at Sherlock’s funeral, when he’d wanted very badly to shut her up somehow, because she kept saying how sorry she was for how she’d treated Sherlock over the years. At least Anderson had been consistent, and had told John: “I’m sorry, doctor Watson, even though he was a premium arsehole.”

Greg smiled at him, looking a bit worn, and Sherlock looked at him for a moment as John took his place beside him, and a smile slipped across his face that seemed almost unconscious; after a second it was gone again. But his hand came up to grab at John's arm, the same way it had when they had been walking to the Chinese restaurant, the earliness, the shock of their reacquaintance roaring like a young waterfall around them. John noticed Greg's eyes flicking down to where Sherlock's fingers grasped at the seam of his sleeve, and he answered his gaze with – he wasn't even sure – surprise? Acceptance? Probably a tangible bit of happiness?


“And there is no reason to assume that it isn't,” Donovan interjected, frowning.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Except for the fact that it's obvious that the supposed suicide died before the supposed murdered.”

“Time of death is inconclusive, Sherlock,” Greg reminded him, but he was smiling slightly.

“I don't need Anderson's sloppy forensics. You just need to look at the scene to know that the man died before the woman, and that someone, either a very stupid killer or someone who didn't see how they were killed, then spent a lot of time making it look like he killed her.” Sherlock's eyes were flashing.

“Show us, then,” John said, and Sherlock released him and stalked over to the large board on the side of the room, where pictures of the crime scene had been pinned up.

They followed, Donovan scowling.
“So, back in homicide after all, then?” John asked Greg quietly as they made their way after Sherlock.

“Couldn't resist the siren song of gruesome death and sleepless nights,” Greg responded lightly. “I missed the team. And they missed me. Got a huge raise, though. And the apology that I wanted.”

“To Sherlock?”

“Yeah, didn't he tell you?”

John shook his head.

Greg shrugged. “I don't know if it meant much to him. But it did to me.”

John glanced at him with a small smile as they reached the wall, where Sherlock was already talking, pointing at the scuff marks on the carpeted floor, the pattern of the blood from the man's slashed wrists – post-mortem, almost certainly, because there wasn't enough of it – and the unexplained bruises on the man that were unlikely to be the result of anything else than a clubbing with a blunt object. John allowed the familiar, tingling feeling of admiration fill the pit of his stomach as he watched Sherlock in his element, finally a flurry of activity again, face shining with insight.

—

In the taxi, Sherlock sat brooding tensely, undoubtedly running his mind over the details that still needed explaining and that would give them a lead.

“Why didn't you text me when you were at the scene?” John asked him.

Sherlock ignored him for a long minute, probably finishing a train of thought, before he said: “You were at the clinic.”

It was true, but John hadn't thought Sherlock would know that, let alone consider it an impediment to come to a crime scene. “Yeah, I guess so,” he said, wondering a bit.

Sherlock fixed him with a short stare. “I'll let you know next time,” he said, then returned to his thoughts, brow furrowed.

London flashed by, oppressive, shimmering, teeming with life. Sherlock stared out the window.

“Sherlock?” John ventured.

Sherlock said nothing.

John pushed on. “Greg said the Yard apologised to you.”

Sherlock turned to him, face curiously blank. “Yes.”

“Well, who did it? What did they say?”

“Chief Superintendent Ruskin himself,” Sherlock responded, profoundly unanimated. “He was disgustingly humble. I stopped listening after a while.”

“Is that the wanker –”

“The one you decked, yes.” Sherlock's mouth twitched in a momentary smile, before he turned back to look out the window.
John grinned to himself. “Thinking about that still gives me such joy.”

Sherlock hummed non-committally, but then said: “Me too.” John remembered how they’d ran together that night, linked together by their handcuffs and later their hands, needing to feel the other’s presence, caught in a swirl of adrenaline and fear, but profoundly, deeply, in it together. He coughed. He wanted to say more, but without Sherlock’s face to go on, just the sharp, untelling line of his nose and cheek against the bright lights of the street, he decided not to.

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Back at home, Sherlock paced the evening away, talking to himself in low riddles, slipping into different languages at times, mostly Spanish from what John could tell, his long hands shaping and molding unseen things around him. It was almost, but not quite, the way he’d acted before when he was deep into a case – what was different wasn’t more than just a fleeting impression of a deeper physicality, of an awareness of body that was new, that Sherlock seemed to have developed as his hands landed on himself as often as on something else, sliding his hands over his own face, touching his sides lightly. And the Spanish. The Spanish was new. It was the first time John had seen him quite so animated since his return, and at one point he went upstairs just to get away from it for a bit, to try to get the strange tightness in his chest to abate, and – yes – to get his rather unwelcome arousal under control.

“Fuck,” he swore as he sank down on his bed. Leave it to Sherlock to be dead for two years and then return, as ridiculously and weirdly gorgeous as before, as completely arresting in his intensity, and now with a fluidity of movement, of hands, of self-centred physicality that shot straight down to John’s groin. He wondered for a bit if Sherlock's new attention to his body had been prompted by the unimaginable pain he would have been in the weeks after his fall, then tried to shut off that train of thought; it was unbearable to think about. Either way, Sherlock's detached brilliance at crime scenes had always been at least a little arousing to John, but it had never been anything he couldn't control; but now Sherlock touching himself while thinking, a combination of complete mental focus and a bodily there-ness that had never really been there before, and God, Spanish – Spanish, sultry in itself, absolutely maddening in Sherlock's mouth, with that voice.

“God, what is my life,” he muttered to himself, pressing his eyes shut. He couldn't block out Sherlock's voice – it was so low and deep it carried up to his bedroom, incomprehensible, fluid. His trousers were tight, and, cursing himself somewhat, he decided that a quick wank would be easier and faster than trying to will his erection away.

It felt... strange. Sherlock had been a rather constant source of sexual fantasy before he'd died, taking a pretty prominent place in John's collection of wank fodder, but afterward it had just become so painful, so horrible a notion to entertain that even after John had regained some of his sexual feeling (after he'd become aware of his body again, after he'd progressed naturally, almost unwillfully, to forgiving his body for still existing) he'd shied far away from his sexual fantasies about Sherlock or had at least tried to. At first it had been rather like trying very hard not to think about the fact that he was now in a new flat, alone, and Sherlock was in a cold hole in the ground – and, well, that had obviously burst through the barriers of his control with a force that had shocked him, and had often ended with him slipping from sexual arousal to a deep, dark depression that had him gripping the pillow in misery as he came with more pain than pleasure, the memory of Sherlock, grey, in a splash of crimson on pavement burned on his retina. It was another one of those things that had got better, though, and as all things around him gradually lost their monstrous knife edges and eased back into a more mundane, rounded-off reality, his sexual thoughts around Sherlock and the new sense of terrible finality surrounding them were much more easily left alone, and new things left new impressions on him, and then there was Mary, materialising like a beacon in a fog, a safe haven for his shipwreck, and that had changed things for a while.
Now, though. He shook his head at himself, at the extent of his excitement – it was almost like he was a teenager again, the way his erection was insistent, wayward, stubborn, silencing all other thoughts in his head. He undid his fly and tugged his trousers down over his hips. He closed his eyes as he slipped his hand over his cock, tugging it quickly to full mast. He reached over to his night stand, got out his bottle of lube and pulled a tissue out of a box, feeling a little ridiculous as he squirted the lotion between his palms and warmed it. But he wanked himself quickly, working his thumb over the head of his cock between sure, steady strokes, leaning back on his bed as the pleasure soon began to press in at his edges, resting his weight back on his other hand, legs spreading more widely out of their own accord. He didn't even try to force himself to think of Mary. It was obvious it wouldn't work. Because Sherlock. The voice coming from downstairs was a constant undercurrent, deep, thrilling John as he allowed himself to, for the first time in ages, think about the curve of Sherlock's back and the small, tantalising hint of buttock as he'd stood in his ridiculous sheet in Buckingham Palace; the maddening way he was too tall and his shirts were just that tiny bit too small, buttons straining, practically begging to be torn off; his angry stride, the steady arrogance with which he moved at crime scenes, even more arousing to John because it was so natural, Sherlock obviously being quite oblivious to how utterly delicious he looked; and now the way he'd let his hand rest on his eyes, trailing his fingers downward to his cheeks, as though trying to reassure himself that he was still there as he talked to himself in rapid Spanish; and ohgod; fantasy swooped in to replace memory – Sherlock turning to John and pulling him in by his collar, crushing their mouths together, hard and demanding as John imagined it would be, not gentle and sweet like with most of his girlfriends; Sherlock finally yielding up some of himself, allowing John to take over bit by bit, releasing some of the control, straining up to meet him, pale, angled, long stretches of chest and thigh and neck; saying **John** in a new way, and **please**, so rare an occurrence in reality, **please, John** –

John came into his hand silently and intensely, biting down on the groan waiting in his throat. He crumpled in on himself with the deep pleasure of it. He drew in a shuddering breath as he came down from his high, and then allowed himself a couple of seconds to recover from what had been quite a strong orgasm – he wiped at himself with the tissue, head a bit light.

Then, as the world gradually filtered back into focus, he heard it: “John! For Christ's sake, **John!**” Sherlock's voice was urgent. On instinct, John pulled up his trousers immediately and stumbled down the stairs, fastening his zipper only just in time to appear in the kitchen.

“What is it?” he all but panted, almost expecting to see Sherlock held hostage by three armed thugs or something – but Sherlock was still just standing in the living room, facing him, hands clasped behind his back.

“Where were –” Sherlock began, then stopped himself, a vague sort of surprise sparking in his eyes as he took in John's appearance. **Fuck**, John thought to himself; Sherlock could obviously tell immediately that he'd had an orgasm not a minute ago, he'd be able to pick up the signs immediately – still sweating, breathing heavily, flushed, trousers not quite as arranged as they should be, facial muscles still a bit slack. Sherlock's eyes widened, perceptible even to John, and his mouth twitched into a smile and then bloomed into a grin. John squirmed with embarrassment.

“Look, please just don't say anything,” he said.

“I wasn't going to,” Sherlock said, but he looked infinitely amused.

“Yes, you were,” John said, passing a hand over his face to block out Sherlock's smile for a second.

“John,” Sherlock said, face rearranging itself into something resembling normalcy, “I would never dare to comment on your masturbatory habits.”

John rolled his eyes. “You've dared often enough in the past.”
“Yes, well,” Sherlock said airily, and then uncharacteristically didn't finish the sentence. “I hadn't realised you'd left. I was talking to you, you know.”

“You were talking in Spanish,” John pointed out.

Sherlock looked surprised. “I was?”

“Yes. Glad to hear you noticed my absence this once, but there isn't much I can contribute if you're talking to me in a language I don't speak.”

Sherlock spared him another amused look before dropping down into the couch. John was about to turn around to retreat to the safety of the kitchen when Sherlock said: “So it turns you on, does it?”

John froze. “What?” he squeaked out, the fear pounding in his gut that Sherlock's next words would be the way I speak or the way I think or me speaking Spanish or just, simply, the most true of all, me.

“Being back in the game,” Sherlock said, and John could almost feel his smug smile.

He coughed as he went into the kitchen. “I don't –” he started, and then quickly jumped on the opportunity: “Okay, yes, if you must know. Now, let's please return to the idea that you weren't going to say anything.”

“It's perfectly healthy and normal, John,” Sherlock said, voice practically reverberating with silent mirth. “And nothing I didn't know. Anyway, I can relate,” he added as an afterthought, suddenly sounding quite sobered.

And God, that really wasn't what John needed to hear right now, the idea that Sherlock was excited too, in more than just a mental sense, that he also felt that rush, that heat, even if it was because of different reasons. Definitely not because of John. But still, it felt too intimate, this knowledge that Sherlock was also caught in it, in an arousal of sorts, though John had never really known to what extent Sherlock ever had physical sensations. He'd always been so dismissive of his body, but it was true that it seemed a bit less so now, as though he'd learned to appreciate it more and – no, stop, definitely not the train of thought he needed right now, just after an amazing orgasm just thinking about Sherlock looking at him with lust and invitation in his eyes. He forced himself to focus on the cupboards and started rummaging through them for some teacups.

“I'm missing something, John,” Sherlock said, obviously displeased with himself, “I need you to come with me to the crime scene to have another look.”

“Okay. Sure,” John replied, not even jumping on the opportunity to mock Sherlock for missing a detail because he was so happy for the change of subject. “Just tell me when you want to be off.”

“Finish your tea first,” Sherlock said, “and have something to eat, too.”

“What about you?”

“I'm fine.” John could practically hear the eye roll.

“How long has it been since you've eaten?”

Sherlock offered nothing in return but silence.

“I'm fixing you some toast,” John said decisively. “You and your eating. Seriously, Sherlock. It's not okay.”
“I can do without food for a long time,” Sherlock grumbled.

“Yeah, you and your whole my body only holds my mind back thing. It's bollocks and you know it. Your mind and your body aren't opposed to each other, you know. They support each other. Your brain needs food just as much as the rest of you.” He flicked on the kettle and checked the sell-by date on the milk.

“It's not –” Sherlock began to argue, then seemed to reconsider. “I just forget about eating when I'm alone,” he said and then made a sound that was suspiciously like a yawn.

John stilled, tea cups in hand. “You're not alone, though.”

There was a small silence. “No, I guess not,” Sherlock said, and he sounded as though that was a revelation he hadn't had yet.

John popped the toast in the toaster and let the tea steep. He forced himself to step into the living room instead of hiding back in the kitchen; the atmosphere between them was somewhat strange now, and there were still things that needed confronting, and maybe a moment of strangeness was exactly the right time for it.

Sherlock observed him coming to stand next to the couch with a half-raised eyebrow. John picked his words carefully, feeling a bit out of his depth. “Were you alone a lot? Before?”

Sherlock's gaze was tight, but he held it. “Evidently,” Sherlock said, falling back on his favourite word. “I was supposed to be dead and hiding from a whole network of gangsters.”

“So there was no one... No one you could...”

“John,” Sherlock sighed, “do we really need to do this?”

John bit back his I fucking deserve this, Sherlock, because he'd already expressed enough of it, and maybe Sherlock also deserved something in all of this. “I'd like you to include me in it,” he finally said, uncomfortably.

“I faked my death so that you wouldn't have to be included,” Sherlock countered, and he sounded genuinely annoyed. “It wouldn't be logical to make you go through all of it by hindsight.”

“Well, it's not over, you're still going through it, whether you like it or not,” John said, a bit more snippily than he'd intended. “And I'm back here with you, and I don't understand any of it.”

Sherlock frowned deeply. “Why isn't it enough that I did this for you? For all of you? Why is everyone still in a strop with me? After two years? After all I did to keep you safe?” He looked away from John.

John licked his lips. “You can't imagine what you put me through,” he finally said.

“I can,” Sherlock said quietly, not looking at him. “I went through it too.”

And maybe that was true in a way, but it was also very untrue in a way, so he said: “Damn you if you think we went through the same thing, Sherlock.”

Sherlock jerked around to look back at him, anger pulling at his mouth. “You lost me. Well, John, I lost you too. I didn't know if I would ever see you again. At least you knew you wouldn't. At least you could start to build something new.”
“God, not that again,” John burst out. “Do you really think I could start to build something new after I'd been made to believe my best friend had been lying to me all this time and then apparently was desperate enough to throw himself off a roof in front of my eyes, while I hadn't seen any of it coming? Really?”

“You were doing okay, weren't you? You have all these new... friends and Mary, or don't you?”

There was so much going on in this conversation, too much, and they were losing direction again – he wanted to say well then, why did you come back just as I was, indeed, finally getting back on my feet or do you seriously think I believed that you were a fraud, do you really think you're that brilliant, you didn't fool me for longer than a minute, I knew something was wrong and I never managed to completely shake that feeling or just you wanker or just, a bit more desperately please just let me in, please. He couldn't say all of them, so he opted for: “We went through completely different things. I'm pretty sure of it. And that's okay, except for the fact that I actually have absolutely no clue what it is that you went through. You must understand how hard that is for me.”

Sherlock looked at him for a long moment, and his face softened somewhat, but John could tell that he didn't, he didn't understand, not really. As the seconds ticked away, the anger on his face was replaced by a growing confusion. “Why do you want to know?”

“I just want to try to understand why you are the way you are now,” John said, throat tight.

“I'm not different,” Sherlock said, voice clipped.

“Yes you are,” John simply responded.

There was another long silence as they stared at each other. Finally, Sherlock's eyes flicked down. “I've had to kill a lot of people. I've had a lot of people try to kill me. But I won, every time.” He caught John's eyes again. “Enough?” he asked, face stony.

It really wasn't, of course. John opened his mouth to say so, but then this happened: “Please, John,” Sherlock said.

And a stone dropped into John's stomach – a hot, teeming ball of things, inextricably bound up with each other, a mix of shock at hearing Sherlock say please, of strange guilt at having used those exact same words to come just now, of worry at the way Sherlock's face kept returning to that mask, of anger at Sherlock's continued unwillingness, of sadness at the knowledge that Sherlock's past two years must have been nothing short of horrific, of frustration at the way he kept being shut out, and lots of things that he couldn't untwist from each other.

He looked at Sherlock, not knowing how to reconcile the plea with the utter blankness Sherlock's face was presenting him.

“Okay,” he said weakly. “Let's just get to the crime scene. But I'm not going until you eat this toast.” Sherlock didn't say anything, but accepted the plate.

In the cab, Sherlock grabbed John's hand unexpectedly. John jerked at the sudden contact, then relaxed into the touch, feeling his heart beating in his ears. After a few seconds, he decided to follow his urge, and threaded his fingers through Sherlock's, cursing the leather gloves silently. Sherlock let him without comment. John glanced down at their hands, and wondered when this had become normal in their friendship. If he was honest it wasn't exactly normal in a friendship, but then, hardly any of this qualified as a normal friendship, anyway. But even then, this physicality – Sherlock's hand in his hair in that first moment when he hadn't been able stop himself from vomiting, Sherlock grabbing his hand at the Chinese restaurant and holding it almost all the way through, Sherlock
putting his fingers on his shoulder to show John that he had a hold over him, Sherlock brushing up against him to grab a teacup John couldn't reach, Sherlock grabbing his sleeve and hanging onto it as John joined him at the Yard, and now this – it was new in its quiet consistency. Did it have to do with Sherlock's body, then? Had he seen how it was more than just transport in the weeks of agony that must have held him in an unbearable limbo after his jump? Was he suddenly susceptible to the joys of physical contact? Or had something else happened, in Helsinki, in South America, wherever else he might have been? John swallowed, a lump forming in his throat. It was nice, it was, it was more than nice, it gave him such a feeling of – God, who was he – emotional connectedness that it sometimes was a bit hard to bear. But it was also confusing, only fanning the flame of his conflict further, as it quietly fed into his attraction to Sherlock and his desire to be closer, closer...

Sherlock squeezed his hand lightly, a slight tightening of fingers that had John's heart hammering, and he didn't release his pressing hold until they had to get out of the car.

John felt light, and a bit conflicted, but mostly light, until his phone pinged and he read *Hey, where are you? I thought you were coming over?* and he remembered, with a pang, that he was supposed to go to Mary's.

“Shit,” he swore under his breath, feeling like a right tosser for more reasons than one, but slipped the phone back in his pocket without replying, because Sherlock was off already, coat flying, and John didn't have a clue were he was going. He'd reply later, apologise, and try to reschedule.

Things were pressing in on him that he didn't know the names of.
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER 6

After Sherlock's glorious monologue at the Yard (about how the only possible resolution was that, while it had been the woman's live-in father, suffering from severe Alzheimer's, who had ill-advisedly made the changes to the crime scene to make it seem like a murder-suicide because the man couldn't remember anything, and was frightened to death that it had been him who'd killed his daughter and son-in-law in a moment of senselessness, it was the woman's lover who had actually killed the couple; the husband had walked in on them and things had escalated – the lover had clubbed the husband to death with the clunky design lamp post, the imprint of which was still visible on the carpet and which they would probably find in a garbage skip not too far from the house, while the wife had tried to stop him, and in a fit of panic and insanity he couldn't think of anything else than kill her too; and anyway they would find him by just going to his house, his address was in her wallet, and he, not at all a killer at heart, wouldn't have known what to do except sit at home in continued panic – ugh, sentiment) and the easy arrest, Greg asked both of them to go have a drink. It wasn't even eleven; Sherlock had solved the case in an astounding record time, and Greg had decided that called for a celebration.

John, who'd got an I'm not really free any evening next week in response to his last text to Mary, was all too happy to agree. To John's surprise Sherlock immediately said he'd come too. He eyed his companion curiously, but Sherlock just gave him a minute shrug, as if saying It was your idea, wasn't it? Greg looked pleasantly surprised.

They walked to the pub where John and Greg had spent numerous nights together in Sherlock's absence – for a while, before New Breath, Greg had been the only person to sometimes get John out of his flat. And now Sherlock was here, too. John looked at him with a sudden tenderness as Sherlock was sitting down – lanky, awkward now that he was so out of his element. Sherlock really didn't look at home in a pub.

"Pints, both of you?" Greg asked. John nodded, and was surprised when Sherlock did too.

"You don't like beer," he said as Greg went over the bar.

"I do now," Sherlock said. Then, in response to John's questioning face, he added: "I had a contact in Peru who worked in a brewery."

"Oh," John said, "right." Peru, then. A contact.

Sherlock studied him, seemed to be thinking for a second, and then said: "He saved my life a couple of times. He didn't really know why I was there. Thought I'd got too involved in the coca trade. I let him believe that. He wasn't exactly clean himself, so it worked out. It was still safer than the truth."
Anyway, he... He was surprisingly loyal to someone who he thought to be chased by drug lords.” He went silent, thoughtful.

“He was your friend,” John supplied.

Sherlock looked at him, a strange expression on his face. “Yes, I suppose so,” he said, more quietly, almost inaudibly in the pub sounds.

Greg came back, balancing three pints. John took his. Sherlock took a big gulp, then grimaced slightly.

John chuckled. “Peruvian beer more palatable than our genuine British brews? You traitor.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, but his face was mild. Greg looked a little confused at their conversation, but then held out his glass for them to clink, and said: “To a winning team.”

“A team the Yard doesn't actually deserve,” John supplied.

“A team I don't actually deserve either,” Sherlock said, unexpectedly, and Greg and John exchanged a careful, puzzled look, but Sherlock was drinking his beer, not offering up anything else.

After a slightly awkward pause, Greg said: “So, you lads all settled in at Baker Street again, then?”

“Like we never left,” John said, catching Sherlock's eye for a moment.

“Almost,” Sherlock said, and he knocked back another big gulp.

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“Sherlock,” Greg was saying, slightly slurred, leaning over the table closer to Sherlock, “I'm so sorry I arrested you. That was... That was wrong of me.”

Sherlock, on his fifth pint, face flushed and eyes shining, responded: “Lestrade, you've arrested me lots of times.”

“But that time was different. Different,” he repeated, as though he'd only just discovered the word.

Sherlock leaned over the table too, into Greg's space; it could have been a peace offering, or a challenge, or maybe both. John observed them with a pleasant warmth in his stomach, sipping his beer. “You can't help it that you're a stupid idiot, Lestrade,” Sherlock said, but John could tell his small smile was actually genuine, a rare occurrence in public, “so don't be sorry; everyone was fooled.”

“Except for John,” Greg said, looking over at John.

“That's because –” Sherlock suppressed something that might have been a hiccough, “because John is brilliant, unlike everyone else.”

“That's true,” Greg agreed, and saluted John with his pint.

“John is actually –” Sherlock began, then paused to take another swig of beer, “John is actually the only one on the – on the planet who's got a clue about anything.”

John frowned, the words filtering in through his tipsiness. “What are you on about, you?” he said, feeling his tongue catching on the words. “I don't know anything.”
“You are brilliant,” Sherlock insisted.

“Yes, John, yes, you are,” Greg supplied, nodding enthusiastically.

Sherlock ignored him, and now leaned over the table in John's direction. John watched his face approach stupidly, feeling too sluggish to react. “John,” he said, and pointed an unsteady finger at John, “you're the most singularly eshtra – eshtra – extraordinary man I've ever met.”

“No, that's you,” John returned without thinking.

Sherlock shook his head. “s You,” he said, voice gaining an urgency, “always you. You make me... see. You're like...” He shook his head again, wide-eyed. “You're like a microscope. But for... feelings.” Then he frowned, as though he didn't quite understand what he was saying.

John didn't quite understand either; he was a bit drunk, and so was Sherlock, but the realisation that this was a genuine, rare, rather painfully honest compliment hit him with clarity. He wasn't quite drunk enough not to be aware that he never would have if he hadn't had six pints, but he said: “I love you.”

Sherlock's frown cleared off. For a moment, the mask slipped on – his face a blankness that said only that it was hiding so many things – but then he couldn't hold it, and he looked a bit happy, a bit surprised, a lot startled.

“I love both of you,” Greg murmured from his corner. John held Sherlock's gaze for a long moment, suddenly very aware of the fact that their faces were very close, before they both looked at Greg – who didn't look that drunk anymore, but quite introspective, inspecting his glass seriously. John broke into a laugh at the sight, and Greg giggled along with him, and Sherlock also joined in with a deep, low chuckle.

Sherlock got to his feet, a bit wobbly. “I'm getting another,” he said. “John?”

“m fine,” John said, trying to get a grip on the heat in his gut.

“Lestrade?”

“Don't mind if I do,” Greg said, draining the last of his previous pint and passing the glass to Sherlock.

“Well, he's all... sociable all of a sudden,” Greg told John as Sherlock picked his way over to the bar. John tore his eyes from his retreating form.

“It's the beer,” he said.

“Don't think it is,” Greg said, leaning his chin on his hand, and fixing John with a surprisingly steady look. “I think it's you.”

John didn't know how to respond to that, and instead took another swig, trying to avoid Greg's knowing gaze, which was proving to be still quite sharp after six pints.

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“Christ, Sherlock, this seems a little excessive,” John panted as he tried to help Sherlock up the stairs. “Can you be at least a bit cooperative?”

“No,” Sherlock groaned.
John made a sound of frustration, but then managed to get them up to the top stairs and hauled Sherlock through the door.

“You really don’t hold your liquor very well. I mean, seriously, you were a seasoned intravenous drug user but this knocks you down? Your Peruvian friend never bought you eight pints in a row, then?” John asked Sherlock as he helped him over to the sofa, where he dropped down heavily. John himself felt his head clearing bit by bit already; he'd stopped after six pints, and that was nothing he wasn't used to, and the realisation that Sherlock was really quite drunk and needed his coordination had sobered him up as well. He went over and lit one of the small lamps on the coffee table, bathing the room in a muted light.

Sherlock didn't respond, just snuggled to a more comfortable position in the cushions. John busied himself with undoing Sherlock's laces and tugged his shoes off his feet.

“You've still got your coat on,” he said.

Sherlock made a sound that clearly said don't care. Okay, so really quite drunk, then; Sherlock would normally never sleep in his expensive designer clothes.

“At least let me –” John said, then just leaned in and unlooped Sherlock's scarf, tugging it gently from his neck. The coat would have to stay on, unless Sherlock was able to stay awake for a bit more. As he pulled his hands back, Sherlock grabbed his wrist.

“John,” he mumbled, his voice even deeper than usual.

“I'm here,” John said automatically.

“No, you're not,” Sherlock slurred.

“I am.” He allowed Sherlock's hand to pull him in, and he plopped to his knees next to the couch, ignoring the slight pain of hitting the ground.

“Not... not enough,” Sherlock was mumbling.

John was silent for a bit, trying to calm down the insane feeling of want roaring through his chest, fed by the alcohol and Sherlock's closeness, and his rare vulnerability.

“What do you need?" he finally asked as Sherlock didn't say anything anymore, just held a firm grip on his wrist. “Water?”

Sherlock laughed at that, a short spontaneous burst of chuckles, too loud for the hour.

“What then?” John prompted after a moment.

“I don't... I don't know,” Sherlock said, and he sounded surprised, and uncomfortable; and John thought, well, that would be a new sensation to him.

He waited for a bit, but nothing seemed to be forthcoming. “You going to sleep here, then?” he asked. “Or do you want me to –”

Sherlock released his hold on John's wrist, but instead wrapped his hand around the back of his neck and pulled him in forcefully, bringing their mouths together in a lop-sided, badly aimed, surprised kiss. John oofed against his mouth; their teeth clinked together; Sherlock froze completely under him;
it was quite terrible until John realised where he was, and who he was, and who Sherlock was and with a growl that he hadn't known he had in him, he threw all caution into the wind and went for it – he tilted Sherlock's head towards him and kissed him full on the mouth, feeling those lips – those fucking lips – part beneath his easily, molding against his, as Sherlock's hand on his neck became a vice grip, screwing them together with the surprising strength Sherlock had. Sherlock was sticky and tasted heavy with beer, but oh, he was twisting his tongue against John's, licking into John's mouth meanderingly, he was making deep sounds into the kiss, incomprehensible until they became distinct; si, si, hisses of desire, and God, this couldn't be real but it was, it was, and John half-moaned in spite of himself when he identified the Spanish. Sherlock was half trying to get up, pressing up into the kiss, snaking the arm that wasn't around his neck around John's back, he was kissing back with abandon, his technique sloppy and unrefined, but it was okay, it was good, because it was Sherlock kissing him –

Suddenly, John's synapses finally succeeded in making contact again, and he pulled back with a jerk, but not so strongly that he broke through the circle of Sherlock's arms, so that he was kept in place very, very close to Sherlock's face.

“What?” Sherlock hissed.

“What – what are we –” John spluttered, dazed, brain screaming.

“No,” Sherlock said simply, introducing a no into their lives that was acceptable because it was really a yes, and pulled him back in, closed his mouth over his again, more gently this time, licking at John's lower lip. John fell into the kiss again, and accepted Sherlock's tongue into his mouth gladly, gripping his shoulders – but then, he shook his head against Sherlock and pulled back again. This time, Sherlock let him go.

“Sherlock,” John said, his breathing heavy, “you're so drunk – I can't – not –”

“John,” Sherlock groaned, and it was enough to have blood rushing to his cock, “don't do that – not now –”

“Fuck,” John swore, and he kissed Sherlock again, in spite of himself. “Please tell me,” he said between kisses, “that you want this.”

“Idiot,” Sherlock panted against him, “evidently.”

And John had to take a moment to laugh, a wild, confused laugh, but Sherlock grabbed his collar and dragged him back in, sucking on his bottom lip, and making a deep sound that reverberated right down to his groin.

“Right,” John squeaked as he came up for air, head spinning, “please tell me you'll – you'll be okay with this tomorrow.”

“John,” Sherlock said, and his voice was surprisingly steady, even though it was clouded and dark with desire, “I can't tell you for how long – tomorrow will be okay.”

“You bastard, you're not even that drunk, are you?” John said in a daze, as Sherlock tugged at him again, enticing him back in.

Sherlock chuckled. “I am, actually, somewhat,” he said slowly against John's ear, the sound of his breathing sparking arousal in the pit of John's stomach, “but my head is clearing – it's not – not an act, John, not this time –” and John kissed him for that, for knowing John's fear, for knowing John's need for him to be honest right now, to be there, to really be Sherlock and nothing else.
“You're still in your coat,” John breathed as they broke apart again, and Sherlock laughed, a generous, warm sound.

The long garment was impossible to remove without Sherlock getting off the couch; he swayed a bit as he got to his feet, but steadied himself against John, who'd stood up together with him. Sherlock threw the coat on the floor – uncharacteristically unconcerned about it – and wasted no time getting his hands under John's jumper, tugging it up.

“John,” he all but moaned, in his infuriating, maddening voice, “you really need to rethink your wardrobe.”

“Never,” John said, but helped Sherlock get the thick jumper over his head.

Sherlock stooped down and kissed him, deeply, and John could tell that he was a quick learner at everything; he parted John's lips with his tongue easily, and more confidently than anyone had the right to he tried out the different textures inside John's mouth – tongue, teeth, palate. All the while his hands were picking at the buttons of John's shirt, undoing them one by one and pushing the shirt over his shoulders. John shivered as Sherlock finally got to his bare skin, feeling his way across his chest. The initial confusion was clearing somewhat, and the force of his arousal was quite effectively pushing everything else away, except a persisting feeling of overwhelming, dazed joy. Sherlock bit down on his lip semi-sharply, as though trying it out, and the slight sting had John arching forward, desperate for contact.

He fumbled with the buttons on Sherlock's shirt, the tightness of it resisting him a bit too much for his liking, so he pulled at it.

“Careful with the shirt,” Sherlock growled against his mouth.

“You and your ridiculous – shirts,” John panted, breath hitching as Sherlock unapologetically slid a hand down to his crotch and fondled his erection through his trousers.

“Not ridiculous,” Sherlock said smoothly, if a bit breathlessly.

“Ridiculous, yes,” John countered, though it was harder to get the words from his brain to his mouth with Sherlock's hand pressing down on his erection, “always so – tight – begging to be ripped off you – I can't – ah –”

“Shut up,” Sherlock said earnestly, pulling at his belt. John did, undoing the buttons on that ridiculous shirt, but with a bit more precision now, and then pulled it loose from the waist of his trousers and tugged it off his shoulders, down his arms, struggling for a moment with the still-fastened cuffs. He ran his hands all the way back up, over the planes of arm and chest, smooth and pale under his fingers. He took a moment to look at Sherlock, illuminated by the warm light of the small lamp. There were small, newish criss-crossings of scars leading down from one hip into Sherlock's trousers; knife marks, maybe, or small whip stings, something like that. John gulped, suddenly realising what he was looking at. He tried to find the marks, x and x and x, where Sherlock would bear the evidence of his fall. There was a small, but raised scar on Sherlock's abdomen – John couldn't tell what it could have been the result of. His ran his hands over the curves and dips of Sherlock's shoulders; that the bones there were smooth and steady under his grip was nothing short of miraculous, that Sherlock was still here, still held together by the so easily dissolved bonds of tendon and muscle was something to wonder at deeply. There was a deep mark on the right side of Sherlock's torso, a years-old scar that ran the length of the underside of his ribs. John traced it, as Sherlock held silent against him, breathing heavily, allowing this with a strange stillness – John realised it had to be from the jump; a part of his weight would have landed on this spot. His ribs would have cracked, and one of them had apparently been forced outward, violently piercing the
skin above it. Life-threatening. His lungs would have been at an extremely high risk of being punctured, and that would very likely have been it for him, even with Molly waiting for him inside, only minutes away, all the magic she could perform waiting in her fingers, trying to sustain life for once, instead of cataloguing death.

“Christ,” he said, involuntarily, as the enormity of it hit him.

Sherlock took his face into his hands, and looked at him with a clouded, unreadable expression for a long moment. “Don't bring him into this,” he said, voice tight with something John couldn't identify. Then he leaned down and kissed John, with an insistence that made John's knees forget what their function was. After a couple of moments his shakenness at seeing the scars melted into renewed arousal, and he pushed up at Sherlock, giving back into the searing kiss, moving his hand from the scar to caress the rest of Sherlock's torso; the unmarred skin, the blood underneath jumping up at his touch, unbelievably, miraculously, overwhelmingly alive.

He was rewarded with a sharp intake of breath from Sherlock as he slid his hands down from his shoulders to his waist, and lower still until he met the boundary of his trousers, following the thin trail of hair that led down into them.

John pulled him down for another kiss, and then said: “You're really too fucking tall, Sherlock.”

“Sofa,” Sherlock simply said in response, and he allowed John to push him into it, only putting up a pretense of resistance. He twisted until he was lying on his back across the length of it.

John joined him, though there was no real room for him; Sherlock spread his knees so John could crouch between his legs. Sherlock closed his knees against him, squeezing him gently, and that small gesture of possession made John's cock twitch. He took a second to look at Sherlock, sprawled under him – so awkwardly gorgeous, too long in every sense, long-limbed, long-featured, so alien, so heavily marked, so absolutely heart-stoppingly alluring.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

“Brilliant deduction, John, glad to see you follow,” Sherlock said, reaching up to undo John's belt, and it would have been casual if his voice hadn't been darkened with lust and alcohol.

John stilled for a moment. “Sherlock,” he said, a sudden sinking feeling in his stomach.

But it was Sherlock, and he didn't have to say it, because Sherlock knew already. “John, it's not because Moriarty and my brother lack the creativity to imagine anything about my sex life that I don't have one,” he almost bit, sounding more lucid than anyone with eight pints in their system and with someone else's erection pressing into their legs had a right to.

“So you – you're not –”

Sherlock sighed, sounding long-suffering. “No.” He looked up at John, defiance and tenderness meshing in an entirely particular way. “Though it's fair to say I'm not – very experienced,” he stumbled over the words uncharacteristically, and there was such an openness in his face, a rare display of unrestrained, undiluted Sherlock-ness, and John had to swallow looking at it.

“Me neither – with this,” he ground out.

“Evidently. I gathered as much.” Sherlock said almost drily, popping the button on his trousers – and John decided that this conversation could wait, it would have to wait, because Sherlock was looking up at him in a way that couldn't match any of the fantasies he'd had, because of course the real Sherlock beat out any imagined Sherlock by miles; his eyes light and focused and almost too intense
to bear, giving John his full attention, startling at the most mundane of times, but now, with Sherlock tugging his trousers down to his thighs, almost unbearable in its splendidness.

Not to be outdone, he undid Sherlock's trousers as well as he could with Sherlock fondling his cock through his boxers. Sherlock helpfully lifted his hips so John could, with difficulty, peel down his trousers over his hips to his thighs - “Why is everything so tight with you?” he said, then gasped as Sherlock grabbed the base of his cock.

“Don't pretend you don't like it,” Sherlock growled, and he sounded dangerous, a similar kind of menace dripping from him as when he was pointing a gun at someone – John's cock pulsed in Sherlock's hand in response. Then, apparently growing impatient, Sherlock pushed down his own underpants, fancy, silky, purple, of course; releasing a long, thin cock, the sight of which gave John an unexpected, deep thrill – and then pulled at the waistband of John's boxers until his erection sprang free, and then finally, finally, there was the contact of his long fingers directly on John's cock.

“Fuck, Sherlock,” John said, thrusting forward involuntarily.

“Come here,” Sherlock told him, voice such a soft, low, deep shiver that John felt the need to obey, immediately. He let himself drop forward, resting his weight first on his hands next to Sherlock's torso, then directly on him, sliding their chests together.

Sherlock hummed with approval, and shifted around under John, making small sounds that made John's head spin, until their hips were aligned. Sherlock pushed upward and the contact between their erections was more electric than John had ever expected a simple touch could be.

“Yes, you, yes,” Sherlock hissed; John latched his teeth onto the skin of his neck, where his throat melted into his clavicle, and Sherlock jerked upwards, an honest moan escaping him. He rubbed himself up against John, hips snapping upward relentlessly, and John moved with him, helplessly caught in the rhythm, still firmly under Sherlock's control despite his being on top, but he couldn't care, he didn't mind, Sherlock was grasping at him, at his hair, at his neck, and their cocks were sliding together in a delicious jumble of hot flesh and slight dampness.

“You,” Sherlock growled into his ear, and he made it sound like the dirtiest of curses; John moaned as Sherlock manoeuvered his hand between them, somewhat awkwardly, with some difficulty wrapping his hand around their pricks, but it worked somehow, and John could only whimper in response as he thrust into his grip.

“Yes, you, John, now, you,” Sherlock panted, squeezing them together even more.

“I –” John managed to say before he was coming, spilling himself between them, pressing his face down into Sherlock's shoulder, unable to stifle the groan falling from his mouth.

“Extraordinary,” Sherlock said in his ear, lips brushing his ear lobe, and he kept on repeating it through John's orgasm; two, three times: extraordinary.

John half collapsed onto him, but tried to still keep eye contact, only half-succeeding; and Sherlock pressed himself up against him, his hand slipping from John's cock to his own, maybe six, seven more strokes of fist, now damp with the slickness of John's come between them, increasingly uncomfortable against John's softening prick; and Sherlock came with a silent intensity that was beautiful and strange at the same time – his eyes were open, showing the whites like clouds billowing in his skull, and his mouth was closed, dark, tensed, his teeth worrying at his lips.

John fitted his forehead into the curve of Sherlock's neck as he could feel the tension in Sherlock’s limbs bleeding away. Their breathing was erratic, mismatched, slowing at different paces. Sherlock's
hand found its way back onto John's back, resting there like an anchoring point, a point of gravity.

“Fuck,” John said, when he'd regained the ability.

“You swear far too much,” Sherlock responded, lightly, voice only bearing minute traces of what had just happened.

“I think I've – earned that right,” John said, noting absent-mindedly that he had absolutely no feelings in that moment, except for a transcendent contentment that felt too large to contain in the borders of his body – and he wondered not for the first time at how simple things could be, sometimes, for a little while.

Sherlock said nothing for a short while, but as the seconds slipped by his hand tensed on John. Eventually, he spoke, words rushed: “Are you all right?”

John, who'd been fighting the onset of the post-orgasmic fatigue he knew very well, blinked against Sherlock's neck. “Yeah, I – I think I am. Why do you...?” he didn't finish the question, not quite knowing what he wanted it to be.

“Was this okay?” Sherlock asked, too-rapidly.

John, with some effort, lifted himself off Sherlock, unsticking himself from the film of sweat and come between them (about which he surprisingly didn't care at all), and looked Sherlock in the eye. Sherlock jerked, as though he hadn't been expecting that at all.

“It was more than okay,” John said.

Sherlock looked relieved for a moment, but then, unbidden, horribly, his face relaxed into the slackness of the mask.

“No,” John said before he knew it, “don't do that.”

“Do what?” Sherlock intoned.

“Shut me out. Don't.” Just don't.

Sherlock blinked, and his face twitched and was alive again; tiredness, inebriation, some wonder, some confusion, a small frown.

“Do you even know that you do that?” John asked him, quietly.

Sherlock closed his eyes for a second. Yes, he did. He obviously did. When did Sherlock Holmes ever do anything he wasn't aware of?

“You don't need to with me,” John said, and then felt like a character in a romantic comedy for a bit, in a fictional universe where words actually covered their meanings, overlapping them perfectly, and weren't infected by all sorts of different things, which was a universe in which no one actually lived; and he laughed at himself in his mind, slightly hysterical, because what the fuck was even happening to him? The small moment in which things were simple was passing quickly, and things were pressing in on them again from all sides, quickly trickling into... whatever it was that they had just shared.

Sherlock gave a small chuckle, darker than John wanted to hear, speaking volumes about the way it wasn't saying anything. But he let it pass, because there wasn't much he could say to laughter. And because he couldn't hear what it was Sherlock wasn't saying.
“Sherlock,” he eventually said, “we just had sex.”

“Well deduced, John,” Sherlock responded, the sarcasm less easy than it would usually be.

“We just had sex.” Like saying it out loud made it something that had actually happened, or at least something that didn't resist categorisation completely.

“I know.”

“Sex.”

“Stop saying that,” Sherlock all but snapped, and John felt an urge to laugh; so overwhelming, so inappropriate, so wrong and also so right, and he couldn't fight it, and soon he was giggling into Sherlock's neck.

“Not the best response I've ever had after mutual orgasms,” Sherlock said when he finally calmed down again.

“God, no,” John said, “best mutual orgasm I've ever had.” And then he stopped to wonder at himself for a bit, because where had that come from; it had slipped out as though he no longer had any control, as though the press of Sherlock's hands on his back had taken out everything in him that had the slightest inkling what exactly was going on, as though he had really and truly lost himself. It wasn't that it wasn't true – although he even now, still in the clutches of post-orgasmic stupour, knew that there was just no comparing this to anything else he had ever done, ever, because it was sex, but it was also Sherlock, and it just wasn't the same thing, just like nothing Sherlock ever did was ever the same thing as anything else, ever – but the way he had lost control, words just slipping out like that, was new, and frightening, and well, that fitted Sherlock perfectly, didn't it.

There was a silence, and it wasn't quite comfortable, and it wasn't quite awkward.

“What now?” John asked himself out loud – and well, he guessed that meant he was asking Sherlock too.

Sherlock was silent underneath him, a long stretch of body and mind, reverberating with all the sounds that exist in silence.

He answered his own question after a while, in a sense, or at least part of the extensive spectrum the question spanned: “Do you want to sleep?”

Sherlock answered with a small body jerk, a shrug that moved the entirety of him: I don't know.

John hesitated for a small moment, and then remembered that he was lying on top of Sherlock, with the evidence of both of their orgasms between them, gluing them together in more than one sense, and well, it was all quite clear, wasn't it, hiding didn't really make any sense anymore. “I'd like to sleep with you,” he said, quietly. He lifted his head to look at Sherlock, and found him looking back; a small grace, a small miracle in a world with so much to wonder at.

“Literally, I presume,” Sherlock said, his voice back to the undisturbed smoothness that John knew so well.

“Evidently,” John said, borrowing Sherlock's lexicon for once – because if not now, then when? When would he ever get so close to Sherlock's language, ever again?

Sherlock seemed to be considering it quite seriously. “Fine,” he said, finally, “but I need to shower.”
“Me too,” John mumbled, getting more and more aware of the state of his body as the pleasure from before sank away slowly.

“I'll go first,” Sherlock said after another second, and then he was gone, slipping out from under the press of John with a disconcerting, startling ease, pulling off his trousers fluidly next to the couch, leaving John grasping at not a lot more than air.

John listened to him padding to the bathroom, something horrible and perfect twisting inside him at the same time, and realised that he had never felt so conflicted. The shower was switched on, and John couldn't help but think, in an almost Sherlock-type way: there goes all of the evidence, all of the evidence that he, John Watson, had been there, and there, and had staked his claim on a small part of Sherlock Holmes, a minute part by the look of things, but still something, and really, who could ever hope for anything more? Still, it was all being washed down-drain, brushed off by Sherlock's own fingers, and how could he ever believe it again, without proof?

Sherlock stepped out of the bathroom after about five minutes, as gloriously naked as when he'd gone in, only now slightly shiny in the unfitting, romantic light of the living room, curls flopping into his face. He graced John with a smile, and John knew him well enough to know that it was half genuine, half calculated.

“Your room,” he decided, then was off, a streak of body and tensing mind underneath.

John sighed and rolled off the sofa. He got up and stood for a bit, working off his trousers, his brain still scrabbling to reconstruct everything, but then he just wasn't Sherlock, and it didn't quite work. In any case the soft glow of the lamp inside 221B seemed out of place, as though no light really had the right to remain unchanged after what had just happened.

He went into the shower. He counted the tiles surrounding the shower head. He tried to find any sign of Sherlock having been there minutes before, though he knew he wouldn't find any – Sherlock could probably tell John exactly what he'd done the five previous time he'd been in this shower, just by looking at it, but he himself simply couldn't, and the barrier was too strong to break through; he couldn't imagine Sherlock as he was alone.

He found himself crying a bit under the warm stream of water, and then tried to shake himself out of it, because God, he was crying again, and why? He'd just had fairly amazing sex with Sherlock, something that he'd been hoping for for... well, for years, fuck it, and things like that actually happened in this universe, it was actually possible, there was so much to wonder at in this world. Still, the fact that he couldn't picture Sherlock in this shower, finally off his guard, finally on his own, drove home the fact that Sherlock still had so much more knowledge of him, and of them, than John ever would.

He drew patterns on his belly with his fingers as the water washed him clean, the traces of Sherlock flowing away, joining so many things that were too impure. God, what was his life. Under the heat of the water he remembered Mary, and something crumbled inside him. God, who was he. He hadn't even thought about her, not once, not from the moment Sherlock had curled his fingers around his neck to bring him down for that first frantic, horrible kiss to the moment when he came, Sherlock's voice providing the structure to his undoing, and he had been laid bare by just one syllable – you, and Mary hadn't been anywhere near his mind in that way, she'd never been able to see him that way, to open him up, to see his otherness, his humanity, she wouldn't try to uncover him that way, which worked to her credit, she couldn't, which unfairly and horribly didn't work to her credit.

He switched off the shower and stood in the cooling air for another, too-long moment, feeling the droplets rolling off him; his skin felt alien on him, as though he was just wearing it, as though it wasn't part of him anymore.
He asked himself quite seriously and a touch hysterically: *was this the right decision?* And then he laughed at himself, because it hadn't been a decision at all, it had been like a hurricane, a landslide; Sherlock the force of nature uprooting everything again, pulling the tentative new seedlings of John Watson out and examining them under his microscope.

*You’re like a microscope,* Sherlock had said, before the world had changed, before they’d come against each other’s cocks, sharing breath, sharing skin. *But for feelings,* he’d then said, and Christ, John didn’t feel like it was true, though it seemed strange to think of anything that Sherlock had said as wrong – John still had no idea what Sherlock was feeling, and really, he wasn’t even sure what *he* was feeling, apart from the undeniable, the constant, the unmentionable, the uncompromising, the absolute love he had for Sherlock.

He remembered Sherlock in his bed, and there was the strange dual sensation of *yes* and *no.*

*Yes* won out, of course, because that kind of *no* had no right anymore, it had been banished from their lives at least for a little while. He went back into the living room and looked over the battlefield of the evening, of the night, a crime scene – before he went upstairs he picked up Sherlock’s coat and hung it on the hook at its proper place; a peace offering if there ever was any.

He padded up the stairs, footsteps sounding slightly too hollow to be real, and had the peculiar sensation of being a character in a novel. Fictional. Thinly spread. No backstory. Just a body going up a staircase. And then it all came back, his life, what he was, who he’d been with and who he’d been without, and then he was John Watson again as he pushed open the door to his bedroom, and Sherlock Holmes was in his bed, twisted in the sheets, and looking at him, having been watching the door all this time.

“I thought you weren't coming,” Sherlock said as he made his way over to the bed – his bed, their bed, at least for tonight.

“Why wouldn't I?” he asked.

Sherlock's face had closed up a little already, but some of his openness had remained; he looked worried. “You're not all right.” And it wasn't even a question.

And of all people to be honest with – Greg, Sharon, Ian, Bill, Mary; all deserving of honesty in their own, particular ways – Sherlock was still the best, because he didn't bother with emotional layers, he saw through emotions hiding themselves in each other immediately, even if he didn't see *why.* “I don't know,” John therefore said.

Sherlock looked a bit distressed. “I want you to be all right, John.”

“I will be all right,” he said softly, suddenly very aware of his nakedness.

“Why aren't you all right now?” Sherlock was apparently also very aware of his nakedness, but didn't do what most people would do, even after sex – giving the body its privacy back, giving it a slight berth, leaving it intact. Sherlock was unapologetically, pointedly looking at everything of him; and his body responded in a shocked, but willing way, just as his eyes always did when Sherlock looked at him – it was the first time other parts of him had felt so particularly assailed by Sherlock’s gaze, and it wasn't bad, not at all, it was just... peculiar. And breathtaking, if he was honest.

“I am all right, actually,” John said finally, and it wasn't even far from the truth, and expressable in a way that the truth wasn't.

“Do you regret it already?” Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. Trying to gather the data of him, trying to
click things into place. “Usually that's reserved for the morning after, isn't it?”

John felt a small twinge of resentment at being reduced to 'usually'. “I don't regret it,” he said, rapidly, then continued, after a breath: “I still don't know how you are, and that's what... is difficult.”

Sherlock's eyes widened in a startled version of the look – *Christ, John, you know. And if you don't, then* – “John,” he said, “it's obvious, isn't it?”

John looked at him. “No.”

“I'm here. I'm in your bed,” Sherlock said, and made more room, pressing himself into the wall.

And John smiled at that. Because even if it wasn't as tangible as an *I love you*, it was just as untouchable, just as uncompromising, just as incommunicable, just as meaningless, just as meaningful, just as hard to see for the light shining through. Really, it wasn't that different at all.

“Yes,” he breathed, insides turned to jelly once more, and switched the light off. He found the way to his bed blindly, eyes not yet adjusted to the dark, and slipped into the covers. After a couple of breathless seconds, it was Sherlock who closed the gap between them, pressing his shoulder firmly against John's, warm from his time between the sheets against John's shower-and-air-cool skin.

John stayed where he was, not quite sure what line it was they were toeing.

And – it seemed meaningful to John, though he couldn't have articulated what it was, exactly, that it meant – it was Sherlock who offered up his body, molded it to his side, a careful, curious hand coming to rest on his chest, his nose pressing a questioning line into John's temple; a curl of smoothness and rugged edges where the scars were, attaching itself to the almost vulgar obviousness of John's bare skin. A bit like a new language. With its own pitfalls, and its own wonders.

“You extraordinary man,” he thought he heard Sherlock say at one point, deep in the night, with a voice that was so genuinely filled with wonder that John wasn't sure for a second if Sherlock realised he was awake, though then he remembered that it was Sherlock; so then he wasn't sure that it had happened, because maybe he imagined it, hot and sticky under the too-heavy covers as they were, their positions now melted together almost naturally, the exclamation mark of Sherlock's nose tucked into the ridge of his clavicle and the quotes of his fingers laid gently over his pulse, and it was overpowering for a bit, this new kind of speaking and being silent, before sleep finally tiptoed in almost unnoticed, un-sought-for, and took him away.

Chapter End Notes

doublenegativemeansyes made an absolutely gorgeous illustration of this chapter over on tumblr, so go and have a look! *Untitled* by doublenegativemeansyes (nsfw)
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

CHAPTER 7

He awoke with a startling suddenness, as though someone had yelled into his ear very hard. He opened his eyes, half-expecting Sherlock to be looming over him, urging him to wake up, but his bedroom was empty and bright with late-morning light. Sherlock was gone, though the stretch of mattress next to John wasn't quite cool yet. He bit down on a twinge of disappointment – maybe if Sherlock had still been here, visible, physical, yielding to touch in the morning's honest light, it might have made the transition into this new world, this fundamentally changed world, a world in which he and Sherlock had had sex, a little easier. Now the break was like the chasm between tectonic plates, and John didn't know how he'd have to get to the other side.

He stretched himself out, allowing himself this moment of calm before the inevitable storm, feeling the ominous feeling in his stomach intensify with every second he was awake. The night had been a strange sequence of vague, feverish impressions and stretches of oblivious sleep, with a clearer realisation of Sherlock is next to me every time he woke up, so that by the final time it was already at the forefront of his mind – at one point Sherlock had been licking his neck carefully as though trying out its taste, waking him up; at another Sherlock had been sitting against the headboard, the warm length of his leg pressed against John, his face illuminated by the cold light of his phone; and then at another Sherlock had actually been sleeping, mumbling in a mix of English and Spanish, taking up far too much room, limbs thrown out, hyperactive even in his rest. John had felt glad to know that Sherlock had spent a portion of his night sleeping; it seemed to restore some normality to the situation, and it had also felt intimate to share sleep with Sherlock, for Sherlock to offer up himself in a different state, one that he had less control over, even if he'd kept John awake for quite some time with his fitful sleeping.

He closed his eyes for a moment. His head throbbed a bit with the residue of last night's drinking. So now here he was, finally having taken the chance to do things differently, and just as he'd thought it hadn't been anything like what he'd imagined – real life one-upping fantasy at every turn, gleefully turning everything on its head, infecting everything with everything else. Nothing was quite as simple as it had seemed in the apparent certainty of death – life was a teeming, growing thing, putting out roots in different directions, trying to survive in whatever way worked, and of course nothing was just something, nothing simply lead to something else with the narrative clarity that art had but life lacked. Still, he quirked a smile as he remembered that finally, finally, he had been able to touch Sherlock, and that Sherlock had, incomprehensibly, miraculously, seemed to want him just as much – you, he recalled, Sherlock had kept returning to you in an almost uncharacteristic focus on someone else, and not just anyone else, John. You, his brain sang, and with it came a strong thrill that was a bit frightening in its intensity.

After a moment of obsessively trying to memorise the strange, thrilling expression on Sherlock's face as he'd come so he would never be able to forget it (because there was, like a dark whisper in the back of his mind, the fear that he would never get to see it again; Sherlock didn't often do the same things twice if they didn't offer up anything new, and it would be just like him to treat sex no
differently whatsoever), his mind helpfully suggested to him: *Mary.*

*Mary.* “Oh, fuck,” he groaned out loud. So now he’d gone and *cheated* on Mary, with *Sherlock* – and that took the cake for all of his fuck-ups with girlfriends, now he'd really got himself in it deep, and of course it was inevitable that it should be Sherlock, because Sherlock was the only thing in John's life that fed into that secret undercurrent of him, the underlying unconventional desires buried beneath the other part of him that was a normal bloke who just wanted to have tea and a wife who listened to him and shared things with him, and who would never cheat. Sherlock was the only one who tapped into John's crazy addiction to danger, to trouble; John's secret thrill at leaving, going away, having different worlds, different lives; John's desires, which included having his gun with him, feeling imbibed with its power, seeing the dark possibilities of the stinking, raw underbelly of the city, drawn to it, and now also: sleeping with Sherlock in the depth of night, falling into Sherlock's hands with even more finality than usual.

But in the openness of the morning light he couldn't feel like he was anything but an absolute arsehole who'd cheated on his girlfriend in a bout of drunkenness, a moment of loss of self-awareness, though that wasn't quite what had happened – it didn't matter, because that was never quite what happened, anyway, and it didn't make any difference in that it was what had happened.

He pressed his hands into his eyes, into the dull ache of his minor hangover. The day was starting to put some pressure on him – he couldn't stay in bed and ride this one out, not with Sherlock downstairs, and not with Mary somewhere else, both linked to him in ways that were different yet not that dissimilar. So he groaned, and swung his legs out of bed, willing the rest of him to follow. Putting clothes on felt somehow very alien.

Sherlock was reading the newspaper at the table, face obscured from John's view.

John cleared his throat, and then croaked, nerves screaming in his throat: “Morning,” with a clear awareness that they'd set things in motion that could never completely be shifted back; even if Sherlock were to fold down the newspaper now and say: *delete last night, John, I will too,* it wouldn't work, they were linked now by body as much as by mind, and the body didn't forget. Neither did John's mind, obviously, but he was more than a bit afraid of Sherlock's ability to just chuck out things he didn't think useful – it would be the ultimate cruelty, to judge a thing of such monumentality to John irrelevant, and simply throw it out to make room for more important things.

But Sherlock slammed the newspaper onto the table with unexpected fierceness, face appearing, and he was wearing an open expression tinged with worry and annoyance – John released a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding at the absence of the mask, at the presence of Sherlock. He was dressed in his robe and apparently not much else, the pale skin of his chest peeking out between the badly-fastened sides.

“I'm having a hard time functioning after last night, John,” he said conversationally, by way of good morning.

“Nothing out of the ordinary, then,” John said, slipping into a chair, trying to shield that ridiculously big feeling of happiness at Sherlock's *there-ness* from Sherlock's observation skills, though he knew that was probably a fool’s pursuit.

Sherlock frowned at him. “Why are you not more shaken up?”

“*More* shaken up?” John asked, surprised. “I'd say I'm rather shaken up, actually.”
Sherlock fixed him with a level gaze. “When I got up, I had to think about where I’d left my robe for over a minute before I remembered.”

John laughed a little. “I guess your point is that you are completely, utterly thrown for a loop, and that your mind is ruined, and you’ve lost all of your intellectual prowess, right?”


“Sorry,” John hiccuped, nervous tension and honest mirth sparking tears in his eyes.

He calmed down, and then they sat in a small silence, in which Sherlock’s eyes never left his face. He cast around for something to say, but his mind was curiously blank – the only thing he could think of was so, we had orgasms together last night and that seemed too redundant even to him. So he got to his feet, turning to his constant companion, the one real certainty he had: tea.

“You want a cup of tea?” he asked Sherlock. Sherlock lifted one of his shoulders in a peculiar half-shrug that John decided to interpret as yes. He went over to the kitchen and flicked the kettle on.

“I'm serious,” Sherlock told him, “it keeps on intruding.”

John turned back to him. He didn't miss how Sherlock changed his expression when he turned round; from barely-concealed worry to a more smooth ticked-off-ness; not quite maskless then, but still close enough. He cleared his throat. “The sex, you mean?” In the light of morning, the word seemed inadequate to express what had happened in the dark clutches of the night before, but it would have to do; language stretching its boundaries to contain reality.

“Yes, and the rest of it,” Sherlock waved a hand about as though trying to shake off an annoying fly. John licked his lips. “What rest of it?”

Sherlock fixed him with a clear, piercing gaze. “You,” he said simply, and John was immediately thrown back to the way he’d said it not that long ago, a hand in John's hair, thrusting upwards, almost forcing John to orgasm by saying only yes, now, you. John gulped.

“Me?”

“Yes, evidently,” Sherlock said, now scowling a little at John's slowness. “It's never happened this way before.”

The water was boiling. John prepared two cups, taking his time. The milk had gone sour. He turned around and put one of the cups in front of Sherlock, who looked at it with mild distaste, and then sat down opposite him again.

“Look, Sherlock, I know you like riddles, but can you please tell me what you mean? What way?”

“This way,” Sherlock said, sounding frustrated, and made an involuntarily movement with his hands; it hit John that maybe he didn't quite have the language to describe this, either. “It sticks, it's not receding...” He narrowed his eyes at John, as though it was somehow the result of a cunning ploy from John's end. “It's just not going away,” he ended, somewhat lamely.

John took a long moment to sip his tea, which was by all accounts still too hot to drink. “Do you want it to go away?” he finally asked.

Sherlock considered for a moment, not looking at him. “It's... distracting,” he finally said, “but not...
unwelcome, unexpectedly.”

John felt a bubble of relief blowing up in his chest. He smiled. “You strange creature,” he said affectionately, “so now it's 'not unwelcome' that sex should be something to stick with you, and you don't understand why?”

Sherlock scowled, as though wanting to say of course I understand, but he didn't say it, which was clear enough: he didn't.

“Maybe,” John said carefully, trying to get past his own investment in this conversation, to impossibly forget about what was at stake here for him, “it meant something different this time.”

Sherlock's eyebrows raised a bit as he thought that over. “Yes, well, that was obvious,” he said, “I just hadn't expected it to have this effect on the overall experience.”

“It was obvious?”

Sherlock threw him the look again, but John brushed it off and held his gaze. Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Of course it was,” he said, giving in to John's questioning look, “it was you, John. It was logically impossible for it to mean the same thing as it has before with someone else.”

John felt something burning inside him, and then wondered for a bit at the way in which he'd become a bit of an expert at picking up Sherlock's particular brand of affection, which included referring to John as a variable in an equation, with logical possibilities and impossibilities, and somehow still so human – Sherlock had basically just told him: of course it meant something else, because I care about you so much more. Shrouded in Sherlock-speak, sure, but it was there to be picked up, like a silent, small treasure.

“There's not a lot about sex that's logical,” he finally said, blowing on his tea.

“That was never a problem before,” Sherlock said, glowering at his teacup. John was tickled by the way he seemed offended by all of this, as though the sex had absolutely no right to cling to him and be this distracting and cause these problems for him. Immediately after, he felt a desire to say will you tell me about the other times you've had sex with someone, because it was such a new concept, Sherlock having sex with people, and it was still mostly blank; he wanted to fill it, understand it – but it didn't quite feel as though he had earned permission to know anything about that, not yet anyway.

“I have to say this is pretty flattering,” he finally said, feeling his face colouring in a blush.

Sherlock broke his death glare at the teacup, and looked up at him with a slight surprise on his face. “Of course it's flattering,” he said, as though it was the most logical thing in the world, and, well, it probably was to him. “I've wanted to have sex with you for so long, and it's never really gone away, even when the stimulus of you was removed for almost two years. Now that I have had sex with you, it's not going away either, and though that's not entirely unexpected, it's different from any other experience that I've had.” He looked at John, almost neutrally. “I think you're mesmerising. I want to have sex with you again right now simply because of the way you're sitting in that chair and touching the handle of your teacup with your index finger.”

In the silence after that, John's heart made valiant attempts to get out of his body through his mouth. “Um,” he managed to say.

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow at his lack of eloquence. His face was a mixture of neutrality and an undercurrent of mischievousness that was new. “Do you have anywhere to go?” he asked, finally lifting his teacup to his mouth and taking a sip.
“I – I don’t think – no,” John said stupidly, and it was so easy to push away his plan to go see Mary, too easy, too horribly easy, and he had a small second of lucidity in which he knew I have to break it off with her, but then Sherlock took over again, and all thoughts of her receded. The fabric of life reshifting to accommodate the huge presence of Sherlock.

“Good,” Sherlock said, looking determined, and stood up from his chair, shrugging his robe off, and yes, he was naked underneath, shockingly so, it was too much, too fast. John tried to formulate a response more coherent than bwuh, but before he could, Sherlock had walked around the table, had jerked his chair backwards with a surprising strength and had pulled it towards him, John sitting on it almost like a puppet.

“Why did you even bother to put on clothes,” Sherlock mumbled, tugging at John's trousers, the loose comfortable pair, so they gave easily. “Wasting valuable time.”

John gave a startled laugh at that, head spinning, scrabbling to catch up – blood was rushing to his cock already, and he worried for a split second about his stamina, having come so intensely twice the day before – once when thinking about having sex with Sherlock and then when actually having sex with Sherlock; it didn't seem to be anything Sherlock was concerned with, maybe he didn't know enough about it, but then that seemed impossible, Sherlock not knowing enough about something. He probably just didn't care very much.

“Get this off, you,” Sherlock told him calmly, and John complied almost automatically, lifting his hips of the chair and yanking down his trousers, breath catching at the you, which was so far from condescending it was impossible to even think of; no, it was reverent, almost. Sherlock took over and pulled his trousers over his ankles, and then roughly tugged John's loose t-shirt over his head. It only took a couple of moments to get completely naked, and it was a shock, as though his defenses had been breached without him even realising it – and well, that was sort of what had happened, wasn't it?

Sherlock dropped fluidly to his knees, with his own particular lanky sort of awkward grace, and John had a moment of intense disbelief at the sight; the clean line of Sherlock's back curving away from him as he lowered his head to John's cock, leaning into his lap, pressing his bare chest against John's knees, parting them a bit, strangely bundled up, too tall for this position, really – and: ohfuck, this was definitely something Sherlock had done before. John's brain went silent for a bit as Sherlock's mouth engulfed his cock and took him into the shock of wet heat of it about half-way, licking him to full hardness languidly, running his tongue over the underside of his cock before closing his mouth around it and sliding it down as far as he could take it, and the idea of Sherlock's lips, those impossible, stupidly gorgeous, infuriating lips, wrapped around his cock was almost too much, and he could only barely stop himself from thrusting forward into Sherlock's mouth.

Sherlock hummed around his cock in response, prompting a small moan from John; John wasn't sure it was appreciation or a warning not to do that again, but suspected the latter – Sherlock brought his hands up to rest on his hips and exerted a firm grip there, keeping him in place. John tangled a hand in his hair, taking care to not push down on the head of curls, simply wanting the contact as his breath hitched under Sherlock's ministrations. Sherlock moved his mouth up and down his shaft, letting it fall almost out of his mouth as he swirled the head with his tongue, and John hissed in pleasure, electric shocks of pleasure running up his limbs.

“Ah, fuck,” he said hoarsely, trying to control his hips, sliding his fingers through the mass of curls on Sherlock's head. Sherlock took him almost completely into his mouth again; he was sucking in earnest now, doing this as he did everything else – thoroughly, energetically, as matter-of-factly as a blowjob could ever be delivered. The sight of his bobbing, curly-haired, dark head coupled with the way he let John's cock slip from his mouth again after a couple of strokes, teasing ever so slightly
before running his tongue over the glans with straight-forward artistry, was so breathtaking John’s head was reeling.

“Sherlock,” he panted, couldn't help the note of *please* infecting his voice, because *fuck*, he needed *more*; and Sherlock seemed to hear it and the warm, full heat of his mouth returned as he took in John's cock as far as he could, now steadily sucking, in a relentless, deliberate pace.

After long moments of suspended pleasure, his body thrumming, moans falling from his mouth involuntarily, straining helplessly against Sherlock's steadying hands, John felt the familiar tightening in his gut, in his balls; his fingers pressed down slightly in Sherlock's hair as a warning, because it was hard to get anything coherent out in the way of words, though he tried: “Sher–Sherlock – I'm going – stop –”

Sherlock's response was to remove one of his hands from John's hips and to quickly start wanking himself, not stilling his mouth on John's cock; on the contrary, he hummed around him, making sounds that John almost thought could be words kept inside the confines of his mouth, but then he couldn't think anymore, the vibrations rocking him only speeding up the approach of his climax.

“Fuck,” John breathed at the realisation that Sherlock wasn't going to stop, and then at one particularly powerful suck he went silent and rigid as he trembled through his orgasm, hips helplessly suspended as he moved against Sherlock's remaining hand, trying to control the shudders propelling him forward, spilling himself inside Sherlock's mouth. Sherlock accepted as much of his come as he could, swallowing tangibly, licked and sucked at him until it was over and John's body slapped back down with the sudden force of doubled gravity. Sherlock's mouth slipped from his cock, the sensation giving him a twinge of thrilling discomfort and overstimulation. He was vaguely aware of Sherlock pressing his forehead into John's thigh, hiding his face, and shuddering through another completely silent, tensed orgasm into his own hand, his hand on John's hip digging painfully into his skin. They sat, panting.

“God, you're going to kill me,” John said after a good five seconds, when the fog in his brain had lifted somewhat.

Sherlock lifted his head and looked up at him, one corner of his mouth twitching up, lips deliciously shiny with wetness; the sight gave John an unexpected dirty thrill. “Not my intention,” he said breathlessly.

“Glad to hear that I'm of more interest to you alive than as a corpse,” John said, passing a hand over his eyes, fighting the urge to laugh, because what was his life, really.

“Necrophilia really isn't something –” Sherlock began, seriously.

“God, no, don't ruin it,” John immediately deflected him.

Sherlock leaned his chin on John's thigh and for once, was willing to obey. After a moment, he said, quietly: “It's still here.”

“What is?” John asked – blind, huge, almost uncomplicated affection surging through him, as he rested his hand on Sherlock's hair.

“My desire to have sex with you.”

“You just sucked me off,” John pointed out, a little stupidly. He didn't add the *quite expertly*, because Sherlock hardly needed *more* reason to be smug.

Sherlock rolled his eyes at that, *yes; evidently; you are such an idiot. “But it's still here.”*
John had a strange kind of twinge in his stomach. He trailed his fingers down Sherlock's cheek to get his attention, and looked him in the eye. “You want... Something else? More?”

Sherlock considered. “Yes.” He added, prompted by something he saw in John's face, though John himself wasn't aware of what it was: “Not necessarily right now. It's just... very new that it doesn't go away. I thought –” He fell silent for a second. “I feared it was just an aberration, and it would go away now, after a second time, but it hasn't.” He lifted his head off John's leg and scrabbled up from the floor, stretching himself, apparently completely oblivious to the picture he was presenting John – long, lean lines of chest, hips, smooth thighs, a mess of come spattered on his stomach. John swallowed at the apparent utter lack of concern or awareness Sherlock had for his body. He was just as much at ease naked as clothed. The way he stood there, it wasn't – it just wasn't normal, but then that was normal for Sherlock.

“That's good, right?” John ventured, and felt a small apprehension at the possibilities of the answer.

“I – yes.” But Sherlock looked confused. His phone, lying forgotten on the table, sounded. Sherlock broke the look between them immediately, leaving John slightly anxious, and picked up the phone. He studied the contents of the text for a moment, then seemed mildly satisfied.

“Case,” he said.

“Yard?” John asked.

“No. Website. Not that interesting. A little, though.” Sherlock started tapping out a response, looking almost comical, stark naked, still flushed from his orgasm, working out a text calmly. “Can you come?” he asked John without looking at him.

“Yes,” John said, then sighed. “Give me a minute, though. I wasn't kidding when I said you'd kill me. I'm not twenty anymore.”

Sherlock's eyes flicked to him, and he blinked. “I didn't mean come in that –”


Sherlock's frown peeled off his face slowly, and there was some relief in his expression as he smiled, small but genuine. “Ah, yes, your sparkling wit. It re-emerges. Glad to see you've recovered.”

“I'm not sure that I have, actually,” John said and got up with a groan, legs a bit weak. “Do I have time for a shower?”

“I need one more than you do,” Sherlock pointed out, focused on his phone again.

“We can – we can share if you want?” John said, hesitantly. It seemed like a new level of intimacy.

Sherlock put his phone on the table and turned to him. He looked unconcerned, but he said, quite decisively: “Okay.”

“But no trying to get me off in the shower, okay,” John said, to defuse the strange heaviness of the moment. “I wouldn't be able to get up again all day.”

“I'll restrain myself,” Sherlock said.

In the shower, Sherlock kissed him. John realised they hadn't done that yet, despite the blowjob and
the orgasms, and it felt good, it felt reassuring that it was Sherlock initiating it; it was a slow slide of lips and water that was less intentional than anything they'd done. Sherlock backed him gently against the tile wall, looming over him, and then pulled back. “John,” he said urgently, and managed to both look like a drowned dog and a renaissance painting; with his curls dripping over his forehead, backdropped by the diffuse light of the bathroom filtering in through the blue shower curtain, tinging him darker than he was, and water running down his nose into his mouth, “I don't understand any of this.” Then he retreated a bit more, looking caught, as though he hadn't intended to say it. John could easily imagine that he hadn't – it was such a rare thing for Sherlock to acknowledge that something was beyond him that it usually took something quite huge to get him to that point.

John pulled him back into him and wrapped him into a hug on an impulse, and Sherlock didn't resist, a wet expanse of skin pressed against skin. “Neither do I,” he replied into Sherlock's neck, truthfully, then hesitated for a second before continuing, “but I do know it's something I... want.”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock said, as if impatient, and he was only slightly responsive to the hug, “obviously you want it. And I want it. Which is why I don't understand how... complicated it feels. Is.”

The slip between feels and is was the whole thing in a nutshell, John realised – he knew Sherlock had feelings, they manifested themselves all the time, slipping out of the cracks of Sherlock's control, and he really didn't understand how people like Anderson or Donovan sometimes honestly seemed to think that Sherlock was a sociopath. But he also knew that Sherlock had a very peculiar way of handling emotion – he tried to catalogue it like everything else, and tried to explain it away rationally. He saw its nuance, but he wanted to know it, bullet point it, almost, get it organised. Obviously, that usually didn't work per the nature of feelings, and those were the times when Sherlock often retreated in himself, sinking into silence or sulking, frustrated at the lack of depth he sometimes achieved when thinking about emotion.

“Don't worry,” he said, releasing Sherlock, who drew back with a frown that indicated he didn't have something worked out the way he wanted to, “it'll be fine.”

“An inane platitude, how dull,” Sherlock mumbled, but he pressed the stern line of his nose into John's slick forehead.

In the taxi, he remembered something, and felt for a moment as though he didn't deserve to be a doctor.

“Sherlock?” he ventured.

His companion was focused intently on the screen of his phone, fingers flying, and only barely acknowledged him.

He cleared his throat. “Have you been – you know, tested?”

Sherlock's eyes stilled, but he didn't raise them to meet John's eyes. “Ah. Wondered when you'd be asking about that,” he said, tone completely even once more, and the jump from I don't understand any of this was too abrupt, giving John the equivalent of an emotional whiplash. He even physically reeled a bit from it, from the utter detachment in that voice as Sherlock continued. “I have. A couple of weeks before I came back to London. I am completely clean. And I know you are, too.”

John couldn't help it: “How?”

“You're a doctor,” Sherlock simply said, veering into vagueness, attention focused on something
“How does that prove anything?” John said, going against the instinct that said just leave him be because this actually mattered, a lot, and also because a small – no, quite a large – part of him wanted those eyes on him again, the unwavering focus of the you, and the closeness of I don’t understand any of this.

“Good grief, John,” Sherlock muttered, directing the Christ, John, you know, and if you don’t, you don’t deserve to look at the indifference of his phone screen. “You’re a professional. Most of the time you remember about safe sex,” he continued, leaving the except this time unspoken. “I’ve found your condom packets strewn all over the flat every time you were dating. But I also know that you didn’t use any with Sarah near the end, and though Mary hasn’t come over to ours, I think it quite probable that you’re not with her, either, since I haven’t seen any since we came back to Baker Street; and as a medical professional, I’m more than reasonably sure you wouldn’t do that if you hadn’t been tested every time, as well as asking your partners to do the same. It fits with your personality.”

John closed his eyes at the mention of Mary, and at the complete immobility of her name in Sherlock’s mouth.

“Right,” he said, not quite sure how to feel about this – Sherlock was right, of course, because he was, infuriatingly, always right, and John should have been more aware of what was happening; the fact that Sherlock had been like a whirlwind once more, like a burst of light that eclipsed everything else, was really no excuse at all, and he deserved the small cold point of shame igniting in his chest. The other cold point he wasn’t sure he deserved – was he being punished for something? Or was it just this way, again? Was he an idiot for expecting Sherlock to be less volatile in his attentions after the things that had happened between them? “Right,” he repeated, trying to find other words and failing.

“Yes, I am,” Sherlock said, evenly, and there was nothing about him that was even somewhat warm.

John looked at him, tried to draw him out with his continued presence, with the press of his eyes that he was sure Sherlock was intently aware of, but it didn’t work.

“You should be more careful about sex with former drug users, John,” Sherlock said after a pause, lightly, still staring at that damn screen, as though it didn’t matter at all, really.

“You should be more careful about using drugs,” he retorted; the barb was sharp, completely below the belt, and immature, and it stemmed completely from his unsettlement about Sherlock’s lack of contact.

But when Sherlock glanced up sharply at that, and his eyes clicked to John’s, and there was a moment of naked, breathless, wounded disbelief in them before they narrowed and clouded over with blankness and were flicked back down to the phone, John felt the cold spread throughout his chest and wished that Sherlock hadn’t looked at him at all.

“Sherlock,” he said, guilt grabbing at his throat, “I didn’t – I’m sorry.”

Sherlock pressed his thumb to his phone in what John knew to be the ‘send’ command with exceptional force, but ignored him.

“I have to go see Mary,” he told Sherlock quietly, when the wife of the deceased had stopped sobbing for a second – she’d been crying for almost half an hour, and Sherlock was growing
increasingly abusive, but the woman seemed so upset even Sherlock's annoyance rolled off her like water on wax. John had felt the guilt about Mary accumulating above his head, and if he waited any longer it would topple down on him and he might not even find the strength to go to her - and she'd said that she'd be busy later, so he had to do it now.

Sherlock barely reacted, not taking his eyes off the woman in front of him, his teeth practically bared as he curled his lip at her in distaste. He was smoking, deliberately blowing the smoke into her face. “Now?” he said through clenched teeth.

John felt a flicker of annoyance at the lack of response; surely Sherlock had some clue as to why he was going to Mary's, and even if he didn't know the full emotional scope of what John would have to do John still wanted some form of support from him, almost in spite of himself. “Well, yes,” he said, “I have to –”

But underneath his annoyance Sherlock's face was clouded over with the blankness that John knew well, and hated so. He fell silent at seeing it. Nothing was really registering with Sherlock right now, except the case and the obstacles to its solution – the wife being the biggest obstacle, being in the way, being such an unnecessary, deeply annoying distraction.

“Okay,” Sherlock said, uninflected, “I’ll meet you back at home.”

“Sherlock,” John tried again; to get a point of contact, to say I'm sorry about what I said or just to say, honestly, I want you to look at me.

“Go. I'll finish up here. It's quite obvious he's just faked his death and ran off with his secretary anyway. Boring. Disappointing,” Sherlock said icily, and the woman burst into tears anew. Sherlock eyed her, face contorted with a cold distaste.

“I – okay,” John eventually relented, feeling strange about his need to get more of a response. Sherlock wouldn't turn to him, and the pressure of Mary grew even more, so he had to go now; though he worried about about what the mental state of the woman in front of them would be after Sherlock had finished with her. “Take it easy,” he therefore said, but Sherlock offered nothing, absolutely nothing in response, and John felt distinctly uneasy as he left him to it.

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On his way to Mary, Ian texted him. It felt as though normality had remembered his existence and had come knocking for a bit to break the spell of the past days, that had been Sherlock, Sherlock, and only Sherlock, relentlessly eclipsing everything and everyone else. He felt a stab of guilt when he remembered that Ian would have been going through quite a rough patch, and John hadn't been there for him at all.

We missed you at the session, doctor sir. Want to get a pint tomorrow? Peanuts will be seasoned by our tears. Might get Bill to come too, Sharon's busy. Ian

He considered. Then realised with a mild shock that he wanted to ask Sherlock if it was okay – and that was, once more, Sherlock shifting the balance way more than he should, but now it seemed like he had more of a right, now that he'd finally filled in all of the places that John had already mentally awarded him in his life. Lover, joining the ranks of friend and flatmate and infuriating wanker and
inspiration. Christ, it was breath-taking, the speed with which it had all hit him. Still, he felt like it was much too early for that, and he needed to maintain something of the outside world, a rock to hang onto in the push and pull of the tide that was Sherlock, so he sent back

Sure, you pathetic pushover. 
Tell me when & where. 
Sorry about the session, it's just been a bit crazy.

J

Then, he stared out at London flashing past the window for a bit, recalling how Sherlock had just swooped in with sex, twice now, and had been the only thing he could see for a while; even before Sherlock's fall he'd sometimes worried about the extent to which he molded himself to Sherlock's moods and whims, and this was really no different, though he couldn't say that he had especially minded, in this case. Still, it had been shocking. He closed his eyes against the glare of the city in the bright sunlight, trying to feel like a separate entity, John Watson, not just the Watson of Holmes-and-Watson, and found it a bit difficult. Even now he was thinking of what Sherlock might be putting that poor woman through, and how distant he'd been, before, in the cab, and the way he'd looked almost hurtfully uninterested in where John was going; it never would have registered that way with John before, but now that he'd been leaving Sherlock to go break up with Mary because Sherlock had stepped in and had tangled all of the lines that he'd put out to connect other people to him, it felt absolutely unfair that Sherlock didn't even offer him a flicker of support, of comfort, of some certainty that he was doing the right thing.

Though he did feel like the past days had brought him closer to Sherlock than he'd been, well, ever, or at least since Sherlock had come back, even more enigmatic than before, with more blind spots – he still didn't feel like he had any real grasp on his friend, his infuriating friend, and now his infuriating lover, who was just as much of an overthrowing force as every other role Sherlock had ever played. The small glimpse of uncertainty in the shower had hinted at something that was playing out on a deeper level, but John didn't doubt that he'd have to play this game with subtlety to get Sherlock to offer it up to him. The taxi ride had been a painful indication of that.

He sighed. Who was he, to choose this? To choose this over something as steady and good and healthy and inherently satisfying as his relationship with Mary? An extremely strange co-dependent gay relationship with his insane flatmate, who had a nonchalance about him that could be very damaging to anyone who allowed themselves to care about him, and an intensity about exactly the wrong things in social connections, who picked and chose his way through emotion and threw away what didn't suit him, who'd put him through a grieving process from hell and still didn't seem to fully understand the scope of that. What did it say about Sherlock's mental processes that he had honestly thought it would be better for John to not know that he was still alive? It felt like playing with – not even fire, but more like a bomb, that had been wired to confuse anyone who tried to defuse it.

There was so much to worry about here. Co-dependent; well, yes, there was no denying it, when he was with Sherlock everything else muted to background noise and when he wasn't, Sherlock still occupied too much of his conscience – or at least, and maybe this made it even worse, dependent, as he in all honesty didn't know if Sherlock had the same kind of sometimes over-sized, startlingly big feelings for John as John had for him. Gay; John had never seriously thought that this label applied to him, but he couldn't deny that coming in Sherlock’s mouth was extremely gay, and what did it mean, really, maybe it didn't have to mean all that much, but it felt wrong, naïve at the very least, to think that he could still consider himself completely straight while being this attracted to a man, even if it was only really one man. Insane; Sherlock had in general quite a good grasp on his personal brand of unhinged-ness, which really wasn't sociopathy, but a combination of maybe something of an autism spectrum disorder with a deep unwillingness or, maybe, incapability to put his otherwise extremely
detailed social observation into practice, and a clumsiness with emotion that was mostly born out of a lack of experience with it – in any case he could be very unpredictable, and though the past weeks had been relatively calm, John knew that his explosivity was likely still lurking beneath a veneer of temporary quiet. *Relationship*; he really didn't know if it was, he had no idea what any of this was, really, and he had no grasp whatsoever on what relationships of any kind even meant to Sherlock on a deeper level and what kind of rules, if any, he expected them to follow.

And then he hadn't even started on the sex – what did it mean for Sherlock, really? Did it mean anything at all that Sherlock had been topping John from the beginning, even when he'd been beneath him – choosing their rhythm, practically delivering John's orgasm with that voice, that *you* that was so incredibly thrilling and confusing? John's fantasies had often included Sherlock relinquishing some of the control that he had over John in almost every other aspect of their life; but it hadn't played out that way, and what was he to make of the fact that at least for now, the sex fell into exactly the same pattern they had in everything else? It was both extremely arousing and a little unsettling how aggressive Sherlock had been that morning, and after years of not even having been sure that Sherlock *had* sexual desires, John felt like he needed a little time to get to grips with a Sherlock who said that putting on clothes was a waste of valuable time that could have been spent sucking John's cock – but if there was one thing that life was short on, it was time to get to grips with things Sherlock Holmes did, unless it was jumping off a roof, and then there was too much time to get through, a frozen, sluggish reservoir of time, an endless supply that didn't offer anything of use at all.

Christ. What was his life? From unexpected blowjobs at breakfast to getting in a cab to break up with a woman he'd honestly thought he could love but who he'd cheated on twice now, almost without a second thought, what was his life?

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Mary's smile was guarded as she let him in. The air between them was already full of finality, John imagined uneasily, though it wasn't fair of him to assume that she felt it too. She couldn't possibly know what had been happening to him in the last 24 hours, she couldn't know that the fragile orbit of his universe that had first, with horrible effort, re-built itself to suit a world without Sherlock, and then had to re-construct itself to hold a world *with* Sherlock again, had now been smashed a third time, and was only beginning to take the shadow of a shape around a world in which Sherlock sucked his cock at the breakfast table. And he stood still in her hallway for a moment, feeling himself to be an utter bastard, and feeling life to be so immensely skewed, and lop-sided; taking people away and then giving them back, wreaking more havoc than anyone could imagine, giving him of all people a new chance of mythical proportion, randomly, without deserving it more than anyone else, and then pulling cruel tricks on people like Mary, who were profoundly undeserving of it. As he finished the thought, he took it back – it was *him* who was playing the cruel trick, really, even though it felt like it had been a pre-determined sequence of events; he'd handled it in possibly the worst way imaginable, and that was still his responsibility, even after the insistence, the unstoppability of Sherlock.

He looked at her; blonde, small, beautiful, with an easy, attractive grace, and with a deep and genuine warmth that had drawn him to her like a starving man to a banquet. And that was it then, really – she'd filled his hunger from the outside, but Sherlock was his hunger, burned in him from within, gave him the energy to find his own sustenance, a life that he really, truly wanted and was deeply afraid of at the same time.

“So, what happened yesterday?” she asked as she passed him a cup of coffee. They were sitting on her couch, the couch on which they'd shagged often enough, but now with a space between them what was wider than usual in not just a psychological sense. She was keeping her distance.
He grimaced. The most truthful thing to say would be *Sherlock happened*, but he felt the pressure to narrativise it more, to give her something that she could turn into something useful for herself. “Scotland Yard rang us up for a case, and in all the excitement... It slipped my mind. I'm sorry,” he said, and it wasn't even untrue.

She nodded slowly. “What was the case?”

He was a bit surprised at that, but said: “An apparent murder-suicide. Turned out to be a double murder; the wife's lover killed her and the husband.”

She nodded, seeming interested. “Sounds fascinating.”

“Yes, it was, actually,” he said, recalling how Sherlock had hovered over the bodies, trailing his fingertips over their silence, their bodily statements, the lines of their physicality being the only way they could still speak from beyond that misty boundary they’d crossed – they were lucky, in a sense, to have Sherlock there to capture their final words. Christ, it had only been yesterday, but it seemed like an ocean now lay between that moment and this one, an undiscovered depth teeming with hidden life; space and time curving away from each other, creating a new kind of time, moments in which Greg had said *I love both of you* and Sherlock had called him a microscope, moments in which Sherlock had growled *you* in his ear, prompting his orgasm, moments in which Sherlock had licked his neck in his sleep, sampling him.

“So they needed Sherlock,” Mary said, her eyes still slightly wary, but she seemed to relax – and he realised that she'd already at least half-way accepted his apology.

“Well, yes,” he said, swallowing down the *I'm actually sometimes useful, too*. She looked at him. “John, I'm okay with you going with him, you know.” She took a breath. “You've told me enough about the life you used to have together; don't think that I didn't pick up that you missed it terribly. I'm happy to hear that you get to do that again, because it's obvious that you love it.”

He frowned.

“I would have liked some communication, though,” she said, calmly, and then took a sip of her coffee – milk, sugar, Mary, milk, sugar, Mary.

“Yeah, I... I know,” he said, “I'm sorry. There's no excuse for forgetting about it.”

“I forgive you, you silly man,” she said warmly because she was wonderful, reaching over to grab his hand, meaning to restore the bridge between them, and that's when something snapped in him; the fragile barriers upholding the weight of his guilt snapped, and it tumbled over him like an avalanche.

He closed his eyes, trying to contain his turmoil to the inside of his skull. When he opened them again, she looked deeply startled; she'd obviously seen something that was extremely troubling in the way his face had folded in on itself.

“Mary,” he said, and it was almost a gasp, as he tried to breathe under the crush of his *why am I such a bastard, why*. “What?” she said, her gaze darkening with suspicion.

“I'm sorry,” he said, and then knew that if he owed her anything, it was the truth. “I can't keep on seeing you. I've – I've done something terrible.”
She waited, offering him nothing, and he couldn't blame her for that, because what was he offering her, after all? Her hand was inching back in her own direction, putting the distance back in place, fortifying her own boundaries against him. He pushed on, and picked the most comprehensible, straight-forward thing from the list of terrible things he'd done: “I've slept with someone.”

She was silent for a moment, the surprise moving over her face slowly, then crumbling into a deep disappointment. “Someone,” she repeated, and from her tone he could tell that she knew, already.

But it was his place to say it. “Sherlock,” he said, his throat almost too tight to get the name out, with its echoes, with its traces, with so many things attached to it.

She didn't cry. She didn't scream. In the five months that he'd been with her, he'd come to know her as a strong, solid person, with a steady, reliable personality, a wonderful human being with an honest, true self-awareness and appreciation for herself. She was all that and more as she stood up from the sofa, and fixed him with a firm gaze, only wavering slightly. She was breathing rapidly, and pressed her hand against her chest – trying to get it under control, trying to get the emotions pushing at her body back in line, because he could see her thinking it, and he really couldn't argue: he doesn't deserve it.

“I should have seen it coming,” she said, and she didn't even sound bitter, there was a resigned sort of wonder in her voice. “The way you talked about him... Even a year and a half after his death...”

“I'm so sorry,” he said, and meant it – not that he loved Sherlock, not that he'd slept with Sherlock, because there was just no way that he could ever be sorry about that, no matter how uprooting, how wildly confusing it was; but sorry that he hadn't been better through all of this, sorry that he had tried to hang onto normality while he already knew that it wasn't what he wanted, in the end, sorry that he'd tried to tell himself that it was good the way it was, to her detriment. What he was sorry for was that he had hurt her, but that was such an arsehole thing to say that he didn't even try.

She made a small noise that could have meant many different things. “Were you two together before his death?” she then asked, sharply, towering over him, resembling Sherlock for a split moment of insanity, and then not anymore, not at all, not even close. Mary. Milk, sugar, Mary.

“No,” he simply said, and it was the truth even if it was only one per cent of it, and hoped that she could tell that he wasn't lying; though there was no reason for her to assume that anything he'd ever told her wasn't a lie. She seemed to accept it, though, nodding to herself.

“But you are now,” she said, fist pressing into the patch of skin under which her heart was presumably hammering away. Blood pressure. Stress. Pulse. None of that breaking nonsense, but the heart working even harder to keep itself together under the weight of life.

He had a moment's confusion where he didn't know what to tell her, but none of it could mean anything to her, so he chose the route of least resistance: “Yes.”

“And you love him,” she said, and then seemed to lose some of her self-control, and clapped her arms around herself, as though needing the support of her own body. Her eyes were shining with tears, now, but they didn't fall.

There was a silence that he couldn't bring himself to fill, because the yes, I do was already too strong, too painful. “I'll go,” he said eventually, because the words that he could think of that had any meaning had run out; he felt something in him smart bitterly at the loss of her despite himself. The break between them was too sharp, too jagged; they had been two people who had fit together remarkably well in several ways, and now there were only harsh edges where there had been soft curves rolling into each other. God, he was terrible.
“Yes,” she agreed, voice constricted, though she looked as though she wanted to say more, maybe. Maybe you're an arsehole or maybe how could you do this to me. The silence of her said all of those things just as well, though. He was good at reading the things people who weren't Sherlock didn't say. And it was just like her to have this be the easiest break-up conversation he'd ever had; because it had been the easiest relationship he'd ever had, too, the most steady one, the one on which he had been able to build without having to worry about the firmness of her foundation. It made it all the more bitter, this objectively good break-up – they went well together, even when breaking up.

At the door, she told him, seemingly in spite of herself: “I'll miss you.”

And he would have said so will I and it would have been true, it would have been true in an uncomplicated way that not a lot of other things were nowadays, but he knew that that wouldn't help, not at all, not even a little bit; so he decided not to burden her with his regrets, because she had no place to put them in anymore.

“Goodbye, Mary,” he said instead, watching her close the door on a part of his life that now seemed so remote it was like looking at it through the wrong end of a spyglass.
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

CHAPTER 8

Sherlock?

He tried hard not to remember the dozens of times he'd typed this in the first, upturned weeks after Sherlock's jump, sending it to a number that, when dialled, cheerfully, extremely un-Sherlock-like, told him this number is no longer in use. Please re-dial whenever he tried to call it, emerging from dreams where Sherlock told him to contact him, because a magic trick, John. He tried hard not to remember how he'd always only barely been able to see it, eyes hard and dry and stinging as he looked at the name, at its question mark, throwing it down an abyss of nothing, not even getting an echo back, just the static of the deep, dark sleep of death.

Things had changed, after all.

Fine.

SH

And then, a bit more tangible:

Asinine case.

SH

He breathed a sigh of relief he didn't know he'd been holding.

I'm sorry about what I said before. I'll be home asap.

Sherlock didn't respond, but the coil of guilt (of guilt entwined; of Sherlock, of Mary, of himself) in him loosened a bit nonetheless.

And then he was pissed off for another bit, at Sherlock, at Mary, at himself. Mostly at Sherlock, though.

God, why couldn't he just shout at him like he could before? Why was there this uncrossable depth between them nowadays?

When he was about to slide his key into the lock of 221B, he stopped for a moment, and examined himself mentally – skull ribs arms hips knees toes brain heart liver blood skin scar limp. Strange how he was still in one piece, really, even after all that living. He realised he felt like crying.

He quickly turned the key in the lock and slipped inside, needing to get out of the open battlefield of the street and into the sanctuary that was home, even if it was a peculiar war zone of a sanctuary; the
dangers contained here were ones that he loved, so that was okay.

Sherlock was composing. The sounds drifted down the hallway to meet him. The same trill of notes – one, two, three – then the same thing again, then a pause, and again – one, two, three – a glissando, a new note, another pause. Then a more complete sequence; something vaguely melancholy, ending on a note of dissonance, beautiful, a bit painful. John frowned. Composing often meant emotionally compromised, and extremely unapproachable.

He scaled the stairs, trying to beat down apprehension.

Sherlock was standing upright in the sofa, dressed in his pajama trousers and his robe, which was hanging open, revealing his chest, and a sliver of scars. His eyes were closed as he swept the bow over the strings; he hummed along with the notes, shaping them into what he wanted them to be. A half-filled composition sheet was lying on the ground. He didn't quite respond to John's entrance, and started again – notes, one, two, three, four, and then a new stretch, improvised, following the lead of his voice, which had an unsurprisingly clear, deep, warm timbre. Sherlock singing. Another thing to add to the list of things that never used to happen, and now do.

He didn't look unhappy, though, and John was relieved; he knew how absorbed Sherlock could get into his music when it struck at the right time, so he buried his growing need for some emotional comfort – an unpredictable commodity with Sherlock even at the best of times – and said nothing to jerk his flatmate from his reverie, instead hanging his coat on its hook. He stood for a moment, looking at the way the sleeves of his coat touched Sherlock's, trying to think of something that he could do, something tangible enough, something that took up enough time to allow him to get a grip on the feelings and the thoughts that had passed over him in the past hours. The washing up presented itself as a possibility of potentially horrible proportions.

He went over to the kitchen and turned the hot water tab, mentally preparing himself for what might be growing between the dishes and teacups of days.

He'd almost finished, feeling more and more affected by the strange, ethereal beauty of Sherlock's composition, all the while struggling valiantly with some fungus growth Sherlock had cultivated in a series of petri dishes and had then unceremoniously dumped into the sink after they'd proven to have a completely normal, boring development, and feeling ridiculously as though getting it clean would mean something significant for the state of his life, when Mrs. Hudson knocked on the door frame of the open door.

"Whoo-hoo!" she said happily.

Sherlock stopped playing immediately – not that deep into the music then, after all, or at least not as deep as that time John had found him playing inside the shower in the middle of the night for some reason, now so long ago, a lifetime ago (literally: Sherlock's lifetime), and he had feared for a moment that Sherlock had overdosed on something he couldn't identify, because he had been trembling with an absurd kind of mania and wouldn't respond, and could only play, glowing with a kind of otherworldly light; and then it hadn't been drugs at all, just the music, only the music, as Sherlock had tried to explain to him the next day, uncharacteristically awkward, the music taking over the full top track of his mind, growing so strong that it actually, for some rare, fleeting, magical moments, took over from everything else. It had been a thing of exceptional and terrifying beauty to behold, really, but John had only been able to see it happen that one time.

"Hello!" he called out to her, somewhat glad to have someone near who would have more of a grasp on normal, small communication than Sherlock, the wanker. He hadn't spoken to Mrs. Hudson in a while, and she hadn't been up to see them as often as she'd used to, he realised; maybe she, too, wasn't quite believing yet of what was happening up in 221B, maybe she too had some trouble
confronting the ghosts of lives past head-on. She poked her head around the corner and smiled widely at him as a hello.

“Parcel for you, Sherlock dear,” she then said, turning to face Sherlock, waving about said package, a small, battered thing wrapped in clumsy cardboard, kept together by a piece of unravelling string. There were several stamps and prints on it, as though it had passed through many hands and many borders.

Sherlock jumped off the couch lightly, and took the parcel from her with a silly kind of flourish, bowing down to kiss her hand to prompt the scandalised giggles he loved. John smiled in spite of himself, happy to see, once more, the kind of playfulness Sherlock had always reserved for Mrs. Hudson; but as Sherlock looked over the package John saw his face tighten, and he went with it into his bedroom without a further word. John watched him go, shaking his head.

“Some tea, then, Mrs. Hudson?” John asked from the kitchen, still scrubbing at a particularly resistant spot of fungus.

“Thank you, dear,” she said, and then, as naturally as she always had, began to make the tea herself, bringing a smile to John's face.

“I can do it for you, you know,” he said, but she waved it away briskly, tsk-ing as though he'd suggested something absolutely scandalous – he had a brief moment of slightly hysterical internalised amusement when he realised that it might be her reaction, too, if he told her Sherlock and I have discovered the joys of sex with each other, finally having succumbed to society's opinion of what we should do. God, he felt like he needed to tell someone soon, just to get it to become something that was a reality, not a strange mix-up of fantasy that could prove imagined at any minute.

“Nonsense, love,” she said, “you're busy cleaning up Sherlock's mess, so I can make the tea.”

He eyed her, gratitude surfacing inside him at someone appreciating what he was doing; she looked back kindly. He relinquished the effort of dominating the fungus, refusing to think of it as another apt metaphor for his life, before taking a seat at the table and clearing off some of Sherlock's chemical equipment.

“And how have you been lately?” he asked her.

“Oh, the usual,” she trilled cheerfully, “nothing that would excite the two of you, I expect.”

“I don't know, sometimes a little less excitement sounds like it would be something that we could use around here.”

Mrs. Hudson handed him his mug of tea with a raised-eyebrows look that said for you, maybe, but not for the other person in this flat. He acknowledged the truth in it with a smile.

“It has been a bit quiet around here these past weeks, though, hasn't it?” she asked him, stirring in sugar.

“Yes, I... I suppose it has,” he said, allowing himself to look over at the closed border of Sherlock's bedroom door. It had been calm, almost eerily so, apart from that time he'd shouted abuse at Sherlock and that time they'd had sex on the couch, he thought wryly.

“I'm so pleased he could convince you to come back here, dear,” she said when he'd refocused on her, more seriously. “The first two days without you here were as bad as any I've known.”

“Oh?”
“Oh, yes,” she said with what seemed like a small shiver, “screaming all night. Banging on the walls for hours on end. I don't know what he was up to. I was a bit afraid to come up the first morning.”

He blinked at her.

“He apologised, though,” she said, and her face clearly said that was even more terrifying. “Said something about nightmares.” She shook her head, sadly. “Who really knows what's happened to him, after all.” He looked at her. They hadn't had a lot of contact in the years of Sherlock's absence; she'd called him occasionally and had come to see him a couple of times (as he felt completely unequipped to come see her, deeply unwilling to know of a Baker Street without Sherlock Holmes), bearing always some comfort in pastry form. He'd shared with her, carefully, a very small piece of his grief, and she had understood in her intuitive way that there was so much more, but had never probed. Now he remembered that she, too, had lost Sherlock, and she, too, had regained him – and presumably she, too, was still finding ways to get him to be an active, living part of her life again. She took a sip of her tea, and then said when she saw his look of – he supposed – growing apprehension: “It hasn't happened since, dear, don't worry. You've always had a calming influence on him.”

He fiddled with his mug. Did he, really? Sherlock had been more subdued these past weeks than he'd ever known him, and since that first morning when he'd come out of his bedroom to find Sherlock sitting next to the door, his sleeping pattern had been closer to normal than ever before. Nothing like the things she was describing had happened; or if they had, they'd been much quieter. Sherlock didn't even argue as much when John fixed him food. So maybe, yes. But he couldn't help but feel like it was a deceptive calm that Sherlock was hiding behind, shielding himself off from forces that he couldn't handle yet, and that it was bound to break at one point. He didn't quite know what to do with the information that she was giving him – what nightmares could be so bad that they had Sherlock not shouting, but actually screaming, and banging the wall, not once, like he often did when he was bored or frustrated, but for hours? How could John ever really help, if he didn't know what was taking place in that gorgeous, brilliant, so horribly closed off head of Sherlock's? God, what had happened to him?

She noted his preoccupation, and patted his hand lightly. “You're doing great,” she said, and at that he felt such a powerful rush of love for her that he had to close his eyes for a second.

“Thank you,” he finally managed to get out.

“You're welcome, dear,” and it was so sincere that he grabbed her frail old-lady hand and squeezed it in a way that was bound to be uncomfortable for her.

They drank the rest of their tea in a nice kind of silence. When she finally got up to go back downstairs, he said: “Come up anytime,” and he thought it might have been relief in her eyes he saw as she nodded.

Sherlock came back into the living room shortly after Mrs. Hudson had left, but only gave John a small impression of a smile that revealed absolutely nothing as he went over to grab his violin and his laptop, and then went back to his room, shutting the door behind him with what seemed like intentional softness. John realised he hadn't said a word since John had come home.

Sherlock didn't emerge from his room all evening, which was something that had never happened before in all the time John had known him. The unfamiliar silence in his bedroom was occasionally
punctuated by bursts of music, pieces John recognised as well as new, unfinished swells of sound, still in the process of being composed. When John finally couldn't stand it anymore and went over to knock on his door, he responded, calmly: “I'm busy, John.”

And that was it.

He was furious, but did nothing, apart from throwing his phone at Sherlock's door, which didn't help at all, and prompted no reaction whatsoever. He cursed at himself for not daring to be more insistent, for not saying hey, tosser, I'm your friend and I need you right now or fuck you and come talk to me, I just broke up with my girlfriend for you; he would have before, before — before everything, before Sherlock had jumped off a roof, before John had spent two years swirling to the bottom of life and had had to brave so many different tides in order to swim back up, before Sherlock had turned the sky into the ground and the other way around by coming back, before Sherlock had pulled him down and had shared with him his mouth and then his body in such a way that it hadn't actually felt like sharing.

John switched on the telly, and stared at it unseeingly for about half an hour, redness clouding his vision, before he decided that he couldn't be between these walls for a bit and went out for a walk.

He felt fearful, now, the anger dissipating without a Sherlock to react to. What he feared, he wasn't sure. Sherlock, shutting the door on him so literally, so effectively. Himself, who didn't seem to have the bollocks to bring down that door. Himself, who really felt like he might have let something happen to him that could break him, break him all over again, after all the time he had needed to come back together as a person. Himself, who'd gone and broken up with Mary without having even the slightest reassurance that what had happened between him and Sherlock was a real thing, a thing that would be repeated, that could grow and evolve — right now it seemed like so long ago that Sherlock had looked at him and said: I don't understand any of this, and there had been no real obstacles between them but the easily parted curtain of shower water.

He went on a long walk, passing familiar streets and buildings that he'd avoided for a long time, and they seemed to only cement the feeling that he was going backwards into the past.

He felt a confusing, guilty desire to text Mary. But then didn't, of course, because he'd been more than enough of a wanker to her for today. Probably for more than today. A lot more.

He sighed and texted Ian instead:

Looking forward to that pint
tomorrow. Feels like I really need it.
J

He could almost hear Ian's wry voice in the swift response:

Me too, doctor sir. Me too.
Ian

He hovered outside of Sherlock's bedroom for a long moment when he came back, feeling somewhat refreshed by the tangibility of the city in spite of everything, as he tried to squash the helpless desire to go in and ask if they could sleep in the same bed again tonight. There was nothing about Sherlock that had suggested that he would want to, and the blankness of his door was a silent statement in itself. Or felt like it, at least.

He padded up the stairs to his bedroom with that feeling of stretched-out-ness again, a John Watson
without backstory, nothing but a name in a silly romance novel; a bit angry, a bit hurt, but most of all: a lot honestly sad, and then: worried about the fact that he felt honestly sad where before, he would have felt miffed, annoyed, rightfully ticked off at Sherlock for being such an annoying prat; he would have felt anything but this deep, horrible feeling of inadequacy.

–

And because Sherlock wasn't up when he came to the breakfast table, and because the entirety of his shift at the clinic was filled with a constant, feverish, somewhat belated intrusion of John Watson, you had sex with Sherlock Holmes, he finally gave in and texted Greg. Greg, who he thought of all his friends to be the one who'd understand this most – the one who knew him at the time of Sherlock's death, had seen him at his worst, at his deepest, at his most exposed, when the Greg I just love him I love him I love him and now he's gone oh fuck Greg what am I going to do whatamigoingtodonow just came out without him having any control over it.

You're not going to believe this
(or maybe you are) but Sherlock
and I slept together. I'm not sure
what's happening.
J

He stared at the text for a long moment before sending it, trying to imagine if it wasn't a total overstepping of the boundaries he had with Greg. Surely I shagged him was far less shocking than I loved him, but then, people thought about sex in different ways.

But it was Greg, who was wonderful, so the response was:

I'm at the office. Come over
whenever you want, the team
can handle the shit that's
going on here right now.
Greg

He told Sarah it was an emergency, and, well, it didn't even feel like it was much of a lie. It was a pretty slow day, anyway, and she let him go without much of a fight.

He wasn't sure what he could say, really, apart from what the fuck is even going on, but he felt like just talking to Greg would provide a point of quiet in the volatility of the past days.

–

“So?” Greg said, instead of hello, leaning back in his chair, legs propped up on the paperwork on his desk.

John dropped into the chair opposite him heavily.

“I don't even know,” he said.

Greg eyed him, one eyebrow inching up. “You're not happy.”

“I – no,” John shook his head.

Greg swung his legs off his desk and leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand. “Why not?” As always, the question was innocent, hiding so much more; in this case I thought you'd be ecstatic after all of the angst and unrequited love and terrible regrets that he'd died before you could tell him that
“Because he's being a wanker about it,” John said, and finally, there it was, that familiar, somehow comforting feeling of annoyance at Sherlock that he'd apparently misplaced in the chaos of his brain.

Greg blinked. “He shagged you and then kicked you out of bed or something?”

John shook his head, because that wasn't exactly how it had gone down.

Greg's expression turned pained. “Don't tell me he's suddenly a complete sap, bringing you breakfast in bed or something like that.”

John shook his head again, and couldn't help the giggle at the image. “No. No, thank God. That's about the only thing that would be worse.”

“What, then?”

“Just... Not talking,” John said.

Greg eyed him. “And this is new in what way?”

“It's new in that he's never not talked after having had sex with me,” John said, heatedly.

Greg's somewhat mocking expression slid off and was replaced with something more serious, as though he only now realised what John was saying. “I... Yeah. I guess that's a bit more upsetting.”

John sighed. “And the thing is, he... he actually did talk. Yesterday morning we had a whole conversation, and he said that... well, he said that it was something he wanted.” He decided not to mention the and then he sucked me off just for good measure. “And then we had this small stupid case that really annoyed him, and I was gone for a bit, and now he's completely retreated into himself. I just... I have no clue how to reach him.”

Greg looked at him with his familiar subdued, shrewd expression. “You're insecure.”

“Yeah,” John admitted, “normally I'd just tell him he's being a prick and he'd accept it and we'd shout at each other for a bit, or talk, or not talk and go have Chinese, whatever, and it would all work out fine, but now... I dunno.”

“There's more at stake,” Greg filled in.

“Yeah,” John agreed quietly.

“Punch him,” Greg said after a moment.

John blinked.

“I'm serious. Punch him. You still need to get that out of your system. Punch him and see what he does then.”

John licked his lips. “Greg, I'm not going to just deck him because he's not talking to me. For all I know he's actually going through something rough.”

“All the more reason to remind him that you're there,” Greg said, and he looked completely serious. “Telling you. Punch him. It helps.”

“Are you speaking out of experience?” John asked, raising an eyebrow.
“Yes,” Greg said. “Don’t know if you know this, but I met him on a crime scene, wandering around totally coked up, high out of his skull. The most sociable I’ve ever seen him.” He gave a wry smile. “Got himself arrested, of course, for disrupting police work and insulting everyone. Chased him all over fucking London to get a hold of him after it turned out that he was right about who the murderer was. He was half insane, coming down from another high, totally unresponsive in any meaningful way – so I punched him. It got his attention.” He looked pleased with himself.

John chewed this over. It wasn’t quite surprising, with what he’d pieced together from the scraps of information about Sherlock’s drug use that he’d been handed by Mycroft and Greg, but it was still an impossible thing to imagine – Sherlock out of his own control, riding the waves of something that wasn’t just himself. His stomach twinged unpleasantly as he tried to picture it. He shook his head. “Not quite the same situation, though, wouldn’t you say?”

“Of course not. But I’ve done it a couple of times more, later, when he was clean – whenever he goes into that crazy state of his where he actually, honestly doesn’t remember that other people are human too.” He looked at John for a moment. “Those are usually the times when he's most vulnerable himself, and then he likes to forget that other people can be, too, so he can be an absolute nightmare to them and they won't figure it out.”

And that was rather insightful, so John thought it over for a bit.

“I dunno,” he said.

“It's just advice,” Greg said, sounding unconcerned but hardly looking it. Then he leaned in a bit more and fixed John with a firm gaze. “How did it happen? Not that I want details,” he added, though he sounded keen.

“Um,” John said, and then thought fuck it, fuck all of it, “I guess we were both pretty drunk.”

Greg blinked. “God, I knew it,” he said, “I knew something was going to happen that night.”

“You were drunk, too, Greg,” John countered, feeling a blush creeping up his face. He wanted to add you even said you loved both of us, remember, but then didn’t, because that was so okay it didn't even need to be repeated, it was so true, and it was Greg, the quiet, strong force that had kept Sherlock sane for so long and then had done exactly the same for John when Sherlock had died, and it just really wasn't something to make fun of.

“No too drunk to feel the tension between you two. More crackling than usual, and that's saying something.” His face rearranged into a grin. “Fuck, I knew it. Drunken shagging? I'd never taken Sherlock for the type.”

John winced slightly. “Me neither, but here I am.”

“And was it him who... You know?”

“Yes,” John said, and there must have been something in his voice that prompted Greg's grin to widen even more – maybe the feverishness of his memory of Sherlock pulling him in was shining through in his expression.

But after a minute, Greg's smile wilted. “I'm sorry it didn't work out the way you wanted it to,” he then said, sincerely.

“I brought it on myself,” John shrugged.

“Would you have said no if you knew this would happen?” Greg asked him, leaning back and
putting his feet back up.

“No,” John said, immediately.

“Good,” Greg said, “good.”

“I just... don't know what he wants from this,” John said after a moment, and it felt like a confession.

Greg sighed. “Who the hell knows what he wants from anything? But I can tell you this, John –” and he gave John a meaningful look from under his lashes, “– he cares a whole fuckload more about you than about anyone else.”

That was true. John knew it was true. It helped, a little. They sat in a contemplative silence for a little while, before John said: “I'm just sort of glad I got to tell someone. Makes it feel a whole lot more like it actually happened.”

Greg nodded in sympathy, then said: “For what it's worth, you two are the most fucked-up, weird, incomprehensible couple I can think of, but also the most meant-to-be. In my opinion.”

John snorted. “Me and Sherlock meant to be? God.”

“Yeah, actually,” Greg said, quite seriously. “During that first case, you remember, with that insane serial killer cabbie; when we were doing that drugs bust in his flat, and he was insulting all of us high and low, and you'd only been around for, what was it, a day... And you asked for clarification and he actually gave it, without further comment – I thought then: these blokes should marry each other.”

John laughed, he couldn't help it.

“And I've thought that loads of times over the years,” Greg continued, mouth quirking into a smile at John’s laugh. “Most recent time when he called you a microscope that evening. Must be the nicest thing I've ever heard him say about anyone.”

John fell silent at that, and mulled it over for a second. “Yeah, I – I think it might be, actually.”

There was a knock at the door. Donovan came in and gave John a tentative smile, which he half-heartedly returned, more out of habit than sincerity.

“Corpse in South London,” she said, “passion crime, most likely. They want you to come check it out.”

“All right,” Greg said, and swung his legs down. John got up.

Before John left, Greg clapped his shoulder and said, with emphasis: “Punch him.” Donovan quirked an eyebrow, probably aware that they were talking about Sherlock, but said nothing.

And John, feeling a bit small and a bit big and a bit everything, smiled weakly and left them to it. It took him half the walk to realise that Greg hadn't asked about Mary, and he felt grateful for that in a guilty way, remembering how Greg's wife used to cheat on him before they'd divorced. Fuck, Greg was a good friend.

—

Ian came into the pub a bit later than they'd said; John had already ordered a pint for him.

“Hi, doctor sir,” he said warmly.
John smiled. “Hey Ian. You look less like one of my patients than last time.”

Ian shrugged. “I feel a bit better.”

John smiled at him, genuinely very happy to hear it. “No Bill, then?”

“No, he had this thing of his daughter's... School play or something.”

“Good.” John said, because Bill had once told him that if there was anything he felt guilty for, it was having to struggle so hard to take a genuine interest in his children through the apathy of his depression. As a single father that had to be one of the most difficult things he had to juggle, as well as an apparently extremely fraught relationship with his ex-wife, and, of course, the blankness left behind by a true best friend – the only part, really, to which John could relate.

“I hope he restrains himself and doesn't start offering advice on how to improve the dialogue during the performance,” Ian said, and they shared a somewhat bitter grin at that.

“Hey,” Ian said, after he'd taken a sip of his beer, “I want to know how you are. I spent all of last time completely high-jacking everyone else's right to a whiny self-centred monologue.”

“Don't you start,” John said sternly, “there is no such thing as allotted whining time, and you needed it very badly last time.”

“I did,” Ian nodded, “but that doesn't mean no one else did.”

John stared at his beer. And then he stared at Ian, trying to work out how much he could say – and it felt wrong, because he'd always been able to say pretty much everything to him, to him and Sharon and Bill, because they had all been in the same, upturned, horribly wrecked boat that was sinking to depths none of them had known existed. Now, though? It wasn't as straight-forward.

“It's fucking weird, and fucking scary,” he finally said, settling for that part of the truth, not the part of I am, despite the fact that it's all pretty difficult, so, so glad that I have new chances to take or the part of I had sex with him, finally, and it's so horrible that he had to die to get us to take that step.

“Like being caught in a zombie apocalypse?” Ian supplied lightly. He did appear to be a lot better than last time.

John laughed at the randomness of it. “Yeah, I guess so – the constant watching of my back definitely feels like it.”

Ian looked at him for a bit. “Have you had that fight with him yet, now?”

“Yeah,” John said after a moment's hesitation. “Not all of it. Not by any stretch of the imagination all of it. But some of it, yeah. You guys were right, he can take it again.”

“It's no use to speak no ill of the living,” Ian said, taking another gulp of his glass.

“It's also not really any use to speak no ill of the dead,” John said.

“Yeah, well,” Ian said softly, “they can't defend themselves anymore, so it's a bit different.”

John thought for a bit. “That's what I love about our little group, though. It's what the big group doesn't have. The rawness. The fact that we can say, God, these people we lost, they were fucking arseholes sometimes. And know that we didn't love them any less for it.”

“Ellen was a complete nightmare at times,” Ian said promptly. “It doesn't do the memory of all the
other things that she was any good to deny that.”

John looked at him. Feeling better, yes, but not quite his usual witty self. “Are you okay?”

“I told you I only wanted to hear about you tonight,” Ian said. “But yes, doctor. I'm okay. I just, you know, wish she was still here to be a nightmare to me.”

“And not just a dream,” John filled in involuntarily, thinking of Sherlock, and how reality twisted around fantasies and choked them, and made them come true in ways that were nothing like anything anyone ever could have imagined, so what was true, anyway, and did it even exist outside of the rotating, shifting domain of language – how in dreams people did things that were incomprehensible, but how in waking they did things that were even more so, and how he couldn't hear any of the things that Sherlock was sometimes saying to him with his body, with his new-found physicality, with the new life inside of him, how John was apparently incapable of picking up his trails, his silent words.

“Yeah, that,” Ian said quietly. John's heart twitched. He wondered if there was anyone else on this planet who knew what it felt like to have someone return from a realm they thought was utterly, utterly closed – not just haven't heard from him in thirty years or I heard she lives in France now or she told me once she'd have kids by now, but I don't really know, but actually, completely, irreversibly: I watched him die. I felt his skin yield to me in a way that it never had before, nothing left to give. I received into me the final words he said. That kind of border, that kind of frontier; even with a trick, a magic trick on a feverish repeat in half-sleep – was there anyone else who knew how it changed the currents of wind and the slant of sun to find that it could be crossed, somehow?

There was really nothing he could tell Ian, except for: “It's all fucked up.”

Ian laughed, because he was Ian. And they clinked glasses in a grim understanding.

He ended up not telling Ian what exactly was really going on between him and Sherlock, but that was okay in a way not a lot of things were nowadays, because it felt great to spend an evening alternating between biting commentary of whatever crap show or half-arsed rugby match was playing on the telly behind the bar, throwing peanuts at each other and sometimes, at times, talking about actual feelings – right, okay, so how are you, really, and don't give me any crap, tell me about your nights, about the hours lost between light, about the cracks that open up beneath you as you cross the street, tell me about the dreams, tell me about the nightmares where she's no longer a nightmare, tell me about you, and how you're not quite sure what your skin is without hers to lie against, covering all that with a So, what's up and skirting over the other words with their eyes, careful; slipping between those different things so naturally was one of the most incredible things about his friendship with Ian.

Ian said: “Do you think alcohol makes people more honest or less?” Wistful, as he sometimes was; Ian could be introspective when he wasn't being ironic, and he inspected his glass with something more of melancholy than grief.

John said: “Dunno. I hope more,” because he thought of I love you in a pub, and John, don’t do that, not now, and there it was again, his mythology, his clichés, because what else would suffice? In vino veritas, really? And Sherlock would laugh and laugh and laugh at him, except he didn't know if that was true, anymore, and he could read what Ian was telling him with the slight twitch of the right corner of his mouth (I'm not sure I can love again, did you know that?) but he couldn't read what you meant.

Because who was he?
But Ian said: “Hey, doctor sir, I wanted you to talk to me about you, not stare off into space the whole time.” And he threw a peanut at John. *Seasoned by our tears.*

God, he was lucky to have these people in his life. Lucky. He was so fucking lucky in so many things.

–

Sherlock was out when John came home. The open door to his bedroom managed to be apologetic in a way Sherlock never, ever was. John waited up for him for a bit, then sent a

*Where have you gone off to?*

and was both relieved and annoyed at the

*On a walk.*

*SH*

Sherlock didn't respond to his

*Okay, I'm going to bed, then.*

so that's what he did, feeling like someone with way too many personalities inside him. And then he had a moment of sheer panic when he woke up in the night, and someone was in bed with him, and it was all a bit too much like the war; but then that morphed into such an intense, overpowering feeling of happiness at realising it was Sherlock that he took his own pulse for a moment to ground himself in reality again.

He just hoped it wasn't a dream, as he carefully shifted backwards, closer to Sherlock, after a moment – who responded immediately, still awake, by nuzzling his face into John's neck and draping his arm over John's side, pressing his bare torso against John's shirt-clad back.

“Good?” he mumbled, obviously not that far from sleep.

And John felt like he had the right to borrow his language again, wrapped together as they were, and whispered: “You idiot, isn't it obvious that it is?”

Sherlock tightened his arm around him, and John felt his mouth curving into a small smile against his neck before he rubbed his nose against the spot where John's neck became his skull.

–

And that way, it was okay again at least for that moment, as Sherlock began to talk into John's neck after a long while, interspersed by long stretches of silence; broken off sentences in English and Spanish and sometimes other things, words in other languages maybe, or just sounds sparking off the speed of his brain in his sleep, and sometimes John even thought he caught his own name, making something in him relax that he hadn't even realised was wound as tight as it was – because if Sherlock was dreaming about him, then this – *this* – could be nothing else than reality, as unreal as it felt.

It was okay again at least for that moment, as the conversations they would have to have – *so, um, what is this thing that's happening between us and so, um, I broke up with Mary and I kind of did it for you and so, um, do you intend on having sex with me again or was this it and so, um, I really want to have sex with you again and so, um, is this a relationship and so, um, will you please not be a tosser anymore and just talk to me sometimes and so, um, are you okay in any way and so, um,*
what happened to you in Peru and then bigger, bigger so, um, I think I might be in love with you and so, um, are you in love with me in any way – receded into the darkness of the night, into the fabric of life stretching itself to mold around them in this moment of rare peace.
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

CHAPTER 9

“John.”

A pause.

“John.” Sherlock's voice was a quiet stream, a rumble seeping into his dream, softly parting the cobwebs of sleep that lay between him and consciousness, pulling him up through soft swathes of sheets, through a sea of linen into reality, daylight, the tangible press of a pillow against his cheek that materialised in small jerks of awakening.

“Aghrm,” John managed to respond, eyelids pressing closed to shut out the infiltrating light for a bit longer.

“John.” More of a presence now, the stir of Sherlock's breath on the back of his neck.

“Hnnghr?”

“Yes, more eloquency, John, whenever you're ready for it.”

At that, John's eyes opened in spite of himself. “I – what?” he mumbled, the strange sensations of his dream – something to do with a castle being taken, and then a shower, a flood, and Sherlock was there, somehow he had been everywhere, like water – still with him, seeming unwilling to leave him, seeping out of his limbs with a slow liquidity.

“Are you awake?” Sherlock hummed, the vibrato of his voice just under John's ear lobe bringing John to a quicker awareness as his body swam into the focus of his consciousness, pressed flush against Sherlock's, his back and Sherlock's torso connected all the way down to their waists, Sherlock's arm wrapped around him, hand loose on his lower stomach, and John's feet somehow tucked between the long lengths of Sherlock's shins. Oh, he realised, eyelids pressing out the last trickles of sleep as he blinked – Sherlock's erection was pressing into his left buttock unapologetically, and Sherlock was, very gently, dragging his lips over the skin just behind his ear.

“I – yes,” he said, his sleep-logged body quickly shedding the weight of night, becoming more sharply edged with every touch of Sherlock's lips.

“Good,” Sherlock said, then added, “sleep is so boring,” and his voice was deep and grainy with hours of near disuse, thrilling its way directly down to John's cock, twitching already, more awake than the rest of him. Sherlock closed his lips around his ear lobe in a more intentional move now, and he flattened the hand that had been lying loosely against John's abdomen, splaying out the fingers like a fan, radiating heat from the fingertips. God, how was Sherlock so warm? It didn't seem to fit with his alabasterliness, his otherworldliness. Burning out from inside him was radiation like from the inside of a star, beaming away into a cold universe.
“Sherlock,” he said, and he realised that he sounded strangled in a way that could be read in different ways – Sherlock seemed to hear it too, his body against John's tensing slightly, his hand coming loose again, his mouth stilling. No, no, no; no had a right again, it could be back in their lives, but only to be yes; no, don't stop this, yes, do this. John dug up his own hand from somewhere deep under the covers; he'd lost track of it during the night, when his limbs had become unspun in relaxation, far-flung like distant satellites, but now his hand was his again, and he closed it firmly over Sherlock's, offering up his stomach, because yes, do this, no, don't stop this.

Sherlock made a sound in his ear, a mix of a sigh and a small, quiet moan, and John didn't think he'd ever heard anything quite so sensual in his life. Sherlock trailed his fingers downwards, to the hem of the ratty t-shirt John was wearing, teasing around the edge for a second until he slipped his hand under it, moving upwards over the not-quite-as-firm-as-they-used-to-be muscles of John's stomach, jumping and shivering under his touch, his hand slightly cool on John's sleep-heated torso.

Sherlock's fingers found one of his nipples and lazily slipped over it, the nail of his thumb leaving a slight sting as he flicked it against it deliberately.

“You,” he murmured, not quite a growl, not quite a moan, not quite a caress, and yet, and yet, all of that and more – and John shivered and pressed his eyes closed tightly, feeling the hot rush of arousal gathering in his gut. God, that voice. He gulped audibly as Sherlock licked a confident stripe of wetness on his neck, down from where his shirt began up to where the tenderness of his throat became the armour of his jaw. Sherlock's tongue teased at that spot, pushing at the softness underneath the bone, and ohgod, how could he expose John so quickly, so effortlessly, it was as wrong as it was right, and John's cock was hardening quickly, already, with even the barest amount of stimulation.

“Fuck,” he whispered, then he let out a strangled moan as Sherlock closed his teeth on his throat, exactly where his pulse was picking up, and he didn't doubt that that was intentional, that Sherlock was closely monitoring the fluttering of the blood under the weak frontier of his skin. He reached back and curled his arm extremely awkwardly around Sherlock, his hand coming to rest on Sherlock's pants-clad arse, and he didn't stop the urge he had and just squeezed it, firm and hard under his fingers, wanting more – more something, more Sherlock, and it didn't matter how, as long as he was there, alive, shifting lines of muscle and bone and mind, as long as he didn't leave, never again, never again, and John couldn't help that the sound that broke from his throat was almost a sob as Sherlock let out a genuine growl at the contact and slid his hand down over the expanses of his stomach, easily passing the loose boundary of his ratty underwear and wrapped his hand around John's cock without further ado, bringing him to full mast rapidly with long, straight-forward strokes.

For a split second, John thought about the lube in the drawer of his nightstand and how that would have made things more comfortable, but there was something so final about how Sherlock was breathing into his ear, and was starting to rock his hips against John's arse with a dizzying certainty that made John feel like he was caught in a breaking wave of sorts, and was wanking him with sure, steady strokes, slipping his thumb over the head of his cock and working the pre-come down with the palm of his hand to smooth the friction somewhat – no, there was no way he could stop and say hey, grab that bottle from my drawer, which was something that he would have done with every other partner, but he couldn't now, because – because – because, he didn't even know, but it felt like it could all still slip from him so easily, even with Sherlock saying it again, now growing increasingly breathless and frantic as he rubbed up against John: you.

“Sherlock,” John gasped, his hand on Sherlock's arse drawing him even closer, the feel of his erection shifting against John's arse completely, unexpectedly intoxicating, and John had the almost lucid thought I want all of this fabric gone between us and had a moment of surprise at the certainty of that. Not now though, not now; Sherlock was tugging at his cock with a speed and pressure that
made his eyes falter, small dots of light dancing in his line of vision as his eyes fell closed, his head falling back to bring his body even closer to the jerking, trembling line of Sherlock's, to press as much air out from between as he possibly could. “God, oh God,” he mumbled senselessly as Sherlock groaned into his ear, words falling from him rapidly (“Yes, John, yes, you, si, si, ah, yes, you –”), now practically rutting against him, one long, lean leg curling itself around John's thigh to give him better leverage, stroking John's cock in a steady counterpoint to his thrusts. John's own hips were straining to move, but couldn't quite make up the direction they wanted to go in — backwards into the disorienting, overpowering sensation of Sherlock working his cock against his arse with a merciful ruthlessness, or forwards into the delicious rhythm of his hand. His body settled for holding almost still, caught between these two forces, trembling, awash with sensation.

“John, you're –” Sherlock panted, and at that John was coming, the sound in his mouth an unfinished _Sherlock_ as he spilled himself in Sherlock's fist and in his half tugged-down underpants and in the tangle of sheets around his waist.

“– you're –” And then Sherlock never managed to say what, exactly, John was, as his hips snapped against John's arse one last time and he came, shuddering against John, biting down on John's neck with a sharp sting as if wanting to forcibly stop himself from continuing what he was saying.

They stilled; the day rushed in, blinding, too-real, too-raw, as John managed to open his eyes again. Sherlock's fist unclenched around his softening cock and slid up his stomach, wet and sticky with his come, smearing it on him unapologetically. He could feel the wetness of Sherlock's orgasm seeping through the two thin layers of fabric separating Sherlock's crotch from his arse. It was incredible how coming in his pants like a clumsy teenager felt somehow like a more definitive experience than some of the _proper sex_ he'd had in his life; _sex_, he thought again, a bit dazed, a rough, too-still label for such a jumpy, flowing thing, that changed the air currents between them so thoroughly.

“Fuck,” he said after a couple of breathless seconds, and then pushed the covers off them, stifling now, a furnace, a star centre producing all of the elements of the universe exactly between them.

“The language on you, John, honestly,” Sherlock responded, slowly, languidly, uncurling his leg to push the sheets down even further with his foot.

John chuckled, still breathing heavily. “I can't –” he began, then didn't know what to choose; _stop? begin? understand? speak? cry? believe this? let you leave me ever again?_

He turned himself around inside Sherlock's half-embrace with some effort, limbs still extremely heavy, and flopped back down so they were facing each other. Sherlock was smiling in an unreadable way, his eyes half-lidded, his lips flushed and full. It was almost shocking to see his face; from the moment he had got into John's bed, a dark shadow in the depth of night, until he'd brought John to orgasm with his mouth next to his ear, he'd been faceless. John brought up his hand and traced the lines of that peculiar face, the curve of his lips, that seemed to defy the laws of physics.

“I'm what?” he asked hoarsely.

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow.

“What am I?” John repeated, a bit more clearly. “You were saying –”

Something flashed across Sherlock's face, something close to fear, as though he'd been caught out; but it was gone so quickly John wasn't sure it had really been there.

“You're John, obviously,” Sherlock said, and leaned in to kiss him, almost chaste after what had just happened, just a press of mouth on mouth, lips, sharing a bit of breath, not exactly fresh, but John
“Obviously,” John echoed when Sherlock pulled back, a slight discomfort tugging at his gut; but then Sherlock snaked an arm across his side and pushed him flat on his back gently, shifting over to fit his head into the space between John's shoulder and the beginning of his jaw, bringing the rest of their bodies together, Sherlock's long legs entwining themselves with a slow ease with John's. It was enough to momentarily forget the stickiness inside his half-tugged-down pants, the way Sherlock made a small sound of contentment as he molded himself to John's side, arm heavy and relaxed over his chest. He almost laughed as he thought I'd never have taken Sherlock to be someone who enjoyed *afterglow*, but there they were, in his bed, in the muted light of a rainy spring day that washed everything a mottled grey.

Still, it couldn't have been longer than ten minutes, ten minutes in which John felt sleep collecting in the corners of his consciousness, trying to get back in, trying to overcome the almost paralysed happiness sitting in his chest, before Sherlock pulled himself away, lingering for a second to drag the line of his nose gently over John's temple.

“Are you gone?” John asked.

Sherlock hummed a *yes*, crawling off the bed – the day, impatient, calling him, waiting for him to jump in, to go save a world that he'd quit and that he'd now returned to again, a world that had got by without him, barely, but it had.

“I broke up with Mary,” John blurted out before Sherlock reached the door.

Sherlock stopped in his tracks and turned around, face blank, eyebrows slightly raised. How he managed to still look feral while wearing only come-stained underpants was beyond John, but, well, there he was.

“So you did,” he said, slowly, reading it now in John's face, and then frowned – John suspected he was trying to recall any of the clues that he had obviously missed. “You said things were going well.”

John blinked. Then, as the words registered, a horrible, horrible stone dropped into his stomach; the jolt of it was so great he sat up in spite of himself.

“I – yes,” he said, a bit wildly.

“Then why...?” Sherlock didn't even finish the question as he looked at John with a mixture of curiosity and neutrality. John couldn't tell if it was genuine or not.

“Sherlock,” John said, something that felt a terrible lot like desperation coming to grasp at him, but he tried to push it away, because *no*, he was a person, he wasn't just Holmes-and-Watson, he *wasn't*, he *was*, he was someone. It worked better than he had expected it to, John Watson again, and he lifted his eyes to Sherlock again, feeling a bit stronger.

Sherlock, in apparent confusion, raised his eyebrows even more.

“Things *were* going well,” John said after a slow, conscious breath, “but then I had sex with *you.*”

Sherlock blinked, then his face darkened with something John couldn't identify, and he padded back to the bed, sinking down on it heavily and twisting around until he was facing John. John wanted to beat him to it, because this needed to be his conversation. So he said, feeling uncomfortably like he was taking a jump down a slope of which he didn't know the steepness nor the depth: “And I wanted to keep having sex with you.”
Sherlock passed his hands over his face and then threaded them in his hair, before looking straight at John, looking a bit comical that way, or he would have, if this conversation wasn't so full of hidden needles and potential traps ready to spring. “You love her.” The statement was like any one of his, but his eyes were narrowed in something else than calculation.

“I – I guess I do,” John said. He guessed he did. It couldn't have been put more aptly. “Or at least, I could very easily see it coming to that. But I – I –” the I love you more, you tosser, or at least I love you differently, and it seems to be what I need didn't quite allow itself to be formed. “I couldn't... I couldn't keep doing this and keep seeing her, because it violated all of the rules that we'd agreed on as a couple.”

Sherlock seemed genuinely thrown for a loop, which was a strange, unfamiliar thing to see on his face. “I didn't... I hadn't thought...” He fell silent, bringing his palms together in the familiar gesture under his chin. At the altar of thought once more, the profane worshipper.

“What?” John prompted, the cold ball in his chest growing.

“I thought it was all right,” Sherlock simply said. “I thought you'd say no if it wasn't all right.”

There was a silence between them, a silence that stretched across a chasm, as though they were on separate continents, drifting apart imperceptibly.

John tried to reach for him, tried to be the bridge himself. “Sherlock, could you... tell me what this – this thing we have – what it means to you?”

Sherlock closed his eyes briefly. John had the insane desire to force them open with his fingers, so he could be part of what was playing out on the inside of his eyelids.

“I told you,” Sherlock finally said, voice quiet and uninflected, “it's something I want.” He opened his eyes. “It's something I've wanted for...” He appeared to be counting, eyes flicking to and fro almost imperceptibly. “…thirty-nine months and twenty-three days.”

John couldn't stop the startled laugh. “Seriously?”

Sherlock fixed him with the look, and then gave in and explained, nose slightly wrinkled: “It was a Tuesday. Winter. You were standing at the sink. You were wearing one of your terrible jumpers. I haven't seen it in a while. Not in more than two years, in fact. Good thinking in ditching it. You were doing the dishes. In a strop with me for something. I've deleted what. Something utterly inconsequential. You weren't talking.” Sherlock's eyes flicked to the ceiling and then, mercifully, a small grace in this world with so much to wonder at, fixed back on John's. “And I didn't understand it. But all I could think about was how much I wanted to make you talk again, make you talk while having an orgasm if I had the choice, against me if possible, looking at me if in any way possible.”

He finished the sentence like it wasn't the most utterly heartbreaking thing in the world, as if it wasn't a black hole that distorted the edges of the room.

John had to remember how to breathe. “Why –” he squeaked, then closed his eyes for a split second, because the details of Sherlock's face before him were too overwhelming for a moment. “Why didn't you... do something?” why didn't you kiss me why didn't you press yourself to me why didn't you wrap your arms around me why didn't you pull at my terrible jumper until it came off why didn't you tell me that you were going to make me come right then and there if I wanted you to why didn't you I wanted you to I wanted you to I would have let you I would have let you and maybe then everything wouldn't have the weight of too many lifetimes on it too many orbits of too many planets why didn't you and fuck why didn't I why didn't I why didn't we why did we waste so much time why
“I didn't think you wanted me to,” Sherlock said simply. Sherlock, who immersed himself in everything he wanted until it became submerged in him instead of the other way around, who grabbed things that he wanted to understand and held them to the light from every angle, who threw himself into his desires, that until not long ago John had thought to be purely intellectual, who didn't take his eyes off things he wanted even for a second and went for them with a complete disregard for anything else – grabbing a hold of knowledge, insight, thrills, danger; Sherlock, that Sherlock, but also not quite that Sherlock, because things were different, they were, but it was still Sherlock, even if all the cells in his body had been renewed in the slow, relentless, uncaring processes of biology, now said that he had wanted John for thirty-nine months and twenty-three days, and he hadn't acted; he hadn't thought John wanted him to, and so he hadn't, and then he'd fallen out of life, just like that, as though life was a coat pocket with a hole in it and he was just a lost key.

“Fuck,” John swore, whole-heartedly. “Fuck, Sherlock, and all this time... All that time, I wanted to... Fuck. Fuck.”

Sherlock was looking at him mildly, though there was a hint of apprehension on his face, as well. “I didn't see it,” he said then, sounding a bit bitter. “I should have seen it.”

John let out a laugh at that, because God, this nutter of a man, this marvel, this insanely brilliant stupid creature. “It's not your job to see everything, Sherlock.”

Sherlock fixed him with a look that distinctly spelled disagreement.

“No,” John pursued, “I should have told you. I should have... I should have let you know, somehow, that I...”

“Well, you're an idiot,” Sherlock said without spite, “you couldn't have known what I wanted.” And he was too logical, shifting the blame in a way that John couldn't allow.

He shook his head, because no. Then, his heart hammering, he said: “Do you understand now what I thought I'd lost? What I thought I'd let slip? Forever?”

Sherlock looked at him with the look of a man who'd just heard that he was sentenced to death. It was a bit startling after the earlier blankness of the mask. “Obviously. I've always understood, John,” he said, but there was something in his expression that said to John that that wasn't quite true, that the magnitude of things were becoming clearer to him, too; a small flicker of oh, of oh, I get it now.

John felt decidedly strange. The sex they’d just had could quite rightfully be called clumsy, as could all of the sex they'd had so far, really, but what to do with this feeling of world, of containing so many other things, of being a – God, he was getting so sentimental – symbol of other things, diffuse things, things of love, of stories, and what was even happening to them, he didn't know, it felt like water flowing through his fingers. At the way Sherlock sat with him on his bed, folded in on himself a bit, the scar on his ribs hidden by his arm nestled against himself – consciously? subconsciously? – and looked as though he felt something taking a more solid shape inside his mind, John had that ridiculous feeling of mythology again, of Cassandra, of language failing – but no, he couldn't let it, they weren't heading for tragedy, they could hear each other, they could.

“Are we in a relationship?” John decided to be straight-forward. It always worked better with Sherlock, because he got annoyed when he could see through the round-abouts of usual conversation, and well, he always could.

“Evidently,” Sherlock said immediately, not in the least daunted.

John felt the coldness in his chest unloop a little at that. But he knew about language, and how it
could stretch itself to accommodate the breadth of reality, and how Sherlock and language had an uneasy partnership at the best of times. “And what does that... mean to you?” Fuck it if he wasn't starting to sound like his therapist, and he had a moment of intense dislike for himself.

Sherlock frowned, Christ, John, you know, and if you don't... “What it always has.”

“Which is what?” John pressed, and then was grateful in a small, subdued way that Sherlock refrained from commenting on his redundancy, because wasn't it obvious, honestly John.

“You are... important,” Sherlock said carefully, his mouth twisting as he felt his way around this unfamiliar territory of language trying to overlap with the shifting, fleeting forms of feeling. “I came back to you, because – because after two years I still couldn't get to sleep without thinking of you. I was still thinking about home in terms of you. It wasn't just –” and he made a vague gesture, meaning this place, “– it was you.”

John burned a little on the inside at that, a small collapsing of elements into the beginning flare of a star. “Is that why –” he swallowed, his throat dry, “– why you kissed me, that night?”

Sherlock considered. “Yes, I do think so,” he said. Then added: “And I was a bit intoxicated. It was a pleasant surprise for you to react as you did. I hadn't expected it at all.”

John's chuckle was aborted by the strange heaviness of the moment pressing in on them. “So it doesn't... It doesn't change anything for you, then?”

Sherlock spent a moment smoothing out the rumple of sheets he was sitting on, avoiding John's eye. “Obviously it changes something,” he finally said, “but more because it changes things for you than for me.” He paused for a moment. “I'm very aware of the fact that you expect things from relationships that I'm not... I might not be able to provide... always, or even regularly, or...” He shook his head as though trying to force something out of it. Even his head not an ally at times like this. Even the world that was shivering, growing, unfolding between the bone borders of his skull not enough at times like this. John's heart ached just looking at it. Sherlock continued, carefully: “So if you need something that I can't give you, you should get it from someone who can. It's only logical.”

It's only logical – as though there was anything logical about the hot rush of love in John's chest; as though there was anything logical about how he crawled into the space of Sherlock's body, his projected physicality, and pulled at his face until they were looking at each other; as though there was anything logical about saying “I'll take whatever you can give me,” and meaning it so deeply that it was almost ridiculous, and most definitely worrying; as though there was anything logical about the kiss, that was too much, too much, too much, and not enough.

When they broke apart after what seemed like a long stretch of time, John somehow pulled into Sherlock's lap, Sherlock looked a bit dazed, a bit confused, a bit happy, a lot everything. John realised with a detached wonder that he'd just pretty much committed himself to an exclusive relationship with Sherlock, and had a moment of subdued panic and careful joy coming to knock on the door of his brain.

“Will you do this with me?” he asked, then felt a strange hot twisting as he realised, uncontrollably, how much that was like please, will you do this for me. A leap of an altogether different kind.

Sherlock looked a bit like a wild animal that had the confusing desire to come eat from a proffered hand. But he said: “I thought I already was.”

John closed his eyes, it was too much; it didn't fit inside John Watson, it was universe-sized, this bedroom couldn't hold it, the whole of London couldn't hold it, bursting at the seams. He pulled them
closer together, losing eye contact, gaining skin contact.

“John,” Sherlock said, and he sounded heartbreakingly doubtful as he pressed his cheek against John's forehead, “I can't promise that I –”

“Won't be a fucking wanker sometimes?” John cut in. “That's obvious even to me, you idiot.”

Sherlock said nothing, and instead slid the sharpness of a cheekbone against the side of John's face, allowing the curve of John's temple to connect with the hollow of one of his eyes, closed, lashes quivering lightly, almost imperceptibly, as though sending small smoke signals to John's brain, on the other side of that boundary.

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Downstairs, Sherlock's parcel was sitting on the kitchen table, obviously hastily re-fastened, looking even more clumsy than it had on arrival.

“It's from Julian,” Sherlock said, unprompted.

“Your Peruvian friend?”

“Yes.”

“That's... nice?” John hazarded.

Sherlock fixed him with a stern look. “Or not,” he amended.

“He's in a bit of trouble, it would seem,” Sherlock said quietly as he tugged the cracked cardboard open again, and showed John what was inside – utterly meaningless to John, it was a badly battered copy of a *Superman* comic. He remembered what Sherlock had said during that first moment in the Chinese restaurant – *it was something to do*. Of course it hadn't just been something to do, not there, not in that place with the geography of death where life was trying to be ended for real this time at every corner.

“It's a code,” Sherlock said. “*Superman* means help me. He thought it up. He's quite the American comic book aficionado.”

“Right.” Ah, fuck. “So he's being threatened?”

“Apparently,” Sherlock said darkly, as he went over to his laptop, flicked it open and sat down with it at the table.

“Why did he... Why does he send you this instead of just, I don't know, calling you, or something? Seems awfully indirect, doesn't it? How long will this have been underway?”

“Fifteen days,” Sherlock responded absent-mindedly, already half-way slipping into a focus that excluded this conversation. “And I don't know. He hasn't responded to my attempts of contact. I've spent most of last night trying to get to him, but it hasn't worked.” He glanced at his phone. “I gave it eighteen hours. Fourteen hours ago.”

“And after the eighteen hours?” John asked, already knowing the answer.

“I'm booking the flight to Lima now.” Sherlock's face was passive and pale. Then, he looked over at John, and something that looked like surprise sparked in his face, as though he remembered something. “I should have told you that sooner.”
John waved it away, though inside him a small point of warmth was glad that Sherlock had said it, that Sherlock was already trying in his own way to fit what he knew of things John might want from a relationship into the shifting mass of things Sherlock does. “Fuck, no, you do whatever it is you need to help him.”

Sherlock was scrolling down a long length of web page detailing the different medication shots he'd need to travel to South America. John watched his long fingers on the mouse pad, wondering at that – Sherlock had never been one to care about medical regulation, but then, some things had changed and despite the smoke signals Sherlock had sent him just now, wrapped into him, there was no way that John had seen all of them already.

“Is this a left-over from Moriarty?” he finally asked, trying to sound calm.

Sherlock's fingers stilled for a moment. “Everything of Moriarty's has been destroyed,” he said, blankly.

“Well, maybe a second in command – or I dunno, a tenth in command – someone who managed to stay out of the... the whole thing, or something, don't you think it's possible that –” they're targeting him because he was associated with you?

“No,” Sherlock said, and there was such ice lurking under that one syllable that John fell silent. God, only to wrench that ice open, to crack its surface so he could get at what was frozen underneath, so he could warm up the part of Sherlock that was still infected with it – what happened, God, what happened, tell me, please – but the unshackling of Sherlock Holmes was a slow process, one chain at a time, and John had the sobering feeling that several links of the chain had slipped already in his bed and it would be pushing his luck to try to undo more.

There was a long silence in which only Sherlock's mouse clicks stirred the air between him. “He's in trouble because of me, otherwise he wouldn't have sent me this.” Sherlock finally said, and got up. “I have to get him out of it again. It's likely drugs.” He stared out in front of him for a split second, eyes flicking around a bit in that way he had when he was calculating something.

John licked his lips. “How can he be in drug trouble because of you? I thought you weren't really in the coca business?”

Sherlock's eyes stilled. He looked at John with a mixture of defiance and apprehension. “Reliable covers need to be upheld somehow.”

John tried to read his face and couldn't.

“Sherlock,” he said, a point of coldness igniting in his chest. “Did you –”

Sherlock's mouth pulled closed, as though he were locking it from the inside. “It wasn't a good time,” he finally said, clipped, as though that was an explanation, as though that said anything at all.

“You used,” John said, and he was unable to keep his voice from catching.

Sherlock's face blanked as his shoulders sagged.

“You did. You used.” John looked at him and had to close his eyes for a second against the red blots coming to blur his vision, spots of – of a rush of fury at so much more than just this, such a sudden, irrational, visceral anger that his hands, curled into fists, were coming up in jerks to grab at Sherlock; hit him, shake him, grab him into a kiss of fury, he couldn't tell, but Sherlock saw it coming, and closed his own hands over his fists, his long fingers lean and strong and knowing.
“John,” he said, and his stern tone only made John bristle, try to break free – and then Sherlock was kissing him, over the painful link of their hands; wet and strong and not at all lovely. “Not now,” he breathed as he pulled back, but only a fraction, so his scent was everywhere and John's lip was still stuck to his, the bastard.

“It's never now,” John growled and was the one who brought his head further back to stop the mingling of their breaths, to regain a space of his own. It wasn't quite true, of course, because in his bed, that had been now, it had, but there was still so much left, and this – it made him want to tear his hair out.

“It really can't be now, though,” Sherlock said, and he was quite gentle, and John wanted to wipe that off his face with an intensity that was startling, “I have to go to Peru.”

“Yeah, let's not talk about your relapse when you were in Peru because you need to catch a plane to go back to Peru. Sounds like a fucking plan!” John snapped. And then: growing louder, voice flickering across the border of shouting: “And while we're at it, let's not talk about what happened there at all, shall we?! Let's not talk about the two fucking years you spent in Finland and Peru and who the fuck knows where else doing something that obviously has you so messed up that you still haven't told me one fucking thing about it! Good fucking idea!”

Sherlock's eyes, flashing, bright, were trying to tell him something. After a long, heavy moment his mouth, tense, tight, told him: “It's not what you think.”

And that was so empty, and so meaningless, and it could refer to so many different things that John's fist strained against the keyless locks of Sherlock's hands with the honest desire to just punch his lights out. “Good you always know what I think, but I don't usually have a clue what you're thinking, and don't you – don't you dare –” John bristled as Sherlock leaned in again as if to kiss him again. Sherlock broke off the movement and froze halfway, and now they were both standing off-balance, off-kilter, away from the point of weight that had held them together. And then Sherlock still did it, but so slowly that it was different, and he looked John in the eye while he did it, and his hands slipped from John's fists, which were relaxing in spite of himself, and there was such a plea in his eyes that when his lips tentatively touched against John's it didn't feel like a fight, but like a surrender, almost.

John's hands, traitors, unclenched and molded to Sherlock's side, and his mouth, still full of shout, was now full of kiss.

Sherlock pulled back, and pulled John with him, the broken curl of their off-kilter bodies restored, against each other, and rested his nose against the side of John's.

“I'm not going away,” he finally said, his voice an infuriating stretch of smoothness. “I'm coming back. I'm coming back again.”

“You're a bastard,” John said, and the unexpected tear that dripped from his eye rolled down to meet the tip of Sherlock's nose, and he winced at himself, but Sherlock only pressed into him more.

“I know,” Sherlock said.

“This isn't over.” John tried to sound menacing and ended up half-menacing and half-trembling with a love he was sure Sherlock could identify from him by now.

Sherlock rubbed against the wetness of the tear. “I should hope not.”

And he sounded a bit too level-headed, but they were hugging as though it was a matter of life and
death. And God, John thought, maybe it was.

After a while he began to feel that his desire to stay attached to Sherlock like that forever was only swelling with every passing second, and in a burst of self-preservation he broke the embrace. “When’s your plane?” he said, and tried to sound normal.

“Need to get going in twenty minutes,” Sherlock said, his hands leaving John's body with a clear reluctance.

John felt too much like a ridiculous pastiche of the over-dramatic lover left behind for comfort, but he said, a bit shakily: “Plenty of time for a shower and some toast, then.”

–

And he would have said be careful or I'll kill you myself but Sherlock was Sherlock, and he would have said please, please don't fall into the trap of the cocaine again but Sherlock was Sherlock, and he would have kissed him goodbye but Sherlock was Sherlock, and he would have felt worried but Sherlock was Sherlock, and none of that would have helped, really, against the silence in Baker Street. Of course he still felt worried anyway, because he lacked Sherlock's ability to chuck emotion when it wasn't useful, and had a moment of insanity in which he considered not changing the soiled sheets on his bed, because they still had something of Sherlock; and then he remembered that he wasn't thirteen, and that Sherlock had only been gone a couple of hours, and he changed them, trying not to feel as if he was skinning the bed, shedding its secrets tucked into the layers of the covers between which they had hid and found each other for a short moment.

He would have said I love you when Sherlock was about to leave, but he felt enough of a Mills and Boons character as it was, and it still somehow felt like language wasn't quite there yet anyway, hadn't quite followed them on this winding road, had fallen behind a bit, couldn't do it yet, be spoken in the light of day and not in the protective bubble of night and alcohol. And Sherlock was Sherlock of course and sometimes when things were really obvious he missed them, though he had pressed his nose to John's forehead for a second before bounding down the stairs in the familiar explosion of coat and grim energy.

John cradled his cup of tea and tried not to feel as though it meant a lot that Sherlock had spent a significant portion of the eighteen hours in bed with him. And he tried not to feel as though it was a personal victory that he'd finally shouted at Sherlock again, because really, that hadn't been much of a fight – but then he did feel for a while like it had been good, because maybe fighting shouldn't really be a goal in itself, and something had happened, a lot had happened, something had changed when he'd said this isn't over. And then he didn't feel like a real person for a bit, and decided to text Greg. Beer to fill in the cracks, to glaze all of this over with a sheen of normality.

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Greg said, sympathetically: “You're being more than a bit ridiculous, you know?”

“I know,” John said, and flicked his phone closed and slipped it into the back pocket of his trousers. “Please get me drunk so I'll forget to check my texts.”

“At your service,” Greg said, and waved enthusiastically at the bartender.

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“Fuck, what is this?” John said, trying to get his eyes to fix on his glass.

“No disrespecting the whiskey, all right,” Greg said, a bit slurred, “it's twelve fucking years old.”
“’m serious, Zjohn,” Greg said, a muscle next to his eye jumping, “just punch him already, so he can – can finally grow up a liddle, and... and then fuck him, if you’re – so inclined.”

“Shtop projecting yourself on mm-me,” John slurred, sloshing beer down his front. “Punch him yourself if you’re –” he hiccuped, “if you’re so fuckin keen.”

“Ogay,” Greg wheezed, “I will. If you’ll... lllet me.”

“Ov course,” John said sagely, and slammed his pint down on the table.

“Someone just... needs to sher-sheriously punch his fuckin lights out,” Greg mumbled, trying to steady John against him as they were ushered out by the bartender. “Annd – it hash to be you, y’know, or mmme, and then – and then you,” he wheezed.

“Going to – be sick,” John muttered, and Greg held his hand on his head through it.

Somehow he’d been able to get into the flat, but he couldn’t get up the stairs and slept instead in Sherlock’s bed. That, and the fact that at some point, he could after a long fight get his eyes to focus on the Landed. SH in his inbox, made things quite okay, until he realised how nauseous he felt.

In the morning Greg texted him, much too early:

Fuck, I haven't been this hung over since uni. Almost threw up at a scene just now. You okay?

And though the screen was a bit trembly in front of his eyes, he managed with a long, drawn-out effort to type out a doubly spell-checked

Yeah, okay. Brave man, actually going to work. Is it me or do you feel REALLY strongly about punching Sherlock?

He could almost feel the silent amusement, as well as the mortification, in the

I stand by every word I said last night. The ones I remember, anyway.

And then it was a bit too much to contemplate over the violent pounding of his hangover, this alternate universe that he’d apparently found himself in, and he buried his face back into his pillow – well, Sherlock’s pillow, and that did seem to matter somehow – laughing a bit at himself.
Thirty-six hours after Sherlock’s plane had landed in Lima, when he could no longer stop himself from doing it, he sent Sherlock a text:

*Let me know that you're okay now and then?*

And Sherlock's response was

*Okay.*
*SH*

And the next day, exactly twenty-four hours from the last one, a new response:

*Okay.*
*SH*

And the next day, twenty-four hours later to the minute:

*Okay.*
*SH*

And John laughed for a bit and touched the screen of his phone involuntarily at Sherlock trying to find his way through the maze of what he thought John might need, and doing a surprisingly good job of offering it up in a tangible Sherlock-way, a piece of himself that John could look at, *SH, SH* so far away in body again, but now not quite so much in mind, back in a place that had been death to him in probably more than one way, but sending himself back to the world of the living that was John’s in tiny pixel bytes, in small words of two syllables, stretching across a whole spectrum of reality. Okay.
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

CHAPTER 10

It was in the middle of the sixth night of Sherlock's absence that John woke up for no particular reason in Sherlock's bed and thought to himself: *I haven't touched Sherlock's cock yet.*

Subsequently he spent some time going over his memories of the three times they'd got off together, and had to take a bit of a break to wank (*fuck*, what was his life, was he actually sixteen again?), before deciding that, indeed, he hadn't touched Sherlock's cock – not with his hands, anyway; Sherlock had come against John's cock and his arse, but it had all been through his own stimulation, and well, and then he had to take another moment to decide whether the new twinge of arousal would actually become a new erection, but then he obviously wasn't sixteen and it didn't happen.

The realisation, as well as the fact that he hadn't realised before now, felt a bit too ominous for comfort. He'd have to rectify it when Sherlock came back.

*I am being quite effectively topped*, he thought, and honestly wasn't sure how to feel about that. He fluffed up one of Sherlock's pillows and nuzzled into it, trying to tease out a fragment of Sherlock's scent, but it only really smelled of nothing by now, after six nights of John sleeping in this bed, and maybe it smelled of himself, but he wasn't Sherlock and he couldn't tell.

Oh well. They were now ten days into their relationship, if it was counted from their first time having an orgasm together (and John was aware of how random that was; why not when he had said *I love you* in the pub, why not when Sherlock had said in the shower *obviously you want it, and I want it*, why not when John had broken up with Mary, why not when Sherlock had said *I thought I already was* or even, why not since the moment they moved in together the first time, now almost four years ago, several disturbed orbits of universe ago, because that was apparently how Sherlock counted it; *it means the same it always has*) and it was all going pretty smoothly. Of course, that had mostly to do with the fact that Sherlock had now been in Peru for six days. Still, John thought with a wry humour, they were doing rather well.

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The fact that Sherlock was gone also gave him a point of quiet. Good quiet. John Watson quiet. That was nice, and it was necessary, and he was him, and he was inside his skin again. Also bad quiet. Without Sherlock Holmes quiet; boring; a bit empty. Disturbing quiet at times.

He thought of Mary.

And then didn't, because that kind of guilt needed some time to soften.

And then did, of course, because he was John Watson, and not thinking about things was, in spite of what Sherlock sometimes seemed to think, not his strong suit.

He texted his band of mourners (as he called them with grim humour in his head), quite restless, and
Ian and Bill both couldn't make it, their texts terse, but over her barely-touched martini, Sharon said, with constructed detachment, in response to the *I've just never cheated on anyone before, y'know*: “I don't... *condone* it, John. It's not... It's not right. But the best thing you could have done was break it off with her as soon as you could, and I guess that's what you did... or tried to do.”

Then she took a breath and seemed to force herself to stop looking everywhere but at him; she did that when she was nervous and didn't know what social rules to follow. Now she looked at him, though, her thin lips pursed into a line.

“I don't know,” she said, “but we've all been here for a while, John.” She leaned a little closer. Her face was tight, and drawn, and focused. “Do you want me to tell you what I think?”

“Yes,” he said, though he was a little frightened.

She spent a moment watching her drink, then said: “You've been cheating on yourself all this time. Cheating on her was being honest, in the most fucked up way possible.” She then cracked a somewhat bitter smile. “Though she... No one deserves that, of course. She didn't. But, well – things happen to people who don't deserve them all the time. You and I know all about that.”

He looked at her, carefully. She allowed him to make eye contact as she brought the glass to her lips and took such a small sip he wasn't sure it had actually been one. He wondered for a fraught moment if she meant that none of them had deserved death to happen to them in that indirect and oh-so-direct way that it had, or that he hadn't really deserved life to happen to him that way, either – but then he remembered that she wasn't callous, that she had managed to keep some of the softness in her in spite of the knives that life had thrown her way, and that she was still a shadow of the warm woman she must have been before tragedy put out some of her flames.

*Cheating on her was being honest.* He turned it over in his head, and had to say no to it in the end, because it shifted blame in a way he couldn't accept; but it still helped, it still made him look at her with a liquid tenderness collecting in a point in his chest. He looked at her, at the dimmed light that was her, and he could imagine the brightness she would have emitted if her glow hadn't been high-jacked by life that had happened, death that had happened, because that was still the same thing.

“Do you know that it was –” John began, spurred into action by a strange sense of guilt.

“Of course I do,” she broke through the sentence uncharacteristically, almost harshly, and John didn't know if that was because she couldn't bear to hear Sherlock's name, that name with its unreachable miracle, or because she couldn't bear to bring John to say it. Really, it had been stupid to presume that this sharp, raw-edged, exhausted woman didn't know what was going on, after all of the *fuck I love him and he never knew I loved him and he's gone and if I had a new chance I'd do it differently idoeverythingdifferently.*

She broke the long moment of eye contact between them and disturbed the still surface of her martini with her index finger. Small ripples, an inaudible tinkling of ice, tiny shockwaves in a microverse.

It took him a horrible while to remember that friendship was supposed to be two-sided, and he had a small moment of intense dislike for himself.

“How are you, then,” he asked, leaning closer into her.

She smiled, as though she genuinely appreciated the question, though he knew quite intimately how it always brought with it so many different nuances of good and horrible.

And maybe she was a bit drunk already. Or maybe, more likely, the honesty that she'd given him had
made her a bit bolder. She looked at him and said: “I'm a horrible mother sometimes,” and then proceeded to wave all of his objections away – are you kidding me, your children are lucky to have you and your husband, you love them, you listen to them, of course it isn't easy, but you're there for them and Sharon, please, just see this, please.

“No,” she said firmly, “it's horrible that I have this love in me and I can't give it to them anymore. It's not just Liam's love,” she said, “it's... all of the love. It's like it's got locked up inside me when he died.” She dipped her finger into her martini again, not looking at John. “I'd never before thought that... that love came out of a, I dunno, a reservoir,” and then she did look at him, pained, at the language that wasn't enough, “a place of love that wasn't focused on different people. I thought my love was... distinct? Does that make sense?”

She often asked for reassurance about her feelings, and he nodded, not just to help her, because he understood, really, recalling the months in which he hadn't been able to care about anything but a magic trick in his dreams, and how fucking difficult it had been to unlock his love, and how it had only worked after he'd gained a new, horrible ability to keep what he'd felt for Sherlock behind bars, to isolate it from new people he met, and he thought of Mary again, and took a big gulp of beer to drown the memory.

“It's not distinct,” she was saying, shaking her head, “one link of it is gone and I can't feel any of it anymore.”

He tentatively reached out to touch a finger to the hand holding the martini glass. “It's only been eight months,” he said, though he felt like a wanker for it, because it didn't help, and he'd punched Greg in the eye once for saying It's only been four months, John, but it didn't make it any less true and that was one of the things that reality could never undo.

She laughed, a clear laugh like the tinkling of the ice in her glass, and as cold.

“Eight months is a long time when you're nine and eleven,” she then said, so subdued John had to strain to hear her, and. God. He didn't know what to say.

Little Liam, who hadn't been there nearly for long enough, a four years that John had spent mostly with and then fully without Sherlock, unaware of Sharon, unaware of Liam, only aware of himself and of Sherlock, and that had been Liam's life, those boundaries of time, little Liam who'd suffered through the time that he had had, bad genes, illness, sorry-ma'am-nothing-we-can-do, who'd gone away in the night after the short day of his life and taken things with him that Sharon was now blindly groping about to find again.

“You still love them,” he told her and had to take a sip of beer to get the dry, sandy chafe of what the hell are you saying to her out of his throat.

“If I can't say it, then what does it matter?” she said.

“It matters,” he said, throat rasping, and thought of I love you in a pub because he couldn't help it, his feelings were no one's but his own and it came down to that again in the end, and it wasn't the same, of course, but as he looked across to her, she was watching him with that residual softness in her face that should by all rights have been erased, but had managed to remain.

“I hope you're right,” she said, and then, finally, took a real gulp.

“I know I am,” he said, trying not to flinch, trying not to think about the fact that he knew because he had the chance to know, again.
Her smile was wavering and genuine.

–

When you get back, I want
to touch your cock.

The first response was, hours later, right on time:

Okay.
SH

and John wasn't sure how to feel about that. Then, five seconds later:

I'm a bit busy right now,
John.
SH

and, well, maybe that was about the extent that Sherlock engaged in sexy texting. At least, and John felt a guilty weight coming to rest on him, while doing God knew what in a presumably extremely dangerous environment, rife with so many terrors of different kinds, trying to outrun drug lords, fighting his own demons, probably, and then also of course: Superman means help me – trying to save a friend who'd saved him, who'd been with him through what John sometimes, when he was feeling creative, imagined to have been an extremely uprooting, confusing time. He sighed. He supposed it was already quite exceptional for Sherlock to uphold his consistent messages of okay-ness, but he felt quite cut off nevertheless. It honestly, truly felt a bit too much like Sherlock gone again – John filling his days with work and the friends that he had that weren't Sherlock, and Sherlock... Sherlock in the exact same place as he had been as when he had been dead. The Okay every day was enough of a reminder that this was a chronicle of a foreseen return, this time, but he was so remote again, and it felt cold, it felt naked and empty after the way the fabric of life had had to stretch beyond itself to admit him back in, so huge, so overpowering. It wasn't that a Got shot at today. Survived, evidently. SH would have given him more calm of mind, but it would have been something, something... what? He didn't know what, but it would have been something.

He fiddled with his phone for a listless minute, before remembering that there was a patient waiting to be buzzed in.

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He was walking home from the clinic, as much at ease as he could be knowing that Sherlock was in all probability getting shot at in that instant, enjoying the clear, frail light of a spring gaining in confidence, when it hit him with a weird kind of lucidity that he had actually sent Sherlock a text saying that he wanted to touch his cock.

And, well, it really wasn't anything new, was it? He'd wanked himself over thoughts of touching Sherlock's cock for years now, and then when it became, startlingly, differently, a reality, turning fantasy on its head, he had felt more bliss at fumblingly coming in his pants with Sherlock's fist wrapped around him than he had ever had spilling himself inside any one of his girlfriends, who had been wonderful and soft and beautiful and honestly, honestly enticing, but who had never made him come by saying you, you, you; who had just never got to him in that way, not even Mary in the end, though she came closest, with her easy, fiery grace. It was hardly a surprise that he should want to touch Sherlock's cock.

Sherlock would mock him for ages and ages if he had been present for the particular slowness of this
development of thought.

But it was just... Exactly how gay was he, really? What did it mean that he really, truly wanted to touch Sherlock’s cock, as thin and long and pale as everything that was Sherlock, see it go flushed under his fingers, bounce up as John worked it from base to tip – what did it mean that he wanted to gain some control over the colour of Sherlock by sucking his cock to shining purpleness, and calculate the small weight of his balls in his hands, a small part of what made Sherlock a body, a weight that gravity still worked upon, even after his cheating of it, his smacking to concrete with a force that should have killed him but instead brought him to distant shores, distant dangers.

His voice, now lifetimes ago: which is fine, by the way. Sherlock, still so new, still in his first gust of hurricane in John’s life, before the winter, before this bright new spring: oh, I know it’s fine. Him again, sincerely despite the tension already forming itself between them, just a taste of what would be to come: I’m just saying – it’s all fine. And Sherlock again: thank you, a small miracle on that first night when Holmes-and-Watson were still only barely being drawn into orbit around each other, only barely starting to feel each other’s pull, fledgling twin stars around a shared point of balance. He had to wonder now at it for a bit, at I consider myself married to my work, and while I’m flattered – because five months later Sherlock would be watching him doing the dishes, angry at something that would fade into obscurity, and would be wanting to make him talk, while having an orgasm, if there was that choice. And a lifetime later, literally, ohgod, an infuriating, impossible, heartbreaking thirty-nine months later Sherlock would pull him into the space of his mouth, sticky with beer, full of want of a particular sort, yes, John, now, you. Time was a strange, pushing, insistent thing, getting Sherlock from married to my work to wanted to make you talk again, make you talk while having an orgasm if I had the choice, against me if possible, looking at me if in any way possible. He entertained the possibility that maybe he had been a strange, pushing, insistent thing, too, and it made him feel so wonderful he had to rein the feeling in a bit, because it wasn't meant for this kind of careful spring day, the street bustling with – mostly – peace and – some – violence.

It was all fine. It had been all his life, really. He’d literally fought people who dared to call Harry a lesbo or a dyke, at least if they were people who she didn't know and didn't say it sharing a smile with her. (That had been one of his first tangible encounters with the slipperiness, the inadequacy of language.) He’d told his mother that she’d better shape up her game if she wanted to have any children in her life at all, because even if he and Harry had already started to go awry, had started to miss each other when they threw words at one another, he was still loyal to her by blood and by idea, and he wouldn’t accept his parents being homophobes, it wouldn’t do, this was post-modernity and there was enough pain already in this universe built out of horrible probability as it stood. He’d watched some of his fellow soldiers form bonds that made them happy and it had made him genuinely happy, too – even if the two or three desperate fumbles in dark military tents in Afghanistan, trying to numb rawness with an excess of rough feeling, trying to get a hold on death by holding onto throbbing, screaming life, hadn’t quite made him happy, and had had more to do with trying to chuck John Watson for a bit than finding him. He’d examined queer when it arose and he’d happened upon it in his early twenties, just when Harry was also happening upon it in a different sense; and he’d found the concept to be quite wonderful, really, and if he had had more of a thinking head he might have realised a lot sooner that the idea that identity can crumble and re-build itself with time and the phases of life and (in his case) death applied to so much more than just sexuality, because that’s what queer sounded like to him, and it was what Sherlock had done to him in more than one sense. He'd had more than enough time to get to grips with that on a theoretical level, but the practicalities of it were just, as in all things, that little bit more complex.

So was he John Watson, heterosexual with a particular proclivity to Sherlock Holmes? Was he John Watson, bisexual? Was he John Watson, queer? Did he have to be any of those? Could he just be John Watson, part of Holmes-and-Watson, and also more, himself, just in love, really?
Back at home, he googled gay sex, not for the first time of course, because he was a blogger after all, a man of the internet waves though he still didn't know how to type (and savoured how that somehow made it more like physical writing, a small form of resistance), a child of the last puffs of flower power and love and later of ambiguity and fear in a world made out of so many perspectives it hurt sometimes.

Gay sex brought him all kinds of joys and horrors, just like life. Sex, such a strange, quiet word for such a mirror of the crazy ineptitude of life. The appeal was far greater when he imagined Sherlock doing some of the things GayTube offered up to him.

Fucking Sherlock. It was a dream, literally and figuratively. It was something that had sometimes got him so turned on just thinking about it that he'd even, once, had to go wank in the loo at the Yard – after that he'd tried to keep a lid on that particular image, though it hadn't always worked. It was a visceral thing of different senses, of trying to imagine being that close to him, getting that trust from him, sharing the reins for a bit. He really didn't know if it would ever happen, if it could; if it was something Sherlock would want, could want, ever. He felt glad for time; time that had returned to them, because they would need it with this, and it was the most beautiful thing life could have restored to him, and it was Bill's voice that delivered it, a voice from not so long ago, sitting in a loose circle of tight grief: time; time to fill; time to use.

But there was more, and the shift of reality that they'd found themselves in had pressed that upon him with an insistence he seemed to be ready to examine now. He had a bit of a nervous giggle at himself and the world that was forming itself around him as he realised that he didn't think he would object to being fucked by Sherlock; it was a new territory, not to think about, because his fantasies hadn't completely shied away from it, but new to think about in a way that linked it to possibility – just the thought of it was enough to both turn him on and experience a rush of very real apprehension. The image of Sherlock leaning over him, gazing down at him in that intense way, trying to suss out from the data if he was okay as he pushed their bodies closer together, and then into each other, a new kind of connectedness – it was a shocking, visual idea that left him a bit breathless and a lot aroused. He didn't even know if it was something Sherlock had ever done or even wanted to do, but it was insistent, the thought, pushing up between other, unrelated things.

He thought about erasing his internet history, because though he didn't know of any time when Sherlock had done so since the beginning of his second life, he knew Sherlock to be very capable of hacking into his laptop in a matter of seconds; but then refrained, because why shouldn't he see it if he went looking for it – if John allowed himself to be woken up by the hum of Sherlock's voice in his ear, narrating the hand on his cock until his threads parted, his fibres disconnected, then well, Sherlock probably wouldn't be surprised by finding this on his computer.

He sat for a bit, and then decided to try some self-therapy by going to shop for food. Surely carrots and cauliflowers would be absolutely unjudgmental.

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He sent Harry a text after the shopping, because Sherlock's dislike of phoning seemed to be rubbing off on him, and tried to ignore the horrible realisation that he hadn't contacted her, at all, and that she hadn't contacted him, at all, though she must have heard, the news had been all over the country, everyone abuzz with it for – precisely, he'd counted – six days, and even Harry wouldn't have been able to keep shielded from the world for six whole days.

How have you been?
John

he sent after trying out different things that all amounted to are you drinking? He closed the laptop
and the undiscovered depths of the world of gay sex that he'd left open and went outside; the lightness of the city, opening up like a new lung under the touch of spring, was too inviting to resist, and he went without a moment's hesitation to the small park where Sherlock had re-materialised, a mass of cells and blood and thoughts that he had judged lost to the world and that was now restored to it in a twisted shift of normality. Under the patient touch of the sun the sad trees were becoming slightly less sad, and things were nice and only barely believable, as he sat on a bench, reading the novel that he had been reading before Sherlock came back and life had taken over from art the driver's wheel of the fast car that was reality for a bit, muddling the narrative. It was a crime novel, and he amused himself for a while trying to imagine with how much exasperation and condescension Sherlock would react to it.

Then, Harry's response dropped into his inbox:

doiing all right actually
and you? it must be weird
harry

and he liked the sound of that, and he recalled with something of guilt that she had tried several times to be there for him during the bleak time of Sherlock's absence and she had sometimes even somewhat succeeded. He really should have thought about contacting her before.

Extremely weird. Say, Sherlock's out for a couple of days. Want to catch up? I can make mum's mince pie.
John

And he still knew her well enough to know that she would have scowled at that, and he laughed softly at the

ill come as long as you DONT make that
harry

and texted her the update on his address (well, the return to old times, really), and hoped that she would be somewhat receptive to him, that they could maybe spend some time together as siblings, that he wouldn't want to kill her by the end of the evening; but she was so volatile that it was hard to predict.

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Harry was gay. This was more or less straight-forward; she was gay in way that Irene Adler clearly wasn't, though it was her label of choice (obviously drawn most to women, living with a female partner – but thoroughly accepting of male clients and, more tellingly, deeply touched and intrigued by Sherlock's own particular kind of pull, which was something John could relate to intimately, even if he kind of hated that she had been able to see it so easily – look at us both, only making it harder) and Clara also wasn't (re-married by now to a husband with a baby on the way, if what John had heard was correct). Harry had only ever had girlfriends, had only ever been able to see herself with a woman, had never, she once told John, felt more than just a fleeting aesthetic appreciation for a man.

She was also a lot less of a mess than he had feared; she was completely sober and had brought non-alcoholic beer. She was awkward, short and blonde and blushing, standing around the kitchen as he finished his clumsy attempt at a vegetarian curry, and then she was willing, complimenting him on it though it really wasn't that special.
Because of this, because of the feeling of gratitude at the fact that she really seemed to be trying, and his genuine hopeful happiness when she informed him that she'd been going to the AA meetings with an atypical regularity, he said it: “When did you know you were gay, Harry?”

She sent him a look over her non-alcoholic pint. “When I realised that all of the weird tingly feelings I had around girls weren't exactly heterosexual,” she said.

He considered. The weird tingly feelings he had around Sherlock also weren't exactly heterosexual, but there were no men as a distinct group that prompted those.

“And has there ever been an exception?” he asked, trying to be casual.

She thought it over, then shook her head. “Not really. I get along well with blokes, but that's mostly because I usually don't want to shag them.” He was glad that she didn't press him for the reason for this conversation, about twenty years overdue.

But then she said: “It's pretty great when people surprise themselves, though,” and she sounded smarter than he remembered, but then he'd mostly seen her drunk lately, and there was something of a question in her eye as she scooped up another bit of aubergine.

He cleared his throat. “I guess it is.”

She then asked about Sherlock, carefully, as if testing a limit he didn't know he had in place, and it was hard to really tell her anything that didn't make it sound like he was crazy – he said to her how strange it had all been, and how glad and angry at the same time he had been, and how things seemed to be settling into some kind of balance now; though he wasn't sure at all that that was true. She didn't really seem to understand him, but then that was hardly her fault, as he picked and chose his way through the details that he thought safe to share with her.

Their goodbye was awkward, as he tried to suss out whether she would appreciate a hug in her sober state, and then halfway closing the gap between them just as she stepped backwards.

“Well,” she said, slightly grimacing, “this was nice. Thanks, John.”

“Thank you,” he brought out, and she lingered for an additional second before stepping out into the evening. He watched her go. His sister, still bound to him by so much that they couldn't dissolve, even if she was a near on impossible element in a universe of uncaring probability.

The next time he texted her, two days later, because he felt that he had to try to uphold a habit of contact with her, her answering sentence was riddled with obvious spelling mistakes and he felt the all too familiar flush of deep disappointment, and a small kind of rage igniting, at her, at himself, at whatever it was inside her that she couldn't fight.

Despite himself, because he couldn't know what Sherlock was dealing with; it had to be pretty massive if it was taking him eight full days to get a handle on, he texted him.

*Harry drinking again.*
*All right?*

And Sherlock responded rather quickly, considering that it was five in the morning in Peru, and it was quite breathtaking how much Sherlock did what he needed him to in that moment:

*She's an idiot. All right.*
*Coming back tomorrow.*
*SH*
because of course there was so much more going on, and addiction was a problem Sherlock had intimately known to be like being tangled in a strange spiders' web of sorts – and of course, though John didn't know, it was possible that right now, the web was closing around him again in a way that he'd have to struggle hard to resist – but then in that moment, it was the only thing that could have helped, precisely because it didn't try to help.

The feeling of relief that swept over him at coming back tomorrow was a bit like an avalanche, and he had to close his eyes against it, because it was hard to see for the light shining through, and God, he was such a sentimental fool these days.

Sherlock didn't respond to his question of when he'd be landing and if he needed John to pick him up at the airport, and John thought that maybe that was just a bit too much like being a normal couple, so he resisted the urge to look up the timetables of all possible flights coming in from Lima.

He was called in and went to pull his weight at the clinic, the optimistic but still treacherous weather having brought many people to fall ill with early-year bronchitis and ferocious colds desperate to turn into pneumonias, because he needed to not allow Sherlock to push him into the slot of waiting partner, and then Sarah was extremely pleasant to him; apparently she was someone deeply under the influence of the weather, and he had a great time talking to her, so it worked out fine.

When he stepped through the door into the living room, having followed the string of violin music that wafted down to meet him with a ridiculous excitement, Sherlock was stark naked in the middle of it, violin shouldered and held suggestively somehow, as though it was a dirty sex prop, and there went all of his feelings of being a normal human being is nice sometimes.

"Hello," Sherlock said after he'd brought a sequence of music to its climax, mouth already shaping into a sly grin with the new streak of mischievousness that he sometimes had now; that, and Sherlock being naked in the living room, and Sherlock actually literally saying hello – new things to put into the list of things that never used to happen, and now do. John felt more exposed than Sherlock was at that smile, knowing that Sherlock could tell exactly from his face and the way he held his body how much he wanted to lunge forward and wrap himself around him and stay with him in the throes of sex until the world ended. Just like Sherlock to make him feel like he was being observed like a caged animal while Sherlock was the one playing the violin without any clothes on.

"Living on the edge a bit, aren't you?" he said, trying to mask some of his immediate need, "it might have been Mrs. Hudson coming up."

Sherlock snorted. "As though I couldn't immediately tell it was you from the singularly obvious way you paddled up the street, struggled with the lock and then banged up the stairs with a slight remnant of your limp."

And then that wasn't unsettling in the least, and the most natural thing that John could do was bridge the four strides of leg (three, if measured in Sherlock's legs) separating them and take the violin from Sherlock with a slow, reverent movement (he felt a thrill at the way Sherlock allowed it, allowed him to touch this extension of him, this shrine at which he sometimes came to worship), put it on the table gently, and then tug at Sherlock, who melted down into his mouth, there, so there, so utterly tangible as he kissed John back with something of a desperation that was a bit new.

"Missed me, did you?" John asked, already slightly breathless as they broke apart.

Sherlock didn't respond, just gave him a long, searing version of the look as his hands came up to pull at John's t-shirt – Christ, John, you know, and that felt so much more like a confirmation than
anything he could have said, and it was more thrilling than it had any right to be. He spent a moment
leaning back, looking at Sherlock like Sherlock had looked at him after that first time, when John had
joined him in bed – unapologetically nude, the canvas of his chest and stomach, marked by the scars,
openly on display, his cock already hardening against John's hip. God, that body, so present
nowadays, where was just transport now, where was the wearing of robes over pyjamas now; he
wanted to bury himself in it and trace time back to where the point must have been where Sherlock
had looked down at himself and found that he didn't just have a body, he was one.

“Christ,” he sighed at the sight of him. He toed off his shoes as quickly as he could, undid his belt
himself and tried to get his trousers off with some effort, pulling down his pants with them, just
wanting to get naked, really naked, only holding still for long enough for Sherlock to tug his t-shirt
up over his head.

“Don't you dare keep your socks on,” Sherlock said lightly against him, but the way he brought his
hands down the stretch of John's back, dragging his fingernails over the skin with just enough
pressure to hurt a little, and then cupping his palms firmly around John's buttocks spoke of a
seriousness that made John reel a bit.

“Wouldn't dare,” he breathed, twisting uncomfortably to get the offending items off while still trying
to maintain the closeness of their bodies. Sherlock pulled him up slightly by cradling his bum, so that
he was standing on his tiptoes, bringing their cocks together, and Sherlock hissed before licking a
way into John's mouth so urgently that John's knees struggled to remember what their function was.
Who was he, again?

He reached upward and looped his arms around Sherlock's neck as well as he could, savouring the
feeling of him, the body arching into his touch, SH, SH back here with him, mind and body focused
on him with an intensity that was startling.

“I wish I'd cleared – the table,” Sherlock said, the hitch in his voice as John rubbed against him very
satisfying.

“So you could fuck me on it?” John said, then groaned, as the implication reached him a bit
belatedly; and the idea of Sherlock actually tidying up for once, painstakingly clearing the table of all
of his chemistry equipment, his books, his microscope, his growths, his fluids so he could shag John
on it would have been extremely funny if it hadn't been such a turn-on right then, as Sherlock's cock
was swelling against him.

“Yes,” Sherlock growled, yes with its right to be in their lives, and smashed their mouths together
with some force, bruising the curve of John's lips.

“Bed will – will do,” John said, voice cracking under the weight of it, the press of the yes that was
between them.

And that they couldn't be bothered to go up the stairs, that it was Sherlock's bed, where they hadn't
actually spent any time together yet, where John had tried for the past eight nights to get a whiff of
Sherlock back with him, seemed meaningful for a moment, but then Sherlock pushed him down on it
with a heated insistence, eyes glittering with a specific kind of mania, and that took out all of the
meaning that existed in the universe and pinned it on itself so there really was nothing else left to
contemplate.

Sherlock descended on him, trapping his hips between his knees, biting at his neck – then, suddenly,
stilled completely.

“Sherlock?” John panted, and froze halfway through an arch upward.
“You,” Sherlock said, then chuckled darkly, liquidly into John’s neck, and moved back into it, running his tongue over the small pain of his teeth, “you slept here while I was away.”

“I – yeah,” John said, too aroused to be embarrassed about it, not even wondering how Sherlock could tell.

“How – how sentimental, John,” Sherlock said between licks and nips at his neck and downward, his clavicle, and then – ohgod – his scar, the sensation muted by the damaged nerve endings but the implication raw as Sherlock’s tongue felt its way over the rough curls of flesh, tracing the pattern of the shrapnel with rapt attention; it was new, none of his girlfriends had enjoyed bringing his war wound into sex, though Mary had sometimes touched it as though contemplating it, but then she had come the closest, hadn’t she, while Sherlock was just there, already, in the place where so many body-alien things had had to be fished out of the broken border of his skin, and accepting his mouth on that ruin, on that crime scene that only Sherlock could ever really understand, felt both not okay and so okay that nothing else in the universe ever could be again. He couldn’t fight the raw sound coming up in his throat, a half-sob, a strangled groan. Sherlock took his time with the scar, even raking his teeth over the ridges and edges of it, and then finished off by kissing it, lightly, so lightly, like a small goodbye.

“Sherlock, you are... No one’s ever – done that before,” John breathed, and Sherlock sat up on him, his arse resting on John’s thighs, erection at half mast against his stomach.

“Good?” he asked, the confidence from before slipping slightly on his face; a hint of apprehension, a shadow of doubt.

“Bit not good,” John said, because it was true, but then also, because it was true as well: “and a lot good.”

Sherlock looked down at him, face unreadable. “You extraordinary man,” he said, quietly, wonderingly, and then his eyes widened, as though he was surprised that it was him who’d said it.

“How sentimental,” John said, and reached up to cup Sherlock's face, pulling him down into a new kiss.

Sherlock took control of it again, tongue slipping between John’s lips, threading his hand in John’s hair and pulling at it slightly. John hummed in approval, feeling giddy as the warm, wet pressures of their tongues slid together inside his mouth.

He reached down between them to take Sherlock’s erection in his hand.

And Sherlock responded with such a startled sound, such an abrupt breaking of the kiss, such a jerky recoil that John let him go on instinct.

“What?” he squeaked, hands scrabbling at Sherlock's chest.

“I –” Sherlock began to say, staring at him with a panic on his face that made a jolt of fear shoot through John.

“What is it?” he pressed, urgently. “Don't you want me to –”

“I don't understand,” Sherlock said, eyes wild, “I just don't – I don't –”

“Take it easy,” John said, curling his hands around Sherlock’s hips, grip loose, “just take it easy.”

Chest heaving rapidly with something else than arousal, Sherlock hid his face in his hands for a long,
long moment, and though John really, really wished he hadn't, he allowed the moment to stretch until Sherlock finally pulled his hands away and rested them, lightly, on John's stomach, small points of weight, of heat.

“T’m sorry,” he said, and that was so strange, so rare, that John almost felt worse because of it.

“What's going on?” he asked, carefully.

Sherlock closed his eyes for a moment, but then, mercifully, a small grace, he looked at John. The anguish on his face calmed, he seemed to be trying to get it under control, to slip the mask in place, but it only half worked, and John could tell that the confidence with which he'd been standing in their living room stark naked and with which he'd brought them to this bed had shattered.

“I thought I was all right,” Sherlock muttered, quietly. “When you sent me... When you sent me that text, I was all right.”

“The text? About me touching you, you mean?” John tried for a second to get up, a subconscious desire to get closer again, but the way Sherlock was seated on him made it pretty impossible, and he had to settle for tightening his hands around Sherlock's hips.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, bypassing evidently for once. “I was all right. I was –” he grimaced, “– happy, even. It was annoying how happy I was. It was very distracting.”

John took a moment to process that. “But... you're not happy now?”

“I don't know,” he said after a beat, and John knew that that was the worst thing for him, the worst thing, not knowing, not understanding. Not being able to grasp the lines that connected things to each other, the threads that he used for getting across, across spaces, across times. And it was heartbreaking, the frustration and fear that were so large he couldn't control them, showing themselves like traitors on that enticing face. It was heartbreaking to watch on Sherlock – who wanted to control everything, as evidenced by this thing exactly; who collapsed when he couldn't have control; who had broken down in front of that fire in Baskerville when he had for a moment thought that his control had proven false; who had often mixed his own drugs so he could feel like he was still in charge; who led John everywhere, take my hand; who only accepted control from things as abstract as music and thought; who had that one time that control had slipped from him jumped from a fucking roof and had spent two years destroying, as he had put it, everything of Moriarty's, just to regain that upper hand again; who had said to John waste of valuable time and had sucked him off almost without preamble, guiding himself and John to a climax entirely of his own making.

John had felt that something was off about it, but the extent of Sherlock's distress was new to him as his flatmate, his friend, his infuriating wanker, his lover, his inspiration pressed his hands into his eyes, mouth twitching under the weight of this moment, under John's eyes on him, the contact of which must have felt like another attack on his control in this moment of offering up his weak parts.

“Sherlock,” he said, trying not to sound strangled with the unbelievable helpless tenderness he was feeling, “it's all right.”

“It's not,” Sherlock said, not taking away the hands pushing at his own face.

“It is,” John insisted.

“It is not.” The familiar insistence, the shut up John you have no clue what you're talking about you idiot, at least, was the same. Sherlock took a breath, let the hands fall to John again, re-establishing that small bit of contact, a small miracle. “I can't give you what you need.”
John heard *so if you need something that I can't give you, you should get it from someone who can. it's only logical* in his brain as though a recorder had started playing. It was all wrong.

John opened his mouth to say *yes you can* but then he didn't, because he wasn't sure if it was true, and Sherlock saw through any and all of the inane reassurances that he could give anyway, because he could probably see right now that a cold wave of doubt was suracing in John – if Sherlock was really such a top that he wouldn't let John touch his cock, at all, then that... It wasn't something that felt like it would be enough.

Sherlock was watching him silently. “It's not okay for you,” he murmured, the clinical tone of his observation only slightly more inflected than when he would say *the gardener did it*. And he lifted himself off John, the long lines of his body defeated, curling back on themselves; a far cry from what he had been before, a canvas holding a violin, proud, open, willing. He sat down next to John against the headboard, leaning the back of his head against the wall, removing himself so effectively John felt a bit like crying as he worked himself to a sitting position as well.

They sat next to each other, both staring out in front of them, the bridges snapped between their bodies, the momentum slowed down to nothing.

John felt a bit numb, a bit hurt, a lot everything. He closed his eyes against the soft colours of Sherlock's bedroom; Sherlock next to him was silent as a statue.

But things weren't *lost*, they were still here, breathing the same air, Sherlock wasn't lost to him again, he had scaled that wall, they were on the same side together again; and he wasn't just Holmes-and-Watson, he was John Watson, who was good at fixing things that had to do with Sherlock, who had often found blind spots that Sherlock had overlooked – in himself, never in anything else, of course – and who sometimes made Sherlock *see*. A microscope, but for feelings. “You said you were happy, before, when I texted you,” he said, tentatively.

“Yes,” Sherlock affirmed, voice a dark shudder.

“Why was that?”

Sherlock shifted. John dared a look at him, and, a chance, a thing of wonder, Sherlock was looking at him, too. “It was... pleasant to think about,” he said, wincing at himself, looking as though it physically hurt to say that.

“So you thought you'd want it?” John said, allowing his body to shift a bit closer to Sherlock’s. Decreasing space. Increasing presence.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, and the tone of suppressed anxiety made John want to wrap his arms around him, this bundle of bones and scars and fears, so seemingly confident at times, and now so utterly, utterly undone by his fear of letting go. This wasn't just a matter of wanting to top, he realised. It was a matter of being afraid of not topping, *Gay sex* on the internet had taught him at least that much: there was a big difference.

“And do you?” he said, and felt like a character in a soap opera; language, its patterns, its clichés, not stretchy enough to fit around them as they sat there, but trying, pushing at its boundaries.

Sherlock considered seriously, as he did with all questions he didn't know the answer to. “In theory, yes,” he finally said, and that seemed to calm him down a bit, theory, science, rocks to hang onto in a confusing waterfall; when he looked at John, his gaze had steadied a bit.

“Maybe we just need to be a bit more careful with the practice?” John said, making it a question to
see how it would bounce of Sherlock, how it would resonate.

“I – maybe,” Sherlock said, but he looked a bit cold, a bit lost, a lot confused.

John deliberately brought a hand to his shoulder, a small bridge, a restoration. “Has no one ever touched you, Sherlock?” he asked, frowning. He remembered Sherlock saying he hadn't had much experience, but then he'd gone on to wank and suck John to such easy orgasms that it had been a difficult thing to believe. And he'd accepted so many of John's touches – John's attentions to his scars that first time, John with his hands in his hair at the breakfast table, the hug in the shower, the cuddling in bed, most of which he had initiated, even; it wasn't the contact that frightened him, but the sexuality of it, John supposed, the idea that someone would be doing things to him that would make him respond in ways that he maybe hadn't expected or couldn't control.

“Not that way,” Sherlock said, grimacing. “I've... done things. To others, mostly. It wasn't... Reciprocity wasn't required. Most of them didn't mind. I've never...” His eyes fixed on John with not a small amount of wary trepidation. “I've never wanted anyone to give something back – until now.”

John looked at him for a moment. Who were these people, these fools? Who could accept something like that from Sherlock Holmes and not want to share something in return? He felt a strange flutter of protectiveness that was rather out of place, he realised, because Sherlock had, after all, simply done it the way he'd wanted to, and it really wasn't any of his business how Sherlock shagged people – or at least, it hadn't been until now, and now things were apparently so different for Sherlock it seemed as though there was hardly a point of comparison.

“I want to give something back,” he blurted out almost before he was aware of it.

Sherlock closed his eyes.

“At the speed that you want me to,” John said, with emphasis, as he squeezed his hand around Sherlock's shoulder.

A small laugh escaped Sherlock, apparently involuntarily; a tinier, no less heavy echo of what had followed you could in the phone call that had pulled up so many screens between them, none of them real in the end – a huff of breath, not of amusement but of disbelief, unbelieving of such trust, of such conviction, of such love, feeling as though he deserved none of it.

“You,” Sherlock said under his breath, shaking his head a little, “you.”

And it was him who closed the gap, in the end, or at least, who opened the gap; it was him who unlocked the protective knot of his arms and waited for John to slip between them – a tangle of biology, of neurology, sprawled against each other, catching on each other, the body as a membrane, selectively letting things in, carefully choosing what to keep and what to work back out.

John said, unplanned, randomly, slightly out of sync with the rhythm of reality, against the miraculous, alternative beat of Sherlock's pulse against his forehead: “You're better at being alive than being dead,” and it was as if Sherlock actually knew what to make of that, as he tightened his arms around John into a willing cage, to be opened at the right password.

Only he didn't have a clue. He didn't have a clue what this silence was trying to tell him. If only he could read the things Sherlock didn't say.

But he couldn't.
CHAPTER 11

John eventually left Sherlock in his bedroom, smoking silently by the window, the sheet around him as a sort of comical loincloth – as John stood by the door and glanced back, he was reminded of that time in Buckingham Palace, and one of the first real, unmistakable, wholly undeniable twinges of arousal he’d had looking at Sherlock’s body, and he shook his head at himself silently. If he’d known the things that could and would happen, he probably would’ve died then and there from cardiac arrest.

It was nearing midnight. The flat was calm without them, without the energies sparking off between them, doused in the soft darkness that came from night after such a bright, vivid day. He stood for a second, trying to get a bit of a handle on the things that had just happened between them, and finding his grip to be extremely slippery. It felt like too much, really, too much for this hour of hybridity and vagueness. He looked at the tangle of clothes that they’d left on the floor – his clothes, so quickly removed, so easily shed, only to find that Sherlock was wearing layers of an entirely different kind.

They hadn't really talked more. Words had removed themselves from the situation at least for a little while. But Sherlock had allowed John to be near him, curled into the curve of his neck, and hadn't objected to his hands, slow and careful and all of the things that John had never thought Sherlock could ever need but now apparently did, finding a way across the expanses of chest, of shoulder, of neck, and then stopping there. He'd allowed his lips, now and then, hesitant, hopeful; he had offered no resistance but also no real response. And then he'd pulled away, slowly, as if regretting it somehow, and had gone to stand by the window.

And was it enough? John really didn't know and it was fucking terrifying.

He went over to his clothes, considered putting his pants on, and then thought whatever for. After what had just happened being bare seemed like the best way to move forward. He stared out of the window for a bit, watching the soft glow of the street lamps, unwavering. Beyond reality lay the city, a mirage, a pounding heart, a world so removed it was like watching it from a shore across an ocean. He sighed, wondered when he'd lost his feel for the heartbeat of London – and the answer was there, already: when he'd lost his feel for Sherlock’s heartbeat, literally, when he’d felt around and his skin, still warm, not quite aware yet, offered him nothing, no flutter of life, no pulse. And now that honesty of the body had turned out to be a deception, like most things, in the end – and London was still remote but also no real response. And then he'd pulled away, slowly, as if regretting it somehow, and had gone to stand by the window.

He remembered how he’d felt getting into that cab on his way to the Yard. Like coming home. Just having Sherlock here again had made his concept of home change so much the city and its authorless space were included in it again. But right now, with Sherlock's silent puffing of smoke out into the sleep of millions, slipped out over them like clouds, London seemed as unreal to him as Sherlock.
He wanted to sleep. But he wasn't sure if he'd be able to without Sherlock near him, and it was obvious Sherlock wasn't going to sleep, not tonight – or maybe he was, but then it wouldn't be with John. That was more okay than John would have expected, actually; he wasn't exactly sure that his offering of renewed connection had been met halfway, though it had definitely not been rejected outright – but either way he understood quite well that Sherlock wanted some time on his own to go over things. That was, after all, what Sherlock did. And at least that was something that wasn't abnormal between people who had to figure out sex and what world it was that the word covered.

He realised that he hadn't even asked Sherlock about Peru. They had fallen into bed with an unconcerned finality, with the intention of emerging out of it again together and sharing other things after the sharing of bodies. Only the sharing of bodies hadn't quite gone to plan – because the plan hadn't been sharing, not really, and John just really, truly, hadn't been aware of that. Honest questions would have to wait until the honest light of day. As he stared out over the flickering lights of night-time London, a strange kind of weariness came over him, as he thought of all the things left unresolved between them, and the thought was like a traitor, a thief in the night: is it worth it?

And then he didn't feel like a real person for a bit.

He eventually did put on his clothes, resisting the idea that it might be able to undo time a bit. He slipped out of the flat, into the extension of home that London could be, again, if he let it.

The city was soft, yielding. Spring was there even through the chilly creeping fingers of night; a small, barely noticeable hint of softness, of flowers pushing up beneath soil, of people dead returning to life. It would have been soothing, and it somehow still was, but it would have been moreso if he hadn't left Sherlock in 221B, alone, now even without the knowledge that John was in the flat with him, and John really didn't know if that meant anything to him, the fact that John had slipped out, had closed the door behind him in a soft click of wood and secrecy and hurt and things that were hidden even from John himself, and that Sherlock had probably seen with more clarity than he himself had.

He ended up in front of the entrance door to Mary's flat block in a sudden shift of consciousness; surprised to find himself there despite the fact that the knowledge that he was going there had been rushing through his head from the first step. He took a long while trying to put the pieces of a reason why he might be there together into a coherent whole and then really couldn't do it – it was all wrong, it had to do with being too insecure, too uncertain, of losing a hold on the things that made him him under the weight of Sherlock's eyes, of allowing that to blot out other certainties, like that he tried hard to be good, and that he loved Sherlock; it was selfish, it was utterly reprehensible, incomprehensible, it was all of the things that he sometimes thought he was and didn't want to be. But then his feelings were no one's but his own and he rang the bell, incomprehensibly moved by the small, curly letters of her handwriting under it, just Morstan, not Mary, as though that were a secret she was trying to keep.

He knew she'd be up – they were both night cats, and had sat up together at times for hours-long ruminations and translations into action of life and love and sex and alcohol in the first, starkly infatuation-fueled weeks of their relationship, and then, a bit later, a bit further, they'd tried to avoid pushing the dark cloud of their morning moods into each other's faces, splitting the newspaper in half and hiding behind it, trading coffee over the table, milk, sugar, Mary.

He had a moment of complete and utter hatred for himself before the intercom flickered into life and the distances of technology muted what must have been surprise, and maybe annoyance, in her voice: “Hello?”

“Mary,” he croaked, “it's –” me. John. I don't know who it is, actually.
“Hello?” she asked again.

He touched the intercom involuntarily. “It's John,” he said.

There was a silence, and he didn't know if it meant he'd have to repeat himself. Suddenly, the buzzer was a sound of alarm, slashing open the fabric of the slow, pleasant night air. He pushed open the door.

Then, it was like coming into himself, like snapping back into his body with the surprise of a rubber band, as though he'd been wound so tight he'd left himself.

“Fuck,” he said out loud, and ran, leaving her probably with nothing but a stronger reason to wonder who the hell was that man, anyway, because who was he, doing that, who was he, not being able to regain himself without pulling her into it, fuck, what his life, what was his life.

She was more normal and balanced than he would ever be, and after half an hour sent him a text, stifled with formality, devoid of the tangle of dark dislike and hurt and confusion she might be feeling, though who was he to try to imagine what she was feeling, really: What are you doing?

The truth was:

I'm an arsehole who needed reassurance and couldn't pull myself from the idea that you would offer it even though I've done nothing to deserve it.

What he sent was:

I'm very sorry. Trying to figure things out in a way that only makes it worse. I'm sorry if I disturbed you.

Maybe it wasn't even that different.

She didn't respond, probably couldn't think of anything but Yes, disturbing is the right word for it.

And it was a bit too much like mourning again, beating a path down the streets alone, surrounded by a lot of people enjoying the still-slightly-warm night air that seemed to be pregnant with possibility, and he hated himself for it, because why, his mouth had been on Sherlock's not an hour ago, and he had been thrumming and living under his hand, and why wasn't it enough? He hadn't really known what he was in for, true, when Sherlock had wrapped those long fingers around his neck and pulled him down into the kiss that would not seal their fates but rather open them, but he'd made this choice a long time ago, crumbling orbits ago, even before he knew that it was a choice, and even though he was sometimes a lot of things that he didn't want to be, following things through was something that came as naturally to him as hopping into a cab and almost without second thoughts shooting a man for someone he'd met 36 hours before.

Is it worth it? He thought back to the thrill of excitement that had quivered in the pit of stomach when he'd come through their door earlier and there had been violin music, Sherlock upstairs, Sherlock returned from that other side once more, and how everything had receded again into small, insignificant details on the fabric of life, giving space to the light of Sherlock shining through. It was quite unlike anything.

It is completely, utterly worth it, you fool.
He only needed to think it, once, not say it to himself out loud several times like he'd had to with *Sherlock is dead*, because there was really no doubt this time, was there, not even a whisper of things relegated to dreams.

–

He glanced at the luminescent numbers on the screen of his phone as he slowly climbed the stairs to his bedroom. 02:19

It was 05:03 when he descended them again. It was 05:22 when he finally coughed up the courage to knock on Sherlock's door. It was 05:23 when Sherlock said, in a calm neutral voice John couldn't pretend not to have heard: “No, John.” *Wrong.*

It was 07:18 when the sun came up, and sleep was a small kind of war slipping in and out of bed with him.

–

Sherlock came out of his room looking absolutely fine. Looking great, actually. That somehow rubbed John the wrong way; what had stared back at him in the bathroom mirror had been a wreck, a collision of the different realities of night and day, with his eyes sunk low, the lines on his forehead tensed like pen strokes. Sherlock looked none the worse for wear, face smooth and blank, a palimpsest with its upper layer painstakingly cleared, betraying nothing to the naked eye of the history and languages underneath, clothes sharp, not a curl of hair different than usual; swathed in normality, his own particular abnormal kind of everyday. It felt irrationally unfair. The earlier night with his incomprehensible walk to Mary's seemed remote in the daylight, and John had decided to treat it as the mental aberration that it was or that he had decided it was, a strange, selfish, extremely stupid thing that had been necessary to jolt him to *it is completely, utterly worth it, you fool*, but he still felt overwhelmingly unequipped to deal with whatever would be coming at him today.

“Lestrade texted,” Sherlock, eyes fixed on his phone, said in lieu of *good morning*, but that was one for the list of *things that always used to happen, and still do*.

“Interesting?” John asked, feeling exhausted, trying to derive some small comfort from the heat of his tea cup between his fingers.

“Quite,” Sherlock said with a frown, as though he couldn't believe it. “Disappearance of a corpse from the morgue of St Mary's hospital; corpse of a high-profile politician – Smithson, you've read the papers, I presume – who died of cardiac arrest while on ski vacation; though apparently there was some doubt about the accidental nature of the death; no sign of forced entry; morgue was left completely locked; surveillance cameras in the cold chamber show the presence of the body until it just disappears into thin air.”

“They have cameras in their cold chamber?” John asked.

Sherlock looked at him for the first time, decidedly unimpressed. John felt the stir of an icy annoyance, fueled by fatigue and the need to be looked at honestly. “Not the point,” Sherlock said.

“Isn’t it?” John asked, just to be contrary.

Sherlock seemed to feel it and pulled a face. “Can you come or not?”

“If you want me to,” John said, trying not to feel like he was fishing for a reassurance he already knew he wasn't likely to get anytime soon – there was barely enough breath between them for *good morning*, let alone for something that could be an equivalent of *of course; I'd be lost without my*
blogger.

Sherlock said nothing, just raised his eyebrows at him.

“Fine,” he gave in, because who was he kidding, anyway – he would have followed Sherlock everywhere, into every dodgy street, every red lights district, every underground gangster network, every drugs den, every fucking crack of the fucking earth.

–

In the cab, recalling with something of a belated shock how Sherlock had kissed his scar the night before, John tried: “So how was Peru?”

Sherlock said, lip curled in an all-too familiar, staunch unwillingness: “Humid.”

And they both sat, feeling the waves of their frustration with each other colliding. John was a little alarmed at how easily things had swerved off-road.

Where was you, where was bit not good, and a lot good, where was you're better at being alive than being dead?

Late-night fairytales proving a little too simple in the warring, naked complexity of day.

–

They were pointed to the morgue by a harried-looking nurse, who gave only the barest flicker of recognition when she laid eyes on them.

The sound of Greg's voice greeted them before the sight of him did. He was arguing heatedly with another D.I., who seemed to be completely unimpressed with him, jabbing his finger into his chest in an aggressive way that made John feel indignant on his behalf.

“You had no right to invite him in, Lestrade,” the man snarled, and just then noticed them coming through the door.

“No,” he called at them, face twisted, overthrowing Greg's simultaneous Sherlock, “you can't be in here!”

John felt Sherlock next to him drawing himself up to his full, impressive height. Sherlock who was already agitated, and then denied access to a crime scene – this would be a sight to behold. He stalked over to the two officers; John hurried after him, feet sounding too loud on the cold stone floor of the morgue.

“Oh, hello,” Sherlock said, lacing superficial pleasantries with a deep, tangible acid and condescension, “and who might you be?”

Greg caught John's eye in a look that was part anger, part uh-oh, and part I'm going to enjoy this so much.

“Detective Inspector Davis,” the man responded, sniffing, exuding an exaggerated dignity in the face of a Sherlock Holmes with the air of a stalking cheetah who'd spotted a lone gazelle, “head of the Missing Persons department. No need to introduce yourself,” he added with derision, as Sherlock opened his mouth.

“You know why I'm here, then?” Sherlock said, mask perfectly in place.
“You need to leave right now,” Davis said, “D.I. Lestrade here was under the impression that a corpse disappearing is his department, when it's clearly not. And I don't need amateurs mucking about with the evidence.”

Greg made a sharp sound of dissent, and seemed ready to argue, but when he looked at Sherlock, he snapped his mouth shut. He knew inevitable when he saw it. Sherlock smiled at Davis, a smile of knives, of glass, of razors; John felt a chill just looking at it. His eyes were fixed with a deadly accuracy on Davis, then flicked up and down him, collecting data in that neuron-fast way of his, so quickly John wasn't sure anyone but him and probably Greg would have noticed.

“Of course,” Sherlock said, stressing the sibilant into a hiss, then looked around the morgue in mock-resignation. “In that case, detective inspector, I can only offer you my sincere hope that your people have more sense than you seem to have to protect themselves against the bodies in here.” They all stared at him for a beat. “Because,” he continued smoothly, “you appear to have some dead person on your face.” His eyes were glittering with something more than just malice, and he removed his gloves with care before pointing a long finger straight at the corner of Davis' mouth. There was nothing there, as far as John could tell; only the scab of a quite large, healing cold sore.

“What are you on about, you madman?” Davis spat, and John, despite himself and his lingering annoyance and anxiety over Sherlock, felt his dislike for the inspector hardening even more. There were only a very select number of people who were allowed to call Sherlock a madman; all of them had had snipers focusing on them at one point, and they had well and fully earned the right.

“Exposure of the sore to putrescine, worsening the infection,” Sherlock said, every syllable a measured bite, “through contact with decomposing flesh and moulds that favour the human corpse.” He wrinkled his nose. “I can actually smell it.”

Davis's hand came up to cup his cheek, as if trying to shield himself off. “What?” he snapped, eyes shading over with disbelief and a twinge of beginning horror.

“Deadly if ingested in high doses, so I'd get it looked at, if I were you, detective inspector,” Sherlock said, ice punctuating his every word. “And if I were you I'd take some time to have a small talk with anyone you happen to have kissed lately with that on your face. You might have passed them something else than just herpes.”

John felt his hand moving upward, ready to take its placating place on Sherlock's arm, because he felt the situation shifting into more than dangerous; but then he restrained himself, because there was a new kind of cold fire in Sherlock's voice that he wasn't sure how to put out, and he was still unwilling, himself, to be that person again, to step into the line of fire again.

Sherlock took a small step forward, not quite close enough to be objectively threatening, but definitely into Davis' comfort zone, who looked gobsmacked. “And I don't need to tell you that that's not just your wife,” he hissed, “judging by the shifting tan lines you have under your wedding band, indicating regular removal and enough flippancy about the affair to not put the ring back on in the same spot before visiting the tanning beds you seem to love and by the new, discreet faux-silver chain around your neck – new, I can see the zinc allergy kicking in on your neck, sorry your lover doesn't care enough to buy you a real silver chain – which isn't something a normal friend would give you nor is it your wife's style, judging from the pompous golden cuffs you're wearing which are with near certainty a present from her, probably for Christmas; formality and emotional distance of that gift suggests long-time unhappy marriage, newness and genericness of the chain as well as the fact that the giver doesn't know yet that you're allergic to zinc suggests new affair, probably not the only one judging from the different tan lines on your finger; and from the mis-aligned buttons on your shirt and the very recent bruise of the new love bite you've tried to unsuccessfully cover up with
your collar without the assistance of a mirror I estimate it probable that she or, also not unlikely, he,
judging from the lack of frivolity on the chain and the aggression of the love bite, is a member of
your team or otherwise working in this morgue.” He delivered the last word slowly after the
astounding speed of what preceded it, dragging it out like a torture, drawing out the r, dropping the g
like it was a small bomb, and John blinked. It was the first time he'd been around this happening in
two years. And God, it was still so incredible, so utterly brilliant that he felt thrown off balance for a
bit.

Davis looked for a few seconds as though nothing had happened, then his face twisted in anger; his
hands curled into fists at his side. “Just who exactly do you –” he began, furiously, lifting one of the
fists in an uncontrolled jerk.

John and Greg both moved in as if it had been agreed between them; John tugged Sherlock back a
step to get him further away from Davis, and Sherlock allowed it, while Greg moved in between
them, a shield to both of them.

“Sherlock Holmes, that's who he is,” he said, and John could tell that he was more than just a little
angry, though he sounded collected, “and this is my division, Davis. This case was being re-opened
as a murder case before the body went missing.”

“Besides, it can hardly count as a pressing disappearance if it's already a stiff,” Sherlock said,
sounding almost pleased, in a cold, hard way. John took away the hand that was still resting on
Sherlock's sleeve; at the loss of it, Sherlock glanced over to him, and John was a little shaken at the
intensity of the icy rage that sat under the superficial calmness of his features. Sherlock looked away
before he could respond with an expression of his own.

“Fuck you, Lestrade,” Davis was saying, trembling.

“No need to re-direct your frustration,” Sherlock said, voice level, curling his lip.

“Sherlock,” Greg warned calmly, not turning around. “We're taking over, Davis. Phone Ruskin if
you're not convinced. We'll have a briefing later.”

Davis looked like a man who had just been told that, well, that he had corpse exposure on his face,
John supposed. He opened his mouth to argue, but Greg stared him down silently, in a short
competition of wills. John could sense Sherlock almost physically straining forward again to confront
him, but he stayed where he was – it took John a second to realise that he’d put his hand back on his
arm, though he wasn't sure if that was what was steadying him. Davis suddenly caught his eye, and
said: “Fuck you, too,” and then he was off, almost stumbling.

“Well, that was an effective destruction,” Greg observed calmly, turning to Sherlock, mouth tense.

“Congratulations, Lestrade,” Sherlock said, almost easily, and as he looked at Greg John could see
the anger retreating from his face slowly, folding over into the more familiar vague annoyance, “you
have now finally been proven to not be the most annoying policeman in Britain.”

And Greg almost smiled. “Talk to me,” he said.

Sherlock did. “I'll need to see the tapes, of course. Not just the ones from the night of the
disappearance, but going back to when the body was brought in. I need to see the cold chamber and
get samples from the slab on which the body was stored. I need to see the forensics rapport – don't
look at me like that, Lestrade –” he said, reading Greg's face of resigned unwillingness to open up
closed-off paperwork, “you'd have had to do it anyway; it's the only way to re-open a case. Speaking
of which, I need access to all of the evidence that got the case to be approved for re-opening.” He
smiled grimly. “I'll need to talk to detective inspector Davis, I'm afraid. I was trying to rile him up; it doesn't actually transfer via just touch, but that putrescine exposure on that wound might actually be relevant. John,” he said, suddenly, voice dropping a bit lower, “can you do that for me? I'll tell you what I need to know.” The request was atypical; normally Sherlock all but ordered him around on their cases.

“Yeah, that'll save us all another murder inquiry,” he agreed.

“And I need to talk to all of the people who work here and who have access to this place. No exceptions,” Sherlock finished.

“Anything else?” Greg asked, looking partly exasperated, partly happy.

“Coffee,” Sherlock said, and then to John's intense surprise, went out to get some, and brought back three cups, made exactly to their tastes.

He responded to Greg's layered look (what the hell, he's getting us coffee; that was so wrong and so awesome; but hey, you look like shit, what happened, oh no, what's he done now) with one that said who the hell even knows anymore.

Sherlock disappeared with the tapes, grudgingly delivered to him by the security guard manning the front desk of the morgue (John though about the familiar morgue at Bart's, and how he couldn't imagine it having a security guard instead of just small, secretly universe-sized Molly), saying something about an IT-and-digital-coding-gifted contact. Before he left, he passed John a note on which he'd scrawled in his spidery, looping handwriting what he needed to know from Davis; it was strange to hold in his hand, such a physical thing from someone who preferred to be mediated by screens and uniformly typed letters – he had only ever seen Sherlock's handwriting a couple of times, usually in barely legible add-ons to his shopping lists, requesting or demanding nicotine patches or some chemical compound or other, the number of exclamation marks directly proportional to his level of boredom. The list felt stupidly intimate to have in his pocket.

And then before he really left, Sherlock said this: “John, are you all right?” And the urgency in his eyes expressed a different expectation than an answer like yeah, fine, you?

What John could say was hardly better: “I'm not sure.”

“Have you slept?” Sherlock's eyes flicked from him to the door of the hallway in which they were standing, as if checking that they were still alone.

“No,” John said, because surely Sherlock knew that already just from looking at him and was only asking to... what? Express concern? Probably.

“Make sure you sleep at some point today. You're more use to me thinking on your feet,” Sherlock instructed, but his tone was gentle, and John knew it was silly to take it as an apology for his coldness earlier, but it honestly felt like one; and then there was a moment of rushed, tumbling tenderness between them as Sherlock lightly curled his long fingers around his shoulder, leaned in and pressed his nose to John's forehead, the gesture by now somewhat like a kiss, though not quite, something that seemed to serve as hello and goodbye and I'll be back and are you okay all at once. John grabbed his coat without really planning to and held him in place for a small moment; Sherlock didn't seem to mind, even seemed a little reluctant to pull back. It made John feel a lot better. And then he was gone, the familiar whirlwind, off to chase the tendrils of a trail.
Sherlock responded Yes. SH to his Are you home right now? so John made his way to Baker Street, intending to make true on make sure you sleep at some point today, nursing his hand that had come into contact with Davis' nose in a thoroughly satisfying, if not quite professional way, his total lack of sleep dogging him like a loyal pet.

When he stepped into the living room, there was the smell of food in the air, and there was a dark, scruffy figure on the couch, whose thin, dirt-flecked face turned to look at John, and at the sight of him folded even a bit more deeply into his oversized hoodie.

“Oh, hello,” John said instinctively.

Sherlock stepped out of the kitchen holding a plate with a sandwich sitting on it – an actual sandwich, with white bread and lettuce and bacon, so he must have gone to the shop to get ingredients for it.

“This is the IT expert,” he said lightly. “PJ, this is John,” he told the boy, putting the plate in front of him. John got another flash of pale face and dark eyes as he tried very hard to present a non-threatening picture. The boy was fifteen at most. John felt a small lump in his chest at the idea that children as young as that were living on the streets in a supposedly wealthy country like theirs. PJ sat indecisively for a moment, before leaning over and picking up the sandwich. “He's going to help me with the tapes,” Sherlock said, looking at the youngster, his tone curiously soft.

John nodded, wondering for a bit at the fact that Sherlock had apparently kept his homeless network intact and updated during his absence, as well as the fact that Sherlock had managed to be friendly enough to an adolescent living on the streets that he'd felt comfortable enough to come here. Sherlock wasn't usually the smoothest of caretakers when it came to children, to put it extremely mildly, but PJ looked at him with a calm, hooded look that spoke of a tentative, reserved trust.

“I've watched the recording of the night of the disappearance, and there is no noticeable break, so it's a well-put-together editing job,” Sherlock continued, frowning lightly, watching PJ take big bites. “We'll need to take a look at the actual digital coding and see how they were tampered with.”

John yawned, a bit too tired to be impressed by the way Sherlock was knowledgeable about pretty much everything that could even somehow be incorporated into a criminal investigation.

“You're exhausted,” Sherlock said, eyes snapping to him suddenly, “get some sleep.”

“Yeah,” John said, stifling another yawn, and dug out the note Sherlock had given him from his pocket, as well as his own notes. “Talked to Davis. Wrote down what he told me, but I don't think that was all of it. He wasn't very cooperative.” He frowned and passed it to Sherlock, who glanced down at it. “If you need more you'll have to have someone else talk to him.”

The corner of Sherlock's mouth lifted. “You punched him.”

“Well, yeah,” John said, jaw cracking as the yawn slipped out despite his trying to control it.

“You broke his nose.”

“Hmm,” John confirmed, feeling notably not guilty, and not even surprised that Sherlock probably knew that from the pattern of the dried blood on his knuckles or something equally incredible.

“You,” Sherlock said, sounding a bit amused, and then looked as though that had been fully
involuntary. They held eye contact for a long moment, and John wanted for a very clear, very wistful moment to just take Sherlock with him to bed and curl their bodies together and sleep the hours away to make up for the disaster of the previous night. And then, finally, maybe, talk. Talk. What happened. How was it. What did you have to do. Was it hard. Were there drugs. What aren't you telling me about the past two years. Why can't you tell me. What happened last night. Why couldn't you talk to me. Why can't you bear touches. And God, there was just so much. The timing of this case couldn't actually have been worse. Sherlock eventually blinked and broke the contact, focusing on something apparently around John's knees, a strange pinchedness flashing across his face before he hid it.

PJ had finished the sandwich and was now licking at his thumb to get the crumbs together.

“Go to bed,” Sherlock instructed, sternly and gently at the same time. “I'm taking PJ to that video rental shop where they owe me a favour. They've got an illegal porn set in the back with a very advanced mixing and editing system.” John didn't know what video rental shop he was talking about, but felt too sleepy to be curious.

“Text me when you need me,” he said.

Sherlock looked as though he was going to say something, then changed his mind and simply nodded, bringing PJ to his feet with just a vague hand gesture. The boy sauntered down the stairs, not responding to John's goodbye, and Sherlock lingered, uncharacteristically, for another moment, face half turned towards John. “See you later,” he finally said, sounding tense, and then he was gone, footsteps hard and somehow angry-sounding on the stairs.

–

John woke up to Sherlock sitting on his bed, fully dressed, shaking him gently to awareness.

“Need you,” Sherlock said.

“Need you too,” John mumbled before his consciousness kicked in fully and he groaned inwardly at himself, at the offering up of himself without the reassurance that it would be picked up in any way.

Apart from a small twitch of his lips, Sherlock didn't respond. Of course he didn't. “It's three in the afternoon. When you're up for it I want you to go talk to Smithson's widow. One of the reasons the investigation was re-opened was because Smithson had been getting death threats, and now she is, too.”

“It's murder?” John groaned, stretching out under the covers, forcing his body to succumb to the demands of being awake.

“I have a hunch that it is, but there's something else,” Sherlock said, and when John looked at him his eyes were glittering with fascination, with excitement; and he looked just like he always had, in that moment, the past two years fell away with ease, and he had never even been gone, he'd never left, he had always been sitting on the edge of John's bed, and he was there, throwing himself into the spiral of a mystery with such abandon it made John's heart ache, and God, he would have followed him everywhere, everywhere, he would have followed him into death if he'd only thought for one minute Sherlock could have used him there. “I've been interviewing the hospital personnel that has access to the morgue. There's one assistant that I'm interested in. Hodgins. Very twitchy. He has the same putrescine exposure. Big spot of infection in a cut on his wrist, and around his mouth. Was trying to hide it, too, so knows about it, unlike Davis. I think he's Davis' lover, probably passed the infection to him without him being aware of it,” he said, and sounded so smug John had the half-serious, half-affectionate urge to smack him for it. “From what he's told you I'm reasonably sure
Davis is otherwise uninvolved. And if it is murder, I'm almost certain Hodgins didn't kill him.” He was silent for a split second. “Are you up?”

“Fine, fine,” John said, sitting upright and rubbing his face. “I'll be down in a minute.”

“Julian is all right,” Sherlock said, in a complete non-sequitur.

“Hm? You mean —”

“Yes. He's all right. You asked how it was. It was —” Sherlock's look was one of concentration and unease. “I'll tell you later.” And he stood up and descended the stairs rapidly, feet a swift patter of focused energy.

“Right,” John said to the space where he had just been, feeling a bit overwhelmed in this moment of not-yet-full-awareness.

–

Smithson's wife, whose name was Jane and who reminded him a bit too much of Mary for comfort, was quite unapologetic about her lack of grief, and that was the strongest indication to John that she, at least, didn't kill her husband. She'd have been more likely to play the weeping widow if she'd actually been the murderer all along.

“He was a liar and a cheater,” she said, almost unaffected, though her mouth was tense. “We were getting ready to file for divorce, but he wanted to wait until after the elections, and then he died.”

“We were on the holiday together?” John asked.

“Oh no,” she said, “he was there with the next wife in line.” Right, John thought. Lovely.

She told him, halfway through their talk: “Just find him. My children want to bury their father.” He, uneasy, told her they'd do their best. She was getting police protection for the death threats that had now turned to her – she didn't seem to think he was murdered, although, as she put it, “There are enough people who hated his guts,” and was genuinely puzzled as to why she would suddenly be targeted. She looked worried, and small, and he felt a twitch of sympathy for her as she let him out and said: “Please hurry up, so I can finally begin to live again. He wasn't the only one with a new life shaping up already.”

He texted Sherlock a condensed version of what she'd said:

Unhappy marriage, hated him, isn't really mourning him, doesn't understand the threats, doesn't think he was murdered, has had new partner for a while.

and received a

Evidently not the killer. But maybe still somehow involved. If it was murder. Things taking gruesome turn. Meet me at Yard in twenty.

SH

in return and he didn't have a clue what any of that meant, so he simply went over to the Yard. Greg
hailed him into his office from inside the open door. Sherlock was half-sitting on his desk in a spill of sunlight that tumbled through the window, stretched against it in a tableau of long clean lines of shirt and leg and half rolled-up sleeves and an infinitely focused expression as he was typing away on his phone. John couldn’t help but drink in the sight of him, sun-washed, for a second.

Greg cleared his throat, bringing him out of it in an instant. “This is getting weirder than we’d expected,” he said darkly, and rubbed his hand over the slight bluish shine of new stubble on his neck. Sherlock cracked a crooked smile in the direction of his phone at that.

“It’s getting more brilliant, you mean.”

John looked at him, and for a moment feared that he was going to drown in the wash of pure, uncomplicated happiness that overtook him at the sight of Sherlock, casual and poised both, every neuron in him working at full speed, hurtling forward to the centre of this thing they were circling, his body ready to spring into action under the superficial sheen of relaxation. It was beautiful, and it was real, and he was, fuck, he was alive.

When he looked at Greg, Greg was watching him with a look on his face that clearly said my friend, you are well and truly fucked.
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

CHAPTER 12

The weather held, an out-of-place, bright, blossoming spring afternoon that seemed almost surprised
at itself. The case held, too, it held together, not degenerating into something that would disappoint
Sherlock. There was no lead yet. John knew that only made him keener. He spent most of his time
brooding, thinking on something that John wasn't aware of.

He was like a man returned from the dead.

Obviously.

–

*I'll tell you later* didn't quite deliver, but then *later* could mean many different things, and time didn't
quite behave as usual when they were on a case, anyway.

–

“So Hodgins can't have got the putrescine on him just by doing the normal stuff a morgue assistant
would have to do with corpses?” John, sitting on the couch and taking a break from reading the press
coverage of Smithson's accident and connecting it to the files Greg had passed them, asked Sherlock,
who was striding to and fro energetically between the kitchen and the living room, hands linked on
the back of his head.

“No,” Sherlock said immediately.

John waited.

Sherlock acknowledged that after a moment, and turned to him in a jerk, whole body animated, his
hands coming loose from his head and sliding down to his neck and to the front, resting on his throat
in that new-found casualness of touch, as though his body was now more of a part of this thinking
that it had ever been. John swallowed, momentarily distracted by the way Sherlock's collar was
standing open.

“I know you're not a pathologist by training, but *honestly*, John.” He looked at him with a specific
kind of annoyance, and John's throat tightened; it was the look Sherlock always had when he was, in
his own, strange way, pushing John to *try harder*. It was a peculiar, quite upsetting feeling of letting
him down that John got whenever Sherlock turned that look on him. “Putrescine develops in
*decomposing* bodies, not in freshly dead, coldly kept preserved ones, as you well know. He wouldn't
have been involved in criminal autopsies as a junior assistant; he'd be handling the normal hospital
deaths. And you don't get it on you just by touching corpses. He'd have to be... eating them perhaps,
ingesting them somehow, smearing them on him. Cutting them open in a slightly more enthusiastic
way than would be socially acceptable in the morgue.” He grinned, suddenly brightened. “Rubbing
them on his wounds. Putrescine is only lethal through actual ingestion in huge doses, and the contact
on him is careful, deliberate. Maybe it's the infection that he likes. The cut I saw looked self-inflicted.”

“Don't look so happy about that,” John said, with an honest shudder. He'd seen many things, but the thought of someone rubbing decomposing human against themselves, inflicting wounds on themselves just so they could infect with death, was still rather more than just a bit upsetting.

“Oh, John, the thrill of sordidness is completely lost on you. I sympathise with the dullness that must be your life.” Sherlock closed his eyes, bringing his fingers together under his chin, looking as though he were a Buddhist monk contemplating nirvana, and, well, that wasn't even that far from the truth, and John had to suppress a smile at the image.

“So, Greg was right? Necrophilia?” he then said, pulling a face almost involuntarily.

Sherlock said nothing, just quirked the corners of his mouth without opening his eyes. At least it was making him happy.

Though when he looked at Sherlock again, who still stood silently, his eyes closed, he didn't really look that happy at all.

“No, Lestrade,” Sherlock was saying into his phone, all the while rolling his eyes at John, “don't arrest him yet. We need to know where – I know –” He pulled the phone away from his ear for a moment. John could hear Greg’s voice on the other side, incomprehensible, loud.

“Do you always talk to him like that on the phone?” John asked, amused.

“Not only on the phone, though it's a bit easier to do this way,” Sherlock said, and then put the phone back in place. “Use your brains,” he said flatly, then seemed to be mouthing something to himself John couldn't read, before he said: “We need to know where he's keeping the bodies … That's not actually a crime, Lestrade, and I didn't think you had such delicate sensibilities after all the things we've –” He pulled the phone away again. “Out of self-preservation I apparently delete sometimes how annoying he is,” he told John, darkly, and John thought of a sniper for a moment, and of I want you to tell Lestrade, and couldn't help the quiver of a nervous smile passing over his lips. Sherlock started talking again: “For God's sake, just do as I say,” before hanging up, and John could so easily imagine what Greg would look like, now, staring at the phone, partly annoyed, partly resigned, and partly amused. Allowing Sherlock to do this, because it went two ways – Greg knew how much he needed Sherlock, and he also knew how much Sherlock needed this.

John realised he was still smiling to himself a little, a strange half-smile full of many things.

“It's a an urban legend,” Sherlock said suddenly, after a silence of at least an hour, during which John had very hesitantly gone forward into the disturbing online world of necrophilia and the people who practiced it. Sherlock had ignored all of his oh fucks, his I'm going to be sick s and his remind me why you're not doing this yourselves.

“What is?” John said, as he winced at the swiftness and enthusiasm of an acceptance e-mail he'd got from a forum he was trying to join and for which he'd had to write a very nauseating motivation e-mail.

“People passing on mould from corpses via necrophilia. It's a story that pops up now and then. You know, person gets rash, goes to doctor, finds out partner has been shagging dead people. Though
that's not how it works, of course.”

John turned to look at him. “Since when do you pay attention to stories?”

“I am very inclined to stories,” Sherlock said, almost defensively.


“Right, because you really enjoy the development of fictional tension, and you certainly don't try to undermine it at every turn just to show off that you see through it,” John said and turned back to the laptop, continuing a response to a thread on the forum with a wince, “and you're certainly very good at willing suspension of disbelief.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes at his light irony. “Good stories don't require a suspension of disbelief.”

“I really don't know if that's true,” John said mildly, and then he looked up. “Wait, what is going on?”

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow.

“You're talking to me about the nature of fiction, while there might be a necrophiliac or eater of dead bodies taking out corpses from a hospital morgue and there might still be murder involved and Jane Smithson might be in mortal danger if there is.”

“The solution is getting nearer. PJ is working on the tapes. You're using your inexhaustible magical internet powers to get us some backstory. Lestrade is protecting Jane Smithson. His idiots are analysing the death threats, not that that will help. We know where Hodgins is. And I –” his voice dropped dramatically, “am thinking.”

“And talking to me.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, and resumed pacing. “I'm always talking to you,” he said, as though that explained anything at all, and he sounded reluctant, as though he would rather be saying something else.

–

“So what about the urban legend?” John remembered suddenly after another long while in which Sherlock hadn't said anything, contradicting I'm always talking to you in a way that felt a bit strange, as though he had been expecting a reaction, maybe, though John really couldn't tell.

“Nothing. Not important,” Sherlock said, sounding tense, from where he was now sitting on the table, tapping his foot in a steady rhythm that John hadn't even tried to get him to stop, cross-legged like a thin, agitated Buddha, amidst the remains of dinners and experiments and things between the two and, also, still, some of the newspapers that screamed out his return, old news by now, normality restored, where is he now, you are a miracle, will they rekindle their romance. It seemed like a long time ago, already; time behaving strangely again, after the frozen chunk of immobility of the past two years, now a rush, splashes, things flowing by at high speed.

John looked at him, puzzled again. “Then why –”

Sherlock looked him dead in the eye, face bland.

“You're making it extremely hard for me to function, John.”
John felt his eyebrows climbing across his forehead out of their own account. “What?”

“How are you doing it?” Sherlock said, sharply, and suddenly surged forward, sliding off the table and moving across the living room with surprising speed; he stooped down in front of John and dropped his hands on his lap, clicking the laptop shut with more force than the innocent machine deserved. He turned the pale lights of his eyes on John's face, searching for something.

“How are you hiding from me what you want to say?” Sherlock snapped, his eyes flicking over John's face and then stilling, boring into his eyes with an intensity that became so hard to bear after only a couple of seconds that John's eyes closed involuntarily.

“I'm not –” he said, raising his voice with confusion and surprise, as he forced his eyes, the traitors, open again. Sherlock's teeth were working at his mouth, as though words were gathering at his lips and he was trying hard to keep them in.

“How are you being so normal?” Sherlock pressed, the words slipping out of his tense mouth with a momentum, as though they'd had to fight to get through; he leaned in further, bringing with him the confusion of the increased pressure of his tight gaze and the increased wonder of his body, unsettling, but also something that quickened the beat of John's blood until he could feel it in his head, throbs of different things – unease, surprise, want, anger.

“I have no clue what you're on about, you tosser,” John snapped, allowing the easiest one – anger – to step in.

In a twist of reality that really shouldn't have existed, Sherlock threw him the try harder look.

“Stop – being – normal,” he said and his jaw was squared with the extent to which he was clenching his teeth, biting down on something, only letting the words slip out like small shots, separated from each other, as though he was trying to isolate meaning, to stop things from touching each other.

“Stop it,” John bit, harshly.

And Sherlock retreated, reeled back, as though it had been a physical slap.

And then, incongruously, impossibly, he came back with the strength of a boomerang, and latched his mouth onto John's with a bruising force, sending the laptop sliding off John's lap, fingers twisting into the neck seam of John's t-shirt, pushing down on his windpipe with so much force it hurt. He pulled back before John could respond, one way or another.

“What the fuck has got into you?” John gasped, dazed, and yanked Sherlock's hand away from his neck.

Sherlock's face was still a blank canvas, tense, drawn. “You have to tell me,” he said, and his voice sounded more desperate than it should, coupled with the pale nothing of his expression.

“Tell you what?”

“Where you went that night, what you did, what you're going to do, you, don't hold out until this case is over, John, I can't do it with you here like this, you're – I can't focus, I can't read you, I can't deduce it, I can't,” Sherlock said, rapidly, mouth pinkened and surprised, as though it hadn't seen the kiss coming, either.

John blinked at him a couple of times in what he was sure was a very stupid way. That Sherlock
didn't comment on it spoke volumes. He had snapped his mouth shut again, cutting off the string of words that had been falling out, and was now biting down on his lips as though trying to lock them.

“...” he said, then had such an overwhelming moment of oh that he fell silent again. Oh, of course. Sherlock, seeing through emotions hiding themselves in each other, but never why. And it was a bit new, the clarity of this realisation that Sherlock didn't always see, that there was a screen between him and what had happened this time, and that that screen had to do exactly with what was the problem: the intangibility of emotion, the unpredictability of sentiment, which, though he'd never admit it, he'd never been able to catalogue in a systematic way. The volatility of it, from both sides of an equation he couldn't balance; John and himself. And it had been stupid – yes, stupid, idiot, idiot, idiot – for John to assume that Sherlock would be able to tell, would be able to see that it is completely, utterly worth it, you fool had happened, because how could he, really? How could he, in the dark light of I thought I was all right? His throat tightened at the idea that Sherlock had heard him going out, and had had no clue where he was going, and wouldn't have been sure that he was coming back. It was terrible to think about.

“If you're going to leave permanently I'd prefer it if you did it now,“ Sherlock said, tone so even the content of his words seemed like they had fallen into a wrong scene, had been mis-translated, mis-quoted; and the politeness of it, so intrinsically not Sherlock, so obviously rehearsed.

He needed to be punched. So, Greg flickering into his consciousness for a split second, those are usually the times when he's most vulnerable himself, John did. His right hook was less powerful than it would have been with the momentum of leaning back and standing up, but his fist still connected with Sherlock's jaw in a satisfying loud snap of skin on skin and bone creaking underneath and pain blooming between them. Sherlock's face was forced sidewards, and he didn't quite fall over, though he staggered backwards before John's other hand, the one not curled in on itself with the pain of the punch, caught him and pulled him back in. “I am not leaving, Sherlock,” John said heatedly, forcing Sherlock's surprised eyes to lock onto his, as the long fingers came to clutch at his jaw, “and if you ever, ever say that to me again, after all that you've done, I swear to God I – I will shoot you with my own gun.” And he was surprised at the sincerity of it, so wrong, so right. Language stretching around them, pushing at the membranes of their skins.

And apparently that was the right thing to say, because Sherlock's face folded open like a letter under the growing redness of the punch underneath his fingers, and as his eyes slipped shut there was such a bloom of relief, of overpowering, singular relief washing over his face, that John felt the tension in his own face slipping in sympathy.

“Right. Right, Sherlock, we... We had a fight,” John said, and then amended: “Okay, no, we didn't. We have fights all the time, and this wasn't one. We had a something. I don't – I don't really know what, but...” He reached in and squeezed Sherlock's shoulders. “Did you really think I'd be running away from this not even ten days after I asked you to do this with me?”

Sherlock opened his eyes. “I didn't know,” he said quietly, and once more, there was the distaste for himself, the simmering anger at his helplessness at – this, whatever it was, at seeing things through that distorting mirror. Admitting that he didn't know; John knew by now how terrible that was for him, losing track of the threads that pulled at his fingertips until he touched the core of something, getting lost in the tangle of himself and John.

“I went to Mary's,” he said, talking around the surprisingly huge chunk of tenderness lodged in his throat, because those questions still needed answering. Sherlock's eyes snapped to his. “I admit I wanted to talk to her. I was...” He forced himself to keep the eye contact as Sherlock narrowed his eyes slightly. “I was a bit confused.” Sherlock was watching him intently. “But I didn't end up going in. It was... I dunno, I realised that I... want... to go through this with you, okay?” He had the urge to
pull his hands from Sherlock and pass them over his face, and fought it, because there were two languages at play here, and what he was saying, falteringly, needed the support of his body.

Sherlock fell forward slowly, folding to his knees, like gravity was dropping by to say hello in a very gentle acquaintance, until his head was pressing into John's chest, a warm weight, an anchor.

They sat for a long moment in the strange, slightly awkward embrace. Sherlock's breathing warmed the fabric of his light summer shirt.

“We need to find a way to talk, Sherlock,” John said, wondering at it all.

Sherlock pressed his face further into John. “Evidently we do, if you consider hitting me the best way to get your point across,” he said, and John laughed a little at that.

“You shouldn't – wait so long before asking me if something's going on,” he said, a bit hesitantly, beating down a nervous giggle at the idea of giving Sherlock relationship advice – because, well, that was what was going to have to happen, now that they were actually in a relationship. Or trying to be, because what were their lives, honestly.

“You shouldn't go away,” Sherlock's quiet response came, and it was like an anchor dropping into John's stomach, and oh, how he wanted to take Sherlock's face in his hands and look at him and say I never will again, never. I will never, ever leave this flat without you, if you stay here forever then so will I but reality caught up with him, a rush of salty realness over the sweetness of fantasy. He was done with making promises about forever he couldn't ever be sure he would keep – and Sherlock was not the audience for that, anyway, as non-romantic, as sober as he was. It would only feel like a lie.

“Sometimes I will,” he therefore said. “I'm sorry I didn't tell you where I was going. I should have. But you know I sometimes need a little time to get a grip on things.” Sherlock let out a small huff of agreement against his shirt; yes, you can be worryingly slow sometimes. “Getting out of here is something that works for me sometimes. It doesn't mean I'm... not coming back. I'm never leaving, okay? I've always come back, haven't I?”

Sherlock offered no real response but the tightening of his fingers in John's shirt. Maybe he was thinking about how long it had taken him to come back.

“But when I do go away for a bit and you're not sure what it means, you can – just ask me,” John continued. He waited for a bit, not sure how Sherlock would respond to the suggestion of him asking John anything at all that wasn't just a disguised attempt at showing off.

“Yes,” Sherlock mumbled, “yes.”

“It'll be fine,” John said after a beat, a repeat from what had happened in the shower.

Sherlock, meeting him halfway, said: “An inane platitude. How dull.” And by the way he angled his face so his nose could press into John's chest, John knew that he had him back.

And to prove it, Sherlock said, muffled: “Let's go tail Hodgins.”

His phone chimed, the cheerful tune of an alarm, not the buzz of a text, as he was following Sherlock's long, distinct shape, his shadow even longer than he was in the rapidly failing light of the sinking sun; falling into their roles easily, leader and follower, Sherlock sauntering around, surprisingly convincing as a casual tourist, even with his incongruous coat on such a sultry evening.
(at least he wasn't wearing his scarf) and John his shadow. Sherlock didn't often ask him to double, and John suspected that maybe there was an aspect to it of getting himself under control again, out from under the close presence of John, and well, that was okay if he needed it. It was dusk, the still, fluttering end of another warm day, a bit more feverish than the previous ones – a storm was brewing somewhere, and there was a small hush of expectancy hanging over the warm streets of London.

He worked his phone out of his pocket, not losing sight of Sherlock's stretchedness, his presence, walking between the pools of light streaming from the street lights flickering into life; Sherlock's there-ness, which he appreciated for so many different reasons, but then he read on his screen: Anniversary of Giles' death and he did lose sight then, for a moment that was enough to lead to another moment of holy fuck where did he go because Sherlock was good at disappearing, as life had taught both of them.

But he found him again, true to form, true to life, as Sherlock stopped behind the pillars of one of the neo-gothical buildings Hodgins apparently had the pleasure to pass every single day and examined them with a touristy interest as their target walked past him. And as if he felt the disconnect of John, he was suddenly looking at him, incongruously, out of sync, but too far away to actually read any expression on his face in the gathering darkness. But he was sure it spelled stay with me, John, you idiot. And he could conform to it; he actually just had, in their living room, and he could do it again, had done it so many times already, but now; a bit of no mixed in with a lot of yes.

Right now: yes. The no didn't have a right, not now, at least.

So he did follow Sherlock all the way there, until Hodgins went through the normal door of an entirely normal flat, in a normal side of London, and Sherlock sent him a text: No, not normal. SH and he couldn't really focus on anything else for a second apart from Sherlock's disorienting mind-reading ability that surfaced at unexpected times and was therefore all the more unsettling.

But then there it was: anniversary of Giles' death. He gave himself a mental kick for programming the alarm to only go off at the end of the day; why?

If you say so. Look, I'm sorry, but I might need to go somewhere.

Sherlock's response was:

Right now?
SH

He flinched a bit; he could imagine the scowl down to the smallest detail.

Yes. Sorry. Bit of an emergency.

And there was a too-long stretch of silence, but when his phone pinged, it said

What does this mean, John?
SH

And he smiled, the nugget of love in his chest trembling so hard he had to push his hand against it.

It means a friend needs me right now. I'll probably be home when you get back.
If I'm not, just text me.
The response was swift:

*Go.*

*SH*

And he did this, just because he felt he needed to, this time, maybe it wouldn't be necessary the next time, but it was all happening a bit fast. So that he sent

*Are you okay with this*

without the question mark, without the actual uncertainty, was more there because of what they were now: lovers? partners? figuring things out-persons? than because of any real doubt, because Sherlock didn't often do things without being sure, except when – and he felt his stomach twisting at this – it was getting him off (*Was this okay?*; *Good?*; and of course *I thought I was all right*, small things shining through under the now faltering cover of *wasting valuable time*, where he had still been able to hide).

And that Sherlock responded to this text of redundancy – *Obviously. SH* – spoke just as many volumes; upholding the connection between them. John allowed himself a smile.

The text he sent Bill was many different things at once; cluttered-up guilt and empathy and sadness and more guilt folded into the clean lines of the mechanical curl of technological lettering.

*Hey, bastard. If you need anyone to hit or to swear at or to get extremely plastered with tonight, I'm offering up myself.*

*J*

And Bill's response was soberingly quick:

*Sounds like a better idea than any of the ones I've had so far*

so all he could really say to Sherlock was

*Yep, needed elsewhere, can you manage?*

and received a swift

*Of course I can.*

*SH*

in response, and he grinned at the tangibility of the raised eyebrows, the *really, John?*

He had a pinch of uncertainty over the

*Be careful.*

but sent it, because there were times when stating the obvious was necessary, even to Sherlock.

–
Dont want to be here anymore

Bill sent him, and then, quickly

At my flat I mean not intending
to off myself

and again, swiftly

That would be conforming to
expectations too much

John felt a breath slip out of him at it, and he supposed it could be taken in different ways, but he hoped it meant that Bill was still somewhat all right.

Pub?
J

he fired back, beating an agitated way over the street, trying not to think too much about leaving Sherlock alone.

Not sure if Im up to that	onight

And his worlds were colliding with a bit too much speed, the compartments that he'd been trying to hold were folding into each other, but there was nothing to it, because the pressure of life was as uncaring as it was, and he could do nothing but try to hold himself in its push.

My new flat? 221B
Baker St. I'll be there in
ten twenty mins or so.
J

When he did arrive, Bill was already standing by the door, illuminated by the trickly light of the street lamps, shoulders dunked, hands deep in the pockets of his trousers.

Bill didn't usually do hellos. John said to him, instead: “You're lucky I bought beer a couple of days ago.”

Bill smiled grimly, uncoiled a little, and pulled his hands from his pockets as though he was going to do something with them. “Yes, I am an extremely lucky man with lots of things to be grateful for in my unbelievably well-filled and satisfying life,” he said, and he showed his teeth in a smile of glass. John sent him a grimace that said I'm sorry in a way that Bill was much more receptive to than if he'd actually said the words.

John unlocked the door. Mrs. Hudson was dusting off the frame of one of the pictures in the hallway.

“Oh, Mrs. Hudson,” John said, “this is Bill. Bill, this is Mrs. Hudson, our landlady.”

“Oh, hello,” she chirped, looking a bit dotty in her apron.

Bill shook her hand with a forced, very insincere smile. She looked between them a bit curiously, before John said, slightly awkwardly: “Well, talk to you later, Mrs. Hudson,” and led the way up the stairs.
Upstairs, he looked over the war zone of the living room; cleaning up, already an extremely rare occurrence in 221B, was completely forgotten during casework.

But it was Bill, so that didn't really matter. “I'm sure you can tell how our flat reflects the state of my life,” John said, in a flat, pale attempt at humour.

“You should see my place,” Bill said, too gently for him.

“Sit down,” John urged him, and Bill went over to the sofa and sat in it, pushing John's laptop out of the way, which was still lying where it had slipped off his lap when Sherlock had sprung that kiss of – of wills, basically, and of disguises, on him.

As John opened the fridge and tried to feel around for the cans of beer he remembered buying, before Sherlock had brought in some nicely rotting flesh to look at the levels of putrescine at different points in decomposition (at least he'd put them into air-tight containers), Bill said, too lightly: “The illustrious Sherlock not in, then?”

“No,” he called back, wincing and holding his breath as he had to reach into the fridge a bit deeper, “we're, um, we're on a case. Well, he is, really.”

Bill said nothing until John was sitting next to him and he had slowly swallowed a big gulp from the beer can. “So are you two finally shagging?” he then said. His voice was harsh. Now that John took a look at him, he looked a bit drunk, already.

John felt something failing inside him, and if he wasn't a doctor he might have thought it was his heart. “I –” he began, and could have gone on to don't know what you mean, but then that was silly, because Bill had been there, for some of the different times that if only there was a way iddoeverythingdifferently I'd kiss him until we have no breath anymore had happened. He fell silent instead.

Bill rolled his eyes. “Just answer the question.”

And when did this abyss open up between them; deeper than the one he felt with Ian, nowadays, or with Sharon, because with them there had been bridges left intact, still.

Bill took another gulp of beer, and then his face seemed to soften, which was so out of character it was a bit frightening, and for a moment he looked as though he had a reason to be sorry. “John,” he said, “I've never told you what happened on the night Giles died.”

John licked his lips. “Car accident, right?” he said, tensely.

Bill pressed the beer can against the side of his face, shielding part of it off. “Yes. You know I was in the car with him.”

John nodded, though Bill wasn't looking at him. What was happening, exactly? What was this feeling of losing control, again?

“I never told you... I never told any of you, that –” He abruptly removed the beer can, and John was staring at him, and there was the shock of sudden eye contact. Bill's brown eyes were shiny with tears, and John had never, ever seen that before. It had always been Bill that had made him cry. “– that I caused the accident.” He drew in a shuddering, wet breath. “He lost control of the wheel because I had just told him that I was in love with him.”

In the long silence that followed, Bill used the seam of his sleeve to wipe away the tears that were shiveringly dripping from the lashes of his right eye – his left eye remained dark and dry.
“I'm so sorry,” John said; gasped, because there was no air left in him, really – and he used the words, this time, because his face was doing enough already to carry its part, and it didn't seem like it could be enough, ever, at all.

“So you see,” Bill said, and incongruously, impossibly, grinned, even as an escaped tear painted a shiny line on his cheek, feeling its way over his stubble and rolling into the corner of his mouth, “I have a bit of an extremely unhealthy, psychologically unsound, fucked up personal investment in you shagging Sherlock.”

“Yes,” John said immediately, the words falling over each other, “yes, we are. We are – shagging. We're – together. I can't – I didn't – Bill.”

“Good,” Bill hummed, and pressed his eyes closed, triggering a new tear that followed the path shaped by the previous one.

John didn't know what to do. At all.

“Because the – the thing is,” Bill eventually continued, eyes still closed, breath hitching with suppressed crying, “I'm not actually – sure that he didn't die because he was – happy. He actually... looked at me just before the crash. I – I dream about that l-look.” He sobbed, now, the sound ripping from his throat with some violence, and his large hand cracked the beer can. For a couple of long, faltering moments of time curling back on itself, he was incapable of speech, and accepted John's hand on his broad shoulder, though it must have felt like the last thing that could be of any use right now. After a while he regained a modicum of control over his breathing. “I can't say for sure,” he said, voice cracked, “that I didn't... make it up. But I think – I remember that he looked happy.”

John's hand tightened around his shoulder involuntarily. “But I will never,” his mouth twitched, its corner getting glazed by one tear after the other, gathering there, sometimes rolling past it to his chin, where they collected and dropped off, small spots of liquid grief on his trousers, “never know what he would have – said in response. Because I survived, and he – didn't.”

“God, Bill,” John said, and his voice genuinely sounded like it belonged to someone else. The seconds ticked away, congealed, thick.

“If you hadn't told him by now I think I might have done it for you,” Bill said, a bit calmer, hand coming up to lightly disturb the line of the tears. “Because I can't tell you how – furious –” and he bit down on the word, as though he wanted to keep it in, but it still slipped out like a hiss of hatred, “– it would have made me to see you, of all people, go back to living like that.” To slip back into the terrible easiness of it, of living with undeclared love. Of living with the illusion of more time, new possibilities, no need to do it now. Of living with I will one day instead of if only I had.

“You're right,” John said, and surprised himself by it; he could barely feel his mouth moving, his face felt numb.

There was a silence. “If only I'd waited a bit longer, if I'd just stopped myself, then – maybe –” Bill said, then scrunched up his face in what John could tell was a well-rehearsed motion, a movement of no, “but I can't – think about that, John, because I'm just another bloke, and no one gives a fuck, and I will never get what you got.” And that was so familiar, the if only, the impossible weight of it, the way it pulled, the way it sucked, the way it never changed, the way it never, ever helped, the way it was clear that it wasn't something to think about while being the only thing worth thinking about, that John almost felt himself twitching forward to touch Bill with more than just his hand; but Bill wasn't a hugger at all, and really neither was John, and he stopped himself.

“I don't know why I got what I got,” he said breathlessly, trying to convince his lungs to start working again.
“Neither do I,” Bill said, strangledly, and from the small shocks of his shoulder under his hand John could tell that he was crying in earnest now.

They sat for a long while, a very long while. Tears dripped onto Bill's trousers in a random, steady, heartbreaking pattern. He barely made any sound, though his breathing, laboured, hitching, sounded wet, and his shoulder trembled under John's hand. And then, after a while, he stilled; his was a deep, dark, grainy silence, attracting the dust particles in the flat, clogged, choked. John felt his eyes stinging.

Suddenly, Bill laughed, a deep, gruff, broken sound.

“Now what is this shit,” he said, voice dark and deep like earth, “grown men crying like teenagers. Bring us more beer, John, so we can save this monster of an evening.”

And John removed himself from the sofa, pulling back bit by bit, and got to his feet, unsteadily. “Right,” he said, and then did.

And was there anything to be saved? There was a deep silence between them, punctuated by the distant rumbles of the storm approaching, but it wasn't wrong, and eventually Bill mentioned, sighing with mock-annoyance, that there was a terrible movie on tonight Ian would like. And apparently John could read between his lines sometimes, maybe now far better than ever before, and switched it on, and allowed the biting humour of Bill's improved dialogue to pierce through the haze of shock and painful, stinging, misplaced guilt curled around him, and at one point where they were both laughing, silently reconstructing the snapped defenses of themselves under the sheen of that, he realised with an arresting lucidity that Bill was his friend, and that there was still some truth in the world.

Outside, the rain was falling, whipping the streets into penance for their hubris, driving away the gathered up clumps of springtime warmth on the pavement; and the thunder made the glass in the windows in 221B Baker Street tremble until John opened them, and brought Sherlock's music things into the safety of the kitchen, but otherwise allowed the weather to come and play inside, feeling the spray of rain all the way to where they were sitting. They could use a bit of new air.

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And so when Sherlock came home, soaked, well past midnight, trudging up the stairs as though he were carrying a lot of weight, John was waiting for him in the doorway, and allowed him to come in, and then pulled him into such a tight hug that Sherlock made a small oofing sound.

“I love you,” John said into the spot where the wet collar of his coat was open, revealing the barest sliver of shiny, slippery skin, “I love you.” Language, uncomfortable, jittery, changing, inadequate, leaping, blooming across the chasm of this moment.

“I –” Sherlock said, sounding surprised, and John pulled at him until they were kissing and his hair was between Sherlock's damp fingers and there was some truth in the world and then when they broke apart Sherlock slid the sharp rain-cooled curve of his nose against the line where John's forehead became his hair, his breath coming hot and fast from his pliant, storm-dampened lips, and it was the same and it was different, because it was them.

They actually went to bed together, and Sherlock even allowed John with a grimace and a choice comment on infantilism in relationships (reduced gloriously to silence, though, when John graciously offered to discuss his mother issues) to towel out his hair, and when they slid together Sherlock accepted John's face into the crook of his neck, and his arms were long and warm and he felt like such a focused, warm presence, a collection of sharp, alert life, that John said it again, I love you, not
out loud, but mouthed against the skin of Sherlock's neck, where the blood played.

Sherlock still heard, of course. “You,” he whispered; the smile was audible.

And that he was gone when John awoke in the middle of the night was more than okay, because it was what he had expected; Sherlock didn't sleep during cases, and he was a lunatic who couldn't shut things out when they pressed at him, but that he had shared the long, tumbling moment of John's falling asleep against him without comment said so many things, so many things unsaid that trickled slowly into his dream, hard to make out, as if translated from afar, but still so there, that John curled his arms around himself under the covers, and didn't even feel alone.
The Fabric of Life

Chapter Summary

The fabric of life rearranges itself around the re-emergence of Sherlock.

CHAPTER 13

Sherlock was forcing a plate of toast into PJ's unwilling hands when John came downstairs.

“Eat it,” he was saying, sounding cross, “you haven't had anything in two days.” The boy huffed in distaste, staring him down in silence. John had a bit of a private smile at that; it was more than just a little like the way Sherlock usually reacted when John tried to get him to eat.

“I don’t blame him,” John said, gently, to announce his presence, “you've incinerated that toast.”

PJ's eyes flickered to his from beneath the dark cap of his hoodie; his eyes were blank, but the thin face was relaxed. “Morning,” John said, unnecessarily, but it went unanswered.

“Well, we can't all be extremely prolific cooks,” Sherlock said lightly, not taking his eyes from the scruffy homeless boy at their table.

John suppressed his laugh. “Let me,” he said, and picked up new slices of bread to pop into the toaster. “Any luck with the tapes, then?” he finally said, when neither Sherlock nor PJ spoke for a moment that was a bit too long for a comfortable silence.

“'course,” he heard, and it was the first word he'd heard PJ say. His voice was young, and obviously still deciding whether it would be fully breaking anytime soon, but clear and defiant. “No one can keep no secrets from me.”

“Any,” Sherlock said.

After a beat PJ said, voice dripping with sarcasm: “Any can keep no secrets from me.”

John looked over his shoulder and saw the way PJ was smiling at Sherlock in an obvious challenge.

“I can see why you two get along,” he said, to no one in particular; Sherlock glanced over at him and John was slightly surprised to see the smile playing around his mouth, as though mangled grammar wasn't an extremely serious business that Sherlock used to get quite worked up over in a way that often left John clutching his sides as he tried to suppress helpless laughter as Sherlock raved at him, increasingly intense. (He would never forget the time he'd tried to argue that surely the solar system mattered more than grammar, only to get an utterly incredible, almost foam-at-the-mouth thirty-minute-long lecture about the intricacies of abstract thinking and mental categorisation and the deep, transcendent importance of using the right pronouns in constructing in and out groups and mental representations of group dynamics and how people were just too stupid to commit themselves to clean language and therefore thinking and evidently that had so much more impact on their daily reality than vague specks of light circling them in the nighttime – it was something that had, in the past years, always painfully bobbed to the surface of his consciousness whenever he heard someone saying something that Sherlock would have given a snappy correction to; and it had been a tentative clue into the way Sherlock tried to handle language and why that sometimes failed, how its
slipperiness and flexibility often confounded him, and why he tried to rope it into patterns that it
didn't always follow.)

“Tell him,” Sherlock said with something that sounded like pride.

PJ looked at John blankly. “Tape’s been spliced. Depth job.” John blinked at him, and PJ rolled his
eyes in another mannerism that could have been Sherlock’s. “‘Digital switchin’ of codes to paste
different stretches of film over each other without a digital break. Invisible – only there at the deep
code level, innit?” He made a clicking noise with his tongue. “s fuckin’ difficult to find the splice.
Took me almost a day.”

It didn't really mean anything to John, but he tried to look impressed, anyway. The toast popped up;
he slid it onto a plate and even took the time to locate the butter in the fridge, scraping nobs on the
toast that melted softly against the hot bread. He offered one of the slices to Sherlock, who took it
with long fingers and without comment, apart from a slight raising of his eyebrows. PJ accepted the
plate this time, silent and looking slightly long-suffering in a way that was odd for such a young man.
Sherlock flashed John a look that was surprisingly soft.

They watched as PJ took a small bite from the toast, before Sherlock told John: “He's going to need a
little more time to recover the overlaid film; it should still be there. But now we already know it's
someone who either is involved in the filming industry on a professional technical level or who has a
professional mixing system at their disposal. You can't do this just on any editing program on a
laptop. And they'd have to have had access to the security desk at the morgue.” He frowned. “It
doesn't narrow it down hugely, but it's definitely something. So we need to –”

“Wait,” John said, a shadow of something stirring in his memory, “that reminds me of...”

And he stood thinking for a moment, trying to catch the detail that had stirred to life at Sherlock's
words. He went into the living room and retrieved his laptop from the couch, where it was still
dutifully sitting in the spot that Bill had pushed it to the evening before, before he'd told John how
Giles had died.

Shaking that from him for the time being, John sat down with the laptop in the couch; Sherlock came
to hover over him, looking blankly expectant, and almost absent-mindedly eating his toast, while PJ
nibbled on his in the kitchen, not moving.

“Which was it...” he muttered to himself, looking at the links of the sites he'd been following on
necrophilia since the case had started. He selected the members-only forum he'd had to make up a
gruesome story for in order to be accepted. “One of the members, here, he's got...” He fell silent for a
bit, cycling through some of the threads until he came upon the one he remembered, favourite
(erotic) zombie movie?

“Look,” he said to Sherlock, who dropped down next to him and looked where John's finger
pointed.

“This bloke –” John squinted at the screenname, “what is it... ghengisluver29... He's talking about
remixing movies on request, here. Professional editing quality. And here. Look at his signature.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “Now also taking paid requests for the Intimate Circle films. What's that
supposed to be?”

“It's...” John pulled a face. “This forum has a rating system. Users rank each other's comments, and
they get starred and de-starred, and so on... When I had fifteen highly-rated comments, a new part of
the forum was unlocked.”
Sherlock was watching him. “You put work into this,” he said, sounding pleased.

John turned to look him in the eye. “I always put work into something when you tell me to,” he responded, and after a beat the corner of Sherlock's mouth lifted in that small half-smile that was one of the most genuine he had.

“Not that I exactly had fun doing it, this time,” he said, turning back to the laptop, and navigated to the more restricted forum area. “But worth it, apparently.” He clicked a thread named *Intimate Circle*. “It doesn't say what it is. The real action is probably a lot more restricted than fifteen starred posts. But this is the, I dunno, the hopefuls post, I suppose.” Sherlock leaned closer to him, reading over the posts quickly as John scrolled down. “It's like an audition of sorts. First in a line of a lot. They introduce themselves and get approved by the others to move up in the forum. Final stage is, I gather, admission to the Intimate Circle. Apparently they meet in real life.”

“Ah. Get-togethers of necrophiliacs. I can imagine they do more than have a cup of tea and talk about their favourite zombie movies over biscuits.”

John grimaced. “Right.”

Sherlock was silent. “So this...” He narrowed his eyes in distaste. “*ghenghisluver29* is filming the encounters. And he supposedly has access to professional film editing technology.”

They looked at each other. “PJ,” Sherlock said, eyes not leaving John's face, excitement aglitter in them again, “is there any way to trace this account to a real person?”

PJ appeared next to them silently. “Can't say,” he said, sounding bored. “Lemme have a look.” He stole the laptop from John's lap with a practiced stealth and curled up with it in the chair opposite them.

Sherlock gave a low, warm hum, and he brushed his long fingers over John's neck, squeezing the muscle there.

—

“Hodgins is our man,” Sherlock told his phone and, by extension, Greg. “But you have to wait with bringing him in until we know if he's the person who changed the tape recordings … What do you mean, *why?* Honestly, Lestrade, you … No, you wouldn't.” He sighed dramatically. “*Because,* Lestrade, if he's *not* the person who changed the tapes, he won't tell you a thing about what happened in that morgue, and he'll figure out a way to let the rest know that … Basic psychology. Even you must have learned about that in your training, Lestrade … Stop swearing at me.” His eyes flicked to John's and he flashed him an unexpected smile that gave John a sudden rush of warmth in his belly – obviously he was just playing at being annoyed, this time. “Hodgins is young and nervous and probably a new member of the Intimate Circle,” he then said, in his *good grief you are as intelligent as an amoeba* voice, and John could hear how he was just talking over Greg's voice on the other side, “he'll be fiercely loyal to the top dogs. Won't tell you a single thing. Now, I think he's not the tape remixer. Too... twitchy for that. The tape remixer is probably one of the core members. Proud of that, *and* of the films he's making. Wouldn't advertise in the non-restricted area of the forum otherwise … The forum I had John – look, Lestrade, that's not important … Of course I can … I said, stop swearing.” He rolled his eyes. “If we can arrest the film man, he'll talk … Because he's *proud.*” He removed the phone from his ear for a couple of seconds, then put it back. “For God's sake, Lestrade, because his username is *ghenghisluver* … We'll find him.” And he hung up.

John quirked an eyebrow at him from across the living room. Sherlock shrugged and went into the kitchen. PJ was typing on John's laptop so quickly John was afraid he'd break the key board.
He received a text from Greg:

*Punch him for me, will you? Wanted to say before he hung up that for some stupid reason Jane Smithson didn't tell us that she has a crazy stalker. Death threats might be coming from him.*

*Greg*

He tapped back

*Unrelated, then? J*

He could feel the amused resignation in Greg's next text.

*Maybe. Ask Sherlock. Greg*

Sherlock said: “It's unrelated, but it's still murder,” with such a finality John forgot to ask more.

—

“'kay,” PJ said, voice uninflected. “Got 'im.”

They turned to look at him.

“Her,” he corrected.

“*Her?” Sherlock asked, practically running over the PJ's chair.*

“What did you do?” John asked him.

“Hacked the account,” PJ said, and rolled his eyes in a way that clearly said *below my capabilities.* Once more John was reminded of Sherlock. “She ain't careful. Keeps it connected to a commentin' account on a women's blog that's tracked by facebook.” He squinted. “Janet... Nowak.”

“A woman,” Sherlock said, seemingly involuntarily.

“Strange?” John asked him.

Sherlock considered, then shrugged. “I guess not.”

“You just didn't expect it.” Sherlock answered his small gibe with a curl of his lips, then allowed it to slip into a genuine smile.

“Okay, let's get Lestrade to pull some of his weight, then,” he said, sounding pleased, and entered Greg's number on his phone with a quick, routinised movement of fingers. “And he should get Jane Smithson to come in, too,” he said, before schooling his expression into the vague exasperation he used for talking to Greg.

—

Janet Nowak was a slight, pug-nosed, forty-two-year old woman who looked quite unconcerned about being brought in for questioning.
Greg said: “Look, John, you can’t be there for the interview.” He looked at Sherlock for a split second, who was observing Nowak silently through the one-way-mirrored glass of the interview room. “Sherlock can. Public pardon and all. There’s a –” he shifted and looked unsure whether to laugh or scoff, “official position for him now.”

“I’m absolutely not honoured,” Sherlock said, flatly, still facing the window, “and disgusted that the bureaucracy of this country likes to roll over like a dog.”

“That’s all right,” John said.

Greg’s mouth twitched. “You can watch, though, if you’re silent,” he then said, under his breath, and gave John a meaningful look before saying at the top of his voice: “All right, let’s do this. Sherlock?”

Sherlock looked at John, quirked a smile, and said, “With pleasure, D. I. Lestrade.”

Nowak gave in easily. “There’s nothing wrong with loving dead people,” she bit at Sherlock immediately, as soon as he asked her sweetly how she’d describe her marital status.

He smiled at her, a small, sharp smile. “The law disagrees,” he said, easily.

“The law is made by a bunch of idiots.”

Sherlock looked like he was going to agree. Greg cut in. “You’ve seriously disrespected mourning families who were still to bury a loved one,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “They never even knew. Nothing you will say can convince me that it's worse to have a sex life with corpses than with unwilling living people.”

“You're quite proud of your... inclination. It's a lifestyle,” Sherlock said, face focused, leaning over the table, chin on his fingertips. “It... defines you. It's political for you. That's why you don't get along with everyone in the Intimate Circle, isn't it?”

She looked surprised for a moment, then said: “They're all cowards.”

“Why do you put up with them?”

She was going to say something, but Greg cut in: “Tell us where Adam Smithson's body is.”

Sherlock looked at him, annoyed, but Greg ignored him.

She huffed. “Stupid idea, that was. We're not dumb, you know. We select people who die normally. Who only need one autopsy if any. Smithson was someone else's idea. Had a bit of a crush on him, I think.”

“Hodgins,” Sherlock said simply.

She looked for a second as though she was going to deny it, and then didn’t. “Yes. They can all go to jail with me,” she said fiercely.

“So,” Sherlock said, steepling his fingers, “you... eroticise them. Put them in positions. Fuck them, as well as you can.” He looked interested. “In the morgue?”

“Sometimes,” she said, unblushing. “We always return them if we don’t. I don’t know why I bother with splicing the videos, really.” She curled her lip. “No one gives a fuck. We don’t damage them; we mean them no harm. No one ever finds out. One of the security guards is in on it.”
“Yes, of course he is,” Sherlock said vaguely.

“But this time the corpse was to get another autopsy. Suspected murder case,” Greg took over, “and
the post-mortem sexual activity would be noted, obviously, so Hodgins panicked.”

“Yes,” she said derisively. “He only told me that he'd taken the body after it was already too late.”

“Too late?"

She laughed, a dark sound that had John's stomach coiling even as it filtered through the sound
system. “He's a bit of a nutter, Hodgins. He was hysterical. Had gone crazy. Cut it open and
whatnot. Don't know what he wanted from that. He was always a bit... eager.” She scowled. “I
agreed to splice the video of him taking Smithson. But obviously there would be a break, because,
well, he was gone, wasn't he?”

“Where is the body now?” Greg demanded.

She smiled grimly. “He told me he'd destroyed it. He's a bit of a mad scientist. Keeps acid in his
basement for that kind of thing. I know he likes to take limbs home whenever he can.”

“All right,” Greg said, looking slightly queasy, and stood up. “This statement will help your case.”
Sherlock also got up, slowly, still intent on Nowak.

“Why do you put up with them?” he asked, again, as Greg was turning around.

She looked at him, lip curling. “Well, Mr. Holmes, when you choose a peculiar way of living, it's not
guaranteed that the people you might find willing to share it are necessarily good or even likeable.
Few people are so lucky.”

“Come on, Sherlock,” Greg said, motioning.

Sherlock stood for another moment, and he turned his head; it almost seemed to John as though he
was looking for John's eyes to catch, but then he remembered that Sherlock's side of the glass was a
mirror.

–

Hodgins was arrested on his way to the station, having been indecisive about running for just a bit
too long. The makeshift lab in his basement was quite horrifying, Greg told John later. He did appear
to enjoy the fleshy relationship with corpses in a bit more of a literal way. Sherlock was grinning
like a loon when he came back from visiting it – and John told him to never, ever describe it to him.
He frowned and told John he was missing out on so much excitement in his life, but complied
otherwise.

After that, it was just a murder case, and not even that difficult. Jane Smithson's stalker was brought
in, and he was a mess of man who confessed to killing Adam Smithson in the first twenty minutes of
the interview, though Greg wasn't actually pressing him for anything other than the death threats. It
had been an accident, in a sense; he'd followed Smithson and his new girlfriend to the ski resort,
furious on Jane's behalf in a strange twisted sense of responsibility and identity, and after a violent
shouting and pushing match on one of the black pistes, obscured by heavy snowfall, Smithson had
fallen in an unfortunate way, had a heart attack, and had slid down the piste to be discovered by
skiers down the mountain as soon as the weather cleared. Manslaughter, not murder.

Smithson's death threats had been coming from the stalker, who had, despite not intending to follow
them through, got it in his head that having him fearing for his life would help Jane somehow.
Jane Smithson’s had been coming from Smithson’s new girlfriend, who thought she had planned the murder.

D.I. Davis, Greg told John later, shaking his head, was getting a divorce; but he hadn't known that Hodgins' proclivities extended far beyond having an affair with a married man. “Don’t see him having a carefree shag again anytime soon,” Greg said wryly, hiding only a part of his secret amusement, knocking back a gulp of beer.

A clusterfuck of sentiment if there ever had been any.

And that was that, and Sherlock pressed his nose to John's temple in the cab and even trailed his lips over his ear, breath short and hot. “Brilliant,” he chuckled, and John wasn’t sure exactly what he was referring to, though he could guess.

John dropped into sofa, and was reaching for the remote to catch an episode of QI before the left-over endorphins from solving the case would disappear, making Sherlock so irritating to watch it with that he'd rather skip the whole experience.

But then Sherlock said, would-be casually: “Shower?” And there was no mistaking the look on his face, a question lined with want.

“Will you let me –” John said, angling his face up into the spray of the water, then had to swallow the moan coming up from his throat as Sherlock pressed himself to his back, still mostly dry, a long, smooth stretch of skin only broken by the slight roughness from the scars and – oh – the already eager jut of his cock against John's back. His hands came around, catching a bit on the wetness of John's skin, and he splayed them, fingers open, long, wide, on the spot where John's ribs melted into his stomach, as though trying to cradle all of him in his palms. John leaned back into the embrace.

“You're extraordinary,” Sherlock said, low in the steady rush of water around them.

“And you're avoiding the question,” John said, trying to steady his voice, trying not to sound pushy, though he wanted Sherlock to say yes, oh, God, he needed him to say yes. “Will you... let me?”

Sherlock was silent for a heart-stoppingly long moment.

“I don't –” he said, and then a strange tremor shook him against John. “John, I don't know what... You don't know –”

John turned around inside his arms. They needed to be face-to-face for this. Sherlock looked down on him, water dripping from his lashes, hair still mostly dry, some of it sticking to his forehead in small damp curls.

“Then tell me,” John said, and tried not to sound pleading.

There was that thing again, that Sherlock did with his mouth – tense, closed, his teeth worrying at his lips from the inside. Exactly like when he came, that one time that he’d allowed John to see it, when he’d been that little more on display, the time he’d been a bit drunk.

He reached up to put his palm to Sherlock’s mouth. “Let it go,” he said, and well, if he sounded pleading that was the way it was. Sherlock opened his lips against his hand and he kissed it, open-mouthed.
“Don't know if I can,” he mumbled against the hand, eyes closed, a small barrier.

“What could happen?” John said, trying to lighten the mood, and then it was an honest question; what could happen, what could happen that hadn't already – he didn't know, he needed to know, he'd never felt this out of his depth naked next to another person and that included his first time in the back of a car in 1994.

“You,” Sherlock mumbled.

“I could happen?”

“You could... leave.” And he bit at the hand, lightly, as though wanting to keep it in place.

“I told you I'd shoot you if you said that to me again,” John reminded him, quite seriously, and Sherlock's mouth trembled against his fingers in what might have been a silent laugh. He opened his eyes again.

“I'm not...” He looked extremely pained. “I'm not exactly normal, John,” he said.

John stared at him for a moment. “And that would be new to me in what way?” he finally forced out, letting his hand fall from Sherlock's face.

Sherlock threw him a softened version of the try harder look. It didn't feel like letting him down, this time. But as the look slipped, his face passed into something that looked a lot like fear.

“John,” he breathed, looking more uncomfortable now that John could see his mouth, “I've never – never wanted this before. It's... overwhelming. The sensations. Hard to take in.”

John studied him for a moment. He could only imagine what it was like to be Sherlock; to have everything lunge at you with the sharpness of knives, of every single detail lighting up, demanding attention until it was catalogued. He hadn't really thought about it before – but in that way, it made sense that Sherlock was wary of being touched sexually. That was an overwhelming of the senses by nature, and well, for him it would probably be... unpleasant in its intensity, maybe? Unpredictable, certainly?

“I've never even –” Sherlock continued, then shut his eyes again for a second, “even come with someone else, before this.”


“ Took care of it on my own,” Sherlock said, grimacing slightly, “afterwards.”

John reeled a bit from that. He'd known, already, that no one had got him off directly, but that he'd never even got himself off, during, that was – that was something else entirely.

“Why?” He hadn't intended the shock to be quite so obvious, but he couldn't help it.

Sherlock’s eyes flickered around for a moment, then refocused on him. “Never wanted anyone enough to – and I know what I'm like when – I –” and there it was again, that mess of language that didn't listen to him at times when he didn't have things figured out, trying to get it into the shape that he wanted, and failing, and choking on it.

Under the hot stream of water John tried to catch the light glancing off off Sherlock and reflect it back to him. He reached up again and put his hands on the honesty of Sherlock's naked shoulders,
melting upwards into that beautiful stretch of graceful neck.

“What are you like?” he said, mouth dry.

Sherlock's eyes fluttered closed. His mouth was tight again. “Intense,” he finally said, the word a puff of focused breath.

“God, Sherlock,” John said, “would I be here if I didn't like your brand of intensity?”

Sherlock's eyes opened, and he looked a bit wild, eyes flashing, hair standing upright, half-wet. “I really don't know what I'll do if it's you, John,” he said, voice trembling with the effort of keeping it contained.

John thought that over, trying to ignore the feeling of the inside of his body being a churning ocean.

“We can - agree on, I dunno, a safeword, or something. When it gets too - too much, in any way, for either of us, we can just... opt out.”

Sherlock seemed to be considering. Then the lines of his body relaxed a little, and John only then noticed how extremely tensed up he'd been standing there, like a coil ready to spring. “Okay,” he said, and the word spanned so much of reality that John had to close his eyes against it for a bit, against the light shining through. “What word?”

“Something we're not likely to say.” He thought for a second. “Toast.”

Sherlock pulled a face. “Yes, quite satisfyingly unsexy, John.” And it was good to hear that he'd found his voice again.

They stood there for a long moment, John not sure if this meant that he should take the initiative, and Sherlock a silent expanse of body, his lips slightly parted, now.

“How do you –” John said, just as Sherlock said: “You can –” and then they were laughing for a bit, thrown back to the first time John had stepped foot in Baker Street and they'd chosen the same beats to speak and the same to be silent; a moment that had, it seemed right then, inevitably led them here, in their shared shower, their shared bubble, their shared voices, their bodies about to be shared.

“How do you want it?” John pushed forward, when the laughter calmed.

Sherlock looked him with a look so searing John recoiled from the heat of it a bit, and then pressed back into his space precisely because of the same heat.

“Just touch me,” he said, sounding a bit pained, and it wasn't quite a question but there was the smallest suggestion of a question mark nevertheless, and that made John's eyes slip closed and a moan collect in his mouth, already.

He took his time. Sherlock was like a knot to be unteased, a chain to be unlinked. He reached up to touch his hair, ran his fingers through it, massaged the scalp, the slight tangles and wet coils of the curls molding to his fingers. Sherlock's eyes slipped closed and he made a small sound that almost sounded like a purr. John kept it up for a bit, watching the tightness of Sherlock's body giving bit by bit. Then he slipped his fingers down, wandering over the temple, drawing invisible lines over the brows, slipping over the closed eyes, stirring the quivering lashes. He dragged his fingertips down the nose, that was a bit of a bridge between them nowadays, pressed to John in hello goodbye I'll be back are you okay. And then, the mouth – that incredible curve of Sherlock's lips, knowledge gathering at the cupid's bow, danger lying in the corners, quivering in anticipation and a bit of fear now, wet, full, darkened; his mouth, where words competed with each other, language tried to sort itself out, tried to get from his neurons to his tongue intact and not always surviving the journey; that
dark, curious curve that had been spun so tight when John had seen him come, trying to keep the control, teeth closing the words in, and that now was, impossibly, miraculously relaxed, accepting the tip of John's index finger as he slipped it in gently, and he made a small, involuntary sound as Sherlock sucked on his finger lightly. Sherlock opened his eyes at it, clouded, focused.

He splayed his fingers on Sherlock's jaw, holding his face in his hands, and then brought them together in a kiss, tugging Sherlock down and himself up – still slow, still as undeliberate as he could manage with his cock hardening against his belly, and there was only the pliancy of Sherlock's mouth, the way he moved his tongue against John's in slow strokes of languidness, and then the sound in his throat, that could have been any word but wasn't, as he repeated it as they broke apart: you.

John made a strangled sound. He slid his hands down from Sherlock's jaw, following the pale planes of his neck, dragging his fingertips over them gently. Sherlock's pulse was pounding against him, and it wasn't clinical at all to realise that it was seriously elevated, maybe even a bit more than was healthy after nothing but kissing – but then he knew Sherlock's pulse (except for that time when he hadn't, and that was remote now, in this private sphere so full of both of them), and knew that it was always at least a little elevated, even his body outwitting the mediocrity of biological process.

He touched the collarbones, pushing his hands out to follow them, sliding over the slight bumps and ridges, pushing experimentally into the skin right above them, where Sherlock was soft under the protection of bone. He wanted to do his arms; trail down them, follow every leaping muscle to its connecting point, and then the wrists, blood beating, the palms, lines that meant nothing to him except that they were Sherlock's, and then fingers, trailing against each other – but Sherlock swallowed noticeably, throat shifting, and said, voice a rumble that immediately thrilled down to John's cock: “John.”

And John took a look at his erection – it had wilted a bit during their conversation, but it was back already; flushed and hard and needing, glistening in the spray of the shower and probably with pre-cum. So he filed it away, for later (because they could, they could, time had been restored to them in the most breathtaking curveball the universe had ever thrown his way) and instead worked further downward. He dragged his palms over the pale planes of Sherlock's chest, worked a thumb over a nipple, noted that that didn't prompt any particular response, and then spent breathless moments exploring the scars with less urgency than he had last time; the rough choppiness of the large rib scar shivering away under his fingers, the strangeness of the small, almost perfectly round scar on his abdomen straining against his fingers, Sherlock's hip pushing forward against his fingernail tracing the criss-crossing of smallish scars that only stopped mid-thigh.

“What are these?” he couldn't help but ask.

“Knife,” Sherlock said, voice tight maybe for more reason than one, and John didn't push. Not the time.

And then he felt the heaving of Sherlock's breathing increase as his hands dipped lower, over his stomach, fingertips feeling out a path across the slightly-too-sharp curve of his hips, the beginning of the long lengths of his thighs, and right in the middle of that – the nest of dark curls and his cock, jutting out of it desperately, darker than any other part of him.

“Good?” John asked, needing a sign at this point.

“Bit not good,” Sherlock said, breathlessly, voice grainy, and then, a miracle: “and a lot good.” John felt a laugh igniting at the replaying of his own words – Sherlock borrowing his language, this time, and then his brain felt like it was imploding for a bit, a star collapsing, as the implication of that hit him.
“You're so much,” he brought out involuntarily, resting his head against Sherlock's chest, needing to compose himself already, and fuck, he'd barely been touched.

Sherlock huffed, as if to say evidently, but his breath was coming in short heaves.

“Right,” John breathed to himself, and then before he had any thought that was even remotely like I'm ready for this he decided he would simply never be ready for this, never, and took Sherlock's cock into his hand, surprising himself in the process.

Sherlock's hand came to scrabble at his shoulder in a vice grip. John tore his eyes from the sight of the cock in his hand to look up at Sherlock's face, and it was there again – eyes open, whites, mouth snapped shut, locked.

“It's okay,” he said.

Sherlock's face slackened as the seconds flowed away. “Inane – platitude,” he panted, “how dull.”

And John smiled, and took that as his cue to continue the exploration. He allowed his fingers to wander from the base of Sherlock's cock to its tip, getting used to this just as Sherlock was – it wasn't the first cock he'd held in his hand in a sexual way apart from his own (the scrambles, the scratches, the hisses in dark military tents) but it was the first he'd actually watched this closely, trying to gauge its reaction, and wanting entirely, fully, surprisingly, to have it twitch and flush and throb under his hand. Sherlock made a small sound that sounded good. So he closed his fist around him, and pulled upwards gently in a smooth stroke, pulling the foreskin over the glans. He brought his hand back to the base, revealing the head, dark and wet and glistening.

Sherlock made a muffled sound. John repeated the stroke, a bit faster, and then set a slow rhythm, trying to gather information from Sherlock's responses.

“Ah, si, ijo de –” Sherlock was saying, then stopped himself with a tangible jerk, and brought the hand that wasn't grabbing at John's shoulder to grasp at the shower curtain, fist ing into it.

“You can talk,” John breathed, as he changed his position a bit, pressed his side against Sherlock's so he could move his wrist in a more natural bent. He slipped his other arm around Sherlock's back, and felt Sherlock immediately moving some of his weight into the half-embrace, curling his arm around John's neck.

John stroked Sherlock's cock in slow strokes, keeping his eyes on the part of Sherlock's face he could see, keeping track of his response. His lips were opening and closing, opening and closing. Tense, relax, tense, relax. Lock, unlock. His fingers on John's shoulder tightened and loosened with every stroke, biting into him with a sting of slight pain every time.

“You are –” he gasped as John sped up his pace, slipping his thumb over the slit at every stroke, something that prompted a small jerk forward into the circle of his fist every time. “John, you – you –”

“Tell me – how you need it,” John said, voice breaking.

“Faster,” Sherlock panted, leaning on him heavily, his hand now digging into John's shoulder painfully. John complied.

“You're so – amazing,” he heard himself saying, and it felt right, though he'd wanted Sherlock to be the one to talk; but maybe he had to meet him halfway, maybe it had to be a shared thing, a shared language –
So he said it, let the words come as they pleased: “So gorgeous, so amazing, Sherlock, I can't tell you how much – I want you to – fuck, Sherlock, God, you're so gorgeous,” and he couldn't believe the cloud of arousal in his head, muting everything except the roar of water and want, bringing the world down to Sherlock's cock in his hand and the sting of his fingers on his shoulder.

He felt Sherlock's body giving, bucking into the ring of his hand, and he said: “John, yes,” and John turned his head and moaned into his chest, then kissed it, licked it, dragged his tongue over every piece of skin he could reach in his position.

And then, Sherlock said, panting: “You're – carbon, you're – skin,” and then, like a waterfall, it dropped from his lips: “Epidermis, keratin, stratum – corneum,” and John felt his consciousness tripping over itself, the universe doubling back on itself, because fuck oh my god fuck; Sherlock descended into incomprehensibility, stretches of syllable and moan, and then, “keratinocyte, John, John, ah, John – you,” and he was coming, drawing out the word, you, so strange, so marvellous, in shivers of breath, spurting come between John's fingers onto himself, body trembling against John's side – John looked up to see his face, but it was thrown back, he could only see the straining lines of neck and the beginning of his mouth, flushed. John watched him in a complete, senseless daze that was only broken when the hand that was fisted in the shower curtain succeeded in pulling it down.

Sherlock collapsed against him just as the curtain fluttered against their legs, his other arm coming around John, his body heavy and boneless.

John couldn't quite hold him, and they slid to the wet shower floor, that really wasn't designed to hold two adult men, so their legs entwined awkwardly, though John kept Sherlock inside the circle of his arms.

“You – you broke it,” John said, breathless, as he felt the heaving weight of Sherlock against him going stiller.

And then, he couldn't help it: “That was – oh my God, Sherlock, I've never heard anything like it. You are so – so brilliant, I can't –” he had to cut himself off, because the words that were trying to get out were completely jumbled, tripping over each other.

Sherlock pressed his face into his shoulder. It took John a long moment to realise that he was shivering, and not exactly in a way that indicated pleasure.

“Hey,” he said, worry gripping at his gut, “are you all right? Sherlock?” He used the hand not trapped between the shower wall and Sherlock to brush away the wet curls on the side of Sherlock's face.

A long moment passed. The shower spray blew over them happily, between hot and cold. The light hummed around them. Finally, Sherlock nodded against John's neck. His chest unclenched.

“Good,” he whispered, and then added: “Can you look at me?”

With an effort, Sherlock lifted himself up on one arm, and looked him in the eye. He looked – John wasn't sure if language could do. There was a high flush on his cheekbones, his mouth was slack, the lips darkened, and his eyes were still unfocused, though they were fixing slowly on John – he looked utterly debauched. John felt the urge to laugh, a nervous, ecstatic laugh, but he suppressed it, because this was a moment on which so much hinged – but it felt incredible that Sherlock looked like that just from a simple handjob in the shower. It felt like a new kind of privileged look into the heightened sensation that would be being Sherlock.

“How was that?” he asked, as soon as he had himself under control.
Sherlock appeared to be trying to form words, but what came out was a warbled sound that could have been anything, though he was quite sure for once it wasn't *Christ John, you know*.

“Good, then?” John said, and there was such happiness blooming in him it felt like his skin was going to come undone; his body felt too small to contain it, it couldn't fit inside this shower, it couldn't fit inside John Watson, London couldn't hold it, this orbit spilling out over its own boundaries.

“Yes,” Sherlock finally managed, and he closed his eyes, head falling against John again. John gave him until his legs really started to hurt, and his own arousal was becoming a bit uncomfortable.

But before he could say anything, Sherlock said, voice sounding like something liquid being poured: “It's like – like the music.”

“Hmm?”

“Taking... Taking over,” he said. And John remembered what he meant, how he'd been once before in this shower, different, with his violin – manic then, not relaxed, but apparently in a same kind of higher sphere. It was *incredible* that it had been him that had brought Sherlock to this state. John closed his eyes for a bit, the grin finding its way across his mouth probably extremely stupid. Good thing Sherlock couldn't see it. And that Sherlock was pretty much knocked out.

Still, his body. “Sherlock?” he asked. “Could we – move just a bit, I have to –”

And Sherlock had apparently returned to himself a bit, because he brought himself up, wincing as he sat back on his knees, and cleared a space for John to get up in. They looked at each other, both on their knees, and John surged forward to catch his mouth in a kiss, because he looked worried, and that wouldn't do, he had to remain inside that bubble of boneless relaxation, that zone where finally, things were quiet for a bit, things worked for a bit, that place where his body spoke for him, and *God*, the things he had *said*.

Sherlock kissed him back slowly, tangling a hand in his hair.

They broke apart. Sherlock said, sitting back on his heels, lines of his torso slack, his posture relaxed: “John – I don't know if I can –”

“Oh fuck, don't worry,” John said, knowing immediately what he meant. “Don't worry.” Sherlock looked at him with a bright spark of gratitude in his eye.

“I'll just –” John said, and then looked at Sherlock in front of him, the vision of him, the light shining through. “Could you... Can you kiss me for a bit?” he asked, and Sherlock didn't respond except by the only response that mattered; he leaned into John and pressed his mouth to his, opening his lips with his tongue languidly.

Their position was a bit awkward, but John was so turned on it hardly seemed to matter; he quickly wanked himself, and it would have been embarrassing how little it took, but Sherlock was sliding his hands over his shoulders and neck, sighing into his mouth, making small sounds of encouragement, even a breathed *you* between the press of lips and tongue and the heat of his mouth.

“Fuck,” John gasped against his mouth as his orgasm washed over him, a feeling of utter, utter relief and pleasure, the feel of Sherlock's lips on his a point of focus in the wash of sensation rolling over him.
Sherlock licked at his lips as he recovered, small laps of such a gentleness that John felt a bit like crying.

“John, I think we have a problem,” Sherlock finally said, voice soft and deep, after long, stretched-out seconds so full of things they felt like they were going to burst.

“Really? What?” he mumbled.

“I don't know how I’m ever going to get to my feet again.”

John huffed a laugh. “Use your legs instead of your brains for once.”

“They don't appear to be functional anymore.” After a second, he added: “The legs, of course. My brain has survived.”

John chuckled at his gradual return to himself. “So you broke the shower, and I broke you. Sounds fair.”

Sherlock smiled at him, and his eyes were so unbearable in their lightness, and his mouth so incredible in its sincerity, that John felt like he had to close his eyes just to be able to live through this, and then couldn't, because the link between them was too strong to break, and he just looked back, and his mouth stretched into the most ridiculous grin he suspected he had ever worn.

John had had to half-pull Sherlock out of the shower, but they had managed to towel themselves off and had made it back into the living room, wrinkled from the water, and had just stumbled into Sherlock's bed without getting dressed.

Sherlock was a loose connection of skin and limbs and relaxation against him. That one orgasm had washed him out so completely that his eyes were already slipping closed when John gently tugged at his chin to turn his face up to John's.

“So, biology?” he asked.

Sherlock closed his eyes. “That... That happens. It's – I said I could be intense.”

John looked at the lines of his face, open, honest, no trace of any persona. And loved him. Utterly loved him.

He stopped the flood of questions rising inside him, his curiosity — *so what is it like for you, how does science factor into it at all, and why didn't you want me to see that? what were you afraid would happen? and how different was this, from the other times? from when you do it yourself? — because Sherlock was utterly spent against him, collapsed with lack of sleep and the lingering high of the case and, miraculously, the *first ever* orgasm he had ever gotten from another person. So he didn't voice any of his questions; they could wait – instead he said: “It was incredible.”

Sherlock laughed a breathy laugh.

“Not what people normally say.”

“What do people normally say?” John replied, smiling.

“Absolutely nothing,” Sherlock mumbled, snuggling into John, his voice relaxed, like a spill of velvet. “No one's ever seen that.”
And his body melted into John's so completely, so utterly, like they were one under the covers, that John hoped the universe would end tonight and this would be the last feeling he'd ever feel; Sherlock's hair drying against him, a bare stretch of lean thigh pressing into him, Sherlock's lips working next to his neck in a silent speech, warmth rolling off him, spots of heat in a small, private slice of cosmos.
CHAPTER 14

John was catapulted from sleep in the earthy darkness of deep night, with his heart trying to get up into his throat, and Sherlock yelling into his ear. His body was jerked to such abrupt awareness that he would have fallen out of bed with the shock of it if Sherlock's hands hadn't been like clamps on his body, his fingers digging into him – and he was shouting, shouting, shouting; no no no no puedo no Angel por favor NO POR FAVOR –

“Sherlock!” John yelled at him, pushing him away in a reflex that had a lot of war in it, as his muscles scrambled to attention, ready to leap into action.

And Sherlock went stiff as a board against his hands, then retreated; John couldn't see his face in the utter darkness of the bedroom, but his breath suddenly came as though released from a hold – short, panting heaves, and then, sobs, actual sobs that cut across the harshness of his breath –

“Oh my – God, what's wrong? What's wrong? Sherlock?” John said, panicky, things clicking into place inside his head as it scrabbled to awareness – he put out his arms to catch Sherlock in them, but he couldn't find him; the heat of the other body was moving away from him, the bed dipped as Sherlock rolled off it, and he was out of the room before John could catch up.

When John had hurriedly slipped on some pyjama trousers that were Sherlock's and had come to the bathroom door, that was only half closed, Sherlock was still heaving. He hovered outside, the shock wearing off, and now just aching with worry and not entirely sure what to do. He filled a glass of water and returned to the door, wincing at the continued sounds of Sherlock throwing up.

When Sherlock had gone quiet for more than forty seconds, he took the chance and gently knocked on the door, though it was open.

Sherlock made a sound that didn't sound like it would mean no. So John pushed open the door and slipped inside, aware that he could very well be crossing a lot of invisible lines with every step. Sherlock was still on his knees, bent over the loo, but as John watched he straightened up slightly and brought a trembling hand up to press the flush button.

“Are you okay?” John asked, his voice hoarse, and he stepped forward to trail a hand over Sherlock's head.

“Nightmare,” Sherlock breathed after a second, his voice a strange, horrible kind of quiet, and the redundancy of it alarmed John more than anything, because if it had been him that had said it, Sherlock would have rolled his eyes and said well, yes, evidently.

“Water?” he asked, his own mouth dry, and Sherlock turned to him slowly, slumped down against the loo, and took the offered glass – he had to take a moment to steady his hand before he could bring it to his lips, and even then he sloshed some of it onto himself as he drank, eyes closed. John's hand was still on his curls.
“Better?” John finally asked, as Sherlock let his head fall back against the toilet seat, the glass empty.

He did nothing for a moment. Then he shook his head. No. And very, very slowly, a tear seeped out from his closed right eyelid, that once it had taken the obstacle of his cheekbone slipped down his cheek quickly, and John had the crazy urge to cup his face to catch it before it fell away – this first tear he'd ever seen on Sherlock's face. There had been tears in his voice during the phone call, that phone call from nowhere, but John had never been sure he hadn't just made that up to carry a bit of weight in the months without gravity after Sherlock's jump; and anyway, seeing it like this was so new it hushed everything inside John for a second, as though his organs had forgotten how to work.

He wasn't sure how to proceed, because he was suddenly very aware that a lot of Sherlock had been undone in the past twelve hours; a lot of his defenses had been brought down, and it might have been too much, this, this sharing of a moment of pure, raw, unexpected vulnerability, him naked, crying, throwing up in the indifferent blandness of their bathroom.

John licked his lips. “Do you want me to –” he started to say, doubtfully.

And then thank God for Sherlock, because Sherlock was Sherlock and even now he knew. “No, stay,” he said, and the whisper was a bit broken, but John hadn't misheard, and Sherlock's hand came up to reach for him just as he opened his eyes, shockingly light and shiny like quicksilver, even more alien and beautiful and incomprehensible with tears swimming in them, and God, John got as close to him as he could, though the hug was completely illogical and badly-positioned against the cold porcelain of their loo.

Sherlock made a stifled sound into him, and it was another sob; the sound was suppressed, but his body didn't lie, not this time, and the naked chest heaved and trembled and shifted against John with his crying, contained on the inside.

“It's okay,” John said.

Sherlock got as far as a breathless “Inane plati–” before he couldn't hold it anymore, and his hands scrabbled at John's neck desperately as the heaving sounds of his crying forced their way out. John could feel his tears on his skin.

He held him, feeling wild, feeling helpless, feeling as though a world in which this happened wasn't allowed to exist, because Sherlock wasn't supposed to cry in the artificial light of bathrooms, Sherlock wasn't supposed to be forced out of his own language, Sherlock wasn't supposed to be woken up by pressing cuts of realness in the fiction of his dreams that were so strong that even he couldn't get them under control.

After a while, not very long at all, it abated, and Sherlock was breathing again, a living, shifting thing, and John couldn't believe it, he still couldn't in this moment.

He pulled back a bit; not enough to completely break the embrace, because no, no-that-was-yes, yes-I'm-here, but enough for them to be able to look at each other, and he said: “What happened?”

And it was a moment of infinite weight that even he felt, because the words spanned such a spectrum of reality that it was overwhelming, and he could feel Sherlock's mind working next to him, trying to work out an answer that could be true and that could change how things went from here.

“I was... abducted,” Sherlock finally said, and his voice sounded wet. He shifted against John, bringing up a hand to wipe at his face, to erase some of the traces of his anguish, and then, a bit more
like himself again: “This is... a bit uncomfortable, John, could we –”

And letting the moment go was a bit hard, but they both deserved something in all of this, and this was Sherlock's thing that he deserved; a bit of space, a bit of boundary that was his, that could fortify himself against forces that he couldn't always choose to lock out.

That Sherlock disappeared into his room and re-emerged wearing pants and an old t-shirt that didn't look like it could belong to him, shielding off the statements of his skin, and was gone for a while that was significantly longer than the putting on of the clothes would have taken was all right, because when he sat down next to John on the sofa he turned towards him to face him, and he took John's hand from where it was resting on his Sherlock's-pyjama-trouser-clad thigh and pulled it into his lap; a larger mirror of what he'd done in a cab in a moment that now felt like it had been ages ago and maybe in some ways even was.

“I thought,” he said, and it was almost him again, voice almost as smooth and deep again as it always was, but John was getting better at deciphering him, and he didn't miss the tremor, “that if I just let it be, it would fade away.” He sighed. “It took me a long time to accept that I am not different from anyone else in handling... trauma.”

John looked at him, swallowed under his gaze, that was urgent, troubled, frightened, maybe; he couldn't tell, he couldn't identify all of it.

“I couldn't delete it. It was – that was new. I couldn't even delete parts of it. It kept on... intruding. During the day, but mostly –” and he waved the hand that wasn't holding John's in a gesture that said, well, you know, “during the night. It got a bit better when you came back here. Less intense.”

John remembered what Mrs. Hudson had told him. She'd been right then, or at least partly, because where was his calming influence now?

“From what just happened,” Sherlock said, continuing in his familiar contemplative way, and the hand that wasn't holding John's positioned itself against his chin – one half of his usual pose, off-kilter without its other half, lop-sided, a bit strange. “I gather that my quite frankly unprecedented relaxation from our shower session broke some of the mental barriers I'd managed to set in place against the nightmares. No, don't be like that,” he suddenly added, almost harshly, and John realised his face must have shown some of the guilt that had forcefully sparked inside him, “you can't know how –” and here he faltered, apparently couldn't finish, couldn't say how or what it had been, but it was enough, for now, with language already having to fight so many battles in so many directions, and this wasn't quite a defeat, because John thought he understood at least a little.

John was glad he didn't have to speak. His throat felt like he'd tried to swallow a brick. Instead, he just squeezed Sherlock's hand.

There was a small silence, and Sherlock's eyes flickered around him and then on him, and John guessed that he was trying to assemble the parts of whatever it was he was going to say. “I was kidnapped,” he repeated. “Not even by Moriarty's people. I'd almost gotten all of them by then.” He laughed softly, a bitter, twisted chuckle. “But as you know, I had got involved in the cocaine trade to the extent that it was... a real cover, maybe a bit too real, in fact, definitely too real, not even a cover. So then Julian wasn't wrong anymore and I was actually in trouble for not paying off one of the shippings I'd received, and I was stupid enough to let myself be kidnapped, too preoccupied with Moriarty's men. Stupid.” He spat out the word, and it dripped with venom; at himself, always so much more cutting when directed at himself, it was the sharpest barb he could stick into himself, and John felt a surge of something painful. Sherlock closed his eyes for a second, then continued. “John,
you... you and I, we've gone through lots of things, but...” His eyes unfocused for a bit, as though he were seeing something John wasn't, and he shook his head as though trying to banish something from his mind.

John moved closer to him, body half-turned towards him, and pressed his leg into Sherlock's. His heart was hammering.

“I can take a lot,” Sherlock continued, and there was a tremor on the I that already said so much that John had to bite the inside of his cheek not to make a sound. “But there was someone... I was living with Julian only some of the time, because I didn't want to put him in too much danger. That didn't work, of course, though it's fixed now, that's something else, I'll tell you about that later —” and he chuckled darkly again, and John thought fuck, it's not about that, there's so much he hasn't told me, “but I was also sharing a room in a crack house with... His name was Angel. He was fourteen. Part-time homeless, part-time living with me; he couldn't afford it on his own, not with his addiction.” He pressed his eyes closed for a moment, lines wrinkling his brows, and when he opened them again they were a bit shiny once more, though it might have been the light, it might have been the shadows in 221B. “Complete and utter junky. He was such an accomplished thief he could actually afford coke now and then.” He huffed a small laugh. “He first approached me because he knew I was dealing. I didn't want to give him anything.” He looked at John for a long moment. “I know what it's like. I had my first hit of cocaine at sixteen. It was... surprising, but I couldn't do it. He was fourteen.” And it seemed like such an un-Sherlock-like thing to say, it seemed like something that would never have meant anything to him before; but this was it, really, this was what was different, a softness of thought, an awareness of what a body meant, a more exposed humanity, and it was so sobering that John felt his insides tightening. “But he – he interested me. Incredible mind for someone his age, especially someone as addicted as he was. He helped me out with a lot of problems I encountered trying to outsmart Moriarty's people.” He paused, hand coming up to tangle itself in his hair, pulling at it with obvious force. “PJ... PJ reminds me of him terribly.” His breath was liquid, and John recalled the awkwardness and the intensity with which Sherlock had tried to take care of PJ, and understood it a bit better, now, or maybe not, because who was he to understand any of it, really. Sherlock jerked forward, as though pushing himself: “But evidently the next dealer that came along sold him such dangerous, diluted rubbish that I still started sharing my shippings with him just to keep him from overdosing or dying from messed up chemicals, and I —” he drew in a sharp breath through his nose, “I told him I would help him after all of my own problems were over. And they were almost over.” He fell silent for another moment, and his eyes fixed on John's with even more of a focus. “I told him he'd have to meet you at one point,” he said, and his smile was wavering.

“You – you talked about me?” John said, almost involuntarily, hoarsely.

Sherlock had that involuntary, disbelieving chuckle again. “Evidently, John. Who else would I talk about?”

And then that was like a light shining between them, so bright, a point of begin in an expanding universe, because who else, and he would have thought it was his heart swelling to double its size inside his chest if he weren't a doctor.

“And all the while,” Sherlock said, a touch more quietly, “I reminded myself not to... not to care about him. Or about Julian. I was there because I'd made that mistake.”

John gulped. “Sherlock —” he croaked.

But Sherlock cut in, with a shadow of his usual speed: “I know, John. But it was a mistake in the terms of – of there. Of that.” He drew in a shuddering breath. “Sometimes it was hard to see it as
anything but,” he said. “Caring is not an advantage.” It sounded like a rehearsed line, and then he blinked, as though he was suddenly surprised at what he was saying. And then, horribly, his face hardened. “But evidently I couldn't do it. I missed – I missed – you – and I couldn't – I didn't – I didn't keep them at bay the way – I should have. I didn't – I wasn't – John –” and yes, or more accurately no, language dying in his mouth again, not enough this time, and John curled the hand that wasn’t stuck to Sherlock’s against his throat, fingers reaching into the ridge that ran up to his jaw, his ear, as if to help him get the words out. Sherlock's swallow was a movement underneath his hand, a twist of reality that shouldn't ever have existed.

“It's okay,” John said, though nothing was, inane-platitude-how-dull, he said it because he knew about language and how it really, honestly couldn't do it sometimes, how he couldn't do it for the longest while, either – the stuff you wanted to say, but didn't, say it now and he would have, really, he would have, not to Ella of course, but to Sherlock if he’d thought there was even the smallest chance of him hearing it, but he couldn’t, he tried and he couldn't, just like the tears hadn't come until Ian had punched him in the face so hard he'd had to wear shades to the clinic for two weeks, and that had been an unbelievable six months in, and underneath the mania of ohgodwhatamgoingtodonow there was a black hole that language had tried to fill and couldn't, because there was no gravity, no bottom, the bottom had fallen out of life, just like Sherlock, a jangling key in a coat pocket with a hole in it, and really, honestly, it was okay, even though nothing was.

Sherlock didn't even correct him, didn't even attempt something with shut up John you have no clue what you're talking about you idiot in it; his mouth was clenching and unclenching – locked, unlocked, locked, unlocked.

John left his hand where it was, pushing gently into his pulse, a reminder of both of their bodies, both of their lives.

“If you can't –” John began, and Sherlock pressed forward so suddenly into his hand that it was probably intentional that John, caught off his guard, choked him for a second as Sherlock pressed his mouth to John's in a breathless kiss. John jerked his hand away, and Sherlock made a small sound that could have meant a lot of things, none of which John could unravel.

And Sherlock spoke to his mouth, his nose nestled against the line of John's, as though that was the bridge he needed, and his pace was upped, and he seemed to forget about sentences, about breath, it was like a deduction in pitch and speed and tension, only running backwards, the narrative upended, not from the points of his fingers back into what had happened to someone else but from the points of someone else back into what had happened to him.

“It was easy to pick him off the streets, obviously, because he wasn't careful, because he was still only fourteen and they knew where we'd been living, and I hadn't been very careful about them, because I thought I could outwit them, and I could, but sometimes brute force works too, it was a mistake to forget that, and John do you remember when you told me I'd been using, I should have told you then, but I hadn't been, I hadn't been until then, they just knocked me out and shot me up with so much I was lucky for my history, because I think I would have overdosed if my tolerance hadn't been so high, I don't know if they meant to kill me but I survived, I tried but I still can't piece together how long I was out, can't have been that long with that amount of stimulant inside of me, and when I came to they had him, and they'd waited to torture him until I was conscious, and John he reminded me of you, when you jumped on Moriarty and you told me to run, and he just kept saying not to tell them what they wanted to know, but I would have, John, I would have, but I didn't know, I didn't know the man they thought I had sold the shipping to, and I didn't have the money, but of course they wouldn't believe me, my cover was too convincing, it had worked too well, and I hadn't known that could happen, and that was another mistake, so there was just nothing I could do,
nothing I could say, nothing I could offer them that they wanted, I lied and told them everything that I could think of that they might believe, I tried to break them by uncovering every secret they had, every betrayal between them, but they didn't care, they didn't believe it because I was so frantic, I was manic, I couldn't control myself, I was still high, it didn't work because obviously they were just out to get me at that point and I knew that but I couldn't stop trying, and they were breaking him down bit by bit, they were surprisingly inventive really, and he was only fourteen but he never cracked until near the end and they forced me to watch all of it, they shot me up with adrenalin after a while so I wouldn't manage to pass out, that I didn't die from the combination is still beyond me, I shouldn't have survived, later Julian told me it had taken over nine hours at least, I couldn't tell, and I thought I would die and I wanted to but Julian rescued me and I'd never hated him more, and it was too late for Angel, I don't know when exactly he died because it was so strangely gradual and John the things they did to him –”

And that was apparently the extent of where language could bring him and he closed his mouth over John's again, cutting himself off, and John honestly wasn't sure if the wetness on his cheeks was from his eyes or from Sherlock's, but it didn't really matter, anyway. And this universe, this cruel ball of space and time, it was all wrong, it literally hurt to think about, it was a mess of barbed wire in his chest; Sherlock, brought into exactly the same thing that he'd jumped off a fucking roof to avoid, and maybe even worse, now, having to watch, not having the option of offering up himself, not having any of the answers, which was unbearable for him in ways that had been even deepened now, and John suddenly understood the extent of his rage when Davis wouldn't let him into the case, because Sherlock had thrown himself at every case they'd had so far, even the most boring predictable ones, and he hadn't spotted the desperation there, the small hope to set something right, to find something of the answer, to save someone, but he saw some of it in hindsight, and he also understood, a bit, why Sherlock had drawn out of his grasp again and again and then had fallen into it again and again, as he must have told himself that it wasn't dangerous anymore, but then not believing it because how could he be sure, how could he be sure it wouldn't happen again; it had happened twice now, people he loved, targeted by his love, the big arrows of his love pointing them out to anyone who wanted to harm him. And he couldn't, he couldn't not, because he wasn't a machine, he was the most human human being John had ever known, and that his face was so close to John's right now was a miracle, all of him was a miracle, it was a miracle that he still existed, that he had existed in the first place and that he now existed again, and that he was sharing himself now, finally, after so many years of I didn't think you wanted me to and weeks of wavering, of wanting, of pulling back, of I thought I was all right.

Sherlock breathed puffs of warm, moist air with the taste of the inside of him in it into his mouth. “When I dream about it, sometimes he's himself, and sometimes he's you. I don't know which is worse,” he muttered.

“Don't leave me,” John said, irrationally, unplanned, slightly out of sync with the rhythm of reality, his lips not quite separated from Sherlock's.

Sherlock breathed a soundless laugh into him. “I've tried, John. I don't think I can.”

“Even if you find you can, don't,” he said, feeling dizzy, wondering if it was because Sherlock was feeding him his breath and oxygen had become something that didn't seem as important as it used to.

Sherlock moved his lips in a ghostly, fleeting impression of a kiss, and then, finally, pulled away from him; breathing again, air, breathing is boring, sure, but living had used to be boring too and now it didn't quite seem to be so anymore, not as much as it sometimes had been, because he had had the choice to slip away from it and had found that he couldn't and instead he had come back.
The moment Sherlock's eyes connected to John's again was strange and long, because he looked undone in a way that was only rivalled by the way he'd looked at John in the shower, and even then, not even then.

“You,” he said, clearly, and he squeezed John's hand so hard John felt it even though there was really no circulation left in his fingers to speak of.

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In the morning light Sherlock was Sherlock again.

John had been unwilling to go back to bed, though Sherlock told him to, and had eventually fallen asleep on the couch, the fading awareness of Sherlock standing silently by the window slipping from him as, relentlessly, sleep took him and offered him a brief respite from the weight between them.

When he awoke he wasn't quite sure where he was for a moment. Then, as the familiarity of 221B's ceiling presented itself to him, he realised there was a blanket on him and when he turned his head Sherlock was reading the newspaper in the chair opposite him, fully dressed, with his shoes on, even, his ankle resting on his knee in a faux-relaxed line of being-in-control.

As soon as John stirred, trying to get up out of the tangle of blanket and aching muscles, the top half of Sherlock's newspaper dropped down. The look on his face was smoothed out, mild, and if John hadn't still been lying on the couch he couldn't be sure he'd think the night before, in all of its aspects, had actually taken place.

There was a dry rustle as Sherlock folded the newspaper together and tossed it carelessly away, and then he was to his feet with the grace that was always going to be reserved entirely for a fully dressed Sherlock Holmes, the lines and folds of his expensive shirt and trousers sharp and confident, and he went to stand at the foot of the sofa, looking down on John.

He never spoke. His expression was neutral, smooth, his eyes bright and focused. And then he smiled, probably almost imperceptibly to any casual observer who wasn't John, a small, private smile, the tiny curl of the two corners of his mouth, and it was all the reassurance that all of it was real that John needed.

He turned around, lifted his coat off the hook, slipped into it with ease, and was down the stairs – and then he spoke, calling back an “I'm off to do the shopping!” to John, as though there couldn't have been both looks and words in the same instant between them.

And John, sitting up, muscles sighing – God, Watson, you're getting old – realised that Sherlock must have been waiting for him to wake up just to tell him that of all things he was going to the shops, and surely that meant that this was some kind of whacked-out alternate universe, but that Sherlock had waited to leave until he was conscious was a small thing to be grateful for, because an empty Baker Street upon waking would have felt like the wrong ending of an otherwise mind-blowing performance play. Though performance had had nothing to do with it, really, for once.

He was still in Sherlock's pyjama trousers and was quite loath to take them off – they flopped over his feet in a way that made him feel irrationally content and cozy – so he slipped into his robe and made himself some tea, some reassurance of the world.

Then, he texted Sherlock.
Do you even know where the supermarket is?

Sherlock’s response was quick and witty and longer than any other text that John had ever received from him.

The more pressing question, John, is whether you’ve ever contemplated the fact that there are more than fifty kinds of tea here and our lives have been sadly lacking in this fundamental variety till now. Just think of all of the life experiences that we have not yet had. We have been missing out on so much excitement. SH

John almost doubled over with the unexpected extent of the relief flowing up from his stomach into his chest, and he laughed into his mundane cup of every-day, boring, completely predictable black tea.

He nosed through the shopping bag, then raised an eyebrow at Sherlock, who was fiddling with one of his erlenmeyers and didn’t catch the look.

“You only bought tea.”

“Twelve different kinds,” Sherlock said and sounded pleased with himself.

John shook the bag and let his eye wander over the different brands and packets of tea bags. “Strawberry tea? Blueberry? Vanilla? Are you kidding, Sherlock?”

“You're not supposed to see which ones I've brought, stop looking at them,” Sherlock said, raising the blue liquid in his erlenmeyer to eye level.

“Why not?”

“Experiment,” he only said, giving the tube a jiggle so the viscous liquid coated the sides.

“What, you want to test me to see if I can distinguish vanilla tea from black tea? I can, you know, you don't need to experiment on me for that.”

“Don't be absurd, it's nothing nearly so crude.”

“So what do you suggest we eat now?”

“I was thinking Chinese,” Sherlock said, and threw John a small, sideways smile.

John smiled back, relishing the feel of warmth creeping through his chest. “Are you asking me out on a date?”
Sherlock huffed, adding a drop of something to the blue liquid with his pipette. “John, I know you're slow, but honestly. We've been going out on dates since the first day we met.”

Before they went out to dinner, he updated the blog for the first time since Sherlock's death.

The two years without Sherlock had run from volatile and uncaring to completely irrelevant, and nothing that had happened to him had triggered the desire in him to update the blog, except for the never-finished message of one more miracle, and that was too intimate to ever be shared like that – and then when the miracle had happened, incomprehensibly, there was a whole lot more of life to be had, a whole lot more of space to cross, too much to bother with cyberspace.

Now it seemed fitting. The previous night had felt like it had secured Sherlock's edges, had restored his solidity to him. He was real and he was here and John could touch him, now, could reach out and have more between his fingers than fog.

He tried to write up the whole necrophiliac ring case, because it was by far the most interesting one, but the words didn't quite allow themselves to be formed; he was rusty as a writer, his prose was terse, he annoyed himself with his laborious typing, and Sherlock came to loom over his shoulder far too often, exclaiming things like “John, a semi-colon is not a period! It is so much more!” and “Seriously, John, you can do better than Sherlock was like a man returned from the dead, obviously, surely. Don't be so vulgar.” So he finally gave up and saved the case notes for another time, and the message he ended up posting read: Still my best friend. Still crazy. Still the best man I've ever known. Off to get Chinese, now.

And he was surprised to see that comments had started pouring in already in the time it'd taken him to check and answer his e-mails, the years-old update notification system creaking back into work, dropping his entry into the inboxes of people known and unknown. Loads more people had apparently been following his blog when he hadn't been writing it than when he had been.

Most were a variety of Never doubted him for a second! or Have a good meal! Mrs. Hudson said: i HAVE CAKE IF YOU BOYS WANT SOME DESSERT AFTER! and John took a moment to explain to her about the Shift Lock key. Thank you dear, came her decidedly less insane-sounding reply. John smiled and reminded himself that they really needed to tell her about their changed relationship status – chances were that she'd try to smother them with cake to celebrate.

Sherlock’s response, when he came to pour over John's shoulder one final time, now warm and still a bit damp from a shower, was to stoop down and kiss the spot of skin behind John's ear, before trailing up his nose over the curly shell of it, his breath audible and warm, and nestling the tip of his nose against John's temple.

“How very sentimental, John,” he said, in a warm, deep shiver of voice.

Ian's text, that arrived half-way through their meal, as Sherlock was ranting about the Mercator projection and its implications for people's mental representation of world politics, and how stupid everyone was, prompted by the map of the world painted onto the wall of the restaurant, read:
Doctor sir, if you're available I think I could use a talking-to.
Ian

He frowned at his phone for a long moment. Sherlock noticed, and even left a sentence half hanging.

“What is it?” he said when John glanced at him.

“I'm not sure,” John said, but something in him pulled taut.

Are you okay? What happened?
J

And he wished that the clouded curl of the letters would reveal more, because what to make of Can you come

that wasn't just a meaningless panic?

The lack of punctuation and the fact that he didn't sign his name had John getting to his feet. Sherlock raised his eyebrows at him.

“Friend,” he said, typing, and then sending the *I'll be there in thirty mins.* J without looking at it, looking at Sherlock instead. He cleared his throat. “Ian – he – I met him at my grief counselling group.”

“Your grief counselling group,” Sherlock echoed and then he blinked, as though the meaning of the words only registered now, and John wanted to brush the sudden tightness around his mouth away with his fingers, but there were moments for everything and this one was for something else.

So he said: “Yeah,” and then, “I'm sorry, Sherlock, I have to go check on him. I'll see you back at home, all right?”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock said, waving his hand about as though it were all very obvious, but then he reached up as John was wiggling out of the small space between the wall and their table and closed his long fingers over John's wrist with some urgency, looking up at him with eyes that reflected the dim light of the restaurant. “Let me know when –” *you'll be coming home tonight,* John thought he picked up. Because even if he hadn't said anything, had allowed day to step in with its clarity and its comfort, the night was still there, possible traps, dangers that he might still be unable to control.

“Yeah,” John said. “Of course.”

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The London that flashed past him darkly, pockets of light, pockets of people, spills of brick and stretches of sky above them, distorted with the speed and glass of the taxi, seemed to him to thrum with tension, with danger, a very different kind than the one that usually drew him out into coils of thrill with Sherlock next to him, urging him on.

This was just the very real throb of fear under his fingers as he took his own pulse to distract himself,
and tried not to remember the way Ian had quirked his mouth in that way the last time he'd seen him – *I don't think I can love again, did you know that?* – and how John had done nothing, really, except talk about himself and what it felt like to have the pull of a black hole reversed in a sudden rush of life.

Chapter End Notes

Dansamillion on DA painted this lovely piece as a depiction of Sherlock's nightmares: Sketch 1
How was it, that a simple gravel path leading to a simple front door with a simple, straight-forward door bell waiting for a friendly fingertip managed to be ominous? John swallowed at the small subscript under the bell – Ellen & Ian. It was too dark, that piece of paper, threaded thin with time and London smog, and the names were smudged under the protective casing of plastic. It made John want to bring his fingers over them, trace them, restore them to fullness like a writer might.

And then he took a breath, two, three, before the seconds became knives, and he became uncomfortably aware that he was stalling in a situation that above all needed directness of approach. He realised that what was separating him from what was playing out on the other side of the door was nothing but his own fear; flimsy, fleeting. And he really had no right, he had been summoned here by unravelling threads of friendship, and he had to stitch them back together as well as he could, because obviously there was something in him that Ian needed, now, or he would have still been sitting with Sherlock, maybe wondering at the changes daylight wrought in the eyes of his partner, that were light and veiled and only so rarely unclouded, utterly unaware that Ian was reaching out for a talking-to from someone, from anyone.

Watson, you're a doctor, he chided himelf. And rang the bell. The sound was clear.

“Doctor sir,” Ian said as a greeting when he opened the door, and John felt himself stepping forward to grab him by the arms, just to reassure himself that this body in front of him wasn't a hallucination, and could only stop himself just in time, though he was halfway across the distance between them before he could abort the movement.

“Ian,” he said, the relief in his voice so palpable it was like a hot rock of congealed lava forcing its way upwards from his throat.

“Come on in,” Ian said tiredly, and he stepped aside, out of the pouring of light trickling onto him from the streetlamps and into the shadows of his hallway. John did and picked his way to the small, familiar living room through the dark. Ian didn't switch on the light until John was standing in the middle of the room; he must have been sitting there in the dark all evening, only the journeying glare of car lights breaking through the night in this house, rising and fading voices of passers-by, muted, incomprehensible in more ways than one.

“Thanks for coming,” Ian mumbled, still hovering in the doorway. John looked at him for a second in the assault of new light, felt a bit like Sherlock for all of the detail offering itself at him; uncombed unwashed hair, dark bruise-coloured bags under the eyes, lips chapped, clothes obviously been slept in, but otherwise, at first glance, okay.

“You know you don't have to thank me for that,” he said, and felt a bit choked up at the realisation that Ian apparently didn't have anyone else to send a Can you come to, no one closer to him in age, in world, no one less messed up than Bill and Sharon and himself, so wrapped up in their own, self-centred stories.

“Yeah, no, I do,” Ian said, and then gestured to the threadbare sofa. John sat down on it, remembered how the last time he was there they'd had quite a jolly get-together, drinking far too much until
Sharon had broken down and had had a bit of a hyperventilation fit. And then, much to Bill's outraged objections, John had staged a half-genuine, half-ironic breathing circle – just to break the tension – until Ian had, for his turn, been unable to breathe because of incredulous laughter. The memory felt like a knife, twisting in his gut.

“So, what's up?” John asked carefully, offering up so how are you, really, and please don't give me any crap, tell me about your nights, the hours lost between light gently, too gently maybe, so gently that Ian could choose to ignore it. He sat down – not on the sofa next to John, but on the scruffy carpet, cross-legged, looking even younger than he was. Keeping some distance, maybe. John noticed that the picture of Ellen that he remembered being on the coffee table was lying face down.

“I thought I might finally go ahead and commit suicide after all,” Ian said, fingering a thread coming loose from the carpet. Ian, going after things with words that were like straight lines, cutting across each other, clear, so stark, so explicit it hurt. His eyes swivelled around the room for a second, and then he looked John in the eye – a mixture of resignation and defiance. Pupils blown too wide. Something in his neck stirring; the heart, resisting this breaking nonsense, working even harder to collect itself under the rush of life and death and between.

John licked his lips, trying not to feel any of the things that were trying to get themselves be felt. Still not Sherlock by any stretch of the imagination, then – because at first glance okay was really suicidal and, fuck, what to do with that arrow of a word, that Ian had spoken to him, to all of them, already, following it up with a quest for a joke that wouldn't let itself be found, and finally just falling into just be around me for a bit? “All right. And you decided I could look on? Because of my experience in that department, maybe?” he said, trying to keep his voice from being too heavy. Ian had brought him here for a reason and going into a panic likely wasn't it.

Ian let out a small huff of breath that would have been a laugh in any situation that wasn't the one they found themselves in. “I decided you'd be the best placed person to stop me.”

“Yeah, because I'm really good at getting people to not kill themselves,” John replied, not missing a beat despite his heart missing several, trying hard – hard – not to think about, and then obviously thinking about, the outline of Sherlock on that rooftop, a smear of dark against the infuriating indifferent grey-white of the sky, the backdrop of clouds too bright and the distance too great, in every sense, to see his face – and then the phone call, waves of technology that bridged what their bodies couldn't, the tears that he had heard in it but could never be sure that he hadn't made up; and how stop it now hadn't worked, and how no hadn't worked, and how it didn't have a right anymore, now, how no had stopped being anything, had stopped doing anything justice. And then, of course, through the thud of his beginning concussion, Sherlock hazy and yet so clearly cut in a pool of himself, borders breached, life flowing out without a sense of direction, just following the cracks of the pavement, eyes as bright and glassy as the sky they stared up to. He couldn't let this happen again, he couldn't.

“You brought him back,” Ian said, voice a stretch of constructed detachment.

John leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs and his chin on his hands, closing his eyes against the explosion of the silence that followed. “I really didn't, Ian,” he finally said, quietly. “He brought himself back. I had nothing to do with it.” Not entirely true, maybe. Then again, entirely true. Truth was nothing if not flexible around this.

Ian pulled the thread from the rug with a sudden yank. “Your – love – brought him back,” he said through clenched teeth, and the words were like bites.
“Christ, Ian,” John said, involuntarily, fighting the desire to go sit with him on the carpet. “I can’t – I don’t...” He closed his eyes, trying to order the words, that had only been thoughts up till now, thoughts and feelings, warring, shy, jumping away. “I won’t say that it doesn’t feel like a miracle. It does.” All of Sherlock felt like a miracle, really. He swallowed. “But I didn’t bring him back to life.”

“Why does – why do you get your reward for loving him? For not letting go?” Ian said, and when he looked at John his eyes were bloodshot and wet and entirely too full of pupil.

The silence was like a cold film settling around them. “I don’t know,” John finally said, voice sticking to the roof of his mouth, unwilling to get out. It wouldn’t do to say any of the other things – I was actually letting go just before he came back, I was getting there or it’s not a reward, I’ve done nothing to deserve it or it’s just this thing that would have happened to someone, somewhere, once, in this universe built out of probability, and it just happened to be me, and that’s what I tell myself but it’s true that I don’t believe it when I turn around in the night and I happen upon his body, and it curls against me in his sleep, and his breath stirs my hair.

“It’s not fair,” Ian said, and he sounded so young, and so hurt, and so kicked at by life, that John slid off the couch and sat next to him on the ground, ignoring the warning twinge in his leg, resting his knee against Ian's shin.

“It's not,” John agreed, throat constricted. Nothing was, of course, and Sherlock would roll his eyes at their redundancy. Then again, maybe not. Maybe not anymore.

Ian was crying, though his breath was still fairly even; John hadn’t ever seen multiple tears slip from the same eye in the same moment and it was oddly mesmerising. Ian made no move to wipe them off his face.

“What did you take?” John asked him, gently.

“Four paracetamols.”

John blinked. Trying to commit suicide with paracetamols? “So not really trying at all, then.”

Ian chuckled wetly. “No. I had more, and some other drugs, and I had whisky waiting to wash it down, but I texted you instead.”

“I guess so,” Ian said, a bit flippantly, but that was okay, because it covered a lot of reality; John
remembered the times when he'd shown up to Greg's in the years that now seemed distant when he thought about them, as though they lay beyond some fogged-up window; knocking on Greg's door at crazy hours, half or fully drunk, or just as distressingly sober, and there had been a need he couldn't explain, a need he sometimes thought Sherlock must have had, too, to call him from that rooftop and say keep your eyes fixed on me – and that was it, really; please see me, please keep your eyes on me, let the weight of them remind me that I'm someone after all, please see me, really see me, and love me exactly for all of the things I am under your gaze.

So he looked at Ian. Ian looked back, his blue eyes streaking into the bruises under his eyes, water welling from them in one of the most peculiar things the human body did.

“You can't, Ian,” John said, gulping, letting the feeling take him, “don't you fucking kill yourself. You can't do that to me.” It was, for all intents and purposes, about the opposite of what he knew he should say, of what the very small chapter on suicide help in one of his medical textbooks that handled just a bit of general psychology had spelled out, but it was Ian, and Ian deserved honesty, his honesty, and so far that had always worked, and that's why he was here now. And God, how he felt it, this you can't, you just can't; he'd felt it when watching Sherlock, too, a press of self that was startling in its clarity, no no nononoyoucan'tdothisstopitnow, but there had been so much more space between him and Sherlock that was uncrossable, so many deceptions that he would only begin to see years after, and all the while his knee was touching Ian's shin, and there was warmth pressing from behind the fabric of his trousers, and if John reached out chances were Ian would let himself be caught. Can you come versus stay where you are. “Don't kill yourself,” he pressed, unable to stop the words from coming up.

Ian's face twitched. “Not today,” he said.

“Christ,” John said involuntarily, heart trembling.

And then Ian did bring his hands up to wipe at his face, leaving his cheeks shiny with smeared tears. And he laughed, a little, right, wrong. “This is why I texted you.”

“Why?” John's voice felt like sand.

“Sharon would just ask me not to do it. Bill would just punch me. You tell me not to because I can't do it to you. You selfish fuck. I might have needed that most of all, I think. Someone more selfish than I am.” He sounded more lucid than he had any right to; paracetamol rushing in his blood, whisky patiently waiting, salt pressing at his tear ducts.

“I can tell you all the things I want to, but if you wanted to kill yourself that wouldn't make any difference,” John said, a bit thickly, a bit fearful.

Ian shrugged, said nothing. Radiated some of the well, such is life in his direction. Such is life, such is death.

It felt like he had to say more. “Ian,” he said, treading carefully, “it's okay to still love her, you know.”

Ian fixed him with a bright look. The light of the living room bounced off everything in his face; his eyes, with their enlarged darkness, the tears on his cheeks, the small lining of water in his lashes. “Of course it's not okay. Yoghurt is okay. Or springtime. That's okay. It's not okay that she and I were talking about marriage and the next week she went to the doctor, long overdue, that was her, to get a lump checked out and four months later she was dead from fucking cancer. No, doctor sir, that's not
“Of course it isn't,” John said, holding his gaze. “But it's okay that you still love her, more than you think you could ever love anyone else.”

Ian's eyes slipped closed, triggering more of the weirdly fascinating overflow of different tears at the same time. “It's not okay,” he finally said, breath now starting to hitch slightly, “because she's not coming back. It was – okay for you because he – came back. You – you fucker.” He half-hiccoughed, body working out the sobs against the constraints of his will, tested, tired, the tension giving.

There was a silence, punctuated by the small sounds climbing out of Ian's chest. John tried to swallow the rock of hot guilt in his throat. There wasn't much to say to that. He tried. “I don't think love is ever really not okay.” Sounding like his therapist again. Life still has things to offer. Your love isn't lost just because he isn't here anymore. You're alive, you can't let that go to waste. People aren't dead until you forget about them. The stuff you wanted to say, but didn't, say it now. As though it mattered if there was no one listening, as though any of that had any bearing on the harsh slant of reality, at all. Fuck. He tried again. “Actually,” he considered; then, voice harder than he'd intended: “yeah, I take it back, it's not okay. Nothing's okay.”

Ian's chuckle was liquid with tears. “Yeah, thanks, fuckwit,” he said, and gave John the grimmest impression of a smile he'd ever seen.

There was another long silence, slipping between them, trying to attach itself to something. “Love is always okay, though,” John said then, contradicting himself.

Ian closed his eyes again. “God, fuck you, John.” He sounded strangled, without anger, as though even that was too much trouble right now.

“Did Bill tell you about Giles?” John said, and then was surprised at himself, as though his consciousness had just thrust it forward without that other bit of him, that he was more aware of, having realised it.

“Yes, I do think he might've mentioned him,” Ian said, the sarcasm heavy and heart-breaking. “That one bloke who died, isn't it?”

“Bill loved him,” John said, and didn't quite stop to consider if this was even all right, sharing this with Ian after Bill had held it away from all of them for so long. He already knew that for Bill everything was all right, if it could help, if it could stop Ian from stepping over the same boundary that they'd already lost so much to. “He told him just before he died.”

Ian was silent. Then he said: “That makes it even worse.”

“Does it?” John asked, bringing up his hand to push at the beginning point of headache blooming in his forehead. It was an honest question.

Ian looked at him. “Are you trying to tell me that having loved and lost is better than not having loved at all?” He was frowning. “Didn't take you for a fan of the Victorians.”

“No,” John replied easily, “I hate Tennyson.”

“So what's your point?” Ian said, and he seemed to almost smile at the absurdity of the conversation,
and that, really, was what John had been hoping for.

“Dunno. No point. Apart from...” He cast around for the words, and they only grudgingly let themselves be found; language resisting, fighting back. “Apart from the fact that it wouldn't hurt if we didn't love them, but we'd also never get healed.”

“Yes, nice,” Ian said, rather harshly, his smile-that-wasn't-one out of tune with the collapsed lines of the rest of him. “Ever considered a career at Mills and Boons?”

“Sometimes,” John said, and tried to balance them with a real smile. “Look,” he continued after a beat, after weighing himself and trying to not find himself lacking, “I don't want you to go away.”

Ian blinked. “I wouldn't want you to go away, either,” he then said.

“Good,” John said, “because I'm here.”

Ian hummed. The I am too that John would have hoped for if he didn't know what reality was by now didn't materialise, of course. “Yeah,” he said instead, and it managed to sound good; a word that said so little, was thrown into silence to make it less heavy, had nothing of the gravity of yes or the ineptitude of no, but still, stupidly, managed to be reassuring to John. After a while, Ian dropped his head into his hands. “Feel a bit – weird,” he said.

“That's the pills,” John said, amazed at the neutrality of his own voice. “Sleeping it off will be best.”

“Yeah,” Ian agreed, quietly. “I'll go to bed.”

“I'll stay with you for a bit,” John said, then, realising how the obviousness of that might not be mutual, added: “If that's okay.” The small twitch of determination in his gut already told him that Ian would have to forcibly fight him out of the house to get him to leave before Ian was sleeping, but it felt right to ask, restoring some of the power in the situation to Ian.

But Ian only sighed as he wavered against John. “Yeah – I... Yeah.”

John followed him up to his bedroom, feeling awkwardly out of place, feeling as though he was being let into a sanctuary that he had no right to see – a feeling that intensified in Ian's bedroom, one side of the double bed rumpled, obviously having gone without a change of sheets for a long time, and a picture of Ian and Ellen on the nightstand, frozen in life, forever caught in a look between them that was oblivious to anything else and to the pressure of the time that still lay ahead of them. God. He couldn't imagine having lived in Baker Street for all of the time that he honestly thought Sherlock would never come back to him, and he couldn't even begin to think about what it had to be like to have shared a bed and then find yourself alone in it, alone in the night, cold, no touch coming up to soothe you, just silence, the absence of what you needed and the presence of everything you didn't. He gulped.

“I'll just –” John said, as Ian tugged at his dirty t-shirt, apparently meaning to take his clothes off for this night.

“Whatever,” Ian said, obviously too tired and cried out and swirling with a half-attempt at suicide to care.

John stepped outside of the room for a bit, rested his head against the uncaring wood of the door that shielded Ian from him, and tried to feel like a real person.
He came back inside to find the bedroom bathed in the muted light of a small nightstand lamp, Ian’s clothes scattered carelessly on the ground, and Ian a heartbreakingly small bundle of human and sheets in the too-big bed.

“T’ll, um, is it okay if I –” John said, and Ian cut him off in a sound that could have been yes or I don’t give a fuck. So he toed off his shoes and sat down awkwardly on the stretch of bed next to him, and tried not to feel as if he was invading a sacred space, a bubble in which Ellen would have angled her head into the hollow between Ian's shoulder and his face, sharing sleep, sharing life, bleeding into each other's dreams.

“Thanks, doctor sir,” Ian's voice came in a murmur, small.

“Anytime,” John said, thickly. As Ian's breath started to even out, he wriggled his phone out of his pocket, switched the sound off and tried to be silent in his typing.

Need to stay with him for a while longer. Will try to be home by midnight.

Sherlock responded promptly:

I'll stay up.
SH

And he wasn’t sure if it was because Sherlock needed him there to brave the possible ghosts of the night, or because Sherlock wasn't really interested in sleeping tonight, anyway – but he was grateful, because it was what he needed, too.

“Tell him hi from me,” Ian muttered, almost soundlessly.

Fuck, John thought.

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” Ian said, a bit more clearly, “I can feel your guilt up to here. Stop that and tell him hullo.”

John gulped.

Ian wants me to tell you hi from him.

The response took a bit longer this time.

Suicidal, then?
SH

And then, immediately after:

Well, give him whatever form of popular acquaintance he prefers back.
SH
“He says hi,” John said, and felt a bit like crying.

“Yeah,” Ian said again, vaguely. Then he said: “Don't be too much of a gentleman, doctor sir, I know you need to get home sometime tonight.” He fell silent. His breathing smoothed again. After a breathless thirty-something minutes, John slid off the bed and leaned over him. His breathing was steady and deep. He gently tugged at the hand that was peeking out from the covers and succeeded in taking his pulse without waking him – maybe a bit slow for relaxation, but perfectly within normal boundaries. He was going to be absolutely fine.

His body was, at least.

John lingered for a long time, shoes in hand. What was there to be gained from staying with him? A morning repeat of their conversation, hey, don't you fucking dare kill yourself or I'll do it for you. Was that what he needed, then, again, in the light of day? Maybe, and maybe not, and he would probably think John an absolute idiot for not going home.

Ian turned around in his tangle of sheets, exposing more of his face to the light. John looked at it for a moment, tracing the bruises of the tears, and the relaxation of the lines that Ian's face prematurely had while waking, until he began to feel a bit creepy.

“Right,” he whispered to himself, and made his decision. He turned around and opened the door, wincing at the creak.

Downstairs, he hunted around for a pen and a scrap of paper; he wrote I will call you in the morning. Call me anytime you need me. John on it and went back upstairs to put it on the floor in front of the bedroom door.

Passing through the living room again, on his way out, he spotted the bottle of whisky on the kitchen table, only visible because the living room was once more dark, now, and the kitchen was awash with cold light coming from the relentless slide of time on the digital oven clock. He picked it up and weighed it in his hand; so innocent, so silent, containing so many possible dangers.

He put it back into the liquor cabinet in the living room, and stared at it for a bit, at its amber beauty, its glint in the dimness, and then pressed his fingers into the space between his eyes, where a pain was growing, a hard, dull thudding of unshed tears and fears that wouldn't let themselves be roped into ratio.

Every fibre of him wanted Sherlock in the cab home. It was a bit overwhelming.

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Sherlock was sprawled out on the couch in his robe when he came home, watching the telly, which was odd enough in itself, and even moreso considering that John could tell immediately that it was a rather sweeping romantic drama that was on. After a couple of seconds he identified the rattle of Spanish dropping from the lips of a tall, tan, incredibly fit, incredibly desperate bloke with his shirt half torn off his shoulders.

“Trying to see if you can figure out who's who's real father again?” John asked, accepting the rather out-of-place feeling of relief at being home, as he shrugged his coat off his shoulders.

“Actually, by now I'm trying to find something that I can't predict,” Sherlock responded, sounding
annoyed. “I was informed by Julian that this is supposed to be a –” There was the smallest break, and John realised Sherlock was translating whatever it was that Julian had said. “– breathless television experience, thrilling to the end. Bit dramatic, he. By the end of the opening credits I already knew that the husband is secretly a homosexual roped into a marriage of convenience and will end up having an affair with his wife's brother after much heart-rending dialogue and supposedly artful nudity. Inane.”

“Switch it off, then, before you hurt yourself,” John said, feeling a bit weird about Julian recommending queer flicks to Sherlock, as he took off his shoes and slid into the couch with Sherlock, lifting his feet to set them in his lap. Sherlock let him, and after a second John felt the sudden tension in his legs bleeding out, as though he'd needed a fraction of time to get used to the idea. John studied the graceful curls of Sherlock's bare toes against the fabric of his jeans for a moment.

“The only way I could hurt myself by watching this is if my brain would atrophy completely,” Sherlock huffed, but didn't turn the movie off, and instead slid down a bit so his calves nestled into John's legs, and his feet dangled off his thighs. He looked at John, darkly painted in the low lighting of their living room at night, cheekbones highlighted, still that last lingering bit too sharp to entirely look like Sherlock who hadn't died and gone away for two years again. Drawing the light to him in a distortion of sight. His brows unknit themselves now that the offending visuals of the film no longer impressed themselves on him, though the low rumble of the incomprehensible dialogue that the apparent protagonist was muttering wove itself around them; something about amor, something about muerta.

“So your friend didn't kill himself,” Sherlock said, sounding rather unconcerned. John licked his lips. “Not today,” he said, echoing Ian's words with a sharp twinge in his chest.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “But some other day?”

“I hope not,” John said. “He didn't really try, this time. I hope he won't really try the next time, either.”

“Classic cry for attention,” Sherlock said, and tented his fingers under his chin, looking up at the ceiling.

John's hand tightened around his ankle. “Cry for help,” he said, a bit more coldly than he'd intended, “and I must say I'm pretty fucking chuffed that he cried out for it.”

Sherlock's eyes flicked back to him. His mouth opened as though he wanted to say something in response, and then snapped shut. “Of course,” he said after a tense second.

John held his gaze for a moment.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows. “Aren't you going to say that you agonised over me not crying out for help?”

A beat. John dragged his eyes away from Sherlock's face to stop the cold burst of annoyance in his chest going any further. “Why should I, if you're so adept at reading my mind?”

Sherlock's face, when he refocused on it, was soft and a bit startled. “I didn't mean it that way,” he said, and that seemed extremely out of character, so John studied him.
“You always mean everything exactly the way you say it,” he pointed out.

“You're wrong,” Sherlock said, uninflected. It was the first hint of a raised awareness about his own language, John realised – an increased grip on what exactly it was in language that sometimes confounded him, maybe?

“How did you mean it, then?” he asked, taking the bait in spite of himself.

Sherlock blinked. Maybe he didn't know, himself. Instead of answering the question, he said: “I didn't know you'd been going to group sessions.”

“You couldn't tell from, I don't know, the particular stains on my shoes from... gravel that they use on those little pathways in the supposedly calming gardens at mourning centres, or something?”

“I knew you were still going to some sort of therapy,” Sherlock said, and looked at him from between his lashes, the quicksilver of his eyes intent. “That was obvious to deduce. But not that it was group therapy. I didn't think that'd be something you'd enjoy, really.”

“That's funny, because I didn't think mourning my best friend's suicide would be something I'd enjoy,” John said, then wished he could take it back as Sherlock's lips pressed themselves together into a line that was just a bit less full than his normal plumpness of mouth. “Sorry,” he said, immediately, looking away from it, and cleared his throat. Then he spent a short second thinking about the apology, and said “Actually, I'm not sorry, really.” He could feel the waves of guardedness, of tightness coming from Sherlock; the ankle under his fingers shifted, muscles playing, a pantomime of running away. “I... I wasn't doing well at all with Ella,” he pushed on. “She suggested group therapy. I think she might've been a bit desperate, actually.” He was silent. “Not as desperate as I was, obviously.” Sherlock's feet flexed lightly in what could have been another involuntary bodily response – get away from this, but he was staying, the heat of his eyes on the side of John's head was tangible, or was he imagining things? “So finally I went. I'd never expected it to work, but I was very lucky that the group was so full of lovely people who really – really helped me out at times.” He forced himself to look Sherlock in the eye. The expression that met him was subdued, but focused.

“Are you still going?” Sherlock asked him, would-be casually, but his eyes were intent.

“I went a week after you... After you came back. I haven't gone since. I don't know,” he said, passing a hand over his face, “it doesn't... seem right, somehow.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock said, “their grief is actually real.”

John stared at him for long seconds. “My grief was real,” he finally brought out, surprised at the intensity of the tremble in the words, of the depth of the disbelief, of the hurt.

Sherlock blinked – two, three times; rare gestures of uncertainty. “But you did – you did know, a bit, didn't you?”

“I'm not the genius here,” John bit at him, then took a breath to get himself under control, to get the fuck you, you utter bastard, do you seriously not understand this yet off his tongue. “I hoped. I suspected, even. But – God, Sherlock. Two years went by. Somewhere along the line I had to pick myself up and start believing that you wouldn't come back, just to – I don't know – keep myself functioning, I guess. I had to start believing that my suspicions were kept alive by my imagination. I
couldn't – I couldn't believe that if you weren't dead, you'd have let me gone so long without some kind of message.” Sherlock's feet flexed again. John half-stifled the chuckle in his throat to a small huff of breath. “But I'm not you, and I was wrong about that.”

Sherlock pulled his feet from John's lap and sat up, and then suddenly he was closer, hands coming to pluck almost nervously at John's side.

“John,” he said, urgently, falling back on his old habit of calling John by his name several times in any given conversation, as though that was the only thing reminding him who he was talking to, “I was wrong.”

“Yeah, you were,” John said, and nodded, and was still nodding when Sherlock pressed in to kiss him, hand sliding across his chest to catch him in a lop-sided embrace. He kissed back, because who was he kidding, really. It was a tense, tight kiss, closed-mouthed, an almost dry slide of lips and maybe, John imagined, or was he being stupid, was he projecting things, sorry.

Sherlock pulled back a bit and rested his nose against John's forehead. “Why do you want this?” he asked, a bit of a non-sequitur, the light twinge of puzzlement in his voice so unusual that it stood out tremendously.

John threaded his arms around him and pulled him closer, half-turning towards him, tightening the embrace.

“Because,” he began, throat tight, and thought of the stuff you wanted to say, but didn't, say it now, “I think you're the most interesting person I've ever met, and when you're not going out of your way to make me feel stupid you make me feel very valued, and when I looked at you on that rooftop I realised that I'd never felt like more of a failure because I hadn't been able to help you, and I hadn't been able to tell you how much you helped me, how much you changed my life, and I couldn't save you like you saved me, I couldn't see you up there, and because I fucking love you and I really always have.” Sherlock shuddered almost imperceptibly against him, breath hot. “Enough?” he asked.

Sherlock was silent, the pressure of his nose maybe a bit too heavy to be entirely comfortable. “No,” he said, and then: “yes,” and John wasn't sure if they meant different things. “It was real,” he said then, as though he only now agreed.

“It really was, you wanker,” John said.

“It is real,” Sherlock mumbled, a rare moment of self-correcting, of finding a better way for the words to graft onto reality, and in the tense revision of time John found himself nodding again, and remembered himself, a while ago already, now, trying to keep the searing underbelly of the shout that was burning in him out of his voice, saying I need you to tell me everything, every single fucking thing, Sherlock, so I can start maybe thinking about forgiving you. Language getting ahead of itself, bouncing over the remains of earthquakes, of rocks underfoot, getting across to an undefined stretch of moment still in the making. But it hadn't been quite true. Every single fucking thing was mostly a lie; he needed some things, yes, and as they trickled from Sherlock he was collecting them into the careful cup of his hands, seeing himself reflected in them, examining them at moments when he imagined Sherlock couldn't see, and most importantly, maybe, he needed this: the acknowledgement that there were things that had been real for him, that Sherlock had receded from him in such a convincing impression of fading that there really was no other word for it, and that he had been re-materialising only very, very slowly – through a fog, through a haze of yes and no and how they drove each other off, through a slowly growing sense of body and mind. Maybe there was more
understanding, now, hiding in the smallness of is, because in the end there was no stronger action for either of them, after all that had driven them from being.

They sat for a bit. Being.

“It's unfortunate that your friend is suicidal,” Sherlock finally said, and he sounded slightly hesitant.

“Yeah, it is,” John said, thinking of Ian with a sharp twinge of anxiety, and thought but such is life, and such is death.

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“Isn't this a bit of a record?” John asked as Sherlock flopped down on his bed next to John, still on top of the covers, looking quite unfairly gorgeous in just his black satin pyjama trousers, that sat rather low on his hips, and the long, pale stretch of his torso revealed, lightly muscled, smooth except for the textures of the scars thrown into contrast by the nightstand lamp. “Sleeping two nights in a row.”

“Well,” Sherlock said, a touch sarcastically, “the absolutely undisturbed, completely unfractured sleep I had last night wasn't quite enough for me.” John was about to say something that amounted to yeah, of course, sorry, but Sherlock rolled over on his side and his face was mild. “I actually sleep almost every night when we're not on a case, John.”

“You didn't use to.”

Sherlock half-smiled, a bit strained. “After Peru sleeping seems more valuable somehow.”

“Because it's harder,” John supplied, bringing over his hand to smooth across Sherlock's shoulder.

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed, “and because I hadn't anticipated how pleasant it would be to sleep with you next to me. It's surprisingly not-boring.”

John laughed a little. “Though we haven't actually done it that often, yet, so we'll see.”

“I don't see it becoming boring,” Sherlock said, and the look in his face was quite earnest.

“Well, let me know when it does, so I can go back upstairs,” John tried to joke, but it was rather strained with a very real flush of anxiety.

Sherlock, resting his head on his hand, was watching him intently. “You're very tense, John,” he finally said.

John sighed and closed his eyes. “Well, yeah,” he said, “I just had to talk a friend out of committing suicide.”

“Ah, yes. Of course. Emotionally draining. And,” Sherlock said, “just now you had a very strong sense of fear that I might, in fact, begin to find this boring, though I've just told you that I don't see it happening.”

John cracked an eye open. “Stop with the telepathy,” he said, “and let me believe that I have some thoughts at least that you don't know about.”
“I'm sure there is a vastness of riches in your mind that I'm completely unaware of,” Sherlock said, voice slow and soft. “In fact, I don't doubt it. Which is why I don't think this becoming boring is something you need to worry about.” He reached over and placed a hand on the covers that were pulled over John's chest. The warmth of his fingers bled through. “Anything I can do to relax you?” he said, and his voice dropped to a deep, sensual murmur that was both soothing and promising.

John didn't hold back the small sound of pleasure at just hearing that voice. “You talking to me is already working,” he said.

“I thought me talking always translated to punch me in the face,” Sherlock said, almost cheekily.

John laughed at the memory, so suddenly delved up from where it had been sitting somewhere, covered in old thumb prints, stored away, collecting dust. “Well, I hadn't expected that one to make it into the mind palace.”

“Don't be stupid, John,” Sherlock said, and he slid closer, “I've never enjoyed anyone punching me more.”

“Bit of a masochist, are you?” John said, smiling.

But the eyes that Sherlock turned on him were wide and dark. “Who knows,” he said, nonchalantly, and it was a hard to tell if that was yes or no or a genuine I don't know.

“Right,” John said, not sure what to make of that, and then Sherlock was tugging down the cover. But he didn't – he wasn't sure if he was up to it, really. His limbs were heavy, sleep was pushing at him, he was worried, he was overwhelmed; over the space of 24 hours he'd gone through the quite intense experience of giving Sherlock his first partnered orgasm, Sherlock had told him that he'd had to witness the hours-long torture of a friend and was basically suffering from some serious PTSD, and Ian had honestly entertained the notion of offing himself – and well, he was just really fucking tired.

“Sherlock,” he said, “I don't know if tonight –”

“I know,” Sherlock said, because of course he did, the wanker. “Just let me.”

“I'm serious,” John said.

“I know you are.” Sherlock looked at him, and then frowned. “Do you really think I'd try to have sex with you after you just said no? Such trust, I'm wounded, John.” He was half-offended, half-joking. “Just let me.”

“I – all right,” John said, a bit confused.

Sherlock drew down the covers, pulling them out from under him, too, so they were pooled about their feet. He reached in and picked at the buttons of John's pyjama vest, undoing them one by one unhurriedly, and then pushed them off his shoulders.

“You need some better sleepwear,” he said, tugging at the garment until John lifted himself on his arms and Sherlock could pull it away from under him. “In fact, you need better clothes.”

“You enjoy the way I dress,” John said, allowing the small grin, “don't think I've missed how you like to touch my jumpers when I leave them lying around.”
“I’m trying to think of the most efficient way to incinerate them without you noticing when I do that,” Sherlock murmured, and John let it slip with a chuckle, because it was very obviously not true, and then he relaxed into the warmth of Sherlock’s hands brushing across his chest and shoulders, sliding gently over the still slightly shocking coarseness of his scar.

“Roll over,” Sherlock said, and John shivered at the way his voice curled into his ears, dark and low.

“I think I might have a bit of a you-talking kink,” he said as he complied, flipping himself over with some difficulty, his body protesting the idea of moving at all.

“How utterly vanilla,” Sherlock said smoothly, and John’s heart jumped in his chest as Sherlock set himself on him, the weight of him coming to rest just below John’s arse, and he wished for a lucid moment that Sherlock had removed his trousers along with his vest, so he could feel the slide of satin and Sherlock’s thighs inside it against his skin. “I propose we explore that some other time,” Sherlock murmured close to his ear, his torso not quite on John’s back as he rested his weight on his arms, the heat of his skin tangible, crossing the space between them, “though as you know,” he continued, and John was sure he was doing his very best to extract every ounce of depth, of heat from his voice, and God, it was working, the wanker, “I’m not averse to talking most of the time, so I’ll narrate this if you want.” He sat back, his weight shifting back to John’s legs.

“Is this how you plan to still seduce me after assuring me that you wouldn’t?” John said, gulping, fluffing the pillow beneath his head in a more comfortable shape.

“Obviously not,” Sherlock said, and John had to bite back a sound at the unexpected sultriness of the words, and at the hand Sherlock trailed up from his waistband to his shoulder, “this is how I plan to get you to relax.”

“As long as you don’t talk about biology to me,” John said, only half-serious, because though he would never, ever have expected it, the memory of Sherlock so close to orgasm, mouth full of scientific terms that should by any right have been absolutely mood-killing, was in fact thrilling.

Sherlock hummed, but didn’t comment. For a moment there was nothing, as though he was still waiting for something. Then there was a shift of muscle on John as he reached over into the nightstand and pulled out a bottle.

“Is that lube?” John said, involuntarily.

“No,” Sherlock said, unconcerned, “though I do have some, obviously.”

There was the wet sound of something being squeezed into his hands and of his palms rubbing together. When he touched his hands to John’s shoulders they were even warmer than usual, and slick with oil.

“Why on earth do you keep massage lotion in – your nightstand?” John said, with a slight hitch of breath as Sherlock rubbed down a confident, powerful stroke from his shoulders down the length of his back, spreading the oil.

“Molly sent it to me as a birthday present last year,” Sherlock said, and sounded disapproving. John could imagine his scowl with clarity.

He huffed a laugh at the absurdity of that, and then moaned quietly as Sherlock pressed his thumbs to
the knots of his shoulders, feeling them out with a firm strength.

“And you kept it? You bothered to bring it back from Peru?” he asked, incredulously, when the slight pain in his shoulders passed into a gratifying warm pleasure.

“I had the strange feeling that it would come in handy one day,” Sherlock said.

John was silent for a bit, wondering at that, as Sherlock's long fingers sought out a way across his muscles and he worked them quite expertly. He felt a deep, contented warmth sinking into his skin.

“All right,” Sherlock finally said, “she'd filled the bottle with a particular mix of chemicals I needed to track down a trail and that I didn't have the lab equipment or the contacts for to produce. Took a long time to get to South America. I figured – she must have paid quite a fee for the shipping of such a dangerous product, and she'd been satisfyingly discreet, so I wanted to...

“Thank her by buying her some actual massage lotion?” John supplied, grinning into the pillow.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, sounding dignified.

“Because you couldn't think of anything to give her on your own.” John grinned at the silence from behind him, at the tangibility of the scowl. “And now you're using it on me,” he continued, the words passing into a sigh as Sherlock kneaded the thick, tense band of muscle shielding his neck vertebrae.

“I might have deleted that I bought it for her and only recalled that I had it because of this situation.”

“That, and it's a completely inappropriate present for a single woman you're not trying to seduce,” John responded, amused, trying to not get the slackness of muscle that was spreading over him get an influence over his tongue, too.

Sherlock was silent for a second, working on a particularly resistant knot in John's left shoulder with a slightly painful, extremely gratifying force. “Is it?” he finally said.

“Yes, it really is,” John chuckled, and then hissed as Sherlock pressed his palm down, hard, on his shoulder, and then curled his fingers around it, rolling the muscle. “Though I'm sure she'd appreciate how rare the sentiment of wanting to thank someone is from you.”

“I've thanked her,” Sherlock said, a touch more quietly. John fell silent at that, remembering what she'd told him, not long ago; how she hadn't wanted to, how she'd resisted the idea of helping Sherlock jump off a roof, but how she still had, and how heartbreaking it had been for her to be around him, knowing that it wasn't true.

“I should hope so,” he therefore said, before his eyes slipped closed at Sherlock's hands, now trailing over his warmed back with a gentler pressure, a soft touch of fingertips slipping on oil, before he worked his way up with a renewed strength, pushing his knuckles down on the spots where the muscles still resisted him, and well, if this wasn't one for the things that never used to happen, and now do list, John wasn't sure what was. Sherlock shaping his body like this, working out the kinks deep within, his body letting him in, letting the warmth of him saturate his skin.

“Where did you learn to do this?” he asked, slightly slurred from relaxation; and God, he was actually drooling quite profusely into Sherlock's pillow.
“Anatomical knowledge,” Sherlock said matter-of-factly, and John giggled involuntarily. Obviously. “And,” Sherlock continued, the screwed down expressiveness of his voice not lost on John, “Julian has a serious back problem.”

“Oh,” John said, “right.” He blinked into the pillow, a bit of the tension restored. Sherlock massaging his Peruvian housemate. It was… It was strange to imagine. He tried to beat down the unexpected surge of jealousy, because who was he to have it, really? There was still so much he didn’t know. Maybe this tied in somehow with Sherlock's increased attention to bodies, his, John's. He made a mental note to ask about that, at one point, if he could organise the question, anyway, because he wasn't sure what exactly it was that was so different and how he could express how much he liked it, but then Sherlock rolled his shoulder again, and this time it was just calm pleasure, no pain, a gentle lapping of warm skin at skin, and Sherlock's weight comforting on the back of his thighs. He sank back into the sensations.

Sherlock wrapped up the massage an undefinable stretch of time later by slipping his fingers up John's neck and tangling them in his hair; pressure of fingertips on skull, warm, slippery with oil – and by leaning in and running his nose up the vertebrae between John's shoulders to where it met his hand at the base of his skull, pushing into the small hollow where skin crossed over vulnerability before the protection his body upheld around his brain began, and then he pressed his chest against John's back, slightly cool against the heated skin, such a comforting weight that John didn't mind that it was a bit harder to breathe, that way. When he rolled off, John let out a small sound of protest at the loss of the contact, but his body was a pleasant sprawl of limb and heat, and he could only mumble an incoherent sound that was meant to convey thanks as Sherlock tugged up the sheets to cover them.

Sherlock draped himself against him, and God, the warmth inside John was almost too much to bear, too bright to look into, discs of light swirling over hidden pits of gravity, and how could he ever have lived here, in this flat, with Sherlock, alive and there and sitting just across from him over the battlefield of breakfast, and not do this at night? How?

“Sherlock,” he mumbled, wanting to vocalise some of it, and maybe also something of if you dream again, I'm here, but Sherlock pressed a small kiss against his temple.

“I know,” he breathed, sounding a little smug.

Because of course he did.

The wanker.

And he left his lips where they were, slightly moist, warm, mouth slipping over the entirely peculiar curve of John's thoughts where they ran into the outer boundary of his brain, as if he were trying to tease them out and taste them, lap them up, turn them over on his tongue and find some sustenance that way; and John thought against him, thought hard despite the softness of their bodies in the sea of bed, thought fast despite the slow rush of sleep coming in like a tide at midnight, because hard and fast was the only way to splinter bone and open up the defenses of the body, to have things tumbling out to offer themselves up for safekeeping by someone else: it is real.
John had a small moment of awareness in the middle of the night, when Sherlock gently extracted himself from their tangle of body, and hovered over him for a moment, and then, just when John was about to try to reach up to him, drunk with sleep, he let out a small breath and receded, sliding off the bed and tip-toeing out of the room with a care that was heart-stirring.

John vaguely entertained the notion of going after him, but then felt the heaviness of his body, and Sherlock hadn't seemed frantic, hadn't seemed scared, and maybe he'd just had enough of lying around in bed. So he relaxed back into the hug of sheets and bed, not quite as warm without Sherlock, but sleep caught back up with him soon enough.

–

He stayed in his room for the phone call he'd promised Ian.

Ian answered the phone promptly, after two rings, with “I live, doctor sir,” and John couldn't help but laugh a little at that.

“Good, because otherwise I'd have to very unprofessionally revive you in a Dr. Frankenstein kind of way,” he said, feeling relieved at the steadiness of Ian's voice.

There was a short moment of silence that was awkward, because they were on opposite end of a wire, not even that, of invisible waves, and they couldn't look at each other, and silence on the phone was really worse than any other kind, except obviously, horribly, the kind left behind when people found themselves on a different side that was far more remote than the muddled distances of technology.

“Are you okay, now?” John forced himself to say.

“Like yoghurt,” Ian half-mumbled, and it took John a second to remember what he was referring to.

“You were quite clear-headed through a suicide attempt to remember that,” he said.

“It was four painkillers. I've had more,” Ian said, sounding flippant, but it was hard to tell without his face to go on.

“Don't have any more anytime soon.”

Another stretch of slightly uncomfortable silence. “Yeah, no,” Ian said, and of course it was too ambiguous, too indecipherable, but such was life.

“Or if you do, call me before you do it,” John said, chest tight.

A beat. “Yeah, wouldn't want to take your chances of being doctor sir away.” It sounded promising, and John let out a breath.

“We should have another evening with the four of us,” he then said, thinking it over; he'd seen all of them, separately, and they'd probably seen each other, too, and they'd all become that bit more clear and that bit more tangible in their complexities, again, as they did every time he saw them, but it was
true that they might all need the easy pressure of the four of them again, being able to fold themselves away in a bigger grid if they needed it, deflecting attention from themselves when they didn't want it, laughing and crying and drinking and not being personally scrutinised all the time.

“Yeah,” Ian agreed. “It's... your turn, though.”

John thought about Sherlock. “I'll, um... I'll see what I can do,” he said.

“All right,” Ian said, and then, “Talk to you soon?” The question was a bit atypical for him, maybe a small search for some reassurance, still, or maybe an unspoken promise that he wasn't leaving.

“Yeah, soon,” John complied, knowing what he was agreeing to. “Take care, all right. Bye.”

–

The flat was empty when he came out of the bedroom, and that was surprisingly disappointing. The kitchen table was strewn with papers filled with Sherlock's loopy, scrawly handwriting – chemical equations for some experiment.

He looked around for food and then remembered that Sherlock had only bought tea in his insane shopping outing the day before – so he had some, giving the vanilla a wide berth, and spent some time compiling a shopping list.

*milk*

*sugar*

and he laughed at the normality of, it for a bit.

Feeling brave, he wrote

*eggs*
*rice*
*potatoes*
*onions*
*carrots*
*broccoli*
*leeks*
*tomatoes*

and then

*mince*
*puff pastry*

because Sherlock liked mince, and unlike Harry actually enjoyed John's meat pie, modelled after the unbeatable example of his mum's, who'd picked it up in her unimaginable backpacking through Australia in her youth – Sherlock's relationship to the dish was uncomplicated because he hadn't been there when Harry had been almost force-fed the stuff while she was trying hard to be a vegetarian, trying hard to alienate her parents pre-emptively before delivering the blow that she was a lesbian. It was one of the rare things that Sherlock would eat, usually even completely, when John put it in front of him, even when he was on a case, though then his consumption of it was often punctuated with complaints about John trying to get him to slow down.
He tapped the pen against his mouth, then wrote

wine
beer

thinking of what he'd promised Ian.

Sherlock came treading up the stairs shortly after noon, looking a bit troubled.

“Hullo,” John said, from where he was reading his crime novel in the armchair.

“It's the housekeeper,” Sherlock said as he took his coat off in his usual graceful half-twirl.

John stared at him, and then at the novel.

“Have you read this?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes in a way that clearly said that even the mere idea of him reading that book caused his brain cells to rot. “I can tell from the cover.”

John looked at the cover. It was a stupid drawing of what he supposed was meant to be the protagonist, a burned-out copper, walking up to the crime scene that held the novel together, a huge nineteenth-century style mansion.

“Are you serious?” John asked.

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow.

“How?” He still hadn't learned to control that particular impulse, and really, he didn't want to.

Sherlock's mouth twitched. “Well,” he said, “I can tell from the style of the illustration that the quality of the book is mediocre at best, so that any big plot twists are unlikely, and the storm brewing in the background over the house tells me it's a murder case, highly likely the master or mistress of the house, and the title –” his voice curved with distaste as he said the words, “The Basement, with its servant-master dynamic implications, obviously refers to class issues being one of the driving points of tension in the story, and I can see the outline of the housekeeper in the doorway on the cover, and most illustrators who are money-starved enough to take this kind of low-brow work wouldn't just make up a random character to put in there, and probably think the audience won't catch it, rightfully so, so based on all that, I daringly deduce it is the housekeeper.”

John stared at him, couldn't help the grin finding its way across his mouth. “That's amazing,” he said. “And a bit wankerish, I must say, because now you've ruined it.”

“Just saving you some time,” Sherlock said, then stooped down to untie his shoes.

“I actually enjoy spending time getting lost in fiction,” John said, snapping the book shut, watching the curve of Sherlock's back as he tugged gently at the expensive laces of his Italian shoes, and then straightened, stepping out of them with care. He toed off his socks, and somehow he was even more beautiful that way, impeccably dressed, but with the inquisitive curls of his bare feet against the
darkness of the floor. John smiled at the sight.

“I can think of something far less boring,” Sherlock said, and smiled lightly. “Want to have sex?”

“You are something else,” John said, amused, after a beat. “You're already undressing and I haven't even said yes.” Sherlock was, indeed, picking at his cuffs, and then carefully undoing the buttons on his shirt; the infuriating aubergine one, that was more gorgeous on him than any stupid piece of clothing had any right to.

“I am deducing that you'll say yes,” Sherlock said. “Though of course I will leave you the illusion of free will.”

“Bit confident, aren't you? How on earth can you tell?” John said, smiling, though it was true, of course.

“You are quite easy to read, John. I can tell from the flush creeping up from your neck, and the unconscious tensing of your legs, ready to move so you can get up here and kiss me.” He flashed John a cheeky grin, with a flicker of teeth through the inquisitive curve of his lips. “And you have absolutely nothing else to do, since you've already been out to the shops, and the clinic doesn't need you today, and you know the ending of your absolutely thrilling and stimulating novel, and on top of that you obviously feel quite optimistic about life seeing the amount of fresh produce you've bought. I look forward to the meat pie, by the way. But as you have the luxury of time, you might as well.”

By now the buttons had all been undone, and he tugged the shirt up from where it was tucked into the waist of his trousers, exposing the tantalising curve of his stomach and chest, and well, the satisfaction of proving Sherlock wrong on one of his deductions definitely wasn't worth the far greater satisfaction of putting aside the useless novel, getting up, and crossing the living room to slide hands between the loose sides of shirt and skin, feeling a way to shoulders still covered in light silk, and pressing a mouth to a collarbone.

“So predictable, John,” Sherlock said, but he was tugging rather urgently at John's belt.

“Sometimes a little predictability is a nice thing,” John said, and Sherlock huffed, but then proceeded to agree by the way he pressed his mouth to John's and allowed the tip of his tongue to slip between John’s lips slowly, in a slide of warmth and wetness.

“I want to try more,” Sherlock said quietly when he pulled back, and through the front of absolute, unshakeable confidence he was putting up John could glimpse some of the nerves playing underneath as he caught John in one of his arresting, intense looks, eyes full of things that were still to be unwrapped.

“All right,” John returned, just as quietly. “Bedroom?”

“If you insist on being dull,” Sherlock said, back to his normal smug tone of voice, but he took the lead, gently steering John in the direction of his room, hand a warm pressure in the small of his back.

Sherlock closed the door behind them, and then leaned against it, waiting for John to turn to him. He was such a vision – with his shirt hanging open over the lines of his torso, the curls on his forehead, by now back to the familiar length, almost sweeping into the liquid heat of his eyes, those impossible lips slightly parted – that John started forward and pulled him down into a kiss of tongues and the scrape of teeth on lips. Sherlock managed to deftly undo his collar and a couple more buttons of his checked shirt while pushing back into the kiss with conviction.
John pulled back and said, a bit breathless already: “You know you can –” as Sherlock nudged a knee between his legs and pulled him into the pressure of his thigh.

“Yes,” Sherlock murmured, “toast. I know. Inspired.” And that had them both chuckling for a second, John burying his face into Sherlock's shoulder, until the tremors of nervous laughter had stilled and he pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the skin under his lips, smooth and pale, and covering so much life. He slid his hand down from Sherlock's shoulder, slowly, giving him time to stop it, and slipped over the barrier of the smooth fabric of his fancy trousers to his crotch, palming the growing bulge there, increasing the pressure when Sherlock sucked in a breath and the fingers pulling at John's shirt buttons yanked at them with a bit more force.

“All right?” John asked, as he worked at Sherlock's fly.

“Yes,” Sherlock hummed, then: “You don't need to check all the time, I'll – let you know,” and his breath hitched as John's fingers brushed his half-hard erection through his pants as John unzipped the trousers.

Then, apparently growing a bit impatient and overriding John's intention to let things take a slow course between them, he pushed John's shirt over his shoulders and tugged it from his arms, letting it flutter to the floor, before he unstuck his upper body from the wall and peeled his own shirt down his arms. He slipped from between John and the door and hung the purple shirt carefully over the chair at the desk, before sinking down onto the bed and looking at John with obvious invitation in his eyes.

John stooped to pick up his own shirt. “Considerate,” he said pointedly, and dropped the garment over the back of the chair to join Sherlock's.

“That's a shirt you've had since before we met; in fact, it's from a second-hand store in Kabul from when you were on leave at some point,” Sherlock said, smirking.

“It has sentimental value,” John said, and came to stand in front of him.

“Yes, because your memories of Afghanistan are ones you cherish deeply,” Sherlock said languidly, before leaning in and pressing a hot, wet, open-mouthed kiss to John's abdomen, as his hands deftly undid his belt buckle and made quick work of his jeans, tugging them down until they fell to his ankles of their own accord.

“Some of them, yes,” John said, half-serious, stepping out of his trousers and being glad that he was barefoot.

Sherlock looked up at him, pupils blown wide. “Evidently,” he said then, and his voice was a deep, slow shiver. “I do apologise. Let me repent.” And he ghosted his fingers over John's growing erection inside his boxers before he hooked a finger around the waistband, pulling on it and then letting it snap back with a slight, pleasant sting.

“Let's get this off,” he murmured, and John's cock twitched at the sound of his voice, liquid, dark, and at his hands, reaching around him to massage his arse for a moment that was far too short before he used his fingertips to pull John's boxers down. John shook them off. His erection, almost fully hard, bobbed against his stomach, hardening further when Sherlock leaned in and pressed a kiss to his abdomen, just above where his cock was nestled. Sherlock's breath was hot against the tip.

“John,” Sherlock hummed, and John shivered with it, with that voice, with his name inside that
mouth, the thrill of breath and sound almost tangible on his cock, “I’d like for it to be a bit more reciprocal this time.” He leaned back, tugging John between his still trouser-clad knees and shifted backwards on the bed, so John could crawl on it, too, ending up on his knees next to Sherlock’s thighs, so present, so powerful, God, so there. “But seeing how utterly, well –” Sherlock’s mouth quirked in a smile, “how relaxed I was last time, I think it might be better if I... do you first, so to speak.”

“Yeah,” John breathed, arousal a hot point in his gut, the collapse of a star beginning inside him, trailing a hand down the paleness of Sherlock’s chest, down, past the marks, x and X and x, the skin warm against his hand, until he met the frontier of his trousers. “But take these off,” he added, wanting them both naked, wanting their bodies as tangible as they could be, realities, canvases to be filled with each other’s gazes, the boundaries fading.

Sherlock complied, flopping back, lifting his hips and shimmying out of his trousers and boxers in a quick, surprisingly elegant movement, freeing his cock, that was already flushed and hard. He kicked the expensive trousers off the bed indifferently, and at John’s raised eyebrows said, in a soft, sultry tone: “It would be an interesting experiment to document exactly the ratio of caring about clothing to the extent of sexual arousal,” and John growled, and kissed down on that mouth, hard, pressing their bodies flush together.

“You have a me-talking-about-science kink,” Sherlock said, smirking, when John pulled back, but looking not quite as smug as usual with his lips wet and swollen.

“Maybe,” John said, then allowed Sherlock to roll him over so that he was half-seated against the headboard and Sherlock ended up on top, leaning over him in a dizzying stretch of heat and skin and focused eyes and the miracle that he still was and the warm, earthy scent of him and more, something else, the slight hint of his arousal.

“Quite certainly,” Sherlock breathed into his ear, and John let out a small sound, and tried to jerk upwards to meet him, but he moved away just a fraction. “I shall make it my mission to prove it one day.” And then he dragged his lips from John’s ear over the line of his jaw, lingering at his mouth, and sucked for a second on John’s lower lip, but moved away again when John tried to draw him in for a proper kiss.

He licked a path down John’s neck as his hand teased not-quite-touches over his cock, his mouth pausing to graze at his pulse point with his teeth, tiny sharp nicks that had John moaning helplessly.

“Fuck, Sherlock,” he whimpered, hips straining upward to get some real friction, but Sherlock didn't comply.

“Gladly, John,” he breathed in the deepest thrill of voice John had ever heard, and then kissed further down, lips skating lightly over John’s collarbones, stopping to suck firmly on a nipple, which prompted a line of heat directly down to John’s cock, and ohgod, of course he would know how to read that, the wanker, and he rolled the tiny nub between his teeth mercilessly; small streaks of pain and pleasure.

“Ah, fuck,” John hissed wholeheartedly, fistng a hand in Sherlock’s curls.

He released the nipple, fingers still ghosting over John’s cock maddeningly lightly, and moved further down, mouthing hot kisses to the trembling, shifting planes of chest and stomach, until he reached his target, and blew down gently on John’s cock.
“You,” he breathed, and his expression as he looked up at John, settled between his legs, was a lot less smooth than his words up till then had been, eyes wide and dark and liquid, his lips flushed with kissing, and something of disbelief written on his face, and he was a miracle, he was – but then he wrapped his hand around the base of John’s cock, steadying it, and slipped his lips around it until they met his fingers; a shock of wet, startling heat, and John groaned deep in the back of his throat as after a few light flicks of tongue Sherlock immediately set a rhythm of tongue and lips and pressure and ohfuck. He sucked hard on the glans every time his head came up, and after a tumbling amount of breathless, cross-eyed seconds, John had to make a conscious effort remember to uncurl the fingers that were too tightly wrapped in Sherlock's hair.

“Sorry,” he panted, and then groaned as Sherlock let his cock slip out of his mouth.

“No,” he said, voice a rough scratchy growl, and John mewled involuntarily, hips jerking to get his cock back into the heat of Sherlock's mouth, “I like it.”

John's eyes widened slightly, but then he fisted his hand back into the dark coils of hair, and descended back into a moan as Sherlock slid his cock back in, the hand at the base a tight, hot pressure. Almost involuntarily, he pulled at the curls; the tremor of Sherlock's deep moan around his cock had him gasping, swearing.

Sherlock used his free hand to hook John's leg over his shoulder, managing to not break the contact, and he hummed deeply around John, sucking mercilessly, and the fluttering minutes were insistent, and Sherlock looked so incredible in every way, glancing up at John with eyes so full of pupil John didn't think there was any paleness of iris left, and then, and then, the leg now securely shouldered, Sherlock brushed his fingers over John's balls, tugging on them for a moment, prompting a fuck from John, and then strayed lower still, ghosting over the crack of his arse and just slightly pushing between the cheeks, nothing more than that, a brush of fingers, but it was a last flicker of sensation added to so many things, propelling John so ruthlessly to orgasm that even his right leg jerking into a cramp couldn't stop it, and he could barely gasp out a “’m going –” before he was yanking at Sherlock's hair in earnest in spite of himself, toes flexing painfully, his orgasm so overpowering that he honestly couldn't help the half-shout forcing its way up through his throat as he pulsed into Sherlock's mouth, who took all of it, the shivers of his moaning only prompting new, almost painful bursts of pleasure in the wave of sensation crashing over John.

“Fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,” he panted brokenly, as the bedroom flickered back into focus and Sherlock licked his cock one more time, prompting a twinge of overstimulated half-pleasure, half-pain, to get all of John's come into his mouth, and swallowed it with his head angled, his throat pressed against John's thigh, so he could feel the unbelievable dirty movement of it, and fuck seemed to be the only word he could remember for a few, long moments.

“Ow,” he said then, and Sherlock chuckled breathlessly, unshouldering John's leg so he could stretch it out, easing the cramp.

“Fuck, Sherlock, that was...” John said after a couple of breaths, as Sherlock slid up against his side, resting his chin against John's shoulder, “that was fucking brilliant.”

“Yes, this happens to be the part I am quite prolific at,” Sherlock said, seemingly unconcerned, but the small tremor of anxiety wasn't lost to John, even with orgasm still clouding his senses.

“I love you,” he said, through the haze, through the fog, into the clarity of the rounded pressure of Sherlock's chin, and he didn't think about it, there was no thinking, there was some truth left in the world, “I love you.”
And Sherlock slipped a hand across his chest and clamped him into a half-hug of such tightness that John huffed out a small sound of protest, and then, of approval.

“Endorphins,” Sherlock muttered, but he drew John in even more.

“Very romantic,” John supplied, half-smiling, trying to find a way to contribute to the hug, but he was effectively caught. “I love you whether I've just come or not.” He settled for angling his face so his nose brushed Sherlock's forehead. “And I need you – to know that. I love you.”

Sherlock's breath was short and hot. “I think I – I know,” he muttered, as though it were a secret he could only share under his breath, and then he said, quietly: “John, I love...” He shifted; John could feel the line of his nose moulding to his shoulder, and then the light touch of his lashes closing. “You,” he breathed, and it sounded a bit strange because it didn't seem to be a response to anything at all, and the two parts of the sentence were separated by something, time, air, gravity running down the cracks of the universe to collect and pool together, though somehow the words seemed to link across that boundary quite well. And it wasn't that special a moment, objectively, as they sat there, wrapped together in the receding pleasures and the bodily aftermaths of sex, smelling of it, sweating with it, time, unbothered, slipping by – but there it was, that feeling of world, and language coming to play in the sandbox of reality, trying to measure up, trying to be enough, and John couldn't tell but he could imagine how Sherlock's lips had held those words in the roof of his mouth for a long time, wondering at them, stopping them, because how was it enough, what did it mean, when was the time, and what were the rules, and maybe, though John knew it was probably too much to ask, really, he hadn't over-thought this moment, and maybe he felt it too, the gravity of it, but even if he didn't – and this John knew was true – it was a translation of... not only heart, not only brain, something else that was a core of him, where everything sparked into being, where love was, where jumping off a roof was, where I want you to tell Lestrade, I want you to tell Mrs. Hudson, and Molly was, where trying to save Julian was, where dreaming about Angel was, where crying in a bathroom was, and there was some truth in the world left, and Sherlock was it.

“I know,” John breathed in response, because it was true, it was true in a way not a lot of things were nowadays, and he knew, he actually knew, it had been there in every you, every single one since that first one, and maybe even more so there than now, here, and Sherlock knew too even if his way of knowing was probably different, it didn't matter, because here they were.

“John,” Sherlock said, into the fold of his shoulder and neck, “can I kiss you?”

“Are you kidding?” John said, because he wasn't sure, couldn't be sure that Sherlock wasn't off in some alternate universe, a twist of reality in the maze of his brain where saying I love you was so new and so heavy it changed the rules between them.

“No,” Sherlock said.

“Of course you can,” John said, incredulously, and Sherlock angled up his face and pressed their lips together, and it was only when John tasted his own come, slightly bitter, on the slide of tongues between them that he realised Sherlock had been asking permission for that, maybe. But he liked it, he did; he'd always liked it when women he'd been with did that, it gave an extra edge to the thrill to a blowjob – and now it was Sherlock, pressed up against him with breath heavy with the both of them, and that only made it more intoxicating.

With the kissing came the increased focus on the length of Sherlock's cock, a bit surprisingly still hard, pressing into his thigh.
“Right,” he said against Sherlock's mouth, “can I –” and Sherlock's grip unclenched. He sat up fully against the headboard, and as John manoeuvred to crouch in front of him, between his legs, sitting back on his heels, they looked at each other with the full gravity of I love you still between them. Sherlock swallowed, a shift of pale throat, and he looked at John as though trying to find something, something; his eyes were focused, intent in that familiar way, and then he relaxed, as though whatever it was that he'd been looking for, he'd found it.

“John,” he said, “I'm a bit... highly-strung. I don't know if I'll be able –” to take a lot, John read.

“That's fine,” he said, and smiled, placed a light hand on Sherlock's thigh. “What do you want?”

“The same as you,” Sherlock murmured, head already falling back a bit, as though the words themselves were already a lot, and his cock twitched without any stimulation, hardening further, blood rushing, weight, gravity, life. “But don't – don't –” he said, then had to collect himself for a moment, get his words back in order, get language to obey again, at least for a bit, “not too much... foreplay.”

“Right,” John said, and blinked – he'd thought taking it slow, building it up, would be the best way to go about it, but apparently that wasn't true, and maybe it was the gradual build-up, the layering of touch that was so overwhelming for Sherlock.

It felt a bit too strange to just cut straight to sucking Sherlock's cock without any lead-in, so he pressed in and kissed him again, teasing into his mouth, and Sherlock sighed into it, and then made a small sound of need when John closed his lips around his tongue and sucked on it, gently. He kept his hands on Sherlock's jaw, restraining the natural-feeling urge to trail them downwards, and instead focused on kissing him, and on the small tremors of body next to him. God, he was so sensitive, his breathing already shallow from basically nothing. So he broke the kiss, pressed another peck to the line of Sherlock's jaw, and then shifted down, moving his hands to Sherlock's hips, until he was, weirdly unexpectedly, face to face with Sherlock's cock, jutting out of the nest of his pubic hair, leaking onto his stomach.

“Um,” he said, suddenly realising what he was about to do. “Sherlock, I've never actually done this before, so if there's anything –” he started to say, but Sherlock made a sound of desperation and frustration.

“John,” he murmured, sounding pained, “I'm so close already that if you don't hurry up, I'm going to come just from your breath. There's not – not a lot you can do wrong at this point, I imagine.”

And that was a bit dizzying, of course, and John's heart was leaping around in his chest, apparently no longer concerned with pumping around his blood.

“Right,” he said, and then before he had any kind of feeling that resembled I'm ready for this he knew he had been ready for this, actually, for a long time, and took Sherlock's cock into his mouth as far as it would go without feeling uncomfortable; which wasn't that far, really, he really didn't know how to do this, and the sensation of it was... peculiar; a throbbing, almost weird feeling of hot skin inside his mouth, and the bitter taste of pre-come on his tongue as he ran it up the underside of cock inside his mouth. It was the sound that Sherlock made that made an incongruous, impossible twinge of desire flare in his stomach, in spite of his recent orgasm – an utterly animalistic growl that seemed to come from the deepest part of his gut, and if there was one thing John regretted it was that he couldn't find a way to look up at him to really see his face.
He experimented, trying to translate some of the things that he'd always liked, bobbing his head up and down the shaft, beating down his gag reflex when he took in a bit too much, and Sherlock was making stretches of sound that almost sounded like they couldn't exist, and then they crystallised into words, and John couldn't quite restrain the nervous giggle bubbling up in his mouth, and at that Sherlock's hips jerked a bit, and John gagged a bit, but it was okay, it was only a bit, and it was all right, because: “John, you – your taste – amylase,” Sherlock hissed, and then, “lysozyme,” and he drew the word out in a moan as John started to suck as well as he could, feeling himself in an alternate universe again. “Sí, John, ah,” and John vaguely registered the way Sherlock's hands were fisting violently into the sheets next to him, and he remembered somewhat blurrily that Sherlock had liked that bit of pain, before, so he dug his fingertips a bit more firmly into the jut of hips beneath them, and Sherlock all but sobbed out a “lipase, John, you, yes,” and then, raggedly, “stop, no, toast –” and it honestly took him a second to take that in, to have it register, but when it did, it was like a weight coming to crush him, and he immediately released Sherlock's cock from his mouth.

“Fuck,” he said involuntarily, sitting up, “what's – are you –” and then he forced himself to take a breath as he watched Sherlock's contorted face, his eyes wide open, the whites whiter than they seemed to usually be, frozen, locked.

“It's okay,” he said, and pressed forward before he could think better of it, taking Sherlock's face into his hands.

And that it worked was nothing short of a miracle, that his hands seemed to be the key to the lock of those jaws, so that they came loose under his fingers, and Sherlock's mouth opened, and he was breathing again, it was a miracle, it was. He shifted so he was next to Sherlock again, keeping one of his hands on the curve of jaw into throat, watching him.

“John,” Sherlock mumbled, blinking, still staring ahead.

“I'm here,” he said, soothingly, inane-platitude-how-dull, yes, but sometimes it was necessary to state the obvious, even to Sherlock.

“I think I might have – I might have... toasted out too quickly,” Sherlock said, and he sounded a bit slurred, and then turned his head so he was looking at John.

John shook his head. “There's no such thing as safewording too quickly, Sherlock. When you feel you want to use it, you use it.”

“But I didn't... I didn't really want you to stop, I just couldn't –” his eyes were still blown wide, dark, unreadable.

“It was too much,” John supplied.

“Yes,” he said after a beat, “but it wasn't unpleasant, just... overwhelming.”

John studied him. He was aglow with something, something that looked vaguely familiar but was hard to place right now.

Sherlock brought over his hand and touched it to John's face, locking their eyes together in an intense gaze. “I still want it, John,” he said, breathlessly.

John gulped. “Are you sure?” he asked, because he really felt like he needed to ask.
“Yes,” Sherlock said, in a tremble, a spill of voice.

“Okay,” John said, and licked his lips, and had a moment of wonder at the taste of Sherlock on them, “right, okay.”

And what could he do but resume, returning to the worship of that body, of that mind, its alienness, some of its hitches, its hiccoughs being revealed to him in this privileged intimacy? It took Sherlock less than twenty seconds to come after John had taken him into his mouth again, and he came, clutching the headboard with one hand, the other curled around his own throat in a strange angle of limbs, with a breathtaking, broken whisper of “lacto...peroxidase,” and if that would have been off-putting on anyone else it only felt more like a wonder on him, and John couldn't help that some of the come slipped out of his mouth – he wasn't sure if he'd have swallowed it if Sherlock had given him some warning, but Sherlock probably had been overcome by it, too, and it really wasn't that bad, it was less bitter than the pre-come, and it was something of Sherlock that he with a surprising intensity wanted to sample, to learn.

Sherlock lolled against the headboard, body one smooth line of relaxation, boneless, eyes wide open, flushed, a vision.

John wiped his mouth and then moved back next to him, tugging him into the space of his shoulder.

“You are a marvel,” he breathed.

“You are – extraordinary,” Sherlock murmured back, muffled, mouth apparently catching on the words.

“C'mon,” John said, trying to fight the wholly unexpected onslaught of tears pressing at his eyes, “let's try to get under these covers, all right?”

With an effort, he managed to tug the sheets out from under them, and pulled them back up, Sherlock already moulding to his side again in the same way that he had two nights ago, not one point of tension, of resistance, still in his muscles.

“It's – I don't know what time, but afternoon,” he said, a bit slurred.

“We've got nothing to do,” John said, smiling.

Sherlock gave a huff of laughter, and pressed his face even closer into John.

“Are you all right?” John finally ventured, still feeling a bit overwhelmed.

Sherlock was silent for a long moment, and John started to think that he'd fallen asleep. “I am absolutely all right,” he eventually said, and he sounded bit more collected already, “in fact, I don't know if I've ever been more all right.”

“Good,” John said, relief bleeding throughout his chest. Then, because he couldn't fight it: “What is it – that happens?”

Another beat of silence. “The thought of you doing what you're about to do is already so strong that it's almost enough,” he then said, “and when you actually do it, that can be... it's a lot.”

John nodded, though he could only begin to imagine what that had to be like, what sort of double
stimulation that had to be, the force of Sherlock’s mind already supplying him with such a strong suggestion of sensation, and then his body filling in whatever was left, flowing over the boundaries of body and mind, connecting the two in a way that had be absolutely staggering.

“And the chemistry, before you ask,” Sherlock continued, and John could feel his smile against his neck, “it's an equation sometimes, or a sudden visual idea of structure, of components, and when I come, it all... it all comes together, and I can see you, brought down to your parts, and it's like being inside of the smallest bit of you.” He sounded almost un Concerned, as though it wasn't the most heartbreaking, the most mind-blowing thing in the universe.

John tried to say something, but found that his throat had completely choked up.

So instead, he tightened his arms around Sherlock until it felt even like a fraction of the feeling of fitting together that he was describing, and that fraction was already glorious, and he closed his eyes, forgetting about the afternoon, forgetting about the day and its demands, forgetting about everything but the weight of Sherlock's head on his shoulder and the long length of his leg entwined with his own.

—

If there was anything that was wrong in those slim, undemanding hours, who knew how many, that slipped around them as the friendly gloom of the bedroom increased with the steady flow of time that John couldn't measure, it was that he woke up to find Sherlock facing away from him, back rigid, speaking, moaning, into the unresponsive emptiness of the other side of him: “Julian – Julian, por favor – ayúdame,” and his shoulder working as his hand sought someone who was half a world, half a dream, all of reality away.

John, trying to beat down the stone-hard pinprick of uncertainty in his chest, slipped an arm around Sherlock and drew himself closer to his back.

Sherlock relaxed into his embrace. “Sí,” he sighed, and though John couldn't be sure who it was that Sherlock was happy to have close to him, he pressed a kiss to his neck, trying to alleviate a bit of the darkness that lurked around the corners of his mind, and really, if there had been someone else, maybe, who had been able to do the same thing, he would fight to be happy about that, because so much past suffering could never be undone, and past happiness should never be undone, either.

—

When he woke up again, the bedroom was dim, though not quite dark, and Sherlock was watching him intently, resting his head on his hand. John jerked to awareness at the unexpected focus of his stare.

“Bit of a stalker, aren't you?” he said, sleepy mouth curling around the sounds.

“You have been surprisingly not-boring to observe for about six minutes now,” Sherlock responded evenly. “Not quite the pinnacle of romance that I've been led to believe it was by popular media, but still.”

John snorted. “Watching me drool all over your pillows is romantic to you?”

“Problem?” Sherlock quirked an eyebrow. “I don't know if I need to remind you that I not long ago had an orgasm while naming chemical components of your saliva.”
John blinked. Well, that was true.

“So,” Sherlock said, “partnered orgasms apparently make one very hungry. Dinner?”

And somehow it seemed fitting not to go out, so they didn't have to bother with more clothes than pyjama trousers. It wasn't even seven, and Sherlock, in a twist of alternate universe that made John laugh so hard he didn't know if he'd survive, attempted to help John with the meat pie, before being dismissed because he couldn't stop making comments about John's cutting technique. After the obligatory “I'm only trying to help you, John,” and John swearing an oath to never, ever let Sherlock into the kitchen again while he was cooking, Sherlock shouldered his violin and played, the composition that he'd been working on when Julian's package had arrived, but now a bit more upbeat.

John took a moment from dicing onions to look at him, sweeping the bow over the strings, swaying to the music far more dramatically than it called for, the muscles of his bare shoulders working. He was beautiful, and he was there, becoming more sharply lined as the streetlamps of Baker Street flickered into life and threw cubes of steady light through their windows.

Something prickled in the back of John's throat, and he had to take a moment to get himself under control, because, God, he was going to have a heart attack one of these days.

After quarrelling about whether it was the one and a half carrots that Sherlock had chopped before John had banished him from the kitchen, or the rest of the dish that John had prepared that made this particular meat pie so much more of a success than any previous attempts, John remembered.

“Oh, right,” he said, “I'll probably be having some friends over for dinner during the week-end. Saturday, probably. Still need to check.”

Sherlock observed him over his empty plate. “Your friends from your grief therapy,” he said, and didn't even make it a question.

“We try to get together once a month. It's my turn to host.” John shrugged, though he felt far from flippant.

Sherlock tapped his knife against the side of his plate. “You want me out when they come.”

John entertained the notion of saying well, you don't have to if it's inconvenient, but it was Sherlock, who had a different relationship to words than anyone else, so he said: “Yeah. I really need you to be out.”

There was a small silence. Sherlock turned his eyes from John's face to his plate as though there was anything left to observe there. Patterns of gravy, maybe. Traces of vegetable and meat and saliva and particles of John's hands.

“And what do you propose I do, then?” He sounded half-genuine, half-mocking.

John licked his lips. “I dunno. Have a drink with someone.” Sherlock raised an eyebrow at his plate.
“With... Greg,” John added, coming to the realisation that Greg was about the only person that he could imagine not just tolerating, but actually somewhat enjoying being with Sherlock on his own for the entirety of an evening, though even he might be something of a stretch if Sherlock decided to be stroppy; and it was a realisation that came with its own particular kind of chilling wonder.

“Lestrade will punch me if he's had a drink and I'm around him and you're not,” Sherlock said, frowning, sounding a bit petulant, finally looking at him again.

John chuckled. “As well he should.”

Sherlock scoffed, but was otherwise silent.

“Can I count on you being out?” John pressed.

“I'm sure I can find something to occupy me while you insist on banishing me from my own flat,” Sherlock grumbled, but then reached over, dragged his finger over John's plate and looked at it intently before licking it, and John knew that there, shrouded in Sherlock-speak, was an equivalent of I'll do my best.

He followed the path of the finger as it was sucked into the mouth. “Go and put something on,” he said, “you're being very distracting.”

“Not my fault you have such a one-track mind that you can't handle this much stimulation,” Sherlock said, smugly, voice curling around the finger before he let it pop out of his mouth with intentional loudness.

—

Dinner and tears on me,
Saturday, eight? 221B
Baker St.
J

Sharon's response came, first as usual, more transparent than the others as usual.

Love to. x

Bill's gruffness followed, a bit later:

Look forward to the
hysterical crying as
always

Last, Ian's

I hope you're going to hide
the kitchen knives. Make
us something spicy so we
can pretend that's why
we're crying.
Ian
dropped into his inbox. All of them burning with an unsaid so will he be there, or maybe he was just imagining things now and it was silly to assume that everyone else was as preoccupied with Sherlock’s presence as he was.

“Saturday it is,” he told Sherlock, who was wearing his plastic safety glasses but not his shirt, poring over the blue, gluey froth in his Erlenmeyer, which had congealed to an unpleasant-looking gel since he’d started the experiment the day before.

Sherlock sighed dramatically, but when John switched on the telly and plopped down on the couch, he noticed Sherlock picking his phone up from amid the test tubes littering the table in a way that was almost secretive, and tapping away a quick message. Making his own plans, then. That was good. Maybe. Probably. Either way it didn't quite do to be curious when he'd basically commanded Sherlock to get out of the flat, so he wrestled that particular feeling down.

“You want to watch QI with me?” he asked, grinning a bit to himself.

“And I would sooner watch your hairline receding,” Sherlock responded, not missing a beat. “It would make for far more excitement.”

John sat back into the sofa, quite satisfied, and then for a moment quenching, and then fully allowing, because he could, now, the liquid love bursting in his chest when Sherlock suddenly sidled up next to him on the couch in a slide of satin and chest, safety glasses pushed up in his curls, and pressed his nose to John’s hairline over his ear, commenting “Yes, John, adequately middle-aged, I’d say,” before he was gone again, back at the table, fiddling rather ill-advisedly with chemical compounds without putting a shirt on, probably just to wind John up more.

And that was almost a typical evening in 221B, and that had been so atypical lately, so rare, after all of the upheavals and aftershocks that had trembled between these walls, that John closed his eyes for a moment just to relish the feeling of the leather of the sofa sticking to his bare back and the tinkling of glass tubes as Sherlock picked and chose his way through what were probably explosives in the making; and John couldn't mind, he couldn't tell him to be more careful, because Sherlock himself was such a steady, reassuring presence, now and then muttering incomprehensible things to himself as he moved around the experiment – he wasn't a time bomb, anymore, he wasn't an explosive substance that John didn't know how to handle. If he reached out now, Sherlock would let him, wouldn't even ask him why – he would meld forward into his hands, as much attracted to the point of gravity between them as John was, and it was – God – it was more than John could ever have hoped for, it was more than he could ever have imagined; reality one-upping fantasy at every turn, full of twists and bends that no one could predict, with none of the narrative clarity that people looked for and lived by, but so much deeper, it seemed in that moment, as John only realised that he'd been looking at Sherlock when Sherlock responded to his gaze and looked up with an amused pull of his mouth. Yes, overthrowing all of the nos that existed – they were here, this was them, this was home, with all of its distinct voices of night and day and secrets and sharing, and when John looked back at the telly he focused on Stephen Fry’s grinning mouth for long, long moments, feeling honestly like his heart was swelling; points of collapse, points of explosion, not much difference between the two, the rapid expanse of a universe that contained the two of them against the hard frontier of his ribs.
Chapter 17

The tight clench of Sherlock's fingers around his jaw cut through his dream and slashed apart the red-clouded grey, the flat responselessness of skin, the lack of resistance, the nothing that sat under the pounding haze that distorted the pavement, the dark blood-streaked figure on it.

“John,” Sherlock said, urgently, his voice a reality that drove away the last tatters of sleep.

“Wha –” John mumbled, and Sherlock's night breath was heavy and uncomfortably warm on his cheek, but as he fell back into his own body and realised what was going on, realised that his heart was racing against his ribcage, and there was the hot pounding of blood in his ears, John angled his face a bit more so he could taste more of it. “Sherlock,” he whispered, involuntarily.

“Obviously,” Sherlock's voice came from the invisible black hole that was his mouth, not far from John's face, from his dark shape in the bedroom, more warmth and touch than vision, and his fingers loosened slightly, but he didn't take them away from John's face.

“Did I wake you?” John asked, still drowsy.

“Yes,” Sherlock said.

“M sorry.”

“That doesn't bother me.” Sherlock sounded flippant, but his fingers were still searching into the soft groove behind John's jawbone, as though he were trying to get behind the bone and feel what was hidden there. It was a bit strange, a bit tender.

“Right,” John said, closing his eyes, allowing the more complete darkness of the inside of his eyelids to replace the night full of things. He seized control of his breathing, counted the beats of his exhalation, then very consciously drew a gulp of air in. There was no lingering terror, there was more... almost surprise, as though his mind had known all along that the fear wasn't necessary anymore, and the warm contact of Sherlock's body half on his had filtered in even before he'd woken.

“Is that what you dream about, now?” came Sherlock's voice, calm, quiet, through the perfect blackness of his closed eyes. “Instead of Afghanistan?” There was a silence. “You were saying my name,” he added, as though John had asked him how he'd known.

John opened his eyes, though he couldn't really see anything except the vague, maybe even imagined outline of Sherlock's sleep-tousled curls, and swallowed; he was sure Sherlock could feel it, with his fingers still pressed into the lines of his jaw. “Afghanistan still happens, too,” he said. “I – this stopped happening regularly quite a while before you... as soon as I accepted that it was true, I think. It's been... a while.”

He couldn't see it, but he was sure Sherlock was watching him intently, maybe even seeing more than he, John, could – with the strangeness of those eyes that saw so much, that picked up so many details that everyone else never saw.

“Does it help that I'm here?” Sherlock asked.
John laughed a small laugh. “Does it help the nightmares of you committing suicide that you're not dead and you're lying next to me?”

Sherlock was silent, and John realised it was probably an honest question.

So he said: “Yes. Of course it helps.” It helped for *everything*, for all of life, really.

“Good,” Sherlock said, and pressed the line of his nose to the warm, slightly damp spot on John's cheek where his breath had been focusing for a long moment, until he withdrew and unlocked his fingers from around John's face. “Come here,” he said, voice warm and smooth, as he settled himself back against his pillow.

John shifted until the planes of their bodies slotted together again, and, resting his face against Sherlock's chest, breathed in the smell of Sherlock in the night, clean sweat from being tangled in warm sheets with another person, the dark natural scents of skin surfacing over the lighter smells of daytime showering and clothes.

“I was dreaming,” Sherlock murmured, “of rain in the Andes, and sitting under a thatched roof with water dripping into my tea.”

John kissed the small patch of chest he could reach just by turning his head.

–

The clinic rang him awake at seven. Sherlock tried to swat the phone from between his fingers with the arm that had been lying heavily across John's chest when he was jerked awake, but he managed to get it to his ear.

“Watson,” he mumbled. The weariness of the female voice on the other side suggested that she was nearing the end of her shift.

“Morning, Dr. Watson. Dr. Mortimer just phoned in that she won't be able to make it today due to illness. Can you replace her?”

“No,” Sherlock muttered from beside him, mouth apparently full of pillow.

But John said, nearing full awareness: “Yeah, I – er – I'm available. Eight?”

“If you can make it,” the receptionist said evenly.

“I'll do my best,” he said, trying to deflect Sherlock's half-hearted jabs at his sides, and hung up.

“I need to get up,” he said, passing a hand over his eyes.

The one eye of Sherlock's that wasn't obscured by the pillow glared at him. “You do realise you're forcing me to get up too.”

“You can stay in bed if you want,” John said, pushing himself to sit up.

“There is nothing of interest in this bed when you're not in it,” Sherlock said matter-of-factly, and was out of bed even before John was, slipping out of the room in a flash of sheet-marked skin, looking for his dressing gown, and he was halfway through making coffee when John joined him, at
which point he left the coffee to John and went to sulk at the table, refusing both toast and caffeinated beverages.

—

His shift was filled with hysterical patients suffering from little else than overstimulated imaginations.

He texted Sherlock once:

_I would much prefer to be in bed with you right now._

and he smiled, and thought _as close to normal couple texting as it's going to get, probably when he received_

_Evidently. I'll have you know the bed reciprocates the sentiment quite strongly._
_SH_

—

He came home, quite knackered, to Sherlock and a special delivery from Angelo's; Sherlock half-dressed and draped over the sofa, Italian food wafting heat and mouthwatering smell on the table.

“Will you talk about me?” Sherlock said when he came through the door, and it didn't quite feel like the seamless transitions of monologue John often stepped into that suggested that Sherlock was just picking up a thread of conversation he'd been developing while John was out.

“When?” he said, wincing at the ache low in his back as he shrugged off his coat.

“When your friends come over.” Sherlock sat up, looking blankly at him.

John looked at him for a second. “I suppose we probably will, yeah,” he then said, not sure what Sherlock was expecting.

Sherlock's face betrayed nothing except a vague sort of dissatisfaction, and he settled back, steepling his fingers in front of his chin. John decided to let it go, not feeling quite up to fishing out whatever it was that was occupying his companion right now.

“You want some?” he asked instead, going over to the table and weighing the wrapped-up portion of tagliatelle alla bolognese in his hand.

“No, it's for you,” Sherlock hummed, staring at the ceiling. “Water's just boiled if you want tea. I'm fine.”

“Right,” John said, and shook some pasta onto a plate. “Thanks.”

Sherlock drew up his legs and threw him an open, bright look. John plopped down where Sherlock's feet had been and waited for Sherlock to put his feet into his lap before setting his plate on his shins. He watched Sherlock as he closed his eyes and brought his palms together under his chin, obviously
deep in the maze of an unfinished thought. It was a bit new, this; he'd always been around for it, but never quite as literally, never with Sherlock's warmth pressing into his thighs, with John's fingers curling around Sherlock's ankles as his body and mind both worked towards a solution for whatever it was that was eluding him for the moment.

“I don't know if I appreciate your toenails being this close to my food,” he said, smiling a bit.

“John,” Sherlock said, not opening his eyes, “you've eaten things that have been close to all sorts of human appendages, most far more contagious and – I do think – more repulsive than my toenails. You're not fooling me.”

Of course he wasn't, and that Sherlock's left foot developed a slight twitch, a nervous spasming of muscles as his face drew closed, too, apparently circling something that wouldn't give itself up to his mind, so that John's plate trembled a bit as he scooped up a forkful of tagliatelle and tomato – it was somehow very all right, and it made him feel warm.

–

It took two more days of no cases and Dr. Mortimer continuing to be ill for Sherlock to grow seriously agitated. John noticed him texting back and forth with someone for long stretches of time, growing more and more dissatisfied with every response. On Wednesday afternoon he started pacing and mumbling, and poking at the blue gel until he proclaimed the entire experiment a waste of time and dropped it into the sink, only scowling when John told him that he would be doing that particular washing-up himself. During the night he slipped in and out of bed, and for the first time since his disappearance, there was the sound of violin music deep in the night; angry, harsh strokes that ended up being so jarring that John went into the living room and sat with him, first trying to reason with him, then trying to express shouting through pressured whispering, thinking of Mrs. Hudson, and then changing tactics, requesting pieces he knew Sherlock loved and that were far less amelodic. It worked to some extent, though when he finally went back to bed he could already read the silence as ominous, a feeling that was confirmed when he appeared at the breakfast table and the charred remains of their fleece blanket were scattered over the table, a fragment still pinned under the microscope.

“Do you have shifts the entire week?” Sherlock groused at him over an untouched cup of tea, reminding John a bit too much of a five-year-old repeatedly going Are we there yet?

“It worries me that you don’t remember that you already asked me that yesterday,” he said gruffly, annoyed at the disruptions of his sleep that Sherlock didn't even have to decency to pretend to be sorry for, and not quite ready to face the day as his cup of coffee was still half full.

“I do remember,” Sherlock said, curling his lip. “I'm trying to emotionally manipulate you into changing your schedule.”

John looked at him over the rim of his coffee mug, partly annoyed, partly amused. “Can you seriously not think of anything else to occupy yourself than dragging me down into the – the pit of despair that is you being bored? How is it any better when I'm here?”

Sherlock's phone pinged; he glanced at it, his mouth tightened, and then he fixed John with a bright look. “It's better because then I can at least seduce you.”

John coughed a laugh through his mouthful of coffee. “So now having sex with me is something to take your mind off things, is it?”
It took a long second for Sherlock's mouth, which had opened to form a word, to actually start producing sound. “You know it is,” he said then, and the shift from exasperation to sobered earnestness was a bit surprising, and John swallowed.

“Yeah,” he said, and licked his lips. “Yeah, I know.”

There was a silence. Sherlock seemed to have forgotten about scowling, his face smooth and open.

“You could text Greg to see if he can use you for something,” John said finally, when the strangeness between them became a bit too much, and took another sip of coffee to focus on.

“Lestrade doesn't use me. He needs me. And he texts me. I don't text him. That's how it works,” Sherlock huffed quietly, and resumed flicking his index finger at the handle of his tea mug.

“Well,” John said, getting to his feet after a glance at his watch, “I'm off. Someone here has to make some money. That's also how it works, sadly.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, but it was insincere, and he looked a bit sad.

And John, with a small kind of tightness in his chest, leaned over the warzone of table and breakfast mingling with experiments to kiss him, on an impulse, really, and Sherlock allowed the peck, and was smiling and frowning at the same time when John pulled back.

“So this is domestic bliss then, is it?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

John said, resisting the urge to lean in and kiss him again: “If our flat had about a 100% less explosive chemicals and explosive moods from a certain half of the domestic arrangement it would be, I guess.”

“Sounds excruciatingly dull,” Sherlock said, tapping his fingers on the tabletop, but he still smiled at John, a quirk of one corner of his mouth.

“Never thought I'd say this, but it kind of does, doesn't it?” John said, and then lingered uselessly for another moment, reluctant to leave all of a sudden, until Sherlock's smile twitched into a grin and John was sure Sherlock was mocking him lightly now, and he stepped out of the kitchen and shrugged into his coat.

“See you tonight. Try to avoid anything exploding.”

“Yes, darling,” Sherlock said, voice reverberating with sarcastic mirth.

“You can use your time to think of more appropriate nicknames for me, or I'll be forced to break out the gun,” John called back at that, already halfway down the stairs, and then hurried down to deprive Sherlock of the last word, and when the door fell into the lock behind him, he chuckled a little, incredulously, at himself, at them.

Two hours into his shift, when he had a moment to check his phone: fourteen messages from Sherlock. He sighed, expecting fourteen Bored. SHs or, worse, something like John, where do we keep the fire extinguisher? SH progressing over Whenever you're ready for it. SH to Never mind,
crisis averted. You were never very fond of your mattress, were you? SH

Instead, the messages, sent in intervals of five minutes, read:

John, I really do think
I prefer ‘John’. Fits you.
SH

It’s short.
SH

It’s simple.
SH

It’s readable. Transparent.
SH

It exudes trustworthiness.
SH

But exists in so many
languages it defies
definition.
SH

The only disciple to
stick with the pure
transcendency.
Courage, commitment.
SH

John the Baptist. Loyalty.
Seeing things through.
Setting things in motion,
taking a back seat, burning
in the background.
SH

Did you know that
America has a lot of
Johns?
SH

SH

A John. Drawn to darkness, not put off by rules of propriety.

SH

The John. Grit and grime and body and smell and biology.

SH

Covering a lot of ground, basically.

SH

Could be dangerous. John.

SH

He was stunned for a long, long moment as he scrolled through the messages. He then pressed his palm against his mouth to stop the laughter; the nervous, incredulous laughter, because fuck, what was he saying? It was glorious and extremely unsettling at the same time. God, he fucking loves me, was a thought that announced itself on its own, and he bit his fingers to keep the sounds in.

Sherlock, are you drunk?

Sherlock sent back

Irrelevant, but slightly, yes. I am unexpectedly enjoying this beer you bought.

SH

John sucked in a breath through the barrier of his hand in front of his mouth, and shook his head – no, yes, trying to clear his head, and then still not being able to help the giggle coming through. He typed, being glad for the normality of tone of text messages:

That was for my dinner party. And it's not even noon.

The response:

How perfectly dull.
John shook his head, then frowned.

*Wait. Why do you know all of these random facts about John? American facts? Not the sort of thing you'd usually save.*

There was a couple of minutes of nothing, and John was about to buzz in the next patient when his phone sounded again.

*I did research you.*

and immediately after:

*Just not before we met.*

John pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger to give himself a different sensation to focus on than the burst of nervous heat in his chest, trying to swallow away the almost physical rush of love that sat like a mouthful of warm liquid in his throat, spreading down through his chest.

*So, what, you googled me?*

He remembered doing exactly the same thing after meeting Sherlock, and it was a bit unsettling to recall.

*Amongst other things.*

John shook his head, not really wanting to know what the “other things” might have been. Sherlock had more than enough ways to get into Mycroft’s intelligences on British soldiers than John wanted to be aware of.

*So you clicked random pages about “John”?*

The response was immediate:

*Not random in the slightest. You know my methods, John.*

“Jesus,” John whispered, smiling. He quashed the urge to hold the phone to his lips. Giving in to some of it, in the end, he sent:

*I love you too.*
and wondered at language, like he so often did. Sherlock didn't respond, and he didn't need to.

–

When he came home, Sherlock was naked and stubborn and tense and somewhat harsh, pulling at his clothes until he could get at skin, keeping John's trousers halfway around his thighs and his shirt only half undone, guiding him through an almost merciless handjob against the table, John's hands keeping him steady on its edges, knocking over petri dishes and Erlenmeyers, pushing back into the stretch of bareness that was his lover behind him, and Sherlock came into the fold of clothes still bunched around John's arse before John did, finishing with a peak of pleasure spiked with pain.

Sherlock bit his neck from behind, breath ragged.

After a moment of gathering himself, John asked between breaths: “Are you okay?”

Sherlock's tongue darted out to tease at the slight pain where his teeth had been, softer now, the edge taken off, before responding. “I am now.”

John pressed back into him, and Sherlock's arms came around him. He hesitated for a moment, then said: “Really? Because this is an awful lot like it was before.” Before you let me touch you, he meant.

He could practically feel Sherlock thinking behind him. Whatever it was that he'd been expecting in response – don't worry about that or not important or I'm bored or brilliantly deduced, John or something else, he didn't know – it definitely hadn't been what Sherlock said: “Are you okay?”

“I... don't know,” he said, honestly, and it was a bit strange that he hadn't realised it before he said it.

Sherlock wheeled him around, and his face was calculating, his eyes narrowed slightly. “Is this one of those times where it's really important I state the obvious?” he said after a couple of seconds.

“Depends on what's the obvious,” John said, a bit confused.

Sherlock looked at him. “I enjoy it when you touch me, John,” he said then, and then snapped his mouth shut, as though he still wasn't used to saying things like that out loud, or at least when he wasn't in that bubble in which things could be returned, in which he could accept John's hands trying to undo some of his tension.

“That's good,” John said, feeling a bit weak.

Sherlock unlocked his mouth, and the look of determination on his face was so precious John almost laughed in affection at the sight of it. “It clears away a lot of things when you do.” He thought for a second. “But it needs a space to start with. I don't think it would work when I'm like... this,” he finished, somewhat lamely.

“All right,” John said. “That's all right.”

Sherlock smiled, looking a bit relieved, then pressed forward and kissed his mouth. “Good?” he mumbled when he pulled back, and John was suddenly struck by the idea that was Sherlock, and the body that was him, how he was right now, completely naked against the clothedness of John, trying to get between the folds that separated them, apparently so restless alone that this had been necessary for him to get to the calmer space that allowed him to, right now, rest his nose against John's without much of the agitation of before, and he had a strong pang of a feeling he couldn't quite identify when
he realised how terrible it had to have been for Sherlock to be alone – to not have anyone to share himself with, to push himself up against, to talk to, to be a mind and a body with, to take from and give to and explore the limits of taking and giving with. *Alone is what I have. Alone protects me.* and how that had been such a blatant lie, such a dark cover to keep John stranded at you machine, that betrayal that was short but should never have been there, the small point of hurt that Sherlock pressed to get John to leave him alone so he could climb the stairs to the roof and save all of them, to fragment himself so he could keep everyone he loved intact. Sherlock hadn't been fine before, when he was alone. He hadn't been fine when he was alone in Peru. He hadn't been fine before John.

“Yes,” he said, a bit strangled, and hugged his lover, his strange, naked, marvel of a lover. He could hear the smile in the small sound Sherlock made.

“I'm going to... change my clothes,” he said after a short while, a bit hesitant, not sure if it was right to break the contact between them.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Sherlock said, pulling back. “I'm getting into the shower.” And he was off, tight lines of naked body. John watched him go and wondered at him for a moment, so different at times, such a shifting variable; someone else's touch a catalyst that his own clearly wasn't. So wound-up, now, so tense, for reasons that John couldn't know but still thought he had a good idea about.

He passed a hand over his face and took a breath. He would have to be the one to start this conversation.

–

Neither of them had remembered to re-hang the shower curtain after Sherlock had ripped it down, so when John came into the bathroom, the floor was wet and Sherlock was a shock of skin and scars with water and light bouncing off it, a bit diffuse in the steam. He was threading his fingers through his sopping hair, rinsing it of shampoo, and he didn't open his eyes.

“Hello,” he said, angling his face further up into the water stream. “You appear to have misplaced your sense of privacy.”

“I've learnt from the best,” John said lightly in response, looking at the flooded floor with a frown.

Sherlock shook his head, spattering John with droplets, and John could spot his half-smile into the shower spray at John's sound of protest.

“You're thinking about Julian, aren't you?” John said, after a moment, slipping a bit on the water on the floor as he made his way over to lean against the sink.

Sherlock opened his eyes and turned to him, and the look of honest surprise on his face was such a rare sight John smiled at it, despite the tightness clenched in his gut.

Sherlock studied him for a split second, before his face folded into his *ah, yes*-expression. “I've been talking about him in my sleep.”

“Yeah,” John didn't even bother to deny it.

Sherlock turned the shower off and stood for a moment. John tracked the water running off him, rolling over the ridges and hollows of that body that he loved so, that was so close and so tangible. He suppressed the small twinge of desire it was already sparking in him again, for now, and reached
over to hand Sherlock a towel.

“What did I say?” Sherlock said finally after stepping out onto the wet floor, rubbing the towel through his curls, the Peruvian-sun-lightened ends now dark with English shower water.

“I don't know. I don't speak Spanish.”

Sherlock gave a light snort at that, though his face soon passed back to serious, a bit pinched. “Of course.”

“But it sounded...” John eyed him, trying to keep his expression as neutral as he could, “urgent.”

Sherlock twisted the towel between his hands, looking more uncomfortable than John had ever seen him. “Yes,” he murmured, more to himself than to John.

“Has he been texting you all this time?” John asked him.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, and then, unprompted – a first – elaborated. “He wants me to go and see him again.”

“But you don't want to?” The hems of John's jeans were getting soaked through where he was standing on them.

The look Sherlock gave him was troubling: too layered, too indistinct, it could have meant both yes and no. “Hm,” Sherlock hummed, revealing nothing, as he passed the towel over his arms, and when he looked at John, his moist hair standing up in crazy tufts of ringlets, his face had clouded over with a careful blankness. “We didn't part on the best of terms last time.”

John studied him, feeling something cold twist in his gut at the reappearance of the mask; it had been a while since he'd seen it this clearly, put on this purposefully. “You do realise you still haven't told me – well, anything. Not about him. You've told me about Angel.” Sherlock's mouth twitched. “But not about him.”

“Yes, John, I realise that.” Sherlock said, quietly, bypassing evidently, then pressed the towel to his mouth as though he wanted to muffle his voice even more.

“Will you? Tell me?” John pressed, because he wasn't sure he could handle it for any longer, having Julian pop up at unexpected times, when Sherlock was giving him a massage, when Sherlock was sleeping against him, when Sherlock was playing with his phone, when they were watching telly together – it would be all right, maybe, if he just knew who that man had been, and what he had been to Sherlock, though it was becoming clearer and clearer, but he needed to know it from Sherlock, to see how he said it, what he looked like talking about it, to assess how much of it was still there and what it was, exactly, that had been there.

The sound Sherlock made was a muffled expression of – of protest, maybe, of Christ, John or maybe of I don't want this, frustration, perhaps, and as John watched, Sherlock's body seemed to tense, muscles knitting together in an unconscious gesture of defence, of putting up boundaries.

“I'm getting dressed,” Sherlock finally said, voice level.

John tried to catch his eye, but they remained focused on the towel. John licked his lips to get rid of the sudden dryness in his mouth. “Yeah, all right,” he said, feeling suddenly like maybe it wasn't fair,
exactly, to come in here with all of Sherlock on display – he knew by now that while Sherlock wasn't body-conscious in quite the usual way, the sharing of his body was still something that meant something, that it was an opening of sorts, an unlocking of territory that was still largely unexplored. He recalled how Sherlock had needed clothes as well when talking to him about Angel; there was still some power to be gained from the shielding off of skin, from hiding some of its reactions.

John stepped outside of the bathroom, allowing the door to close very softly, and pottered about the kitchen, feeling a bit anxious and therefore: making tea, with his socks squelching on the floor until he pulled them off and threw them in a wet heap on the table top.

He wasn't at all sure what he was doing, and experience had taught him that letting Sherlock choose what he wanted to share and when he wanted to share it was likely to lead to the best result, but this had been silently gnawing away at him for some time – a light point of pressure that sat underneath the things that they said to each other, a dark spot, a pocket of meaning buttoned closed. He wanted to understand, he really did – he wanted to give Sherlock all the time he needed, all the space he needed; but incongruously, impossible, he wanted Sherlock to reward him for that by telling him about this without prompting. It wasn't fair to expect it, he knew. He was an adult, he was experienced in relationships, and if there was one thing he knew very well by now it was that no one, not even Sherlock Holmes – maybe especially not Sherlock Holmes – could ever read the underlying expectations of actions if they weren't voiced. It was wrong to start feeling insecure and a bit angry at Sherlock for not offering this up of his own accord – but as he pressed a hand to the small stab of developing headache between his eyes, his feelings were no one's but his own, and they sat there, smouldering and smoking: small pits of jealousy, of uncertainty.

Sherlock ambled out of the bathroom in a waft of steam, a bit crinkled, a bit damp, dressing gown wrapped tightly around him, and walked past John to go sit on the sofa. He drew the long lengths of his legs up against his chest and rested his chin on his knees; his eyes slipped closed, and for a long second he looked as though he were meditating. At the conscious folding up of his limbs, of the removal of the contact of his eyes, John felt the knot of anxiety in his gut tightening.

“Tea?” he asked.

“No,” Sherlock said without opening his eyes.

That his cup should look so lonely on the table as the tea sat steeping was ridiculous, so John ignored it.

Taking a breath, and carrying his tea, John crossed the distance between himself and the sofa and sat down on it as gently as he could, so as to not upset the tea. Sherlock's eyes opened and though he didn't turn his face, he seemed to be watching John in his peripheral vision; John decided to take that as a good sign.

“Look,” he said, “I hope you know I'm not –”

“You are,” Sherlock cut in.

John frowned. “You don't even know what I was going to say.”

That got Sherlock's attention, of course, and he unlocked his frame somewhat, as though indignation were as good a purpose for his body as any, and now he was fully looking at John. “Please,” he said, and it had never sounded less like a plea, “you were about to try to convince me, but mostly yourself, that you're not a jealous person.”
Of all of the possible paths John could have taken with that, he chose what was probably the worst, judging from the tightening of Sherlock's face: “So there's a reason to be jealous? Is that what you're saying?”

Sherlock's lip curled delicately. “I said nothing of the sort, and I only say what I say,” he said, almost mysteriously, uncharacteristically unspecific, and John was tempted to remind him that he had admitted, on this sofa, not so long ago, that he really didn't always mean things the way he said them, but, trying to steer himself back into an on-road course, he stopped.

He licked his lips, tea cup too-hot in his grip, the warm slide of the liquid about the last thing he seemed to want at that moment. “I'm really not that naturally jealous,” he said, stiffly.

Sherlock rolled his eyes elaborately, in a way that he hadn't done in quite a while and that set John's teeth on edge. “Every mention of Julian has you tensing up like steel. You were immensely tickled when you learned that no one else has ever –” he waved his hand around his face, as though the words were annoying flies, “touched me. You almost took my head off when you learned that Molly was aware of my being alive.”

John blinked, thrown off-balance by the last bit. “Do you seriously – do you think that was because I was jealous?”

Sherlock looked at him, mouth tense, brows furrowed. “What else would it be?”

John breathed, then cleared his throat to force the slow, beginning burn of anger down. “I wasn't jealous that you told her, I was... okay, yeah, I was hurt,” he said, trying not to snap, instead slipping into a light sarcasm to protect himself, “hurt that my best friend killed himself in front of me and then went skipping off for two years and never spared me enough of a thought to let me know that he hadn't really kicked the bucket. Yeah. If it's jealousy to be hurt over the fact that you apparently managed to sustain contact with Molly and Mycroft and your – your fucking homeless network, but were unable to send me a message that all of this grieving wasn't exactly necessary, then yeah, maybe I was jealous.”

Sherlock was watching him passively through his lashes, his eyes grey-green and still. The kitchen light buzzed and ticked in the silence between them.

“Maybe I am jealous, yeah,” John finally said, frowning.

“Why?” The question was almost a bark, short and sharp, and John wouldn't have been sure Sherlock had said the word at all if he hadn't seen those lips forcing it out, before snapping shut again.

“Why?” he echoed, incredulously.

“What more can I do to –” Sherlock said, then spread his hands in a gesture of inability to catch something, of reaching out and finding air.

“To what?” John prompted.

Sherlock scowled, and John was reminded, not for the first time, that between Sherlock and language there was often a silent war waging, a minefield strewn with pockets of silence that could explode when stepped on. And there it was again, as biting as ever; Christ John, you know, and if you don't,
you don't deserve to.

In spite of himself, he seized Sherlock's hand. The fingers, a bit dry and wrinkled from the shower, resisted for a split second, as though instinctively; then Sherlock allowed his hand to be drawn in by John's. "I just – I want you to talk to me," John said, aware that he sounded a bit too much like a nagging mother for comfort.

There was a lengthy silence. Sherlock was looking at their hands, linked on the stretch of sofa that separated their thighs. "I thought I was," he finally said, and now there was a tone of doubt, of wonder, of what am I missing?

John swallowed, the sound wet and loud in his own ears. "You are," he said, "I know you are. I know it can't be –" easy, he meant to say. But the word wasn't quite strong enough. Nothing was quite strong enough. 'I love you," he therefore said, randomly, unplanned, out of sync with the rhythm of mundane reality; and he wasn't even sure why, except for the fact, lacing through everything, through every other word, that it was true.

Sherlock's eyes snapped up and focused on John's. He looked discontent. "Unfair," he said, and then, gently but irrevocably, drew his fingers away from John's, breaking the contact between their palms. He brought his hands up, steepled, the tips resting under his nose, against the peculiarity of his upper lip. His face was blank and pale.

"How is that unfair?" John said, a bit too harshly, bringing his hand back to his own body, curling it into a crossing of arms to have it not just lie there, not just mourn the loss of Sherlock.

Sherlock looked away from him. "You're trying to guilt me into having this conversation," he said tonelessly.

John watched him, felt a strong tangle of annoyance grow tighter in his chest. "I'm really not," he said through clenched teeth.

"Good," Sherlock said, tensely. "I don't do guilt." And it was such a lie, such a flat-out lie, completely disproven by what he had trickled into John's mouth on this same sofa in drips of breaking language, in the glow of deconstructed night, in a strange, lost stretch of time – I told myself not to care about them, but I couldn't. John throat constricted at it, at the way Sherlock tried to duck out of sight, out of light. It wasn't right, he wanted to pull him back.

"That's bollocks," he said hotly, in spite of himself. Sherlock's face was unreadable; there wasn't even shut up John you idiot you have no clue what you're talking about and that John should want that back, that instead of this blankness, was a bit disorienting. "I don't want you to feel guilty," John said, turning the words over before he said them, holding them to the light, weighing them on his tongue. "But it's obvious that there was something between you and him, and I just – I just want to know some of it." Sherlock allowed eye contact to be restored between them in the silence that followed. "Just so I know – what's going on with you."

Sherlock got to his feet smoothly, and looked down at him. His mouth was tight. For a long moment, John waited for him to say something, to fill that half-expectant look with something, but he didn't.

"Look," John said, "please sit back down."

"No," Sherlock said, then immediately looked a bit surprised at himself. There was, distinctly, a moment in which he narrowed his eyes at something only he could see, and he looked almost sorry.
“All right,” he said then, contradicting himself, the words slippery breaths that seemed to escape him without his knowledge, and by the way his eyes flicked over to the bedroom door John could tell that he was calculating whether it was worth it to cross that distance and close the door, to erect that barrier like he had in the past, to just run away. But he didn't; he sat back down, a lot less smoothly than the way he'd got up, as though his limbs were straining to carry him away, and he had to force them to bend so that he was back next to John.

It wasn't just something. It was a lot. John felt the knot of annoyance loosening somewhat.

“Yes, all right,” Sherlock said, frowning deeply, looking at his palms as though the answers were written there; lines that meant nothing to John except that they were Sherlock's. “I suppose you'll want to know if I had sex with him.”

John blinked. “I –”

“I did,” Sherlock said, without inflection.

John passed a hand over his face. “That's –” he began, then faltered, because what was it?

Sherlock made a noise that was like a click of breath through his teeth; impatient, uncomfortable. “Don't pretend that's not what you wanted to know.”

“It isn't, actually,” John said, a bit more biting than he'd intended, and also a bit less truthful, because of course that was one of the things he'd thought about.

“Then what, John?” Sherlock said, and he leaned in a bit, his face calculating and tense. “What do you want from me?”

“God,” John snapped, “I'm sorry for wanting to have a conversation with my partner about his time pretending to be dead and living with someone else and – and shagging them, apparently.”

Sherlock blinked. “Partner,” he echoed, as though tasting the word, picking out the one part of the sentence that John hadn't struggled with.

The silence was short but thick. “Yeah, I'd say so,” John said, not without anger, not without anxiety either, “or is that too much, too, Sherlock? Is that too much to handle, as well?”

Sherlock's eyes flashed, and immediately John regretted saying it. He brought out a hand, his mouth was opening, shaping an apology already, but Sherlock was too quick, and he was to his feet again.

“Maybe it is,” he said, quietly, and in a rustle of dressing gown he withdrew himself out of the circle of them, the space in which John could reach out and find him.

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” John snapped at his back, anger bubbling in the pit of his stomach. “Yeah, run away, Sherlock. That'll work. Like it did the last time, remember?”

Sherlock turned around sharply, and his face was a bit wild, twisted into harsh lines. His mouth opened, stayed that way for a second, and then closed bitterly around the: “I'm just going into the bedroom, John. I'm not dying.”

And John could only sputter in helpless anger as he disappeared, letting the door fall closed with a soft click, because that was Sherlock, of course, immediately putting his finger to the centre of the
sore spot and pressing down with controlled strength – and yes, it was true that it sometimes still felt like he wasn't there when John couldn't look at him, because the newfound carelessness of the time that they seemed to have now was slowly beginning to feel *exactly* like before, and that was unsettling in itself: it wasn't because things hadn't happened that they couldn't. If anything, it was fucking unfair of Sherlock to pretend it wasn't at least partly his fault that John was still working hard at breaking down that wall, brick by brick, trying to get back to being completely, utterly sure that Sherlock wasn't going to go up into smoke in a moment of forgetfulness, of weakening attention.

God, for Sherlock to say that, after having plunged in and brought John up from the sticky waters of a nightmare about his suicide – it was efficient, and sharp, and painful, and altogether too much like a Sherlock pre-*will you do this with me*.

John groaned into his hands as he pressed his fingers to his face, his temper flaring around the cold thought of *ah, fuck*.

—

It was, in a way, a testament to the increased closeness between them that John didn't worry that much about the silence in the bedroom – he managed to be mostly angry, this time, instead of feeling like he'd failed someone (himself, Sherlock).

He could give him some time.

But that door was going to open, and if Sherlock didn't open it, John would.

He could be kind even if Sherlock couldn't, right now. He remembered *you shouldn't go away* and scribbled a note, because Sherlock's phone was still on the table: *I'm going for a walk. I hope you'll be here when I get back.* With every step he took down the stairs the weight on his shoulders lightened.

—

London was bright and crisp and exactly what John needed – people, alive, preoccupied with everything and nothing, bustling past each other; air; a confident spring sky that was darkening beautifully, columns of cloud streaked muddied pink and grey, tipping into dark blue and eventually black dotted with star. The walk did him a world of good, and when he slid his key back into the lock of 221B he felt like he was equipped to handle this warzone of a home, so full of dangers that had to approached with caution.

Sherlock was lying on the sofa, his face tipped back on a pillow, John's note text-down on his chest.

“Hey,” John said, unzipping his jacket.

Sherlock sat up, and for Sherlock, that counted as a response. “You're not very upset,” he said, after a moment of observing John put his coat away.

John took a breath and turned to him. “Are you?” he asked.

Sherlock shot him a look that clearly said that upset wasn't something that ever happened to him. John lightly rolled his eyes at it, and its untruth. “I shouldn't have –” Sherlock began, then pursed his lips. John waited. “– said that,” Sherlock finished.
“That you weren't going to die?” John said stiffly. “No, maybe not.”

Sherlock was watching him carefully, eyes wide and still.

“I shouldn't have said that about it being too much,” John said, after swallowing away a lump of sudden, stark affection for Sherlock, as he sat there, half-upright, the scrap of paper that said I hope you'll be here when I get back held in place over his chest, long fingers twisted into the belt of his dressing gown. “Sorry.”

Sherlock acknowledged it with a twist of one corner of his mouth. There was a silence. “Sorry,” Sherlock said, looking a bit confused at himself, a bit out of step with everything, an awkward echo of a word that didn't seem to fit inside his mouth, but it wasn't just something, it was a lot, and John smiled at him.

“It's all right,” John said, and stepped closer to the sofa. Sherlock moved his legs to make room for him after a moment, as though he still had to think it over. “At least,” John added, then sat down, “if it isn't too much. You know – partner and all.” He watched Sherlock from the corner of his eye.

Sherlock's mouth tightened, then loosened. “No,” he finally said, no-that-was-yes, and John felt something in him relaxing again.

He reached out and touched a hand to Sherlock's pyjama-clad knee. Sherlock slid down a bit against the pillow, pushing into the touch.

“You'll still want to talk about it, I presume,” he said, watching John intently from between his lashes.

John shrugged, licked his lips. “He obviously meant something to you. That's... all right. It is,” he insisted, when Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “I'm glad you weren't alone there.” It was the truth, and apparently Sherlock found that in his face, too, and he relaxed a little.

“It – wasn't the same, John,” he finally said, looking away. “It wasn't the same as this.”

“That's... good,” John said, watching the way his fingers were pale against the dark satin of Sherlock's trousers.

Sherlock let out a breath. “He was a good friend.” He thought for a moment. “He still is.”

“A friend you slept with,” John said, keeping his voice neutral.

“At times,” Sherlock said, and he sought John's eyes with his. “Not regularly. It was something that... happened.” He winced at his own vagueness.

“Yeah, all right,” John said quietly, trying to untangle some of the things he felt about this new bit of information and not really succeeding.

“John,” Sherlock said, and there was a note of urgency in his voice. “The first time was right after he saved my life. When Angel died.”

“Ah,” John said, and it only really sank in then, so he said again: “Ah.” Something that happened. Something that had happened when Sherlock had been at his most vulnerable, his deepest point, his point of lost contact, of lost self, of needing to be grounded. John blinked as he tried to imagine it –
he couldn't, of course, but even he could see how Julian had probably tried to get Sherlock through the first shocks of coming back to himself, the cocaine wearing off, the hours of moving between shock and the first twitches of realisation, the flashes of sound, of image – and no, it wasn't that hard to imagine how holding Sherlock would have seemed like a good thing to do, forcing him to attach to another body, maybe slapping him to awareness, and out of his growing hysteria, and then kissing him, maybe, telling him I am here and you are too and accepting the frantic grab for another body, alive, warm. It wasn't possible for John to ever know how it happened, but it could have happened that way, and it seemed like if it had, it couldn't be that wrong. A spot of comfort in a stretch of loss. “Right,” he said, more to himself than to Sherlock.

“And after that, it just... sometimes happened,” Sherlock said, tensely, and John realised his mouth was tight with anxiety, and his eyes were drinking in every detail of John, looking for – signs of disapproval, of disgust? Of no?

“I think I understand,” he said, though he couldn't be sure. Sherlock covered John's hand on his knee with his own, long fingers slotting between the spaces of John's, tracing the sensitive skin of the webbing between them.

“I wasn't doing well,” Sherlock mumbled, looking at their hands on his knee. “I relapsed. It took me – a while to get clean again.”

John's swallow was like a slide of sand. “So that's what –” he said, then closed his eyes. He remembered how they'd fought about that before Sherlock had gone to Peru, still so far away from each other, with so much bridge to cross between them still, unmarked miles of dusty war-zone road rigged with mines and barbed wire and deceptive detours. God, and now here they were, together, hands warm against each other, language extending itself across the gap, putting out roots, winding around them. It was incredible.

“Yes,” Sherlock murmered.

“But you're all right, now.” It wasn't quite a question, because John was reasonably sure he'd know if Sherlock wasn't – still, he was only John Watson, and he needed pedestrian reassurance now and then.

Sherlock huffed. “Obviously,” he told his knee.

John looked at him until Sherlock responded to the gaze and looked back. John leaned across the bridge, built the bridge with himself, with the tilt of a body falling towards a shared, circled point of gravity, and Sherlock met him halfway – the kiss was badly angled and slightly awkward over the pointy obstacles of Sherlock's knees, but it didn't matter. When John pulled back, Sherlock was smiling.

“We've actually come some way, haven't we?” John said, tightening his fingers further around the boniness of Sherlock's knee; he could feel Sherlock's hand on his responding, pressing down further too.

“How sentimental, John,” Sherlock said, low, deep, warm, voice audibly affected by relief – and John couldn't help the grin.

And it wasn't over that way, of course; there was still a lot to carefully unwrap, to unstick, to unlayer. A relapse. A friend lost in the most horrible of ways. A lover gained in the most confusing of ways. There was still so much left unsaid; but they were getting there, he could see some of now, it wasn't
kept from him, there was the prison of cocaine, and the unutterable absence of Angel, and the choking hold of dreams, and the confusing but soothing touch of Julian, and glimpses of things that Sherlock wasn't likely ever to tell him, because some things curved darkly outside of the grasp of language, not tangible enough, and because some other things stopped mattering after a while, like if Julian ever made Sherlock tea or if Julian had a telly and they watched terrible Peruvian daytime television sometimes or if Angel taught him slang swear words in Spanish or if they sometimes bought food together from stalls on the streets in Lima; there would probably never be a moment to prompt that kind of talk, though John, uncomfortably, felt like he wanted to know, almost wanted a minute-by-minute rundown of Sherlock's time in Peru, so it didn't feel like such a nothingness, such a weightless hole of gravity.

It was all right, though, that desire, and it was all right that it would probably never get fulfilled; they were okay in that moment, and Sherlock seemed to think so too, because his face was soft and readable with love as he looked at John.

“Okay,” John said, randomly, slightly out of sync with the rhythm of reality, and Sherlock must have read it for what it was, that one word, meaning you're all right and I'm all right and there is really no other way we could have been sitting here right now, because he folded away his legs and leaned in and kissed John again, gently, as though trying to re-discover a boundary they'd crossed a long time ago, trying to re-learn a wonder that was beginning to wear a little, maybe, that was getting a bit dull, maybe, or maybe not, as Sherlock made a sound against his lips that was too indistinct to mean anything, and probably meant a lot of things, maybe even things he wouldn't have been able to express if John had asked; and it was okay, really, it was, because though nothing was they still had the sofa pressing into their legs, and the smell of the dirty dishes manifesting itself in slightly alarming waves, and the heat and strength of their hands, beginning to sweat against each other, mingling a bit, and Sherlock touching John with hand and lip and curl of hair, a ticklish touch that was one-sided, so John had to give something back to balance them out and slipped his tongue between the slow, unhurried press of lips against his, and then there was much more to be discovered, and much more of each other to learn, and Sherlock spoke haltingly of numbers, \( \pi \), John realised, small slices of structure in space, trailing off into infinity, trickling from the openness of Sherlock's lips and filling the hollow of John's throat as his come spurted between John's hands onto their bellies, their limbs folded together, finding slots, spaces to fit, puzzled together again bit by bit, slice by slice, vein by vein, stitch by stitch.
Chapter 18

Sherlock was a bit calmer after their second try at the conversation about Julian and the ensuing sex, so different from when he'd almost cornered John upon his coming home; but he still came back very dissatisfied from the morgue the next day because Molly didn't have anything she could let him take, and later he threw his phone at the wall when Mycroft texted him something that he wouldn't elaborate on, rolling his eyes so much John told him he was a bit worried about his eye muscles. Late into the night, thankfully, a case that sounded interesting arrived via the website – missing jewels, regained lost siblings, mental illness, inheritance issues, and Sherlock was even in a good mood as he left very early the next morning to catch a train to Hertfordshire. John got up to share a moment of coffee and bleariness (his) and thoughts (Sherlock's) with him.

“You want to come,” Sherlock observed, pausing for a second in the deft closing of the buttons of his coat.

John, who had been staring unseeingly at the lines of his pale fingers against the dark fabric, came out of his absent-minded reverie. “Want to, yes. But I really have to do this shift. They need me and Friday is always very busy.”

The button slide into its designated hole smoothly. John looked up from Sherlock's hands into his face. “Your shift is over at five,” Sherlock pointed out, and he raised his eyebrows slightly.

John smiled at it, and at his particular Sherlock-way of extending an invitation; never speaking the question, just stating fact, leaving a trail of clues to lead to the I'd like it if you came along. “You go do your magic. We'll see.”

“No magic,” Sherlock hummed, but he was far from displeased, and then quite slowly, deliberately, he stepped back up to the table and pressed a kiss to John's mouth in an obvious mirror of what John had done the day before. “Bye, darling,” he said, and the grin on his face was so evil John groaned.

“I will shoot you when you get back,” he promised as Sherlock straightened up, smug.

“Of course you will. You have an unhealthy preoccupation with violence, John,” Sherlock said, undisturbed, and adjusted his collar. “I think you should see a therapist.” His grin was devilish, and before John could collect his wits enough to respond, he was off in a whoosh of coat.

John chuckled lightly, shaking his head, and knocked back his cup of coffee. After another minute he decided that he could wait for the caffeine to kick in in bed, and stumbled back for another hour of merciful unconsciousness until his alarm went off, slashing through the wool of his shallow dreams, in which Sherlock wore an apron and cooked him chicken parmesan.

——

*Staying here for the night. Case might benefit from a medical professional if you can think of any.*

John smiled fondly.
Medical professional commandeered by London police force in puzzling case of missing pints. Will give you thorough medical check-up when you return.

Sherlock's response barely took two seconds.

Medical training should have covered proper use of wit. But I look forward to it. Tell Lestrade I want you in one piece and not hung over. SH

—

They spent a long portion of the evening not talking about Sherlock at all, and that was maybe a welcome change of pace, John realised. He talked for a brief bit about Ian and his worries about him; Greg seemed to think he'd done the right thing going over there and being not quite gentle, instead even rather harsh, but it was so hard to see when it came to life and death and the shadowy zone between them, where Ian was right now, it was so hard to shine a light on all of the things lurking there, and John still wasn't sure – but it felt good to talk about it, even if only for a little while, with someone who wasn't Sherlock, and who didn't have such a convoluted relationship with death and suicide and the concept of Ian. They moved on, letting the lightness from slight tipsiness chase away the weight of the long silence between them, and Greg took over. He had stated, over his first pint, that nothing at all was up with him and that he really didn't have anything in particular to tell, but by his fourth he was relaying to John in amusing detail how his brother and sister-in-law had managed to return from holiday only to realise that they'd left their car and house keys in the pocket of a pair of trousers that still lounged back in their agriturismo in Italy.

“I secretly love it when stuff like that happens to him,” Greg said, with a smile that was guiltily gleeful, “it feels like cosmic payback for all of the times he nicked something from our dad or ate mum's cake and managed to get me punished for it, and all of the times he stole my girlfriends from me by being the charming older brother.”

John giggled and balanced his pint in his hand, content to feel its weight, and the warm presence of Greg across the table. “You still helped him out, though?” he asked, knowing how innately helpful Greg was.

“Yeah,” his friend said, and shrugged. “I'm too noble for my own good. Let her and the children sleep in my spare room while he took the train up to Scotland to go to her parents' for the spare housekey.” He shook his head. “Kids were exhausted, but completely wound up, of course. They wouldn't go to sleep until I read to them.”

“You read them a bedtime story?” John grinned.

“I'm quite an experienced storyteller,” Greg smiled, and then he fell silent for a moment, probably thinking back to long-gone times when his own children had still huddled up to him to listen breathlessly to the next adventure. His brother's second marriage had resulted in two young children,
but Greg's own children were finding their way into teenagerdom by now, and Greg had once told John that since the divorce he sometimes found it hard to keep up with their confounding, rapid development.

“Yes, you are quite the magician with words,” John gently teased him.

Greg looked at him for a long moment. “What about you?”

“What about me?” John sipped his pint again.

“Children,” Greg just said.

John eyed him incredulously over his glass. “Are you seriously asking me if I plan to have children soon?”

“I never said soon,” Greg defended himself. “I'm just wondering. I recall you thinking about it after you started talking about Mary moving in with you.”

“Yeah, well,” John said, shaking his head lightly, “that was all it was, really, thinking. If it had... If things hadn't changed, we might have got there at one point, but –”

“Do you want kids?” Greg just asked, simply, and it was another one of his simple questions, skimming over so much, holding so many other questions inside it.

John thought it over quite seriously. “I don't... think so,” he finally said. Then he took another gulp to organise his thoughts, because how was he to explain this, really? “There are things that I had... before... that I didn't object to, or anything. Things that I thought that if they happened, they'd be good. You know, marriage, children. And if Mary had wanted kids, I suppose I –” But he cut himself off again, because it was a thought that was flung so far, so removed from reality by now, separated from him by layers of realness in which Sherlock stepped out of the shower like a shining beacon in the night, and kissed him over breakfast in a version of domesticity that was vivid and still set his gut on fire, and came apart in his mouth talking of the smallest parts of him, molecules, particles mingling, possible universes merging with the insistent flow of reality around them – and most of the path that lay before them was still shadowy, but if John knew one thing, it was that it was bound to go in different loops than what he was used to. “It's just not the same,” he finished, lamely, unable to really articulate any of it.

“Yeah, all right,” Greg said easily, because he was Greg.

“I'm almost forty,” John said, a little uselessly. Greg just shrugged in response, apparently unimpressed. “Besides,” John said, smiling a little, “Sherlock is...” Sherlock is everything. Sherlock is already too much. Sherlock is more than enough. “I very seriously doubt that Sherlock is parent material.”

Greg looked at him, one of his small, private, sad-and-happy smiles playing around his lips. “I'd never have said he was boyfriend material, either.”

It was the first time anyone had referred to Sherlock as his boyfriend, and it made John laugh. It seemed like a word that existed in a sphere that was utterly uninhabited by Sherlock; a word that completely, violently disagreed with everything that made Sherlock Sherlock. “He isn't really, you know. He's just Sherlock material.”
“And you just happen to love him,” Greg said, face quite intense, and John felt a rush of affection for him.

“Yeah, I do,” he said mildly, and raised his pint to his mouth to try to hide the flush heating up his cheeks.

–

When he got home, only very slightly tipsy, he popped the DVD that Julian had recommended to Sherlock into the player, muddled around with the settings until English subtitles appeared, and came to the conclusion that when he focused on the incredible attractiveness of all three major characters – wife, husband, brother/lover – it was actually quite an enjoyable experience.

–

Back tonight. Solved.
You should have been here.
SH

John knew Sherlock meant it in a it was interesting, you would have liked it-way, rather than as something that was meant to incite guilt in him, but he still felt a little uncomfortable sending his response:

Will be glad to see you. But you do remember tonight's my dinner thing, right?

The scowl was tangible even through the screen:

Seriously, John, one would start to think you are projecting personal fears about the onset of dementia.
SH

He sighed, half-amused, half-worried.

All right, all right. I'll let you know when they've all cleared off.

And the sarcasm was a bit too biting for comfort in the

Very gracious.
SH

–

Bill arrived first. Early, even, a bit uncharacteristically so, and he was warm and gruff, bearing beer brought back from an artisan brewery he'd visited on a trip to Wales with his eldest daughter.
“Well, this place is in a sorry state,” he said, and John laughed lightly, because the flat actually looked habitable for once; he'd put some work into tidying it up, clearing the table until it could be used as one, and trying to convince himself that it wasn't because he was uncomfortable with his friends seeing the evidence of Sherlock spread everywhere. “I preferred it the way it was. Suits you a lot better.”

“Well, I can't have you lot sitting on the floor, can I?” John said, undisturbed. “You want some of that beer you brought?”

“Yeah. My plans to become an alcoholic keep being foiled, so thanks for being a mate and sticking by me.”

John smiled a little tightly at the cynicism. Bill was in a good mood. “Too much effort to become properly addicted, you lazy sod?” he quipped as he stepped into the kitchen to try and locate the bottle opener.

“I am utterly committed to being a dysfunctional quitter, as you well know,” Bill countered with relish. John heard him start to pick a way through the living room – it was always a good sign when Bill started to invade personal space to find things he could feign outrage at. It meant he was feeling good.

“Explain yourself,” he said sternly to John as he came over to pass him the bottle. He was holding, between his thumb and index finger as though it was likely to give him a disease, the Peruvian DVD John had watched the night before.

“It's Sherlock's,” John said, trying to hide his slight anxiety with a grin.

Bill raised his eyebrows and re-studied the cover, from which the sultry, heated gaze of the male protagonist scorched at them from over the quite tantalising flash of bare skin over his collarbone, with his equally gorgeous scantily-clad wife pressed against his side, and her brother like a vague shape in the background, ominous, ghost-like, stunning for all of his vagueness. “Refuse to believe that bloke's a genius, then,” he snorted.

“Someone recommended it to him,” John said. “He hated it, honestly. It's got subtitles, though, so I re-watched it when he was out and it's actually not half bad.” His mouth twitched into a genuine grin at Bill's look of disgusted exasperation.

“John Watson, you are a disgrace,” Bill said, and put the DVD back.

There was a silence. Bill sipped his beer, then, quite unexpectedly, looked John straight in the eye.

“You told him not to be here tonight, didn’t you?”

John swallowed. “Yeah,” he admitted after a beat, because it was Bill, deserving of honesty.

Bill looked at him for another inscrutable moment. Then, he said, and John was hyper-aware that it was a favour being bestowed on him: “So what shit will you be feeding us tonight, then?”

Ian was pale and shadowy on the porch when John opened the door for him, but the smile that slid across his lips was genuine.
“Doctor sir,” he said, and then, unexpectedly, pressed forward and caught John in a hug.

“Er,” John said, and then brought his arms up around Ian, patting him awkwardly on the back. The embrace lasted for only a couple of seconds, before Ian jerked back, looking almost confused at himself.

“Shut up,” he said, face producing something between a smile and grimace.

“I didn’t say anything,” John said, battling down the huge surge of affection that he felt for this man, this young man of so few years and so many wounds.

“It was a pre-emptive warning,” Ian muttered, and then stepped inside the hallway as John motioned him in. “Is anyone here yet?”

“Bill,” John responded.

Ian dawdled, looking slightly awkward.

John closed the door. “You okay?” he asked carefully. He'd not heard much from Ian in the days that lay between the night when it had been John instead of pills and whisky, though he'd made sure to aim a purposeful Are you all right? J his way regularly, and the responses had always been swift and affirmative.

Ian half-shrugged, as though it were a question that defied answer. “Yeah,” he said, “I'm... okay.”

John looked at him for a moment, trying to draw out more information from how his friend was standing there, tall and awkward and young.

“I went to stay at my dad's for a bit,” Ian said. “Once I got over the idea that it's pretty pathetic for twenty-six-year-old to go and stay with one of his parents it actually helped a lot.” His smile was wry.

“Nothing wrong with being pathetic,” John said, “that's the one thing we're all really good at.”

Ian's expression was slightly bitter, and a lot real. “Yeah, it takes skill to be such consistent whiny fuck-ups.”

John smiled at him, couldn't help the hand coming up to fasten itself around his forearm. “Glad to have you back,” he said, and meant it so deeply it was almost like a physical sensation.

“I want beer,” Ian just said in response. “And I want some tears to go with that.”

“I happen to have ample amounts of both,” John said, and he was carefully glad, carefully hopeful; it meant something that Ian was here right now, that he'd come, that there apparently was something in this hallway, this flat, this promise of beer and sharp shards of witty conversation for them to cut themselves on, this circle of broken and half-taped-together people that felt like it could help.

Ian was steady and present as he scaled the stairs, John close behind, tracing the sharp jut of Ian's shoulders in his light spring coat.

“Oh, the comical child deigns to join us,” Bill said as Ian stepped through the door. He was flicking through Sherlock's collection of CDs that had travelled with John to his new flat and were now back
in their rightful place in 221B: classical pieces and operas, most in several different executions. John had looked at them once, after Sherlock's death, trying to find traces of the man he had lived with, as 221B was slowly being vacated to – horribly, impossibly – make room for someone else, but it had felt futile; he hadn't ever known Sherlock to listen to any of them, though there were obvious signs of wear on some.

In one of the first nights in his new flat, he'd tried to listen to the one of which the casing was cracked and thumbed. He had no clue about classical music whatsoever; the title had told him it was Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphosis*, and just from the title it felt so horribly fitting and unfitting at the same time to listen to it as Sherlock was breaking into bits that would melt into the ground, growing away with the silent movement of grass and animal, body and earth mingling, structures being undone in the final journey of discovery, his destination across an ocean that John couldn't shout or see across. He remembered biting at his fingers, not even really noticing it until the weaknesses on the sides of his fingernails began to bleed as he recognised, after a stretch of bombast threaded with the rustle of static – the recording was *old* – a gentler space of music that he had often woken up to after nightmares of bullets and sand and not enough water or red dots and Sherlock's frozen surprise and too much water; so often, in fact, that he had wondered sometimes if Sherlock knew he was dreaming, and was gently trying to wake him. Sherlock's violin version of it had had a whole different kind of feel than the recording, much lighter, trembling with an underlying, subdued energy as the sounds chased away some of John's nightmares. *Metamorphosis*, John remembered very clearly thinking, and then he had had to stop the music and, unable to convince himself that Sherlock hadn't *felt* things that way, had spent the night trying to cry and breaking on the rocky shore of being unable to, because this was before Ian had punched him, before the floodgates had been breached. He swallowed at seeing the box of discs under Bill's curious fingers.

When he re-focused on his friends, a bit shaken by the suddenness of the memory, they were chuckling away over something, likely something horrible.

Bill put the CDs back without any scathing comment. Classical music was acceptable.

“Booze,” Bill said cheerfully, and went into the kitchen. John caught Ian's eye, and there was a palpable relief in his friend's expression. He blinked a couple of times, as though sending John a message in Morse code; and that the meaning of it was lost was all right, because Ian's grip on his beer bottle when he took it from Bill was steady and relaxed, and he tipped his first gulp back with obvious pleasure.

“I've missed you wankers,” Ian said, and John held out his bottle for the two of them to clink theirs against.

“I haven't in the slightest,” Bill said, “but I'll never turn down beer and food, even if John made it.” His eyes were mild and warm as he took a swig of beer.

There was a short moment of companionable silence.

“So, no...?” Ian asked, would-be casually.

John didn't miss the quick glance that passed his two friends, and said: “No.”

“John reckons we'll scare him off,” Bill said levelly.

“More the opposite,” John said, tensely.
They were uncharacteristically subdued. John was so used to Sherlock reading him like a map that it was a bit strange to realise that they probably didn't know the extent of his unwillingness to have them meet Sherlock; an unwillingness that he didn't quite understand, himself. It had to do with how much he sometimes still couldn't fully believe it when he thought of Sherlock, and it was almost as though the gazes of these people who had lost so much and regained so little, less than little, nothing, blank spaces of cold in their beds and lives, would reduce Sherlock to a phantom, again. And there was this, too: he didn't want Sherlock to look at them and see through all of their defences, all of the layers that they'd painstakingly built around themselves and their pain. It didn't seem fair that he of all people should get to see it.

“Bollocks,” Bill finally said, “you're just afraid he'll fall in love with me, instead.” And a stark burst of affection for Bill fired through John at this second favour, this allowing of the issue to rest beneath a layer of normality.

“Yes, you're an incredible catch,” Ian said easily, eyebrows raising in amusement.

“Of course,” Bill said, lifting his beer in a toast to himself, “I'm a single father with two different therapists who only goes out to have beer with other depressed fuckers. Who wouldn't have me?”

The door bell rang.

–

“It really is a very nice place, John,” Sharon said, nodding, as she scanned the living room again, eyes travelling over the hurriedly tidied-up evidences of his life and of the more carefully stored-away traces of that other life that was here, and that was now so entwined with his he wouldn't be able to do it again, he sometimes realised, moving out of Baker Street and separating his things from Sherlock's. It had been hard enough before, and now it would be nigh on impossible. She reached out a pale hand to Sherlock's microscope on the corner of the table next to her, holding out a finger as if to touch it, and then she didn't, and irrationally John loved her for it.

“Ta,” he said easily. “Can't take credit for finding it.” It was after dinner already, and they were all lying about in their chairs, heavy and flushed with food and drink, and the conversation was easy and warm and funny and there was a silence-before-the-storm kind of motionlessness that they all felt, he imagined, but that none of them up till now had been willing to puncture and deflate.

“Your last place was just as nice,” Ian said lightly, playing with a left-over piece of jacket potato on his plate.

“Didn't quite have the same company, though, did it?” Bill said, leaning back into his hands, twined together on the back of his neck.

“Yeah, how’s that going?” Sharon said, quietly, after a heavy beat of silence.

John downed a big gulp of beer. “Fine,” he said, after he could no longer pretend he hadn't swallowed it already.

They all looked at him with guarded expressions.

“Really well, actually,” he said, caving, and then winced at himself. “He's... He's well. We're well.”

Ian slowly brought the piece of potato to his mouth, and chewed away on it. Bill raised his beer to
his lips. Sharon's face was still and pale and sympathetic.

And God, why were they all so good at silence?

He felt himself pushing on in spite of himself, because dancing around this conversation was getting old, it was getting obvious, and he'd given all of them pieces of it, anyway, so: “It's almost a relief that he's gone back to being quite a handful to live with. He was harder to pin down before that.”

“He’s probably changed quite a bit too, I imagine,” Sharon said, and, a bit strangely, she was smiling.

John thought about the too for a moment. Sherlock hadn't ever said anything about John being any different, but now that he thought about it, there must have been things about him that even Sherlock hadn't anticipated, that he'd had to re-observe, small gaps of John that he'd had to fill with the knowledge that he could glean from glancing across the slowly fading boundaries between them. “Yeah, I suppose,” he said, wondering at it for a bit.

“So what the fuck happened to him? That wasn't in the papers, I mean?” Bill said.

John couldn't tell them all of it, obviously. But what they would understand, he could tell them: “Bad stuff, for the most part. It's... most of it he's reluctant to share. But it's getting better.” He paused. “He changed his opinions on what it means to be alive quite a bit, I think.”

And they did understand, because oh, how their opinions had found themselves changing with the knives life had thrown their way; he could see it in how they were silent, and Ian held John's gaze for a long moment, his eyes much bluer than Sherlock's, less shifting, less alien, but almost as inscrutable right now.

“It makes me so angry,” his friend said into the continued eye contact between them, and his two other friends were there, too, and he could feel their nods without having to see them. “But, doctor sir,” Ian continued, “I hope you know that I'm also happy for you. When I can bear it.”

He nodded, because he actually knew; and no matter how different the thread of time that was wound around him right now was from the ones that were keeping the three of them together, he still remembered what that was like: irreconcilable feelings living inside the same skin, somehow managing to co-exist, and the brain, sparking with pressure, still managing to be contained, to not push so hard against its boundaries of bone and human that it broke outward and flowed away.

“Usually just angry though,” Ian mumbled, finally breaking the spilled spell of his eyes between them, and Bill was already switching his empty bottle for a new one.

“That's what therapy is for,” Bill said, smiling a thin smile, and saluted John with more flourish than was strictly necessary.

Sharon shrugged, curling her thin fingers around the stem of her wine glass. “Therapy is for everything,” she said. “Everything that doesn't fit.”

And God, that really was everything, wasn't it? John closed his eyes against the dark light coming from the people sitting in a messy circle around him for a moment, not sure if he could bear it, and held the neck of his beer bottle firmly in the ring of his thumb and index finger, wondering if he could snap it, and what that would do.

Sharon, pushing them away from the subject quite artfully, said: “There are fuckers who have been
stealing the flowers from Liam's grave.”

And by the time they had arrived at the somewhat faltering account of her first couples therapy session with her husband, which had gone well, all things considered – though that was a lot of things, the things considered; childmarriage-death-life-love-loss and the incredible, the unimaginable spaces crossed by those words, and any scale of relativity lost most of its meaning in the dark forest through which they were trying to push a path, but still – John finally managed to unscrew his fingers from around the clamminess of the bottle, the beer now warm and too-frothy.

And not all of it seemed to be resolved, there was still this stuffiness around him, as though the edges of his body were being muffled by something, by old air, by time long past, but when he caught Bill's eyes the minute smile, almost as small as Sherlock sometimes managed them, seemed as genuine a you're all right as anything he'd ever laid eyes on.

Ian's eyes, when he sought them, stayed connected to his, and they were mild and a warm blue.

Sharon and Bill left together; when they had been slipping into their coats they'd somehow fallen right into a new conversation, something about Sharon's eldest incessantly trolling some internet forum – her worries, Bill's unorthodox suggestions. They were laughing when they said goodbye to John and Ian, and stepped out into the brightly illuminated spill of Baker Street winding away into the night, where cars ripped through the valiant attempts of fog trying to climb the street lamps.

Ian was fiddling with his coat. “Hey, doctor sir,” he said, a bit quietly.

“Hm?”

“I know this isn't... but...” Ian cleared his throat. “Could I stay here tonight?”

John blinked.

“Just tonight,” Ian said. “I don't... I don't feel like going back there right now.” He looked a bit anxious.

“I – yes, of course,” John said, almost before he'd managed to think about it; and immediately he half-regretted it, because the resistance to these two parts of his life meeting flared hotly at the thought of Sherlock coming home to meet and immediately dissect Ian, pulling him thread from thread, but it was only a flash of feeling that faded quickly. If Ian was asking for this, it was something he needed.

“You can say no, you know,” Ian said, and he sounded almost like he disapproved of John's quick acquiescence.

“I'm saying yes,” John said. “We've got a spare bedroom. It's no bother.”

Ian watched him for a second, then smiled, a closed-mouthed, tired, relieved twitch of lips.

“Thanks.” It was a quiet, heavy word, expressing so little and so much at the same time.

“Yeah,” John said, and closed the door, shutting out the spring chill of the streets, the dangers and wonders of nighttime city, “anytime, as you know.”
Upstairs, while Ian draped his coat over the back of the sofa, John flicked the kettle on and stood for a moment with his palms flat on the table top, facing away from the living room, trying to beat down the squirm of apprehension in the pit of his stomach.

“If you want to watch some telly the remote's on the table,” he said, and Ian plopped down on the sofa without a word, and was soon a silent figure, bluish in the light of fiction beamed across the living room, the sound switched off, mouths moving meaninglessly on the screen.

John's fingers hovered over the absurd collection of tea in the cupboard.

“You don't happen to like vanilla tea, do you?” he asked, suppressing the disbelieving laugh bubbling up in his throat.

“What the fuck? Disgusting,” came Ian's reply.

“Yeah, I thought not,” John smiled, but the night was strange enough to reach for blueberry.

He handed Ian the cup of weirdly dark blue tea. Ian eyed it and set it aside on the coffee table with a half-amused, half-tense kind of finality.

“Ian, why did you stay in your house?” John asked him as he held his own too-hot cup of tea carefully between his fingers, and then had to put it onto the coffee table. “I mean, wasn't it...” He hesitated. “Isn't it difficult?”

Though it had hurt immensely to leave 221B behind, to step outside that door with a box containing a slice of his life, carefully picked clean of Sherlock, John was certain it would have been even more unbearable to stay, and to move like a ghost around things that would never feel the touch of their rightful owner again. It was just stuff; still, no matter how clearly he realised Sherlock would laugh at the sentiment, John knew some things could gain meaning until it was almost audible, a low whine in dark hours, whispers, imagined voices. Some things had been hard to part with, or would have been if John hadn't begun to feel the first pebbles of the avalanche of guilt and grief that would come to crush him in the months after. There had been: Sherlock's chemistry tools and his notes, that had been left so haphazard and expectant-looking it seemed impossible Sherlock wouldn't come back to finish whatever it was he was working on; some of Sherlock's clothes, his blue dressing gown hung carelessly over the foot of his bed and stained with a spill of coffee not two days old; Sherlock's violin, that Mycroft had come to claim just two days after his brother's death in a very strange, stilted way that John might have found suspicious if he hadn't been so numb (he had laughed for a bit, when he saw the Stradivarius again after Sherlock's return, still sleek and beautiful but not without its marks, such a mirror of its owner in so many ways, and he realised Mycroft must have got it to Sherlock before he left the country; it had been one of those things that had flattened John with a helpless sort of anger and an almost hysterical sort of resignation at the same time, still caught in the incredible vortex of things that he had had to cope with just after Sherlock's return).

Ian shrugged, looking as though he were in a bit of pain. “Fucking difficult,” he said.

“Then why –”

“I spent most of the first months being high and useless,” Ian replied. He let out a small, bitter laugh. “After I surfaced from that I was too lethargic to do anything, let alone find a new place to live.” He
was silent for a moment. “Maybe I should try to find something,” he said quietly, “but just thinking about it feels like betrayal.”

“Yeah,” John said, something heavy and sharp stuck in his throat, “I know.”

There was silence. John drank some tea and winced at the strange sweetness of the blueberry. “You know we'd help you find something if you want,” he finally said.

Ian's smile was tense. “Yeah,” he breathed. “I know you would.”

John took another sip of tea. The taste was somewhat growing on him. “Well, for now, you can stay here,” he told his friend – his pale, young, wonderful, wounded friend.

“You look tired,” Ian said, “and you're too nice to tell me to piss off and get to bed, so I'll just go and do that now.”

“Yeah, a bit knackered,” John said, though it wasn't completely true. “You're upstairs. Bed's made, if I'm not mistaken. I'll get you some of Sherlock's pyjamas, they should fit you.”

He'd said it without thinking; Ian looked intrigued and reluctant both. “Yeah, all right,” he said. “I guess I'll – will I meet him in the morning?”

John passed a hand over his face. He couldn't really think about that right now. “Probably,” he half-sighed.

“Well,” Ian said, and got to his feet, “you can tell him it's safe to come home now.” He left the living room and climbed the stairs; John counted the soft footsteps to that room that used to be his, before he and Sherlock had fallen into the wordlessly agreed-on habit of sleeping in Sherlock's room, after the first shocking nights still so full of questions, spent mostly in John's.

He rubbed his eyes. All things considered, it had been a good evening; yet, there was the slumbering feeling of discomfort that came from many different elements in it, and now mostly the knowledge that for all of his planning, there had been no stopping the mingling of his carefully kept worlds.

He turned to the plates and the empty bottles on the table, and thought for a moment about how utterly he couldn't be arsed. He picked up his phone from where it was lying on the mantelpiece. A bit surprisingly, Sherlock hadn't texted once.

_Battlefield cleared._

_See you in bed._

He stretched, rolling his shoulder, and went into the bedroom to find some pyjamas for Ian.

—

It took less than fifteen minutes after John's text for the rapid, energetic patter of Sherlock's feet on the stairs to materialise, and John wasn't in bed yet, of course, but only halfway through brushing his teeth when he became aware of it. He heard Sherlock shuffling around, the jangle of his keys, the creak of the floorboards as he removed his shoes. John bent down to spit into the sink and rinsed his mouth.

“In here,” he called out.
“So I gathered,” Sherlock returned from the kitchen, and then, as though it were something they did every day, he slipped through the half-open door of the bathroom and flashed John an innocent, close-mouthed smile in the mirror and reached nonchalantly for his toothbrush.

“Oh, did you want a kiss, first?” he said smoothly, catching sight of John's raised eyebrows, and the wanker actually stooped down and trailed his lips over John's cheek.

John couldn't help the tiny laugh. “Not very sexy, Sherlock,” he finally said.

“No?” Sherlock hummed, spreading toothpaste over his toothbrush. “I'd think the sooner we're both ready for bed, the more time we have to spend in it and to decide what we might want to do with this evening.”

John shook his head with a small smile, his stomach an infinite number of times lighter with the tangible height of Sherlock next to him, the two of them pressed together in front of the sink. He could already feel the warmth coming from the body beside him. It was almost ridiculous. He traced Sherlock's face in the mirror.

“Your idea of seduction is a bit out there, to say the least,” John said.

“My methods are impeccable, as has been amply proven,” Sherlock responded, the dignity of the words compromised severely by the way the consonants were blurred with toothpaste.

“You've been in a fight,” John said, now noting the reddish smear of a recent bruise starting to bloom across Sherlock's cheekbone.

Sherlock lightly rolled his eyes, and spat and rinsed before responding. “I spent the evening hanging out with PJ, as he insisted on calling it. We were forced to defend our honour at one point.”

John chuckled, slightly drowsy with the pressures of the hours that lay behind him and the bone-deep relief of Sherlock next to him, and dropped his face against Sherlock's bicep.

“You're a menace,” he breathed.

“Nonsense. It was fuelled wholly by altruism,” Sherlock said, and angled his head so his lips brushed the top of John's head.

“I thought you might be in a strop with me,” John muttered into the silky fabric of Sherlock’s shirt.

“I was. The fight raised my spirits considerably.”

John smiled against him. “How was Hertfordshire?”

Sherlock waved a dismissive hand. Cases solved usually receded from his consciousness very quickly. “Very much like everywhere else. Stupid people trying to out-do each other in daftness. More greenery, though.”

John lifted his head. “Thanks for tonight,” he said, “I know it wasn't the most... it wasn't very –”

“Elegant,” Sherlock filled in, and his face was a bit tight. “And now your well-laid plans have gone awry, after all, since your suicidal friend is sleeping in your bed.” In response to John's involuntary
look of surprise, he said, raising an eyebrow: “Unfamiliar coat on the couch. Table left in unusual disarray, pointing to emotionally compromised state; normally you'd at least put the plates in the sink to appease your inner meticulous soldier. And you looked quite worried when I stepped in here. Hardly difficult to piece together.”

“Right,” John said, shaking his head a little at the immediacy, the hugeness of Sherlock's presence.

“Did he feel unequipped to go home?” Sherlock asked him, with a disinterest that John knew was feigned.

“A bit. He's all right, though.” John studied Sherlock's smooth expression in the mirror.

“Well, I certainly look forward to the breakfast conversation,” Sherlock said, slightly harshly, then busied himself for a moment with collecting a pocket of water in the cup of his hands, and splashing it into his face. John observed how some of the drops escaped before he could catch them with the towel he passed over his face, rolling down over the bob of his Adam's apple, drawing pen strokes of shininess on the lines of skin that folded down into his undone collar; one drop pooled shiveringly in the revealed dip of skin that spanned the hollow between his collarbones. When he looked at John his lashes were stuck together in small arresting curls of bolded wetness, framing the intense grey-green-blue of his eyes with a darker lining than usual. There was a warm rush of yes inside John.

The skin around Sherlock's eyes crinkled as his mouth, shiny and moist, twitched into a smile. “Indeed,” he said, agreeing to something only he would be able to read, moving in to wrap the length of his arms around John and press his water-cooled face against John's forehead, and his voice, falling low with a whispered you was rich like warm butter, melting into John's ears, down into the maze that led to the shivering of synapses, the trembles of space between the boundaries of his skull, the worlds there, the births of words, you finding its path to – somewhere, an illumination, a darkness, a tentative centre unsure of itself. And yes, it was stupid for John to have missed him as much as he had, because for fuck's sake, he'd only been gone two days, but the way Sherlock pressed them together, dragging his nose across the sensitive spot between John's eyes and upwards, mouthing cool smears of tap water and hot spills of breath over his forehead – that was stupid too, and if Sherlock was doing it it couldn't really be that stupid, so John just pressed up and replaced his forehead with the far more effective pathway of his mouth, tasting the mint of toothpaste and the air of London and the faint smoke of cigarettes underneath.

Sherlock broke the kiss. “John,” he muttered against John's mouth in a warm flow of breath.

“Hmm?” John tightened his arms around Sherlock's torso.

“I might want to have sex with you.”

John laughed involuntarily. “You might?”

Sherlock pulled out of the embrace, leaving his hands resting loosely on John's sides, and looked at him intently. John stared back, a bit nonplussed. Sherlock's mouth relaxed after a long moment. “I want... more,” he said finally. “I want to see you, I want to... I want to fuck you.”

John blinked at the unexpected vulgarity, a rare thing – and then as it registered fully a thrill of excitement laced with a bit of anxiety shot through him, pooling hotly in his stomach.

Sherlock continued before John could offer a response: “I gather it's considered polite to talk about that sort of thing before...” He shrugged a shoulder instead of finishing the sentence. His face was
focused and searching and – yes – a little tight with the buried kind of worry John had learned to read in recent weeks.

“Before just getting on with it?” he supplied, smiling, mouth a bit dry.

Sherlock let go of his sides, and he drew back a little. “I know you don't have a lot of experience with it apart from maybe some experimentation with Sarah, who was obviously into anal play, and I know you’re still on the fence about your own sexuality, which you feel the need to define in terms of existing categories, because you like to have a way to refer to things with words that have existing connotations, though you're well aware that human sexuality is far more varied than the terms available suggest; you've thought extensively about bottoming and topping and I know from your internet history that you look at porn involving anal sex; you responded positively when I touched you during fellatio, and I could tell from –”

“Sherlock,” John said, a little startled, cutting through the fast-paced stream of observations that was animated with a little more nervousness than Sherlock's usual deductions. He grabbed Sherlock round the forearms. “Slow down.”

Sherlock closed his mouth slowly.

“I – Christ,” John half-laughed. “How do you... I haven't even thought about most of that as in-depth as you have.”

Sherlock looked at him, his face clearly spelling out the well, obviously, I'm a genius and you're not. To his credit, he didn't actually say it.

For a moment, there was silence. Sherlock seemed a little ill at ease.

“You're right,” John said, and ignored Sherlock's small sound of of course I am, “I haven't... Sarah liked it, yeah, but it was never more than...” He felt his cheeks heating up, and almost laughed at himself. Watson, you are not sixteen. You've had loads of sex. Stop blushing. “Never more than a finger or two,” he pushed on. “And that was... more than three years ago.”

Sherlock was regarding him intently, a touch warily, the way he sometimes took his eyes away from his microscope and looked at his sample without it, as though the increased distance would reveal a greater picture that he was missing.

“But I did like it. And – yeah, I want it,” John said, with a warm bloom of nerves in his stomach. “I figured that out a while back, that I wanted you to. If – if you wanted to.”

The line of Sherlock's shoulders dropped a little, and his face relaxed. By the way he closed in and laid his hands over John's cheeks John could tell that he was measuring John's blush in some way.

“You're embarrassed,” Sherlock noted with a bit of wonder in his voice, his face soft.

“No,” John denied, and looked up at him, “a bit nervous, yeah. Not embarrassed.”

Sherlock gave his small half-smile and leaned down to kiss him, searingly, deeply, tongue licking a path into John's mouth with intent. “Good,” he said softly, voice pitched low and warm, when they broke apart.

“What about you? Have you done this before?” John said, looking up at him.
Sherlock tensed slightly. “Yes,” he said without much of a pause, and John swallowed at that, because it wasn't nothing, it was a lot. Sherlock let out a slow breath before continuing. “I've never done it while not high.”

“Oh, fuck,” John said involuntarily, and then couldn't stand Sherlock's eyes for a moment, and pressed his face into Sherlock's chest to avoid them for a bit. It was — so unbelievably sad, so wrong, it should never, ever have been that way. “So, with Julian, you were —” he mumbled.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, simply. John could feel the rumble of his voice in his chest. “I told you I'd never come with someone else,” he continued, and slid his long fingers through John's hair as he spoke. “Cocaine is good for stamina but generally bad for orgasms.”

John shook his head against Sherlock's chest. “God, Sherlock,” he said.

Sherlock laughed a little, small, not joyful. “Leave him out of it,” he murmured, “there's no room here for useless fictions.” His fingers in John's hair tugged gently at his head until John tipped it back and they were looking at each other again. “It's over, John. That place, that... it's over,” Sherlock said.

John swallowed thickly. “I want you,” he said, without thinking is-this-all-right, without wondering, without uncertainty, because it was there in Sherlock's face, so obvious, so easily read, so undiluted — and he needed to let Sherlock know it was reciprocated just as strongly.

“Good,” Sherlock whispered, and kissed John with a harshness that immediately had his cock responding; a bit messy and unrefined, a tangle of tongues and the scrape of teeth.

Sherlock had both of John's knees hooked over his shoulders, and was doing that thing with his tongue around the head of John's cock that had John's eyes rolling back into his head, and he was fighting it, because he wanted to see, he wanted to see the press of Sherlock's nose against his pubic hair as he slid his mouth down to swallow John down to the root, the flushed red of his lips wet around John's cock, but he couldn't help it, and all he saw for a second was black, his own head, inside, the shadows inside his own skull. Sherlock chuckled around him, and the vibrations of that had John involuntarily tightening his fingers in Sherlock's hair so harshly Sherlock made another sound, an almost startled moan.

“Sherlock,” he managed, tongue tripping over the syllables.

Sherlock sucked hard on the upstroke, forcing a fuck from John's throat, and let John's cock slip out of his mouth; it bounced against John's stomach, hard and flushed and shining. Sherlock pushed John's legs off his shoulders and sat back on his heels; expanses of skin, lightly gleaming with sweat in the dim light, of body, of not-just-transport, and he was a vision.

“Fucking hell –” John began, but Sherlock looked up at him, eyes wide and shining darkly.

“Turn over,” he said – growled, voice liquid and dark.

John couldn't stop the strangled sound coming up out of his throat, and did as he was told
immediately, rolling over.

“Here, put this under your –” Sherlock said, and John lifted himself half-way up on his knees so Sherlock could put a pillow under his hips.

“I'm going to ruin this pillow,” John said, voice strangled, as he plopped down on the mattress without finesse.

Sherlock's laugh was low and made John's insides twist with desire. “I hope so,” he said.

And then there were his lips on John’s shoulder, mouthing wet kisses to the skin. Sherlock licked a confident stripe of wetness down John's spine, hands massaging John's arse cheeks, and John, suddenly realising what he was about to do, couldn't stop his hips grinding into the pillow at the hot spike of arousal.

Sherlock kissed his lower back, exactly there where it always ached when he was tired, and gave a small nip to that spot, a scrape of teeth and then the soothing touch of tongue.

“John, you are –” Sherlock said against his skin, barely audible, and bit it instead of finishing his sentence.

When Sherlock kissed his left arse cheek and a hand inched up his right thigh, John pressed his eyes shut; he didn't know how to prepare for this, had never done this, found the idea to be overwhelmingly filthy erotic, and then all thoughts of what the idea of it was were pushed aside by the reality of it – breath ghosting across the crease, hands gently parting the cheeks and –

“Fuck,” he swore into the mattress, almost jerking away on instinct at the first touch of Sherlock's tongue, wet, hot. Sherlock licked him carefully, as if gathering data – and John almost laughed breathlessly at that, because no doubt Sherlock was, was cataloguing taste and temperature and texture and John's responses as his tongue felt around John's arsehole. For long, breathless moments he licked with flat, broad strokes that made John squirm against the pillow. It was a strange, extremely erotic sensation and John shuddered back against Sherlock's mouth when Sherlock pointed his tongue slightly, pressing against his hole with a bit more strength.

He willed himself to relax, but it wasn't easy; his entire abdomen was thrumming with oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck, with the newness of it, with his unexpected overwhelming arousal, and when the tip of Sherlock's tongue pressed at him until it slipped just a fraction past the ring of tight muscle he clenched without meaning to, and there was a rush of breath against his arse as Sherlock pulled back a bit.

“Relax,” he said, only barely loudly enough for John to hear, and his voice was – so gravelly with desire, so deep, that John half-moaned just at hearing it, and then when Sherlock's tongue was back and pushed back inside him just a little, he made no attempt to swallow the groan.

“Oh, fuck, Sherlock, this is –” he said breathlessly, trying to stop himself from rutting against the pillow, “so good, fuck –”

Without warning the sensation of Sherlock's mouth was lost, and John made a sound of protest.

Sherlock slid upwards until his chest was pressed to John's back, the hard line of his cock poking into John's thigh, and he said into John's ear: “I'm going to get you ready, or I'll – I'll come just from doing this to you.”
John shivered. “Yes, yes,” he said breathlessly, “do it.”

Sherlock shifted on him, reaching for the lube that was waiting on the bedside table, and he settled himself between John's legs, pushing them apart a bit wider.

“You should see yourself,” Sherlock said, and he sounded awed. “You're – it's – you're extraordinary, John.”

“Do something,” John said, looking back over his shoulder, “come on, do it.”

There was the wet sound of Sherlock slicking up his fingers, and everything in John was on fire with anticipation. Sherlock leaned in and pressed a kiss to his shoulder blade just as the wet tip of a finger slid against John's hole.

“Ready?” Sherlock asked his shoulder quietly, and John loved him so, was so intensely in love with him, with how he was, how he sounded, how alive he was, how much of a point of light, of heat, of beginning, of gravity he was against John's body, how he smiled against John's back at the stuttered “I – yes.”

The finger slid in knuckle-deep and Sherlock waited a moment before pushing it deeper – it went in fairly easily; it had been three years, yes, but John wasn't completely new to this, to this strangely wonderful feeling of stretching, of being filled. Sherlock's fingers were longer than Sarah's, and the sensation was half-uncomfortable, half-pleasurable.

“More,” he said after a couple of moments, as the very slight burn subsided.

Sherlock complied wordlessly; the second finger went in far more slowly, meeting more resistance, and John hissed into the mattress at the sting. Sherlock held still, allowing John's body to adapt.

“Yeah, all right,” John finally said, responding to a question Sherlock hadn't explicitly asked. Sherlock moved his wrist gently, twisting his fingers carefully. He pulled out, ignored John's sound of protest, added more lube and slid in again. It was better, already – and as the minute thrusts of his fingers became a bit more forceful John could tell he was looking for John's prostate.

“Bit – deeper,” he said, and Sherlock laughed a little, breathlessly, but when he scissored his fingers, working John open gently, and then thrust a little deeper, he did actually brush across John's prostate, sparking a wholly particular kind of pleasure that vibrated up his spine.

“Ah,” John gasped, and Sherlock made a small sound in response, scissoring his fingers further and further open.

“Come on, I can take it,” John groaned, and Sherlock slipped another finger in – and John sighed stutteringly, the slight pain melting into a building buzz of pleasure quite quickly.

“Good?” Sherlock asked from behind him, and he was still too far away, there was too much space to cross between them, too much separating them, so John said very decisively: “God, yes, I'm ready, come on –”

Sherlock pulled out his fingers, prompting a groan from John. “Not like this,” he breathed, “I want to see you, John, I have to –”
John twisted his head back to look at him. “How do you want me?” he asked, and could visibly trace the shiver that went through Sherlock at the question.

“Oh your back,” Sherlock said, voice dark, heavy, “with the pillow under you.”

John rolled over again, shifted until it was right. His heart was hammering in his throat.

Sherlock lubed himself up quickly; his cock was glistening, leaking wetness, fully hard against his abdomen. John's mouth went dry at the sight of it, and there was a small twinge of ohfuck how is that ever going to fit, but then Sherlock moved in with a slow grace; he keyed their hips together as well as he could, and as soon as they were relatively aligned took John's right calf in his hand and brought it up, pushing his shoulder into the back of John's knee. John almost laughed, incongruously, at the realisation that it was undoubtedly not a coincidence that Sherlock had chosen his good leg.

“All right?” Sherlock asked, and he was smiling as he said it, as though he knew the answer already, and – well – he probably did, the wanker.

“If you don't do it now I think I'll – go have a cup of tea,” John said, aiming for levity, and Sherlock flashed him a smile of many meanings; but there was no reducing the weight of the moment between them, and no reducing the way Sherlock looked in the mutedly lit bedroom, angling down his face to look at John, how he was a slow swirl of cells and mind that light fell into, trickling down onto his face from the mess of curls on his forehead, particles of light skimming over the miraculous angles of his cheekbones and the swollen curve of his lips as his teeth came to work at them, pulling at them as he used his hand to angle his slick cock against John's entrance. John's breath hitched in his throat at the sight of him, offering up so much, so there, such a pulling presence in a dark room, and it was almost enough to distract him until the push became real and – ohgodjesuschristfuckinghell – the head of Sherlock's cock pushed into him, past the loosened ring of muscle.

Sherlock's eyes, if possible, grew even darker with pupil, with dark holes that light hid in. “I – John,” he brought out, then breathed out a stuttered stream of air, and John realised over the strange sensation of the stretch how much he was clenching, “you – you – you have to –” and John expected something like relax, but what Sherlock said was: “– help me –”

John couldn't help the moan, because God, help me, that was – that was everything, and he did help him because that is what John did, that is what he could, again, and the universe gave him a second chance, it was something of a debt repaid, the sin absolved of only looking up and saying all right, stop it now and not being able to do anything else, to pass Sherlock anything but no; this was yes, holding Sherlock's gaze, of bringing up his other knee so the access was easier, and nodding once, expressing all of the yes that the universe could hold. He willed some of his tension away, and looked at Sherlock's face, trying to trace all of the things that were passing over it; too much, too fast, but they were looking at each other and that it was for John, because of John that Sherlock looked so undone, so flushed, with the blood playing so close to the surface of his skin, was amazing.

“You,” was Sherlock's exhale of breath, and then he pushed forward, hands coming to scrabble at John's hips. John gasped at the slow penetration, at its depth, at the already slightly familiar rush of pleasure-pain-pleasure.

“Oh – oh God,” he breathed, fingers twitching with the desire to bury themselves in Sherlock's hair, but settling for gripping the sheets, since Sherlock's head was a little too far away.

Sherlock hissed, and his eyes were open and wild; a small bright ring of grey-blue around wide-blown pupils, and he was flicking his eyes to and fro in that way that would have told John in any
other situation that he'd gone into the maze of his mind, collecting and chucking information at a break-neck speed; and what he focused on at the end, mouth falling open, lips flushed, the inside of his mouth a dark pathway, was John – and that was almost as thrilling, almost as disorienting as the feeling of his cock inside John, because it was a similar kind of sharing, almost.

Sherlock was looking at him as though he was that final clue, that final thing that brought him to the solution – wide-eyed, mouth shaping a small o.

“Sherlock,” John said, hoarsely.

“Yes,” Sherlock breathed stutteringly, and pressed his torso forward, bending John's leg further – his movements were jerky and uncontrolled at first, until he managed to catch hold of a rhythm of hips and legs and toes flexing. John tried to meet him, tried to work upwards, but it was too much, there was so much, he couldn't even make a lot of sound, it was already hard enough just to breathe, the breath was gone from him for a long while, his blood pounded everywhere, it was a physical sensation of everything thrumming, of everything in a rhythm, and then Sherlock, whose fingers on John's hips were anchors, points of focus, pulled out almost completely and slammed back in with a sudden force, hitting John's prostate almost unexpectedly; and then there was sound again, and John heard the moan he made and almost couldn't believe it for a moment. His spine arched of its own accord, which made Sherlock's next thrust hit home even deeper.

Sherlock was talking, a mishmash of words, it was hard to say which; it didn't really matter, his eyes were steady on John's, intense and clouded.

“F-fuck, Sherlock,” John managed to say over the steadily growing sounds of their bodies moving against each other, and as if that were some kind of cue Sherlock curled a hand around John's cock, bringing it back to full mast with practised strokes that matched his thrusts.

“Oh God,” John garbled, his words getting lost somewhere in the onslaught of sensation, pleasure-pain-Sherlock-sound-smell-pleasure.

“I – you, John, it's – you,” Sherlock gasped, verbal faculties seeming to be breaking quickly, and then he said, through what seemed to be clenched teeth: “Can't – can't wait for you to – to do this – to me,” and John moaned loudly at that as it filtered into a part of his brain that was still half-functioning, because it was so much, too much, almost, and he couldn't for a moment, couldn't not, and he closed his eyes against the bright light of Sherlock in the world of their bedroom, drawing time and space together to him.

And Sherlock said: “John,” and there was a question in it, somewhere, and John opened his eyes to see it, and Sherlock's pupils were black holes hiding captured light, ringed with thin bands of iris, and by opening his eyes John seemed to have answered the question already, because Sherlock's mouth fell slightly open and he leaned in even further – John's leg muscles protested, but that was only half a sensation in what he was feeling, one that didn't warrant a response – half-fitting his lips around John's, breathing indecipherable things into him, molecules, atoms, likely, cores of air circled by the smallest forms of being, but this time John couldn't make it out in the steady stream of sound that he was swallowing; soon he was a bit dizzy from lack of oxygen, breath passing between them. Sherlock thumbed the head of his cock between them just so, delicious sparks of pleasure were collecting in his gut as Sherlock's cock hit his prostate at every thrust, John managed to breathe a “Fuck, yes,” against Sherlock's mouth and then he was half-sobbing, half-just-breathing, coming, coming in spurts over his own stomach and Sherlock's, long moments of nothing but body and
Sherlock's lips and his cock and white lights popping behind John's eyelids.

Sherlock pulled his head away from John's face and let out a cry that almost sounded as though he was in pain, and he slammed into John with a strength that was sure to lead to bruises, which was a thought that John dazedly had as he scrambly recovered from his orgasm and found that there was still a lot of sensation left; too much, almost, almost painful – but Sherlock was close, was grasping at him with hard fingers, was saying “Yes – John – you –” and his name getting tangled up with chemical formulas that John couldn't place in that wash of sensation, and when Sherlock came it was almost unexpected, the rush of semen inside John, the sensation of Sherlock's cock going even harder for a moment before pulsing and throbbing and – God, it was filthy, it was so fucking good, it couldn't have been more right; Sherlock finished on his name, a John drawn out into unintelligible stutters of sound in the back of his throat.

“Oh, fuck,” John breathed to no one, to himself, to both of them, as he watched the way Sherlock's mouth filled and emptied itself of sound, his eyes flickering, flashes of quicksilver with black set into it. It was the singularly most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen, and he was almost too flattened by sensation to be able to process it.

Coming back into himself the tension slipped from Sherlock, his hands unclenched, he pulled out with a small sound of pain and pleasure both; he fell back onto John, boneless, almost bodiless if it hadn't been for the weight of him, pressing down, the clutches of gravity back in place, and John managed to get his arms around him, catching him, letting their uneven breathing bounce off each other.

John tried to speak and found that he couldn't, really, not yet – and after a few seconds, when he could, the only thing he could think of was what the fuck just happened because his brain was still re-booting, and there weren't quite words yet. So he kissed Sherlock instead, through sweat and saliva and his own taste and the specific taste of the inside of Sherlock's mouth.

Sherlock kissed back, slow; it was almost as much a kiss of breath as of mouths.

“Yes,” John finally managed to say, and it was as if he'd answered a question, and Sherlock's lips were smiling against his.

Moments slipped past, time was lenient and silent.

“Fuck, I missed you,” John tried to say but ended up whispering, blinking against the light, against the after-bursts.

Sherlock let out a small sound against him, language still putting itself back together after the explosion, still inventing itself.

Seconds passed, breathing slid back into normality with halting steps, and something of muscle memory seemed to restore itself to Sherlock, and he managed to half roll himself off John, his legs catching between John's.

John angled his face so their foreheads were touching.

“I like it – I like it that your eyes are always open,” he breathed, slightly deranged, randomly.

Sherlock hummed.

“Are you – are you afraid that I'll be gone if you stop looking?” John asked him, calming down slightly with the warm, sweaty pressure of Sherlock's forehead and locks of his hair trapped between them.
“Not anymore,” Sherlock said after a beat, voice raw and deep. “I like it now how you – go away, and then come back.”

“I'm always coming back,” John replied, without thinking.

And Sherlock, miraculously, said: “So am I,” and kissed John, a calm mingle of even more of them. He was slack against John, without resistance, without any kind of tension, limbs heavy.

“I need to clean up,” John mumbled, a bit unwilling as fatigue and post-orgasmic relaxation stole over his limbs; but he was sticky in places that he hadn't ever been, covered in his own come and filled with Sherlock's.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, but didn't seem inclined to move.

John untangled himself from him, dropping a kiss on his hair, and wore Sherlock's dressing gown to the bathroom, wincing with a particular wonder at Sherlock's come trickling slowly onto his thighs. He cleaned up quickly, spent a minute watching himself in the mirror with an almost incomprehensible sort of elation, an almost hysterical urge to laugh which he could thankfully suppress, and went back to the bedroom with a flannel for Sherlock.

When he came back to bed, Sherlock was already half asleep and mumbled a sound of thanks as John passed the flannel over him and with some difficulty tugged the covers over them.

“Did you mean it?” John muttered as he fitted himself around Sherlock, who pressed his back flush against John's torso and tugged John's hand over his side, tangling their fingers together.

“More... specificity,” Sherlock managed.

“When you said... me – fucking you. Did you – is that really something that –”

He could almost feel Sherlock's eyes opening, the drowsiness breaking slightly, though there was no way he could have been sure.

“Yes,” was the response, singular, precise, a star blowing away the gases of the cloud that it was born out of.

“Oh fuck,” John said, his voice muffled against Sherlock's shoulder.

“If you can handle it, that is,” Sherlock said, his grin almost audible.

“I'll have to check if I don't have a heart condition first, I'm afraid,” John said, a bit weakly.

“Don't worry,” Sherlock breathed, squeezing his fingers. “I've seen you chase criminals all over London. I don't want to detract from your excellent medical knowledge, but I'm fairly certain your heart is in great condition.”

John huffed a chuckle against his skin. “Are you saying the only heart condition I have is you?”

He could practically hear Sherlock's smile. “Such a wordsmith, as always.”

“Well,” John said, nuzzling his cheek against Sherlock's shoulder, “this definitely isn't something for the blog.”

“I'm sure your readers would love to hear about this,” Sherlock said.

“They're never hearing one word of it,” John breathed, “this is you and me.”
Sherlock didn't quite respond, but his sigh was a shudder of body that seemed to move the whole of him, and John could trace it against himself. There was so much wrong, there was so much scrambled, when he stopped to think, and there was Ian, alone in a friend's bed because he couldn't stand being alone in his own, and there was no real way to cross the space between them, the stairs that he'd climbed into that other world that used to be John's before it had merged with Sherlock's – he couldn't reach out and touch Ian the way he could Sherlock, because he wasn't that person that had had that gift, who had been able to say in the night it's okay and have it be more than just words, because that person saying it made it true, immediately, and that that was lost was precisely the reason it wasn't okay, anymore. John pressed his eyes closed against the warm planes of Sherlock's shoulder, breathing in the smell of him, sweat and London and the earthy Sherlock of him that had no name but John would recognise everywhere, which was also, right now, a bit the smell of himself, and thanked – thanked everyone and everything, all of the elements in Sherlock that had been exploded out of stars and had passed through so much only to now, temporarily, form the skin John was lying against, and the space inside it, so full of twists and turns and hurts and loves, and if he felt a little guilty he supposed that was something that he would have to learn to cope with, because if he could choose again and there was one wrong he could undo, it would have been this again; he would have, again, carefully undone the fabric of life that had grown over the absence of Sherlock, he would have loosened the stitches until Sherlock could step through again, bringing with him a new dawn, a bright new spring, a light shining through, slow shock waves in space, explosions without sound.
Chapter 19

John woke with a strange gradualness from dreams of trickling, of drops rolling down, of liquids of different colours – tea, brown and blue, and blood, red and grey, and water, cloudy and colourless – to Sherlock's bedroom dim and silent with a grey early morning hush. There was the mournful patter of rain against the window; so that was it for the impossibly self-assured streak of pre-summer that had held for a longer while than the season should have allowed.

He stretched, his limbs protesting lazily, his muscles still too relaxed to appreciate the entry into full consciousness. He let out a soft, unintended half-laugh at the sudden, too-sharp tingle of soreness in his arse – that was going to make sitting not entirely comfortable, at least for today. He closed his eyes again for a bit, just appreciating the quiet, still-willing reality in the early hours. Rain on a window. The beginning sounds of day replacing night. There was a particular way London sounded in the morning; there was never a real hush in this city, never a moment in which everyone was asleep at the same time, but the way sounds multiplied seemed different in daylight. Outside and inside; body heat transferred through sheets that had twisted in the night. The straightforward results of sex: small pains that made things real, and memories so fresh they weren't yet memories, with their own particular weight, still sharp with light undimmed by the mundaneness and the flexibility of remembering.

John noted they'd got separated in the night, each with his own dreams and movements; maybe Sherlock had woken after a few hours from his usual post-sex paralysis and had untangled himself to get his phone or either of their laptops to chase away the inanity of empty night-time space, or maybe John's body had reacted to the overwhelming warmth of two people under the same covers, and had withdrawn itself limb by limb in oblivious sleep, pausing every step of the way almost apologetically, as though on some level he were still aware of the re-setting of boundaries. Mary used to say he did that sometimes. Sherlock had never mentioned it, but Sherlock didn't need to mention things for them to happen, even if it sometimes felt that way. Maybe there had been dreams.

Sherlock's hand came like a gentle reminder of a world outside of sleep, burrowing its way through the twist of sheets between them, touching warm and a bit sticky onto the skin on John's side, then sliding over loosely to his stomach. The rest of Sherlock followed, a connection in different steps; the mattress dipped a little as he shifted closer, one long stretch of hard shin slipping between John's ankles, thighs connecting, the scratch of Sherlock's pubic hair ticklish against John's bum, finally the touch of chest to back. Sherlock was a bit too naked, a bit too warm, a bit too close – he smelled of sex, though John supposed that was as much his own smell and the sheets' as Sherlock's, probably, and that was a good thought, the sharing of it, of something as fleeting as scent, it could link things together over the oblivious hours of sleep, of time that had come and gone unnoticed. It was somehow lovely how it was too hot between them, how their skins stuck to each other with shared night and sweat, with a private burst of heat on a chilly morning. Sherlock was half-erect, but seemed unconcerned, nosing against the tender spot in John's neck that hardened upward into his skull.

John made a small sound of approval. Outside, the hum of traffic was swelling slowly. Sleep hadn't quite evaporated; if he closed his eyes, he would be able to... if Sherlock just kept his breath there against John's neck, warm and steady and slow, and his body, real and alive and calm, tensions eased by this bed, by sex, by them; then, yes, he'd be able to sleep again, for some more hours, until London had forgotten about the night and woken him again with its loud presence.

But: “John,” Sherlock said, voice scratchy from hours of disuse, “your friend has been awake for at least two hours.”
John's eyes sprang open with the sudden intrusion of reality. “Two hours?” he asked; it came out in a slightly slurred jumble, his mouth was still sleepy and unwilling.

“That's when he started pacing in your bedroom,” Sherlock responded. His lips brushed against John's neck, blurring the words against him. “He might have been awake before. He's in the living room right now and has made himself two cups of coffee already.”

John let his head fall back a little on his pillow, so the back of his head connected gently with Sherlock's forehead. “All right,” he mumbled, a bit meaninglessly. “What time is it?”

“Around seven.”

John breathed out. Sherlock's hand connected more fully to his stomach. “And he's been awake for two hours? Fuck.”

“I would have got up,” Sherlock said. The but that John was expecting didn't come. Maybe Sherlock didn't have a but, or maybe he didn't know what it was. But I thought you wouldn't like it? But I thought I'd leave the handling of your friends to you? But I found it was pleasant here in bed?

Sherlock had been in bed with John, awake, for more than two hours; he'd listened to Ian pacing, coming down, making coffee, sitting quietly and radiating his presence.

“Weren't you bored?” John asked the wall he was facing, which was growing a lighter grey as the cloudy day progressed leisurely outside.

Sherlock answered against his neck: “Not unbearably so.”

John smiled a little; a tremble of affection, a twinge of worry.

“John,” Sherlock said again, after a moment, “did you know our rooms share an air vent?” He sounded careful, as though measuring his words.


“Yes,” Sherlock hummed, and the mouth he pressed to John's neck wasn't smiling.

“Oh, fuck.”

“Well, yes.” Sherlock almost sounded pleased.

John looked over his shoulder to face Sherlock, but it didn't quite work; Sherlock's face was buried in his neck, and all John could see was dark curls and sheets pulled up high.

“Sherlock,” he said, frowning. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I was very focused on having sex with you,” Sherlock said, muffled.

John groaned. “God, you're saying... shit, he heard all of it, didn't he?”

Sherlock surfaced by tugging the sheet down. He pulled back to look John in the eye; his face was pillow-lined, rumpled and loose with sleep.
“Likely, yes,” he said neutrally. “I always heard you when you masturbated in your room, so it's logical to assume he could hear us, especially since you were always fairly quiet, I think because your masturbatory habits in the army taught you how to do it silently and quickly –”

John cut him off, spluttering: “You – you heard me when I –” He shifted around a bit more so he could look at Sherlock more comfortably. Sherlock looked back, vaguely expectant. John didn’t know of what. “You listened to me tossing off?”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “You had an orgasm last night while I was penetrating you, after fellatio, anilingus and digital stimulation. We've had sex in many different instances in many different ways now. Why would it bother you that I heard you masturbating?”

John shook his head, stifling a laugh at Sherlock's clinical sex terms. “That's not... I didn't know you could hear me. It was – supposed to be private,” he said.

Sherlock just looked at him.

“God,” John said, passing a hand over his eyes, unable to stop the chuckle. “Well, I guess I'd already given up so many forms of privacy living here with you, it was probably stupid of me to assume I still had that one.”

He was silent for a moment, pressing his eyes into the darkness inside his hands, and thought about how it was okay now, how it didn't bother him that Sherlock had listened to him having a wank, years ago, lives ago, or not at least not as much as it should, how so much of his own idea of privacy had got twisted up under the insistent pressure of Sherlock (Sherlock-then as well as Sherlock-now). Strange how things in the past could change when they were looked at from a different angle of present. Strange how the light of memory changed. Sometimes, when John thought of Sherlock-on-pavement nowadays, which he tried not to, there was the stir of life under his fingers, of blood resisting, pushing back – it hadn't been there in reality, Sherlock had taken drugs to suppress it, and anyway there hadn't been time to feel it. He hadn't been meant to feel it. Now, sometimes, he felt a pulse under his fingers when he remembered it.

The thought of Sherlock lying in this bed and listening to him wank – probably having to strain himself to hear anything, really – was almost intimate now; exciting, sexy, where it would have been mortifying before.

Sherlock's fingers, alive, closed over his and pulled his hand away. “John, I didn't mind,” he said, earnestly, as though that changed anything.

John tried to glower at him; it probably didn't come over as genuine. “Well, I would have, if I'd known then.”

Sherlock obviously had a response waiting in his mouth, but seemed to reconsider. Instead, he just pressed forward and kissed a brief kiss to John's mouth.

“Just tell me you didn't do this intentionally,” John said, frowning a little, when Sherlock pulled back.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “What, you think it was some sort of territorial display?”

John said nothing.
“Idiot, of course not,” Sherlock scoffed. “I planned it while I was away and long before I was aware he was here.”

“Yes, you did plan it, didn't you?” John said, wondering at it a bit.

“I plan everything,” Sherlock said with dignity, and kissed John again, and that way the times when he didn't have things planned became irrelevant; when he was forced to make his plans out of the scripted monologue of alone is what I have, when he had had to paper cut himself on look up, I'm on the roof top when he was pushed into the rehearsed lines of please, will you do this for me, when he had fluttered down like the already written pages that he had had to shackle himself to. “You liked it,” Sherlock said, without really taking his mouth from John's.

John smiled. “Evidently,” he said, the word shared between them in that moment, crossing the small space between their lips. Sherlock accepted it into his mouth from John, as if it had only been lent out for a bit. Maybe it had been. John kissed his lips to seal the transaction.

“All right,” he finally sighed against Sherlock's mouth, against his warmth, against his taste, the dusk of sleep, the lingering tang of sex. Unwillingly: “I need to get up.”

As John had thought, Sherlock's pyjamas did fit Ian, but not exactly in the same way they fit Sherlock. Ian was almost as tall as Sherlock, though it didn't register as obviously because he wasn't as lean, and his legs weren't as noticeably long. The trousers, dark, luxurious, smooth – Sherlock wore them often, when he came to bed with John and they just slept and didn't end up naked. They'd been new, Sherlock must have picked them up somewhere on his travels, during his hiding, or maybe in the week when he'd lived here already while John packed up his stuff and trailed his fingers over the one text a day from Sherlock, still so ignorant, still so unable to know anything from the cold impersonality of Sherlock on a screen. The feel of these new favourite pyjama trousers against John under the covers was always a small reminder that things were different. Not worse; different. John had started to associate them with Sherlock in the night, the slide of satin with warmth and strength behind them. On Ian they looked like they had been misplaced.

Ian looked like he'd been misplaced.

“Morning,” John said, tightening his dressing gown around him. He heard Sherlock's bed creak as he sat up in it, and clicked the door gently closed behind him; maybe to pretend for at least another moment that he'd been alone in there, that Ian could just look up and say hello and drink more coffee and make a few painful jokes, and nothing would have to be avoided or skirted or confronted.

“Morning,” Ian said briskly, sending John a tight smile.

“Slept well?” John asked, then winced a little at the platitude.

“Oh, yes,” Ian said blankly, “wonderfully. Lovely quiet neighbourhood, this.”

John licked his lips and squared his shoulders almost without noticing as he tried to read Ian's carefully neutral expression.

Ian's mouth folded into a small grin after a few moments. “Jesus, doctor sir. Don't look so startled. No need to worry.” He sobered a little. “It's your flat.”
John cleared his throat. “Yeah, erm. Well.” He cursed himself inwardly for not being more aware of Ian's presence, and a bit irrationally he cursed Sherlock for being so quintessentially Sherlock, so magnetic, so arresting, so impossible to focus on without instantly forgetting about everything else. It was a little painful to imagine Ian lying awake in the bed that had been John's for a long time, twisted sleeplessly in the sheets, trying not to hear, trying not to notice, trying not to – or was this just projection, now? – feel even more alone. Awkward, yes, but also more than that; it was a stark reminder of what both of them had lost and only one of them had regained. He couldn't think of anything to say but: “More coffee?”

“Yeah, all right,” Ian said, face carefully blank again. From the coffee table, he picked up the novel John had been reading until Sherlock had so kindly informed him about the ending. Ian gestured with it at John, raising an eyebrow. “I've been reading this. Questionable,” he said, with a tight smile.

John half-grimaced over his shoulder, walking over to the pot of coffee that Ian had made. “You're not the first to say that,” he said.

“No, you're not,” came Sherlock's clear, low voice from the doorway to his bedroom. Both John and Ian started and looked at him. “But John does love his seedy crime novels.”

He was still tying the belt of his dressing gown, but at least he was dressed – he had pyjamas on underneath. John swallowed as he noted very clearly how thoroughly shagged he looked – hair flattened on one side, standing up crazily on the other, and a red suction bruise peeking just over the collar of his pyjama shirt. John realised he probably didn't look much different.

Sherlock was smiling at Ian; it wasn't the small, genuine smile that John loved best, but it wasn't his abundant, fake one, either. He slid his hands into the pockets of his dressing gown, which made him look uncharacteristically demure. “Hello,” he said.

“Hullo,” Ian responded, and he was young as he said it, he was pale, he was himself and someone else, wearing pyjama trousers that weren't his, that belonged to someone who had been a ghost to him until now, even after Sherlock had returned to John, because he'd only ever lived in John's words, and that hadn't changed. Not until now, not until Ian could look over and see Sherlock standing there in the doorway to the room in which he and John had forgot about Ian for long, long moments, while Ian had been unable to forget about them.

“Um, this is Ian,” John croaked, his mouth suddenly dry, “my friend. Ian, this is – Sherlock.”

“His other friend,” Sherlock said lightly.

He glanced over at John; whatever he read in John's expression made him narrow his eyes. “His partner,” he amended, not looking away from John, and took his hands out of his pockets, straightening his shoulders. His entire body language changed with this gesture; even as he stood there in his dressing gown he seemed to lengthen to his full height, his full presence. It was subtle, probably unnoticeable to Ian; but John saw it clearly, and realised that Sherlock had been intending to play a character, and had for some reason in the past second decided not to.

John frowned. Sherlock looked away from him, back at Ian. John didn't doubt that he'd scanned Ian up and down by now, reading things into the way he held the novel in his hand and the way he'd sat up on the sofa when Sherlock had entered the room, and that he probably knew from his response to Sherlock's appearance exactly who he'd lost and how long ago. “Well,” Sherlock said, “don't hold back.” Ian's eyes flicked over to John; there was something raw and confused about his expression.
“Breakfast,” Sherlock specified. “You've been up ages, you must be hungry.”

Ian got to his feet without responding and walked over to the kitchen table. Sherlock fell into the chair opposite him. “I'll, um, make toast,” John offered to cross the silence.

Ian said: “I'm fine,” just as Sherlock said: “Yes, do.”

Well, making toast was better than just watching, seeing Sherlock leaning forward to rest his chin on his clasped hands, apparently watching Ian very intently; John let out a little breath as he turned to fiddle with the toaster. He wondered if Sherlock was as aware of the thick tension between them as he was.

“It's interesting to meet you, Ian,” Sherlock said.

“It's a bit surreal to meet you, to be honest,” Ian said frankly.

“Yes, it must be,” was Sherlock's slow response. “You're looking at me like you're not sure it isn't a trick.”

John turned around and leaned against the kitchen counter, crossing his arms. Ian looked at him for a split second over Sherlock's head; there was nothing there that was easy to read.

“It was a trick, of course,” Sherlock continued. His shoulders were tight. “A magic trick,” he continued, slowly, chewing over every syllable. The quotation marks were almost audible.

John looked away from the two of them. He'd told Ian a few times about what had been said in Sherlock's final phone call – he couldn't be sure Ian would recognise the words, but John certainly did. After a long while he'd forcibly erased them from everyday life with an enormous effort of will; but he couldn't control them when he was asleep. They played forwards and backwards and showed up in the most mundane of dreams, the most normal, the ones in which Sherlock did nothing, just sat at the kitchen table or looked in darkly from a doorway, receding with a slowness that was still faster than anything John could tell him, the speed of sound wasn't enough, the words couldn't reach him, he was beyond that threshold where language had meaning. A magic trick, John. In dreams he'd said it often, disembodied, or extremely bodied, reaching out to John with his hands in a way that he never had in life, except on that roof, and then there had been too much space between them, too much mournful rain, too much gravity waiting for its due. A disappearing trick. A conjuring trick. There is no energy lost in the universe, John; everything returns, nothing ever goes away, Sherlock had once told him without even taking his eyes away from his microscope; and then he'd gone to prove himself wrong, completely and utterly wrong in a way that he hadn't ever been before. Or at least it had felt that way.

“Yeah,” Ian said, sounding pinched. John could tell he wanted to say something but wasn't sure what it was. “Quite the show,” he said finally. “The audience was impressed.”

John bit the inside of his cheek.

There was a beat of silence, then Sherlock said: “Well, I'm pleased to see you've reconsidered your suicide plans.”

“Sherlock,” John said, without thinking; a plea? a warning? hard to say, and Ian's eyes connected with his, sharp, a bit disbelieving. Sherlock turned his head and looked at John as well, and there was a lot of weight in their combined gazes, and John found it hard to answer them both.
“Well, I am pleased,” Sherlock said, sounding almost defensive.

“Good to know,” Ian said calmly, and brought his coffee mug to his lips – even John could tell it was empty. Ian realised it too, stared at it for a moment, then put it back.

“Toast,” John said unnecessarily, after it had popped up.

Sherlock accepted a piece without comment; Ian declined with a head shake and a tight smile. John sat down next to Sherlock. His own piece of toast tasted a bit burnt and bitter. He cleared his throat.

There was the slight disturbance of Sherlock tapping his foot against the table leg in a quick, light rhythm.

Ian's fingers traced the handle of his mug.

Outside a car screeched to a halt, another honked; small pockets of drama on the rainy street outside.

John cast around for something to say that didn't involve dying or sex or Sherlock or the unwelcome inanities about rain.

“All right,” Sherlock said, as though responding to a question no one had asked. “You're practically vibrating with questions.”

Ian looked at John first – John could only shrug lightly in response. Another moment passed, unremarkable. “What did you – why did you –” Ian finally burst out, hands clenched so tightly around his coffee mug his fingers were mottled red and white, as though his bones were shining through the translucency of skin, of trapped blood. He appeared to collect himself, then said: “Why did you play dead for so long?”

“To protect John,” Sherlock said immediately, as if he had expected the question, or had rehearsed the answer. He glanced at John.

Ian, forever Ian, who never hid behind words, made a funny sort of noise, half a laugh, half a sigh.

John suddenly realised that of all things he could imagine Ian feeling sitting across from Sherlock, Ian apparently felt mostly outraged on his behalf. “You protected him by letting him believe you were dead for two whole years?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said simply, and bit off a piece of toast with a louder crunch than seemed logical, and chewed it furiously.

Ian looked at John. His mouth was tight. “Does he even know –”

“Yes, I'm quite aware,” Sherlock cut in.

“Stop it,” John said, frowning deeply, “it's too early for this. In fact, it'll never be late enough for this.”

“He doesn't know what he put you through,” Ian said, looking intently at Sherlock.

“I actually do,” Sherlock said, breaking the remainder of his toast in half and crumpling it between his long fingers. “You don't know my reasons. And I do believe I know John better than you ever
“Christ, Sherlock,” John snapped, glaring at him. Sherlock answered with a look that was just as annoyed.

Ian snorted his strange half-laugh again. “You don't know anything about how he was. You weren't here. You weren't around.”

“Ah, yes, whereas you were, and you were of course completely steady and stable and able to evaluate what exactly was going on without projecting your own emotional turmoil over losing your girlfriend – just like you are extremely capable of looking at this situation objectively without superimposing your own desires and your jealousy onto John,” Sherlock said pleasantly.

After a long moment, Ian's mouth twitched into an extremely insincere smile, and he started getting to his feet. “John, thanks for letting me stay here. It's appreciated. But I think it's time for me to be off.” He uncurled his fingers from around the coffee mug; it dropped down on the table with a heavy sound. “I'll just change into my own clothes,” he finished quietly, and walked over to the landing. His footsteps up the stairs were measured and steady.

“What the fuck, Sherlock?” John snarled. “What is your problem?”

“Nothing as such,” Sherlock said, but his eyes were glittering.

John made an indistinct sound of anger at him and was about to get to his feet to follow Ian, but Sherlock got up quickly, too.

“I'll go talk to him,” Sherlock said, suddenly subdued.

“Ah, yes, excellent idea,” John snapped. “You can just go up and tell him a bit more about his girlfriend who fucking died from cancer, you fucking wanker, and how you understand everything about me and he's just an idiot overwhelmed by emotion and – yeah, sounds like a good plan!”

Sherlock closed a strong hand around John's upper arm. “Let me talk to him.”

“Why the fuck would I do that? You're not exactly the most sensitive person around, Sherlock,” John said, and pulled his arm free.

“He doesn't need sensitive,” Sherlock said matter-of-factly.

“Well, he doesn't need you either,” John responded heatedly.

“I'll – apologise,” Sherlock said.

“Save it,” John said. “The last thing he needs is you pretending to give a toss. He's better at seeing through things like that than you think.” He side-stepped Sherlock neatly and climbed the stairs, quietly seething.

He knocked on the door of what had been his bedroom, lifetimes ago.

Ian opened the door with a lot of force. “Doctor sir,” he said, the words tight. The nickname sounded out of place.
“I'm sorry,” John said immediately, “he's an arsehole sometimes – he doesn't have a clue what he's –"

Ian let out a harsh sound. “God, John, you know he's completely right, so stop it, all right?”

John closed his mouth slowly.

“And he's also fucking wrong at the same time, which makes it worse,” Ian said, face twisted into harsh lines of frustration. “He really doesn't have the faintest what you went through. He doesn't know one fucking thing about how broken he left you.” He turned away from the door. John hesitantly stepped inside. “He can't know,” Ian continued, his thin arms wrapping themselves around him. He was still in Sherlock's pyjama trousers and his own sleep-wrinkled t-shirt. “You could tell him all about it and he still wouldn't know.” He wheeled around and met John's eyes. They stared at each other for a few moments; Ian's face changed. He looked sad, now. A bit more than usual – more than what was always there, the always present static of grief under everything else.

“He can't stand not knowing anything,” John said. He swallowed against the rising feel of a bursting, uncontrollable affection for Ian, which was too large for this moment, this grey rainy morning, this bare room that had fallen into disuse and almost seemed surprised to have this amount of drama inside it. “That might be why he lashed out – it's – for him, not understanding things is...”

“I don't understand him,” Ian cut in. “I don't understand how he did what he did and how he still thinks it did anything to protect you. I don't understand how he can say what he just said.” He pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes. “You told me he could do that, but it's... that he sees through me like that, it's – it's fucking terrible,” he said without animus, voice bled of anger, still shielding off his face. “Because it's true, you know. It's... I want you to do everything that I can't anymore. To have everything. I also want you to lose everything again, because it's not fucking fair.” He was breathing heavily. For a moment, John thought he was crying; but when he removed his hands, his blue eyes were dry. He was Ian, and he was pained, and he was honest, and he was more than a little lost.

“I understand,” John managed to get out.

“You really don't,” Ian said, without inflection. “I asked to stay here because I couldn't... I had to meet him.” He shook his head, wide-eyed. “It's not okay. I'm not okay. Sometimes I want him to die, for real this time. Do you understand that, doctor sir? John? Sometimes I think about you losing him again. I can't help it. And it makes me want to kill myself even more than I already do, sometimes.”

“Oh, fuck, Ian,” John said, and stepped forward without realising, and closed his hands over Ian's shoulders. “You're my friend,” he said.

“I'm a fucking disgrace,” Ian said, but he didn't reject John's touch.

“No,” John said, but couldn't manage more; couldn't say no, you're my friend or no, I really do understand or at least I think I do or I don't blame you for hating this. There was a spreading spot of ice in his chest as it took shape in his head; Ian, trying to pluck the poison out of his brain, the thoughts that came like thieves in the night; thoughts of John alone again, in that place again, that tunnel without light at either end – Ian in this bed, in this flat, God, he must have cursed his request to stay here, he must have hated whatever he had heard in the night, sex and life and connection, too loud to drown out, too present.

Ian closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he said: “I should go.”
John let go of him. His eyes pricked, Ian looked out of focus, blurred. “Are you sure?” he croaked.

“Extremely sure,” Ian said quietly.

—

“Well,” John said when he had come up again after letting Ian out of the flat, “that was kind of you.” He went to stand in front of Sherlock, his hands clenched at his side.

Sherlock’s was seated in the armchair, his fingertips resting against his lips, covering his mouth. He looked John straight in the eye. “I’d have apologised if you’d let me,” he said, the words weaving their way through his fingers.

“You'd have faked an apology,” John said hotly.

“No,” Sherlock said, and took his hands away from his mouth.

John sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb. “I don't expect you to... look, I know you. I don't need you to be pleasant to everyone.” He fixed Sherlock anew with his eyes; Sherlock looked blank in that way that hid many things. “But I'd hoped you'd be sensitive enough to see that you don't get to talk to those people about their losses that way.”

Sherlock’s face changed; he frowned deeply, and brought his hands down on the arm rests of the chair with a loud smack. “Why not?” he snapped. “Am I somehow unable to commiserate? Why shouldn't I understand grief? Do I need to remind you that I've had my share of loss, as well?”

“No,” John said quietly, after a pause, “you don't.”

“Well then?” Sherlock said sharply.

John said nothing, acutely aware that they weren't really talking about Ian anymore. Sherlock, too, was silent for a while. His fingers were curled tightly around the arm rests. “I thought you wanted me to be me,” he finally said.

“Of course I want you to be you,” John replied. “Why wouldn't I?”

“Because that was me, John,” Sherlock said through gritted teeth, with a bitter twist in his voice. “I wasn't going to be me at first,” he added, and his face was hard to read; it was drawn, lined with – worry? anger?

John looked at him, and it occurred to him, softly, like it was a thought just floating by and spilling gently onto a shore, that maybe Sherlock hadn't intended to say anything upsetting, that he'd just found it impossible not to revert to his usual way of crossing bridges – with a haughty superiority, with a scalpel-precise zeroing in on the pain points of a conversation, undoing every stitch, every clumsily patched up wound. John's anger, already so confused with sadness, ebbed away. He wet his lips. “Look, it's... you don't need to be anybody else,” he eventually told Sherlock.

Sherlock made a small sound of derision. “You think I handled that horribly,” he stated. “You'd have preferred it if I'd played the role of subdued, pleasant, easy-going friend, so Ian wouldn't have been embarrassed, and you could've pretended I'm your so-very-normal partner who just faked his death in a burst of regrettable insanity, but not to worry, it's all okay now, he's back, and he understands
what he's done, it's been explained to him by people who get it!” He snapped his mouth shut after the half-shout, mouth working on many other words that were waiting on his tongue.

“Fuck you,” John said calmly.

Sherlock's eyes snapped to his, narrowed.

“Fuck you if you actually think that's what I think about you,” John said. “What do you think happened last night?”

Sherlock blinked. “We had sex,” he said.

“Yeah,” John said, “we had sex. We had sodding amazing sex, and you did things that no one has ever done to me, and I wanted you to because it's you, you lunatic. I'd missed you so much it was starting to worry me. I – fuck, Sherlock. You don't have to be anybody else. I need you to be you, otherwise we can just pack up and call this whole thing off.”

Sherlock's chest was heaving visibly. His eyes were intense, dark, still.

“I don't think you did well just now, no,” John said. “I hate that you hurt Ian. He's my friend and he's not exactly doing all right; so no, you didn't handle that well. But who doesn't get things wrong sometimes? Even you, Sherlock. Christ.” Sherlock's mouth twitched as though he wanted to say something, but he didn't. John rubbed a hand across his forehead before continuing. "I'd still rather you cocked things up as yourself than put on some persona to get the response you're aiming for. You don't have to do that inside this flat.” Sherlock's mouth opened; his exhalation was audible. “And,” John continued, “you don't know him, but Ian actually appreciates honesty more than anyone I've ever met.” He considered. “Except Bill.”

He stepped forward and reached out to tangle his fingers through Sherlock's hair, pulling gently. With a small sound Sherlock yielded, and pressed his face into John's stomach; his fingers clenched tightly around the belt of John's dressing gown. “Wanker,” John said, leaning into the warmth, the counter-weight of Sherlock, “how the fuck could you ever think I'd want you to be anyone else. Thought you had me figured out better than that.”

Sherlock mumbled something indecipherable into John's belly. The line of his nose was strong and sharp against the softness of John, pressing against the fabric between them.

“I'm going to take a shower,” John finally said. And then added, because sometimes stating the obvious was necessary, even to Sherlock: “Join me?”

Sherlock's hands relaxed a little.

In the shower, Sherlock carefully kissed John's scar; the damaged nerve endings haltingly translated the touch to John, like Morse code, slightly delayed, lagging slightly behind reality. They were kisses of words, but they didn't quite retain their meaning; John could feel the tongue and lips and teeth shaping themselves against him, but he couldn't hear the message. Maybe it didn't matter. He raked his fingers through Sherlock's wet hair and held him there, against that only barely restored ruin of skin, of boundaries messily re-sealed, so easily breached again if he wasn't careful. There was the cool-warm-wet rush of breath against his shoulder as Sherlock sighed against him, pressed his face in harder; a stooped line of shoulders and neck and sorry. Sherlock's body, trying to fill the gaps left by
the words that sometimes got lost during the winding journey between the dark sparks of synapses and the click of teeth and the curve of lips.

–

_I'm sorry it ended badly, but you're always welcome here. You know that, right? Ring me if you need me._

_J_

_Don't worry, doctor sir. I know._

_Ian_

–

Sherlock got dressed after their shower, but then spent the next hours lying on the sofa in silence, legs kicked out over the coffee table, a sprawled, collapsed heap of slowly wrinkling lines of sharp dressing folding into the soft curls of his socked feet. Whenever the clouds outside broke just a little and the dark cover over London lightened for short moments, there was the enlarged, wavering projection of raindrops rolling sideways over his face – a distorted mirror of their window with a hopeful, fleeting burst of light behind it. It made him look like he was underwater, pale and closed-eyed, calm under a surface of remote back-lit storm. Something stirred inside John at the sight of it, an uncomfortable memory of a dream that he couldn't quite reconstruct, a vague ache.

It was quiet in the flat, so quiet John wouldn't have been surprised if Mrs. Hudson had come up to check whether they were still alive. John made them tea that Sherlock didn't drink, and finally he sat up and said: “I'm going to the morgue. I need more kidneys.”

“Oh, okay,” John said agreeably, looking up for a second from the article that he'd been trying to read, and that he only now realised was ‘Top Ten Summer Tips for Beach Reading’. “Tell Molly hi from me, if you see her.”

Sherlock wound his scarf around his neck with a slow sort of precision, as though he were giving himself time to undo the movement. John looked up to catch his gaze and Sherlock smiled in his small half-way; John responded to it with a very sudden pang of relief.

“Take an umbrella, it's biblical out there;” John said, and for a moment Sherlock actually looked as though he might consider it – but then that was probably wishful thinking on John's part, and Sherlock slipped out of the hallway door quietly, almost surreptitiously, as though John weren’t watching his departure.

John listened to his footsteps on the stairs; seventeen steps taken in a rapid, steady rhythm of leaving. As he usually did, Sherlock skipped the final step, a bit of his restless impatience that had solidified into a habit that he exercised even when he was going somewhere he didn't necessarily want to be. Funny how muscle memory reached across new habits easily, how two years of probably doing stairs differently hadn't changed the way Sherlock left 221B Baker Street, London.

John re-focused on his article and laughed when he noticed _The Basement_ in the number three spot. He tossed the magazine away and rested his head back against the armchair. There was a half-
hearted rumble of thunder outside.

–

When John got up from the sofa and stretched and yawned in clear well-I'm-going-to-bed preparation, Sherlock, who had spent the evening tinkering with his newly acquired kidneys, called him over to the table and pulled him down into a kiss.

“You don't have a shift tomorrow,” he stated, rather than asked, when John had straightened again, feeling warm.

“No,” John said, answering anyway, “unless they call in at the last minute.” He paused. “Are you coming to bed at all?”

Sherlock shook his head, already re-focused on the gelatinous organs in different states of swelling. “This needs monitoring.”

“Okay.” John yawned again, only half managing to suppress it. “Is it all right if I still sleep in your bed?”

Sherlock looked up at him with the clearest Christ, John, you know, and if you don't, you don't deserve to-expression that he'd worn in a long time.

“All right, all right.” John smiled. “Just checking.”

It wasn't quite the same, but at least Sherlock's smell was there to be teased out of the pillows.

–

“All right?” Greg asked amiably as they stood side by side in the rain that had held for almost three days straight now, watching Sherlock standing over the strangely twisted body on the tarmac some distance away. He was a streak of grey coat, edges blurred by the downpour around them, as though he were blending in with the rain and pooling out over the ground.

“Yeah,” John responded easily, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, “nothing new to report.”

Greg threw him a sideways grin that glistened with water. “It's funny how I came to fetch you both while Sherlock was comparing human kidneys in – whatever solutions those were, and you say there's nothing going on.”

John smiled and shrugged, blinking against a raindrop rolling past his eyebrow into his eye. “That sort of thing stopped registering long ago.”

“John!” Sherlock called, the sound of his voice strangely diluted by the rain.

John half-jogged up to him. Greg followed, more slowly.

“Tell me if she was alive when she was run over,” Sherlock said. His voice was wet with the rain on his lips. “It's clear that she's been run over twice; these marks here are clear. But it's hard to see how much time has elapsed between the two times, and if she was still alive for either of them.”

Any other time John might have teased him for finding anything hard to see, but not now, because he
looked down and saw exactly how broken the body was; a mockery of human, of limbs splayed in unnatural ways, naked, stripped of every dignity, sodden with rain. John swallowed. “All right, let me take a look, though we’ll likely need an actual post-mortem to be sure,” he said, and kneeled in the puddle of water that the body was lying in.

“There's not a lot of bruising around the tyre marks that broke her ribs,” he said, frowning. “Not enough for pre- or post-mortem, it would seem.”

Sherlock's eyes were clear and light, and he was smiling almost imperceptibly.

–

It took Sherlock three days to figure it out; in the end it was a rather easy case to solve, though not necessarily to stomach (a killer who had bled his victim slowly, and then delivered the final blow by letting her go in an empty car park, following her around with his car until she'd collapsed with exhaustion from the blood loss and he had run her over, killing her, and then done it again just to be sure). John felt better after a cup of tea at the Yard, and secretly felt somewhat comforted that the sight of a person turned so absolutely into nothing was still at least a little upsetting.

Sherlock, grimly happy with post-case energy, suggested dinner at Angelo's, and picked out the clams in his *linguine alle vongole* with an interesting precision, sucking them into his mouth leisurely, licking out the small shells. John stared. Sherlock raised an eyebrow in response, and innocently circled the stem of his wine glass with his long fingers, catching the condensate on his fingertips. Well, that was new.

“Where did you learn how to flirt like that?” John half-growled in the cab, fisting one hand in Sherlock's hair and pulling on it with a measured force, listening with satisfaction to the way Sherlock swallowed an involuntary sound.

“Not from you,” Sherlock responded airily, though his Adam's apple bobbed wildly when John tugged again on his curls.

“Wanker,” John said, tightening his fingers so Sherlock exposed more of his throat, growing into the touch, and in the glare of street lights that passed over them, catching them in alternating stripes of illumination and darkness, he could see Sherlock's grin grow in different steps, stop-motion.

–

After John had recovered from his orgasm, which Sherlock had sucked from him with relentless wet strokes of mouth and an almost unbearably intense two-fingered prostate massage, Sherlock allowed John to push him down onto the bed, looking up with wide, darkened eyes.

“Do you want me to try –” John asked, half on top of Sherlock, as he slid his hands further down Sherlock's growing erection, cradling his balls in the palm of his hand. Sherlock's hand tightened on John's shoulder as John's hands moved onto the soft skin of Sherlock's perineum, sliding a finger over the sensitive spot.

“I – no,” he breathed, the lines of his body very suddenly tightening under John into a hard bow of tension.

John moved his hand back up, rested it on Sherlock's abdomen and held it there, steady, until something of the tightness dissolved, again.
“All right,” he said, “all right.”

Sherlock tipped his head up and kissed him, not hesitant, and John wasn't sure what to make of his refusal; but Sherlock's cock, half-softened, quickly grew again under his fingers, and soon he was pumping into John's hand in a counterpoint to his strokes, holding his arm around John's neck in a strong, quivering grip that was almost uncomfortable.

“Ah, yes, John, _there_,” he hissed, and John, caught in the forceful embrace, brought his face down against Sherlock's neck, slightly sweat-slicked. Sherlock arched upwards, pulling John in more, pushing his cheek hard against the hammering pulse in Sherlock's neck. It felt awkward, and he struggled a bit to keep his rhythm going, but there was the rumble of Sherlock's voice under his cheek – he could hear it, and feel it even more clearly; what he could make out was chemistry, what sounded like equations half finished, snapping in two as Sherlock's voice broke. John inadvertently jabbed his jaw into Sherlock's throat at the sudden sensation of Sherlock's fingernails digging into his shoulder, and Sherlock came with a jumbled sound that could have been the result of the equation, but in any case bled into gasps of _you_, hips stuttering upward in arrhythmic play of muscles, come splashing against both their abdomens.

Sherlock held John crushed against him for a couple of moments, his breath ragged and fast, before relaxing his hold, his arm falling away as though all of its strength was slipping away. “Yes,” Sherlock mumbled, eyes already half closed.

John reached for the flannel on the bedside table and cleaned them up a little, before gathering with some difficulty the covers that they'd kicked down in their haste.

“‘You all right?’” he asked.

Sherlock hummed; the relaxed tone was probably meant to convey yes. He lifted his arm with a little grunt of effort. John slipped into the offered embrace, fitting himself to Sherlock.

“Do you like it when it hurts a little?” John asked finally, quietly, feeling the force of Sherlock's heartbeat against his face lessen as his pulse returned to normal.

Sherlock shifted a little. “It would... seem so,” he said.

John closed his eyes. “If there's anything... anything you need, or want, anything else, you know you can –”

“Yes,” Sherlock sighed, and his fingers wound through John's hair. “I know. This is good, John, this is – this is good,” he repeated.

“Okay,” John said, swallowing against Sherlock's chest.

There was a moment of silence, the warm, soft sort of silence of a bedroom shared, of body heat exchanged; Sherlock's body was slackening even further as he apparently fell towards sleep.

“Are you gay?” John asked suddenly, staring into the darkness of the bedroom.

Sherlock started a little. “What?”

“Are you gay?” John repeated.
“I must... admire your sense of comedic timing, John,” Sherlock murmured, his voice a pleasant rumble under John's ear. “Because I just swallowed your ejaculate and had an orgasm with your hand on my penis.”

John smiled a little. “I'm aware you're having gay sex. It would be slightly worrying if I wasn't.” Sherlock's small chuckle trembled against John's cheek. “But you know what I mean,” he said.

Sherlock's chest rose and fell with a deep sigh. “It doesn't really matter much to me,” he said, “but if you insist I pick an existing label, I do suppose gay would come the closest.”

“So there were never women for you?” John asked.

“Rarely enough to be statistically insignificant.”

John pressed his grin against Sherlock's skin in a sort of kiss. “Sexuality isn't an exact science, you know.”

“All things are exact science,” Sherlock said, voice relaxed.

John shook his head lightly, wondering how much of that Sherlock actually meant, and what it meant, in the end; 'exact science', was the naming of the chemical elements of John's skin during orgasm exact science? What was exact, really? What was science? And then the thoughts receded, not that important in the end; John was silent for a moment, savouring the liquid burst of happiness in his chest, as Sherlock's fingers on his skull started rubbing small circles that sparked a subdued kind of warm pleasure.

“What about Irene Adler?” he asked finally.

“She was statistically insignificant,” Sherlock murmured, voice dropping lower.

John was silent. Statistically insignificant, maybe, but significant in every other way. It was... well. It was what it was. She wasn't here; Sherlock was, John was, and Sherlock's thumb was lightly scratching John's scalp. Sherlock's chest shifted as though he were drawing breath to say something, but then he just let it out; a long stream of air, soundless.

–

All right?

J

Yeah, fine. We should go out and have a pint this weekend, what do you say? Bill's coming. It's been a while since we got drunk properly and wallowed in self-pity. By the way, tell Sherlock he can stop worrying, all right? It's getting a bit annoying.

Ian
John raised his eyebrows at the text, then glanced over to Sherlock at the table, who hadn't moved for the past ten minutes, eyes pressed to his microscope.

“Ian says you can stop worrying,” John said, neutrally.

Sherlock lifted his face off the microscope, but didn't look at John. “Ah,” he said.

John eyed him.

“We had coffee,” Sherlock said finally, looking back into his microscope, hands elegantly turning one of the adjustment knobs.

John froze for a second, then sat up on the sofa. “I'm sorry, I thought you just said you had coffee with Ian.”

“Yes, very good, John. Your listening comprehension skills are still adequate for someone your age.”

John ignored the gibe. “When on earth did you have coffee with Ian?”

Sherlock sighed, and finally actually looked up, turning towards John. “I sent him a text three days after he stayed here; he accepted the invitation four days later, just after we wrapped up that case with the twice-run-over, bled-out –”

“Yes, all right,” John cut in, wincing. “So, that's... four days ago?” Sherlock didn't dignify it with a response. “But what did you – what did you two talk about?” He was aware that he sounded slightly horrified at the idea of Sherlock having coffee with Ian; the idea of Sherlock getting together over coffee with anyone was strange enough as it was, but the idea of Sherlock and Ian exchanging pleasantries in a café was just... it was hard to imagine.

“Suicidal ideation,” Sherlock said airily.

“You're having me on,” John said blankly.

“No,” Sherlock said. “Don't look at me like that,” he added, frowning. “It was by any standard a good conversation. We both got something out of it.”

“Really?” John said, feeling a little gob-smacked. “What did he get out of it, then?”

“He got some of his anger out,” Sherlock said, smiling a bit. “He feels very angry with you at times, but he's not irrational enough to take it out on you, because he values you as a friend and he's aware you had no fault in what happened. He's also very angry with me for quite an impressive variety of interconnected reasons, and we don't have a friendship that could be damaged, so that left the way clear for him to express some of his darker sentiments.”

John blinked. “So he shouted at you?”

“Shouted is too forceful a word. He swore a lot, though,” Sherlock said. “When he calmed down, he admitted he felt a lot better than he had in a long time.”

John shook his head, a bit disbelieving. “That's... yeah, I can actually see how that would help,” he said. “So you just sat there and allowed him to insult you?”
Sherlock shrugged one shoulder. “He needed it.”

John looked at him, sitting there at their table strewn with kidneys and toxins, at the man who often understood so much and sometimes so little, and who liked to have people believe that their needs didn't deserve a place in his priorities. It was a bit amazing, really. “And what did... what did you get out of it?” John asked him.

Sherlock broke the eyecontact between them; he picked up a petri dish and examined it for a moment. “I might have...” he said, putting the specimen back, and trailed off uncharacteristically; he was silent for a second. “He explained why he said that I didn't know what I had put you through.”

John's mouth was suddenly dry; he licked his lips, waiting.

Sherlock gave up addressing the table and looked at John. “I already knew that I'd – misjudged the situation to some extent,” he said, looking a bit pained. “But he told me –” He fell silent.

“What?” John said, frowning a little.

“He told me what you were like,” Sherlock said, simply. “When he met you. And later, too. He told me about the time he punched you in the face.”

“Right,” John said, feeling strangely cornered.

That had been one of his worst moments, though the definition of worst moment had shifted quite a bit with the incessant pounding of time in those first months, that with relentless pressure had taken him further and further away from a time that had still held Sherlock, that hadn't yet come apart at the seams, that hadn't yet ripped open into cracks that had closed again over Sherlock's head. He'd only known Ian for a few weeks, Ellen had only been dead for a few months, not quite as long as Sherlock – and that was terrible, too, that idea, that they'd ended, that they had all ended, that they were receding, that there were fixed points against which to measure their lives, Ellen and Sherlock and Giles, the silent shadow partners that trudged after the three of them every time they went out for a pint after a session, not quite complete yet, not yet aware of the existence of Sharon and Liam, because Liam was still alive then, small and ill and floundering – and John had been half-insane at one point, furious at everyone and everything, and he'd told Ian how much better it was to have known that she was going to die, how much better it was to have been able to say goodbye, to know everything that was about to happen, to know at least that she didn't want to go, how much easier it all had to be, God, he didn't believe it even as he was saying it, but he couldn't help it, something had started talking and it wasn't him, except it was. Yes, he had deserved that punch, and he had needed that punch, and he'd clung to Ian right after in the most embarrassing hug he'd ever had, too-tight, too-close, much too intimate for such a new acquaintance, but Ian had let him, and John had cried for the first time since he'd stood at Sherlock's gravestone, and then almost hadn't been able to stop during the weeks that followed, slowly emptying himself of something that would never really run out, but that still thinned, that had been too full, that had been under so much pressure it was about to explode.

Not his proudest moment.

But Sherlock didn't elaborate. “He cares about you,” he said, instead.

“Yeah,” John said. “I care about him too.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed.
“So what do you need to stop worrying about?” John asked, looking at the text on the screen of his phone.

“Oh,” Sherlock said, “I sometimes ask him if he's still alive. Though I'm fairly sure he's no longer in any real danger of committing suicide.”

John blinked. “How often is sometimes?”

“At regular intervals,” Sherlock said lightly.

John half-snorted. “Well, maybe you should ask about his health with a bit less regularity, then.”

Sherlock shrugged, but didn't argue.

“Why didn't you tell me?” John asked.

Sherlock turned back to his microscope and changed the lens settings. “I had to think about it first,” he finally said.

John observed the line of his back in his crisp shirt as he leaned back in to study his specimen slide. “Is it okay that I know, now?” John asked.

“Yes,” Sherlock said. “But I still need to think about it.”

“Some things you never really stop thinking about,” John said, and reached for the remote to switch the telly on. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sherlock lifting his head and looking at him for a long moment.

Sherlock fucked him with a slow, intense focus that evening, words just barely forming under the surface of his breath. He came before John did, wide-eyed, awed, speaking of synapses, of neurons; but he still managed somehow, even through the growing slackness of his limbs post-orgasm, to replace his cock with his fingers while only missing a few beats, and the feeling of his fingers fucking John through the lube and the slick slide of Sherlock's own come had John pulling himself off furiously, almost sobbing out his orgasm when it hit.

Sherlock rubbed against his prostate one more time after he'd come down, sparking a raw after-shock of pleasure, and pulled his fingers out slowly, then plopped down without finesse next to John, body succumbing to relaxation. John watched him for a second, then threw out an arm to the bedside table and managed to get a hold of the flannel; it reminded him that he needed to do the laundry, and that had him inwardly laughing.

“That you... that you managed to... God, thanks for that,” he breathed, cleaning himself half-heartedly.

Sherlock slid his head into the fold of John's armpit. “Not... God,” he slurried.

“Thanks, Sherlock,” John said, with a low chuckle, closing his arms around Sherlock's relaxed weight.
“Mutually... beneficial situation,” Sherlock mumbled, dragging his nose gently up the small stretch of John's chest he could reach. John could feel his eyelashes fluttering closed.

“Yeah, you're welcome too,” John breathed, and closed his eyes.

“Stay here, John,” Sherlock muttered, already half asleep, or maybe even fully asleep.

“I'm not going anywhere,” John responded quietly.

–

And of course, it happened at the most mundane of moments, because that is when things happen; moments only become extraordinary when they already are, when there has been that twist, and it is in remembering that the lead-up gains its importance, the misguided ideas of determinism, of signs. It had been later, after all – when he had sat in his chair after the funeral, head too full of genuine but meaningless condolences to really process anything except that the silence in 221B had acquired a density that seemed impossible, that honestly felt like it was pressing in on his windpipe – that it had become important that he had said you machine, that he had said friends protect people; and there was no reason that those things should have haunted his dreams except that they directly preceded Sherlock's death.

It was just like that, really; later, on the floor, bruised, the heavy eye of a gun pointed right at him tangible even if it wasn't visible, it became important that he'd debated telling Mrs. Hudson that he was going to Tesco and could she please tell Sherlock if he came back, but decided not to because well, Sherlock wasn't actually a toddler; and it became important that Sherlock had told him in half-sleep to stay there and that John, awake, had said he wasn't going anywhere.

There was nothing extraordinary about it, he'd been walking home, trying to figure out if the homeless kid he'd seen sitting on a bench was really PJ or just someone who looked like him; and it had been so long since he'd been in danger, he hadn't felt like he was in danger since Moriarty, and Sherlock had said so clearly everything of Moriarty's is destroyed, about the only unambiguous thing he'd said in that entire conversation, and John felt safe, again. London was his again, London had Sherlock again, London was exciting and challenging and dangerous but not uncontrollable, not anymore. It was an unimportant moment when he realised he was being followed, and another unimportant moment when he realised it wasn't Mycroft. Unimportant moment, long ago, when he promised himself not to be crazy and to never take his gun with him on normal outings, like going to Tesco. Unimportant, when he was cornered after head-butting one of the three kidnappers with such force there was blood on his forehead, but not his own, unimportant, when they aimed a gun at him and he realised he could still identify a steady shooter's hand with ease.

All he could think was: fuck, not this again. Not this again, not after will you do this for me, please, after Peru, after Angel.

Important: Sherlock had no way of knowing where John was. Important: even if Sherlock did find out, it would take him a while to track John down. Important: Sherlock suffered from post-traumatic stress flash-backs to when he'd been present for Angel's kidnapping. Important: Sherlock could crack under the similarities, the guilt that sometimes surfaced. Important: this was Sherlock's weakness.

Important: Sherlock.

Sherlock.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was easy, in the end, to imagine that he was back in Afghanistan. There was a similar kind of quality to time in that unidentifiable darkness; time was a thief in the night, lurking in the corner, not making itself known – tangibly there, tangibly masquerading as silent and still, while life outside progressed with a brazen, uncaring speed that was impossible to trace. John still remembered, at times, how suspended in a strange bubble of slowness he’d been in the interval between getting shot and waking from narcosis; he woke up with the fracture in his collarbone neatly set, the elements of war that had invaded him picked out and lain almost reverently on a metal platter that was brought to him immediately when he asked (well, he was a doctor, after all). Bits and pieces of a battle that had got inside him. Coming back into himself, blinking against the gritty reality of the plaster coming off the hospital ceiling, he had felt like he’d lost years of his life, and that wasn’t the first time a hyperbole of language became truth in the complex lights of sunshine and war – there had been dreams of home that had stuttered into the eye-blinding sands of Afghanistan, London silent under a scorching sun that wasn’t and never would be of that world, desert lapping at the steps of the Houses of Parliament, Harry standing in their childhood garden and hoisting up a gun on her shoulders that she would never be able to carry that way in real life, throwing him a grim, all-too-familiar smile that belonged to war, there and here. The dreams upset his internal clock. When he asked, his colleague told him he’d only been out for a couple of hours; almost routine, this kind of operation. He himself would have been able to perform it without having to take a break. Bullet removed, wound closed; next. Patient saved; next. Patient lost; next. The doctor moved on, his grimly sympathetic face more than enough of a you’re going home, mate, and John, feeling sweat start to collect on his brow, had felt like he’d been asleep for ten years.

It was easy to pretend he was there again, as things began to run together in the oppressive darkness behind his blindfold. That it should calm him had stopped worrying him years ago; of course Mycroft had been right when he’d said fire her, she's got it the wrong way round – he was a Holmes even if John hadn't known it at that point, and the Holmes brothers were only ever really wrong when it came to themselves or each other. Thinking of Afghanistan made something inside John ignite, a hard core that held him together far more efficiently than his spine ever had, a sense of resistance that he'd know exactly what to do with should the moment present itself.

His phone was still in his trouser pocket – probably amateurs, then, he thought; the first thing Moriarty had done while John had been unconscious, being strapped with Semtex, was take away his phone – and it buzzed against his thigh in bursts of what was sure to be Sherlock. He counted them; eight texts, then the first phone call, another volley of texts, another phone call. In fairly short sequence, four more calls. A text. A stretch of nothing that was more frightening than it had any right to be. A final call, cut off before Sherlock could have reached voice mail. He wriggled against his bonds, but they were secure and tight; and that he couldn't read what Sherlock was trying to tell him, that he could only feel the irregular signals of attempted communication, was enough to make him need to bite down on his tongue to stop himself crying out in frustration. His phone was silent. John knocked his head back against the wall behind him, focusing for a moment on the short, distracting
After Sherlock stopped trying to reach him, John lost track of time – he felt it the moment it happened, when he re-focused and heard nothing in particular, and it had stopped being possible to guess how long he’d been there. He stretched back against the wall, twisted around in the blanket they’d given him and started counting his own time, running backwards through the points of previously unremarkable actions that had brought him here. He took the walk backwards; he recognised PJ, this time, and went over to have a chat. Maybe he offered him some food from his shopping bag. Probably PJ refused, shoulders hunched and face shaded by his hoodie, but maybe he didn't, this time. John went back to Tesco after that, and had the automatic doors slide open behind his back; he was watching the street as though he were on the look-out for something already. He took his shopping out of his bag (minus the bits that PJ had taken: cheese, the soft white bread that Sherlock liked and made John wince because it was so sweet), scanned it backwards without any of the usual trouble, and gave the produce back to the store. Maybe someone else had more use for it. What did he and Sherlock need any food for, anyway? They could ring up for a takeaway every day. Besides, Sherlock barely ate and John could stand to lose a few pounds. They still had so much tea left. They could survive for months, just wrapped into each other, untangling only to make tea, and then slip back together, drinking from the same cup to minimise the washing up. John came out of the shop back first, facing the sliding doors as they closed, and contemplated what to do now; there was really only one thing he wanted, in the end. He walked back, always on the look-out for things behind him, never in front; he stopped for coffee but instead decided that he wanted to give it back to the waitress. She looked worn and thin and swept her hair into her face when he gave her the steaming cup, so she could look at it surreptitiously. Maybe this time, he almost touched her in the spot where she had the fingertip bruises on her wrist and leaned up to her and told her softly, so no one else would hear, that she didn't deserve that. This time, she possibly drank the coffee herself and seemed to believe him. He went home. He climbed the stairs backwards. Sherlock, who knew about the reversal of time, of course, because Sherlock knew everything, was home, waiting in the doorway, and wrapped himself around John from behind; he rested his chin on John's head, and every word he said, picked from different nights, different thems, Sherlock-then, Sherlock-now, Sherlock with a hand pressed into John's throat on their sofa, Sherlock's body apologetic in the shower, Sherlock during sleep; all of the sounds were tremors of throat against John. You have to come back, John, you have to. Where you went that night, what you did... I can't read it, I can't deduce it. I can't do it with you here like this. If you're going to leave permanently, I'd prefer it if you did it now. You shouldn't go away. You might... leave. Stay here, John.

I usually listen to you, John thought, eyes closing behind the scratchy material of his blindfold. But it can't be done, Sherlock. I can't listen to you always.

When someone came to talk to him, it could have been hours later, or a mere ten minutes. John had drifted off into an uneasy, half-lucid sleep; jolting awake into the pressing darkness of the blindfold was disorienting, and for a moment he was caught in a surge of panic that only passed when he closed his eyes and created a darkness he could control.
“Hello, Dr Watson,” someone to the right of him said, pleasantly. A woman's voice. “Sorry about the blindfold. It's just to be cautious. You've been great, though. Thanks for being so quiet.” Her English was strangely uniform, with a slight foreign lilt to it that John couldn't identify; not a native speaker, but someone with great command of English.

John said nothing, just waiting, every muscle in his body ready to spring.

“It'll all be over soon,” she said. “We're pretty sure he's on his way.”

“Who,” John ground out hoarsely, but it wasn't really a question.

“Don't play dumb,” she said, almost affectionately.

“What do you want from him?” John croaked, trying to pinpoint her location from her voice, but finding it hard; he had no idea of the dimensions of the room.

There was a moment of silence that felt charged to John. “He hasn't told you,” she said, sounding a bit wondered.

John bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from reacting.

“Just a little transaction mistake that needs correcting. Not really of interest to you, I think,” she said airily. “But you're really helping us out. Thank you.”

“Fuck you,” John said, in spite of himself.

Her laugh was small and delicate. “Stronger than you look,” she said approvingly. “A worthy companion.”

John would have spat at her, but he didn't know where she was.

—
Sherlock's voice arrived before the rest of him did; words that John couldn't hear, shouting, the familiar depth of Sherlock's deep voice when he needed to be menacing.

There was a clattering of what sounded like pans, and distinct sounds of fighting. There was a gun shot; John let out a cry at the sound and tried to get to his knees, but fell back.

There was a split second of silence, then: “John!” Sherlock shouted.

“In here,” John croaked, and it was probably impossible Sherlock had heard that, but he came crashing through the door anyway; still invisible, but already so present that John felt his heart skipping several beats, and raw, deep relief flooding him.

“Take this away from me,” Sherlock’s voice came, harsh. “Take it away, John, or I'll – I'll –”

“Drop it,” John snapped, “drop it now.”

Something clattered to the floor with a reverberating racket.

“Kick it away,” John commanded. “Carefully.”

Sherlock did; there was the sound of something sliding across the floor and hitting the wall.

“Good,” John said, managing to struggle to his knees this time, ignoring the protests of his muscles. “Now untie me. Sherlock – untie me. Come on, untie me.”

It took Sherlock long, worrying seconds to respond, but when he did he was fast, footsteps coming in a quick rhythm, and sank to his knees behind John, first tugging at that wretched blindfold until it came loose and John had to narrow his eyes at the sudden influx of artificial light, and then scrabbling at John's bonds – his fingers were trembling, and it took him a moment to get a grip on the knot.

John twisted around, and though it was spotted with colourful flickers of light, his eyes still adjusting,
the sight of Sherlock's face was enough to make him go weak with a warm relief.

“God, I'm so glad you're here,” he said, rubbing the raw lines on his wrists. “How did you find me?”

Sherlock got to his feet briskly, evading John's movement forward, which had been intended to bring their bodies together. “Homeless network's been tailing you. Though PJ came to me far too late,” he said, rapidly, with a strange, twisted expression on his face. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I'm fine,” John said. “Sherlock, what's – what are you –”

Sherlock's body seemed to draw together; his shoulders fell, his head dropped, he allowed his back to hit the wall behind him, standing folded against it in a strange hunch. He closed his eyes.

“Sherlock,” John said, and got to his feet.

“Leave, John. You have to leave,” Sherlock said, perfectly calm, voice measured. “You have to leave now.”

John, leg muscles tingling unpleasantly with the renewed blood flow, bent over to pick up his gun from where it had skidded into the wall. He checked to see if the safety was on, then stepped over to where Sherlock was standing, eyes still closed.

Disregarding the twinge of doubt about this being the best thing to do to someone in the midst of what was probably a traumatic flashback of some sort – it definitely wasn't, but Sherlock often needed things that were really the worst – he pressed the butt of the gun against Sherlock's collar and slid it up his throat and jawline with a steady pressure, into the fold where his jaw melted upward into his ear. Sherlock tensed, and opened his eyes.

John touched his unoccupied hand to Sherlock's shoulder. “Do you remember what I said?” he asked calmly. He could feel Sherlock's muscles contracting in a violent shiver under his hand.

John allowed the silence to lengthen, looking up into Sherlock's face, trying not to show his fear, then pressed the gun in a little harder.
“Do you remember?” he repeated.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, voice so soft and deep John had to strain to hear it.

“Nothing’s changed,” John said; Sherlock produced a choked laugh, and the lines of his shoulder relaxed a little under John's fingers. “I'm not leaving. Don't say it again. I'm warning you.”

Sherlock looked at him without blinking for a long moment, eyes a still, clouded grey, before letting out a long breath. The breath became “Yes,” near the end, and John carefully removed the pressure of the gun.

“I've made my choices and you know it,” John told him, throat constricted. “Don't think I don't know what they mean.”

Sherlock stared at him, eyes almost too intense to bear. He moved forward slowly, wrapping his fingers around the back of John's neck with a grip that was nothing short of painful. “You love me,” he said, and his voice was so full of wonder it made John want to stumble forward and melt together with him.

“You love me too,” John said without hesitation, because there was no doubt, not anymore, and the reversal of the roles expressed such a different kind of certainty he wasn't sure for a moment if he could carry its weight; but then Sherlock's fingers were still there, pressing down hard on his neck, points of reality, of yes.

Sherlock was the one to fall forward and press his mouth to John's in a wet, hurried, uncoordinated kiss, and John was so full of fear trickling away, of an immobile sort of determination taking its place, of an overwhelming hard-core love, that he couldn't respond for a moment, and just felt Sherlock's lips against his and Sherlock's tongue slipping inside his mouth, angry and forceful, pressing down hard on John's tongue. When John finally gathered himself enough to push back, to give into the kiss, Sherlock relaxed against him, and sighed into John's mouth in a strange mixture of air and tongue. The vice grip of his fingers on John's neck loosened somewhat.

They broke apart, but stayed close, exchanging breaths, drawing each other in. “All right,” John said to Sherlock's mouth, feeling a bit woozy with a relief almost too large to bear, “now let's get the fuck out of here.”

Sherlock closed the small gap between them again and licked John's lower lip, as if tasting him.
“They're all knocked out. I didn't kill them,” he said. “If you had been dead, John – I wanted to be able to –”

“Make them hurt,” John said, to save Sherlock from the words, to take them into his own mouth and reduce their weight that way. “I know. It's all right.”

“For a moment, when I was in there,” Sherlock said, his voice so low it was almost inaudible, “for a moment, John, I thought you were him.”

John closed his eyes. “You thought I was Angel,” he mumbled against Sherlock's mouth, and felt the small nod, untraceable but for the brush of Sherlock's lips against his.

“I don't understand it,” Sherlock said, voice thick with things that couldn't be swallowed away. The conflation of the 14-year-old Peruvian homeless boy and the 40-year-old military doctor – it was strange, because he had never even seen a picture of Angel, but John felt as though there were a part of him that he shared with the boy, now, and it was all right, because if anyone had the right, well.

Still, he said: “I am me, and I'm here, Sherlock,” because sometimes it was necessary to state the obvious, even to Sherlock.

Sherlock drew back, eyes wide and light, pupils large. He looked a little dazed. “Yes, you are,” he said, and the vagueness of it would have worried John if they hadn't been where they were right now, if they hadn't been who they were, if he hadn't known exactly how many meanings it had.

The sirens of approaching police cars ripped through the air between them, and John, listening to them drawing nearer, felt inexplicably restored to a world with people in it, with Sherlock and Greg and London and time in it.

“I called Lestrade before coming in,” Sherlock said, sounding resigned.

John looked at him, suddenly sharply aware of the fact that they would no longer be alone, and that there were rules that would have to be followed, rules that didn't take I've made my choices into account, rules that didn't care about I am not leaving, and if you ever say that again, I swear to God I will shoot you with my own gun. “And are you... are you all right? I mean, this is... about drugs, isn't it?”
Sherlock looked at him with a tense sort of surprise. “I didn't think they'd tell you that,” he said.

“They didn't.”

Sherlock blinked. “It's not a problem,” he finally said, words tight.

There was the sound of cars stopping and doors slamming. John watched as Sherlock straightened and passed a hand over his face; when it came away he looked blank, bored, a canvas of nothing, a high-functioning sociopath. John swallowed, something large and painful twisting in his chest.

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“No headache? No disorientation?” the brisk-mannered ambulance nurse asked him, pressing a wad of disinfectant-soaked cotton wool against the wound on his forehead from headbutting one of the goons that had taken him off the street.

John took a swig from the bottle of water she'd passed him before replying. “Headache, yeah. A bit. I'm fine.” He did feel a little nauseated, but that had more to do with Sherlock standing a hundred yards away, his back to the ambulance, a line of dark coat and curls painted blue in time with the lights. Greg was talking to him; their faces were close together, and now and then John could see Sherlock jabbing his finger into Greg's chest. Greg held his ground. Their voices wafted over to the ambulance from time to time: meaningless shards of angry-sounding words. As John watched, Sherlock threw his hands up in the air in obvious exasperation, and turned away. Greg left him to it, and jogged over to the ambulance.

“Will you be all right?” he asked again, back-lit by the police lights; he looked drawn and worried, with an obvious shadow of stubble on his cheeks.

“Yeah,” John said. “I'm really okay. They didn't do anything to me.”

Greg looked back at John. “What about him?” he asked under his breath.

“I don't know,” John said truthfully, after a beat.
“He was... I've never known him like that,” Greg said, sounding hesitant. John looked away from Sherlock and into his friend's worried face. “On the phone – I was glad he wasn't physically there, because I think he would have hurt me.” He shook his head, looking a bit disbelieving.

John swallowed, eyes wandering back over the rigid black figure that Sherlock cut against the flickering lights. He felt oddly unscrewed, as though the joints that held his body together had been undone. Everything ached; his shoulder, his leg, his back, the point of pain on his forehead. His chest.

“John?” Greg asked, placing a light hand on John's shoulder.

“Yeah,” John said uselessly. “Look, Greg, could we do statements tomorrow? I think we need to go home.”

“Yeah, Sherlock left a politely worded request as well,” Greg sighed, and John smiled a little at the sarcasm. “It’s fine. I don’t expect you're planning to leave the country before tomorrow, right?” He smiled his fatigued smile.

John smiled back tightly. “No, I don't think so.”

Greg took the warm pressure of his hand away, and John felt a peculiar sense of loss at that. “Take care of each other,” Greg said, and when John looked up at him again his face was a strange mixture of determination and embarrassment.

“Yeah,” John said, feeling drained.

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John refused Greg's offer to drive them home. Sherlock, for once, allowed John to hail a cab, and said nothing when it took two tries. For a moment John was afraid he wouldn't get in; but he did, without a word. During the ride, Sherlock was unapologetic about keeping his hand wrapped tightly around the back of John's neck. He squeezed rhythmically for a long while, until it started to feel almost like an external pulse, and then let his fingers wander, feeling upwards, to the shells of John's ears, or up the slope of John's skull. It hurt a little, but that was all right, because it took the attention away from all of John's other points of pain, that hadn't come from Sherlock, that hadn't been cuts and bruises of love. It was okay for Sherlock's presence to hurt a little. It had never been any other way. John grabbed onto Sherlock's thigh to pass everything back that he received, to show that he
was still there, that he was as inextricably bound as Sherlock was. Sherlock's fingers pressed down on the nape of his neck, probably hard enough to bruise, then whispered upwards, and for a moment John thought a bit randomly of fingerprints, and what kind of evidence he would ever be able to yield to someone like Molly. Violence, he could imagine she might say, and maybe, like an afterthought: or love.

They were silent. London passed outside in glimmers of glass and stone. It was late; the people still on the streets moved with the casual alertness natural to night city dwellers. The cabbie hummed along to an inane pop song.

When Sherlock's fingers seemed to have found a resting spot in the hollow above which his skull began, John finally said: “Will you tell me?” – an unintentional mirror of a conversation he only barely remembered, because it had scarcerely registered over the deafening roar of Sherlock's restored presence: the two of them in a Chinese restaurant that had changed owners, talking without any refined aim over steamed egg dumplings, two years still between them like a bridgeless river.

So much was different, but all the same Sherlock, again, said “Yes,” immediately, and again, he looked like he regretted it as soon as he said it. John squeezed his thigh and waited, looking at his fingers splayed on the dark fabric of Sherlock's trousers.

“This is... the aftermath of when I went back to Peru, I'm afraid,” Sherlock said quietly. “Julian is an idiot.” He didn't sound derisive; in fact, it wasn't without affection, and John shook his head a little at the small, sudden flare of jealousy in his chest. “He's taken whatever I had as contacts in the coca trade and expanded on them. But he got into big trouble selling a shipment at the wrong price for its purity. That's always a good way to make enemies in that sort of business. And it ended up in a high-end club and some cousins of one of the most influential dealers died. Not good. Stupid.” He paused. “He sent me the comic because he was sure they'd be watching all of his communications, and he wanted to protect the source of the shipment for some reason. He panicked. It wasn't exactly crystal-clear reasoning he was doing.” His fingers on John's neck suddenly loosened, as though he suddenly noticed how tightly they were squeezing. “He still had a lot left of the rogue shipment; I ended up getting rid of it for him. And I helped. In... other ways.” He closed his eyes. John swallowed. “The dealer's family's been threatening me on and off ever since I returned. But it was so half-hearted I didn't believe they'd actually... do this. Stupid.”

“So just plain payback, then,” John muttered, and felt a surge of nausea at the idea; just a way to hurt Sherlock, just a way to get to him. Find the weak point and apply pressure.

“I don't understand why they didn't hurt you,” Sherlock said, and sounded genuinely confused. “If they wanted revenge, it was only logical for them to hurt you. I don't understand why they didn't.”

“Yeah, they were pretty decent for drug lord lackeys,” John said, feeling disconnected, detached, as
though the city flashing outside couldn't be real, and the trembling of Sherlock's thigh under his fingers had to be a hallucination. For a moment he wondered if he didn't have concussion, after all. “Maybe they just wanted to scare you.”

There was a heavy silence. Sherlock’s fingers were still, growing a bit damp on John's neck.

“Don't listen to my voice mails,” Sherlock finally said, quietly.

John closed his eyes, and nodded so the fingers could feel it.

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Back at 221B, John asked: “Are you hungry?”

Sherlock didn't answer; he unlooped his scarf, put it away with care, dropped his coat onto its hook and stepped out of his shoes. Then he whirled around to face John and curled his fingers around John's shoulders, keeping him at arm's length, looking at him with the intensity that still managed to startle John sometimes.

“No,” he said finally.

“All right,” John said, and hooked his fingers around the wrists resting on his shoulders. Sherlock blinked, as though the contact was surprising.

“Are you?” he asked, and John needed a second to remember what he was referring to.

“I don't think so,” John said; the idea of food wasn't appealing, though it had been more than ten hours since he'd eaten.

They stood for a little moment. The flat seemed silent and breathless. “We're still here,” John said, voice having to fight its way up through a whole host of obstacles in his throat.

Sherlock pulled him in slowly, as though he could only bear it if it was gradual. But when the
embrace was finally complete, when they were finally body to body, he tightened himself around John, fastened his arms around John's neck with such intensity that John for a moment wouldn't have been able to say his name if anyone were to ask for it. “If you had died, John,” Sherlock began.

“I didn't.” John said into his shoulder, to try and stop the words before they became inevitable. “I didn't.”

Sherlock was still, and he seemed to accept the intervention. He drew back to wrap his fingers around John's jaw and pull him up into a kiss, less frantic than the one in that nondescript room, but still insistent, sloppy.

“I see,” John said, aiming for levity but sounding strangled with the weight of everything, as Sherlock pulled away and breathed heavily against him, resting his forehead against John's, already tugging at his shirt with insistence.

“I wanted you to leave,” Sherlock mumbled.

“I know,” John said, allowing Sherlock to pull on his shirt buttons without finesse. “But I didn't. And I don't. So fuck you.”

Sherlock half-laughed into his hair, and it relaxed something in John he hadn't known was wound as tight as it was.

“Show me, then,” Sherlock murmured. “Show me that you're here.”

“Yes,” John said, yes, yes, there was no more room for anything but yes, and he angled his face and licked upward into Sherlock's mouth, because there were two languages at play, and just saying it wasn't enough for it to be true, not this time, yes was more than just a sound, and from the way Sherlock melted downward, his mouth opening, his body moulding to John's, John could tell it was the only way to make the words real in that moment.

“More,” Sherlock said quietly when they broke apart for breath, and tugged the final buttons on John's shirt open and starting working on his trousers. “Good?” he then asked, slightly unsynced with reality.

“Of course,” John replied, without having to think about it, there was nothing to think about, though
this was a minefield, where they were, but it was their minefield, and the only way to navigate it was body to body, breath into breath.

Sherlock pulled at him. “Bed,” he said, then made short work of his own shirt; the ridiculous aubergine that was so gorgeous and stupidly too small, and this time Sherlock seemed to think so as well, just yanking it open, scattering buttons everywhere.

“I liked that one,” John said, swallowing away so much he could say but that wouldn’t mean anything.

“I don’t care,” Sherlock said, a bit grimly, and kissed John again.

They half-managed to undress further on the way to the bedroom; Sherlock all but kicked the door open and they fell into bed. There was no time, it seemed; it hadn’t been restored yet, it hadn’t started up again yet. Almost a full day had fallen through the cracks without a trace, full of moments in which John saw nothing and Sherlock dialled and re-dialled his number and left voice mails that he now realised he didn't want anyone to hear, moments that had been so different for either of them that it could hardly be the same time. There was a strange sense of pressure, a sense that they were in a window of limited possibility that could close without warning. John stripped off the rest of his clothes quickly and kicked them off the bed, while Sherlock tugged off his trousers with equal disregard.

Sherlock wasn’t quite hard. Not at all, in fact.

“Are you –” John began, and Sherlock descended on him, mouth and teeth and hair.

“I will be,” he said harshly. “Just need to – rearrange my thoughts,” he continued, a bit softer, then closed his teeth over the point in John's neck where his pulse was picking up, causing him to draw in a shuddering breath.

“Take it easy,” John said, and gasped again when Sherlock bit him in earnest. He remembered what Sherlock had said once; the thought of you doing what you're about to do is already so strong that it's almost enough, and realised that right now that was drowned out by the thoughts of what had happened, to John, to Angel, to that thing they both were, and to Sherlock, and to the things that all of them were – so he took Sherlock's face in his hands and tipped it up, forced those eyes to lock on his, forced himself to not be startled by the wildness of Sherlock's eyes, and said: “Think of me. I've made my choices. I'm under you. I'm with you. I want you.”
Sherlock's eyes darkened, the depth of his breathing increased audibly. “Yes,” he whispered. He blinked, then said, rushed, as though he couldn't help it that the words were falling out: “I need – more, John, I want to – will you –”

“Yeah,” John said, trying to swallow away all of the things that were sliding in his chest, “I'll do it. God, of course I will. I want to – if you want me to –”

Sherlock crashed their mouths together, groaning into the kiss, harsh, sharp, teeth, inviting in pain that they could control; Sherlock's knee nudged John's legs apart and he settled between them, bringing their hips together in a hot contact of hardening flesh – it was working, his cock was warm and growing against John, his mouth was working against John's, shaping words that lost and gained meaning at the same time.

“John, you –” he said, voice low and scratchy, when John had to pull out of the kiss to breathe.

“Yes, I,” John grunted, when Sherlock rolled his hips against his, and he ignored the twinge in his leg when he pushed his ankles into the back of Sherlock's knees.

Sherlock stilled; he was a stretch of silence above John, sounds bouncing off, light curving away. A vision of such breathlessness that John couldn't do anything but endure his look.

“I can see you,” Sherlock breathed, and then he was back, back in the rhythm of reality, of them, of bodies, and he licked and kissed at John's neck, hand wrapping around John's growing erection and stroking it, bringing him to full hardness quickly. John didn't stop the small sounds making their way up from his chest; small reassurances of his presence, his body.

“What do you need?” John asked breathlessly, aware that Sherlock was still very pointedly keeping control; and it was all right, he understood, he could do this, he could do this and so many other things, he could do what Sherlock needed, he could and he would for as long as he had the ability.

“Everything,” Sherlock growled, and then: “you,” and it was the same, the words fell into the same pit, the bottom of life restored; meaning was able to hang on and not disappear completely into the sucking gravity of cold space.

It was very different, John realised – when Sherlock had fucked him for the first time there had been time, there had been the urge to draw things out and make them last, to make the most of the moments between them because time slipped away and never returned, was a strange, pushing,
insistent thing, and they had gathered armfuls of it and kissed and shagged and came and slept in it – stolen time, bunched around them, possibilities everywhere that turned themselves over into memory easily. This was – it was urgent, because the moments seemed charged, time was fleeing, the threads unravelling, and there was no real language at this moment to express anything in. He could tell Sherlock was confused between different textures of time, of self; John knew Sherlock saw himself, refracted into different pieces as though through a prism – strung out on cocaine, in Angel's shoes, in John's shoes, John and Angel switching roles, Angel at the pool, John in Peru, Angel's unreadable face on a rooftop. There was no way to know if it was really there for Sherlock, but John could see all of it, and by the way Sherlock kept grabbing his face he could tell that some of the confusion was real. It was a bodily thing for something that words could never get at; and all John could do was hope that by reaching up and taking Sherlock's face in his hands he made it clear that this was now, it was here, they were them and not a strange culmination of everyone lost, of people that were beyond saving. It was true that they had been lost but they had also been saved by themselves and by each other and the danger in this bed was controlled, was just another form of safety.

Sherlock squeezed John's cock just so; he was fully hard by now, slick with pre-come. Sherlock looked a bit insane, hair standing up in agitated curls, his eyes wide, his skin flushed; and yes, there was a moment in which John could see how time could have reversed, how this was Sherlock caught in the sticky web of drugs, of fear, of there-is-nothing-I-can-do, but it was just a moment and, like any other, it passed. “You're... all right,” John tried to tell him, breath hitching when Sherlock thumbed the head of his cock, gathering the pre-come at the tip.

He almost wished Sherlock would say inane platitude, how dull, but he understood why that wasn't part of this situation anymore, because everything he did right now, everything Sherlock did, every word that they aimed at each other, hoping to hit a target, was a variant of you're all right.

Sherlock leaned over him and crushed their mouths together in a kiss that was somewhere between love and violence.

“And so am I,” John panted at him as soon as Sherlock stopped biting at his mouth.

“Why can't I –” Sherlock began to say, in a low, dangerous murmur, then cut himself off, snapping his mouth shut tightly. He reached for the lube, popped the cap on it and covered his fingers – it took John a couple of seconds to realise what he was doing, and then he was already doing it: reaching back to finger himself, to get himself ready as quickly as he could.

“You can,” John said almost involuntarily, to counteract whatever it was that Sherlock thought he couldn't do, and Sherlock had that laugh again, low and deep and disbelieving, that most horrible sound, that had haunted John's dreams for so long – that little laugh that had followed you could; that always came after instances of trust, of yes, that he just didn't seem to understand.
“You don't know what I was about to say,” Sherlock ground out. There was a slight sheen of sweat forming on his temple.

“I don't care,” John said, a bit illogically. “Whatever it is, you can.”

“I can't keep anyone safe,” Sherlock said, then winced, and John wanted to take his arms and stop them and look at him until he could look back. He was referring to everyone, John knew, everyone who mattered – when he'd tried to keep Greg and Mrs Hudson and John safe he'd lost himself, and he'd gone away from them only to put new people in danger, and then had found himself unable to sacrifice even himself. And he was referring to himself, because he was in all of them, ever since keep your eyes fixed on me he had bound himself to them, and he couldn't dissolve the bonds anymore the way he'd tried to before, because he wasn't a machine, he was the most human human being John had ever known, and he knew by now how much Sherlock still secretly wished that he didn't feel any of it, that he could walk away from it – but it had proved impossible, his step onto that ledge had been his step into so much more, unexpected things, things that he hadn't quite known he would ever have to cope with.

“Fuck, Sherlock,” John said, and tried to stay on top of the profound wave of insane, protective love that was threatening to drown him. “You've done so much, you don't even know –”

“You died,” Sherlock told him, shoulders shifting as he used his own fingers to work himself open, eyes flashing.

“No, I didn't,” John said again. “I didn't, Sherlock. I didn't.”

“Not – but for me, it felt like you did,” Sherlock said, quietly, and John could have said again that it wasn't true – but he acknowledged that maybe it was, for a bit, in this moment, because Sherlock had, he'd died in a lot of ways except one, and Angel had died in every way, in every horrible way, and John hadn't known any of that as it was happening, and there were varying degrees of death sometimes, even if that might have seemed impossible before.

“We're alive,” John managed to say, and then, more forcefully: “Stop it,” when Sherlock grimaced. John reached up to touch him. “For God's sake, take it easy – how long has it been?”

“This is the first time,” Sherlock said as though it were nothing, frowning deeply with discomfort.

“Fuck,” John said, and closed his fingers tightly around Sherlock’s shoulders. “Stop. Let me.
And that Sherlock yielded after a long, highly charged moment, that something in him unlocked again – that was nothing short of miraculous. John could visibly trace the movement of him pulling out of himself, and he loomed over John, his cock soft once more, his face tight.

“This isn’t a war,” John said, and spent the next moment wondering if maybe he was telling himself that first and foremost, but Sherlock seemed to relax just a bit, and set himself astride John; the slide of his long lean legs and the unexpected wetness from his lubed arse against John's stomach was enough to reignite the hurried, confused desire in John's gut.

With shaking fingers, Sherlock took his hand and poured some lube onto it. John rubbed his fingers together, warming the cool gel a little. His heart was pounding in his ears, in the wound on his forehead, in his cock, in the ending points of his fingers; something was pulling at him, pushing him forward insistently, and time wasn't friendly, time caught on the ragged edges of Sherlock on top of him, time tore itself apart, coming loose thread by thread and throwing Sherlock back to a place in which he hadn't believed he could ever be saved, or could ever save anyone else ever again.

“Like this,” Sherlock said quietly, taking John's hand and guiding it between his thighs. John nodded; he understood at least some of it, of Sherlock's direct and urgent need to be able to control the input of sensation. Sherlock lifted himself on his knees just a fraction and John squirmed a hand between them, and then bit back a moan when two of his fingers slipped in, immediately gripped by the tight clench of Sherlock's body. Sherlock was hot and slick around him, and he drew John in with slow rocks of his hips, fucking himself on John's fingers. He made a harsh, almost angry sound and tried to push down more; but the angle was wrong for deep penetration.

“More,” Sherlock groaned, but John didn't think it was possible; he was so tight, still, so tense.

“Not yet,” John tried to say calmly, but his voice broke a little as Sherlock ground down on his fingers.

“Come on, come on,” Sherlock panted, “ayúdame, por favor –”

John's gut was suddenly flooded with ice. He tried to look up at Sherlock, but Sherlock's head was thrown back too far for their eyes to connect; there was only the long taut line of his neck, moving with the strain of his breathing, and the beginning of his mouth, closed. John pulled his fingers out with some difficulty, caught as his hand was between his abdomen and Sherlock.
“What are you –” Sherlock half-growled; John wiped his hand on the sheets and closed his fingers tightly around Sherlock's hips.

“Look at me,” he commanded.

Sherlock stilled. The tightness of his body that was curled away from John undid itself a little, and his shoulders fell forward, his face tipped down, the darkened verdigris of his eyes was visible again.

“We're not doing it this way,” John said, feeling something large and painful pushing in the back of his throat. Sherlock's face did a strange sort of twitch in response, almost like he was receiving an electrical surge that animated his muscles without his knowledge; he didn't speak. “Come here,” John said hoarsely, and held open his arms in a clear, vulnerable invitation.

For a long, highly charged moment, it seemed like Sherlock would refuse, would shake his head, mouth set in a mournful line, and would take away his body one step at a time, removing himself limb by limb in that same way he had, once, in this bedroom, when he hadn't been able to bear the intensity of John's touch. But John held his eyes steadily and something seemed to deflate inside of Sherlock, as though he hadn't been breathing, had simply been recycling the same air in his lungs all this time; he fell forward with that same gradualness that he'd had when he'd attached himself to John in the living room earlier. He rested his forehead against John's with a slightly painful weight, pressing down on John's head wound, and the breath he let out over John's face was long and deep and stutter-stop. His eyes were open, a bit too close to properly see so it seemed like the light rings of his irises bled into the deep darkness of his pupils, the lines that separated them undone at this level of closeness; John looked into those eyes anyway, because they were everywhere this way, they were what he could see of Sherlock right now, he was too close to make out what was in them, but that didn't matter, what mattered was that Sherlock was looking into him as well.

“I know this isn't easy,” John said, low and soft, with just enough force behind the words for them to make it across to Sherlock's mouth. “But I need you here, Sherlock.” He swallowed, the sound loud in the small space between their faces. “I need you here just as much.”

“Yes,” Sherlock whispered after a beat, and he sounded a bit wondering, as though it hadn't occurred to him. He broke the strange, pressured contact between their faces and lifted himself off John, shifting until his body was parallel to John's, pressed tightly to his side, a long leg winding its way between John's. “I'm sorry,” he said into the fold of John's shoulder, just as much touches as words, lips brushing against John's skin, anchoring the sounds there. *I'm-sorry*, words that Sherlock had never seemed to fully understand before he'd stepped off a roof, and that even now were rare and came with a halting uncertainty, as though he still wasn't sure what he wanted from them. His mouth made a more direct contact with John's skin and they happened again, those words, *I'm-sorry*, without sound this time.
John closed his arms around him tightly, tangling the fingers of one hand through his hair. He licked his lips, mouth dry with all of the words trying to get out. “I didn't die,” he said, and managed to almost sound normal. “Not really. I didn't die then and I didn't die now.”

“No,” Sherlock mumbled against him, no-that-was-yes, yes-you're-here.

“No,” John said, steadying his breath, “you can't... you can't control everything, Sherlock.”

“I should be able to,” Sherlock said. His hand on John's side was tight.

“Everyone wants to control everything, but no one can.” John pressed his fingers down on Sherlock's scalp. “Not even you. You can do so many things, it's... it's incredible. But you're – you're not a machine.”
Sherlock said nothing; John didn't know if the words that had haunted him for so long after Sherlock's jump – *you're a machine, friends protect people* – would have been given a place in the mind palace or would have been deleted immediately: collateral damage, the result of a well-laid plan, operation *hurt John so he'll go away and can be saved without knowing it*. It was hard to say what it meant, the long, steady breath that Sherlock let out against him.

“I killed them, you know,” Sherlock suddenly said, his low voice quiet and steady.

John blinked. “Who?”

“Angel's murderers.”

John closed his eyes. “Yeah, I... I thought you might have.”

“I got clean for it,” Sherlock said. “I got clean on the pure strength of the thought that I would track them down and kill them.”

John pressed his cheek against the top of Sherlock's head. “They deserved nothing less,” he said, suddenly hoarse, and was a bit surprised to find that he meant it – he was so careful, usually, in passing that judgment. Being in Afghanistan, so close to that line, that blurry horizon that separated death from life, had taught him that it was hard to say who deserved what, but even knowing that he shouldn't, he meant it. He felt it. They had deserved it for inflicting it so cruelly on someone who hadn't.

“They deserved to be tortured,” Sherlock said matter-of-factly. “They deserved everything they did to him. I had all these plans for them...” He trailed off. There was a long silence. “In the end I just shot them.”

Something in John relaxed. “Why?”

Sherlock shifted. “I'm not like you, John,” he said, voice low and deep. “I don't have your moral compass. That's why I always let you be the madman with the gun; because you're not a madman, while I... I think I would have caused them pain if it would have yielded anything, but –” he cut himself off abruptly.
“It wouldn't have brought him back,” John filled in quietly, after a moment.

“It didn't seem like a productive use of my time,” Sherlock said flippantly, but his tone was contradicted by the way he pressed his face into John's chest. John hugged him even tighter; the closeness still wasn't enough, he wanted more of them to touch, to lie against each other, to mingle.

“Secretly a humanitarian, then. Very, very deep down. You've managed to hide that well,” John said, but his voice came out rough. Sherlock pressed a kiss to John's shoulder, and they were silent against each other for long minutes. John moved the pads of his fingertips in small, slow circles on Sherlock's scalp, trying to soothe some of the turmoil underneath. It felt like some of the urgency was gone from the room – it no longer seemed like everything could come collapsing down, like the walls could crumble at any moment, like the two of them were falling into a black hole and their elements were being unravelled. John closed his eyes, and appreciated the friendliness of the darkness on the inside of his eyelids.

“John,” Sherlock said quietly.

John hummed, eyes opening.

Sherlock said nothing for a moment, then suddenly pulled back enough for them to look at each other. His face was tense, his eyes wide. He was utterly still for a second, then lifted himself up fully inside John's embrace and looked at him with piercing focus before moving in and kissing him, hard. John responded immediately, opening up his mouth so Sherlock's tongue could slip inside.

Sherlock pulled back abruptly. “Fuck me, John,” he said, and where he had been frantic and confused before he now sounded certain, almost calm. “I want you to.” He kissed John again. His hand slid up in a light touch from where it had been lying on John's side and came to rest on John's throat, right under the hardness of his jaw. A renewed spark of arousal ignited in John's gut when Sherlock lightly bit his bottom lip and let it slip from between his teeth as he pulled back. “Please,” Sherlock said, voice liquid and deep.

“Yes,” John said when Sherlock looked at him, eyes shining darkly. “God, yes.”

Sherlock leaned back in and slid his mouth down over John's throat, skimming over his collarbones with nips and licks before closing over a nipple and sucking on it. He brought his hand down slowly, over the expanses of chest and stomach and the soft connection of hip and thigh; the touch had John sighing with increasing pleasure. By the time Sherlock closed a loose fist around John's cock it was hardening again already, growing under the acute streaks of pleasure that came from Sherlock rolling John's nipple between his teeth, and the light, teasing touches of his fingers.
“I'll do it,” Sherlock said, and it took John a moment to realise what he was talking about. “This time.” His face was serious. “Good?”

“Yeah, of course,” John said, and Sherlock looked distinctly grateful for a moment.

He rolled onto his back, took the lube, coated his fingers with it and brought them between his thighs; John alternated between watching the way his hand moved between his legs and looking at his face. Sherlock caught his eye every time, expression focused, sweat forming at his temples so his curls stuck to his forehead, slightly damp.

“I love you,” John said, mouth going dry at the hot flare of Sherlock's undiluted attention on him.

“Yes, you really do,” Sherlock grunted and changed the angle of his wrist. “Inexplicably so.”

“Stop fishing for compliments,” John said, and had to swallow a nervous laugh.

Sherlock smiled a little, then let out a soft gasp. “That's – good,” he breathed, and John half-moaned at the sound of his voice, and the sight of his face, wide-eyed, growing slack-jawed. “Are you – are you ready, John?” Sherlock said, and his voice broke on John's name, dark and deep.

John gave his cock a quick tug, thumbing the wetness at the head, and said: “Fuck, yes.”

Sherlock sat up and lubed John's cock with a practiced, efficient ease; the touches had John's hips stuttering upward.

Sherlock positioned himself on his knees on top of him, and there was a long moment of silence, John with his slick cock in his hand, Sherlock a pale expanse of lean torso dotted with scars, a breath-taking space of body and mind, his pupils so wide-blown John almost felt like he'd be able to hide there, in those small spaces of sight that drew in the world in splashes of upside-down light.

“You,” Sherlock said clearly, a permission, a blessing; his tense, trembling thighs relaxed a little and John could brush the head of his cock against Sherlock's slick hole in an exploratory contact.
“Yes,” Sherlock said, aligning them further, and John let him choose the moment – he sank down just enough to take in the head, and he made a sound that could have been pleasure and discomfort both and probably was.

John made a reassuring sound and closed his eyes, fighting the urge to thrust upward and bury himself in more of that tight warmth. “Take your – time,” he managed, and that it was possible, to take time, to take their time, to have time accommodate them and grant them moments to use, was incredible. Sherlock's hand came to rest on his abdomen, slightly damp. John could feel his muscles relaxing and he let himself sink down further.

“John, you –” he said, sounding a bit desperate, and John opened his eyes. At the eye contact Sherlock immediately relaxed and he took in John's cock down to the base, buttocks pressing down on John's thighs, his cock quite soft against John's stomach. John couldn't make any sound that had meaning, just a garbled mess of vowels; he closed his fingers hard around Sherlock's hips, and couldn't help the small shift upwards. Sherlock made a small, soft sound.

“Sorry,” John gasped, but Sherlock shook his head, his damp hair sticking to his forehead; he was a vision, gleaming with sweat. He was still watching John, wide-eyed, and held his gaze even when he started rocking his hips, and only after a couple of experimental movements that had John struggling to keep his eyes open, he slipped into a rhythm and somehow managed to set a steady pace.

John moaned and scrabbled harshly at Sherlock's hips, prompting a low, deep sound of approval. He couldn't stop the response of his hips, moving in time with Sherlock's.

“Fast learner, aren't you?” John groaned, and Sherlock didn't respond except by pushing down every more exquisitely, sliding against John. John moaned when Sherlock arched his spine, changing the angle a little; and the heat, the squeeze, it was incredible. Already he could feel that he was close; a liquid heat was spreading through his abdomen, his balls were tightening.

“God, this won't – I can't –” he babbled, intense pleasure bursting through his belly. “Sherlock – I can't – last –”

“Good,” Sherlock said breathlessly, “you – I want you to – come, John, you, come, you're so – come on, come on –” He leaned forward, changing the angle, and gasped as John's next thrust hit home. John felt him clenching even tighter, and moaned deeply, hips snapping up as much as they could.

“Do it,” Sherlock panted, bearing down even more, “come on, let it go – give me – you – give me you –”
“God, I–” John managed, but then his words got jumbled somewhere between his brain and his mouth. His hips worked upward and he came inside Sherlock in a white-hot daze of pleasure; he came so hard he couldn't see anything even though his eyes were open; the darknesses of the bedroom, of Sherlock's eyes, of his own brain ran together, small points of light danced across them, bursts of energy hiding dark space, sparking off the nothings where everything was born.

Coming down was a bodily experience of falling back into himself; what swam back into focus were the lines of Sherlock's face, closer than before, making him fall in love all over again, that look, layers of worship, of Sherlock's particular kind of prayer: Sherlock was saying his name, and you, and that was the same, of course.

“You look like you –” Sherlock said, then cut himself off and simply spilled forward, letting his mouth fall onto John's, unrefined smears of lips that could hardly be called kisses. He lifted himself slightly; John's spent cock slipped out quite easily, and Sherlock shuddered against John's mouth.

John broke the sloppy kiss, still gathering his breath, and slurred: “Sherlock,” and then nothing else of language manifested itself, and that was all right, because it was all he needed.

“You looked like you were dying,” Sherlock murmured. John looked up at him, unable to formulate a response. “And you came back.”

John drew in a breath. “Like you,” he finally managed, tongue tripping over the syllables.

Sherlock laughed, a genuine, deep, warm chuckle. “Like me,” he repeated, and pressed kisses to the skin around John's mouth. John let him, too dazed to really offer anything in return. Sherlock was unhurried, kissing the corners of his mouth, tongue coming out to trace his upper lip. After long, sated moments had passed, John blinked and felt his body being restored to him. Sherlock's cock, he noticed, was heavy and half-erect against his stomach.

“Oh, you,” he murmured, and Sherlock pulled back.

“I just want to come on your stomach,” he said clearly, “with your eyes on me.”

“All right,” John said, smiling, feeling as though he'd swallowed a sun, so much heat, so much light inside of him in the friendly dimness of their room. He reached down and let his fingers wander over Sherlock's warm cock, before closing his fist around it and tugging it to full mast soon enough.
Sherlock was breathing heavily above him, making small sounds of encouragement that grew into breathy moans as John started stroking him faster, slipping his thumb over the wet glans.

“Gorgeous,” John said before he could think better of it, and Sherlock jerked forward into his hand.

When he started speaking, eyes going a bit glazed, it took a while for John to understand what he was saying; he returned to hydrogen, to helium most of all, holding John's gaze with eyes that focused and unfocused, that flitted away and snapped back, and he came in absolute silence for the first time that John knew of since he'd stopped censoring himself, mouth open but empty of sound, staring at John as though he were the miracle, the wonder, and streaked John's stomach and chest with lines of come and shivered and shook through the after-shocks for longer moments than the usual seconds of his orgasms.

He came back, gravity took him again, his body folded down; he didn't seem to mind the mess between them and just melted down over John's torso, shifting his hips with grunts of effort until they were aligned in a sticky embrace.

John worked an arm free carefully and wrapped it around him. As they lay, he noted, absently, that dawn seemed to be pressing behind the curtains of Sherlock's window.

“What did you see?” he asked, heart pounding in every point of him.

“You,” Sherlock sighed, and his fingernails dug into the skin of John's side.

John closed his eyes.

“Don't... leave, John,” Sherlock breathed.

“If I can help it, I never, ever will,” John said, swallowing away the warm chunk of love in his throat.

“I'm not entirely comfortable with your homeless network shadowing me all the time,” John said,
after all the paper work had been signed, and it had become clear that Sherlock's drug trafficking activities in Peru were officially on record as an undercover operation for MI6 (“Mycroft hasn't told me yet what he wants in return,” Sherlock had said darkly; John had just looked at him and wondered at the seediness of the British Government for a few moments).

“Why not?” Sherlock said, stirring sugar into his coffee. “It's because of them that I found you.”

John looked at him. “I know, but...”

“Bloke needs his privacy,” Greg said brightly as he passed by with a plastic cup full of coffee of his own.

“Stay out of it, Lestrade,” Sherlock said. Greg flashed them a grin and walked further down the corridor to his office.

“Can you just... tell me who it is, then? So I can talk to them, maybe?” John offered.

“If you talk to them, their cover is blown,” Sherlock said, frowning. “It's for your protection, John. And don't tell me it's not necessary.” He raised an eyebrow.

“I've been kidnapped before and it's always been all right,” John said. He was silent for a second. “You know I can take care of myself, most of the time.”

Sherlock’s plastic beaker crumpled a little in his grip; he winced at the dribble of hot liquid spilling over his fingers. “Of course. But most of the time isn't good enough,” he said, glaring at his hand.

John looked at him, and realised that this would be a battle that would take a longer time than this; this man who wanted to know and control every variable, who wanted all of the time, who wanted what no one could have: the guarantee that things would always be all right. But maybe he'd get there, at some point.

“Cut it back to during the night,” John said, and took a sip of coffee.

Sherlock glared. “You were kidnapped at ten in the morning on your way back from Tesco's.”
“Well, that's not likely to happen again soon then, is it?”

“That's not how statistics work,” Sherlock said, frowning. After a pause he said, a lot more softly: “John, please.”

John looked at him, and saw the anxiety behind the neutrality of his face. He swallowed. “All right,” he said. “For now, at least. But I do want you to introduce me to them.”

“Fine,” Sherlock said, and John didn’t miss the relief in his voice.

—

John had four voice mails when he finally caught his breath enough to check, and deleted them all without listening to them. He looked at the string of unopened text messages from Sherlock and hesitated for a second.

He opened the first one:

_Where are you? You didn't say you were going out._

_SH_

and deleted it.

He opened the third one:

_John, no one's seen you._

_If it's not possibility one or two, try to let me know._

_If it's possibility six, le_
He sighed, gut clenching, clicked back out of the text and started deleting all of them, until he came to the final one. He opened it without consciously deciding to.

You told me to just ask if
I didn't understand. You
meant that. You're not
answering because you
can't. If I'm wrong, spare
me and tell me. Please.

He stared for a moment, thumb hovering over the command for Delete, and finally just clicked out of the text, leaving it as read. He had to take a minute to get the liquid rush of love in his gut under control; too warm, too overpowering.

He opened an empty text message and typed:

I love you.

Sherlock's response took a while, which made John a little nervous.

I suppose I didn't explicitly
tell you not to read those.
Thank you for not listening
to the voice mails. Chinese
tonight?

SH
Irrationally, John held the phone to his chest, until he reminded himself that he was an adult with patients waiting.

–

*Doctor sir, you've got to stop
scaring us like that. I know
you like adrenaline but this is
more than a little self-destructive,
and that's coming from me. Will
you be able to make it for a
pint this week-end? Bill's busy
all of a sudden. Btw, check your
e-mail.*

*Ian*

---

*Date: Wed, May 16 2012, 09:34 AM*

*Subject: to the depressed whiners*

*From: [Ian.MK@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:Ian.MK@hotmail.co.uk)*

*To: [j.h.watson@gmail.com](mailto:j.h.watson@gmail.com), [billp@telecomcast.org.uk](mailto:billp@telecomcast.org.uk), [damianandsharon@gmail.com](mailto:damianandsharon@gmail.com)*

*Hi merry band of mourners,*

*I was wondering when you'd have some time to pull yourselves out of your respective depressions for long enough for another get-together. We wouldn't want to go too long without reminding each other that we're always better off drunk, would we? I think it's my turn to host the crying festivities; when are you, busy, socially well-adjusted and extremely well-functioning people, free during the next, say, two weeks?*
I've got some news and I want to share it with you all right now. I'm finally putting my archaeology degree to some use and joining a dig in Turkey. I think it might be good. It's a six month programme to start with and I'm leaving in three weeks, so I'd love to see your pallid tear-streaked faces before that.

See you all soon and hopefully not in a next life,

Ian

---

Date: Wed, May 16 2012, 10:07 PM

Subject: RE: to the depressed whiners

From: billp@telecomcast.org.uk

To: Ian.MK@hotmail.co.uk, j.h.watson@gmail.com, damianandsharon@gmail.com

well fuck me, i never even knew you had a degree in anything. archaeology. it sounds like hell to me, digging up pottery in a desert, but i guess we could all use some more distant contact with death. good on you, mate.

i'm busy next weekend, but all yours the next, if you're all still alive then.

bill

ps: john, what the fuck is going on with you? you were on the news and everything.

---

Date: Fri, May 18 2012, 00:51 AM

Subject: RE: RE: to the depressed whiners

From: j.h.watson@gmail.com

To: Ian.MK@hotmail.co.uk, billp@telecomcast.org.uk, damianandsharon@gmail.com
Sounds like a really great idea. If you need some tips on how to survive desert conditions, you know where to find me, right?

I'm also free two week-ends from now.

Cheers

J

PS: Bill, that's pretty much what you get when you live with Sherlock Holmes. I'm totally fine. I'll tell you all about it when we see each other. I didn't know I was on the news, though. We don't watch the news that often. Sherlock likes to outsnark it.

Date: Fri, May 18 2012, 00:53 AM
Subject: RE: RE: RE: to the depressed whiners
From: billp@telecomcast.org.uk
To: j.h.watson@gmail.com

glad you're all right, mate.

Date: Sun, May 19 2012, 01:34 PM
Subject: RE: RE: RE: to the depressed whiners
From: damianandsharon@gmail.com
To: Ian.MK@hotmail.co.uk, j.h.watson@gmail.com, billp@telecomcast.org.uk

God, Ian, that sounds like a really amazing plan! It'll probably do you good to get out of England for a while and spend some time with new people who're interested in the same stuff you are. And Bill's poking fun but archaeological digs are actually a really nice way to gain a new perspective on death.

So 'two week-ends from now' is next week-end, right? I can do Saturday, not Friday. Does that work
for everyone?

Love

Sharon x

PS: John, what an exciting life you lead. By the way, I think we'd all like to meet Sherlock. See who this fucker is who keeps putting you in mortal danger. It's been long enough, don't you think?

Date: Sun, May 20 2012, 05:12 PM

Subject: FW: RE: RE: RE: to the depressed whiners

From: j.h.watson@gmail.com

To: SH@thescienceofdeduction.co.uk

What do you say? Want to come along?

Date: Sun, May 20 2012, 05:13 PM

Subject: RE: FW: RE: RE: RE: to the depressed whiners

From: SH@thescienceofdeduction.co.uk

To: j.h.watson@gmail.com

In case you aren't aware, we live together. I'm in the bedroom. Come talk to me.

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Sherlock Holmes

Consulting Detective

www.thescienceofdeduction.co.uk
You're right, Sharon. If no one objects, I could bring him along next time? Just for half an hour or so. He's got work he needs to finish. And I'll be honest: you need to build up a tolerance to him, anyway.

J

Saturday it is. Eight, mine. Bring booze.

Ian

I really look forward to seeing both of you (seriously).
John was rolling his stiff shoulder, getting ready to slip into his coat and leave the clinic, when his phone buzzed. He looked at the number for a long moment, feeling his heart leap unpleasantly.

*Hey, John. Sarah told me what happened. I'm very glad you're not hurt. I was just wondering if you might be free to have coffee sometime.*

*As friends.*

*Mary*

John looked at the text with some relief. He knew Mary and Sarah knew each other; it was how he and Mary had met. It was so very Mary, this; this unhurriedness, this lack of pressure. No *I miss you*, if she even did (because really, he had no right to assume that she did), no dramatic *I heard you were kidnapped and somehow realised what you meant to me*. He found himself, almost without noticing it, typing out an affirmative reply.

*Hi. Yes, I'm all right.*

*Occupational hazard, I'd almost say. How's Friday?*

*Two?*

*J*

And she was normal, and lovely, and steady, and Mary:

*See you then.*

*Mary*
She was wearing a shade of lipstick that John didn't think he'd ever seen before on her. She'd been there a while already: the coffee cup in front of her bore a smeared impression of her lips in soft red.

He ordered tea.

She seemed to mean her “Great,” in response to his “How have you been?” and that wasn't nothing.

He told her about the kidnapping, because it was the most recent thing of interest that had happened to him; and he wasn't surprised to find that there was so much about it that he couldn't share with her, because so much of it belonged to him and Sherlock, and there were things that could be met with an interested raised eyebrow, expressions of sympathy and a new order for coffee, but that couldn't be understood, not really, not in the soft light of normality in a London café on Friday afternoon.

“This might sound strange after your tale of being plucked off the streets by gangsters, but you look happy,” she said, into the not entirely comfortable silence between them that followed after, stirring sugar into her milk-clouded coffee.

He looked at her. “I am,” he said.

She smiled without showing her teeth; a vividly red smile that John found he couldn't quite read. “I'm glad,” she said, and even if it was only part of a truth he could tell it was a truth, nevertheless.

“Look, Mary,” he began, wincing a little at himself, “I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the way I did things. I shouldn't have... I should never have cheated on you. It wasn't right.”

“No, it wasn't,” she agreed calmly. She pressed her eyes closed for a second, and when she opened them again her face softened. “I'm over it, John.” She frowned for a moment at her cup; when John looked down at it he saw that she was smudging the blur of lipstick with her thumb. He looked back up to find her looking at him seriously. “It was obvious from the beginning that there was something of you that he had, that he had... taken with him,” she said. “That was okay. It was. You still had a lot left to give.” She studied her thumb, now stained red, then looked at him again. “But when he came back, I was fighting a losing battle from the beginning. It was really only a matter of time.”

Yes, he realised, it really had been only a matter of time; a matter of time restoring itself, of branching
off into different possibilities, of laying open a new space that they could use, that they could change. He nodded, grateful for her and the way she was herself.

She smiled again, small, maybe just a little sad, and brought the cup to her lips.

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“How was Mary?” Sherlock said as John was toeing off his shoes, face hidden behind the screen of his laptop, which was balancing on his pulled up knees.

“Fine, actually,” John answered, and sat down on the sofa in the space left free by Sherlock’s pulled up legs. There was a second of silence, before Sherlock clicked the lid of the laptop closed with a bit more force than necessary. His eyes were narrowed.

“You smell like her,” he said.

“I do?” John said, a bit taken aback.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, and lowered his knees, the laptop balancing precariously. “Almost as much as you used to when you spent the night at her flat.”

“I didn't go to hers,” John said, frowning a little. “We had coffee.”

Sherlock blinked a couple of times, rapidly, and his face softened. “She must've worn a lot of perfume, then,” he finally said, and put the laptop on the coffee table, before stretching out his legs a little further and tucking his bare toes under John's thigh.

John watched him for a second. “Do you remember,” he began, then hesitated for a moment, but Sherlock was watching him with a blankly interested expression, so there wasn't really any going back, “that you said that there were things... that it was all right if I was just sleeping with you while still being with her? That I should get what I couldn't get from you from someone else?”

Sherlock’s mouth did a peculiar thing, a very quick tightening, the lips pressed together into a line, and then a noticeable relaxation, falling open a little. “I remember,” he murmured, voice a deep burr.
“You didn't mean that,” John said.

“I actually did,” Sherlock said matter-of-factly. “I would have settled for that. If I had to.”

John swallowed. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said simply.

John studied him for a long moment. Sherlock looked back, eyes focused. “But... it isn't true anymore, is it? It's not true anymore that it would be all right,” John said, half-circling one of Sherlock's ankles with his thumb and forefinger.

“Is it still true that there are things I can't give you?” Sherlock said, raising an eyebrow.

John smiled. “That was never true, Sherlock.”

Sherlock sat back and tipped his head back; he was smiling slightly at the ceiling. “Then what I said was never true, either.”

He wiggled his toes a little under John's thighs.

–

John came up the stairs with the shopping in hand, feeling happy – over nothing, really, over everything, over too much to break down into components. The blazing sunshine over London. PJ, who had been tailing him nonchalantly, picking through his shopping unhurriedly and taking out some bread and apples with a small smile. The prospect of meeting up with Ian, Bill and Sharon later, and the both worrying and pleasing fact that Sherlock was coming along for a bit. The music coming from the living room – a whole orchestra, not just Sherlock playing, so apparently Sherlock had re-discovered his classical recordings, too. Sherlock's voice rolling down the stairs to meet him. The fact that 221B still existed, and it had yielded itself up to them again. The fact that Sherlock still existed. The fact that he, John, still existed.
Sherlock was talking to his computer in rapid Spanish – the first time John actually heard him do it not in a dream, not in hacked up pieces of word, of shards of sentence splintering away, chipping off shattered ice.

“– no era la mejor idea,” Sherlock finished, then looked up at John.

“I would ask you if you've finally cracked, but you've been talking to inanimate objects since long before I met you,” John told him cheerfully, shrugging off his jacket.

Sherlock eyebrow quirked in perfect tandem with the corner of his mouth. “Idiot,” he said, affection hiding behind the word. “I'm talking to Julian.”

“Ah,” John said, blinking a second of surprise away.

“Skype,” Sherlock said, then frowned lightly, as though he couldn't quite believe it himself.

John stared at him, unable to stop the grin. “You're actually talking to someone instead of just sending them typed messages? Face-to-face, even? Do I need to call an ambulance?”

“How very amusing,” Sherlock said.

There was a tinny, far-off string of words that fell from the computer – ¿con quién estás hablando? – half a world filtering through invisible waves, distance compressed to nearly nothing, time falling away between the fingernail-thick lengths of screens separating Sherlock's face from Julian's.

“Juan,” Sherlock said, and he didn't look at the screen as he said it, instead held his eyes fixed on John.

John smiled. “I'm 'Juan' now, am I?”

“Linguistic accommodation,” Sherlock said lightly, then spent a moment observing John. “Well, get over here,” he finally said.
“Er,” was John's eloquent response.

“You want to see him,” Sherlock simply stated, as though there were nothing complicated there, nothing that they'd fought over, nothing that if they had let it could have been a break in the bridge between them as it was still growing to meet in the middle. But of course he was right, the wanker – John did want to see him. See if any of it matched his imagination, if the reality of him could withstand what he'd grown to be in John's mind.

“Right,” he said.

“Of course I am,” Sherlock said, and his face was soft, smooth, open.

Julian was a mass of pixels and jet black hair, with teeth that were white against a tan skin. Even translated by webcams and miles of racing electronica John could tell he was very attractive. He wasn't sure if the grin that was gracing the screen was directed at him and not at something Sherlock had said before, as the images filtered through after the sounds did; but the smile stuck, and Julian was waving at him, now, a halting mess of jumbled fingers.

John licked his dry lips, to get them to unstick from each other. “Hola,” he tried.

“Hello!” Julian said, somewhere, somewhere else, a spot where it was night, curved away from them by half a planet, none of the sunshine that was dropping through the window onto 221B's floorboards on him, none of the molecules that John and Sherlock were sharing in their breath close to him; racing through tangled knots of space and time, sound tumbling into the depth of John's ear from a mouth that had probably stopped saying it just that fraction of a second before it reached him, light bouncing off him into John's irised, where his brain pulled the up-side down picture upright and restored the axis of the world that separated them. “Cherlock, le has enseñado castellano,” Julian was saying, and his grin was blocky, pixellated, wide. Cherlock – with its softer start and its sharper finish, the vowels less rounded, the stress a bit more eager. And what did it mean, that name fitting itself over the ridges and hollows of Julian's mouth? John felt Sherlock's head coming a bit closer to his before he could track the movement on the small screen that depicted them.

“No seas huevón,” Sherlock responded, his consonants a bit harder than usual – because of the Spanish? Because of the distance?

Julian laughed a laugh that reached them sound first, visual second. “Ya te lo comprendo, está bien bueno ese pedazo de carne. ¿Qué hace contigo?”
“What is he saying?” John asked, as he with a sideways glance saw the relaxed smile around Sherlock's mouth, too slight to show on the screen.

“He's saying he doesn't understand why someone as attractive as you is with someone like me,” he said, then grimaced half-heartedly, as though he only then realised that he should at least try to act offended by that.

John hadn't quite expected the laugh bubbling up in his throat. “He obviously doesn't know anything about your many, many domestic qualities,” he said.

“I can try to explain to him that there's more to me than my cock, but I don't think he'll quite get it,” Sherlock said. It was a joke – a weighty one, one that could go many ways, putting one foot in front of the other warily; John could see Sherlock's side-eye in the webcam image of them.

“I should hope not,” John said, and it was enough – Sherlock was smiling again.

“Dice que tengo muchas dotes,” Sherlock said.

Ignoring it, and ignoring Julian's delayed laughter, John said, feeling more than a bit awkward: “Gracias por … sticking with him.” His hands came up to guide the words across, to ease them from one language into the other.

“De nada,” Julian said, voice still detectably warm under the cold din of microphone distortion.

There was a silence. Sherlock pressed his shoulder into John's; a light pressure of here we are.

“You are a brave man, Juan,” Julian-on-the-other-side-of-the-world said, his vowels clear and sharp and non-English, rendered exotic just by being taken into such a foreign mouth.

“I try,” John said. “I try.”

Julian was smiling – if there was any sadness in it the webcam filtered it out, stored it away in the space between them, kept it safe. And Sherlock, beneath Julian, in a different frame, a different place, a different life, smiled too – and when John turned his head he could actually see it, that smile;
he could see that there was no sadness there, not even a hint of it, and if he’d wanted to he could have touched his finger to it, let his hand wander over the soft reality of Sherlock's lips and the dip between them, damp from talking. Sherlock was looking at him when John's eyes clicked up from his lips, eyes crinkling in a smile that wasn't quite overt enough to really touch his mouth.

“I'll make some tea,” John said, and took his leave from Julian with an awkward-looking wave.

“Adiós,” he said, and smiled for a bit at the crossing over different bridges, at the returned “Bye,” and the quirk of mouth that he could clearly see even through the frontier of the screen that showed that it was just as funny for Julian to hear John attempt Spanish as the other way around. Language leaping across a greater boundary than usual, and still arriving relatively unscathed – miracle lay in many small things.

John went to the kitchen, and looked back to where Sherlock was sitting, feet kicked up on the coffee table, supporting the device that was carrying Julian to him, sharply lined in the lost rays of sun finding themselves in their living room almost like afterthoughts.

“I'll have vanilla,” Sherlock said, English unexpectedly breaking the warm flow of Spanish.

“What, seriously?” John asked.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, and looked over the edge of the laptop to John, eyes dancing with sun, with him. “I'm up for a bit of excitement.”

“Suit yourself,” John said, and if he was warm on the inside that was all right, really it was, in that moment.

He flicked on the kettle, laughing a bit to himself.

The Spanish became something of a background noise – he only picked up words here and there, and the rest eased into a pleasing, warming mix. The smooth sounds of the language passing between Sherlock and Julian were exceptionally nice to listen to; a murmur of rounded consonants and distinct, sharp vowels, a rapid patter of word boundaries melting into each other. John entertained the notion of asking Sherlock to talk to him more often in Spanish, maybe teach him some of it.
The tea was ready when Sherlock said several *Chaus*, the goodbyes bouncing between him and his friend on the other side of the world. The laptop was clicked closed almost tenderly, pulling the curtain on a corridor in space and time, bringing all of Sherlock back.

Sherlock got up, strolled over to the kitchen, his bare feet whispering softly over the floorboards. He stole one of the cups, sniffed it, then took a sip though it was unlikely it had cooled enough; probably burning himself in the process of wanting things too soon, wanting too much, taking the pain with the pleasure.

“Peculiar,” he said, looking thoughtful and staring into the tea for a moment before putting it back on the table with delicacy, his long fingers cradling the cup as though it were something to be treasured.

And then he was there again, and his hands slotted into the groove under John's jawbone, tipping his face up gently and pressing a soft, brief kiss to his mouth.

Sherlock drew back. “He didn't insist,” he began, slowly, as though not completely sure of the words, “but he'd like to come and visit me.”

John swallowed against Sherlock's fingers. “Yeah, well, if you want him to, you should... you could get it sorted.”

Sherlock studied him for a long, lit moment. He looked serious. “You don't want him to.”

John thought for a minute. “No, I think I'd actually really like to meet him.”

“You're still jealous,” Sherlock finally said, but he was smiling, a bit.

“I'll stop being jealous when you stop being so unreasonably attractive,” John said, feeling himself growing upwards under that gaze, and wondered for a moment if he'd ever get used to it, to that, to Sherlock's undivided focus on him, eyes flicking over every part of him and gathering him up, undoing his lines.

Sherlock's grin grew slowly over his mouth; it was a peculiar mixture of smug and tender, and his lips were still smiling as he pressed them to John's. They were rendered pliant by speech, by exotic sounds loosening their ends, their tensions. John closed his eyes, pressed into the kiss, imagined for a moment that he was catching all of the things that Julian had received, and then so much more.
because there was no screen here; Sherlock's tongue that pressed between his lips, coming to complicate things in the most welcome way there was, was nothing if not unapologetic in its presence.

“Right, okay,” John muttered into Sherlock's mouth, wrapping his hands around the seeming fragility of the lines of neck that supported the universe inside Sherlock's skull and pushing upward into that hollow where it began, where the hesitancy of skin became the certainty of bone, softened by falling curls.

“A bit more enthusiasm wouldn't be out of place, John,” Sherlock quipped, mouth still smiling.

“Oh, Sherlock, yes,” John corrected himself, and though the words were playful with exaggerated breathiness, they were quite truthful, more than quite, more than truthful, empty of untruth, there was some truth left in the universe, and it was that Sherlock pressed their mouths together securely again, with a play of the tip of his tongue over the roof of John's mouth, as though testing that there weren't any words hiding there.

And really, it wasn't that special a moment, objectively, as they stood there. The speed at which light travelled. Still slow in an ever-expanding universe, in the end. The light that fell from corners that folded themselves open in the blinks of human lifespans, that raced through space and was only matched by time, and that now warmed the floorboards of 221B in a spill of gold so rich it was surprised at itself, and that softly fuzzed the back-lit lines of curl that crowned Sherlock's head as he pulled back and then leaned in again, as if thinking better of it.

And yes, John thought, hands growing upward, life putting out roots in different directions, his fingers splaying themselves out over the back of Sherlock's head, feeling the bounce and thud of his thoughts, coming to knock on the barrier between them. Yes, because there was no other way to describe it, the fall forward, not to a ground rushing upwards, not to a hostile antagonist trying to unravel them, but instead to the point between them where Sherlock's fingers pushed through the holes in the silence between their mouths, a silence of sun and tea and water wafting off the cups in small particles and really, a silence of sounds, of words protected by the dark passages of lips melted together, bridging the abyss, crossing the uncharted waters between synapses.

Sherlock broke the kiss gently, his bottom lip sticking to John's for another split second, moments that were unremarkable except that they were theirs, and Sherlock straightened against John, sliding his nose up over the hard barriers of bone protecting his eyes up to his forehead. He was almost kissing John's eyes; the lashes closing and parting almost against his lips, the warm rush of his breath a touch in all but definition.

Outside, London passed beneath their window; shouts and swearing slashed through the muddied air of daytime city; particles of smog attached themselves to girls' hair stirring in the careful breeze;
somewhere there was a tree straining its leaves to make most of the summer, cut short by the height of the building surrounding its small park; somewhere else light glinted on the threads of a spider's web spanning the length of a traffic sign, though no one noticed it but the spider, and miracles lay in many small things after all; Sherlock's kisses tasted of the scent of him, of vanilla and of him, the brilliant figure that he cut against the dark light of worlds sparking into being, of day-to-day and night-to-night and what it was about that that made John's stomach flame with bursts of yes; the fabric of life was light and see-through, a gauze that tangled and crinkled together and dimmed some of Sherlock's life, too-clear for the naked eye, as he reached in and pressed a kiss in the form of a word, a you without uncertainty, to the peculiar curve of thoughts that welled under John's temple, a curtain over things that were never sure they would ever happen, caught in whatever breeze passed through the window at 221B, and bring untasted, undreamt particles of stars, of smoke, of Sherlock's fingertip that caught on the increasingly exposed skin of John's scar as he tugged at the rough fabric of John's shirt and stuck there, a mark on a mark, a floating sign of yes-i-am-here overlaying you-were-very-nearly-gone, life tangling together, never knowing where to, but lingering here for a bit, in this nook of time where light came to pool together, slowing down, moments bleeding into each other.

“Tea'll go cold,” John said, going for normal and finding himself stranded at breathy. “We'll have to make a new pot.”

“There are worse things,” Sherlock whispered against his lashes, and then, as though discovering the words: “there are worse things, yes.”

FIN

Chapter End Notes

All the love and gratitude in the universe to my amazing beta, hechicera, who helped improve this story from chapter 16 onward and will hopefully shed her light on the previous chapters, too. Thanks to Val for the thorough Brit-picking and making me aware of the phrase "it's biblical" for "it's raining" - my life is much improved. Thanks to St J, shefa and drinkingcocoa for their support, hand-holding and insights (knowing or unknowing). Finally, thank you to everyone who was kind enough to leave their feedback; it really means a lot to me. <3

This is a full list of the wonderful fanart inspired by this story! *flails for a bit*

* After the Fall: lovely digital artwork by digitalwave on LJ
* The Fabric of Life Movie Poster: a wonderful movie poster by labellecreation on LJ
* Sketch 1: an evocative rendering of Sherlock's nightmares by Dansamillion on DA
* Re-emergence: beautiful illustration of chapter 1 by Dansamillion on DA
* Untitled: breathtaking illustration of chapter 6 by doublenegativemeansyes on tumblr
* Book cover: a frankly stunning fake book cover by gryffindorandproud on tumblr
* Book cover: a really lovely Victorian inspired book cover by hechicera (who is also my amazing beta) on AO3
Works inspired by this one:  
Cover for The Fabric of Life by hechicera

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