"Xie [...] had invented an entire pleasure-industry by combining superior visual aesthetics with impeccable personal attention. Drasha salons were by that time a feature of any even half-decent house of repose in every pleasure district in the British Isles, but once upon a time, when Xie debuted, there had been only one, and Xie had named it: the Icehouse."

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In a contemporary dystopia, Unity is peace--despite the fact unsanctioned information, illicit currency, and every sort of danger flows unchecked in the world's pleasure districts.

John Watson, a weary hired gun, is assigned by the mysterious Mentor to investigate a subversive element lurking in the Icehouse, the world's most famous House of Repose. As accustomed as he is to dealing with the unexpected, John is nevertheless woefully unprepared to meet the gem of the Icehouse, Xie, the world renowned "drashaskaya," the living work of
art after which all other drashas are modeled.

In sumptuous suites, amid trailing puddles of silk and fervent whispers in the night, John soon learns that nothing is as it seems in the floating world of London’s pleasure district.

*  

Modern-day dystopian/one-world government/espionage/geisha!lock AU

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Hello, Lovely Readers!

I have changed the title of the fic to "The Jewel in the Tower". I will be publishing an original novel in autumn 2017 which shares the fic's former title, and wish to keep internet search results for that work "pure", which meant changing the title of the fic so it doesn't come up when folks search for the novel.

Nothing in the text has changed.

The phone jittered beneath the edge of the pillowslip, shaking him awake from a jet-lagged, restless sleep full of nightmares that evaporated as soon as his eyelashes parted.

.TXT from TheMentor: Report immediately.

He silenced it, dropped it off the side of the bed so it thumped onto the carpet, then rolled over and tucked his head beneath the extra pillow. It was too soft, lumpy, and the slip smelled of bleach, with a hint of lavender that failed to masque it. He made a mental note to insist on a nicer hotel next time, in a relatively quieter part of the pleasure district—near theaters and tea rooms rather than casinos and brothels. Just because he was a killer didn’t mean he wanted to spend his free time surrounded by lowlifes.

The job had been quick and clean, as anticipated. An eastern European gambler with an idea that he could hoard his winnings with a stack of counterfeit Identity Cards, switching out the ICs as needed to assure the house never caught on that he’d long ago reached his currency limit and should be cut off until he’d spent some. A man with more curr than he was allotted could convert it into more power than he was allotted. And that couldn’t be allowed to happen, regardless of the fact the fella had been vlast, upper class. Even the oligarchs and Unity politicos must adhere to currency limits, or the whole damn thing could fall apart. A middle-class, regular 'shlost bloke with even one fake Identity Card could be executed; the east-Euro vlast bloke had at least seven of them before Unity decided to come down on him.

An unlucky choice to skip a whorehouse in favour of an alley-girl, and the gambler found himself backed against a brick wall, trousers around his knees, with a woman bearing visible needlemarks on every exposed inch of skin. His concentration- and pleasure-tensed expression went slack and stupid when the Face stepped into his field of vision, pistol raised to aim squarely at his left eye.

"Got greedy. And this is where you’re a skinflint?" The Face tsked, shook his head. "Very unfortunate."

The gunshot echoed in the alley. The prostitute didn’t even scream.

"There’s fully-loaded Identity Cards in his pockets," the Face told her.

She was nil; she could have a thousand fake ICs before anyone in Unity would pay it any notice. Sick, drug-addicted, or hopelessly disabled (fewer and fewer survived; the Face couldn’t remember
the last time he’d seen an amputee or an autistic person in the pleasure districts, or anywhere in London—possibly there were none left in the entire British Isles), nil folk spent curr on their habits or on a comfortable place to lie down and die. No matter how far any of them went above their currency allotment, they’d never disrupt Unity wasting curr uselessly; it wasn’t worth hiring someone like the Face to deal with them when they got out of balance. In the end, they mostly self-selected.

The Face holstered his gun, closed his jacket over it, and texted the Mentor while the nil whore liberated the ICs from the eastern European’s trousers.

_TXT from TheFace: Kid’s in bed. Time to pay the childminder._

He hadn’t followed up with a full report, and that was why the Mentor was after him now; when he picked up the phone next there’d be a string of less and less patient-sounding messages demanding his report. But he’d only been back in-country less than 36 hours and he was fucking exhausted. Unity should just let him fucking sleep off his jet lag; the job was done and there’d be others. The report was unremarkable and the Mentor could wait. For now, he needed to sleep.

It started with the hands.

He swiped two fingertips across the surface of an ever-so-slightly iridescent skin cream specially created for him by a hundred-year-old Japanese woman on the outskirts of the pleasure district, where she welcomed customers into her shop as if they were long-lost daughters and sons, shoved cushions beneath their slippered feet, poured boiling water from clay teapots over tightly-packed sachets of sour-smelling green tea into shallow, wide-mouthed bowls. She said the beauty cream contained crushed pearls, mink oil, wisteria-honey—and perhaps it did—but regardless of its actual composition, he was a true believer and so dutifully massaged it across the back of each hand, in tiny circles with the opposite thumb. Another swipe and he dragged it along the length of each finger, smoothed it into the creases of each knuckle, skated his cuticles. A bit more rubbed between his palms, then the graceful under-and-over roll and chase of his long, pale hands, reminding them to soften, and slow, and curl oh-so-elegantly, for the time was at hand when he must become Xie.

His phone was lying on his make-up table, and the voice at the other end was of a magazine writer, profiling Xie as the doyenne of _drasha_, the term he had created to describe his particular blend of artificially-constructed beauty and wholly-sincere hospitality. The word was a blend of two fascinations he’d carried throughout his life. First was the old term “drag,” which in his youth had been a very outré concept, indeed—men dressed so convincingly in the style of women that they couldn’t be told apart from the genuine article—but the true appeal of which, to him at least, was the execution of a perfect _illusion_, the construction of something entirely new, something beautiful and absolutely _other_. He’d married it with “geisha,” that elegant, ancient Japanese art of being a well-rounded entertainer and genteel companion. Pronouncing his invented word with a Russian accent as he did— _DRAH-zha_—added it the mystique of the language of the upper class—a glamour of wealth, power, and exclusivity.

The magazine writer was a woman with a lilting French accent which reminded him of the way his grandmother had spoken, and so he was already disposed to like her. Not to mention that pieces like the one she was writing would mean more clients in Xie’s salon, more curr on his own Identity Card to buy more face paint, more silk, more of the custom-blended, crushed-pearl hand cream.

“Xie, you are undoubtedly the first, and best-known—best-loved—drasha artist in all the pleasure districts of the British Isles, and you welcome holidaymakers and other guests into your salon nearly
every evening. But do you ever take a bit of a holiday, yourself?”

The writer pronounced the name perfectly, a quiet, hushing, Shh to start, the soft i that flirted with but did not quite fully become an ee, then ending on a collapsing whispered breath of an uh. It was the final bit that all but native speakers of the Chinese dialects seemed destined to foul, resulting in tinny, sometimes cheap-sounding variations: Shee-uh, See-aw, even Zee-ah.

“I live and breathe for the pleasure of others,” he replied in his low, honey-smooth baritone voice, another of his signature attributes. Xie was an otherworldly creature, though generally gave the impression of softness, lightness, ethereality, gentility—qualities generally assigned to the feminine. Thus, the unapologetically masculine voice created an exotic—some might say startling—juxtaposition. “I cannot even imagine what I would do with myself on anything like a holiday. I could never sit on the wrong side of the table and let someone pour my wine. It’s a scenario too bizarre to consider.”

His hands moved in a slow float over the make-up table to pluck up a tiny pot of black lacquer and a slim brush with only three hairs. He began to draw, and then fill-in, the half-moons at the base of each fingernail, and blew gently across to encourage the varnish to dry.

The writer’s voice burbled a syrupy, just-us-girls quality. Xie was gracious and friendly and understood that sometimes pronouns would be used inelegantly; it was a failure of the English language that it had gender-specific words at all, and those who spoke it were but hapless victims of circumstance. Thus far the writer had managed to sidestep the issue altogether, which hinted that she might not bungle it in her final article—another point in her favour.

“There’s such an air of mystery about you, though. . .one you seem to cultivate, hmm?” It was a teasing tone clearly not meant to pose any real challenge. “Tell me, Xie, where did you grow up?”

“In a diamond-walled palace on a ten-thousand foot cloud.”

“How lovely! What were your parents like?”

“My mother was an autumn fairy and my father was a star—just pure light and heat. Always won at cards.”

“They sound absolutely charming,” she said gamely, then turned to another topic. “I’m sure you’ve heard the tales that some ‘shlost workers have saved their meagre curr-overages for years and years, just for a chance at one evening in your salon, Xie. That must be flattering.”

“I’m utterly humbled that people who work their whole lives to keep our society running smoothly: manufacturing, advancing technology, and of course developing new and more gorgeous pleasure districts for the benefit of all of us—and who I well know have only a small margin of overage for their own leisure spending—would forgo some of the smaller pleasures of life in order to splurge at the Icehouse. It touches my heart so deeply.”

He squeezed another, even more delicate cream onto the pads of two fingers, and began a drawn-out, meditative massage of the face and throat.

“What sort of experience could a ‘shlost man or woman anticipate at your salon? Would it be different than what you offer your usual clientele?”

“No different, not at all. If anything, I would endeavour to be even more gracious, more generous. . .I would most definitely bring out all my very best jokes.”

“How delightful that must be,” the writer enthused, going along.
“I would play my violin, and insist on only top-tier food and wine. For a guest who will only ever visit me once, without a doubt I would do all within my power to provide an unforgettable evening. It seems to me that’s the very least I could do.”

“You’re compassionate and kind, as well as talented,” the writer said.

“Don’t forget beautiful,” he prompted, a gentle joke.

“Of course not! Speaking of beauty, what secrets can you share with readers?”

He pulled out a wide, shallow drawer and fished out a round tray of paint in an alien shade of acid-green, speckled through with silver and white shimmer that caught the light, like the finish on an expensive sports car. He went into another drawer for a white, triangular sponge and stroked it across the make-up.

“So many times we hear that true beauty comes from within,” he said, sounding wistful. “But I will tell you honestly that beauty is artifice and must be created through careful application of paint, powder, and when necessary, lowered lights.”

The writer chuckled.

“So learn to cover all that is wrong and strange and plain about you—slather it with paint, shape it with picks and trowels, then spray the lot with shimmer-dust—and if you are lucky, as I have been, you will eventually stumble upon something pretty enough to look at.”

The writer’s laugh this time was quick, forced, and slow to sound. He dragged acid-green shimmer-paint down from the jaw onto the throat, and knew the tone of the comment had gotten away from him. He thought, light and air, and then said, “Of course what do I know?—I only pour drinks for a living.”

This self-deprecating joke allowed the writer to ramp quickly back up to speed and she giggled, “Oh, now!” and he smiled quickly at the mirror before resuming long strokes with the make-up sponge.

“You’ve been charming, and I’ve enjoyed our chat so much,” He said then, in a tone that carried sincerity and humility in equal measures, “But I’m terribly sorry to tell you I must bid you good evening. Please promise me we’ll talk again?” And it sounded as if he really was terribly sorry and simply desperate to chat with the writer again.

“Of course, Xie; it would be my privilege and pleasure.”

His fingertip landed on the END button and he closed his eyes. Breathed in. Breathed out. When he re-opened them, the pale eyes stared past his own reflection, right through himself—for already, he was beginning to vanish—and he lifted another pot of paint, another slim-handled brush, and resumed the dreamy business of becoming Xie.

John Watson never shot anyone in the back.

It was how he came to be called the Face. A target always saw his face just before he pulled the trigger—or sometimes for longer, depending on the job. Some others he knew only fired long-range rifles from long distances, targets shrunk into full-colour cameos that could fit on the face of a coin. Others used stealthy movements, silencers, and the cover of darkness to assure they were never
noticed at all. One crazy one only used knives; she wanted every kill to be close, intimate as a kiss. John was a little afraid of her.

John Watson—the Face, former military doctor, killer-for-hire, deep-cover Unity operative, whatever-the-fuck-you-wanted-to-call-it—used a handgun, English-made, compact and ugly and heavier than it looked. Definitely no silencers; he didn’t take the jobs that required stealth. The Face’s jobs looked like crimes, like robberies, like muggings or murders-of-passion. Except that there were no robberies or muggings anymore, no murders of passion. Not that anyone ever heard about, anyway. Unity was peace; crime had been eliminated through a purge of all deviants and a relegation of other degenerates to class-status nil. As far as anyone knew—would ever know—the only people who didn’t die of natural causes in the 21st century brought execution on themselves and should have known better, been happy with what they had, which was exactly the same as what everyone else had. Unity had brought a life free of struggle, three days working and four days’ leisure and a wage that met all needs with a little left over. If that wasn’t satisfactory, well. Defective thinking like that should have had you classified nil to begin with.

He’d slept for some indeterminate amount of time, woken aching for a piss, rejected his own reflection in the bathroom mirror as something foreign and deformed. When did he get so mean-looking, so hard and grey and misshapen? Bad deeds were etching lines onto his face, and every six months he looked a year older. He fetched his phone off the floor as he ambled back to the bed, crashed down on his back and was grateful for even this substandard bed in this mid-range hotel. Three nights ago he’d been on an ancient military cot that smelled of mildew, in the middle of the ass-end of nowhere, a/k/a, the wasteland formerly known as America. It was barely-controlled chaos there, and he’d been told his cover was humanitarian work. Doctoring, which had once meant something to him but now was merely a means to an end, and that end was more curr piled up in his account than he could spend in a lifetime given his mild tastes and lack of leisure time. He had a number in mind, and when he reached it, he could retire. It was still a ways off, but John could see it from where he was.

He’d done the doctoring, for an endless stream of what would have been called refugees if they weren’t trapped in the same damn place they were fleeing, every single one with the same dead-eyed, thousand-yard stare; they were like zombies, like ghosts. Rumours around his station were that Unity planned to let them go extinct, or as near as, then rape the land for resources and eventually abandon it. The Americas were a nightmare, a bloodybones story used to scare children into behaving, a reminder to everyone of any age of how good life was “in the world” thanks to Unity. Now that he’d been there, John understood that the terroristic threat of being sentenced to “life in the Americas” was not an empty one. The place was a desperate, backwards hell on earth. He’d slept every night there with his hand wrapped around the handle of his pistol. Half-slept. Never really slept.

So, yes, he’d done the doctoring—for all the good it did when there were only skeletal supplies and no medications of any kind—gathered a little intel though it was not his area of expertise, and done a dozen jobs. Four months there had been more than enough to get his fill, and he’d demanded something back in the world. And so here he was, stripped to the waist with a dull throb at the back of his skull where it met his neck, on a lumpy pillow in a square room with a view of an air conditioning condenser unit on a roof next door.

As expected, when he did look at his phone, there was a slew of irritable texts from the Mentor, demanding his report.

_TXT from TheFace: Fuck’s sake, jet lag is real. Report forthcoming._—he checked the time, did some calculations—_1630 hours._
He threw an arm across his eyes, relished the quiet of a sound-proofed hotel room, the only noises
the faint ping from the lifts now and then, or a cart being pushed down the corridor by a room service
waiter or a maid.

It hadn’t always been true that John Watson never shot anyone in the back.

It was years ago now, when he’d come out of the official military then was quickly swept back into
the shadows where he now made his living. He’d done a few jobs by then, but not many—certainly
fewer than a dozen—and he was still finding his way. Back then he was using a weird, lightweight
handgun with a long silencer on the barrel that made it look frankly ridiculous, but he had a vision in
his mind—from films and television he’d seen Before—that made it seem de rigueur for a hired
assassin to sneak and creep and fire a silenced handgun from behind the heavy brocade draperies of
elegant restaurants. He wore disguises—or half-disguises, anyway: huge coats and knit hats and
eyeglasses and false facial hair—and all of it was patently ridiculous but he got the jobs done, so
there were always more jobs.

The target was a woman, wife of a Unity politico—she’d said some things too publicly and too
loudly that were critical of the population-suppressant additives in the general water supply—and
John had come upon her at a little café in the quiet tip of a pleasure district in what used to be
Scotland. She was wearing a wide white sun hat and a light pink shawl, at a little round table with
two other women. They were all laughing and drinking tea, eating cake, husbands undoubtedly
engaged in a round of golf on one of the nearby world’s-best courses, for what other reason was
there to visit what used to be Scotland but golf? John passed by, completely unremarkable, behind
her chair, and shot her next to the ear. She slumped so suddenly it took the ladies in her company
several seconds to register the change, and that instead of laughing and eating cake, they should be
screaming, weeping, fainting.

He’d rounded a corner, walking with purpose but knowing no one would stop him; they never did.
John wasn’t sure why—to this day, still wasn’t sure why—but he’d cut a glance back at the target
just before he was out of range of sight and it was only then he realized she’d been holding an
impossibly new, pink infant to her breast. The baby went on nursing even as the target’s head hung
forward on her neck at a wrong angle, her elbow still resting on the arm of her chair, the baby still
nestled in the crook of its mother’s embrace.

That was the day John Watson became the Face. He still would have killed her, because that was the
job, but not with an infant at her breast. Shooting her from behind prevented him from seeing the
whole picture. He couldn’t shake the thought that if he’d chosen to shoot her in the torso rather than
the head, he’d probably have shot the baby, too. He still had dreams about that baby’s face nuzzled
up against its dead mother’s nipple. When he woke from them, he never could fall back asleep.

His phone rang and John was fully prepared to ignore a call from The Mentor clucking at him, but as
it turned out, the name on the display was Michael Connelly, an army medic John had been posted
with in America.

“Watson here.”

“Oi, Watson! Home sweet home, what!” Connelly’s voice was loud and cheerful, as ever it had
been; he was an optimistic joker with a quick smile and the crumbling remains of an Irish brogue
he’d probably picked up from his parents. Regional accents were vanishing as the population aged;
you could tell how old people were based on the broadness of their vowels or the stilted, Russian-
influenced rhythms that were becoming common even among the English-speaking masses.

John caught the bridge of his nose between fingertips and thumb, squinted hard until he saw yellow
blobs dancing behind the dark of his closed eyelids.
“Yeah, home. Something like that,” he allowed. He was never home. He hadn’t had a proper home in fifteen years.

“Listen, my account’s groaning with unspent curr and a couple of my old gang’s in town on a leave. What say we hit the pleasure district tonight, get some steaks in our bellies, and drink ourselves blind.”

John couldn’t help but smile. It felt like something that real, regular people did. “That’s actually a very tempting offer.”

“Get some whores, too,” Connelly added, as if he were ticking boxes on a to-do list. He was young and had a young man’s priorities. “Ain’t it good to be back in the world, boss?!” Laughter rolled out of him.

“Don’t know about that bit, but a good meal and a few drinks wouldn’t do any harm.”

“There’s a place—the Icehouse, you know it?”

“Can’t say I do.” John swung his legs around and shoved himself up to sit, then padded across the carpet to nudge apart the curtains. He squinted hard at the invasion of daylight.

“It’s well known, easy to find. Beautiful girls will bring us food and whisky and let us massage their pretty little feet, hear me, boss?” John gruffed out a laugh at the overexcited, new-bike-for-the-birthday-boy tone of Connelly’s voice. Connelly went on, “I’ve a room booked for eight o’clock. Will I see yeh?”

“Can’t see a reason to say no.”

Sherlock Holmes was possessed of large, pale, long-fingered hands that moved like rippling water, like hawks circling on an upward draft of warm air. There was a mesmeric quality to the gestures, even the utilitarian reaching and gripping and shifting of this and that from here to there; it was like a signal to himself that he was stepping from one life into another. Even half-made-up, in a tatty dressing gown with frayed cuffs and one now-bottomless pocket, he was already becoming something other. The simple act of massaging skin-softening cream into his own hands had come to act on him like a soporific, the roll of his long fingers over and under his palms a hypnotic suggestion that invited tension to flow out of his muscles and quieted his often over-busy mind so he need focus only at the task at hand: painting and powdering and arranging hair and clothing so as to epitomize grace, elegance, and beauty. Later in the salon would emerge a welcoming demeanour, charming conversation, amusements and entertainments, and—always—assuring the comfort of the guests.

It was no accident or stroke of luck that had made the name Xie the shorthand-term for a pinnacle experience of comfort, pleasure, and well-spent leisure time. Nor was it a coincidence that the uncanny being bearing that name occupied a singular seat at the tip of a pyramid. Every drasha in any pleasure district, anywhere, had either been Xie’s apprentice or was emulating Xie from afar. Xie was the undisputed drashaskaya—the owner of drasha, the deedholder—and had invented an entire pleasure-industry by combining superior visual aesthetics with impeccable personal attention. Drasha salons were by that time a feature of any even half-decent house of repose in every pleasure district in the British Isles, but once upon a time, when Xie debuted, there had been only one, and Xie had named it: the Icehouse.
Face and neck painted iridescent-shimmering acid green, with exaggeratedly-arched, black pin-stripe eyebrows emulating the details on a high-end automobile from Before. Hair slicked back into a high, sleek near-pompadour, with an improbably long tail cunningly attached and arranged to give the illusion of continuity. Spiky, aggressive—blatantly false—eyelashes thicker and longer at the outer corners of the eye so that a glance downward implied tailfins, and emphasized the steep gash of the cheekbones that were one of Xie’s most striking facial features, forever highlighted by crafty application of shadow and shimmer and play of light.

Sherlock was drawing a slender brush across a bullet of black lipstick when the door behind him slid open and his man-of-all-work—who was no man at all, but a tiny woman called Molly Hooper, with mouse-brown hair, a pleasantly pointed chin, and a small, swooping nose—crept in without word; she knew better than to speak first and break the spell. Molly had arrived one autumn day years ago with her first adult Identity Card practically still warm from the press, asking to become Xie’s apprentice. And while she had been Xie’s shadow for quite a long time, in the end she was too shy to really enjoy the duties of hostess and entertainer, and had settled instead into a routine of stitching fallen hems (her handwork was impeccable, stitches so straight and even one would never know them apart from those made by a machine), brushing out hairpieces, and fastening or unfastening hard-to-reach buttons as needed. Given that Molly was also the nearest thing to a friend Sherlock was allowed, he was loath to ever let her get away.

“Molly,” he said, and met her gaze reflected in the make-up mirror. “I trust you’re well and happy.”

“I am,” she answered, as she always did, polite and casual. She had created in a leather-bound notebook a sort of bible, comprising details of each and every evening’s attire: from the baubles fixed into the wigs, to the inner gowns and outer gowns and overcoats and carefully-draped sashes; every strand of gold or pearls or gems around the throat; every streak of varnish on the fingernails and every rhinestone glued at the base of an eyelash. This way, she kept a record of the outlandish creations, and some were occasionally repeated or reinvented, and whenever Sherlock called for “that cuff I wore with the sunflower ensemble last summer,” Molly would know precisely which it was in a matter of a few turns of the page.

Leaving Sherlock to his transformation, Molly fetched the book from its drawer in a tea table beside the red velvet armchair set in the corner for the comfort of guests who visited only rarely, and made note of what she saw in use thus far, waiting until Sherlock had leaned close to the mirror to duck in and check the identifiers on the particular shades of make-up used, the brand and style numbers assigned to the lashes—even noted the type of adhesive used to apply them. She was nothing if not thorough.

“The slim black gown, I think,” Sherlock said, almost to no one, though Molly knew it was meant for her. “The leather, you know which I mean. . .and there’s a blouse in this same shade of green.”

Molly nodded. Xie’s clothes were kept in a climate-controlled storage room a long lift-ride away, below ground, behind electronic locks and under guard, as if they were treasure.

“Shoes?” she asked.

Sherlock hummed a combination of amusement and resolve. “Boots. To the knee. There are some with hidden zips.”

“I know the ones.”

“Thank you.”

Molly made a few more notes, slid the book back in its place. “Vroom-vroom,” she sing-songed, and
Sherlock smiled gently at Molly’s reflection as she let herself out again.

Connelly’s mates were young, like him—maybe even younger—and already jolly, surrounding a long dining table stained dark cherry, in a room on the penthouse level of the thirty-story Icehouse. One wall was nearly all windows and the view of the city was a riot of neon and LED, flashing, strobing, distant video screen billboards down near street level flickering garish colours, though the images were too distant to discern. The sky was the starless orange-blue of an overlit city, with a distant sliver of jaundiced moon.

The blokes were all clean-cut and lean, military men with a little overage to burn on a night out. The table already groaned with bottles and glasses, wine, whisky, vodka...food as well, though most of it looked as yet untouched. They were loud and chummy and carrying on several conversations at once. John offered a hand for each to shake, forgot every one of their names as soon as he’d learned it. Aside from military service, he’d clearly have nothing in common with them, and John did not enjoy telling his stories even if they’d be inclined to ask; some younger fellas did, but most seemed to think their own stories were more interesting, more full of near-misses and can-you-top-this. In truth, they were usually right. John’s time in the official military had been spent mostly in field hospitals, suturing minor wounds and dispensing medication for travel-sickness. Without a war on, there hadn’t been much fodder for war stories. And everything that he’d done since officially leaving the army was not the sort of thing one talked about—in fact, talking about it would put him at risk for termination. He anticipated an evening spent chewing his food and nodding, laughing when appropriate, and leaving as soon as was polite.

All the artifice of the houses of repose—rooms like these, eerie facsimiles of those in upscale homes, as if the drashas who poured the drinks and suggested games of cards after dinner lived there instead of worked there— grated on John’s nerves, somehow. It was perfectly pretty and perfectly comfortable, there was nothing unpleasant about it. Not really. What irked John was that it was all so carefully cultivated to appear genuine when every soul in the place knew it was fake. Fake hospitality, fake smiles, fake friendships that lasted three hours and ended with a transfer of currency. Of course, it was the done thing, it was expected, but that didn’t stop John feeling a bit wrung out and hollow. Hence, the enormous overage sitting in his account—allowed because of his profession; no ‘shlost-class bloke would ever be allowed to hold that much curr if he weren’t doing the sort of jobs John did—adding up month by month to eventually reach that number he had in his head that meant he was finished working. A life of leisure lay ahead. But if places like this were the only place to pass his leisure time—well. He’d have to think about alternatives when the time came.

Beautifully turned-out people brought course after course of gourmet food arranged so artfully on the platters and plates it was nearly too pretty to eat. John didn’t talk much, only listened and laughed—they were a gang of likeable, garrulous young men and just listening was pleasant enough. In the course of the meal their wine glasses seemed never to dip below half-full; bottles of the harder stuff were passed around, then passed around again. By the time the food was thoroughly pillaged, John was blurred at the edges, would not have risked standing unless compelled to do so. Bad news for him when another pretty little thing slid aside a pair of elaborately carved teak doors at one end of the room and gestured that the party might be more comfortable in the salon thus revealed.

“Cigars, gentlemen?” she asked. “I’ll call the others to join us once you’re comfortable.”

John was clearly not alone in his happy haze, as the lot of them lurched slightly sideways once they’d got their feet under them, laughed at themselves and each other for having lost their tolerance
for drink while serving as doctors, nurses, soldiers, police. The room into which they were ushered was the salon proper, richly appointed with antique (or at least antique-looking) furnishings tastefully mismatched; silky-looking Oriental carpets that all but screamed for the removal of shoes and socks, if not to be outright stretched facedown across; and velvet-flocked wallpaper in shades of red varying from regal to criminal. The light was amber-tinged and carefully placed to play up only the best features of the room and its inhabitants, the way candlelight would. The men fell onto overstuffed settees and sofas, and a tabletop humidor was opened, the distinctly warm, sweet smell of premium tobacco wafting from it. John held up his hand and shook his head but accepted another glass of the chewiest, most complicated whiskey he’d ever tasted, in lieu of a smoke.

The pretty girl made the rounds, offering more drinks, wooden matches, after-dinner mints, warm towels for their hands, and at some point she must have somehow summoned others, because now there were four of them, all in semi-elaborate, costumey ensembles and dramatically made-up faces, elegant little hands with painted fingernails, slender feet clad in soft shoes that shushed along the watery-looking carpets. John sank as far back as possible into his seat—a deep, wide armchair made of buttery-soft, coffee-coloured leather—and watched over the top edge of his glass as Connelly and his mates paired off with their pretty new companions as naturally as if they were all old friends. He decided he’d finish his drink, say his goodbyes. Companionless though he may be, the memory of the soft-enough hotel bed was tempting.

And then Xie came into the room, and John Watson reconsidered his decision to make an early night of it.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

In chapter 1, killer-for-hire John Watson, recently returned from assignment in the Americas, accepted an invitation to a London house of repose for an evening in the salon of world-famous doyenne of "drasha," Xie.

Link at the end of the chapter to a playlist of songs that inspired this story and its ’verse (more to come, I imagine).

Six and a half feet tall, thin as a whip, dressed in a complex assemblage of black leather and yellow-green silk, face and hair made-up to match, Xie glided in as if on a conveyor, and the room went momentarily silent. Hands gliding apart at waist-height in front of a corset-like arrangement of black metal buckles and slender leather straps—a welcoming gesture—and John’s eyes followed the motion, noted the way the impossibly-long tails of the sleeves covered the hands completely, yet the curving backs of fingers were discernable through the silk as the hands came to rest in a graceful, downturned pose for just a half-beat before clasping together in front of the heart.

“Gentlemen, it’s lovely to see you.”

The shock of a deeply satiny male voice rolling out from between those elaborately-painted lips was a disconcerting thrill John felt in the back of his jaw. Of course he’d known somewhere in the back of his mind that any of these girls might be boys—the Icehouse was famous for drasha salons, it was why they’d come—but it still somehow caught him off-guard. John couldn’t have said what else he might have expected to hear. A softened, sexless whisper? A high-voiced impression of a woman? But it was definitely something other than what he’d just heard. The unrepentant dissonance of that baritone voice coming out of that willowy column of soft-moving allure was...well, it was just interesting, wasn’t it?

“I see you’re in high spirits and I hope you’re quite comfortable,” Xie went on, and gazed at each of them in turn—raindrop-shaped eyes, strikingly pale blue-green surrounded by an elaborate architecture of black make-up, enormous false lashes, miniscule black rhinestones glimmering at each inner corner. John set his glass on a nearby sidetable, crossed his arms, resettled himself in his chair. He’d say this for the world-famous drashaskaya: despite Xie’s celebrity, and the exquisitely weird vision before them, the tone of voice and earnest eye contact did give an impression of genuine concern for their happiness.

A drink appeared in Xie’s hand then, and only varnished fingertips showed as it was received, most of the hand still drowning in the trailing ribbons of the sleeve. “I understand you’re servicemen working for the safety of us all, and so I offer a toast in your honour.” Glasses were raised and Connelly and his mates’ chests puffed up. “Shall we drink to well-earned leisure time?” Xie offered. The painted mouth curled just a bit into a demure grin, lips only, no teeth.

The men fell over themselves shouting out and laughing at the reminder they were at their leisure (costing each of them most his overage though it was), and it was bottoms-up all around, John included. Xie gamely threw back a generous shot of brown liquour without even flinching, then came to settle on a tufted velvet ottoman beside John’s chair. John found he couldn’t avert his eyes.
He was far from alone, though, as every gaze in the room seemed fixed on the exotic apparition Xie presented. “If you’ll indulge me, I do so enjoy hearing the stories you lot always have to tell. I wonder, do any of you have a story about something frightening?”

Connelly was up for it, shifting his body forward to the edge of the sofa on which he slumped, and marking the air with the tip of his finger to indicate he could tick that particular box.

“Here, I’ve got one. Brace yourselves,” he began. Xie stared expectantly at him, giving John a good view of the dramatic profile—all slashes and angles, pointed nose, triangular jaw, steep cheekbones, jutting adam’s apple—and John could see that the opalescent lime-green make-up was worked even into the whorls and curves of the ear, nothing left to chance or laziness, a noteworthy commitment to premise.

Connelly’s jaw set in his seriousness. “I was a kid, maybe twelve or thirteen, and the family was well out in the countryside, caravan camping in late summer.”

“Haven’t you been in the army, though, mate?” one of the other fellas challenged. “Scariest thing ever happened to you was when you were a kid?”

Connelly protested. “Give me a minute, here, trying to set the atmosphere!”

There were chiding guffaws from the other men.

“Ah, now. I asked—I want to hear it!” Xie put in, good-naturedly, sounding almost laddish. That voice. John felt his mouth curl up.

Connelly bowed his head gratefully toward Xie, then went on. “Of course doesn’t my da go on with a ghost story right before my brothers and me are going to sleep, and the three of us are sleeping outside in this little pup tent so the folks can have the wee pullout bed to themselves.”

“Go get it, Old Man Connelly,” one of the fellas chimed in.

“It’s my ma, Ryan, for fuck’s sake,” Connelly sneered.

John piped up with a scold. “Oi, mate. Language.” He flicked a glance toward the only drasha he was certain was female.

Connelly immediately looked sheepish and apologized. The drasha gave him a demure smile but her eyes lit up in a way that John hoped Connelly recognized, given his young man’s priorities.

The back of Xie’s hand, shrouded as it as by the fluttering overlong sleeve of the green blouse, suddenly brushed against John’s bicep. “Old-fashioned manners, how charming.”

John shrugged, couldn’t help but feel chuffed at the praise.

Xie turned back toward Connelly. “Go on, now, with your tale of terror.”

“All right. So we’re three boys. In a tent. In the fu—sorry, the bloody—pitch black darkness, scared out of our minds by my father’s story about some ghost of an old man that wants to take over the body of a young boy so he can have a new life, all this rubbish,” Connelly said, shaking his head at the memory of his father’s less-than-ideal parenting decisions. “Somehow, we settle down and I don’t know about my brothers, but I was sleeping with my hand outside the blankets so I could fight off the ghost if he showed up.”

There was a burst of laughter from the assembled party. John was leaning far back in his chair,
gently tipping his glass back and forth so that the ice cubes clinked against its cut crystal walls. He half-listened to Connelly’s story while studying Xie’s elegant profile through hooded eyes. He wondered vaguely how long it took to assemble such an intensely-detailed presentation, and then wondered how long it took to undo it, and in what order, and whether the pieces of the ensemble were carefully arranged, re-hung, tucked on shelves and in labeled containers, or if they were left on the floor in a heap—in which case, who came along behind to clean it all up?

Connelly had carried on talking all the while, gradually becoming more animated in the telling of his tale, his voice louder and his gestures bigger, and John was distracted from his musings enough to tune in and catch the very end.

“And to this day, my brother Jamie swears it was the old man’s ghost what done it!”

One of the drashas gave a dramatic, stagey shiver of the shoulders, as if the story were truly creepy. The men puffed cigars and slugged back drinks.

“How about you, boss?” Connelly put in then, and John could tell his old station-mate felt obligated to draw him into the conversation. “ Anything ever put the fear in you?”

Xie turned to face John, then, the long body shifting so that every angle pointed straight at him. John cleared his throat and picked at the fabric of his trousers at the knee. He gestured with his glass and one pointing finger.

“You know, there is something I thought about right off,” he began. “I was out in suburbia this one time; can’t even remember why I was there—doesn’t matter.” His head was muzzy, but even so he allowed Xie to refill his glass from a decanter carried on a wooden tray by one of the other drashas. “Night time, not too late, but after dark, I’m—oh, I remember,” he interrupted himself. “An old school friend had gotten married, got a job out that way, something with telecomm. Anyway, he and the wife had me out for a weekend visit to their new place, and I was on my way from the train station to meet him in a restaurant. The streets were pretty quiet even though it couldn’t have been eight o’clock at night.”

“They roll up the sidewalks at dusk out there in the suburbs, innit,” one of the men put in.

“Well, you know,” John allowed with a shrug, “What’s there to do anyway?” He sipped the whiskey, noticed that Xie’s gaze on him was slightly narrow, and reflexively bared his teeth in a small, defensive smile before carrying on.

“So I’m walking, looking for this restaurant, feeling sure I’m in the wrong street because it’s all just houses, no shops or anything nearby, and it seems like it’s a very long way between streetlamps. But I turn a corner and I’m in the right place at last—a little town square, but still not another soul to be seen, no one out walking.”

“Which suburb was it?” Xie asked, as if asking him to repeat himself, though John knew he hadn’t said to begin with.

“Ah,” John thought. “Acton.”

“East or West?”

“Acton Town, actually,” John replied, and narrowed his own eyes, wondering what on earth difference it could possibly make. “Have you been?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure,” Xie said mildly. “Sorry to interrupt—do go on.”
“I walk past a couple of shops, when out of absolutely nowhere, there’s a pack of dogs.”

“The suburbs are overrun!” Connelly chimed in, too loudly. “Feral fu—sorry again. Feral bleedin’ dogs everywhere!”

John nodded. “Well, I’d heard as much, but I hadn’t spent time out there in ages, and I’d never run into any before. But here I was walking down this dark pavement—the restaurant was right there!” He extended his flattened palm, indicating an imaginary spot in the middle distance, looked bemused. “I was nearly there, but this pack of dogs. . .I swear I don’t know how they came up on me so fast, so quiet, from nowhere at all.”

“How many?” one of the other fellas asked.

“Four or five medium sized ones, two huge bastards—one a German shepherd, the other one maybe a retriever or something, but they were five stone apiece, at least.”

“Were they growling and barking and that?”

John shook his head a bit as he sipped once more at the whiskey. “They were the stealth squadron, I think. There’s two come up behind me, the rest in front, sort of loping around each other, but all eyes were on me, and they took turns letting out these little huffing sounds—not quite a growl, but getting there. So now I’m thinking, that’s it for me, I’m dinner.” He thumped hard against his chest with the fingertips of one hand. “I am literally the dogs’ dinner.” He could feel how wide his eyes were in the telling. “I don’t mind telling you, I nearly pissed myself.”

“You did, boss,” Connelly chortled. “Come on! Course you did, admit it, you pissed yourself.” The others joined in, laughing and shoving pointed elbows into each others’ sides.

“Yeah, all right.” John tipped his head back and forth, held his hand up in a gesture of surrender. “Just a little, though.”

An eruption of laughter; John saw Xie’s shoulders shake a bit with it, though the painted lips remained closed. He found himself inordinately pleased to have been the source of Xie’s amusement.

And then he realized he would have to think quite quickly of how to end the story, because the reality was that he had drawn his handgun and shot them, one after the other, and only one of them was able to run off while the rest lay there dead on the pavement with bullets through their eyes. It was not the sort of story that could be happily told in polite company. He bought himself a second by sipping the whiskey.

“So how did you finally get out of it?” one of the drashas prompted at last.

John joked, “Oh, so you noticed that about me? That I haven’t been eaten by wild dogs?” Before he could give it too much thought, he finished the story as cleanly as he could. “Well, so, yes, I stood there frozen and—I don’t mind telling you—bloody terrified, while these dogs sized me up like they were deciding who’d get the leg and who’d get the wing. And all I could think to do was to start shouting for help, so I took in this great breath, getting ready to scream my head off to this empty town square, for all the good it might do, and it was the damnedest thing—‘he shook his head, shrugged, and settled back into the chair. “They just ran off. Quick as they’d showed up, they were gone.”

“Come off it!” Connelly demanded, clearly dubious.

“I swear to you, on my soldier’s honour, they just packed up and left.” John held up his hand, swearing his oath. “But, yeah, the few minutes before they ran off? Definitely some of the scariest
moments of my life. Hands down.” He shook his head again, settling the matter.

Xie’s head tipped to one side, just slightly, in a gesture John couldn’t decipher.

“Thank you so much—both of you”—Xie turned to nod at Connelly. “For the stories. I’m never disappointed when soldiers come to visit; you always have such compelling yarns to spin.”

Connelly looked chuffed and a bit pink in the face; John’s grin got away from him for a minute—he could feel it—but he dialed it back, not wanting to seem too over-eager to receive praise.

“Let’s have a game, then,” Xie said. “I’ve Never Once? Everyone familiar? One of us says something we’ve never once done, and those of us who have done it, take a drink.” John stared at Xie’s neck, the wide, scalloped leather collar of the dress reminded him of batwings, and there were black painted lines down the sides of Xie’s throat that reminded John of racing stripes. “I’ll start. I’ve never once been outside the British Isles.”

The men all snorted sarcastic laughs and drank. Xie’s glance fell on John as he sipped at the magnificent whiskey he knew he’d better stop drinking soon or risk falling asleep in the gutter later, to be stomped by some rickshaw-puller or run over with a bicycle.

“Were you in the Americas as a doctor, Captain Watson, or was it when you were in the army?” Xie suddenly asked him, in a lowered, more confidential tone, as Connelly slurred about never once having caught anything from a sex-partner.

“Doctor,” John answered, before he’d had time to register that they’d made no introductions, let alone exchanged CVs. “How’d you...?” He tilted his head. It was like talking to a sculpture: pretty to look at but in the end, distractingly more distant than talking to a person.

“When the reservations are made, we receive some basic information about the party.”

“Ah,” John said. There was a burst of ribald laughter; one of the apprentice drashas was balancing her glass on her chin, to many accolades.

“I knew you for a military man by your posture, though, and for a doctor by the pen in your shirt pocket.” Xie’s hands were folded amid a puddle of green silk. Feet in torturous-looking leather boots, crossed elegantly at the ankle. The greenest blue eyes John had ever seen.

“That so.” John was skeptical.

“Indeed.” The voice was calm and low and nearly hypnotic.

“Suppose you meet a lot of people,” John ventured, “Start to pick out commonalities. Soldiers stand up straight. Doctors. . .carry pens.”

Xie shrugged ever-so-slightly, the mere suggestion of a shrug, really. The eyes cut to the side. “Medic, nurse, cook, ooh, intelligence operative!, police.”

John made a little scoffing noise. “Intelligence operative,” he chided.

“Shh. Keep your voice down. He’s not activated at the moment, but regardless, we’re not supposed to know.”

John protested, “No, but he’s a—“

“Tank mechanic?”
—tank mechanic.” They said it in unison. One of Xie’s drawn-on eyebrows shifted upward.

John took another swallow from his glass. “It’s a good trick.”

“It’s not a trick.” Xie’s voice was mild and matter-of-fact. “And I know you for a very dangerous man indeed, given you’re carrying a pistol in a shoulder holster despite the fact that to be found in possession of a firearm is grounds for on-the-spot execution. Even more troubling, it could get you removed early from this lovely party.”

John pursed his lips, exhaled hard through his nostrils. “Like you said,” he muttered under his breath. “I’m a military man.”

“Ah, but you’re long retired.” The look in Xie’s eyes, the slight curve of the mouth, let John know that his illegal firearm was of less interest to Xie than having made all the right guesses about him. All at once, Xie spoke up loud enough for the whole room to hear. “Your turn, Captain Watson.”

“Please, just call me John.” He cleared his throat, smiled tightly, looked at his hands, and didn’t bother to keep the cheeky tone out of his voice as he added, “I’m long retired.”

The assembled looked at him expectantly, and Connelly shouted out, “He’s never once got a blowjob from a whore!” The men rushed to down their shots of liquor, laughing around it, chasing chin-dribbles with bare knuckles and embroidered handkerchiefs passed to them by manicured fingers.

“I’ve never once. . .”

John’s mind went utterly blank. There was a pause long enough to make things uncomfortable, and he cleared his throat, then again.

“Now that I think of it,” Xie piped up, spine straightening, and all the attention in the room shifted instantly. “My darling friend Butterfly has been practicing the most charming song, and—oh!—what a voice. It’s quite lively and we’ll all be joining in before it’s through, I’m sure.”

Butterfly was a tiny creature dressed in white, with a soft down of what looked like drifting snow sparkling across almost-bare shoulders. She moved to perch on the arm of a sofa and began to sing, swaying her head, a familiar old folk ballad that undoubtedly they’d all be shouting along to, soon enough.

Xie turned back to John, leaned in so their faces were close. John could see a single, cracked-pink capillary in the sclera of one bejeweled eye. “I apologise if you were uncomfortable. . .”

“No,” John protested, and waved it away. “No, not a bit. I just. . .I blanked out for a moment. I’ve never once eaten a dandelion green, never driven a car, never seen the stars at night in London.” He shrugged. “Just got a bit of. . .what? performance anxiety.” He forced a smile. In truth, given that Xie had drawn his own attention to the handgun that was, in fact, currently nestled up against his ribcage, he’d only been able to think of all the things he had done that no one else in the room would have, and which he could never say aloud. That he had rolled a bullet on his tongue when he knew it was meant for a beautiful woman. That he’d stepped over the body of a man young enough to be his son with the only thought in his head that he’d bet on a horse race and was missing it. That he hadn’t had an unbroken night’s sleep in at least a dozen years.

“Can I pour you another?” Xie offered.

“Better not,” John said, and frowned. He closed his eyes a bit longer than a blink. When he opened them again, Xie was rising to stand. John’s stomach churned, and he blamed the drink. Something in
his chest caught, and he blamed the drink. Something in his pelvis stirred, and that was all down to Xie, this otherworldly creature wearing a metallic-flake paint job, whose hands John couldn’t see, enrobed in black leather that looked like it would melt under John’s fingertips if only he could touch it.

“Oh, now. Where you off to?” John managed to blurt. His instinct was to grab an elbow, a wrist, well-hidden fingers, but he knew better than to manhandle a work of art—sirens would no doubt blare, strobe lights flash, guards come running to toss him on the floor and zip-tie his wrists behind his back—and so he restrained himself, lowered his hand onto his knee even as he shifted to sit on the front edge of the leather armchair.

“I have other guests to see to,” Xie said graciously. “You understand. . .” A quick sideways glance and another of the drashas scurried to potentially take Xie’s seat by John’s chair.

John waited for the back-of-his-head voice to tell him to shut up, but clearly it had long since passed out from one too many slugs of that four-figure whiskey, because no one and nothing stopped him from saying, “I was sort of enjoying having you to myself.”

Xie’s head tipped to one side, only the slightest bit. “That’s kind of you to say.”

John got to his feet, fought against an imminent sway. “You’re. . .astonishingly beautiful,” he gushed, carefully picking out each syllable to minimize slurring all those s’s. “Which you know, of course.”

Xie’s eyes lowered demurely.

John ventured a single step closer, and drew himself up as tall as he could, though even then he was nowhere in range of an ear, or even the knife-edge of the jaw; the heels of the long leather boots were six inches high, at least, and Xie towered above him. He cleared his throat and murmured, “How much?”

“I beg your pardon?” Perfectly polite, as if the problem were only that John hadn’t made himself heard.

“I’d like to be alone with you. How much?” John’s hands raised in a helpless gesture. “Or—I’ve never been here before—is there some sort of, I dunno, menu that I order off or something?” His eyelids were heavy and he felt himself listing to starboard, yanked himself upright.

If it were possible, Xie became suddenly even taller, and the hands utterly hidden beneath the green silk sleeves nonetheless seemed to clasp together, one palm pressing down on the other upturned one, like an angry schoolteacher about to give out to a misbehaving pupil.

“Captain Watson, I can see you’ve unfortunately overindulged.” Xie turned to the others and there was another delicate head tilt. “You’ve all been charming company; I hope one day we’ll meet again. You’ll forgive me, but I must make a rather early evening. Feel free to enjoy the salon, and the company of these charming creatures, for as long as you like.” A sort of bow, and then. “Good night.”

John stood dumbly, fumbling in his billfold for his Identity Card, and watched Xie make a graceful, quick retreat, vanishing behind a sliding door.

Connelly looked at him like he’d just scored one in his own net. “Bloody hell, Watson! How drunk are you?”

“What now?” John was a bit baffled, and the desire to lie down on the soft carpet was becoming
stronger than ever.

“They’re not prostitutes.” Connelly hissed, and the other men nodded and made noises of agreement. “Especially not that one! Xie’s only the most famous drasha in the fucking world and here you are, trying to get yer prick wet? You must be even drunker than you look.”

“Or you’ve got titanium-plated bollocks,” another man—the one Xie had picked out as an intelligence operative—put in. “What were you thinking?”

John shrugged hopelessly. “I...you said there’d be...”

“No, here, mate!”

“Honest mistake,” John offered, and he could hear himself slurring. “Probably happens a lot.” He looked at one of the drashas for confirmation. “Right?”

The drasha shook her head.

“Right,” John said, and started toward the lift. “Guess I’m off, then.” It was mercifully quick and he stumbled into it, leaning heavily against the side wall as he jabbed the button for the ground floor. He had to look in his wallet for the key card, to remember what hotel he was staying in.

It had been quite a while since such a request was made, but despite the mild shock of the insult, Xie had kept reaction to a minimum, careful to allow as much room as possible for Captain Watson—John—to save face. Now having withdrawn to the dressing room, Sherlock sat with his back to the mirror and leaned down to unzip the impossibly high boots.

Gratuities, if any, would either be light (the drashas who stayed with the party were likely to get the lion’s share) or, with luck, generous as the guests attempted to make up for their friend’s bad behaviour. Sherlock slid one foot, then the other, free, and shook the long sleeves out of the way so he could massage the cramps out of his arches with the balls of his thumbs. If the tips weren’t up to expectation, he’d be hearing about it the next day, but he hadn’t observed closely enough to anticipate one way or the other.

Sherlock moaned quietly at the relief of his fingers rolling up and over each other along the sole of each foot, then flexed and curled his toes against the carpet as he set his feet back to the floor. Next he went after the buckles on the wide, corset-like belt and took a full, deep breath for the first time in several hours, reminding himself to fight the temptation to let his spine collapse and relax all at once. He rose to his feet, slid the zipper at the side of his torso down to loosen the gown, then stretched both arms high overhead, rolled his shoulders as his arms dropped back down into place. A sore spot beneath his right ribs protested, but the slight burn there was welcome, as it helped remind him of himself, of his body.

The gown was removed and laid across the red armchair—Molly would fetch it early the next morning—and then tugged loose the wrapped-around blouse and let it drip into a puddle nearby. Next were countless hairpins, the long tail of sleek black hair, earrings, necklaces, lashes and rhinestones peeled free from where they’d been glued to the skin around his eyes—all of it laid out across the little tea table for Molly to find. Sherlock was always careful to avoid his reflection as he broke Xie apart.

The shower was so hot the steam quickly became oppressive, and Sherlock’s throat ached for clean
breath as he watched green-tinged suds and opalescent-slicked water swirl down the drain near his still-aching feet. Dark-scented soap that reminded him of the inside of an antique costume trunk, a quick pass with a rough flannel over skin mottled pink by the relentless fall of fever-hot water, and Sherlock wrung out a cascade of green. More soap, more scrubbing, less paint each time he wrung out the rag.

Once the water was clear, he knew it was safe, and stepped out to find the wall mirror only big enough to reflect his face and throat was heavily coated with steam. As always, Sherlock was grateful not to have to look too closely at himself, at his ungainly body always sounding with aches and pains, limbs too long, flesh so weak. He hated every mark on his skin, hated the skin itself for its freckles and moles; its quick blush; its tendency to bruise easily and to scar badly, blatantly displaying evidence of even the most minor harm. Sherlock shrugged into his dressing gown, flicked fingers through his sopping hair to separate the waves.

Back out in the dressing room, he fetched his phone and texted Molly that he’d finished the night early. Then a text to the Icehouse Administrator’s phone saying the same, but adding that he was sure there’d be gratuities, no one should worry.

Will you come up and have a drink with me before bed?—SH

TXT from IcehouseAdmin: Making rounds; I’ll be at the flat in half an hour.

Then bed?—SH

TXT from IcehouseAdmin: Then more work. Just because you quit early doesn’t mean I can.

Sherlock didn’t risk making a reply.

* 

Here's a link to a still-evolving playlist on YouTube. Musical inspiration for this 'verse has been vital; hope you enjoy some of these songs! If that link won't work, try copy/pasting this into yr browser: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHaBWF1stcWagxozqmUfWn7APVDTR4IKz2
In chapter 2, John attended a party in the Icehouse salon of the word-famous Xie, had a few too many slugs of very good whiskey, and committed at terrible breach of etiquette.

* HAPPY BIRTHDAY to the Lovely Reader I'd most like to tuck into my bra, so she would ever be close at hand, Succubus! <3 Thanks for always being so charming and supportive, darling. xoxox

* NEW TAG: partner violence/domestic violence

“You knew the job was done.”

“When I send a request for you to report, I expect a response within two minutes. You have been back in country nearly a week.”

John sighed lightly, through his nostrils. “What can I say—” he began.

“There’s work to be done—”

“I need a break—“

“Always.” The Mentor finished, as if John had not even spoken.

“—like a holiday. Or. . .”

“A holiday?” The Mentor sounded incredulous, even chuckled under his breath. “That’s rich.”

John rubbed a knuckle against the bridge of his nose. “Or, something less, I don’t know. . .intense?”

The Mentor hummed, and there was a sound of shuffling papers. “I know America is difficult—“

“Do you?”

“But you’re back now.”

“Have you been there?”

The Mentor continued ignoring John’s interjections. “Ah. I do have something a bit softer.

Deadline’s quite far out. In the interim it amounts to raking up information.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Now, now, Captain.”

“I’ve done some intel; no one’s complained.”

“I haven’t offered it yet.”
“And I need to get out of this hotel,” John put in, finishing a thought he’d never voiced aloud in the first place. “If nothing else. It’s. . .”

“Mid range at best, I know. You’re used to better and you deserve it. I was appalled when I heard.”

John gruffed a laugh, pressed himself up on his elbows, with an aim to getting out of the only-marginaly-comfortable bed. “Were you? ‘Appalled’? I notice I’m still here.”

“Come to my office tomorrow morning and we’ll talk through the assignment.”

“I already said I’ll take it,” John said firmly, gaining his feet. He scratched at the scar on his shoulder.

“And I said I haven’t offered it yet. Will half-ten work for your busy schedule?”

“Right,” John allowed.

The Mentor rang off without a goodbye.

*

There was another little ritual that Sherlock performed—not every night, only when the illusion allowed for it—to alert the center of his brain that he was no longer himself, that there were guests to welcome and please, that it was time to be Xie. Anyone watching him dress and make-up and ultimately transform was unlikely to spot it, or to understand its depth and weight, because it seemed like nothing. And it was precisely this quality of intimacy, of only-I-knownness, that made it so significant to Sherlock.

It was earrings.

He’d had his ears pierced shortly after he debuted, specifically for a pair of blindingly sparkling chandelier earrings on display in the window of nearby antiques shop. They were only paste—nothing precious, just faceted clear-glass stones set in metal so cheap the silvertone was flaking off where they had once rubbed up against someone else’s earlobes—but Sherlock was so inspired by their shimmer, movement, and a hint of some older, more authentic kind of glamour than even the type Xie was selling in the salon every evening, that he constructed an entire look just to suit them. It took six weeks for the raw, pink pinholes in his earlobes to heal sufficiently to support the earrings’ weight; a happy coincidence, since he needed that long to assemble the rest of the illusion.

He’d created a gown of hot pink silk-satin, carefully embroidered with a shower of clear crystals so that it looked as if the wearer had just ducked away from a light snow, with fluffy, intricate flakes clinging at the shoulders, down the infinitely long drape of each sleeve, and around the hem where the short train puddled and dragged. The silhouette was based on a traditional Chinese hanfu style—an A-line, wrapped robe with bell-shaped sleeves—but the colour and fabric were classic old Hollywood, based on an evening dress Sherlock remembered from a musical comedy of the 1950s. He’d paled his skin with golden-white cream and created an elaborate beauty make-up so that he looked sensually feminine. His own dark hair disappeared beneath a wig of weighty, platinum waves that fell to caress his shoulders, one eye nearly obscured by the ripple of thick hair. The natural fullness of his bottom lip was enhanced with shades of pink and pearl and a glimmer of gold dotted just at the center, the cupid’s bow of his top lip exaggeratedly rounded. He wore long strings of rhinestones around his neck, crisscrossing and tangling in cascades down the back as well as the front of the gown.

When everything else was pinned, combed, painted, glued, tight-laced, and sprayed into place, Sherlock took up the dangling rhinestone earrings and slid the wires through the still-tender holes in
each earlobe. He let them settle, holding his head very high and still atop his long neck.

Looking back at him from the mirror was the fantastic creature called Xie. An ever-so-gentle shake of the head, side to side to side, and the earrings rocked and swung—not even enough to brush the neck, just the slightest shift in their weight—as the stones caught the light from the make-up mirror. The gentle tugging sensation hyperfocused all awareness to just these two tiny, untouchable places. A shimmer of erotic thrill started at the very point of that sweet pull and licked down through the jaw along the sides of the neck, turned fluid in the chest and settled in a hot-cool pool deep in the lowest part of the belly. Xie’s lips parted for breath to escape in a soft sigh.

And so whenever the illusion warranted earrings, they were sure to be long, dangling, and heavy. Now and then throughout the evening, Xie would notice that familiar, pleasant tug, and immediately feel centered, settled. It was a secret, whispered reminder of the vast universe beneath the skin.

*  

“Prompt, as ever,” the Mentor said archly, and rocked back in his enormous leather chair behind his enormous mahogany desk. The Mentor’s office furniture (there was also an enormous credenza and an enormous, only slightly impressionistic painting of the Unity flag) always made John wonder what he thought he had to prove. John was nearly a half-hour late for the meeting he’d had no choice about.

“Overslept. The hotel forgot my wake-up call. Mucked up my room service breakfast, too. Quince jam,” he scoffed, deadpan. “Honestly, what were they thinking.”

“Have a seat.”

John had been standing at ease in the center of the room, and lowered himself into a less-enormous leather chair facing the Mentor’s desk. He sat straight, rested his elbows on the chair’s arms so his clasped hands dangled in the air before his chest.

“Report?”

“Target solicited a prostitute in an alley outside the Aces Casino and while in the midst of the act was terminated. Routine.”

“Did you recover any contraband?”

“No my job.”

The Mentor’s head tilted in annoyance, and he rephrased. “Was there evidence of contraband?”

“The whore emptied his pockets,” John told him. “So whatever overage he had on those fake ICs, it’s nil.”

The Mentor made a broad, almost grand gesture with both hands. “And balance is restored.”

“About my fee,” John said, and didn’t need to say more.

“You’ll find it in your account within 48 hours—now that you’ve deigned to report.”

“I think within two hours would be acceptable,” John replied. “Now. What’s the intel job?”

The Mentor smiled mildly, in the way he had that made John want to jump up and smash the grin off his beak-nosed face. “Oh, am I keeping you from other appointments? I do apologise for the
inconvenience.”

John said nothing.

There was a large leather folio on the Mentor’s desk, noticeable primarily because the desk lacked the usual clutter of a person whose work involved everyday devices like telephones (the Mentor was mobile-only), computers (he had assistants who carried them or had them at their own workstations, but the Mentor probably hadn’t typed a word of his own in twenty years), and paper (dangerous in that it could fall into the wrong hands and tended to make undeniable those things which were more wisely left to the ephemeral spoken word). He laid his hand upon the folio and plucked gently with one finger at the strings wound around its closure tabs.

“Tell me what you know about Deep Sea,” the Mentor said, not a challenge, nor mere curiosity, but somewhere between the two.

John shrugged, let his hands drop into his lap. “Nowadays, mostly just an urban legend, isn’t it?” he offered. “A sort of myth. Did those bombings in the mid-nineties, trying to disrupt Unity. Public executions every hour on the hour for sixteen days.”

“Seventeen.”

“Pretty well discouraged anyone from ever reviving the movement,” John finished. Then, with a patently false grin he added, “As well it should. Disruption of Unity brings despair to us all.”

The Mentor hummed, acknowledging the cheeky tone of the comment. “There’s growing evidence that Deep Sea is enjoying a bit of a rebirth on the continent, and probably elsewhere,” he intoned, and drummed his fingers—duh-d-dunf—on the folio. “Unsanctioned radio broadcasts. Some unusual mobile phone chatter, coded text messages and the like. Strange things happening with merchant ships. Wildly interesting transfers of currency.”

“So I’ll be joining the merchant marine?” John prompted, undermining whatever dramatic one-man-play the Mentor was trying to put on.

The Mentor ignored the question, but his frown gave John to know he’d made his point. “Naturally the easiest places to launder curr are the pleasure districts, and massive amounts of it are being funneled through gambling parlours, bookmakers, brothels, and the like.”

“What, here in London?” John asked, finding his curiosity vaguely notched upward by the mention of the pleasure districts.

“All over—Paris, Marrakesh—but yes, lately here in London, as well. I know you don’t spend much of your curr on. . .” the Mentor ventured limply, eventually arriving at, “anything. But I’m sure you’re aware London is the most robust pleasure district in what used to be Great Britain.”

“Kills you saying that, doesn’t it? Used to be Great Britain.” The stick up the Mentor’s arse was so tempting, John just had to jiggle it now and then.

“Unity is peace,” the Mentor replied tonelessly. “Life’s better now than it was Before.”

“Right.” John looked at his watch.

“In particular, we’re interested in some activity centered around one of those houses of repose, the Icehouse. Do you know it?” He quickly unwound the string from the tabs, folded back the flap and slid out a stack of files at least two inches thick.
John cleared his throat, willed his face to stay neutral. “Everyone knows it.”

“We’re convinced Deep Sea’s planted a few major players inside it, either as frequent customers or possibly working there.” He passed John a folder and John opened it: building schematics, personnel records, photos. “In that file you’ll see some likely possibilities: several high-rollers who frequent the casino and the salons; one couple who occupy a penthouse flat in the building; the head of security; and a handful of other employees.”

John thumbed through the stack, glancing at photos, looking for a pair of familiar green-blue eyes—possibly in an unfamiliar face—and didn’t realize he was holding his breath until he’d got to the bottom of the pile and saw no one he knew. He started through again, this time skim-reading names and biographical notes.

“We’ve arranged a parallel account for you, so money won’t be a problem. Your cover story is simple, given that you’ve been in the salon of the famous Xie recently, and might be recognized during future visits.”

John’s chest tightened with outrage that the Mentor had obviously been tracking his whereabouts when he was technically between jobs.

“You’re a doctor, recently returned from humanitarian work in the Americas, and as such have been allowed a significantly higher allotment and large overage rights. With Unity’s gratitude.”

“Right. And now I’m back, I’m going to blow it all on gourmet meals, four-figure alcohol, and gambling.”

“Don’t forget prostitutes.”

“They’re not prostitutes there—at the Icehouse.”

The Mentor cocked an eyebrow. “Aren’t they? Book a private party with one of those drashas some night and see what comes of it.”

The inside of John’s head was growing hot and he clenched his teeth hard together.

“Use your judgment as to the best approach,” the Mentor went on, “But find a way to get as close as you can to the people in that file—befriend them, bribe them, float an idea that you’re sympathetic to this newly-reinvigorated Deep Sea movement—and try to get a handle on which of them is the hand that moves the strings.”

John shut the folder and set it on the edge of the desk closest to him. “Not actually interested.”

“You already accepted the job.”

“You said it hadn’t been offered.”

“I’m offering.”

John cleared his throat. “Don’t. It’s not for me. I’m sure there’s something else available, more in my wheelhouse—just wet, no intel. Back to basics.”

“When I say, offering.”

There was a pregnant pause, and a heavy blink of John’s eyes—a deep settling of his shoulders—indicated his acquiescence. Taking a job that put him inside the Icehouse obliterated any possibility
of putting the other evening’s blunder behind him for good. But it seemed he was not at liberty to decline the job.

“There’s a perk,” the Mentor said semi-brightly, with lifted eyebrows and as near as he ever got to a genuine smile. “I know you’re unhappy with the hotel you’re in, so I’m sure you’ll be glad to know there’s a flat.”

“In London?” John said immediately. “A flat.” He couldn’t keep his disbelief out of his voice.

“Nothing flash, just a little place we keep at the ready for long-term assignments. The landlady is accommodating and willfully ignorant; she’ll know who’s paying the rent, but should she ask, you’ve got your cover story. The address is here,” he passed another slim folder, strangely weighty in John’s hand. “And keys. You may have visitors at your leisure, so long as cover is maintained. Surveillance is minimal. The place is yours for as long as the job requires.”

There were three keys taped to the inside cover of the folder, and a photo of an average-looking block, with the entrance to a café, and a single, heavy black door beside it. 221B Baker Street.

“Westminster?” John said.

“It’s snug,” the Mentor offered, then returned to the subject at hand. “You’ll report as necessary, minimally once a week, and whenever I request it.” He narrowed his gaze at John meaningfully. “Delays will be considered insubordination.”

“Yeah,” John waved it away.

“This operation is time sensitive; there’s a dossier here with a summary and timeline of recent events for you to go through. Prompt reports are crucial. If I feel you are being willfully uncooperative, your contract could be subject to termination.” His tone became stern. “Do I make myself clear?”

John looked up then; the Mentor’s expression was expectant and serious.

“Yeah,” John repeated, grimly this time. “Perfectly clear, yeah.”

“Questions?”

“Yeah, loads.” John peeled the keys off the folder and then picked them off the sticky tape. “For now, though: why me? This is way more complex than I’m qualified for.” He pocketed the keys and passed the folder back to the Mentor.

“You’ve no known connections. You work alone. You’re essentially homeless, with no roots more specific than ‘British Isles.’ Family all dead, unmarried, no children. Not even a pet.”

“No one to miss me if this somehow gets me killed.” John tasted something dark and dusty—like coal—on the back of his tongue.

“That’s not what I meant to imply. It’s only that you seem exceedingly unlikely to be part of a vast underground network bent on overthrowing the world’s one government. People like that tend to have to interact with each other, and your primary interactions with people are limited to shooting them, or—much less frequently—sexual trysts that end long before sunrise.”

“Aw, now; don’t beg. You can just ask.”

The Mentor rolled his eyes a bit and straightened his not-crooked necktie. “Any other questions?”
“None.”

“Good, then.” The Mentor gathered the files, slid them into the folio and tied it shut, then offered it to John as both men got to their feet. “Get to work.”

Molly had already left the mail on the table outside the flat’s front door by the time Sherlock returned from the barber. Shuffling it front to back as he made his way through the foyer toward his little study, he found a thank-you-for-the-interview-note from the magazine writer, which he skim-read and then binned. There were three heartfelt requests to become the drashaskaya’s apprentice (there wasn’t time for a new one for at least two years). And a small, square, wooden box of a size and shape Sherlock by now knew well, for Xie’s numerous admirers had sent countless trinkets over the years. Beneath the box, and affixed to it with a criss-crossed length of yellow-green satin ribbon, was a sturdy, square envelope.

Sliding into the leather armchair at his desk, Sherlock pulled the knot apart, tucked the ribbon into the breast pocket of his suit jacket so that one end trailed out, and slipped one long finger beneath the edge of the envelope’s flap to loosen it. The card he withdrew featured a reproduction of an ancient painting of smiling Japanese ladies enjoying an outdoor concert. Similar images were found all over the British Isles since they had been zoned a leisure destination for those living on the continent. The pleasure districts—worldwide, not just in what had once been the UK—had been envisioned and designed in emulation of *ukiyo*, the hedonistic “Floating World” of Edo-period Japan’s urban tea rooms, theaters, and shops (not to mention gambling parlours and brothels) frequented by artistic bohemian-types and peopled for the pleasure of the larger population by geishas, bookmakers, sumo wrestlers, and samurai. Many found the images trite, given their ubiquity, but Sherlock had an affinity for them, and he let his gaze linger over the scene before opening the card. Inside it, in small, blocky handwriting:

*Xie,*

*I must apologise for my inexcusable behaviour. I was utterly potted and a few months in America seems to have uncivilized me a bit. I’m usually made of better stuff.*

*Excuses I’m sure you’ve heard before: I was drunk, you’re fascinating and lovely and, dear god, your eyes... Unfortunately these are the best I can manage. You were charming and gracious in the face of my unforgivable(?) insult and I proved myself unworthy of such charm and grace.*

*I am more sorry than I can say, that magnificent whiskey and your otherworldly beauty carried me away in such a dead-wrong direction. I saw this little gift and thought of you, and send it along without expectation, only as a token of my esteem.*

*Humbly (so humbly),*  
*John Watson*

*PS—if you’re curious about that hell on earth you’re lucky enough never to have visited, I have stories. Really, the only pleasant thing about the Americas is the sky at night—so big and full of stars. When you look up at it, you can almost forget where you are.*

*PPS—how did you know I was in America? That trick of yours about doctors carrying pens?*

Sherlock found the note disarming in its contrition. The underlined “so humbly” in the closing was a
self-effacing acknowledgment of his embarrassment; the question mark after “unforgivable” invited
but did not demand a response. And he had emphasized the beauty of Xie’s eyes rather than resting
on the less intimate compliments—fascinating, lovely, charming, gracious. All indicated a man truly
embarrassed by his drunken faux pas. This was no false apology serving only to clear his conscience
without real regard for the feelings of its recipient. Sherlock recognized those all too well, and had
heard enough of them for a lifetime. He slid out the narrow central drawer of his desk, and tucked the
card safely inside.

Sherlock’s own stationery bore his monogram in sleek, vertical letters deeply embossed into heavy,
silver-white cardstock, with the narrowest border of metallic chrome-blue. Smoothing the card open
and taking up a weighty pen that had once belonged to his grandfather, Sherlock wrote:

*Captain Watson—*

All is forgiven with immediate ease. I hope you’ll consider another visit to my salon, this time as my
guest. The sky over America sounds intriguing—I’d love to hear more.

—X.

Once he’d slid the card into its envelope, he carefully tucked in the flap and wrote *John Watson* on
its face. He left it on the table outside the front door; Molly would see to its delivery.

Sherlock moved to the parlour and settled on the long, low-slung sofa of vaguely Scandinavian
design. Hesitant to rush opening the gift, he first shook the wooden box beside his ear and heard only
a quiet sort of thudding rattle against the inside of the hinged lid. At last he tilted the lid back, and
inside the little box—centered on a piece of white, ersatz cotton—was a toy car of the sort he’d had
as a child, of which there seemed to be none left in the world. When oil peaked and there wasn’t fuel
enough to run non-government vehicles, the auto-manufacturing plants had mostly been converted
into growhouses for crops. The only cars one ever saw now were out in the dirt-poor exurbs, where
rusty, useless, decades-old automobiles had been craftily converted into chicken coops, dog kennels,
and sometimes—in the very poorest districts—peoples’ homes.

The toy car Sherlock now turned over and over in his hand must have come from a curiosity shop. It
was nearly the same acid shade of yellow-green Xie’s make-up had been that night of their first
meeting, and it sported black racing-stripe details along its sides and on the hood. Sherlock flipped it
in his hand, and on the silvertone metal undercarriage was etched *Plymouth Barracuda*. He spun the
tiny, red-rimmed wheels with the tip of one finger, then turned it back upright. He’d had one very
much like it in his boyhood; the memory of its low-nosed, sleek look had inspired him to create Xie’s
ensemble. He set it down on the glass top of the coffee table and gave it a little push across; the
sound it made was a comfortingly familiar echo of days long since passed, and Sherlock smiled,
fetching it back and tucking it into the breast pocket of his jacket, beside the length of matching green
satin ribbon.

“Sherrr-lock!”

A tricky, sing-song tone that was as likely to mean true jollity as it was a cruel set-up. Sherlock
grabbed the little box and slid it under the plush velvet sofa cushion, shifting himself over a bit so he
was directly atop it. “Good morning!” The lilting voice still didn’t reveal its true intention; Sherlock
would have to see his face, the set of his shoulders, the way his hair was combed, before he could
decipher his mood.

Jim strode into the living room dressed in boxer shorts and a sleeveless vest; bare feet; tartan flannel
dressing gown ready for the rag-man left open at the front. The sharp tips of his fringe jolted up
diagonally away from his forehead, which was smooth, his eyebrows relaxed and apart. His brown
eyes were sleep-soft, and he scratched his belly absentely as he walked.

“Just got up?” Sherlock asked casually. It was nearly two in the afternoon.

“Long night last night. How was yours?” Jim went to the kitchen island, shuffled the newspaper absently for a minute before he crossed to the kettle and lit the burner.

Sherlock reached for his wristwatch, which had slipped partway round, centered it, then pulled at his monogrammed shirt cuff to expose three-quarter inches of sleeve beyond the edge of his jacket. “An early one for me. Swedish politicos. They were drunk so I left them to it.”

Jim’s movements stilled and he tipped his chin as he shot Sherlock a penetrating look. “Gratuities?”

Sherlock picked at microscopic lint on the knee of his trousers. “It wasn’t worth putting up with them. When guests drink that much. . .” he shrugged slightly, waved one hand in a you-know-what-I-mean gesture. “And they were more interested in ladding it up together than anything I had to offer.” He was lying, of course. The Swedes were actually quite shy until Xie called for beer and got them talking about the upcoming Alpine bicycle races, which they all had bets on. Once they’d had a few drinks and the drashas laughed gamely at their jokes for a few hours, they’d been more than generous with all of them, Xie especially. But Jim didn’t have to know exactly how much extra curr was landing on Sherlock’s Identity Card; Xie had been the one to earn it, after all.

Jim had fixed his tea—black, with so little sugar he may as well not use it at all, and blew across its surface. “Two this week like that, Sherlock. . .” he made a tsk-tsk noise and shook his head, and it would have seemed like a teasing joke coming from anyone else. As it was, Sherlock crossed his arms in front of his chest. Jim went on. “Those soldiers, too—when was that?”

“A few nights ago,” Sherlock said dismissively. “This evening it’s some couples on holiday together from Hong Kong. They’re always generous. I’ll make it up.”

Jim hummed, a downward drag on it that hinted at disapproval. He took up the newspaper in one hand and his cup in the other, circled the poured-cement countertop of the island and crossed to a sling-back leather armchair near the sofa. He set down the paper, the cup on top of it, and leaned far forward with his elbows on his knees, proffering his stubble-grizzled cheek to be kissed. Sherlock’s jaw softened and he felt his lips curl up a bit even as he leaned in to oblige. Jim sat back, scratched his belly again, stretched his arms above his head.

“What’s the face?” he asked suddenly, sharply. Sherlock’s gut tightened just behind his navel.

“No, Sweetheart. No. Nnnope.” The pop of the p was explosive. Jim’s eyes glinted. Sherlock kept both feet on the floor. “That was the look of a daydreamer. And it’s not me you’re dreaming of, because why would you? I’m right here.” He gestured down the front of his chest with upturned palms, illustrating his presence. “So who was it put that little grin on your face? Hmm?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock said, and shook his head gently side to side. “No one, nothing. I wasn’t thinking anything in particular.”
Jim scooted up to the front edge of his chair, as close to Sherlock as he could get without standing, and reached across to lay a hand on Sherlock’s thigh, prominent spirals of his knuckles flattening as his fingers gripped. He ducked his head a bit. “Here, look here Sherlock.” Sherlock raised his eyelids but otherwise kept still as a stone, arms still tightly folded, hands tucked under his opposite biceps. “Hmm? Looking here now? At me?”

“Yes.” He wanted to say, you can see that I am, but of course he would never because he knew better.

“There’s only two things you need to hold in that pretty, curly-topped head of yours. Right? You know this.” All the sleep had gone out of his eyes and they darted from one of Sherlock’s eyes to the other, at regular intervals, a sideways pulsation of his gaze. “First—always first—take care of me. Right? Yes? Keep me happy.”

He seemed to be waiting for an answer; Sherlock gave a tight half-nod.

“And then the entire rest of your head should be filled with just two words. You know what I’m going to say. You’re not new here!” He threw one arm out suddenly, gesturing at the vast expanse of the flat, but it still made Sherlock flinch—just a quick, hard blink and a tension in his jaw that made his teeth ache—and Jim brought the hand back between them, clawed his fingers around Sherlock’s wrist to tug his folded arms apart. Sherlock let him. “The only other thing you ever need to think about, Sherlock—“ He made Sherlock’s name into a scold, all by itself. “Are two simple words: Make. Money.”

The fingers hooked to his forearm were digging in painfully. Sherlock withstood it until just before he couldn’t bear it anymore, then started to pull his arm back. Jim held fast. The hand on Sherlock’s knee slid in and up, and Sherlock pulled his head backward between them, clawed his fingers around Sherlock’s wrist to tug his folded arms apart. Sherlock let him. “Stop,” Sherlock gasped.

“I’m trying to get you to focus.”

“I am. You have.”

“So what are you going to do tonight, Sherlock?”

The pain was exquisite, made Sherlock forget trying to get his arm out of the pincer grip that was surely going to raise fingertip-shaped bruises even through his suit jacket and shirtsleeve.

“Make money,” Sherlock breathed out hard, then bit his lips.

“Make money.” Jim released him, returned his elbows to rest on his thighs. “That’s simple enough even for you to remember. Sherlock. Sweetheart.” He sank fully back in his leather armchair, slurped slowly and noisily at his tea, then asked, “Is there anything in? I’m famished.”

Sherlock shifted his posture, trying to assure the hidden gift box was secure and wouldn’t draw attention with a telltale lump in the cushion, then got to his feet.

“I’ll go and see.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

In chapter 3, John had a meeting with the Mentor and was assigned to gather intelligence on a possible anti-government plot, centered in and around the Icehouse. He sent a note of apology and a token of his esteem to Xie, and Xie graciously forgave him his inelegant behaviour. We also met Jim Moriarty, administrator of the Icehouse, who treats Sherlock unkindly.

“They’re ready for you,” Molly said gently.

“Thank you. Five minutes. How many?”

“Party of six—three couples, mixed, middle-aged. And four women in their thirties—girls’ night out, I think. Oh, and that one you invited, Captain Watson.” Molly stopped rather abruptly then, and her reflection revealed that she bit her lip, and her eyes were a full of mischief. “He’s quite cute. I didn’t think so at first, but I see it now.”

“What is it you think you see, exactly?” Xie’s eyes were narrow.

“What you might have seen, that made you invite him as your guest.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” A dismissive wave of the hand.

Molly shook her head. “All right, forget I said anything. But there’s no harm in looking; I wasn’t implying anything. I mean, I looked, and heaven knows I’m not exactly in the market for—”

“Good evening, Molly. Thank you.”

Clearly unbothered by the cold tone of voice, Molly only smiled and nodded a bit, then left.

Sherlock’s ring sat, as it did every evening, in a small crystal dish on the make-up table. It was narrow, plain, hammered platinum—hopelessly out of fashion now, most couples were getting rings tattooed nowadays, given the scarcity of precious metals—but he wore it whenever he wasn’t working. Jim wore his for a few days at a time, then it turned up in his trousers pocket, or on the edge of the sink in the master bath, or once on the rug under the edge of the sofa in another of the Icehouse salons.

Xie had already decided that tonight, music would be first, then conversation, and perhaps tea, given that the group was unlikely to want a rowdy drinking party (leaving aside Captain Watson’s overindulgence at his last visit). Xie rose to stand on slippered feet, shushed across the dressing room to draw the violin case from inside the climate-controlled cabinet where it lived, and then crossed back to the door that opened into the small, plain foyer between the dressing room and the salon. Once that was closed, a half-moment with closed eyes, a slow-drawn breath—Xie hovered between worlds—and then, at last, the door to the salon was slid aside.
John was always game for flirting; two of the women—some kind of all-girls-together, drinks-and-giggles thing—seemed to be competing with each other for his attention, which was a situation terribly tempting to abuse. He’d vowed to himself before he’d even walked in the place he wasn’t going to risk getting so stupidly drunk again, and so had been sipping at fizzy water garnished with curls of tissue-thin cucumber and glossy lime rind.

“It must have been terribly lonely—“ one of the women was saying, until the other interjected with an exaggerated frown.

“Sad.” She nodded the frown to punctuate it.

“—Yes, sad, too!” the first concurred, then barreled onward. “I’ve heard it’s just so awful there. And you a doctor; you must have had the worst of the worst coming to you.”

John shrugged; America was not top of his list of conversation topics but he’d been the fool who mentioned he’d just come back from there. Naturally people were curious.

“Sad, yes,” he allowed. “I did what I could. It was a fairly...uh...sheltered situation, though. There’s a military base. Comfortable, by the standards of the place.”

“I’ve heard people there are practically wild. ...Regressing? Like, just—“ Her hand in the air described a crooked circle. “I don’t know what word to use.”

John cleared his throat, worried the rim of his glass with his thumbnail as if scraping off some bit of grit there. “It’s a war zone,” he said, and nearly shrugged, trying to indicate he had zero desire to elaborate.

“It bothers you, I can tell,” the second one piped in, and laid a glossily-manicured hand on his forearm, shifted the woven fabric of his shirt back and forth with her fingertips as if soothing a child. Her face was a caricature of concern and John’s chest tightened. “You have such sad eyes.” She pouted out her lip, a plastic masque of sympathy. John fought an urge to throw her hand off his arm. To his relief, one of the drashas drew the woman’s attention with a compliment of her shoes, which made her twist away and reach down for them, freeing his arm. John made a show of stretching his back, raising his elbows and shoving them backward to open his chest, then rose to stand. He took his glass with him, crossed to the far wall and feigned interest in a small painting that hung there, of a stone cottage with a stream running past in the foreground, and several zigzagging, crumbling rock walls set at crazy angles. There was the distinctive rumble of a pocket door floating along its track, and a collective inhalation as Xie entered the salon, smiling a warm greeting while sliding the door back in place, then moving to set down a violin case atop an ornate lacquer cabinet before greeting the party.

“Welcome! Welcome, my friends—aren’t you just lovely?” A soft, wide smile in a face painted pearlescent pale grey, with the widest expanses emphasized by highlights that resembled nothing so much as shimmering, pale blonde sand. The gown was similarly coloured where it sat low on Xie’s shoulders, baring carefully painted skin and the inviting shadows of collarbones, then the fabric gradually darkened to slate-grey as the eye travelled downward. Spattered down its length were fine threads and glossy beads of dark blue-red in a flowing spill and swirl that began with the impossibly long, crystal-laden earrings and ropes of necklaces at the throat, which seemed to melt into the gown’s embellishments. Xie wore slicked-back hair and was much shorter than John remembered; a gliding step forward as Xie accepted a proffered glass quarter-filled with wine the same red as the beads revealed the toes of flat, black satin slippers beneath the gown’s hem, which quickly swallowed them up again.
The glass was raised, and Xie proposed, “A drink to your loveliness!” John’s lips parted on a sharp inhalation at the delicious shock of that deeply masculine voice sounding through Xie’s painted mouth, then closed around the rim of his glass as he sipped at his seltzer. The assembled raised drinks to themselves and each other, and the room momentarily filled with the crystalline ring of glasses kissing each other.

Xie passed the rest of the wine back to one of the men with a graceful smile and an almost-curtsy. “I thought I’d play a short piece for you, if you’ll indulge me.” The violin was lifted from a case which was itself a work of art: warm, tea-and-honey-coloured wood, inlaid with an intricate scroll design in much darker tones. Xie’s hands were again utterly hidden by over-long sleeves that hung just past the fingertips in front, then trailed dramatically. Only the varnished tips of the fingers emerged as Xie grasped daintily at the hooked wire of one long earring and drew it out of the lobe. The earring itself was laid gently into the velvet-lined lid of the violin case to prevent tangling of the many strings of tiny beads.

Xie took up the violin and tucked it beneath one arm, then claimed the bow and began to twist a metal knob at the base to tighten its strings.

“I hope you will allow me to indulge one of my favourite pastimes,” Xie said, and John found himself slowly closing the gap he’d created to escape the uncomfortable interaction with the flirtatious housewives. He took a few steps forward until he was stood behind the same oversized leather armchair into which he’d slovenly sunk on his previous visit; this time, he stood at his full height, lightly rested his hand on the chair’s curved back. His eyes closed longer than a blink as that syrupy deep voice went on, “I have recently composed something I find rather stirring and inspirational...” The blue-green eyes scanned the room, meeting gaze after gaze with a twinkling friendliness, and John could practically see each set of shoulders lowering in response, one after the next, releasing a slight sigh of previously unacknowledged tension. “If you are not too terribly bored by it, I will consider it a qualified success.”

Xie’s blood-red-painted mouth curved into little moue of self-effacing humour, and John felt his own shoulders making a subtle movement of their own—squaring, drawing his back up to elongate his spine in soldierly, solid posture. Immediately, he was self-conscious of this obvious preening, and gently cleared his throat, looking at the floor for a moment before shifting his gaze back toward Xie, who was still preparing to play.

The violin swung upward and settled beneath the chin, and John vaguely wondered if it might not destroy the carefully applied make-up. As the bow rose—a diagonal slash in the air—John took a few soft steps around the armchair, and then moved even nearer, to a tufted-leather ottoman large as a coffee table, and lowered himself onto its edge. He exchanged a quick half-grin with one of the gents from Hong Kong, and the room hushed in anticipation.

Xie shifted the angle of both violin and bow, hovering the bowhairs just above the strings of what even John—who knew nothing whatsoever on the subject—could see was probably a very expensive (and possibly rare, as it looked quite antique) violin. A gentle twist of the head, adjusting the jaw, and a deliberate inhalation. John felt himself leaning a bit closer, and turned his better ear slightly toward that end of the room.

Suddenly: “I promise it’s quite short.”

The room bubbled with laughter, a welcome release of anticipatory tension, and before the sound of it had died away, the bow lit down on the strings with a bright ring, then came a shimmer descending into a quick sigh, and again, a race upward—a gang of children skittering up a flight of steps, singing out a play-yard chant as they went.
John slid closer, the velvety corduroy fabric of his trousers easily swiping against the leather ottoman as he went. He watched Xie work fingertips against the neck of the instrument—pressing and releasing the strings as if tapping out a message in code—and fixated slightly on the cunning way Xie’s sleeves must be somehow attached to the long fingers, for they were visible only above the center knuckle. The fingernails were painted in a pearly-grey shade, with sparkling dots of red like drops of dark blood at the bottom edges. Despite these embellishments, there was something in the shape of those fingers—blunt-tipped, slightly unrefined—as thrillingly masculine as was the honey-dripping baritone voice, and they moved with exceeding grace as Xie played the increasingly stirring piece.

A bird’s gasp. A half-pause. Then river rapids letting go a triumphant shout, and another drawn-out pause that filled the room with a new kind of tension, like that just before a crowd erupted into cheers. Sudden, urgent, toy-soldier marching, and at last an absolute thrill as the notes shivered down, down, down, then leapt up. And up. And up. Then up up, up up UP.

Xie flourished the bow skyward and its tip traced a tight, quick spiral before diving down to rest at Xie’s side. The party let go fervent applause, almost too much for the few rooms of the salon and their relatively small company, and Xie made a tiny but gracious bow—head and neck tilting forward, eyes sweeping the floor—then quipped, “I told you it was short—there’s plenty of party left, never fear.” A quick burst of laughter as Xie returned violin and bow to their case, and slipped the waiting earring back where it belonged, then the once-again entirely hidden fingers swept its generous length forward to lie against the collarbone.

As Xie engaged in these small rituals, one of the other drashas rolled in a delicate wooden tea-cart. It was of a type John had not seen since the one in his gran’s house that sat in a corner of the parlour, groaning with hand-tatted lace doilies and mismatched cups and saucers and three tea pots, including a souvenir one from the Queen’s silver jubilee year. None of it was ever used in his presence, perhaps not in his lifetime, and it seemed to exist only to give his gran something to dust. As the drasha, dressed in a pale-blue gown that trailed behind for miles, began to fuss with the pots and the leaves and the milk pitcher, John vaguely wondered what had become of his gran’s things, and wished he’d been smart enough as a younger man to have packed at least a saucer into a box and saved it someplace. Where that would be, he hadn’t a clue, but surely something could have been arranged.

John was startled out of his reverie when the drasha by the cart asked in a lilting female—or at least, feminine—voice whether John cared for tea. Before he had even answered, Xie drifted across the floor between them and said, “Captain Watson, if you’ve a few empty minutes, I’d appreciate the opportunity to fill them.”

“Please.” He relaxed his face into what he knew was one of his most disarming grins. “Call me John.”

Xie demurred with an echoing smile and a low sweep of the draped sleeves toward an alcove lined on three sides with richly-upholstered banquette-style sofas; small round tables stood in the center. Another pair of hands appeared to receive John’s now nearly-empty glass of fizzy water before he’d fully formed the idea to rid himself of it, and he crossed to the alcove, followed closely by Xie. He cleared his throat. “After you,” he offered, gesturing that Xie should sit.

“I insist; you’re my guest.”

“But you’re…” John didn’t finish the thought, only nodded something like appreciation and seated himself on the banquette, rearranging a few of the embroidered pillows to make way.

Xie floated down to settle just around the corner, on the sofa’s short side. The drasha who’d brought
the tea cart set a tray between them on the little round table: a pot already steaming, two wide-mouhooded, gold glass cups on matching saucers; teaspoons; sugar cubes; a pot of cream; and a plate of thumbnail-sized *petits fours* richly decorated with real flowers and dustings of gold leaf.

“I’m so glad you accepted my invitation,” Xie said.

John felt his back straighten and he cleared his throat. “Not nearly as glad as I was that you accepted my apology. I was...” he let go a quick sigh. “It—“

Xie fixed raindrop-shaped eyes on him and narrowed them beneath silvery-grey false lashes a mile long. “*Shh.* All is forgiven. On to more pleasant topics.” Beneath the hem of the sleeves, Xie’s hands lifted the lid of a small ceramic dish and drew out two dull, yellowish-brown pellets about the size of the toy car John had sent; each was nestled into the bottom of one of the glass tea cups. “How is the new accommodation? My guess is that the bed is better than at that hotel you were in, at the very least.”

John was so fixated on watching the graceful swirling gestures above the tea tray he answered before his brain caught up. “It is, much better.” Xie lifted the lid of the tea pot and seemed to approve of the way the steam rushed up off the surface of the recently boiled water. “But. How did you—?” John hadn’t said he was at a hotel, when first they’d met. Or at least, not that he could remember.

Xie’s grin turned playfully sly. “I told you before, it’s not a trick.”

“You’re, what, psychic?” John asked, not too much of a scoff in it, just in case Xie did in fact claim to be clairvoyant. Given Xie gave every appearance of being a creature from another world, it would certainly fit.

“Not at all. Just observant.” Xie shook the sleeves back just enough to once again bare the blunt, bejeweled fingertips, and John held his breath. “Here, watch,” Xie said silkily, and John followed the blue-eyed gaze toward the bundles in the cups, which he knew must be tea, but which looked rather more exotic than he was accustomed to. He hoped fervently it wasn’t matcha; he couldn’t stand the stuff. Xie’s naked fingertips took up the teapot and poured a thin, steady stream of water into the cup nearest John. The water briefly clouded and shimmered remarkably, as if full of opal dust, then clarified. The dull-looking pellet sunk into it began to swell as Xie poured water in the second cup and returned the pot to its place. The painted fingers lifted John’s cup and saucer and placed them directly in front of him at the edge of the table.

The mucky bundle of who-knew-what was unfurling, blossoming, and within a few more seconds, there was a fully-bloomed flower in the bottom of John’s cup, with concentric rows of spiky, chrysanthemum-like petals the beige-pink shade of a rose slightly past its prime, and brown-green leaves beneath. John’s grin was wide and showed his teeth.

“That’s lovely,” he said, with real delight in his voice.

“Things are not always what they seem at first glance,” Xie replied knowingly, almost teasingly.

“No, that’s true,” John agreed. He looked down into the cup again, studied the mathematical arrangement of petals, tight and tiny near the center, longer and with more room to breathe as they expanded outward. “It was a very pretty piece you played, there,” he said then, and traced the rim of the saucer with one thumb, just keeping busy. He looked up at Xie again. “What do you call it?”

“It hasn’t got a name, actually,” Xie offered. “Perhaps you can suggest one.”

John thought for a few seconds, then shrugged a bit and said, “*Blood from a Stone.*”
Xie’s eyebrows crept up, accompanied by an inquisitive head-tilt. “What made you think of that, I wonder.” The tone was definitely teasing now.

“It’s what you’re wearing,” John said, cleared his throat, “I mean, that’s what I, uh, observe.” He tipped his chin at the gown in shades of grey; the blood-red beads; the pale skin of the face. “River stones? So smooth they’re almost metallic. Shiny. They look wet even after they’re dry.” He could clearly see them in his mind’s eye. “And then all this violent red, sort of—” He had a crisis of confidence, but the words were already on their way out so he let them go. “...oozing.”

He cleared his throat again.

“Exactly the effect I was going for. Well deduced.”

John shook his head, it’s nothing, ventured to take up the loop of the cup in curled fingers.

“You’ll want sugar,” Xie said, and reached for the tiny tongs to grasp a sugar cube on John’s behalf. “Probably two. It’s bitter.”

“Not what it seems at first glance, then,” John said, finding his footing again. He held out his cup to receive two lumps of sugar, watched them begin to dissolve in the hot tea, one on each side of the hovering flower.

Cup-rim settled gently between slightly parted, black-red lips, Xie sipped.

“No sugar for you, though?” John ventured.

“I’ve grown accustomed to the bitterness.”

John hummed, sipped at his own tea. It tasted vaguely of perfumey white flowers, and dry earth, and a crisp edge of orange, but not of the peel, or of the pulp—more like the pith. Despite two lumps of sugar, it was, indeed, rather bitter.

“So, really, though. How did you know I was staying at a hotel?” John asked. “And that now, I’m not.”

“The same way I know those three couples aren’t merely friends, but have a complex, multilayered romantic relationship they’ve shared for years, but only on twice-yearly weeklong holidays.”

John squinted at the six—three men, three women, not all in opposite-sex pairings—as they raced each other and two drashas to slap down playing cards in some competitive game that set them all laughing and teasingly smacking each other’s wrists.

Xie went on. “And the same way I know that one of those vlast housewives is hoping you’ll ask to take her home this evening.”

John blurted, “What? Which one?”

Xie looked knowing, said nothing. John cleared his throat.

“No, nevermind. I don’t. I’m not interested, anyway.” He harrumphed again, his cheeks warming, and sipped the tea. “Especially not in some other man’s wife.”

Xie fixed a gaze on him that reminded John of the way his mother used to look at him when she was feeling his forehead for fever. “Your neck was stiff when we met before; it’s better now.”

“It was, a bit,” John allowed.
“You were in a substandard bed; the pillows were too soft. The shadows under your eyes, though. . .”

John shrugged a bit. “Probably perpetual. I don’t sleep well. Never have.”

“Never?” Xie prompted, and the sleeve slipped down to expose the fingertips again as the cup moved toward waiting lips.

“Not for a very long time.” John didn’t say more, and they were quiet a moment.

“I liked the little car, by the way,” Xie said then, and except for the fact of being the famous drashaskaya, sat there beside John because ten people (now being wholly ignored in favour of a freeloader) paid to make it so, the glimmer and shift of the gold-and-turquoise gaze might have seemed like flirtation.

“I’m glad. I had loads of those when I was a kid. Who knew they’d be collectible one day?” He set down his cup in its saucer, turned it by the handle. “Should’ve saved them; could have made some money.”

“I had them, too,” Xie said, as if the velvet baritone voice were not enough of a reminder that things were not always what they appeared to be at first glance. “My favourite was one of those long American sedans from the ‘50s, with tailfins. It was pale blue, with chrome. It sparkled.”

Like your eyes, John kept himself from saying. “If I see one, I’ll be sure to pick it up for you.”

“And I liked the card, too,” Xie said, and the cup clicked back down on its saucer. “I’m quite partial to ukiyo-e, all those ancient paintings of the Floating World. I know they’ve become so ubiquitous as to be a cliché, but I like them.”

John smiled. “I do, too.”

“Isn’t that a fitting phrase?” Xie mused quietly, and the gaze wandered around the perimeter of the alcove, out into the salon. “Of course the pleasure districts were designed to emulate it, but there’s some poetry in the phrase, don’t you think? When it’s applied to this strange idea, this place out of time, where the only work is to provide service and delight to others. It’s an otherworld.”

Xie’s eyes met John’s again, and Xie’s head tipped quizzically, inviting him to agree.

“It is; it’s like walking in and out of a dream.”

“Of course, the usual lines are still drawn—we’re all ‘shlost class workers here, entertaining vlast holidaymakers—but the kind of work we do. . .singers and actors, sex workers, card dealers and curiosity-shop-keepers and boxers. . .and us drashas, of course—“ John took note of the fact sex workers were carefully differentiated from drashas. “It makes me feel as if we are all of some other class, outside of the usual; not higher, but perhaps parallel.” Xie’s fingertips skated in slow-motion around the rim of the teacup. The voice was pensive, almost dreamy. “I’m as near as passes for a celebrity—”

“I’d say you’re an actual celebrity,” John put in.

Xie hummed, went on. “I’m nearly as wealthy as any vlast oligarch owing to the generous upper limit on my allotment, and overage rights.” It was said matter-of-factly, no trace of bragging. “I live in a spacious flat full of expensive, beautiful things most ‘shlost folk couldn’t dream of owning. Nominally, I’m ‘shlost; that’s what’s printed on my Identity Card. But I recognize I don’t live the same way—or work nearly as hard—as most ‘shlost class people do.” Xie’s voice went even quieter,
and John had to lean in to hear. “Even the vlast don’t look down on me as part of the working world, but up at me, on this plinth they’ve raised me onto. Xie.” The eyes rolled skyward as if referring to some vague notion, unrelated to the being who’d poured John’s tea. “Drashaskaya. Esteemed for beauty and gracious manners, with this salon written about in magazine articles full of shiny photographs. . .” Xie let go a rueful little laugh. “It’s quite bizarre, when you take time to think about it.”

John wasn’t sure whether to agree; Xie’s naked honesty in that moment astonished him into speechlessness, even if he had been sure which reply was wanted.

“Anyway,” Xie said, back to a slightly louder, but still hushed tone of voice. “The word ‘floating’ seems particularly apt, as regards my place in the world. And so I’m always drawn to representations of the Floating World, like the one on the card you sent. I put it away in my desk for safe keeping.”

John smiled and drained just enough of his tea to leave the flower adrift within the cup. “There are dirty ones, too,” he ventured, smiling crookedly. “Downright pornographic old woodcuts depicting truly shocking behaviour.”

“Ah, now,” Xie said smoothly. “Let’s save some discussion for a future rendezvous.”

Definitely flirting, then. John shifted in his seat, leaned closer, with his elbow on the tabletop.

Xie grinned around the rim of the cup, sipped again, then set it aside. “Thank you for sitting with me,” Xie said quietly. “Would you mind if we rejoined the party?”

John held up his hands, surrendering. “Of course, of course. I’m. . .” He wasn’t sure. “It was my honour. My pleasure. To—ah—sit.”

“Yes, well naturally it would be.” There was something genuinely playful in the tone; John desperately wanted to believe Xie’s flirtation was not merely part of the package bought and paid for by the couples from Hong Kong and the bored housewives. Xie drifted gracefully up from the banquette, and the mere fact of standing brought the attention of all present, wholly and immediately. “Friends, I wonder if you’d indulge me in some storytelling so I can get to know you all a bit better.”

Xie virtually floated across the floor, to settle prettily on the edge of one of the oversoft sofas, between one of the housewives and a man from Hong Kong whose shirt was by now open at the neck, the knot of his necktie pulled loose. “I feel certain you’ve each got an interesting story to tell. Mariana, I understand you were born in South America? Did you live there long?”

One of the housewives seemed taken by pleasant surprise that Xie knew her name and this tidbit of her personal history. She swept long, glossy chestnut hair over one shoulder and nodded so vigorously it fell to the front again immediately; she left it. “That’s right,” she answered, addressing Xie though everyone present was attentive. “My mother is Colombian; my father worked for UK Petro back then, when they met and married. Oh! But if I say how old I was when we came to England, I’ll give my age away!” She screamed a laugh and her girlfriends followed right along with her.

“I wouldn’t dream of asking you to do that,” Xie assured her.

“Let’s just say I do remember living in Colombia, but by the time I was ready for school, we’d already come here.”

John interjected. “So. . .is that why you were so interested earlier, when I said I’d been in the Americas?”
The woman, Mariana (possibly the one who was interested; she’d certainly acted that way earlier, with her hand on his arm and her fussy, exaggerated expressions), nodded and turned to him. “A bit, I suppose. I remember it—but I don’t—you know? England’s home. But my mum. She cries when she thinks of how it must be now. Were you...you weren’t in Colombia?”

“No.” John shook his head. “Nowhere near. I don’t even...” How he kept getting drawn back to this topic, he couldn’t fathom. “Maybe it’s better there,” he offered limply. Mariana gave a small smile that got nowhere near her eyes.

“Maybe so. Let’s hope,” she replied.

Xie patted Mariana’s knee, twice, reassuringly, then said smoothly, “How about you, Guy?” addressing the man with the loose tie. “What do you reward yourself with when you’ve gotten through an unpleasant task?”

Guy’s face pinched as if he was thinking hard. His partner, a man graying at the temples and with deep smile lines beside his mouth, softly backhanded Guy’s shoulder and piped up, “Bubble tea! Honeydew!” This drew light laughter from the assembled company, and John marveled at how smoothly Xie was able to direct conversation to keep the party both pleasant and engaging.

“It’s true,” Guy admitted, throwing up one hand and waving them all off. “There’s a shop two blocks from our flat, and it never fails I am the only man in the place. Which is so stupid—bubble tea is great!”

Another smattering of laughter, then, and another of the housewives put in, “It really is! No shame in that, Guy—don’t let them tease you. It’s a treat; you’ve earned it.”

“I wonder, John,” Xie said then, and the sound of his name in that mouth was like pouring warm honey in his ears. “Have you ever said to yourself, How did I end up here?”

John frowned a bit, cleared his throat, slid off the banquette to stand nearer the rest of the group. “Well, actually.” He squeezed one hand with the other, warming up to the tale. “If no one minds.” He looked inquiringly from face to face and was met with smiles.

“Go on, then,” one of the other Hong Kong fellows encouraged. John noted that the man’s hand was on the knee of a woman not his wife, so perhaps Xie had been right after all, about the complexity of the holidaymakers’ situation.

“I was just out of university, soon to join up with the army for my physician’s training. Me and some mates took a bit of a mini-break—us with no money and not much ambition and less than no sense,” he began. “Best we could do was just head out to the exurbs, thought about camping out, packed something like four loaves of bread, a summer sausage, and more whiskey and beer than three men should drink in a lifetime.”

“Like you do at that age,” one of the men put in.

“Right, exactly.” John gestured toward him; they understood each other. “So we ramble our way out there, pass through a little village, not even a village, really, just caravans around a well, some goats running about. That sort of thing. Come out the other side, go about half a mile into the woods, decide we’ll camp. Afternoon turns to evening, and we hadn’t thought much about how cold it would get—we weren’t exactly at the seaside, but no one told the wind that.”

John pulled a nearby footstool with the crook of his ankle and sank down onto it, elbows on his
knees as he leaned in to continue the story.

“So we’re drunk—just _shivering_—teeth chattering, the whole bit, and we’ve got this piddling little fire going but we’re feeding it leaves and tiny twigs and it’s not going to last much longer. Suddenly my mate Charlie says he thinks he can see a bonfire off back toward the village, and maybe if we bring what’s left of the beer, we can make a friend long enough to get warm.”

“Was it summer?” Mariana asked.

“Yeah, but early. Still quite cold at night. I can’t stress enough how bloody cold we were.” John noted that Xie was smiling lightly, watching attentively with eyes slightly narrowed as if trying to identify which genus and species John belonged to. “So, sure, why not, we gather up whatever we’ve got—barely anything—and Charlie pisses on the fire to put it out, and off we tramp through the dark toward this bonfire. Come to the edge of the village and there’s a huge party going on. Clearly everyone’s turned up, the women are done up in their best, there’s kids running wild everywhere, a fiddler and a bloke with a guitar, and people are dancing—turns out, it’s a wedding! So there’s food and everyone’s festive, and they take us right in, like we’re long lost cousins, and shove these _coffee cans_ into our hands. Literally coffee cans, full of the most vile rotgut whiskey ever to have probably been brewed in a caravan’s lav.”

All eyes were on him, and John was relishing the telling of the tale.

“So of course you drank it,” one of the housewives said.

“Of course we did!” John said quickly, with a grin. “Of course we did. What did we care? So we spent the night drinking and dancing at this exurban wedding, had some food—kept on drinking!—and eventually, of course, the bride has brothers who seem like they’re sizing us up, you know—“ He raised his chin, looked down his nose. “Like they could start something. So I’m keeping my eyes on them, but by then I’m really barely standing, so even if they make a move, I’m useless.”

“So did they?” one of the Hong Kongers asked. “Make a move?”

“Well, so this one has a shaved head, and I can’t take my eyes off it. Shiny, round as a billiard ball, just beautiful. So I go up to him and say, _Hey, I’ve been thinking about shaving my head like yours, who’s your barber?_ And suddenly I hear this click and see a flash kind of out of the corner of my eye.” John made a quick motion in front of his chest, thumb flicking out and up against his curled forefinger. “The guy’s got a switchblade! And he says, _I’m the barber._”

“Uh-oh!” one of the men joked.

“Exactly. So then he throws his arm around my shoulder, and he’s hard as bloody steel, this guy! Arms like tree trunks, the whole bit. So then he says, _I can do yours if you like, right now, free of charge._ And I’m looking at my mates for help but they’re trying to get off with women, completely ignoring the fact this drunken exurb giant is planning to shave my head—in the dark—with a switchblade knife.” John threw up his hands as if he’d given up on his friends. “So I just take another swig from my coffee can of rotgut, and I say, _Yeah why not._”

“No!” one of the housewives shrieked, and finished in a disbelieving laugh.

“What else would I have done? But clearly my man didn’t feel the late hour or the fact he’d been packing it away all day was enough of a challenge, because suddenly he lets go of my shoulder, reaches into his pocket and before I even realize it, he’s pressed a little paper square into my mouth with his thumb, then one in his own gob.”
“What, LSD?” one of the women asked incredulously.

“I can only assume,” John said. “I spit it out as soon as his back was turned—too late, by the way—but he certainly did no such thing. So he drags me to his caravan—well, I assume he lived there, maybe not—and sits me on a stool by the little sink, and goes to work shaving my head.” John sat upright and shrugged deeply. He fixed his eyes on Xie, still wearing the same slightly interested expression beneath the illusion of a face made of smooth stone. “So, when you ask if there was ever I time I asked myself How did I end up here? . . . that was definitely the one.”

The corner of Xie’s mouth quirked up. “The only one?”

The party broke out in laughter and John mugged, looking knowing, like a man who might have many such stories.

“But did it turn out all right?” one of the men asked. “Both of you on acid—lucky he didn’t slit your throat!”

John grinned, “Perfectly well done, but it turns out I have a just bloody awful head.”

There was another burst of laughter, and the drashas began to gather up glasses and little plates of half-eaten fairy cakes and saucers with cups of tea—just regular tea, John noticed—long gone cold. The party was breaking up. John rubbed the flats of his right hand up and down along his jaw. “It’s funny about the drugs, though. That part seems like it should be the wild bit of the story but I’ve always thought it must have been more fun doing stuff like that Before. When it was still illegal.”

Xie’s maddeningly invisible hands smoothed the front of the granite-grey gown. “How do you suppose?”

John gave another shrug. “Everything’s a bit more exciting when it’s illicit, don’t you think?” He winked, stagily, in a way that could have been meant for anyone, or for everyone, but still he felt a bit unsteady having ventured it.

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” Xie retorted, not testily, but in a tone that indicated that path of discussion was closed.

John wanted to kick his own arse. He was not usually so clumsy with his flirtation. But then, he’d never before flirted with a wealthy alien celebrity, and to his dismay, he was beginning to realise he didn’t know the rules—though it was clear the usual ones did not apply.

One of the girls-night-out vlast housewives—who up to that point hadn’t spoken to him and had barely even looked at him—stopped on her way across the room, behind the footstool on which John sat. Laying one hand on his shoulder, she leaned down and whispered in his other ear, “I’m with you on that—it’s fun to break rules.”

Xie met his gaze with something like triumph lighting up the icy turquoise eyes.

“How did I end up here?” the woman asked him then, and John got to his feet, harrumphing around an itch in his throat. Before he had a chance to reply, the lift door suddenly slid open and a man strode off it, every thread and button and shoelace on him screaming that he had curr to burn. He was not tall, and had an enormous forehead rising above beady dark eyes. With a nearly offensive air of ownership, he crossed to where Xie stood and slithered his arm down the back of the gown, then around Xie’s waist.

“Sorry to interrupt the party,” he announced, too loudly, in a voice like a playground bully’s sing-song taunt, “Lovely ladies…” he tipped his head. “Gorgeous gents.” John took a half-step forward,
lifted his chest. "Must be about time to scurry on home, anyway, I reckon." He turned his face to Xie’s then, though he had to look up a bit. "Aren’t you going to introduce me?" There was a demand in it.

"Friends, I’d like you to meet—"

"Jim Moriarty," he interrupted. "Administrator of the Icehouse—hope you’re enjoying it, by the way. Stop by downstairs at the casino on your way out, why don’t you? Tell them drinks are on me; they won’t believe you."

He grinned at his own joke, so stilted in its delivery that the air in the room shifted toward general discomfort and the guests all sped up their leavetaking behaviours.

"She’s been entertaining, I expect. Had a good time, did you?" He slanted his beady eyes at John. After another quick clearing of his throat, John nodded, tightly, just once. He tried to catch Xie’s gaze but the mystic eyes were trained on the floor. "Gratuities welcome!" the administrator practically shouted, then barked a quick laugh even though it sounded much more like a threat than a joke. The drashas ushered the guests to the lift with gestures and forced smiles, waiting with them for it to return from lower floors. Whatever convivial spirit there’d been after John’s tale of adventure in the exurbs, this strange bloke in his overpriced silk necktie had quickly squeezed it out of the air.

"You must’ve done something nice to be back here so soon," Jim intoned, eyes pinning John to the spot. "You’re one of those soldiers from the other night."

John realized immediately that as the Icehouse’s administrator he’d have had access to all the information on John’s Identity Card—including his photo—when he’d swiped into the building. Not to mention whatever security camera footage there must be. But given the huge number of people that must swipe in every night, it was unsettling that he’d have zeroed in on John at all. Considering the half-joke about gratuities, maybe there was some kind of flag on John’s IC, or some report had been generated; he’d swiped in, but having been invited as Xie’s guest, he hadn’t paid anything for his evening in the salon. As for John having “done something nice”... he wasn’t going to mention Xie’s invitation; for all he knew it wasn’t the done thing for someone to come into the Icehouse without curr draining out of his account, and John certainly didn’t want to get Xie in trouble with the boss.

John’s only reply to Jim was a questioning look.

"Soldier," Jim repeated, and flexed his shoulders, shrugging or menacing, John wasn’t sure. "Just got a big payout, I imagine? Hefty bonus at the end of a mission? I hear you gents get your limits raised —" He held his downturned palm above the height of his shoulder. "—way up." He whistled. Xie’s eyes were on the move, scanning the floor, but didn’t rise. "And she doesn’t come cheap! There’s people can’t save enough in a lifetime to be in here once. Yet here you are. Captain Watson. Again."

His mouth rumpled into a weird little smile.

Something about the way he kept saying she bothered John. It could be he just couldn’t get his obviously-Irish tongue around the pronunciation. But John suspected not.

"What can I say," John offered. "I’m... very lucky." He looked around the salon, gaze passing quickly over rich wallpaper, drapes, furnishings, the toe of Xie’s slipper just visible beyond the hem of the gown. He stared a moment, caught himself, met Jim’s eye again. "And, yes, I do have a bit extra burning a hole in my pocket; did a humanitarian mission in the Americas. I’m a doctor."

"Just what they need over there, I’m sure," Jim replied, the tone blatantly scoffing. Xie’s hands were clasped together, and obviously wringing, beneath the silver-grey bell sleeves. "A veterinarian’s
probably more appropriate. They’re a bit—“ his hand curled into a claw, and his teeth showed. “—feral. Aren’t they?”

“I should—” John said quickly, and motioned toward the lift. “Bit late, and the party’s over.”

“Indeed. Hope you’ll come visit us again,” Jim said, and did not stand aside to let John pass. “Well don’t be rude, Shee-uh, walk your guest out.”

So both things were true: he couldn’t say Xie’s name properly, and he had been saying she all along. For some reason he couldn’t even discern, John’s teeth ground together.

Xie took John’s elbow and glided along beside him toward the lift. Jim crossed to the far wall, to the bar, and began to clink ice into a glass, decanted thick brown liquour over it. Xie’s head tilted. A near-whisper. “I never got to ask you about the sky, or the stars.”

John’s voice was equally low. “Next time.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” They’d reached the lift and Xie’s fingertip extended just enough to press the call button.

“Can I—?” John had reached the moment when he would normally ask for a telephone number, but it seemed like too big a leap—Xie wasn’t his date—and he wasn’t sure how he would finish the sentence he’d begun. Luckily, Xie saved him from himself.

“When you call, ask for Molly Hooper. She keeps my schedule. You’re welcome anytime.”

“Good.” John grinned. “Good.” The lift opened and John stepped in.

With a slight bow of the head and a smile softening the harsh red of the lips, Xie said, “Good night, then. John.”

“Good night.”

Once the doors had slid closed, Sherlock breathed deeply before turning around.

Jim, sprawled in the leather armchair with one ankle on the opposite knee, jacket unbuttoned, swirling his glass, sang out, “Someone’s got a crush!”

“Of course not.”

“The way he looks at you.” Jim shook his head. “Like a puppy in a shop window. Back when there were puppies in shops instead of running in packs out in the exurbs. Anyway, it’s something you can definitely use to your advantage.”

Careful to keep the tone low and even, as the phrase itself could sound insubordinate, Sherlock asked, “Why would I?”

“Come over here.”

Sherlock instantly obeyed, stepping quickly across the room, stopping a few feet from Jim’s chair.

“Of course you would. Because what are you here for?”

“To take care of you.” Sherlock gathered the skirt, the train, shifted and swirled them and made space, then kneeled. Then crawled.
“And. . .?” When Sherlock was in reach, Jim’s hand darted out to clutch the back of the neck, and his hand moved, almost like stroking but not nearly so kind. He pulled and Sherlock—still wearing the illusion of Xie smooth as a stone, spattered with beaded-up, barely oxygenated blood—crept closer, and reached with hidden hands to persuade Jim to uncross his legs.

“To make money,” Sherlock murmured.

“Very good! Not as stupid as I thought. At least, not at the moment.” He thrust his pelvis forward in the chair, let his head settle back, watched as the draped sleeves spiraled in a wash across the front of his trousers, unseen fingers making quick work of unfastening them, freeing him from them. “Be quick,” Jim barked. “I’ve got things to do.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

In chapter 4, John attended Xie’s salon where Xie played violin and reminded John that things aren’t always what they seem at first glance. Later, John shared another story from his past, and Jim suggested Xie could use John’s obvious attraction to good advantage.

He’d phoned requesting a private party, telling himself that it was merely a new angle on the place; of course it was actually out of curiosity about the Mentor’s assertion that even at the Icehouse, the drashas were for rent by the hour. John had been booked in with one called Flor, knew nothing but the name. He’d arrived early enough to play an hour’s worth of blackjack and come out nearly even, which suited him fine. Money gambled and lost was wasted and he could never enjoy the game knowing that he’d thrown away even five or ten when he had that number in his head that meant he could stop working. One of the pit bosses was in the files; John had kept the corner of his eye on her as he played—watched her move from table to table, looking over the dealers’ shoulders, greeting the high rollers and calling for drinks on the house—but nothing she did was overtly suspicious, and she never even made it as far as John’s table for him to properly size her up.

The salon was far smaller than Xie’s, and on a lower floor, but the décor was nice in a sleek, Scandinavian style nothing like the lush, cluttered-boudoir look of Xie’s salon, and the view out the window was pleasant (if one liked blinking lights). And of course, the whiskey was still very, very good. Just the one, though, John had decided, and so he hadn’t even sipped it yet, only swirled it in the glass, took a good whiff (tobacco, stewed plums, black pepper) and let it warm in his hand. He’d dressed carefully, in dark, flat-front trousers; dark red pullover; two-button, unfussy jacket. His shoes had seen better days, but they’d been quite posh in their time, the best he’d ever owned (though their current state of disrepair was another symptom of his inclination to hold onto every penny). He was stood by a screen embedded in the wall, scrolling music choices and fiddling with the sound system, but couldn’t find anything that pleased him and let it lapse back to silence. There was a soft, quick triple-knock at the door that implied a response was unnecessary, and sure enough before John could speak up in answer, the door slid aside.

He turned to see what there was to see of his companion, the mysterious Flor, but the creature who glided in was not Flor at all—it was unmistakably Xie. John bit a smile and gripped his glass a bit tighter in his fist.

“I felt we hadn’t properly finished our conversation,” Xie said airily, fast-flowing dark honey in the voice. The door slid shut and Xie crossed to the ornate wood-and-glass cabinet that held the night’s selection of liquors and a glittering array of cut-crystal glasses that rang when touched and splintered all reflected light into a riot of diamond-dust. “Are you comfortable? Shall I freshen your drink?”

John’s heart began to thump hard and he felt unaccountably giddy. Xie’s gown hung in a great, soft A-line swirl from a soft sash tied high above the natural waist, and featured another pair of impossibly long sleeves. It was mostly silvery-white, darkening to ash-grey near the hem, as if the whole thing was washed with watercolours. A close-fitting, deep red jacket with shorter sleeves left only a narrow strip of skin exposed in the center, elongating the throat. The silky, red sash was looped in an effortless bow at the center chest and the tails drifted down nearly to the floor.
“Thanks, no,” John managed. “I’m going to take my time with this one. But you should. . .can I pour you one?”

“I’m taking the evening off,” came the reply. Xie’s face was painted in dark, upswept angles, with invitingly glossy red lips and eyelashes of black lace. An impossibly tall wig—black, blended with streaks of red and white—cascaded like a waterfall in front of Xie’s left shoulder, and was adorned with ostentatious roses, each bearing a sparkling gem in its heart.

John took a step closer to Xie, who stood across the room by the bar with hands clasped beneath the trailing sleeves, taller than ever, if that were possible. Barely aloud, John breathed, “. . . beautiful . . .”

Xie’s face tipped down and the gold-and-turquoise eyes lowered demurely in response to the compliment. After a half-moment’s silence, one arm swept toward the sofa, which was soft and impossibly wide, covered with puffed-up pillows all in shades of brown and gold, embroidered with metallic threads in abstract patterns. “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

John knew that as a drasha Xie was meant to host the parties but it still felt a bit backward—ungentlemanly—that he shouldn’t be the one offering a seat, or pouring a drink, or asking if Xie needed anything. He did move to sit, rearranging throw pillows behind his back lest the sofa swallow him completely. Xie settled elegantly beside him, straight-backed, not too near, body angled slightly toward John’s, hands together in the lap. John stared at the notch between the collarbones, and lower, where the skin was bare of make-up but for a layer of subtle shimmer that caught the light as Xie moved.

“Shall I dim the lights? It makes it easier to enjoy the view.”

“No,” John answered quickly. “No, it’s fine.” He looked into his glass, then back at Xie’s pale, welcoming eyes. “I’ve seen my fill of London. I’d rather just look at you. If that’s all right.”

“Captain Watson,” Xie said, mock-scolding, with a sideways tilt of the chin.

Something occurred to John then and he frowned. “What about the one I was meant to, ah, meet tonight?”

“A paid night off for Flor. How lucky,” Xie said breezily, mouth quirking up at the corner with mischief. “When I learned you’d be here, I couldn’t fight an urge to corner you so that you might tell me more about a night sky with actual stars in it.”

John drew up one leg, hooking his ankle behind the opposite calf so that his body was angled more toward Xie. “Have you really never been outside Britain?” he asked, remembering the game they’d played that night he’d so horribly mucked up with his crass attempt to buy sex from Xie. John pushed away the memory of how the evening ended; he still burned hot with embarrassment at how stupid and uncouth he’d been.

“I’ve rarely even left London,” Xie replied. “My work leaves me little leisure time of my own, and when I travel it’s only to other pleasure districts which are as brightly-lit as this one. The skies everywhere are hazy purple with only a few stars.” A gentle shrug of the shoulders. “Venus. Not even a star.”

John hummed. “I’ll spare you too much detail about America, but I really was quite taken with the night sky there. Where I was—there’s an army base rigged up with electric and all—but an hour’s hike in any direction beyond it and there wasn’t an electric light to be found. I stole more than one evening lying on my back looking up at that enormous black sky. It would make you dizzy, all the stars.” John didn’t mention that he’d lay there on the ground clutching his pistol in his hand and alert
to every gust of wind or snap of a twig.

““It sounds beautiful. Do you know the constellations?”

“Not really. Big and little dipper. The fella with the belt?”

“Orion.”

“Right. Even those were hard to pick out; none of the books on astronomy mention that there are hundreds of stars in between the ones you’re looking for, when the sky’s dark enough to see them all.” John’s gaze drifted to the window, a quarter-view of Xie’s reflection. “One night there were meteor showers. White lights just streaking across the sky, dozens of them, one every second, every two seconds. . . .It was stunning.”

“Made you forget where you were,” Xie prompted. “You said in your note?”

“That’s shameful, what They—“ John caught himself. Just because it felt private, didn’t mean it was. “What’s going on there. It’s a war zone; it’s like the third world used to be, when I was a kid. Starving people, disease of every kind, people dying for lack of clean water to drink. The smell.”

“I’m sorry you had to see it,” Xie said softly, and one arm slid forward, then down, the hidden hand landing on the seat cushion between them, but no closer. “You call it a war zone,” Xie said then. “But Unity is peace; there’s no war there. Or anywhere.”

John snorted a half-laugh, took a mouthful of the whiskey and rolled it over his tongue, grimaced at the low burn before he swallowed. “Just a figure of speech,” he said tightly. Eager for a change of topic, he glanced down at the puddle of silken fabric between them on the sofa, knowing beneath its folds lay Xie’s fingertips, which he’d so closely watched moving over the violin strings as Xie played. John decided-without-deciding to be bold. “Why do you keep your hands covered?” he asked, curious but undemanding. “Is it traditional for the, uh, costumes? This is Chinese, right?” He gestured with his glass, then sipped and set it aside.

“Based upon Chinese hanfu, yes; aren’t you observant.” Xie smiled softly. “Korean hanbok, as well; I like to fuse the best bits of different things. And no, it’s not always traditional to cover one’s hands. It’s only that I find they tend to ruin the illusion.”

John’s eyebrows went up.

“I am not blessed with delicate hands,” Xie clarified, and smiled, almost bashfully. “Graceful movements can be mastered, and lovely lines can be created beneath a drape of silk shantung.” Xie’s hand lifted off the sofa cushion then, and floated elegantly in the air between them, the suggestion of a curved wrist coming visible, and then there came a quick unfurling of fingers that made a pretty rippling motion beneath the drifts of sleeve. “But nothing can be done to make an inelegant, square hand look like anything other than what it is.”

John shifted a bit, as if to get more comfortable, but took advantage of the movement to lessen the space between their two bodies.

“It’s part of the appeal, though—the juxtaposition of all this,” he gestured, indicating Xie’s elaborate wig and costume, “with, say, your voice. That’s quite masculine.”

“It’s artful.” Xie allowed. “I know my voice is pleasant, and to try to alter it would be. . . .” Xie’s mouth curled up playfully and the voice went comically higher, a bad imitation of a screechy old woman with a broad, uneducated accent, “. . . just a bi’ ridiculous, duncha agree?” John laughed, and rested his arm on the back of the sofa; he would need only to shift his wrist for his dangling hand to
come within reach of the fabric of Xie’s gown near the shoulder. Xie shrugged again, and both hands settled back together in a puddle of silver-grey silk. “It’s not the same with the hands. Instead of creating mysterious dissonance, they tend instead to make me look like just a man in a dress.”

“Are you not?” John asked, really worrying about how it might come across, but pressing on nonetheless. “A man? In a dress.”

Xie’s lips pursed and the face dipped down, looking away from John.

“I’m only. . .” John began, his voice gone quiet with hesitancy. “You’re stunning. It’s a living, breathing work of art you’ve created here—don’t get me wrong, I find this all quite beautiful.” He cleared his throat; his words were coming out too fast, getting louder as he went, and he drew a quick breath, huffed it out, settling himself. “But I look at these eyes of yours—all green and blue and gold, with that strange little freckle inside your iris. . .”

Xie looked up at him then, and those changeable eyes were as wide as John had ever seen them, fringed with lace, positively glittering.

John moved again, his knee now so near to brushing against Xie’s knee, close as he could get without touching, and he said, “I look at your lovely eyes, and I hear your delicious voice, and. . .” He tipped his head deeply, shifted his gaze down, away from Xie’s painted face. “I memorise the shape of your neck.” His mouth was dry but now his left-behind glass was well out of his reach. He licked his lips quickly, then his hands began to move, palms downturned, toward Xie’s well-covered forearms, where John estimated he might find wrists. “And there’s someone real underneath all this paint, and I want to know who it is.” He grasped then—gently—and found he’d guessed correctly, for the knobs of bone at the wrists were obvious beneath his fingers as he slipped them over the pooling fabric. Xie didn’t pull away, but stiffened slightly before acquiescing to John’s touch. John’s gaze drifted back up to Xie’s still-wide eyes, and he lifted one of Xie’s wrists, sensing the weight of the hand as it hung in an elegant arch beneath a curtain of grey silk.

Out of the corner of his eye, John could see the lump in Xie’s throat bob down and then up, riding a hard swallow. John’s free hand moved then, and he slipped his fingers beneath the edge of the sleeve, letting it ride up on the curve of his knuckles as he pressed forward, and up, drawing back the curtain of silver silk. The tips of his fingers brushed feather-light across the back of Xie’s hand, and Xie’s breath caught audibly at the almost-touch as John’s hand moved steadily forward to lift the drapery away.

Impossibly long fingers: narrow, interrupted by bulbous knots of knuckles, blunt-tipped—with glossy but unpainted fingernails trimmed short. John’s lips came apart around an almost silent gasp at the sight. The fingers dangled gracefully in curved arcs from what was, indeed, quite a large—and almost square—hand. The tendons that moved the fingers stood up high beneath the skin on the back of the hand, and there was a sporadic suggestion of hair’s-breadth, indigo veins. The sturdy wrist was slender by comparison, though not actually slender. John caught his bottom lip between his teeth momentarily, felt the sting of the bite, then his tongue flicked out once more to moisten his lips and he glanced up. Xie stared at their three hands hovering there together, taking quick breaths John could just hear slipping in and out between slightly-parted red lips.

In soft slow motion, John shifted Xie’s wrist in his hands, careful not to let the sleeve slip back down to spoil the view, and turned the hand palm-up. He cradled it in his own hand and let the tip of his middle finger trace the inner edge of the prominent cushion at the base of the long, pointed thumb. Xie seemed to want to pull the hand back but John closed his grip just slightly—not to trap, only to reassure. The tip of John’s middle finger began an exquisitely slow drag down the length of each finger, one after the next.
He looked hard at Xie’s painted face, and their gazes caught and held. “It’s a gorgeous big hand,” John murmured, and the sound of it was ragged even to his own ears. He glanced down long enough to place his fingertip at the base of Xie’s ring finger, starting to trace its length, watching how it twitched in response to the feathery touch. Xie’s breath jumped inward on a slight gasp. John looked up again, and decided to be unashamed as he whispered a plea.

“Tell me your name?”

He didn’t look down this time, found the base of the pinky and drifted his fingertip down along it until he reached the tip, then reversed course.

“Xie.” The rush of breath was like a sigh, it was beautiful, undoubtedly it was beautiful, and fitting—an exotic name for an exotic creature—but John longed for a hidden depth.

“No,” John said gently, not scolding, and his fingertip began to spiral around the wide palm of the hand cradled in his own, inward in the slowest of circles, with the lightest of touches; to his great pleasure, the fingertips curled and fluttered in involuntary response. “Your name,” John urged, and leaned in closer, their hands near his heart. And then, a whisper so low it was merely breath: “Please.”

Xie was silent for a heartbeat, two, gazing at John’s finger as it circled its labyrinthine path to the center of the palm, and then pressed, and then began to swirl outward toward the edges.

“I’m sorry,” Xie finally said. “I. . .can’t.”

John changed his grip then, smoothing the pad of his thumb across the palm in long, firm sweeps, massaging, watching how the fingers curled up and then relaxed as he manipulated the muscles.

“Is the other one as handsome as this?” John asked quietly, and a smile teased the corners of his lips. “I can’t imagine another hand so handsome.” Xie’s exhalation was an almost-laugh and the hand still at rest rose steadily upward, fingers curved elegantly and pointing toward the ceiling; a flick of the wrist and the sleeve slid down, and John exaggerated a long, low whistle. He reached for it, grasped it, arranged both of Xie’s hands palm-up cradled in his own much smaller, short-fingered hands. Both thumbs now stroked deeply across Xie’s wide, pale palms, smoothing and massaging, passively working the fingers as if there were puppet strings attached.

John looked up to meet Xie’s gaze, which held something like shyness in the blue-green, upward-tilted eyes. John felt his tongue dip out and then in, and he pressed his lips together, then let them part. “They’re perfect hands,” he said quietly. “They’re positively gorgeous.”

Xie’s mouth quirked at the compliment, rumpling in an uncharacteristically messy way that could only have been a break of character. John’s gut flipped.

“May I have them back?” Xie said, low and quiet, but light.

“Mm. Later,” John said dismissively, and went on applying deep pressure with his thumbs. “They’re quite soft,” he added.

“Yes, well,” Xie began, and this time moved to decisively pull them from John’s grip. “They’ve never done an honest day’s work.”

“But don’t cover them,” John said then, a bit more plaintively than he would have liked, and, as the moment was clearly passing away, he shifted back a bit, putting more space between their bodies.

“As you like. But it’s like putting a cheap frame on a priceless painting.”
“This is my party, though; consider it my special request.”

Xie demurred, and John took a generous sip from his glass to wet his dry mouth. He had more questions. “So, tell me, Xie, the famous drasha, known the world ‘round—"

“Do they know me in America?”

John’s mouth hung open a moment. He wondered if Xie might be joking, but couldn’t be sure. “You know where I saw a lot of you? Russia,” he said quickly, diverting, but not lying. “There were flyers in every train station, posters in the St Petersburg pleasure district—a really lovely picture, all in red and black.”

Xie looked pleased, but didn’t press John further on the issue. Instead: “What’s Russia like?”

“Cold,” John grinned. “It was January. One thing I noticed: the women aren’t particular natural beauties like Scandinavians, or chicly turned out like Frenchwomen, but they put in a lot of effort to look good—even for no occasion.” He shrugged and looked into his glass, which was nearly empty; he considered having just one more, especially if the evening was going to be a long one. “It impressed me.”

“And what were the men like?” Xie prompted.

“Drunk.” John set the glass on the table, pushed it away with the tips of three fingers. “It’s part of why I was glad to leave. I tend to—” He cleared his throat, then again. “—overdo. Especially if I’m keeping bad company.”

He could see Xie make a move as if to slip the sleeves back into place, but at the last second seemed to recall John’s request to leave them, and honoured it. “I understand,” Xie said.

John raised his eyebrows.

“Shall I call for tea?” Xie asked suddenly, as if only just remembering that the job at hand was to be an attentive facilitator of John’s pleasant evening.

“No, no,” John assured. “Thanks, no. We’re fine, I think. Unless—” he made an offering gesture. “Would you like tea?”

“No,” Xie said, and smoothed the drape of the gown with the hands John found distractingly appealing; he longed to hold the soft palm against his lips, to close his teeth around one of the long fingers, between the knuckles, to discover the breadth of the resistant bone beneath the skin.

“You were saying,” John said then, and his voice was lower, and he leaned in a bit toward Xie, who still sat impossibly tall and straight, shoulders and hips and knees and ankles set at angles such that the shape of the body beneath the flow of silk reminded John of a lightning bolt. “You said you understood about overdoing the drink.”

Xie’s face dropped briefly, and the fingers tangled and worried each other a bit. “I have—or had—my own tendency to become. . .overcommitted. I found myself at a crossroads once upon a time, and ultimately was persuaded that it was wiser not to continue the way I was going.”

“You were a drinker?”

“At times, but my real love affair was with opium, in any form.” Xie said this unashamedly, but without meeting John’s eye. “My family had already rejected me, and I was on the verge of being reclassified nil. It wasn’t worth it. I met someone who helped me set a new path—he’s the
administrator here now, you met him. James Moriarty.”

John nodded, though the memory of the beady-eyed administrator was not a pleasant one.

“I told him these outlandish ideas I had, these strange obsessions with drag artists and Japanese geishas. . .He had curr. Connections. And all these years later. . .” Xie made a rolling gesture in the air with one hand, describing the passage of time, the road traveled. “Here we are.”

“It’s amazing,” John said, “It was you, created all of this: the drashas, the salons—were there even houses of repose before you started?”

“No, the Icehouse was the first. It was in a different building then, tiny—a few streets over from here—just my salon, and we had a little one-room flat in the back with no hot water.”

John swallowed. “Oh, then you—” he started, and tried not to frown, but frowned anyway. “You lived together? With that Moriarty fella?”

Xie took an extra half-beat, raised those spectacular eyes to meet John’s, and said simply, “Yes. We still do. We’re married.”

John didn’t know what to do with this new information. He shifted a bit, smoothed his hands down his thighs, then tugged at the cuffs of his jacket. He stood, crossed to the bar and started pouring two more glasses of whiskey.

“When I met him, I was desperate,” Xie said evenly. “He saved me, really—got me to detox, made dozens of elaborate plans, with all sorts of graphs and calendars and check lists he pinned to the walls. . .Within a year I was already becoming well known. . .Unity started to rebuild the entire London pleasure district around the Icehouse.”

John returned to the sofa, thrust a glass toward Xie in such a way that there was no choice but to take it from his hand. John drank a deep draft, grimaced at the alcoholic burn left by not having allowed the whiskey time to breathe and open up.

“Curr and connections, you say,” John said flatly. “And you, the creative part of the team.”

“Something like that,” Xie murmured, and sipped, painted lips barely closing around the rim of the glass. “I remember, John, that you said you weren’t interested in involvement with another man’s wife.”

“No. Yeah, I did say that.”

One pale, square hand reached for John’s then, and closed around the back of it, fingers sliding beneath the edge of his palm.

“And so I’ll understand if you feel misled. I’m sorry if I’ve shocked you.”

Xie’s thumb stroked the back of John’s wrist, and their eyes met, and John knew in a flicker of an instant that he did not care one good god damn about James Moriarty.

“But, see. . .you’re no man’s wife,” John whispered, and drew Xie’s hand toward his face. “I can see you’re not.” He held the knuckles just out of reach of his mouth, felt the moisture of his own exhalation in the space between. Then, urgently: “Tell me your name.”

The wicked arches of Xie’s painted-on eyebrows shifted down and in. Instead of saying no, though, Xie said, in a sort of low, soothing croon, “Not never. Only not now.”
John closed the space between his mouth and Xie’s hand, pressing mostly-dry lips against the deep creases of the knuckles. There was a faint taste of honey left on his lips when he released the hand, and Xie withdrew it.

“I won’t stop asking,” John said. He cast a quick glance toward the window, and behind his own reflection he could see the riot of artificial lights, the glass-and-steel geometry of buildings, and the gaps carved out of the skyline by the Thames, the only real thing left in the city.

“I have rules,” Xie said, and the posture shifted slightly, softening a bit. “You’ve already made me break one this evening by uncovering my hands.” A half-smile through painted lips. “I’m not sure which of us to be annoyed with.”

“Neither, then,” John said decisively.

The rippling silk of Xie’s gown began to shift then, and the knees and ankles and shoulders—and the handsome, pale hands—all rearranged themselves so that now Xie was so close to him that John’s nose was filled with a rich aroma of earth-and-honey-scented amber oil laced with the indolic scent of jasmine flowers: the intimate aroma of Xie’s carefully perfumed skin. John’s gaze flitted once again to the long column of exposed throat, the flickering shadow there in the notch between the collarbones. Xie’s magnificent eyes met his for an instant before the gaze dropped just slightly, intent on John’s mouth. John licked his lips, a nervous habit, he couldn’t help it, but one that seemed not entirely inappropriate at the moment. Xie’s face tilted downward, and one of the thrillingly masculine hands alighted on John’s knee.

Those lips: heavily, carefully painted and impossibly glossy but still revealing their true shape. The top one a mathematical impossibility: twin triangles with no hint of a curve anywhere until Xie smiled or spoke, the central valley between the pretty peaks forming an arrow to point straight down at the plump, perfect bow of the lower one, invitingly creased and potentially rough-textured, pretty and offputting in equal measures. A deep pang of want began to coil up in John’s gut, unsettling him, driving him forward, and he allowed the tips of his fingers to skim along the surface of Xie’s gown where it puddled on the sofa beside Xie’s knee, in search of solidity beneath all that softness: a taut muscle, a jut of bone, a delivery on the promise of those pale, square hands.

“How can I—?” John murmured, and their eyes caught for a moment. “I want to kiss you.” Barely a whisper; who was he to make such an unreasonable request? He’d never ask to cozy up to Michaelangelo’s David; never run his gunpowdery fingers over the surface of Van Gogh’s Starry Night. He couldn’t presume to interfere with this work of art, anymore than another. But, god, how he longed to.

Xie’s impossible lips pressed forward around a “Shh. . .” and then ducked beside John’s ear. Xie’s hand on his knee started a maddeningly slow slide upward, clutching, fingertips digging in even as the palm smoothed the fabric of his trousers, skated along the thick muscle of John’s thigh. “I’m here for your pleasure, Captain Watson.” The voice in his ear was a satiny rustle of breath, low and deep and dangerous, and John pressed his knees slightly apart in unspoken appeal. Xie’s long fingers swept into the crease between thigh and hip, and John’s gaze dropped to the bare throat, and he wondered what the tip of his tongue might learn from a quick flicker against the pulse point, or in the trough beside the adam’s apple.

“I thought you weren’t. . .” John started, but didn’t want to say the words—a prostitute, a whore, for rent, for sale—and risk Xie feeling insulted anew at the reminder of John’s stupid, drunken presumptions of the past. John’s hand went to Xie’s shoulder, stroking down the slope from the inner edge of the gown’s neckline, and he thrilled at the way the muscular curve of the shoulder filled the palm of his hand. He tried again. “I was scolded for presuming this place was a brothel.”
“It isn’t,” Xie said, so softly, so near John’s ear the skin of Xie’s face radiated warmth onto John’s jaw. The hand moved again, to the front placket of his trousers, and John sucked in his breath to make space.

“Then why are you—“ Both of Xie’s hands were working to unfasten his trousers now, and John sank back a bit, let his eyes close.

“Because I liked your story about the exurban wedding, even though it wasn’t your own story.” Xie’s fingers were everywhere, dipping and sliding, above and beneath and inside and over, and John sucked his teeth. Xie was right that the story wasn’t his; John had sunk, grateful and utterly shattered, into a kindly offered caravan bunk and heard the head-shaving story from his mate Charlie the next morning.

The cunning, long fingers and wide palm were tracing John’s rapidly-rising length now, over the fabric of his boxer shorts, and John determined not to let himself buck up into that gorgeous, distracting hand. Xie went on, in the satiny deep voice, “And because I like that you’re dangerous in a way I can’t put my finger on yet...” The tip of Xie’s tongue licked out against the lowermost edge of John’s ear lobe, just a flick, then there was a rush of breath to cool the spot. “But I will.” John didn’t know what to do with his hands so he dug his fingers hard into the seat cushions at either side of his thighs. He had no doubt Xie would see all the way through him sooner or later if this went on, if he kept coming round, and that could pose a problem for him given the job he was meant to be doing. But right now, just right now, Xie’s hands were sliding beneath the last layer, wrapping around him, deliriously warm and so, so much smoother than skin should ever be. John found he couldn’t worry as much as was warranted about how an affair—even a one-night affair—would almost certainly complicate the job.

Xie’s head drew back then, and John forced his eyelids half-open to look at those slick, rough lips, those fascinating chameleon eyes, and Xie’s cunning fingers were all around him and then Xie said, “And because it’s what you want, John. Isn’t it what you want?”

“Yes,” he huffed, with not a second’s hesitation. His name in that mouth, cradled by that voice, taking shape through those lips, was like a miracle. John was rapidly losing himself, and certainly losing any ability he might once have had to form any thought other than that breathless Yes, with such an exquisite, improbable creature humming in his ear, staring into his eyes, delicately teasing him to life with those oh-so-perfect hands. “But if you’re not—if this isn’t—You won’t get into any trouble or anything?”

“Hush, John, and nevermind.” Xie looked knowing, and the lips curled up ever-so-slightly. “Shhh... I promise, I’m not breaking any rules. I’m not even working. I told you earlier, I’m taking the night off.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

In chapter 5, Xie and John engaged in mutual seduction, and John was taken by pleasant surprise when Xie made a bold move.

Molly had spent the better part of the evening in the flat Sherlock shared with Jim, rummaging Sherlock’s endless bookshelves arranged in absolutely no order—not alphabetical, or by subject, or even by spine colour (that was how she did hers, like a rainbow, pink on the top shelf, black at the bottom). He’d asked her to find a book he thought he remembered having, of retold fairy tales, and Molly was beginning to think he’d imagined it. Most of what Sherlock did own was esoteric—nothing as lowbrow as a novel or a book full of beautiful photographs of how the landscape looked Before. Histories of Japan, sewing patterns, etiquette books, and antique illustrations of flowers and birds—these he had in abundance, but a book of fairy tales struck Molly as something he might have had in his childhood bedroom but not in the office where he sketched ideas for Xie’s next elaborate look.

On the verge of giving it up for a lost cause, she noticed the door to Jim’s office—a mirror image of Sherlock’s, the two doors facing each other across a hallway—was slightly open, and so pressed at it, telling herself she would scan his bookshelves quickly and then leave.

Jim’s desk was neat—the surface almost completely empty save for a wooden in/out tray free of any paper in either compartment; and an elegant, weighty-looking pen resting in its velvet-lined cradle. A leather armchair, a tall chrome lamp, and a small table holding a crystal decanter of dark red liquid were the only other furnishings. He had three sparsely-employed shelves, most of their space taken up by artful arrangements of small sculptures; a photo of him and Sherlock both much younger, grinning and with arms around each other; and a small framed painting of the Icehouse lit up at night. It took Molly less than thirty seconds to scan the titles of the books standing in small groups between the more elegant clutter. Irish classics—Joyce and Wilde, Behan and Heaney, Swift and Doyle—and two of the Unity texts they’d all been required to study at secondary school.

The desk had four drawers: the slim middle one, and three stacked on the right side. Molly tugged at the sleeve of her jumper until it entirely covered her hand, and used this to make an experimental tug at the handle of the top drawer. To her surprise, it slid open, unlocked. Inside was the sort of junk that Sherlock left scattered all over the top of his own desk across the hall: scissors, notepads, extra pencils and pens, rubber bands, paper clips, loose batteries and screws and a wooden ruler.

She slid the drawer shut, held her breath, listened.

The next drawer held nothing but a pair of shoes, with the detached heel of the right one lying beside them. Molly suppressed an urge to giggle, imagining Jim might think a cobbler lived in his desk, or perhaps a cobbler’s elves.

She leaned to slide open the third drawer; it was quite deep, and there was a metal box inside with a simple, five-digit combination lock. She lifted it out, now with both hands covered by the cuffs of her jumper. It was quite heavy, and when she shook it, whatever was inside seemed to move in one solid thump, and not far. She set it on the edge of the desk, shook one hand loose from her sleeve and ran the back of her knuckles across the floor of the drawer, seeking a telltale impression or bulge that
would indicate a false bottom. There was nothing. She knelt down, pulled the drawer all the way out and ducked her head.

There was a slim, hidden shelf-like pocket hanging from the bottom of the middle drawer, and tucked into it, a small, black, leatherbound book. She fetched a pencil from the junk-filled top drawer and used it to nudge the notebook out of its perch, catching it in her covered hand. Paging through quickly, Molly saw it looked like standard accounting—expenses and income—but the notations with each entry seemed nonsensical. “Gauge,” “Tar,” “Redfoot,” “Hilltop.” She figured it for a code, and memorized as many of the words as she could. “Liszt,” “Plug,” “Tinderbox” . . .

“Sherlock? That you?”

Jim. Molly slapped the book shut, stuffed it back in its place.

“Just came for up for a fresh shirt and tie,” Jim called. “Dumb cunt waiter spilled a Vodka Collins on me. Needless to say he won’t be coming in to work tomorrow; I had security carry him out.”

Frantically, Molly retrieved the metal strongbox from the desktop and laid it as quietly into the drawer as she was able, hoping hard she’d turned it the right way round.

“Thought since you were off tonight— Oh, Molly! Wasn’t expecting you.”

She’d just got the drawer shut in time.

“Sorry, Jim. Sherlock asked me to come fetch him a book? But I couldn’t find it anywhere. When I came to peek at your shelves I dropped an earring.” She held up a small, dangling earring of cheap metal, with a blue glass bead. “No backs; gets tangled in my hair and I turn my head and it’s gone.” She pressed up to her feet.

Jim stood leaning sideways in the doorway, arms folded across his chest, head tilted casually. “You’re lucky to find it, then,” he said, and grinned. He had a particular voice he used when he spoke to her, casual and friendly, and he’d never said an unkind word to her in the several years she’d known him. For no reason Molly could even explain, his friendliness was off-putting in the extreme. “What’s the book she’s after?”

“Fairy tales,” Molly said with a shrug. That was one thing she could point to that bothered her; Jim insisted on referring not only to Xie, but even sometimes Sherlock, as “she” and “her,” despite the fact it clearly made Sherlock uncomfortable. She wasn’t about to get into a snit with Jim about it, though, so instead asked, “Don’t suppose you’ve seen a book of fairy tales anywhere?”

“Not much for reading, me,” Jim replied good-naturedly. “Never even opened any of these.” He gestured toward his collection of Irish classics. “The decorator put them there. But our Sherlock’s always in them—books—squinting, going hmmm!” He mugged, mimed holding an open book close to his face, smiling away. “Quite deep into the self-improvement, is our girl. Trying to pump up the ol’ brain she doesn’t even need.”

Molly took a step forward, as if to leave, but Jim didn’t move from the doorway. “You know,” she said quickly, “it could just as easily be in the dressing room, or the salon—Sherlock said here in the flat, but—”

“Right, I won’t keep you.” Still, he didn’t stand aside. “Oh, and how’s your Greg? No ring yet, I see.”

“No, not yet,” Molly said, and waved one hand in the air. “No hurry, though. We’re fine.”
“Sherlock would go absolutely mental to help you plan a wedding, of course,” Jim enthused, at last uncrossed his arms to lay one hand on Molly’s elbow, leaned in conspiratorially. “I can put a bug in Greg’s ear, you know. You just say the word.” His smile widened, all-girls-together. “Sometimes straight men—” he rolled his eyes and grimaced. “They just need a little push.”

Molly shook her head, laughing it off. “No, no. Really, it’s fine. We’re. . .it’s nice.”

“Well, the offer stands. He’s lucky to have you.” He gave her a doting, paternal look, all crumpled smile/frown and aren’t-you-precious raised eyebrows. “Our Molly.”

Molly’s forearms beneath her jumper erupted in gooseflesh. “He knows it,” she assured. “He’s tells me all the time he’s lucky. Glad he met me. All that.” She folded her mouth into a smile but didn’t bare her teeth. “I’ll leave you to it, then! Soak that shirt in cold water and hang it up to dry, then to the laundry on Wednesday.”

Jim stepped out into the hallway to let Molly pass, and she scurried toward the front door of the flat.

“See you, Jim,” she sang out, but didn’t look back at him as she let herself out.

“Take care, my dear.”

John smelled of better quality grooming products than he had when they’d met before. No more generic, hotel-grade bar soap and watered-down shampoo; these were more deliberately chosen, though only slightly more upscale. The smell there beside his ear where Xie’s parted lips hovered, sighing warm breath against John’s skin, was of almond shampoo, and of after shave icy and green. Beneath it, his whiskey-sweetened breath, coming harder and faster. Beneath that, synthetic musk antiperspirant mixed with the genuine musk of sweat just about to turn sour. Beneath that, gun oil. And then even lower, beneath all of it, something dangerous and intoxicating, low and thrumming and undeniable.

John’s breath skimmed in across his taut lips, sharp and cool. Xie’s tongue-tip glanced along his jaw—he’d shaved before he came, as if he’d had a date, as if someone might touch his face. Xie couldn’t help but smile at this. John Watson did not seem like a man who looked on the bright side or hoped for the best; it was not mere optimism that drove him—it was complete and utter self-assurance. Although he hadn’t been expecting Xie, he’d been absolutely sure that whoever he met this evening would be getting very close indeed. And who could blame such an assumption; Captain John Watson radiated heat and power even as he made his self-deprecating jokes and looked at the floor.

“I like the way you smell, John.” A rumbling almost-whisper.

There was a lingering feeling of unsettlement about having let John expose the well-guarded hands. Sherlock’s too-big hands, Xie’s glistening lips, Sherlock’s curious tongue, Xie’s powdered neck. Taken all together, the math didn’t work, and the illusion crumbled. Nonetheless, long fingers encircled and stroked and teased; the palm curved softly around eager heat, at once solid and silken.

“Jesus, that’s lovely. . .” John sighed, and it could have been in response to the compliment, or to the sound of the voice, or to the hand moving in his lap, or all of those, or something else—though probably not something else. John’s fingertips skated the edge of the gown’s neckline, brushing skin enough to elicit a shiver, then the palm of his hand curved close around the shoulder, down the
length of the busily working arm, lightly gripped through the diaphanous sleeve at the twitching bicep, then loosened and settled there just above the elbow. John petted the silk of the gown in awkward mid-tempo—neither soothing nor urgent.

Xie leaned back to gauge the expression on John’s face: closed eyes, biting his lips shut, eyebrows crowding toward each other, then rising as if in surprise. Probably sensing that Xie was watching him, John half-opened his eyes.

“Is this what you want?” The hand slipped away briefly from its ministrations and the pink tongue emerged from between slick red lips to stroke the length of the first two fingers. John let out a soft moan, and nodded slightly. Xie near-whispered, “I’m here for your pleasure, John. . .just tell me what you want.” Xie’s hand slid down again, and John sucked his teeth.

A broken gust of breath: “Xie.”

“Mm.”

Xie shifted again, holding the puddle of sleeve out of the way, and John’s hand sought the back of Xie’s neck, alternately gripping and releasing, sweeping up and stroking down, drawing Xie’s face close to his.

“Xie. . .” John’s wet whisper in Xie’s ear, and he let go of restraint, pressing up into the tight circle of fingers and palm, and he moaned the name again, “Xie,” a breathless incantation, over and again, “Xie. . .Xie. . .” Softly, drawn out, always ending in a sigh.

Xie murmured an encouraging noise into John’s ear and the tongue-tip teased out to trace its outer edge—sundried skin and fine wispy hairs, a taste of salt.

John’s breath stuttered and Xie could sense the impending finish, maintained tempo and pressure and let the tip of the nose brush feather-light up along the skin of John’s face beside his ear.

“Oh,” John gasped, and, “Mmm,” and “Xi—aah. . .”

“Perfect,” Xie whispered, and minded the silk gown, minded John’s clothes. “Gorgeous.”

“My god. . .”

Xie’s lips curled up into a self-satisfied smile, murmuring beside John’s ear, “I’d give you a little kiss here on your cheek, but it would leave a stain.”

“Believe me, I don’t mind.” Xie leaned away, demurely hid the spattered hand behind a fold of the gown and started to get up from the sofa. “And turnabout is fair play,” John added. He was grinning as he moved to put himself back in order. Xie crossed the room, fetched a bar towel and swiped away the evidence in a few quick passes.

Revealing his disharmonious hands to John had been a mistake, Sherlock now realised. Regardless of what John had said or done implying a wish to find the hidden depths beneath the layers of chiffon, the artfully-applied paint, powder, and shadow, in the heat of the moment he’d made himself abundantly clear: it was Xie he wanted. The sleeves were shaken and allowed to fall back into place, the expression rearranged to be neutral and placid with just a hint of a closed-lipped smile.

“I’ll call for a bite to eat, shall I?” Xie said smoothly, sweeping across the room to adjust the lights, summon a meal, assure the guest’s comfort. There was time yet to fill.
Out of an abundance of caution, Molly took two separate sets of lifts—one down to the fourth floor, where her little one-bedroom flat was, then the one at the opposite end of the main corridor—up to the penthouse level to reach Xie’s dressing room. Molly was murmuring a repetitive chant to herself as she went, and her focus on the task was single-minded enough that when the lift doors slid open and someone was standing there waiting to get inside, she started and even let out a high-pitched squeak of surprise.

“Hey, all right. It’s only me. Fancy meeting you here.”

“Greg!” Molly sighed relief as he stepped into the lift and reached out as if to embrace her. She held up her hand. “Don’t talk!”

“But—“

She hissed, “Shhh!” and looked hard at her own reflection in the highly-polished steel of the doors as the lift resumed its skyward trajectory. Greg looked puzzled, fiddled with his utility belts as if taking inventory—handcuffs, two-way radio, pepper spray, a pair of mobile phones, a stun gun, all part of his daily uniform as head of Icehouse security—but he kept quiet, as commanded.

Once they’d reached the topmost floor of the Icehouse, Molly sprang from the lift and marched toward Xie’s dressing room, digging in the small bag she carried with its narrow strap across her body as she went, pulling out a set of keys while still yards from the door. Greg trailed behind her, and once inside, she went straight into the drawer for her costume notebook, flipped to a blank page near the back and began to scribble.

“Don’t forget you need—“

“Hush!”

“—milk,” Greg finished much more quietly.

With a loud exhalation, Molly ripped the sheet from the notebook and held it out to Greg.

He didn’t look at it, instead playfully demanded, “Haven’t seen you all day—give us a kiss.” Molly obliged, pressing herself up on her toes to kiss him quickly.

“I found something,” she said quietly, backing away and gesturing at the paper in Greg’s hand. He glanced at her list, which was clearly nothing to do with shopping: *Gauge, Hilltop, Lizst, Tar, Tinderbox.*

“So what is it?” he asked, eyebrows knitting downward in a frown.

“Jim Moriarty’s got a book hidden inside his desk in their flat,” Molly told him. She knew the room itself was free of surveillance equipment—no cameras, no microphones—but she kept her voice low in case someone passed by the door in the hallway. “It looked like accounts; four- and five-figure numbers, like expenses and income. The notations were gibberish, though—these are the ones I’m sure of—I thought, maybe a code.”

Greg frowned in a different way. “What were you doing in his desk? Was he at home?”
“Sherlock sent me looking for a book he wanted. Jim wasn’t there at first.”

“At first?” Greg was exasperated; he’d told Molly more than once that he didn’t want her to spend any time alone with Jim, unpredictable as his temper was. Molly always waved off his concern, reminding Greg that she’d known him for years and they’d always been cordial—her close relationship with Sherlock seemed to merit some strange respect from Jim, like he was always on his best behaviour and wanted to stay in her good graces, even though his friendliness toward her reeked of fakery.

“I had everything put back where I found it by the time he came into the room,” Molly reassured. “He just chatted to me like he does, and I told him I’d go look for Sherlock’s book in the salon. Then I left.”

“These aren’t much to work with,” Greg said, folding the sheet of paper several times and lifting his foot onto the seat of Xie’s make-up stool so he could slide it into his boot.

“I can try to get more.”

Greg shook his head. “Leave it for now. I can pass this on and see what comes back.” He set his foot back on the floor, and his expression shifted. “Thought it was Sherlock’s night off?” He left the implication unspoken that Sherlock’s night off meant Molly’s night off.

“Xie’s covering a private party for another drasha; I was only looking for a book of fairy tales. I’m not really working.” She got to her feet. “Speaking of which, I’ve got two more places to look, and —” She glanced at her wristwatch. “Fifteen minutes, so why not make yourself useful?” Her nose wrinkled when she smiled. “There are two bookcases in the salon. I’m going to go through these drawers.” She motioned him toward the sliding door, and Greg went through into the salon, turning on lights as he went. Molly began opening drawers at the make-up station and shuffling the contents.

From the other room, Greg called out—not very loudly—“Stay clear of Jim, will you?”

“Gladly.” Molly replied. “He’s harmless. Asked after you, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh, did he,” Greg said grimly.

Molly’s smile grew sly. “He did. Asked why I haven’t got a ring on my finger yet.”

“And what’d you tell him?”

“That there’s no rush. We’re fine.”

Greg returned to the dressing room, then, empty-handed. “Nothing in there but collected works of Shakespeare, 25 ancient volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary, and some art books.” Greg caught Molly by the hip and turned her toward him, trapping her in the circle of his arms, then tipped his chin down so they were face to face. “Are we fine?”

“Some things are more important,” Molly said quietly. “There’s work to be done.” Greg nodded slightly, and his expression was grave, but Molly sensed he was still looking for reassurance. “We are, of course. We’re fine.” She kissed him again, less chastely but not for long, then pulled away. “I’ve got to go.”

She had only had to rifle through two drawers to find the book—unusually small and bound in grainy, dark-green leather, its title embossed in gold.
John finished tucking himself back into his trousers, quickly zipped and buttoned up, cleared his throat and scrubbed his hands across his face. He felt stupid and sleepy, warm and tingling beneath every inch of skin, yet even the post-orgasmic haze wasn’t enough to assuage his want. Xie was on the far side of the room, using those long fingers to type orders into the computer mounted on the wall.

John cleared his throat. “Can I. . .” he started, and what he was thinking refused to translate on the way out of his mouth. “What about you?” He reclaimed his glass, now nearly empty, and wet his dry mouth. What he wanted was to splay Xie’s long body across this soft, clean sofa, and peel away layer after layer until the naked truth was at last revealed. John would read it all, take it to heart, finish the story those gorgeous big hands had only begun to tell.

“I’m fine,” was all Xie offered in reply, and the tone was indiscernible.

With Xie’s back turned, John allowed himself a confused frown. “Night off”. . . Xie had come specifically to see him and wasn’t even being paid. . . they’d been flirting. . . and yet, that refrain of being here for his pleasure, and now wanting nothing in return. Xie was married—and maybe now feeling guilty? John didn’t know what to make of the sudden chill in the room. Before he got too carried away in analysis, there came a soft knock at the door, and Xie moved to open it.

John stood when he saw a petite, pretty woman and a silver-haired, straight-toothed gent standing just outside the door. He instantly recognized the bloke from the files, and tried to recall what notes there were. Ran Icehouse security. Ex-police, maybe? John cleared his throat to clear his head as Xie beckoned the pair inside the salon with a sweep of the billowing sleeve.

“May I introduce you to my friend, Captain John Watson?” Xie said smoothly, as if the two of them had not been engaged in a breathless tryst just minutes before. “Captain Watson, this is Molly Hooper. She’s my wardrobe mistress.”

Molly pulled an amusedly annoyed face and reached to shake John’s hand. “I’m Xie’s P.A.” She corrected.

“We never have settled on a job title,” Xie allowed breezily.

“I like ‘Executive Administrator of the Drashaskaya’,” Molly put in with a smile.

Xie turned to John and talked past Molly. “It’s an ongoing negotiation.”

John laughed and released Molly from the handshake.

“Greg Lestrade, head of security here at the Icehouse. Keeps us all feeling safe and snug as we go about our work,” Xie said then, and John offered his hand to the bloke. “You and Greg have history in common, John. He, too, was in the army.”

“Yeah, once upon a time,” Greg shrugged.

John’s eyebrows rose. “Retired?”

“Nearly ten years now. I really didn’t have the stomach for it,” Greg replied, crossing his arms in front of his chest while John mentally inventoried the arsenal hanging from his belt. “This is much more my speed. Keeping an eye on the petty cash. Watching for card-counters in the casino. Bouncing drunks now and then.” He grinned with the straight, white teeth. “Don’t even have to bounce them myself—just tell one of the big young blokes to bounce them.”
John nodded at this and rather than let the conversation lapse, Xie directed a comment to Greg. “John was telling me about the pleasant surprises he found during his time in America.”

Greg made a quick scoffing noise. “Are there any?”

“Did you do time there?” John asked casually, in lieu of response to Greg’s mild sarcasm.

“Way back. America is what made me decide to request a discharge. I was there in the middle of the 1990s. The Thunderhead campaign.”

“Really. About the time that squad went missing?” John pressed. Famously, mysteriously, an entire platoon of infantrymen stationed at a post on the coast of Argentina had vanished—seemingly off the face of the planet. There were rumours that the squad had become one of the primary Deep Sea cells in the Americas. The official line was that they’d been massacred and buried in a mass grave by the natives. They were seldom spoken of anymore.

“Right about then, yeah.”

“Were you anywhere near?”

“No.” Greg waved his hand dismissively. “No. North. Well north. Not something I like to talk about much; you understand. Like I said—I couldn’t stomach it. I was glad to get home.”

“I do,” John said, nodding and raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I understand. Not my favourite topic of conversation, either.”

Ever driven to set an off-track conversation back on the rails, Xie smiled and offered, “In a more happy coincidence, both of you gentlemen support South Cross football.”

John’s eyebrows leapt up again, this time because he was certain he had never said such a thing to Xie, and it must be yet another of Xie’s uncanny observations about him, though he couldn’t begin to imagine what about their interactions to that point had indicated which team he followed. Greg’s entire posture portrayed his relief at the change of subject.

“Oh, yeah?” he said with a laddish grin. “How much did you lose on Sunday’s match, then?”

John played along. “Not much this time around—only my shirt.”

Molly piped up, “You two should see a match together sometime. Don’t you have tickets next week, Greg?”

Greg smiled affectionately at her; John thought there must be something between them more than being work colleagues. Greg confirmed this by tipping his head toward her as he said to John, “See how quick this one’s ready to give up her ticket? I know she doesn’t really enjoy it, but she’d never say.”

“That’s what we call a ‘keeper’,” John joked, throwing Molly a wink that was met with a charmingly pinched grin.

“I have got tickets against Merrimack—pretty good seats—if you’re interested.”

“That’s very kind of you,” John said. “Definitely, I’m interested. Let’s get in touch—“ he patted his pockets as if looking for a business card he knew he wasn’t carrying. Greg fetched one of his own from a sleek little leather folio in his breast pocket and passed it to John. “Ah, excellent,” John said, and glanced at it, then slipped it inside his jacket, buttoning up while he was at it, suddenly becoming
aware of his handgun in its holster under his arm. “I’ll ring you in a few days and we’ll firm it up.”

“Lovely!” Molly said, then turned to Xie. “This was in your dressing room, by the way, not in the flat.”

Xie accepted it, fingertips-only, then the little green book vanished beneath the drape of sleeve along with the hand. “Thank you so much.”

“All part of my job as ‘Managing Editor’,” Molly smiled. “We’ll leave you to your evening, then.”

Another round of handshakes and they bid each other goodnight. John crossed to the bar and Xie slid the door shut. As John poured another for each of them, this time adding a splash of water to dilute the whiskey, Xie resumed a seat on the sofa and told him, “I knew you and Greg would get on. You have rather a lot in common.”


Xie looked at him sideways, with a playfully scolding glance. “That’s not at all what I meant to imply,” Xie said. John set their glasses on the low table and sat down, angling his body slightly toward Xie’s. “Only that you’re very similar types. I think you have certain ideals...a worldview, shall we call it?...that may align.”

John nodded, sipped at this drink while he thought over his reply. Greg Lestrade was in the files, marked out as the single most suspicious character of the lot, almost certainly a Deep Sea operative, and Xie was clearly hinting at something. But Xie wasn’t in the files at all, so John couldn’t presume Xie knew anything about money laundering or terrorist plots that may be percolating outside the salon, let alone whether Xie’s attitude toward such would be sympathetic. It may just be that Xie was acknowledging recognition that John was up to some mischief that hadn’t yet come to light, and if this Lestrade character really was Deep Sea, surely Xie had picked up on whatever aura of skullduggery he must give off; Xie might only be saying they were two sneaky peas in a pod. In the meantime, John knew he had to choose his words carefully until more things came clear.

“He seems a nice enough bloke. We both hated America,” he said, and crunched a small bit of ice between his back teeth as Xie drew the little book from beneath the sleeve and rested it atop one long thigh, “I guess that’s a start.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

In chapter 6, Sherlock felt, after a brief sexual encounter, that it was Xie John really wanted.

“Your story about the dogs reminded me,” Xie said breezily, tapping the little leatherbound book with a hidden fingertip. “I had Molly fetch this for us.”

John decided to wait it out—follow along—since Xie had clearly moved on from their intimate encounter, at least for the time being. He would let himself be grateful for Xie’s continued company; at least he wasn’t sitting here alone and abandoned with his wilting erection and flushed neck. He’d settle for this abrupt and awkward transition and whatever came next, so long as Xie didn’t leave.

Far from leaving, Xie settled prettily beside him once more, quite close, and while John was disappointed that the gorgeous hands were once again enshrouded in billows of silk, he said nothing in protest. The fingertips made flickering appearances, then vanished and reappeared as Xie opened the book and paged through it.

“You were trying to catch me out,” John asserted, without anger or even annoyance. “When you asked me about Acton.” He’d only just put together why Xie had interrupted his story about the pack of feral dogs that wanted to tear him apart by asking for the seemingly irrelevant detail of which part of Acton he’d been in at the time.

“You weren’t there to meet a friend,” Xie replied simply, and tucked one thumb between the pages to hold the right place.

John cleared his throat, and ventured to let his fingertips—more affectionate than suggestive—skate down the back of Xie’s neck from the hairline to the edge of the collar. Xie’s eyes closed for as long as it took John to trace the smooth skin, and John instantly felt more at ease.

“What really happened there, in Acton Town, I wonder?” Xie asked softly, and turned to face him. There was a challenge in the sky-green eyes, and John had a distinct impression that not only would Xie know if he were lying, but that a lie was unacceptable; the glint in Xie’s eyes was an ultimatum. John was being tested.

“I was there to do a job,” John answered, quiet, matter-of-fact. His fingers stroked upward along the back of Xie’s neck. “And I did it.” Xie listened with a placid, open expression. “But before I did the job, I killed the dogs.”

“They didn’t run off, then.”

John shook his head, tightly, just once. “One did. But if I could have killed it, I would have.”

Xie’s gaze drifted to the side of John’s torso, and John was immediately aware of the heft of the handgun secreted beneath his jacket. Xie said, “You shot them.”

“Yes.”
“You’re a dangerous man,” Xie said quietly, and John’s fingertips edged just beneath the neck of the gown, there at the top of Xie’s spine.

“Yes.”

Being reminded of himself made John think about what a potential disaster he was courting by getting even as close to Xie as he already had, setting aside the fact that what he really wanted—desperately wanted—was to be so much closer.

“But I’m not afraid of you,” Xie said, and the glossy red lips pressed together, then relaxed. John didn’t know what to say in response, unsure whether Xie was asserting bravery in the face of danger, or expressing surprise at foolish disregard for it. Perhaps both.

The moment hung in the air between them, silent, and John’s fingertips swept across the imperfectly smooth skin of Xie’s upper back.

“You don’t sleep well.” Xie’s voice was low and purring, and John kept petting, longing for more skin, more of the truth hidden in the pretty wrappings and trappings, but willing to wait—though he couldn’t say for how much longer.

“No. I don’t,” John admitted, and leaned close to Xie’s ear, boldly tucking his nose behind the lobe, nuzzling lightly as he inhaled the amber-and-jasmine perfume and the flat, sweet scent of rice powder.

“May I read you a bedtime story?”

John hummed a bit of a laugh, and brushed his lips—just barely—against the side of Xie’s throat. “If you like.” Xie’s head tilted away, making room for John’s soft, hesitant kiss brushing upward, lips seeking the hollow behind the jaw. He leaned away just enough to wet his lips, but before they alighted against Xie’s skin, one hand fluttered up to gently nudge his chin, pushing him away. John sat back, gave Xie a questioning look.

“Here,” Xie murmured, and patted the sofa’s back. “Rest your head. Let’s see if I can’t fix you.” A crooked grin. “I do like a challenge.”

“I can’t sleep here—now,” John protested with a smile.

“We’ll see.” Xie sounded almost playful, patted again. “Let me try.”

John raised his eyebrows skeptically, but quickly acquiesced. “Please yourself.”

And to his own mild surprise, John did as he was told, arranging a small pillow on the sofa’s back and resting his head on it. Xie took up the book in one hand, and scolded, “Close your eyes.”

“Definitely not,” John replied. “I want to look at you.”

A slight shrug, and Xie turned back to the book.

“Once upon a time, there was a straw-haired, ocean-eyed boy—a shepherd, though he longed for a more exciting life—who spent day after day sitting in the shadow of a volcano, at the edge of a thick forest full of the Good Folk.”

“And where was this?”

“A wonderful place.”
“Ah. All right. Carry on.”

“The boy was quite lonesome, though, spending the entire day sitting on a tree stump watching the flock, and as his mind drifted through daydream after daydream, at length he devised a plan by which he might gain not just companions, but excitement. And so he gathered himself up from his seat on the stump and began to run, fast as he could manage, away from the pasture, through the forest—“

“Why did he not just call on the fairies,” John put in. “To keep him company?”

“They didn’t like him,” Xie replied, feigning annoyance, but given away by sparkling eyes and a mouth that fought not to curl up into a grin.

“Why not?”

“He interrupted them when they were reading to him.”

John bit his lips, pressed one finger against them to hush himself.

“Where was I? Ah, yes—away from the pasture, through the forest, and into the village. As he drew nearer, he began to shout frantically, ‘Wolf! There’s a wolf in the pasture!’ and the townspeople came to their windows and doors and their brows knitted and the ladies fussed about his well-being and the men ran behind him through the forest back to the pasture, only to find the sheep unmolested, a wolf nowhere in evidence.”

“Ah, see—there’s a way the boy could’ve passed the time,” John said. “Molesting the sheep.”

“Shame on you,” Xie teased.

John shrugged, and comically arranged his face. “I understand it passes the time.”

“Hush,” Xie demanded, and playfully nudged John’s knee with the back of one hand. John caught it, and peeled back the sleeve, and encircled the sturdy wrist so he could trace the tendons on the back of the hand with the tip of one index finger. Xie went on reading. “The boy was so pleased at the attention, a few days later he repeated the ruse, and again the townsfolk rushed to help him in his distress. A few more days passed and one hazy afternoon the boy lifted his gaze only to discover—slinking and skulking around the edge of the forest, stalking the flock and drooling through yellow, broken teeth—a wiry-haired wolf with glassy, starving eyes.”

John lifted the square palm of the hand, and ducked his face to plant a kiss in the center, holding it there against his lips for a few seconds before releasing it.

“Are you listening?” Xie challenged.

“Wolf,” John murmured, and kissed again in another spot, just off-center. “Actual wolf.” Another kiss. “I have to admit I’ve heard the story before, but I could listen to your voice every minute of forever and never be tired of it.” He pressed his lips to the crease between palm and wrist. “So please carry on.”

Xie’s impossible eyes fell shut momentarily, as John dragged his lips along the length of the thumb.

“The boy began to shout forlornly, ‘Wolf! Wolf!’ and became quite panicked. Again he cried out, ‘Wolf!’ even more loudly than before. But this time, the townspeople—who had felt foolish in the wake of his previous deceits—assumed he was once again pulling a prank. Not a single one of them came to his aid.”
John circled the blunt tip of the thumb with his tongue, then closed his lips around the pad, and began to suck. Xie’s breath hitched before the story was resumed.

“The wolf tore the poor sheep to pieces,” Xie read, and the voice lowered and coarsened, and John hummed a bit, teased the sensitive inside of the knuckle with his tongue-tip, and then resumed sucking, harder this time, pressing his tongue flat against the varnished nail, the ball of the thumb against the back of his teeth. Xie went on, struggling for steady breath. “And the boy was lucky to escape with his life. When he returned to the village, his shoulders drooped and he sought the advice of the oldest woman in the town, who was the witch they went to for medicine and love advice.”

“As you do,” John murmured around the thumb, then moved on to the tip of the index finger, rolling his tongue over and under it before drawing it in and closing his lips around it.

“The wise woman laid hands on the boy’s shoulder and the crown of his head, and told him, ‘No one ever, ever believes a liar. Even when he is telling the truth.’”

Xie shut the book and laid it aside. John raked his teeth along the tip of the index finger and raised his gaze. Xie’s painted-on eyebrows rose questioningly, inviting his response to the tale.

“Depends how good a liar he is,” John protested, and lowered their hands onto Xie’s thigh. His fingers stroked up the back of the hand, skittered over the bump of bone, brushing upward in search of... more.

Xie grasped John’s wrist and gently pushed it away, shook the sleeve down so it half-covered the hand. John made no move to carry on.

“The exurban wedding,” Xie said quietly, eyes intensely focused on John’s so that he did not dare look away even though the heat blooming across his chest was becoming less pleasant, more prickly. “And before that, the friend who was no friend—the dogs that didn’t run away.” The eyes widened. “How many lies, I wonder, before I’m left no option but to regard you as a liar?”

John swallowed hard. Every moment with Xie was do-or-die, and why was that?

“They were only stories,” he said, and his thumb worried the creases of Xie’s slack knuckles. “And anyway, it’s you that won’t even tell me your name.”

“I told you earlier, not never. Only not now.”

John cleared his throat. “There are things I can’t say.” He looked down at his own hand on his knee. “It’s not the same as lying.” And anyway, we’ve only just met, he thought, feeling resentment rise up in the base of his throat.

“Will you come again? To my salon?” A different tone, softer, signaling the confrontation was over.

“Likely to my detriment, I find I’m liable to do anything you ask.” He smiled; it was the most honest thing he’d said to Xie since they met.

“Tomorrow,” Xie said, quietly insistent, “I’ve got four scientists and two of their spouses coming for tea. Will you join us?”

John nodded, and Xie looked genuinely pleased, like the winner of a game, albeit one with low stakes.

“But you still won’t tell me your name,” he ventured, not quite a question.
Xie looked down and away, at the corner of the room, then back at John. “Not never.” Xie’s hand found John’s, and the long thumb stroked his wrist, petting him, soothing.

John said, “Fair enough. There are rules, I know.” He watched the thumb sliding slowly back and forth, back and forth. “I feel like you’re about to tell me good night, and I really don’t want you to.” This felt like a risky admission, like leaning too far off the edge of a dock, over water too turbulent and murky to see through, impossible to measure the depth, the danger. “Will you read to me a bit more? This voice of yours. . .”

“Another time,” Xie said, just above a whisper now, and the green-blue eyes looked up at him from beneath false lashes made of delicate black lace that put John in mind of something else entirely. He leaned close to the inviting length of Xie’s neck once more, sliding his nose and then his lips against the faint throb of the pulse there at the side of the throat.

“I’d like to. . .” John murmured, and let his lips brush against the ridges of the ear. “Be here for your pleasure.” His hand found the thigh through layers of watery silk, just above the knee; the muscle was pleasingly taut and sturdy beneath the flats of his fingers, stroking first side to side, and then venturing ever-so-slowly upward.

A delirious, unrestrained low hum from Xie: “Mmm. . .” A tilt of the head, inviting John’s mouth to explore the cables and valleys of the long throat, and his fingers and thumb arced along the thick flank of quadriceps muscle, fingertips skating the sharp edge of the outer ridge. Then all at once, Xie said, “No,” and Xie’s hand caught John’s and stopped it, didn’t push John away, but held him.

John sat back but left his hand where it was, trapped beneath the welcome weight of Xie’s hand, on Xie’s solid thigh. “Listen,” John said softly, “I understand if you’re feeling guilty—because of your husband—“

“No.”

“We can forget what happened earlier. It’s—well it’s not fine, but it’s fine.”

“No.”

John caught Xie’s eye for half an instant, then watched his own hand guiding the cuff of the sleeve up to Xie’s wrist, exposing the broad back of the hand lying atop his own. To their stacked hands, he said, “I just mean—the stakes are higher for you, and I’d understand you not wanting to take the risk—regretting tonight—and all of this.” He raised his eyes again. “But if you don’t stop me, I’m telling you now: I won’t stop.”

“I’m not going to stop you,” Xie whispered. The glossy red mouth slid into a smile. “I don’t want it to stop. You to stop.”

“All right then.” John grinned and licked his lips. “Good. I’m glad.” He leaned in again, with an aim to open his mouth against Xie’s amber-and-jasmine-scented neck.

“But I do have to say good night.”

“Please let me kiss you,” John murmured against the tender skin of Xie’s neck. “Just once.”

“You are kissing me. . .”

“That mouth. Those lips that look so rough under all that shiny paint. Please.”

“Soon,” Xie breathed, and all at once the free hand was resting against John’s chest, fingering the
John felt a tightening tingle in his nipple as Xie’s long fingers petted his shirt front.

“Good,” John gusted, and snaked his tongue-tip upward along Xie’s neck, nearly the back, close to the hairline. “I’ll consider it a promise.”

“I have to go, or I’m afraid I never will.” A hitch of breath that nearly sent John insane. He let out a low moan against Xie’s throat.

“So don’t,” he insisted, and pressed his upper teeth.

“Please don’t tempt me to break any more of my rules.”

John pulled away from a lightly sucking kiss where Xie’s neck met the sloping shoulder. “In that case, let me leave. I don’t think I can watch you walk out without trying to stop you.”

Xie’s fingertips traced a trail down the long, pale neck, caressing the places John had kissed and bitten, and the black lingerie-lace lashes lowered to hood the eyes. “All right then; I’ll see you out.” Xie stood, and John followed, his chest and gut and prick all too warm and aching with desire. It wasn’t but a few steps to the door, and John reached to lift Xie’s hand to his mouth, pressed kisses to the knuckles and fingertips.

“‘There’s something . . .’ Xie said suddenly, in a different tone of voice John couldn’t quite interpret. Xie’s gaze darted to the floor, then up toward the door just past John’s shoulder, then at John’s chest. John lowered their hands by their sides but held on, waiting. Xie’s fingers slipped beneath the lapel of his jacket, the thumb stroking downward across the surface. Xie swallowed, John could see the adam’s apple retreat and advance. Looking at the thumb stroking, not at John, Xie spoke again.

“I need a favour.”

So there it came. John knew his poker face wasn’t good; and with Xie’s keen ability to observe absolutely everything, he figured it for a lost cause to even try. Best to shut off the taps of his emotion—a trick at which John had excelled since childhood, retreating to the far corner of the garden when his dad got that look in his eye and his mum started in with every trick she knew to placate him—feel nothing, reveal nothing. He’d been stupid to think this amazing creature had really put together this elaborate costume, chased off another drasha, flirted and smiled and plied him with drink on a night off, just to spend time with him: The Face, a dangerous man, a liar. Xie had let him peel back the sleeves and nuzzle the neck and come into the hand, all the while coaxing him to talk, to give away that he was weak with wanting and therefore ripe for manipulation. It made more sense this way, he thought, though he hated that it did; Xie needed a favour, so John—slave to his prick, rookie mistake, what an idiot he’d been—was led on and then, just for insurance, wanked off.

He dropped Xie’s hand, or Xie pulled away—maybe both at once, no matter—and Xie went into a pocket in the seam of the flowing gown, drew out a handful of familiar white plastic cards. John didn’t get a good look, didn’t need one because it was obvious it was a stack of Identity Cards, no doubt assigned false names and loaded with illegal currency overages. Xie slid the stack into the breast pocket of his jacket, laid the long hand palm-down over it. Finally, Xie met his gaze, and looked momentarily lost.

“What’s this,” John said flatly.
“I can’t explain. Will you just hold them for me?” Xie’s eyes searched his, and he could see there was hesitation. The first two fingertips even hooked the upper edge of his pocket and moved tentatively side to side, as if Xie might be considering reclaiming the ICs. “Just hold them.”

John nodded and made no move to reclaim Xie’s hand. “I told you already I think I’m liable to do anything you ask. It wasn’t a lie.” John wasn’t sure whether his reassurance even mattered; Xie already thought him a liar. Or, at the very least, was on the verge of thinking so.

“It won’t be for long,” Xie said, and the look in the green-blue eyes was decidedly unsure. John found himself relieved; if Xie was off balance, too, maybe all wasn’t lost, and he could still regain the upper hand in whatever new game they were playing. Like some naïve first-timer, all it had taken was some attention to his prick for John to let his guard fall, assumed it meant something it didn’t. Of course Xie didn’t want him. Of course not. He was only useful. Still, there was a job to do, and a pile of illegal Identity Cards was almost certainly relevant, so John would go along. Stupidly, he’d let his emotions through to the surface. That wouldn’t—couldn’t—happen again.

They were already standing close, but John half-stepped forward, even further into Xie’s space, and Xie’s arm was trapped between their bodies, palm resting high on John’s chest.

“I’m a liar. You said so yourself.”

Xie said nothing, only stared into his eyes.

“I’m a dangerous man.” Not a threat, only a reminder.

Xie didn’t flinch, didn’t even blink. “Just the sort of man I need.”

John’s eyebrows went up and he nodded slightly, resigned to it. He stepped back and went for the door handle.

“Tomorrow, then,” he said, and didn’t wait for Xie’s reply before stepping through and closing it behind him.

* *

Xie quickly finished the evening’s business at the wall screen—credited Flor’s Identity Card with curr; summoned the cleaners to fix up the room, lowered the lights—then retreated upstairs to the dressing room.

Once inside, Sherlock locked the doors and kept his back to the makeup mirror as he untied the sash, unbuttoned the gown, shook it down from the shoulders and left it to puddle on the floor. Beneath it he wore his usual foundation of tightly elastic briefs similar to cycling shorts. He had no interest in undertaking any of the painful extremes about which he’d read when researching drag illusions in his youth, of male genitalia manipulated painfully, all surfaces smoothed with cunning use of tape and undergarments and hours spent aching for the sake of hiding what was most masculine. He couldn’t hide the thick column of his neck, nor his deep voice, nor even the tips of his fingers—and anyway, he wasn’t trying to pass as a woman—so why would he bother to attempt self-inflicted genital torture? It was enough to merely point his prick up, center his bollocks beneath fabric sturdy enough to keep things where he wanted them, and (usually) wear gowns that draped and floated rather than clinging.

He perched on the red armchair to remove his shoes—not as comfortable as his softest slippers, but not nearly as difficult to wear as some—simple black sandals with a thick rubber platform sole and a single strap across the top, between the toes. Opaque black stockings with the big toe defined to
accommodate the strap were peeled down from just below his knees and left inside-out on the floor, and he scratched gratefully around his ankles and up his shins, resettling the smattering of fine dark hair. A flurry of hairpins made a light clatter as he dropped them onto the side table, and the silk roses came loose from the hairpiece, then the hairpiece from his own hair, and he spent a long minute massaging his tender scalp with his fingertips, teasing his waves of hair apart and breaking the bonds of the styling products he’d used to arrange it. It was a wonderful, pure relief to worry his fingers over each aching spot where his hair had been pulled in the wrong direction, bearing excessive weight. Where his scalp had irritatingly burned, now it pleasantly throbbed. He let his eyes close.

John Watson had left the salon feeling manipulated and used. Sherlock hadn’t meant it to play out that way, but had foreseen it as a possibility, of course. With Xie murmuring in John’s ear, teasing and stroking—and yes, Sherlock had to admit to himself now, testing him—and then demanding a favour with no real explanation...of course a man like John Watson, ex-military, a man with an illegal firearm and a stack of borrowed stories to preserve his cover, would think it was all an elaborate ruse. But Sherlock would have asked John to hold those ICs, regardless. The timing was, in the end, unfortunate, and now it would serve as another test, of sorts—one that could clarify John’s intention. Sherlock didn’t worry that John would report Xie’s deck of false Identity Cards to Unity, but he did wonder if John might not come back to the Icehouse, to Xie’s salon, to the willingly bared throat and wide open hands. It was entirely possible that with a shuddering sigh and tight-bitten lips, John Watson had already gotten all he came for.

Sherlock stretched the entire length of his body: neck and shoulders; rippling spine; muscular, endless legs and long feet. He let his head come to rest propped on the chair’s back as he sank back into a more relaxed posture, and lifted his fingertips to drag slowly down the length of his neck, remembering John’s fingers there—John’s breath, lips, tongue. John’s open, sucking mouth. John’s teeth. Up again for another pass, starting low on his cheeks, down over his jaw, then a slow tickling slide, pinkies bumping over his adam’s apple, middle fingers briefly sensing his pulse. This time he let his hands drift lower, turning inward and spreading to cover his pectorals, skating the tips of his nipples—how tightly they’d beaded up in reaction to John’s attentions, tingling and warming beneath Xie’s silk gown. Sherlock scissor-pinched them between the knuckles of his first and second fingers. Would John want to pinch them this way, or run his fingers over the flattened curves of Sherlock’s chest, hard-ridged with muscle where a woman would be soft and plump? If only. But John wanted Xie. He’d spent his pleasure in Sherlock’s oversized hand, but the breathless moans that accompanied it had been cosseted around Xie’s name.

Sherlock caught sight of his reflection—whorish red lips still shining with lipstick and lacquer, eyes hooded by enormous false lashes like black lace lingerie—and immediately shut his eyes against it.

*John checked his face in the mirror on his way into the shower, god he looked so old, like his father, that bastard.*

Sherlock shifted his grip, pinched his nipples harder now between thumb and curled forefinger, rolled and tugged and felt the tingling thrill of it all the way down to his still tightly-restrained cock.

*John let the water slap his back, hard and hot, like a punishment for being so stupid, falling for a honey trap without even getting to dip his prick in the honey; he soaked his head, and blinked appreciation for the way the water stuck his eyelashes together and stung his eyes.*

Sherlock wanted John—wanted John’s fingers on his nipples, rippling along his ribs, settling on the jut of hipbone, digging in there to hold him fast and guide him where John wanted him—but did John want him?

*John’s fingers as he flicked water from his lips smelled faintly of amber and jasmine that quickly*
dissipated in the steam around his face. The smell of that sturdy neck; the salt and honey taste of the fingertips, the feel of the soft palm of that big gorgeous hand; John craved more, all, desperately longed to peel away the layers to reach hot skin, hard muscle, wiry body hair, and a darker, fuller scent than the dank floral one worn to mask it. Whatever Xie’s game was, John’s cock clearly didn’t mind a single bit that he was being used, and John maneuvered the taps to cool the shower a bit, braced himself with one hand above him wrapped around the neck of the showerhead, the fingers of his other hand sliding back his foreskin.

Sherlock pushed his flattened fingers beneath the waistband of his shorts and shoved them down beneath his bollocks, his thickened, aching cock at first lying flush against the wiry hair there, then rising away as it filled hot with blood and need. Would John want to see him like this, thrumming and flushed and with his cock full and glistening at the crown? Would John take him in his hand, in his mouth? Sherlock swiped his palm with his tongue.

John fucked into his hand, sucking his bottom lip into his mouth and holding it in place with his teeth. He wanted to smear those painted lips with his thumb, bare their coarse surfaces for his own lips to rough up against, for his tongue to trace and his teeth to bite.

Sherlock’s hand worked his prick in quick, light strokes with a swirling pinch each time he reached the dripping head, drawing his own slick along his length on the downstroke. John had asked for, practically demanded, Sherlock’s name—what would it sound like flowing out of John’s mouth, pouring into his own ear—but wanting Sherlock’s name wasn’t the same as wanting him. This body. This wreck. Xie was soft and sweet-smelling and smooth, while Sherlock was angular, ungainly, scarred, and so imperfect.

John’s arse clenched in time, knees bent, hips rocking up into his curled palm, and he panted Huh. . . Huh. . . Huh., dreaming of peeling back silk and satin to reveal a sharp-boned body pale as those huge hands, long and lean and arching up to meet him; John wanted to know—needed to know—whatever was hidden there he wanted to lick it, suck it, inhale it, devour it. He groaned, so close, he wanted, he wanted, god how he wanted.

Behind closed eyes, Sherlock conjured the hungry looks John had given him earlier that evening amplified to snarling, licking lips and teeth, wolfish. . . ‘Wolf! There’s a wolf!’ . . . A broken moan escaped his dry mouth as he wrapped his fingers tighter around his prick, shifting the skin up and back, pinching one stinging nipple past the point of pain. If he whispered his true name in John’s ear, then would John want him?

Fuck. Yes. Who are you? God I want you. Yes.

If he gave John this body, would John take it?

I want you, want to have you, have you, oh fuck. . .

What would John say to this shivering mess? Yes. This broken bundle of bones? Oh god yes. This skin. These angles. This salt-and-musk cum spurting from this flushed-pink prick just for him, for him, only for him? Yes. Oh yes. Oh my god yes.
In chapter 7, Xie and John parted with promises to meet again; Xie asked a favour; and each was left with uncertainty and no small degree of longing.

“There’s some indication that the money being laundered through the Icehouse is bound for Africa, of all places.”

“Africa,” John echoed. “Are they even getting mobile phone service there?”

“Not much past the borders of Morocco, but that’s all that’s needed. Obviously Deep Sea could be operating anywhere—the whole continent’s in shadow,” the Mentor said. “Or perhaps it’s being used as a waypoint for indirect smuggling.”

“Smuggling what, though?” John wondered. He was half-listening; surely he’d be taken off this job long before these kinds of details became useful to anyone. He was way out of his depth, it was obviously complex and despite the fact he’d asked for a different kind of job, he was feeling the itch for something familiar and simple. Acquire target, terminate target, get paid. He nudged the drapes aside, gazed down at mostly-empty Baker street, tracked the movement of some irrelevant bloke in a cheap suit and bad hair cut. “People? Weapons? Where would anyone even get weapons.” He huffed a half-laugh. “Has the army been keeping up with inventory?”

“I assure you, if there are weapons to be had outside the military, they are not government issue. It’s impossible.”

The curtain fell back into place and John crossed through the small, cluttered lounge—the flat came furnished and full of some stranger’s effluvia; John vaguely imagined someone may have died and left it all. Walking into 221B Baker Street had been like walking into someone else’s life.

“Nothing’s impossible,” John countered, but not forcefully. “Anyway, I’ll—what, note that and put it in the file?”

“If that helps you,” the Mentor replied, and the dismissive shrug was audible.

“Who stayed here last?” John asked suddenly, swiping a finger along a bare spot on the mantel and checking for dust, of which there was little.

“That’s privileged information. And none of your concern.”

John’s head was tight and achey. “Yeah, no, OK. Doesn’t matter. Just curious. Have you been here? It’s a tip.”

“Transient people tend not to be tidy. When’s the last time you worried about cleaning up after one of your jobs?” John wondered how it was possible for the Mentor to raise his eyebrow in a phone call.

“Point taken.”
“You’ll report in a week. To me. Nothing in writing.”

“Yeah. Fine.”

John opened all the kitchen drawers, one after the other. The usual—one with dishrags and oven gloves; one full of pens and notepads and takeout menus and rubber bands; one with flatware. No scissors, but those might be in the desk, or the medicine chest. More significantly: no knives. There were regular table knives, sufficient for spreading jam, but nothing keener. No chef’s knife, no bread knife, and he’d be out of luck if he were suddenly to get a wild desire to fillet a fish. In the few days he’d been ensconced in the flat—John didn’t think of it as a safe house, as the minimal surveillance he’d been told about meant the place was probably less safe than the norm—his diet had consisted primarily of takeaways and sandwiches from the shop downstairs; he didn’t need much in the way of chef’s tools. Regardless, it was a bit strange. Perhaps the previous tenant had been that crazy one who only used blades, and she’d refilled her quiver from the kitchen on her way out.

There was a safe in the miniscule third floor bedroom—he’d stashed Xie’s fake ICs there—and John considered leaving his gun inside it while he spent the evening at Xie’s salon. It felt strange having it there where all was genial and genteel, but at the same time thinking of being separated from it felt a bit like locking his prick in a strongbox and walking away—impractical, uncomfortable in the extreme, and potentially very dangerous to his health. He’d shower and shave, leave the holster aside once he’d dressed, and see how it felt.

On the kitchen table lay an already-wrapped gift for Xie, and another notecard depicting a *ukiyo-e* painting of smiling geishas playing musical instruments (tempted though he was, John had bypassed the dirty ones in favour of something innocent). He’d labored over the note itself for some time—absentmindedly chewed the end of his plastic biro into a flattened, shreddy mess as he thought—but was ultimately satisfied with the distinctly non-poetic product of his labour. He’d promised himself as soon as Xie had slid those Identity Cards in his pocket that he would stay on the job as long as he had to, but not get personally involved. Let Xie go on thinking John could be gamed, fine—that was something he could work to his own advantage. He’d play dumb and let Xie unload evidence onto him—right into his pockets—maybe even eventually come to trust him enough to give up useful information. All that endless conversation—Xie was bound to let something valuable slip out eventually.

Of course, there were images of Xie in his mind that had no bearing at all on the job, distracting images he found he wouldn’t have wanted to push from his mind even if he could. Sensations and sound and *dear god* those big hands and that sturdy long neck, hinting at that something more John found himself heartily hungry for. The heat of Xie’s breath against his face, the sonorous silken voice, the expert fingers, the amber-jasmine aroma skating the surface of Xie’s skin. . . As surely as John knew that to give second thought to any of it—let alone to dwell on the promise yet to be delivered—was as good as painting a pretty little target right between his eyes, he knew just as strongly that with a flutter of false lashes or the snap of bony fingers, Xie could set him on his knees. One pretty word, one bared shoulder, would put John facedown at Xie’s feet in worshipful supplication, and he’d be glad of it. Xie could command him, and he would obey. Whatever—whoever—it was living inside the elaborately painted, elegantly draped shell of Xie was almost certain to overwhelm him completely, and despite the alarms clanging in his head, John was eager for it.

And then, of course, there was this issue of the administrator, this weasely-looking spouse, with his bad jokes and attempted staredowns. Xie had instantly dulled in his presence, staring at the floor, hands wringing beneath the folds of overlong sleeves. The memory of it made John’s guts twitch; dimming a star like Xie was a blatantly criminal act. Jim Moriarty was a problem, and not one to be solved, but—more satisfyingly, to be sure—one to be dispatched.
John tried to wash the whole tangled mess of it from his brain with scalding water and shampoo that smelled like arsenic. He shaved and dressed; in the end, he took his gun.

The scientists and their spouses turned out to be spectacularly elderly. They were reserved, quiet, had various European accents among them, and one of the women was wearing a bizarre red hat with a vertical plume curled near the top like a candy cane. The scientists were three men and a woman, and only two of them had brought spouses, so once a drasha dressed in what appeared to John’s inexpert eye to be a traditional Japanese kimono led him in and made introductions, the party numbered four gents and three ladies. The scientists were posh—all vlast, obviously, but they’d likely been upper class Before. One of the men sounded American.

The sliding door John now realised must lead to Xie’s dressing room slid open with its familiar wooden rumble in its track, and Xie minced in possibly on tiptoe, taking tiny steps. Traditionally shaped kimonos seemed to be the order of the day, as all the drashas and now Xie, too, were wearing them. Xie’s appeared to have been created from one oversized, reshaped Union Jack, the white and red crosses shooting up toward the shoulders and down across the wings of the sleeves and the narrow skirt, all on the familiar field of blue. A wide obi sash worn high relative to the natural waist was of solid blue, with narrow bands of white and red peeking beneath its bottom edge, another narrow ribbon of white across the vertical center beneath an enormous, faceted red jewel set in ornately carved metal—it might have been an antique brooch. The hem swirled in a pool around Xie’s hidden feet. The face was made up pale—not the heavy white of a geisha by any stretch, but remarkably light—and nearly featureless as the lips and face were all of the same powdery shade. A wide, bright slash of red, like a swipe from a paintbrush, ran from temple to temple across Xie’s eyes, covering the bridge of the nose and the eyebrows. There was a tiny white pearl glued at the inner corner of each blue-green eye, and the wig was an angular style shorter in back than in the front, where long wisps of shiny black hair brushed the shoulders. Every now and then, when Xie’s head turned, blue and red faceted beads dangling from the earlobes caught the light.

John was still unaccustomed to the sensation of mild asphyxia that overcame him whenever Xie entered a room—he sucked in a gasp of astonishment and then forgot to exhale it again, every time. He wanted to stand, but as no one else seemed similarly moved he only lifted his chest and shoulders a bit as Xie greeted them in the typically hospitable fashion, meeting each pair of eyes in turn, stopping to compliment each lady on a piece of jewelry or shade of lipstick or that ridiculous feathered hat. Xie at last caught John’s eye.

“I feel so safe when my friend Captain Watson visits.” A stagey wink in John’s direction. “Not only is he trained as a surgeon in case I fall off my shoes and scrape a knee—” This drew mild laughter from the assembled, and John tipped his head at them, quarter-smiling in a way that was meant to repel rather than invite conversation. “—but he was also a soldier, so he’s almost certain to have a huge store of dirty jokes in case I run out of conversation before the evening’s out!” A heartier laugh, and John raised his eyebrows, playing along.

Xie made a sweeping gesture toward one of the other drashas, who scurried into the next room and soon wheeled in the tea cart John had seen on his earlier visit to the salon. “In order to save myself in advance from running short of topics,” Xie smiled, “I would be so grateful, Dr Swain, if you would indulge my curiosity—” Once it was settled in place, Xie stood beside the cart and with syrupy, flowing movements and hands discreetly covered by sleeves that somehow managed never to knock anything over or dip into a pot or cup, began to pour the tea. Addressing a white-haired gent in a pale grey suit and the gold-on-crimson necktie of his alma mater, Xie went on, “—I understand your
research was critical in developing some of the early agricultural advances made by Unity in the
dawn of our prosperous era.” Xie poured steaming water from a minimally fussy, rectangular white
pot over a small mound of dark tea leaves in the bowl of a silver strainer resting across the rim of a
cup. “How were you approached with the assignment, I wonder?” Xie lifted the strainer away and set
it on a waiting tray on the lower shelf of the tea cart, lifted the cup in its saucer. “Do you care for
honey?”

The white-haired scientist declined, and Xie passed him the cup, then returned to the business of
pouring the next cup as the man set his tea—chamomile, possibly with a bit of lemon, John could
smell its perfume in the rising steam already—on the low table in front of his knee, and harrumphed
into his closed fist, resettling his girth on the sofa.

“Yes, well, I’d been working in food science most of my career,” he began in a decidedly Southern
American accent, and Xie passed a cup of tea to his wife, started to pour the next, attentive both to
the scientist and to the business of the tea simultaneously. “For one of the big fast food chains there
in the states, in Florida. So it was really much more science than food, when it comes to it.” He
directed this jokey comment to one of the other scientists, who hummed agreement and nodded,
looking amused. “Karin and I were a few years married then—second for both of us—and she was
based in Hamburg.”

“I worked in banking. Took early retirement after the restructuring,” his wife volunteered.

Every now and then, when Xie twisted and dipped just a bit, to place a tea strainer on the lower
shelf, John caught a glimpse of unpainted skin beneath the neckline of the kimono as it shifted there
near the ridge of collarbone. Half-listening to the scientist reeling out his story, John willed himself
not to think of dipping two fingers beneath the fabric there, feeling nothing but pure skin free of paint
and powder, or—worse, more troublingly distracting—of holding the thick, rough silk aside and
nuzzling close enough to smell not jasmine-and-amber perfume, but something else. Something salty
and low. He purposely shifted his attention back to the storyteller.

“We were glad to be offered settlement in Europe, of course, and when I met with a processor about
a work assignment, he told me about Unity’s First Hundred Days initiative—to feed and house the
world in a hundred days—well, of course I wanted to do my part. That’s noble. I remember thinking
precisely that: ‘noble.’ I was assigned to a group there on the continent, and did some fast work on
developing grain crops that required less water and had shorter seed-to-harvest windows, so we got
half-again as much yield in each season.”

The others seemed interested; John thought it was the typical overly-sunny reminiscence of a truly
harrowing period when the Chinese were rumoured to be burning down their farms and engaging in
mass suicides in their terror of suffering starvation and torture in another Great Leap Forward. There
had been, in those hundred days, impressive progress made—explosions of construction and massive
rejiggering of food distribution, work assignments sorted, Identity Cards issued, class status assigned,
and currency allotments determined. By the hundredth day under the new Unity government, the
world looked different indeed—you might even say it looked better, especially if you didn’t wish to
be arrested for poisonous ideas—but it was difficult to entirely overlook the mass relocations, the
disappearance of the infirm and undesirable. Certainly, Unity had made its First Hundred Days goals
slightly more reachable by cutting the population by thirty percent in the first ten days. It wasn’t
talked about.

Xie had distributed all but the last few cups of tea, and the fellow was wrapping up his story. “I
wanted to keep working until we’d finished the wheat we were working on—drought tolerant
enough to grow even in a desert, ‘Wheat fields in Namibia!’ we used to say to urge ourselves on—
but Karin wanted to travel before we got too old.” He lifted his cup, prepared to sip, pausing to
throw an affectionate grin at his wife for her foresight in forcing the issue of his turning in his lab coat. “My group perfected the wheat eight months after my retirement. They’ve had two harvests in Angola already.”

“What a storied career, Dr Swain,” Xie said, sounding suitably impressed. John caught the flash of bare skin again and noticed himself licking his lips but couldn’t help it, and ultimately decided not to be bothered; he vaguely hoped Xie might even notice. Xie passed tea to the woman in the red hat and finished, “It really was noble work of which you can be rightly proud. I’m sure Mrs Swain is proud of you, as well—even moreso on the beach at Cannes.” The wife burbled a laugh at this, as expected. John found himself suddenly thankful he’d never married.

“I imagine you’d have much to discuss with my friend Dr Lyons,” Xie offered, indicating with a light gesture. “Her work was related to agriculture, as well.”

The two researchers began exchanging CVs, and the rest fell into chatter about how to best pass their time on holiday in the London pleasure district—comparing restaurant menus and matinee offerings and asking each other which hotels they were staying in. Xie had only two cups of tea left to serve. Three other drashas swooped in to deliver platters of little biscuits, tarts, cakes, and candies, arranged beautifully on beds of tea leaves dotted here and there with curls of gold leaf and tiny yellow flowers, which refocused discussion onto exclamations of how beautiful it all was, accompanied by lots of pointing to different items and guessing their identities, provenance, and fillings.

After a quick scan of the sweets trays, John turned his eyes back on Xie, who looked at him momentarily with an entirely new expression, brow lifting as if asking John if things were all right between them. John grinned assurance and Xie’s pale lips twitched upward, the fingertips of the left hand emerging to fold back the hem of the sleeve on the right hand—only halfway, exposing the fingers and just the first third of the hand itself—and as Xie had successfully poured and served half a dozen cups of tea without incident, John knew this was done for him, for his pleasure. Xie was attentive to the work at hand: laying the heavy silver tea strainer over the lip of the cup, spooning in the tea leaves, pouring from the pot with the exposed fingers gripping the handle. John’s eyes were fixed on the long fingers, and given present company, he tried but mostly failed to push away memories of how they’d felt wound around him, drawing forth sighs and shudders while Xie breathed against his jaw.

A pretty show was made of dipping the wooden honey-dripper into the pot, then drawing it out and drizzling a golden stream of the sweet syrup into John’s cup, then the pale fingers lifted the saucer and Xie stepped behind the sofa where John sat, leaned forward over his right shoulder to present his cup on its saucer. When John reached for it, he brushed the insides of his fingers against the backs of Xie’s.

In a whisper that stirred the hairs behind John’s ear, Xie murmured, “I’m glad you came back,” then straightened to stand and moved away. The sleeve had fallen back into place by the time Xie poured the final cup of tea and settled with it onto the arm of another sofa.

The party carried on for as long as it took them to finish their cups and make two passes at the sweets trays, during which Xie had said, “This one tastes of cardamom and burnt sugar, John; I know you’ll like it,” and just the voice, the lips and tongue carving out the words from the breath, had John shifting to give himself room—absolutely desperate for another glance at the bare skin of the upper chest, the dank and flowery perfume in his nostrils, the sturdy thigh beneath his hand. Conversation stayed on neutral topics, boring as hell, and John didn’t volunteer anything, only speaking when spoken to. John looked into the bottom of his cup at the gold-green, gritty dregs of his tea and imagined how shocked the old geezers would be if he acted on his thudding desire to close the short distance between him and Xie in a few sure strides, to shove his hand inside the open edge of the
neckline and grip hard muscle, feel the tight pebble of a nipple graze the edge of his pinky. ..to clutch that rectangular chin in his hand and claim those pale lips, ravish the mouth that almost certainly tasted of apples and straw, cardamom and burnt sugar. ..

“No, never have,” he answered the fat German one, “Never have been to Scandinavia.” A winning grin. A lie. He’d done a job in Trondheim not two months before. The hotel had been aces—huge, soft bed in a luxury suite with a view of the sea. The target had cursed both John and John’s mother in the instant between seeing the Face and slumping to the floor. A waste of last words, in John’s estimation. John checked his watch and excused himself to the gents’ as the drashas started clearing away the cups and saucers and spoons.

As he washed his hands, he wondered if Xie would know he’d lied about never having been to Scandinavia, and if so, whether it would be another strike against him. Then he wondered why it should matter to him how many strikes went against him anyway; he was here to do a job, and wanting to unwind Xie’s miles of flowing fine fabric to devour whatever they hid was perhaps inconvenient, but it was not as if he’d never wanted to fuck a target—or, in this case, not a target but. ..what?. .. an asset—before. In fact, there were far more he had wanted to take to bed (or in an alley, or against a restroom sink) than those he hadn’t. He could keep working to seduce Xie out of those silk robes and still get the job done; he just couldn’t kid himself it meant something it didn’t.

He felt a bit self-congratulatory about his ability to compartmentalize as he emerged from the gents’, rounded the corner back into the main part of the salon, rubbing his palms together, smiling lightly. But then he realized that in his absence, the party had quickly broken up, that the drashas had removed every trace of evidence—every teaspoon, every crumb—and that Xie was reclining sideways on a long chaise, bent legs covered by a dramatic swoop of the long hem of the kimono. Alone.

“I didn’t think you’d mind missing out on goodbyes,” Xie said, smiling.

“No, no. Ah—no,” John stammered, and stood stupidly in the middle of any number of places he could be sitting. “No, I don’t mind. That was quick.”

Xie waved one arm dismissively, trailing the sleeve that covered the entire hand. “They moved downstairs to the cigar lounge.”

“But. . .” John protested, and pointed to the tabletop humidor he knew was full of the same fine cigars his military companions had smoked on his first visit to the salon.

“Oh, of course. I forgot.” Xie’s pale mouth curled up around the gently sarcastic response. “Shall I call them back, then?”

“Oh god no.”

John cracked his own smile then. He was doomed. He’d have to get the Mentor to take him off the job; he was fucked—he was dead. His mind tripped over itself rushing to the part where this somehow ended with him flayed alive, tied up with his own intestines, hurled into the Thames. But in the meantime, here was Xie drawing the knees in a bit and gesturing with covered hand and sideways gaze to the empty end of the chaise, silently inviting—or commanding?—John to sit.

“Did I notice you had a little something?” Xie ventured, and John still didn’t move to sit, casting his eyes around the room for an excuse to leave, an alarm to pull, a bottle of brown liqueur—even the cheap stuff would do. “A little gift? Maybe. . .” Eyes downcast demurely, as if Xie was unsure. “. ..for me?”
“Actually, yes,” John said, and jabbed one finger in the air—*aha!*—then crossed to a long console table against the wall near the lift. He picked up the little wrapped package and when he returned, he did sit at the end of the chaise, sitting straight-backed near the edge as if he might shortly need to flee. He passed the gift to Xie, who let one sleeve slip back just enough to uncover the fingers as it was received.

“Oh! It’s lighter than I expected!” Xie exclaimed, holding the attached card by its corner; the box, cube-shaped, sat atop it effortlessly, attached with a pyramid of ribbon north-to-south and east-to-west around both, tied into a bow at the top. “Did you wrap it yourself?”

“You can’t tell?” John joked. “I’m sure a professional would have made a much nicer presentation.”

“I like it.” Xie began to pick at the knots with fingertip and thumb. “I saved the ribbon from the other gift you sent.”

“Did you?”

“Of course. I might need it someday.” A shrug with head and shoulders. “To decorate a wig or to hang a pendant on. . .you never know.”

John was pleased, probably more than was warranted. Xie caught a loop of the ribbon at hand—which was dark red, velvet on one side—and began to pull. “This matches the salon. I’ll save it, too.” Once the box was untethered from the envelope, Xie draped the length of ribbon over the sideways-tilted thigh and let it rest there. One fingertip slid beneath the envelope’s flap. Xie read the note silently, smiled with closed lips.

“You’re a charmer, Captain Watson.”

John played dumb. “I can’t imagine what you mean.”

Xie—

*Carried the smell of your perfume with me all the way home last night, and I missed it as soon as I woke up this morning (a solid six hours; your bedtime story worked on some kind of time delay, maybe? Like a comfort bomb. I want to cross that out but I don’t want to mess the note with scribbling so I’ll leave it. Jokes like these are about what to expect from me in future, I’m afraid, should you decide to go on keeping company with me. In my favour, though, I can mix the cocktails your grandparents drank and I once assembled a shelving unit with directions in Japanese, so I think those add up to me being well-rounded and a good provider.).*

*I will sign off now before I embarrass myself (further). I have some very important staring into space dreaming of the side of your neck to do, anyway.*

*(already? Answer is yes I’m afraid) your,*

*John*

Xie tented the card on a nearby side table and turned attention to the box, which took some fiddling to open, the sleeves sliding down and away from the hands in the process in a way that seemed accidental even though John felt certain it was no accident. Inside, a layer of tissue to lift away, which Xie did gently, letting the paper drift in the air as it was moved aside to rest on the side table with the card. John couldn’t decide where to look, but since he already knew what was inside the box, he settled on Xie’s face.

Eyes widening, Xie dipped just the first two fingers and thumb into the box and drew out John’s gift: a painted egg with a window cut out and a little dioramic scene inside, of a dark-haired boy dressed
in blue and a little grey dog, both made of clay, in dynamic poses suggesting playfulness. The background of the scene—a dirt road, wooden fence, a tall patch of sunflowers—was delicately hand-painted on the interior of the egg’s shell in painstaking detail, and the boy and dog stood on a tiny platform covered in sand, a suggestion of the road portrayed in the tiny mural. The egg’s exterior was painted sky blue, with ornate gold and bronze metallic curlicues all over. Xie’s smile was one John hadn’t seen before—at first delighted admiration, sliding slightly sideways into mischief.

“The boy who cried wolf?” Xie asked.

“Something like that.”

“You’re the boy?”

John cleared his throat. “Clearly, I’m the wolf.”

Xie’s head drifted backward on the long neck in a half-nod. John waited for Xie’s prompt so that he could make a remark about Xie being the boy, but nothing was said which would open that particular door.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you.” Xie nested it back inside the box, propped up so it was visible but in no danger of being dropped or knocked over, and set it on the table beside the note card.

John rubbed his hands downward along the tops of his thighs. “Did you really not think I’d come?” he asked. “Earlier, when you said you were glad I came back, I got the impression you were. . .not surprised exactly, but. . .” he shrugged.

“I did wonder,” Xie said, but didn’t elaborate.

There was a rumpled pile of fabric beside John’s thigh, beneath which were tucked Xie’s feet, and calves, and shins; John let his gaze linger on the tricolour folds of heavy silk.

“It’s not a real flag, is it?” John asked suddenly, and leaned a bit, squinting at a fine line of white stitches.

“No. Of course not, no. Where would I even find one?” While it wasn’t technically illegal to have the colours of any of the nations that existed Before, there had been massive pressure to burn them, even ceremonial flags like those given to the widows and mothers of dead soldiers, and it was rare to ever see any flag other than Unity’s, in any context. “No, I stitched it together myself. I was thinking about the way you used to see it everywhere—made into t-shirts and on throw rugs and subverted in every conceivable way for fashion and style. Other countries’ flags were almost nothing but the most irksome, over-the-top sort of patriotic, even when printed on a handbag or a sticker on a car. But the Union Jack was always. . .rock-and-roll.”

John’s chest shook with a silent grunt of a laugh, remembering. “You’re right. The punks started it and it just kept on. It did always look cool.”

“It was excellent design,” Xie said, and it was obvious this was significant praise.

John reached for a nearby edge of the kimono’s hem and slipped his fingers under it, gripping with his thumb and lifting it closer to his face to examine the work. Xie’s knee shifted ever-so-slightly and John had never before in his life gasped out loud at the sight of bare toes, but there it came, sharply audible as his lips came apart around the inward rush of breath. Xie’s slight movement, combined with John holding the kimono’s hem aloft, had revealed the top edge of Xie’s foot: improbably long toes, nails as well-kept as the intricately manicured fingernails. John wondered momentarily if he should drop the edge of the gown back in place to cover it—it could be accidental—but a quick
glance at Xie’s self-satisfied grin gave John to know it was no accident.

“You know you’re torturing me,” John said, his voice betraying the fact he was more thrilled than exasperated.

“Nevermind, then,” Xie said breezily and began to reach for the hem as if to hide the bare toes, but the persistent smile gave it away as a ruse.

“Oh no you don’t,” John scolded, and caught Xie’s hands despite the screen of the dangling sleeves, wound both wrists up in the circle of his fingers and laid them aside, on Xie’s own knee. His gaze flicked down to the bare toes, still and pale against the rich, crimson brocade of the cushion, then up at Xie’s tantalizingly teasing expression, even as he slid his fingertips beneath the edge of the kimono and gently edged it back, revealing more of the long foot, and then further—nearly to the ankle. “Are you ticklish?” John asked.

“Not especially,” came the reply. Xie’s sleeve slipped down to the wrist as long fingers reached to sweep one lock of black hair slightly to expose more of the knife-edge jawline.

“May I touch?” John asked then, and he turned his body slightly more toward Xie’s bent legs.

“If you like.” Xie spoke and moved simultaneously so that by the time the words were out, Xie’s foot was resting in John’s lap with its high, elegant arch wantonly exposed. The other foot remained hidden beneath the folds of the kimono. Xie reclined more drastically to the side, against the high arm of the chaise. John couldn’t keep himself from letting go a soft hum through closed lips.

The foot resting on his thigh was long and narrow and soft-skinned, sharp tendons making themselves known as Xie flexed and curled the long toes a few times. As Xie had slid the foot into John’s lap, the ankle had emerged—its rounded jut of bone and the crush of folded skin behind it as the foot relaxed into a demi-point. Almost—but not quite—delicate, appropriately large for someone as tall as Xie, and obviously pampered and polished in the same manner as the hands—shiny, colourless nails trimmed precisely, not a hint of callus or blister or rough skin anywhere to be found. A few fine black hairs on the knuckles of the first two toes, and sprinkled across the instep. John draped one palm over the arch of the foot, feeling the tendons beneath his fingers, the vulnerable softness of the sole against the heel of his hand. Gently, he closed his hand to almost-grasp, then slid it down the length of the foot toward the toes, which wriggled a bit in response to his touch.

John continued to repeat this sweeping gesture, soft and sure, gently massaging, and looked up again find Xie’s expression had softened from its flirtatious tease into something much more tranquil, the eyelids drifting down toward sleep or pleasure.

“Why did you think I might not come back?” John asked quietly, and rested his other hand loosely around the ankle, testing the rigidity of the bones, the flexing of the tendons.

Xie’s eyes fell fully closed as John’s thumb worked itself in tiny circles against the softest, deepest center of the sole of the foot. Sleepily came the reply, “I thought you may have already gotten what you came for.”

John sat with this for a moment, choosing words. “But. I didn’t even expect to see you last night.”

Eyes still shut, tone still low and quiet. “Playing dumb doesn’t suit you, John.”

John cleared his throat, worked the pad of his thumb in a wobbly path along the instep of the pleasingly weighty foot. “No,” John agreed, surrendering. “Are we speaking plainly?”

“I thought once I’d gotten you off, your curiosity would be satisfied.”
“So we are speaking plainly, then,” John grinned. “That bit was. . .” He searched for the right phrase. “Pleasantly unexpected. But it’s not what I came for. Last night,” he clarified, “Or tonight, either.”

Xie’s closed mouth drifted up at the corners.

John used both hands to stroke and caress the length and breadth of the foot resting on his thigh, gently tracing along each toe in turn. Xie hummed. Suddenly aware of his own tongue darting out to lick his lips, John bit down on anything else he might have said. Wasn’t he cutting himself off from emotional entanglement in order to get through the job? He should be demanding intel on that pseudo-cop with the prematurely grey hair, asking about the stack of illegal ICs locked in a Unity-sanctioned safe in a Unity-arranged flat. Instead he was sitting with Xie’s—not Xie’s—smooth-skinned foot in his lap. He was not merely fucked—he was well and truly fucked.

Eventually, Xie murmured, “Are you not going to ask me again? You said you wouldn’t stop asking.”

“Are you going to tell me?”

“No.”

John changed the trajectory of his hands and fingers, now moving toward the heel, toward the ankle, with an aim to slipping his fingertips beneath the edge of the kimono and revealing more—the whole ankle, the shin and calf, sure to be leanly muscular, and—if John was lucky—lightly furred with more of the dark hair decorating the top of the foot and the toes.

John tried anyway. “Tell me your name?”

A breath: “Xie.”

“No,” John said, upward-tilted scolding in his tone. “I want the name that goes with that strong neck. . .” John’s fingers traced a circle around the jut of bone at the inside of the ankle. “And those handsome hands. . .” He slipped his fingers beneath, cradled the ankle with fingers and thumb, taking measurements. “And this lovely big foot.” He chuckled around the words, taking the liberty of teasing. Xie’s lips quirked up in amusement, but one hand drifted down to cover John’s hand where it had slipped beneath the hem of the kimono, pushed it gently away from the leg, and then adjusted the fabric to ensure the ankle was covered once more.

“You know my answer.” It was clear Xie was trying to let John down easy.

“Yes,” John acquiesced, and went back to massaging the foot. “If not never, though. . .”

Xie’s eyes came open gradually, looking heavily weighted, then blinked in slow motion as if fighting off a trance. John found himself unaccountably delighted, as if he’d coaxed a wild tiger to sleep in his lap.

“Soon.”

There was a familiar sound then, of a wooden door sliding along a track, though it was muffled and slightly distant, and John found himself looking at the door from which Xie usually emerged, though it was clearly shut. He frowned in puzzlement. Xie, however, all at once looked absolutely panicked, blue eyes wide and darting, body jerking upright, reclaiming the foot, rising quickly to stand.

“You have to—“
Xie grabbed John’s card off the side table and slipped it quickly into the front of the wide obi sash as the rumbling slide of the door—which must be hidden behind the door to the salon, on the other end of a corridor, John surmised—sounded the opposite tone as it was slid closed.

“Here,” Xie commanded in a harsh whisper, gripping John hard by his arm just above the elbow and urging him to his feet. “Just—“ Given the alarmed look on Xie’s face, John allowed himself to be persuaded, and ended up stepping through the door to the dining area where he and the soldiers had eaten dinner during his first visit, standing just inside it with his back to the wall, invisible from the main part of the salon. “I’m sorry,” Xie hissed, and moved to slide the door closed.

John stood in the dark, straining to hear. He reached across his chest, beneath his jacket, and silently unsnapped the small strap holding his pistol in its holster.

A man’s voice, which John quickly recognized thanks to its half-swallowed Dublin brogue. The administrator, Xie’s husband, that shifty-eyed Jim Moriarty.

“Party’s over, is it? . . .So why didn’t I see any tips when I looked up your IC just now?”

“They moved down to the cigar lounge; they’re probably just waiting until they’ve finished the evening.”

“Did you ask?”

A silent pause. John released the tension in his jaw with a quick grimace; he hadn’t realized he’d been clenching it.

“Well, did you?”

Xie sucked a sharp gasp while replying, “I never ask,” and John didn’t like the sound of it but couldn’t put his finger on why.

“Well maybe that should change. There’s plenty of girls working all through this place that aren’t afraid to ask.” A heavy shuffling sound, the rustle of Xie’s clothing against the brocade fabric of the chaise. “I see that soldier boy’s back sniffing around your skinny arse, again. Not another free party for him, I hope.”

“No.” Quietly; then slightly urgent: “Let’s go downstairs; are you done for the night? We can—“

“When am I ever done this early? Don’t ask stupid questions. . .What’s this?”

“Jim—“

“What is this? Someone brought you a present?”

“One of the guests, an old man. He makes these little eggs as his retirement hobby.”

John admired the quick thinking but hated hearing Xie tell a lie on his account. He closed his eyes.

“Stupid waste of time. . .Here’s a call from the front desk; going to report on your tips for the night. Whaddaya reckon?” A weirdly ominous tone of voice. John was going to bring up this Moriarty bloke in his next report, see what there was to learn.

“I’m sure I don’t know. Why are they calling you about that?”

“Because I told them to. Shut up now. Yeah?. . .All right. Good. . .You’re lucky. Lucky girl.”
“I need to get undressed. Come through.” The familiar rumble of the sliding wooden door. “Please.”

Jim’s voice turned simpering, mocking Xie’s tone. “Please. This what you want? Hmm? Please, Jim, oh please.”

More rustling, clothes shifting and rumpling, then mouth sounds, and a loud, low humming noise that could only be Xie’s deep voice. This was not on. John glanced around for another way out, but there was only the doorway behind his right shoulder, or the wall of glass across the room. Thirty stories? Maybe thirty-two? Not far to fall. And if he was lucky, the sound of the glass shattering as he launched himself through it might even drown out the imminent fuck-noises.

“Hmm?” Jim again, insistent, demanding. A heavy but muffled thud—a clothed body shoved against a wall—then something small but weighty scraping against a tabletop, and a beat of silence before whatever it was smacked against the wood of the floor.

“Here, come through. . .”

“I shouldn’t reward you for stupid questions and barely enough curr—“

“Jim. Please.” Xie’s voice was soft and dripping honey, and John wanted to jam a butter knife in his ear rather than listen to it at that moment, murmuring enticement to a man who was not him.

“Don’t beg like a slut, for god’s sake. Don’t treat me like one of these vlast slobs at your party, teasing and oh please, oh please like a desperate, stupid whore. You do sound like a whore, you know.”

The last thing John heard before first one door and then a second further one slid shut, cutting off all sound, was Xie’s long, low, “Shhh. . .”

He refused to imagine the end of the scene he’d just overheard, playing out behind two closed doors in what must be Xie’s dressing room—or even a bedroom?—so instead, John imagined the wide-eyed expression of stupid shock Jim would evince as the Face pressed the thick muzzle of a pistol between his beady eyes. John counted to fifty, and when the salon stayed silent and empty, he ducked around the corner to the lift, called it, crouched behind a sofa to wait for it, then gratefully let it swallow him down the throat of the Icehouse.
In chapter 8, John's spent time alone with Xie, perhaps against his better judgement, but they were interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Jim Moriarty.

I have forgotten until now--shame on me!--to thank Holly (HHarris/musthaveblackedout) for suggesting "the Mentor" as a codename for John's handler. Thanks, bae!

Also, several people have asked for clarification of the pronunciation of "Xie". Here is a link to a video. I hit the initial "Sh" perhaps a bit harder than what you hear there, but not much. I have sometimes said it is a syllable-and-a-half, closest to "Shyuh" or "Sh'yah". (As I write and read to myself, I think I hear "zhee" in my head, so don’t sweat it too hard!) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Km3DZmNCYw

Molly found your number for me in the computer records. Is it the right one? –X

Sherlock set his phone face-up on the make-up table, threw back three paracetamol, chased them with champagne from a bottle already half-gone. Nevertheless, his head throbbed. He glanced at the tiny, blank screen of his mobile every few seconds, edgy with impatience. There was a sensation in the middle-right of his back that felt like it wanted stretching and Sherlock fought an urge to twist in his little make-up chair, reaching across his body to grab its back and pull himself round. Stretching would not help; it was not that kind of pain. He resolved that it would not be a night to wear anything remotely like a corset.

As soon as Sherlock drained the last swallow of champagne, he immediately refilled the flute, telling himself there was no point letting it go to waste now that it was open. With tight focus born of years of practice, he was able to see only the reflections he wished to: his mouth, his neck, the waves of dark brown hair curling against his forehead. Tugging at the edges of the dressing gown to draw it tighter around him, he crossed it in front of his chest and retied the sash to be sure it wouldn’t slip. Sitting up straighter drew a sharp twinge of protest from that spot in his back; he lay one open hand gingerly against his torso and tried for a deep inhale made only slightly easier by gentle pressure there against his lower ribs.

Jim had woken Sherlock that morning, nuzzling into the curve below his jaw, their cheeks on the pillow, eyelashes brushing each other’s temples, Jim’s face boyish and wide-eyed and soft as he murmured against Sherlock’s throat and cheek and closed eye.

It was always the same. Sherlock silently scolded himself for being so quick to forgive, that morning as ever he had in the past. But Jim looked so sweet and sad, and his voice broke tight in his throat, and he really was—every time—he really was sorry. . .

(I was drunk.
I’m under a lot of stress.
I was in a bad mood.
I don’t know why.
If only you wouldn’t do these things to make me angry.
I’m sorry.
I love you.
I don’t want to. I never want to. Why do you constantly make me?

Jim had tenderly kissed and caressed every new mark he’d left on Sherlock’s betraying, too-easily-marked skin. He’d looked up at Sherlock from the middle of the bed down near Sherlock’s waist, hair all out of place and lips swollen with sleep. His eyes were red and glassy. He was so, so sorry.

**TXT from [unknown]:** Yes, it’s the right number.

Sherlock had the phone in his hand before it had finished vibrating, even before the screen had lit up.

*Good. I’m sorry, again, for the way things ended last night. –X*

**TXT from [unknown]:** I understand. It was uncomfortable all round. Maybe we should

Sherlock was sure John was going to say, “forget it.”

**TXT from [unknown]:** try to meet somewhere else, some other time.

*Perhaps. I have to ask you to stay away for a bit. –X*

Molly came in then after a quick, soft knock at the door, with a silken bundle in her arms in shades of orange, red, and yellow, with touches of white and blue that made it appear she was bearing a fire in front of her chest that trailed nearly—but not quite—to the floor. She hung the gown from a peg on the back of the door.

“Thanks,” Sherlock said absently.

“Anything else?” she asked, going for the notebook she stashed in the side table. Sherlock clasped the front of his dressing gown.

“Nothing,” Sherlock replied, and sat clutching his phone, staring at it, willing it back to life.

“You all right? You seem a bit—”

“Fine.”

Molly nodded quickly, jotted the evening’s notes in the book.

**TXT from [unknown]:** I thought you said you didn’t want it to stop?

“I’m . . .” Sherlock said to Molly then, thoughtlessly drawing a sudden breath that sent a quick, jagged jolt across his torso. Molly’s thin lips turned down at the corners but before she could speak, Sherlock said, “Could you take this away as you go?” and passed her the nearly-empty bottle of champagne.

As she received it, Molly looked as if she was about to say something, but Sherlock turned his back to her. “Let me know if you need anything, OK?”

Sherlock hummed, thumbs tapping away at a new message, and Molly went without another word.

*No, but it’s not safe at the moment.*

He backspaced, tried again.
I don’t want it to stop. It’s just that if we’re found out

As he deleted that attempt, another message from John.

TXT from [unknown]: Will you meet me somewhere? Tomorrow?
TXT from [unknown]: For coffee or something. Out in the world.
TXT from [unknown]: Just you, I mean. Without the whole Xie. . .

I can’t. –X

TXT from [unknown]: I want to say ‘armour’??? Oh. All right then.

Sherlock worried the corner of his lower lip between his teeth. There was too much to say, and he’d have to delete all these texts, anyway, just in case.

Can I send you a note? Would you write back to me? –X

Sherlock wanted to set the phone down, and even put it on the table, but couldn’t keep from letting his hand rest on top of it. Within a few seconds he plucked it back up, tapping its edge with one fingernail while he waited.

TXT from [unknown]: Send me whatever you like. Yes I’ll write back.
TXT from [unknown]: Or you could call me. If you can. If you like.
TXT from [unknown]: You know I’d love to talk to you even if not in person.

If I can. But I will definitely send a note in the morning.
I’m sorry.
Again. –X

TXT from [unknown]: It can’t be helped. Don’t apologize.

Sherlock rose to stand, ignored the throbbing ache in his back, the endless stab in his ribs. He ran fingers and palms down the front of the gown as it hung there, smoothed the full skirt then drew it outward like a giant paper fan, and finally let it fall back into place. Passing into the bathroom, he went for the medicine chest for drops to take the red out of his eyes. The shadows beneath them would soon enough be blended away with layers of cream and powder, and Xie would emerge to greet the guests, flawless, friendly, without a care in the world and certainly free of pain.

His mobile buzzed again as he was dripping two fat droplets into his left eye; he could already feel the drops in his right eye sliding down into his nose. He blinked, blinked, tilted his head back to center, relished the feel of streams like tears running down his cheeks before wiping them away with the flick of two fingers. His vision was a crystal-crack blur as he picked up the phone.

TXT from IcehouseAdmin: You’re OK Sweetheart, aren’t you.

Sherlock bit down on both lips, slid back into his chair before the mirror and drew open the narrow drawer, considering how to make up in a way that would best compliment the gown of gossamer flames.

Of course I am. –SH
The target stared at him stupidly for three seconds, four, looked as if he might try to run but in order to get to the exit door from where he was, just come out of a stall in a mens’ room in the factory where he was a foreman, he’d have to pass the Face, and that wasn’t going to happen. Just as his expression was beginning to rumple in a way that suggested he might beg for his life, call out to god, try to tell the Face he had a wife at home who needed him, the trigger was squeezed, the target fell, the job was done. It was always the same.

Back out on the pavement, half a block away, John put his back against a wall and took out his phone and made his report.

_Kid’s in bed. Time to pay the childminder._

One of the quickest, cleanest jobs he’d had in a while—clearly the Mentor had known John would take it despite whatever may have been suggested by his acceptance of the intel assignment in the pleasure district. A brief phone call that morning, and the job was done before tea time. John did the math in his head, just that much closer to the magic number that meant he was finished.

Before he’d even gotten his phone back in his pocket, it buzzed to life with a text from an unfamiliar number.

.TXT from [020.496.1130]: Molly found your number for me in the computer records. Is it the right one?—X

Xie. John kept his back to the wall and replied that the number was his. Once he’d got out of Xie’s salon the previous night, he went downstairs to the casino, trying to clamp eyes on the pit boss in the files, but found no sign of her. He sat at a bar for nearly an hour, nursing a whiskey not quite as good as what he usually drank at the Icehouse, and willed himself not to replay the sounds of Xie’s ferrety husband using words like _tease_ and _whore_ and _girl_; not to think about the low murmur of Xie’s black-silk voice trying to soothe him.

.TXT from [020.496.1130]: Good. I’m sorry, again, for the way things ended last night. –X

_I understand. It was uncomfortable all round. Maybe we should try to meet somewhere else, some other time._

.TXT from [020.496.1130]: Perhaps. I have to ask you to stay away for a bit. –X

There it was. John had not lied when he’d told Xie he had no interest in other mens’ wives; he’d never had a relationship with a married person, or even one who was seriously attached. Over the course of a few months during his medical training, he’d gone out a few times with a woman who was on her way out of an engagement—still living with the bloke until she could find another flatshare—but even that was too strange for him to tolerate; no matter how many times she told John he wasn’t the reason for her breakup, and that she wasn’t sleeping with her fiancé anymore, he never really believed her on either account. But somehow there he was, pursuing someone in a relatively long marriage (he wasn’t sure Xie’s age, but the phrase “drasha salon” had been common parlance for over a dozen years, and Xie had indicated they’d been together even before then), and the closest thing John had to a second thought was not out of guilt, but out of a growing desire to make Xie’s husband into one of his targets.

John supposed being waved off—at least temporarily—went with the territory but that didn’t mean he had to like the idea. Clearly Jim Moriarty could be unkind to Xie, and John didn’t want to be the excuse for it. He decided to give Xie an out, while still making it clear he did not wish to take one, himself.
I thought you said you didn’t want it to stop?

As soon as he hit “send” he regretted it and so he swung well back in the other direction.

Will you meet me somewhere? Tomorrow?
For coffee or something. Out in the world.
Just you, I mean. Without the whole Xie... 

TXT from [020.496.1130]: I can’t. –X

I want to say ‘armour’??? Oh. All right then.

He should have expected the brush-off; why would meeting in public be any safer than meeting at the Icehouse? But his desire to unravel Xie—to learn not only the name, but all the flesh-and-bone angles, the dip and curve of the low back, the muscular edges, the shade of the stubble when it came in—that desire got hotter and louder by the day, and soon it would drown out or burn up even his needs for terrible sleep and terrible food and the comforting weight of his gun against his ribs. Over his morning coffee he’d imagined a silent-movie-style kidnapping: throwing Xie over his shoulder (as if he could—he was strong but there were limits), brandishing his handgun at anyone who might protest, smuggling Xie into a waiting palanquin, drawing curtains around them and shouting at the bearers to double-time away from the Icehouse. What had he thought the previous night? Oh, yes—doomed.

His phone blinked alive in his hand.

TXT from [020.496.1130]: Can I send you a note? Would you write back to me? –X

It was better than nothing.

Send me whatever you like. Yes I’ll write back.

He lobbed another wild one over the wall.

Or you could call me. If you can. If you like.
You know I’d love to talk to you even if not in person.

TXT from [020.496.1130]: If I can. But I will definitely send a note in the morning.
TXT from [020.496.1130]: I’m sorry.
TXT from [020.496.1130]: Again. –X.

It can’t be helped. Don’t apologize.

He tucked the phone in his pocket and started walking; it wasn’t far back to Baker Street and the weather was fair. His pistol was still warm beneath his jacket, cradled there between his chest and upper arm. He would give it a bit of pampering when he got back to the flat: clean and oil it as thanks for another job well done.

It was almost a relief. Squeezing his finger against the resistant pull of the trigger was a condensed, slowed-down second, and he swore time bent around him in that moment so that he saw the bullet fly, watched it hit its mark, pierce and burst. Then the target slumped, or fell, or sometimes only sagged. The jobs were routine now, once he’d got the assignment and details of where to be and at what time and on what day, it was all rote. Checked his equipment, sorted himself (it was best to blend in even though he no longer went in for anything like a full-on disguise; lucky for John, he blended in nearly anywhere, unremarkable in posture, style of dress, or facial features), made the location, did the job. That quick, easy explosion from the palm of his hand was the exact instant he
let the thing go. It ended then, even before the target expired—which was only ever a second or two later. The anticipation of the act was where the headaches lived; firing the gun was the easy part because it meant it was already over.

John rounded a corner onto a major thoroughfare, fell in with the crowds on the pavement, walking with purpose but not in a hurry. He was nothing remarkable, after all, and blended in. Five minutes from that moment—two minutes, one—no one he passed would remember seeing him. He was used to it by now; it was just fine with him.

Sherlock was already fading and giving way to Xie. His hands had been softened with the Chinese grandmother’s crushed-pearl cream, his fingernails painted metallic bronze, his face and throat primed and ready to receive layer after layer of Xie’s make-up. His hair was swept back and pinned and tucked beneath a tight nylon wig cap, his eyebrows craftily covered so they all but vanished from his face, and through half-closed eyes he saw in the mirror some alien thing, some sexless, limbo-dwelling non-being, and in a strange and familiar way, it was a comfort.

Jim had sent flowers—a massive armload of heavy-necked, blowsy blooms that filled Xie’s dressing room with a powdery perfume that reminded Sherlock of his grandmother’s handkerchiefs when he was small and she’d swiped at his face before tea. They were giving Sherlock a headache. The card had read, “I know you forgive me because you know how sorry I am.” Sherlock tore it into eight pieces and binned it.

The funny bit was that Jim didn’t need to apologise, didn’t need to send him texts every hour checking that he was all right, didn’t need to wake him in the morning with sweet talk and soft kisses and lazy, exceedingly thorough sex. The instant Jim had shoved Xie against the wall in the salon the previous evening, it was already over. By the time Sherlock was curled on the floor in the living room of their flat with Jim’s designer oxford relentlessly slamming into his back and side, Sherlock’s mind was already on to the next thing.

It was almost a relief, the explosion of Jim’s simmering fury. Days and weeks (in the past, months, but Sherlock could not remember a recent time when Jim had held off more than six weeks) full of casual cruelty—insults, reminders of how stupid Sherlock was, good for only one thing, maybe two—interruption silent treatments, unpredictable bouts of shouting, pinching Sherlock, poking Sherlock, slapping Sherlock, pulling Sherlock’s hair. Every day waking up wondering if the flame would finally reach the end of the fuse and set him off: sparks and a hiss followed by a deafening bang and percussive waves that rang in the ears. Sherlock grew tenser with each passing hour, avoiding the flat when Jim was at home, avoiding the Icehouse offices when Jim was inside his, keeping quiet just to be sure he didn’t say the wrong thing. That moment when Sherlock recognized the look in Jim’s eyes that meant the wait was over was so welcome by the time it happened, Sherlock nearly wanted to thank him. But then the first mobile phone or ashtray or fist flew, and Sherlock had to shift his focus to protecting his head and belly. The madness dissipated after a few minutes or an hour. Then Jim walked away or slammed a door or—once in a while—sank to his knees in tears, and Sherlock could count on a few days where everything would feel the way it used to, feel normal. It was always a race to see which faded first: his bruises, or his peace of mind.
I like to think of you as “John” rather than “Captain Watson” when we’re alone together; this feels like being alone together, a bit, don’t you think?

I’m sorry—again—for having to ask that you stay away for now. It feels especially precarious—just the excuse one might need to call the whole thing off. I’d understand if you do, though I’d be terribly disappointed. And sitting here pondering what I’ve just written makes me think I should clarify that I have never been in this situation before, lest you think me a serial adulterer. I wouldn’t have dreamed of it, as a matter of fact. But, then...

May I tell you about my fondest memory of childhood? We had an uncle—by marriage, he was Irish, he’d made his fortune in some barely legal stock scheme, I’ve since come to learn—and one summer when I was seven-and-a-half (this was Before, but not by much) my brothers and I were sent to stay with them for a fortnight’s adventure, culminating in a family wedding that last weekend. “Them” was our uncle and aunt (our mother’s sister) and six cousins: three boys similar in age to us, one much older girl already on her way to her own home as a bride—the wedding was hers—and two smaller girls, one toddling and one still in arms.

One of the boy cousins, the closest to my own age, was a bit of a bully and a prankster who later came to no good, reclassified nil when he reached adulthood already alcoholic and involved with a girl at school much too young, even for him at only eighteen. One early afternoon we were well beyond the view of my aunt or anyone else who may mind such behaviour, in the back of beyond, as far as I could see. . . having been raised in the city, my uncle’s country home seemed to have endless stretches of open land and there were several interesting outbuildings to explore (I realize now it was certainly no estate, perhaps two acres, but to my child’s eyes it was vast). My cousin took the opportunity to lock me inside an old tool shed, thinking I would panic and cry for my mummy, no doubt. If I’d been inclined to cry for anyone, it certainly would have been my brother, but as it was, I did not cry for anyone, or even bang on the door to implore my cousin to let me out, and was content to poke about amongst the rusted old farm machines and tools. Eventually I lay down beneath an old workbench on cool, packed earth, and gazed at a spider spinning her web for the better part of an hour, then drifted off to sleep.

When I woke it was to my eldest brother’s hands on my shoulders, urging me out of the cool nook I’d found to rest in, and I was exceptionally put out that he was disturbing me. (It was not him I’d have called, by the way, but the other one, who took turns teaming up with each of us, usually on my side against our older brother, but sometimes on his side against me—in which case I generally would, in the end, cry for my mummy, and she would berate them and pat my hair and give me biscuits and milky tea.) Although I’d been perfectly content, at some point someone must have noticed I was gone and sent the whole family into panic; my cousin got his knuckles smacked and was sent to bed without his supper, as I recall.

I can so vividly remember lying with my back on the cool dirt floor in the heat of a summer afternoon, and the way the light through the window was golden and full of floating motes of dust—thousands, millions, drifting bits of fluff and shimmer that I thought of as fairies (and still do now and then, when the light is right)—and the elegant rhythm of the spider’s hair’s-width legs as she spun silk around a trapped horsefly. I was without a single care, and was calm, and had no sense that the world was dangerous outside my tiny, cosseted existence. Being dragged away from it because of other peoples’ worries still strikes me as unfair, and somewhat irrational. Anyway, I have never found a peace like that again.

See how I have promised you my fondest memory, and yet in the end it seems melancholy. It’s not so in my mind, and wasn’t so at the time. Perhaps I should consider why there is such a discrepancy between what I remember and feel, and the words I use to describe it, what it all means, but that sort of self-examination is neither a strength nor an interest of mine.
You may have noticed I tend to solicit stories from others, yet seldom share my own. Of course it is because Xie has no past, no agenda, and no aspiration other than to make the guests comfortable; the mystery is part of the appeal—guests can assign nearly any story they can imagine onto Xie and it fits beautifully, is always perfectly suited, because there is never contradictory evidence introduced. I wanted to share a story with you because I think you want something more than your own mind’s inventions, and for now, a story from long ago is all I can give.

Please send me a letter in reply. I would beg reassurance that you have not changed your mind about your determination not to stop your pursuit (is it still truly a pursuit when the quarry drags a limb to ensure it will be caught?), but I recognize I am in no position to make demands of you.

What frightens you?

x

Xie—

Your letter was so beautifully crafted. . . is there anything you can’t do? I have always enjoyed writing letters—I wrote so, so many back when I was in the army. Fellas I knew in school, mostly, and a couple of girls, too, who always seemed to lose interest in writing to me after a few months because they’d met someone who was right there with them, while I was god-knew-where for god-knew-how-long. But no matter how many I’ve written, I’ll never measure up to what you’ve sent. I felt like I was there with you, in the shed on the dirt floor.

I don’t remember much about my childhood, really. A few standout moments, like breaking my wrist falling out of a climbing tree when I was eleven (the pain was dizzying yet I had to walk half a mile home because of course my pals deserted me at the first hint someone might catch hell from their dad). Things about school—a teacher who made me hate everything about the English language—reading, writing, grammar, the lot—and then the next year a teacher who made me love all those same things (I took strange pleasure from diagramming sentences, please don’t tell anyone). But a lot of my childhood memories are more like stories I tell myself, without visuals or other associated sensations, so distant from me that I question whether they are memories at all.

My parents were both drinkers, so I come by my own bad habits honestly. Objectively, I know I am not like them, I can do without where they could not, where my sister could not. But I wonder every time I take a drink if this is the one that finally does me in, the one I can’t go back from. And yet I step to the edge of that particular cliff again and again, and then off it. There’s probably something there worth thinking over, but I’m unlikely to. Anyway, my childhood was chaotic, fear-filled, and lonesome, which is probably why I don’t remember much other than certain extreme events. My mother was a liar, narcissistic, self-pitying, and mean. My father was full of rage, unpredictable, strident, explosive. He beat her. I spent my whole life alternately trying to distract them with my overachievements (good student, good at sport, then the military and medicine), or trying to disappear. Not just from their view, from the world, even from my own view. I think I put part of myself away in a box to keep safe, but eventually the key got lost or stolen, and so maybe that’s where all those missing memories are, and I’ll probably never get them back.

It’s not like me to be such a mope. It’s the rain, maybe.

You ask what frightens me and I’m inclined to say, “Nothing anymore.” I spent nearly twenty years terrified, and once I wrapped my head around having survived it, I started telling myself I was
fearless. The worst was behind me. And then I was in one objectively frightening situation after the next while I was in the army and I always got through, even when those around me were pissing themselves with fear. I thought I was immune.

You see through me in a way that frightens me, a bit—if we’re speaking plainly, which I think is the order of the day. When you asked in your letter what I’m afraid of, my immediate reaction—first thing I thought—was that I’m afraid you’ll eventually see all the way through to the man I really am, and you won’t like him. There’s not much there to like; the outside’s OK, and then on through the middle bits, but at the core of it all, I suspect I’m rotten. How could I not be? And then there you are, an ethereal being—well-known and much-admired, with elegance and charm, obviously erudite and talented—with this weird gift you seem to have for seeing into the heart of things. . . what could you possibly see in me that’s worth bothering with? That’s what frightens me, at the moment.

Well, that, and enclosed spaces.

Please know—I’m sure you do—that the moment you beckon, I’ll drop everything, crawl on my knees if I have to, to be near you again. I’ll sign off now before I say something that makes me sound truly desperate.

(Too late, I know. I don’t care.)

Dreaming of your fingers and toes,
John

PS: Is it Will? I hope it’s not Will. I mean, I won’t mind if it is, but I have an ex. . . If it’s Will, forget I said I hope it’s not. It’s not though, is it?

_TXT from [020.496.1130]: If you can’t text back in the next five minutes, please don’t at all.
_TXT from [020.496.1130]: I enjoyed your letter, though it made me ache for the child you were.
_TXT from [020.496.1130]: I don’t think you’re rotten.
_TXT from [020.496.1130]: I’d like to call you later. Will you still be awake at midnight?—X
_TXT from [020.496.1130]: (It’s not Will.)_
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

In chapter 9, it was revealed that Jim Moriarty is more than merely casually cruel, and the Face returned to the type of job with which he's more comfortable. Xie asked John to stay away from the Icehouse for a bit, and the two exchanged letters.

“Well, no, it wasn’t my motorbike.”

“I’m not sure I believe any of this.”

They’d been chatting for the better part of an hour; John reclining on the bed (not his bed, just the bed in the flat) with his shoes toed off onto the floor, shirtsleeves unbuttoned at the cuff but not turned back, with a nearly-empty glass of whiskey on the nightstand beside his gun. It was nearly one in the morning, the flat dark, only the little reading lamp on the far side of the bed casting a golden glow through its old milky-glass shade, as if the room were candlelit. Outside, Baker Street was quiet, and the bedroom’s only window was closed against the chill of evening, muffling any noise there might have been from the alley behind. With Xie’s low, honeyed voice in his ear, and the whiskey blurring him, John felt almost cozy.

“Oh, believe it, sweetheart,” John grinned.

Xie made a distraught, uncomfortable hum.

“Something wrong?”

“Not sweetheart,” Xie said hesitantly, and John twigged right away.

“It’s what he calls you?”

“Let’s not. . .” Xie began.

“Yeah, no. I’m happy not to. Where are you, by the way?”

“In the dressing room. It’s quiet and I’m rarely bothered. Locked in and snug. There are flowers on the make-up table, the whole room smells of them. They’ll only last another day or two, though, already brown at the edges.”

“What else is it like, the room?” John was curious, trying to conjure an image. He imagined an old film version of a theatre dressing room: a mirror with bare bulbs around it, a metal rack draped with feather boas and silk dresses and—for some reason—the trousers clowns often wore, with rainbow-striped braces and a hula hoop where the waistband should be. Pitted wooden floors, tiny wooden folding chair, table littered with mostly-used make-up items. Imagining Xie in such a place was so improbable, though, he was sure he must be wrong.

“Oh, the usual. Drawers full of paint and powder. There’s a cupboard full of shoes; the clothes are kept in a vault.”
“They’re not,” John protested, though the idea was actually a bit delightful.

“They are, indeed. They’d never fit in here, for one. And they’re probably the most valuable bit.”

“Aside from your personality and people skills. Oh, and the pouring the tea without spilling.”

“Yes, aside from those,” Xie allowed, and John swore he could hear the smile.

“Don’t forget the violin.”

“Yes. . .Anyway, there’s the make-up table and a little rolling chair, silly chandelier with dangling crystals, another of the Persian rugs like the ones in the salon. The walls are white; there’s a little bathroom with a shower. Shelves with wig stands, though I only keep a half-dozen or so.”

“The rest are in the vault as well, one assumes,” John prompted.

“That’s right. This red velvet armchair I’m sat in—wingback, quite big—and a table beside it, floor lamp behind it. It’s for guests, but I rarely have them. I sit here to take off my eyelashes sometimes. There’s a foot stool to match. Door to the main corridor, sliding door to the—well I call it the airlock, aren’t I funny, but it’s really just a pass-through to the salon. Another place in-between, a little floating world.”

“Between Xie and you?” John asked, and rearranged the pillows so he could rest his head back instead of upright.

“Yes. Real life and work.”

“Tell me your name?”

Xie hummed, a decrescendo that sounded almost judgmental.

John’s voice slowed and lowered, and he let his eyes close. “So you’re in your wing-back chair there, under your crystal chandelier. Are your feet up on your footstool?”

“No, hanging over the arm. I’m turned sideways.”

“Likely to be interrupted?”

“No.” In just that one word, John could hear that Xie knew exactly where he was leading them. “And what’s your room like?”

“Just a cluttered little room in a messy little flat. The wallpapers don’t match but they’re not offensive, unlike in the sitting room, where they’re impossible to live with. Someone else’s choices of hanging art. Smallish. Pretty dim at the moment.”

“Your description is so vivid, Captain Watson,” Xie teased. “I feel as if I’m there.”

“Mm, I wish you were,” John said slyly. “It’s a very good bed. Excellent mattress, lots of good, mashable pillows. Like a high-end hotel bed.”

“Most people wouldn’t comment about the quality of the bed.”

“Suppose not,” John allowed. “But it’s a bit of an obsession of mine. I’ve been in so many different beds, I can’t help but compare. And I spend so much time not sleeping—I told you, or rather, you told me, I don’t sleep well, you remember? Maybe when I find the perfect one, I’ll finally be able to sleep.”
“I’m sorry you don’t sleep well,” Xie murmured. “What do you think about when you’re lying awake in your very good bed?”

“Lately, I think about you.”

Xie made a self-satisfied little sound. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Think a lot about your neck,” John said, and let his eyes close, conjuring an image of Xie’s long, wide throat with its prominent bump of an adam’s apple, a hint at—but no kind of preparation for—the rumbling voice, and of stroking his nose in the soft valley between hyoid and jugular. “I think about you gasping when I kissed you there under your jaw, and behind your ear. All the lovely sounds you make, all your pretty words.”

“I’d like you to kiss me there again,” Xie told him quietly, right in his ear, a faint inhale sounding like a crackling cloud. “But rougher.”

John’s prick was beginning to ache, and he slid flattened fingers over the front placket of his trousers, encouraging the rush of his blood.

“Bit of teeth,” John agreed, “Not hard enough to leave a mark, but scraping a bit between kisses.”

“Perfect.”

“I think about the shape of your shoulder under my hand, bones and muscle, and as much as I could feel of your arm through your sleeve. The tendon inside your elbow against my thumb.” John licked his lips. “Your big handsome hand on me.”

“Mmm…”

“So I imagine right now, since your party’s done, you must have taken off the pretty frock and the heels and the make-up and all,” John said quietly, and shifted lower on the bed, more horizontal, getting comfortable.

“Yes, of course. Ages ago. Most evenings I’m out of the shoes before the door’s even fully shut.”

“Took a shower there in your little bathroom?”

“Indeed.”

“So I’m picturing you there slung over your wingback chair with just a towel wrapped around your waist?” John prompted, a little grin in it.

Xie breathed the start of a laugh. “Afraid not; I’m wearing a cashmere dressing gown. It’s muted dark red with black piping.”

“I don’t know what piping is, but all right.”

Xie did not sound condescending, only friendly: “You know the tight roll of edging on certain pillowslips, before the hem? Usually it’s satin.”

“Right, right, OK,” John said quickly. “Thanks for the education.” Feeling the smirk crossing his lips as he let his eyes close, he said, “Just the dressing gown, then?”

“That’s right.” A low tone somehow even more suggestive than the usual.

“Open or closed?”
“Hm, bit loose up top, not vulgar but not quite acceptable for company. Covered to just above the knees.”

“Feet bare?” John murmured, by this time working his palm steadily and firmly along his length through his trousers, hips wanting to roll up to meet it.

“Yes.”

“Gorgeous,” John sighed.

“Your breath’s getting ragged; what are you up to?” There was a knowing half-smile audible even over the phone.

“Same thing I hope you are, or soon will be. If I were there I’d kneel on the floor to kiss your ankle bones and the divots between your toes—push the tip of my tongue in a bit to make you gasp and squirm. You’d try to pull away because it would tickle, but I’d wrap my fingers around your ankle and hold you there. Rub the stubble on my cheek against the arch of your foot.”

A low command: “Open your trousers, John.”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

“I did like the feel of you in my hand,” Xie murmured, and John felt it straight down to his prick. He clamped his mobile between shoulder and jaw for a moment so he could make quick work of doing as Xie had demanded with both hands, slipping the button free, sliding the zip, hooking his thumbs next to his hips and shifting the lot of it down his thighs.

“I thought I might actually die watching you lick your fingers,” John admitted. “Why don’t you lick them now and slide that gorgeous hand under your cashmere dressing gown.” In a voice that was nearly nothing but breath, he added, “Please.”

A quick, wet sound in his ear that made his cock twitch, followed by a hushed but indelicate grunt. He swiped his own tongue messily over his palm, reached down to encircle himself and let out a less-than-dignified sound of his own, then quietly invited, “Tell me what you feel.”

“I’m—ah!” The breathless catch in Xie’s voice nearly did John in there and then; he loosened his grip and slowed his hand a bit. “My cock is hard and hot in my hand. . .like yours was.”

John had the answer he’d been fishing for and applauded himself for having been clever about eliciting it. He’d been nearly sure, it didn’t matter really, but he was glad of it.

“If I were there I’d open your dressing gown there at the top, to see your chest, feel it under my hands,” John muttered, his brain playing him a slideshow combining his preferred male body types with images of former partners, that fella in the barracks showers, his ex, but, no, not his ex, anyone but him. “What colour are your nipples?” he asked, by now far beyond any remaining trace of self-consciousness and well into the realm of desperation.

Xie was game, made a quick noise as if the question was thrillingly dirty, then said, “Pink-brown? Like when roses have gone by and darken at the edges. Quite little. Tight as pebbles right now, thinking of you touching them.”

“I’m half-mad wanting to touch them. Pinch them, tug a bit. . .” John gasped for air momentarily, then whispered, “Do it for me, will you?”

The sound of air sucked sharply through dry lips, across even, white teeth.
“Suck your fingertip ’til it’s wet and imagine it’s my tongue flicking against your hard little nipple,” John urged, and listened for the movements of lips and tongue, a quiet sliding, a tiny heaved breath. He imagined long, bony fingers damp with saliva making tiny circles around a tight nipple, and his own nipples hardened in sympathy. “Does it feel good? Do you like it?”

Xie let out a low, drawn-out moan. A whispered, “Yes.” And then a luxuriant hum, as if tasting something delicious. “Mmmm. . .”

“God, that’s gorgeous. That voice of yours,” John huffed, and he knew he couldn’t last and so decided to give in to it. “It’s going to finish me, just listening to you humming like that. Go on, do as you like. Tell me.”

“Mmmm. . .keeping my hand still on my cock, cir—mm—circling my finger around my nipple in tight spirals. . .wet. . .thinking about your tongue.”

John’s spine was liquid, he’d lost track of his legs altogether, and he rocked to the side, curling around himself toward the center of pleasure as his hand worked in a steady, forceful rhythm.

“Thinking about finally opening my mouth for you to kiss me properly,” Xie sighed, and hummed again, “Mmmm. . .”

“God I want to,” John said urgently, and his fist worked quick along his aching length.

Xie let out a long, luxuriant hum, and John imagined the blue-green eyes closing, the face tensing and smoothing. Then another rumbling purr, this time in a slightly higher register, sounding ever-so-slightly more urgent.

“Yes, god, just that. Just—“

“. . .mmmm. . .” Xie went on humming in his ear in a languorous rhythm John imagined was matched by the hand stroking in lazy time, and John conjured a vision of a long, angular body with faded-rose-coloured nipples and a hard, hot prick with those gorgeous long fingers wound around it, “. . .mmmm. . .” —pulling, stroking, twisting to turn the back of the big hand toward John’s wanting gaze—“. . .mmmm. . .”

“Oh, Christ,” John gusted through gritted teeth as his hips jerked and his come pulsed over his hand and onto his yanked-down trousers and boxers, and onto the white coverlet on the bed.

“Lovely. . .” Xie murmured and it sent a little silver shiver of an aftershock through him.

John licked his lips, dry from so much gasping and panting and his stream of harsh whispers, and dragged his hand across the coverlet—it would have to be cleaned now, anyway, and it occurred to him he didn’t know whether he was meant to arrange the laundry himself, or if was already set up. Instantly he mentally berated himself for thinking of such a thing at such a moment.

As he rolled over to his other side, quickly readjusting the angle of his phone against his ear, he near-whispered, “Are you fucking your gorgeous hand, then?”

Xie hummed again, differently this time, almost doubtful. “My hand’s well-occupied at the moment, but I have to keep a bit still. . .more than I’d like, really.”

“Why’s that?”

“My back’s bothering me.” It almost sounded like a question.
John made a sympathetic noise. “Poor you. In that case, I’d be so gentle with you.”

Xie sighed at that, and John’s heart swelled.

“In your salon, stretched out on one of those elegant sofas, same shade of red as your dressing gown, your bare hands and calves and that strip of your chest exposed where I’ve opened it up. Comfortable?”

“M-hm.”

“Good. . . I’d kiss my way up your leg from your ankle, up your shin, to the inside of your knee just nearly behind, where the skin gets so soft and smooth, there in the bend.”

Xie hummed in his ear, and there was a noise of the phone shifting, and a little squelch of lips and tongue that must mean Xie was licking the palm of the hand, wetting the long fingers.

“And I’d hold you around your hips to keep you still so you don’t hurt your back, rocking up to meet me.”

“I want to.”

“I know. I know you do. I can hear in your voice how needy you are, it’s gorgeous. And I’d work my way up the inside of one long thigh—the tip of my tongue, and the circle of my teeth—my cheek and my chin and my nose, dragging my way up, nuzzling against your gorgeous long leg as you part your thighs a bit for me. Would you?”

A delicious gasp: “Uh! Yes.”

“Oh, but then I’d shift up to your bare throat and start to make my way back down—” a frustrated sound from Xie, that John had skipped over the best bits—“kissing your long neck, down your chest, to roll my tongue around your nipple, and lick it quick, and blow across it to make it bead up hard. Are you pinching it now? Rolling it between your fingers?”

A momentary pause and then a whispered, “Feels so good. Mm.”

“Still keeping your hips still with the weight of my hands there on either side, feeling with my thumbs for the creases at the top of your thighs, then pressing into them a bit. And I’d keep moving down: down your chest, and your belly, nudge your gown aside with my chin and lips. Innie or outie tummy button?”

Xie nearly laughed. “Let’s keep it a surprise.”

“All right, like the delicious surprise I’ll find when I slide my hands around your hips, pulling the front of your gown open just enough to bare you?”

“My hard cock, dripping for you,” Xie offered in a rush, as if John’s tease was too much. “Dark hair that trails up my belly and down the inside of my thighs a bit. Bollocks—uh!—aching and the skin pulled tight.”

“My god,” John breathed. “I’m getting hard again just thinking of how it will be to finally see you laid out for me, all your bare pale skin against all that dark red satin. I want you so much.”

Xie hummed.

“I want to bury my nose in that dark hair, and then in that tender spot just under your prick. . . inhale
you.”

A loud sucking of teeth, and an exclamation of, “*God!*”

“*Shh,*” John whispered. “You’re keeping still, remember, so your back won’t hurt. I want to smell you, taste you, slide my tongue all over you—“

“Oh my god.”

“Soft,” John murmured. “*Soft.* I want to hear you humming and sighing for me, want to feel the heat of you under my lips. Is your cock drizzling wet for me?”

“Yes.”

“Taste it for me. Tell me.”

A quick, wet, plosive sound in his ear then, and he could hear Xie shudder around a heavy exhalation. “*Sea water,*” Xie gasped. “*Then molasses...*” Another stuttering breath.

“You’re nearly there,” John whispered, his own prick throbbing in sympathy, filling out a bit though he knew he’d no chance of another go, so soon. Closed-eyed, his voice gravelly from nearly two hours talking and a deep-settling desire to sleep, John urged, “*God,* you’re nearly there, I can hear it. I can *feel* it. I’d hold your hips down even though you’d want to roll up against me, close my mouth around the head of your prick to taste you, suck you, lick you, *god* I want to eat you alive...”

A low moan then, a brief hum through closed lips, then another moan that grew into a long, low, “*Ohhhh...*” John was momentarily sure he’d die of. Then another groan, and another, and finally a satisfied, grunting sigh.

“*Feeling good?*” John asked with a grin.

“*Mmmm...* very. Very good.”

“I’m glad.”

“I need a moment.” A quick laugh, and sounds of movement, fabric shifting, the soft sounds of mild exertion. “And a towel.”

John laughed, quick and hearty.

“*Hold on.*”

“Of course.”

While John waited for Xie to get sorted, he quickly pulled his boxers up and his trousers off, unfastened the top few shirt buttons and yanked his shirt up and over his head, tossed it beside the bed onto the floor. He turned back the blankets and slid between sheets that were cold everywhere but beneath the exact spot he’d been lying upon. He stretched across to click off the lamp and waited for his eyes to adjust to the heavy darkness and soft glow of the city’s endless ambient light at the edges of the window blinds. As torturous as nights could sometimes be, struggling as he did for desperately needed sleep, John relished those few seconds of dark so complete it was like blindness before his pupils widened to let in more light.

“Still there?”

“Yeah, of course,” John replied, near-whispering in the dark. The pillow curved up around his ears,
cradling him.

“You sound tired; I suppose it’s late.”

“I’m fine,” John lied, for he did feel as if maybe—if he didn’t miss the very narrow window afforded him by the post-orgasmic haze—he could drift off. But a few more minutes with that voice in his ear was worth the risk. “You suppose it’s late, by the way?”

“I work at night. The rhythm of my days is different to other peoples’.” Xie sounded, if not wide awake, certainly closer to it than John was, by a long measure. “I don’t usually start yawning ’til near three in the morning, and I sleep until ten or eleven, most days.”

“What do you do with your days?” John asked quietly, and turned to his side again. With the phone balanced against his cheek, it was almost as if Xie was there beside him, wrapped around him, their faces close together, sharing the pillow. Except that he was cold and there was no feeling of breath against his face as the reply came.

“Depends on the day.”

“Tomorrow, then,” John prompted.

“Party of seven booked in for dinner in the salon, so I’ll have to be presentable by half-eight. Two and half hours to dress and prepare. Before that I’ll have a small meal.”

“Do you cook?”

A laugh. “There’s someone who comes in twice a week to cook, and leaves food portioned in the fridge. So in the sense of turning cold food into hot food—yes, absolutely I cook.” A quick breath, in or out John couldn’t tell. “Before that. . .tomorrow? . . .I’ve got another interview with a magazine writer, on the telephone; that’s at four and will last about an hour.”

“Be sure to tell me when it’s coming out so I can pick up a copy and pin the centerfold on my wall,” John smiled and felt the pillowslip shift beneath his cheek. He noticed suddenly that his face ached a bit now they’d been talking so long, from smiling.

“And before that, the barber, for a trim and a shave.”

“What, like an old-fashioned shave? Not with the straight razor?” John had rarely considered that men still got shaved at the barber’s, despite the fact loads of them still had it on the menu. He couldn’t remember seeing one going on while he got his monthly haircut.

“Hot towel and all,” came the reply, and John could hear the smile that went with it.

“That’s sexy as hell,” John blurted, but quietly.

“If you say so. I have three standing appointments a week.”

John tried but failed to hold back a yawn.

“You’re nearly asleep, I should let you go.”

“Maybe. But I don’t want you to.”

There was a short pause, and then a rumbling murmur. “I’ve been thinking about your idea we should meet somewhere else, some other time. Away from here.”
John’s stomach flipped and he suddenly felt much more alert, rolled onto his back and raised his head and shoulders up off the pillow, slid one elbow up to support himself.

“And what do you think about it?”

“There’s a park not far from my barber’s shop, with a Japonesque garden. Clarendon Place, it’s called, off Victoria Street. Do you know it?”

“I’ll find it,” John quickly assured. “Clarendon Place.”

“I’ll be there at half-past one. If you can pick me out of the crowd, Captain Watson, without all my. . . ’armour,’ as you called it. . . I’ll tell you my name.”


“I look forward to it. For now, you should try to sleep. Tomorrow you can tell me about your dreams.”

John was still reluctant but he knew when he was being given the boot. “All right then. Good night.”

“Good night. Sleep well.”

A soft, wet click, and then a harsher, near-metallic one, and John quit the call on his end, tucked the phone beneath the edge of the pillow. He lay staring into the darkness, mentally assembling the man that would result when the parts he already knew were knitted together with all the still-mysterious ones.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

In chapter 10, phone sex! Our men also arranged a meeting, wherein Sherlock promised to give John his name, if John could pick him out of a crowd.

John snorted himself awake just before seven, head and shoulders jerking up off the pillow in a low-grade startle. The filtered sunlight of the hour just after dawn made itself known around the edges of the window shade, bursting forth in wide slashes where in the dark there had been only a narrow, glowing outline. It was a quality of light John knew well by now; half-seven was a lazy lie-in by his standard, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d still been asleep at eight. In London, anyway—travel abroad gave his typically wretched sleep habits the added surreality of feeling desperate for a kip just as the rest of the city was rising, or of wanting coffee and eggs at midnight.

A quick glance at his wrist, and a quick calculation: he’d gotten just under two hours after he’d ended his phone call with Xie, and then—if he’d fallen asleep within a few minutes of his last check of the time, another 75 minutes or so in the earliest hours of morning. He remembered hearing pigeons cooing in the alley just before he drifted off.

There were worse nights.

Typically, with nothing on in the evening (which had been most evenings, at least before he’d developed his new habit of drinking four-figure whiskey in the company of the world’s most highly-esteemed drasha like some vlast high-roller), he would ready himself for bed around eleven: undress, clean his teeth, kill the lights, no television, sometimes a book if it was of the sort just intriguing enough to be worth reading, but just boring enough to not get his brain playing up on him. Into the bed, wherever it may be, and wherever its grade fell on the comfort scale. And so it began.

Turning over the pillows, trying each in turn, searching for the one that smelled best, supported his neck, and didn’t blast the sound of his own rushing blood into his ears. Digging in the curve of his head as he lay on his back, or slipping his forearm under it if he was on his side. John never slept with his back to the door.

Sheets and blankets next, depending on the season, though given his preference he liked to feel weighed down and always covered up as much as the ambient temperature allowed. Lower corners should be tucked in, but not so tight he had to fight against it to roll his ankles. Often he had to get up and tug out the hotel corners, just a bit, to assure this. Covers pulled up high but not touching his throat. Nothing with that shiny polyester satin edging. Nothing that smelled of bleach. He’d wear his coat rather than have bleach fumes up his nose.

He’d tried all the tricks: visualizations, rituals, moderating intake of tea and sweets and salt and sleep-inducing pharmaceuticals. He’d tried hypnosis but it didn’t take. He’d tried counting, chanting, lying with his head at the wrong end of the bed. He’d tried music with subliminal messages and white noise and nature sounds. He’d tried sitting upright in a straight-backed chair until his head was nodding forward and his eyes ached to close, shifting to the bed only when his body threatened to tip onto the floor. He’d tried getting in the bed at dusk and staying there until dawn. He’d tried getting up after an hour, two hours, four hours, changed the definition of “morning” to include three a.m. and started his day in what was arguably the absolute middle—the darkest part—the dead—of the
night.

He let his thoughts drift, he emptied his mind of thought, he put his thoughts in a silver bubble. Once he shot each of his thoughts with a Glock 17.

He thought about his calendar. That job in Napoli. His sister before she got so bad, and about when she got so bad, and about the different choices she could have made at each crossroads, wondered what he didn’t know about her or her life that made her succumb in a way he had not. He checked himself for symptoms of addiction—not just to the drink. In his twenties he’d wondered if he was addicted to sex, or to orgasms, or merely to companionship, regardless of the dubious depth of his feelings. Was he addicted to his fitness regime? Were his eating habits out of balance? When was the last time he’d cooked himself a proper meal? What was the name of that place on the King’s Road that made those impossibly good pasties?

Song lyrics replayed themselves, the same couplet over and over, until he thought he must have already gone mad. A phrase would spring to mind, completely context-free and verging on nonsense, and he’d hear his own voice repeating it with different inflections and tones. Once it had been no thanks, I’m fine; for a couple of years it had been that’s broken then. That’s broken, then. That’s broken, then? That’s broken then. These words that stuck in his head didn’t merely lose meaning due to repetition; they arrived in his mind already devoid of meaning. They may as well have been gibberish, for the weight they carried, but they persisted.

Some nights he had a wank as soon as was settled. Some nights it was a last ditch attempt to pacify himself—clear his head of useless thought and replace it with conjured images of favoured body parts, standout encounters, the best two or three pornos he’d seen—or, even when he wasn’t technically interested or physically energetic enough to warrant the act, it merely served as a tranquilizer. It didn’t always help him fall asleep, but it helped often enough that it was almost always worth trying. Either way, an orgasm was never unwelcome, regardless of the residual effects.

After some minutes or hours or weeks or months the blankets had shifted, or he needed a piss, or the pillow was uncomfortably warm against his cheek, or there was some unidentifiable, semi-regular click or hum or beep or drip or creak from god-knew-where, but which sometimes required investigation of nearby taps, windows, door locks, radios that might have been left on with the sound turned as low as it would go, tuned to static.

Back in the bed, the resettling of pillows, straightening the covers, too hot, too cold, itchy, was his stomach sick? He thought about checking the time, reminded himself not to, eventually always did, but no matter, it was either too close to morning or too far from it. He’d never sleep. He was bone-tired. Wide awake. The army and Unity and the Mentor and the jobs had wrecked him. Obliterated his conscience, but not completely, leaving him just the bit that glowed like an ember in the middle of the night and made him wonder what was wrong with him that he agreed to murder strangers for money. Made him wonder if the other murderers slept. Calculated the hours of ruined sleep based on the number of contractors he knew of, added half-again as many because surely there were more. The one with the knives was obviously mad; she probably slept like the dead. Another reason to hate her.

And then—eventually, mercifully, cruelly—dawn broke.

And then here it was again, burning the darkness away, reminding him of his failure and the loss of his humanity. People slept. They dreamed. They did not know what time the bin men came on Tuesdays. They awoke in a mood other than angry and disappointed. Every night that John struggled through set him just that much further apart from them.

Three hours would have to do, John figured, as he shuffled into the little kitchen to fill the kettle. By
two o’clock it wouldn’t matter anyway, because John would have seen him by then, on his way to
the barber for his posh straight-razor shave, and would know the shape and taste of his name in his
own mouth. He wouldn’t be bothered, by then, about the quality of his night’s sleep or much of
anything else because if he had ever wanted anything as much as he wanted what half-one at a park
called Clarendon Place promised, he couldn’t remember what it was.

A piss and then a splash of cool tap water on his face, pressed with the heels of his hands against his
burning eyes, and John made his way back to the bedroom to fetch his phone, some mix of hopeful
for and dreading the possibility of a text from Xie. The light was flashing, but the text was not from
Xie.

**TXT from TheMentor:** New, relevant materials available for your review. Courier will deliver before
9 a.m.

The fucking job. John inhaled harshly, blew it out through his nostrils. The files were in a stack on
the kitchen table; he’d barely glanced at them since Xie had pressed the illicit identity cards on him. It
had been iffy before—the fire he was playing with by allowing himself to get close to anyone at the
Icehouse, regardless of the fact Xie wasn’t in the files—but it was made much more complicated by
the existence of those cards in the safe upstairs. He wasn’t sure how to proceed. Did he report his
suspicion that whatever was going on with Deep Sea at the Icehouse, Xie was likely at least slightly
involved? Did he keep it to himself until he had more evidence? How any of it could end well for
him was an image he couldn’t conjure.

John studiously avoided looking at the stack of files as he fixed tea, made toast, stood over the sink
eating it. He’d just finished dressing and was running a plastic comb through his hair when the
buzzer went, and his teeth ground reflexively at the sound. The courier was a young woman with her
hair in a knot at the back of her neck, a mutilated and pieced-together canvas bag over her shoulder,
and a bicycle painted a colour he vaguely remembered had once been associated exclusively with
race cars. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, perhaps another of the mentor’s folios with the
string and tab closure, or a box containing something disposable and untraceable—a mobile phone,
or a handgun—but what he received was a square manila envelope that barely weighed anything. He
thanked her, absently offered her tea which she declined with an expression indicating she clearly
didn’t trust him beyond the threshold and would never have taken a single step with him out of sight
of passersby or Unity’s mounted cameras. A novel blend of curiosity and dread filled him as he
carried the envelope up the stairs to the flat, locking the door to the landing behind him as he went to
the lounge to discover the contents.

He used one of the kitchen’s dull knives to slit open the envelope’s flap, and inside was a CD, utterly
unmarked. Also in the envelope was a handwritten note on the Mentor’s stationery—no name or
address or mobile number, only the circular Unity symbol centered at the top and embossed stripes of
red and metallic gold along the bottom—advising him to listen, paying special attention to a
discussion of “vermin.” He was ordered to report in person three days hence, at noon. John frowned,
tilted the disc in his hand so it reflected and refracted the light, showing elongated triangles in all the
shades of the rainbow on its shiny surface. He could just make out the demarcation between the
recorded material and the blank disc; there wasn’t much. He didn’t know what to make of the
“vermin” reference, and the prospect of reporting in person left a sour, dry taste in the back of his
mouth. He’d have to decide how much of his report (if any) would be about Xie, the false ICs he’d
been given to “hold” indefinitely. Of course he was technically required to report all he knew,
whether or not he fully understood its relevance. Keeping any of it close was potentially dangerous,
and not only to himself.

There was a portable player on a shelf in the lounge, a pair of cheap headphones tangled in their own
wire lying on a corner of the cluttered desk. John assembled them, found to his surprise that it
seemed to have battery power, and sank into a threadbare armchair to listen.

“...Unity is not peace. There is no peace. There is only suppression. There is only intimidation. The vlast oligarchy are traitors to their former nations. They are betrayers of their fellow citizens, who they abandoned as they fled into the lie of Unity. Vlast oligarchs are rats. They are vermin. All vlast rats huddle in their own filth in the stinking hold of a ship flying the Unity flag. The shlost and nil classes are the sea! We are the sea! The deep sea will roil up great waves to smash Unity to pieces, sink and destroy the false one-world government. A hundred-foot wave will slam the Unity government until it shatters. And every vlast rat will flee. Every vlast rat will drown. The vlast oligarchy will be finished. Rise up as a great wave! Shlost workers everywhere: Rise up! Ostracized nil everywhere: Rise up! We are the deep sea and we will move as one to finish Unity’s rats. There is no peace. Unity is not peace.”

There was a pause, then another, smoother sounding voice, like a radio chat-show host. “...Unity’s failure was its reliance on only two pillars: wealth and fear. No doubt the living standard rose for many of the former lower- and working-classes. Unity pacified and seduced the everyman, the everywoman, with the promise of life with more leisure than work. Meanwhile it poisoned our water so we can never have children. Children are a privilege now, and what did vlast-class—I’m sorry, it’s vulgar, but it fits—vlast-class vermin ever do to earn that privilege, which used to be the most basic human right—to create a family, make a legacy, pass on a name? They did nothing but to have wealth. They multiply, while we shlost folk begin to die, with no one to replace us. And where does your currency allotment go, when you are dead? The vlast rats grow fat on the backs of our dead brothers and sisters. When I was a youngster, Before, I lived above a grocer. He paid me out of the till for every rat I killed in the alley behind his shop. I stomped them with heavy boots and heard the crackle of their skulls. Every rat I killed put currency in my pocket, for my parents, for my brothers. The grocer counted the corpses and once I was paid I flung them in a canal. Let the sea take the rats.”

A second pause, then a tinny-sounding, static-filled burst of impassioned near-shouting, as with an old-time preacher from Before. “...the response to repression is explosion...the response to intimidation is resistance...the response the killing of my brother is that I should rise up and kill ten of theirs. Not one vlast rat will be left alive as Unity sinks into the deep sea. Not a single rat left alive. Not one old one, not one pup. The response to infestation is extermination.”

That was all there was to hear. John removed the headphones and set them aside with the player on the table beside him. He sat for several long minutes, just staring at the cold metal guts of the fire, and tried to find a way to live with what he’d just heard. Obviously these were some of the broadcasts the Mentor had mentioned, that must be going out over pirate radio on the continent. After so many years living with Unity’s tightly-controlled media output—not to mention the fact that treacherous thoughts, let alone speech, were enough to get a person marked out as a target for someone like the Face—what he’d just heard was startling, and John was discomfited. Nevermind his opinion on the contents of those messages, the mere fact of their existence was boggling.

His phone buzzed a notification and he fished it from his trousers’ pocket.

TXT from [020.496.1130]: Still on for half-one –X

John smiled.

Are you asking, or reminding?

TXT from [020.496.1130]: Bit of both. –X

I’ll be there.
He’d set aside the job for the moment, in favour of contemplating a more pressing conundrum: whether this qualified as a date, and if so, was it the sort that warranted an anticipatory wank? Xie—he’d have another name to roll around in his mind, in his mouth, in just a few hours—had indicated they’d meet before the barber’s appointment, so their time was technically limited. But then again, John was no slouch in the charm department, and certainly there was more than a hint of mutual attraction in the air, and with three standing appointments a week, certainly he could miss one and shave his own face after.

He.

It quickly became clear that the pre-date wank to settle his nerves and assure he would be able to hold out for a respectable amount of time, if it came to that, was no longer likely to be optional as a full-body memory of the previous night’s phone call washed over him. His low, rumble-of-thunder voice. His delicious hums and sighs and moans. And as soon as John could pick him out from a group of strangers in a park called Clarendon Place, off Victoria Street, John would know the surface of his unpainted face, the shape of his body, his precious name.

The ache in Sherlock’s rib had dulled from stabbing and electric to merely nagging, and though he was fairly sure his back bore several smaller bruises, the only really painful one—at the level of his kidney on the right—was beginning to go yellow-green around the edges. Normally, he wouldn’t have looked, but as he was dressing with purpose, he was persuaded to glance quickly over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of it in the mirror, most of his body safely hidden with a bath towel wrapped around his waist and another draped over his shoulders. The bruise was arch-shaped, nearly pointed at the apex, in the shape and size of the toe of Jim’s oxblood-coloured shoe, mostly mottled dark red to nearly purple-black, and Sherlock moved stiffly because of it, except when Jim was looking.

It was just past noon and Jim was still asleep, nude and tangled in the bed sheets, one bare foot and calf invading Sherlock’s side of the bed. He’d overdone the gin the previous night and there was a sick-sweet smell coming off him that Sherlock loathed. His mouth hung open and he snored now and then, seeming to startle himself so he shifted the position of his head on the pillow. Sherlock had played dead when he heard Jim coming in, pretended to sleep while Jim stripped off his clothes and left them on the floor, banged into the bench at the foot of the bed, cursed at it, and collapsed down beside him. A languid brush of Jim’s hand across his hip and down his backside made Sherlock hold his breath, but nothing came of it and Jim was snoring within a few minutes. Sherlock hugged the edge of the mattress, stuffed a pillow behind his back to put space between their bodies.

Sherlock chose a suit that was a favourite of his even though it wasn’t new. Navy twill with a milk-chocolate coloured windowpane check; single-breasted, two buttons; slightly narrow lapels. He almost always wore it with a supple, bright-white shirt and a white pocket square folded so just its straight upper edge peeked out, sleekly parallel to the top of the breast pocket. He had several neckties he liked with it but hadn’t yet decided which he would wear to meet John.

Their his-and-his dressing room was nearly two-thirds the size of the master bedroom, with hanging bars, shoe racks, and built-in chests of drawers on opposite walls. At one end was the door from the bedroom, and at the other the door to the bath. In the center of the room stood a tall, marble-topped island with narrow drawers on each side for neckties, handkerchiefs, cufflinks (Jim’s), and wristwatches (a particular favourite splurge of Sherlock’s; he owned over a dozen very good ones, and nearly twice as many less costly, trendier ones). While Jim’s side held some jumpers and t-shirts
and denims, Sherlock rarely dressed casually—favouring suits he bought directly from a few
favourite designers or had tailored in the old manner—and his shirt cuffs were all monogrammed
with tonal thread. Because it tended to ruin the lines of his suits, he did not bother with underwear.
Now and then he would wear a vest if his shirt was pale-coloured or of a thin fabric, or if he knew
his jacket would be unbuttoned most of the time, though most often he would choose to forgo the
vest in favour of the risqué texture and shadow of his nipples showing through his close-fitted shirts.

Sherlock peeked in at Jim, still asleep in the dim bedroom, then pressed the door shut. He slipped the
trousers from the hanger, and fed his long legs into them, tucked himself in behind the front placket
(right-handed, he had always dressed to the left and so his suits were cut and lined accordingly),
zipped, buttoned, slid the hook into place. He smoothed his hands down his backside and thighs. It
was a very good suit and he knew precisely how it flattered the curve of his bum and the muscles of
his legs, even as he kept his back to the tall mirror in the corner of the room. A white shirt, its slightly
iridescent buttons embroidered with the designer’s logo, monogrammed cuffs left unbuttoned for the
time being while he considered a wristwatch. A pause in dressing to retreat to the bathroom to fix his
hair, still damp and crying to be arranged properly before it went entirely its own, willful way. Since
it was his day for a haircut, the natural curls were at the outer edge of tameability and Sherlock spent
more time than usual redirecting it, until he had coax ed it into a pleasing arrangement: soft, broad
waves across the top of his head; a slightly wild bit above one ear jutting out and up, not quite
curling; and a few slim wisps of waves finding their way down his forehead. He had no illusion that
it looked accidental, but its carefully cultivated pseudo-messiness did give an air of fresh-from-bed
hedonism to counterbalance the suit and tie.

Once satisfied with everything above the neck, Sherlock contemplated what to wrap around it,
dragging long fingers south-to-north across the columns of neckties carefully rolled and sorted by
colour in the narrow drawers of the central island. Ultimately, he chose a slim one in darkest navy,
slightly iridescent silk that looked nearly black when the light and shadow played upon it, and tied it
in a snug single Windsor. The topmost drawer held his watches, and he decided on a silver-faced
one, handsome but primarily utilitarian, with a chocolate-brown alligator strap and a stylized, snap-
like silver buckle. He buttoned his shirt cuffs and slid into his jacket, shifting it up onto his shoulders
and fastening just the top button, pressing his lips together at the flares of dull pain these movements
caused in his ribs and back. The favoured white pocket square was fitted into place, and he slipped
his feet into soft, well-polished shoes in a deep shade of brown to match the watchband and the
pinstripes of his suit. Now at last fully dressed and coiffed (though not shaved; nearly two days’
stubble was making itself known on his upper lip and chin—though two days’ stubble for Sherlock
was still nearly invisible unless one was quite close to his face), Sherlock stood before the mirror,
tugging here, picking a speck of lint there, piecing apart a wavy tendril of hair at his temple. Lifting
his chin, he directed a spritz of his best cologne onto his throat and then smoothed the front of his
jacket. He checked his watch, fetched his phone from the marble countertop and sent a text.

Still on for half-one –X

He strode into the bedroom, perched on the edge of the bench to lean down and tie his shoes. Jim
stirred and rolled onto his back, letting go a grumpy hum.

“Christ, my feckin’ head. Time’s it?”

Ice water trickled down Sherlock’s spine at the tone of Jim’s voice.

“Nearly one o’clock. I’m to the barber. Phone interview later so I’ll be upstairs after about half-
three.”

“Put the tea on before you go.”
“I’m in a hurry,” Sherlock said to the floor, untying and retying his left shoe to avoid having to turn around.

“Your appointment’s at two-thirty. What’s the rush?” Jim’s bare heel nudged him hard in the back—not directly on the massive bruise he’d left, but close enough that Sherlock knew he was probably trying for it. “Hm? Sweetheart?”

“I wanted to stop in at babulya Ishi’s shop first,” Sherlock said. His face burned, certain Jim would hear the lie in his voice. His phone buzzed in the inside pocket of his jacket and he quickly cleared his throat in hopes of drowning it out.

“Hm.” Jim turned over again, rolled up and to his feet. He threw a sideways glance at Sherlock as he passed on his way to the loo. “Your hair looks mad. Having it cut today?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “I’d say you’re overdue.” Louder, from the far end of the dressing room. “Just put the fucking tea on before you fuck off, then, will you Sherlock.” The door shut harder than was strictly necessary. Sherlock pulled out his phone and read the new message.

_TXT from [unknown]: Are you asking, or reminding?_

He kept his eyes on the dressing room door, ears perked to hear Jim coming out of the bathroom, as he quick-tapped his reply and sent it.

_Bit of both. –X_

_TXT from [unknown]: I’ll be there._

Sherlock filled the kettle, fetched mug and spoon and sugar bowl and arranged them on the worktop according to Jim’s preferences before leaving the flat.

Finding the park—Clarendon Place, off Victoria Street, John had repeated it like a mantra—was easy. Just inside the entrance was a wide expanse of lawn dotted with flower beds, big old trees here and there, and a central alley of pavement interrupted by a huge, circular fountain. Beyond the fountain lay another fifty or so yards of the paved walkway, and then an arched gate draped with the last, fading blooms of lilac-coloured passionflowers. John scanned every person he passed—easily dismissing young couples sitting on spread-out blankets and women alone on benches with magazines, but looking twice at any man alone, even those walking briskly carrying attaché cases, clearly using the park as a shortcut on their way to somewhere else. None looked back at him, or if they did, it was the usual half-second gaze of barely-registering-existence common to the passage of strangers in public. His mouth was a bit dry; his palms a bit wet; he could not remember feeling edgy nerves like these in he didn’t know how long. It was thrilling.

He checked the time on his phone and found he was early. Too nervous to sit and wait anywhere, he decided to stroll the meandering path through the Japanese-style garden, and he would try not to look for him _him_ before the appointed time. Who was ever on time, anyway? John had always been pathologically punctual; he would rather be a half-hour early for something than even five minutes late—but he knew the rest of the world allowed more flexibility. He felt himself obsessing, stopped walking and closed his eyes long enough to suck in a deep breath through his nose, held it briefly, then sighed it out as deliberately as he could. He had to calm down or he was going to blurt, fidget, and more or less come across like a jittery fool. John reminded himself that they’d already met. He’d already kissed those hands, that neck, held the bare ankle in the curve of his palm, stared into those
green-blue eyes. They’d already coaxed orgasms from each other, for god’s sake. This was no blind date.

He shook his head, shrugged tension from his shoulders, thought about soldierly stoicism, then—at last—started to walk again. The path was of pale grey gravel, here and there still raked into place where no one had yet walked over it that morning. John turned his attention to the details of the garden itself. Now that he was in it, he was impressed by the natural sound-dampening provided by the plants and trees, and the distance from the bustling Victoria Street. There was an undulating pond in the center that curved out of sight from nearly every angle, making it impossible to gauge its actual size. Rising from its banks were gentle slopes planted with shapely green and red bushes, some pruned to resemble bonsai trees. Here and there were wide expanses carpeted with some low-growing ground cover. There were weeping trees reflected in the still surface of the pond, and garden sculptures of long-legged herons that reminded John of Xie, reminded him he was utterly and completely fucked.

*I need off this job.*

**TXT from TheMentor:** Next to impossible.

**Not impossible though?**

**TXT from TheMentor:** I like to leave a crack for hope to get in.

John made a disgusted sound and pocketed his phone. There were voices approaching around a blind curve, both female, and he spared a grin for two women of a certain age as they passed. He walked on. There was birdsong here, and somewhere hidden in the shrubbery there must be some small fountain; he heard burbling water but couldn’t find the source of the sound. Around the next curve there was a bench stood at the edge of a rectangular pit full of creamy-grey sand, with three boulders standing in it at irregular intervals; a Zen meditation spot, John knew, though he’d never been one for sitting still. The idea of being alone with his thoughts was hideous; he preferred to keep moving, thinking of this, that, and the other—things that happened well outside himself. Looking too deeply inward was only asking for trouble.

He passed the meditation garden and reached an arched footbridge over a narrow stretch of the pond. It was of unpainted wood, with barely-shaped planks that showed off the grain and knots of the tree trunks they’d been cut from, and much smoother rails shiny from years of hands sliding over them. John started across, walking up the sloped surface until he’d reached the crest, where he stopped to gaze around him. This was surely the best view of the garden, though not one that revealed everything, by any stretch, the garden clearly having been designed to provide a novel tableau from almost every vantage point. He checked the time again; 1:37. He felt a shock of urgency: he was late, he might have missed the opportunity, he’d not been told the meeting must be at half-one exactly, but his pulse thudded so hard his thumb throbbed where it balanced the edge of the phone. A quick scan of the landscape revealed no person in evidence, anywhere—not on the paths, not on any of the benches he could see, not lazing beneath the shade of a tree. John’s pace was quicker on his way down the far side of the bridge.

*When he glanced at his watch to see it was 1:32, Sherlock found his hands were trembling, so he stuffed them in his trousers’ pockets. He knew the garden well—it was one of his favourite spots in the city—and so took the right hand path, toward the clearing with its tiny pagoda-shaped temple. The zen garden was boring and made him restless. Anyway, he wanted the chance to meet John in the open, not to accidentally stumble upon each other as each rounded a curve in the path. The clearing was more comfortable for a planned/chance meeting.*

John thought about what he might say, had a few probably-funny things in mind: two witty, two
jokey, one racy. He’d made a mental note of a coffee shop, a wine bar, and a book shop nearby, in case they needed somewhere to be where they could focus on something aside from each other. He reminded himself their time was limited by the (his) appointment with the barber. John cleared his throat repeatedly, wondering if the new-to-him pollen was causing it, knowing that it was not.

Sherlock worried slightly for the state of his shoes; the gravel of the path tended to cough up dust. He heard a martin calling somewhere in the middle distance, and running water from a hidden stream to his right. When he reached the clearing, he was surprised to find at least a dozen people, perhaps as many as twenty, milling around the temple, many snapping photos, some sitting on benches or boulders nearby with open notebooks on their laps. Sherlock figured them for an art class, though the mix of ages seemed to imply not university students, but a neighborhood group or even a day-trip set up by a pleasure district tour company. After an initial flutter of anxiety (he hadn’t actually expected a crowd when he’d issued John the challenge of picking him out of one), he approached a wide-smiling woman with a large bag over her shoulder, taking her for the leader of the group, and asked for a pencil and small pad, if she could spare it. . .of course, of course, here you are, how did I miss you before?

John heard voices—a lot of them, given how quiet it had been and that he’d only encountered the two women since he entered the garden—and rounded a corner into a clearing. Dear god. He hadn’t actually expected a crowd when he’d been issued the challenge of picking him—him—out of one. Yet here was one, writing—no, sketching—in books or snapping photos of the tall, pagoda-like building, the gravel of the path, the leaves of the cascading branches of trees no more than waist-height.

Sherlock chose the side of the temple farthest from the path entrances, and folded open the ring-bound sketchbook, scratched across the surface of the pleasingly rough, thick page with a bog-standard grey pencil. Now and then a body drifted into view and he glanced up, but none were the one he was looking for.

John gave up any pretense of casualness, squinted openly at the crowd before him, hands clasped in the small of his back as he studied each face. There were more women than men, and he told himself that made it easier. One bloke was far too short, another quite overweight. The exaggeratedly fluid hand motions of one tall, slender man caught his eye momentarily, but the skin was dark and the eyes brown, clearly not the man he was looking for. He took several purposeful strides around the side of the building.

Sherlock scribbled and scribbled, started to lose himself in the motion of his hand, the sound of the pencil-tip scraping across the paper.

John spied a tall figure in a well-cut suit, couldn’t make out features because the sun was in his eyes. “Excuse me—“

John’s voice. Sherlock looked up to see John Watson, dressed smartly in dusty-green trousers and a woven shirt—off-white, buttoned to the neck—with a dark grey, lightweight coat that looked to have been designed in Japan, ducking around a tall man in an off-the-rack suit. John gestured, grimaced apologetically, pointing around the man, indicating his desire to pass him. “I have to—“

There he was, nattily dressed, a decidedly male counterpoint the dolled-up vision called Xie, with a soft halo of barely-tamed, wavy dark hair framing the jaw and cheekbones and forehead and—ah, there they were!—beautiful, ice-green eyes John already knew so well. And, oh!, his mouth. His.

Sherlock grinned, tucked the pencil into his jacket pocket and the notebook under his arm, then extended his hand to John.
John shook the proffered hand—huge, long-fingered, pale and soft and stunning—and felt the familiar face-ache from smiling.

“Pleasure to meet you at last, Captain Watson. Sherlock Holmes.”

“Sherlock Holmes,” John echoed, trying it out, learning the shape and taste of it inside his mouth, on his tongue. He stared, smiled, would be damned if he would immediately surrender the hand clutched in his own. Before he’d even thought, he spoke again.

*John shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe his luck. Then he breathed a single word:*

“Extraordinary.”
Chapter 12

Sherlock swallowed hard as John finally released him from their handshake. He looked away, toward the gravel-covered ground, and then gestured toward the path from which John had just emerged. “Bit hectic here. Shall we walk a bit?” As ever, Sherlock defaulted to the familiar comfort of hosting the event; putting John at ease put him at his own ease.

John’s smile was disarmingly boyish and eager, bordering on goofy; Sherlock found himself utterly charmed by it.

“Yeah,” John agreed, and bobbed his head. “Sure, we can walk.”

As they passed the woman who seemed to be in charge, Sherlock tore out the page he’d been writing on from the book she’d lent him, folded it once and tucked into the inside pocket of his jacket, noticing with an amused little thrill how John’s gaze followed his hands through the air. He passed the book and pencil back to the woman and thanked her, meeting her eyes and eliciting her smile.

John fell into step beside him as he started at a deliberate, wandering pace and in moments they had put the busy crowd near the temple behind them, out of sight as well as earshot.

“Oh!” John let out a little gasp, and patted his pockets, jacket and trousers both, eventually pulling a small box from the outside pocket of his coat. “Brought you something.”

“You needn’t have,” Sherlock told him.

“I wanted to.” He handed it over: green cardboard tied with a doubled and tripled length of dark blue ribbon. Sherlock turned it over in his hands, testing out its weight, which was surprisingly hefty for its size. Beside him, John breathed, “God, it’s really like meeting a completely different person.”

“Well,” was all Sherlock managed, and shrugged a little helplessly.

“Well,” was all Sherlock managed, and shrugged a little helplessly.

“It’s fine,” John hurried to dismiss it. “I thought it might be a bit like that, but it’s more….”

Sherlock glanced sideways at John. He’d done something to his eyebrows—combed them into place. Recognizing the forethought sunk into this meeting, Sherlock’s infidelity rattled noisily in his chest and he glanced away again, shifting his gaze to the path a few yards in front of them.

“It’s just more,” John said with a shrug. “It’s more different than I anticipated.”

“May I confess?” Sherlock said.

“Anything.”

“I worried how you’d receive me this way, as a man.” He tapped the little box against his opposite palm. “As I am.”

John stepped in front of him suddenly, stopping them both, and tilted his face up—less so now that Sherlock was in flat shoes—looked hard at Sherlock’s eyes, one to the other, back and forth.

“Not as a man. You are a man,” John said, quiet but firm. “I’m glad you’re a man. I’m glad you’re. . .” he gestured, then let his fingertips brush down one of Sherlock’s lapels. “Just you. This. This that you are.” He grinned as if apologizing for his inarticulateness. “You’re spectacularly handsome, by the way.”
Sherlock felt his chest flush warm.

“Far out of my league,” John added. “The back of my mind is running a massive calculation of how in the holy hell I’m going to manage to keep you—“

Sherlock’s gut twinged.

“—interested.”

Sherlock shook the gift wrapped box beside his ear, raised his eyebrows comically, breaking the tension.

“Open it, if you like,” John encouraged, and looked around for a bench.

“Around this bend in the path,” Sherlock told him automatically, tipping his chin. “Beyond that red maple.”

John squinted and tilted his head. Sherlock only smiled.

“Not a trick,” John said knowingly, then added, “You’re incredibly clever,” and it sounded as if he were sincerely impressed. And they rounded the turn to discover a wooden bench tucked in among the dwarf trees with their bent-over branches brushing the ground. Once they’d both sat, Sherlock turned the box over in his hands, one full rotation, then pinched one tail of the ribbon and began to pull. A sideways glance revealed that John was watching his hands again, or still.

The ribbon fell away and Sherlock quickly wound it around his flattened fingers, then tucked the resulting loop in his jacket beside the folded sketchbook page. He shook the bottom of the box loose from the lid, set the lid on his thigh. Lifting away a piece of white tissue revealed a piece of quartz crystal just big enough to fit in the palm of a hand, its oil-slick shades of purple, green, and fuschia making it resemble a black opal.

“Titanium quartz,” John said. “Or so I’m told.”

Sherlock lifted it out of the box, turned it in the cloud-filtered daylight, watching the colours shift from turquoise to hot pink, here and there darkening to violet. It was a cluster of pyramid-tipped shards, all edges and points.

“It’s meant to keep you grounded while you’re in—what was it?—higher states of consciousness,” John offered.

“That sounds very practical,” Sherlock replied with amusement.

“Oh, and it cleans your karma, and releases grief,” John added with a shrug. Sherlock rolled the jagged crystal along his palm, felling all the corners and cool, smooth surfaces. “Anyway, it’s lovely, so of course it reminded me of you.” John’s hand moved to lift the box’s lid off Sherlock’s knee, an obvious pretense for wanting physical contact, as his fingertips lingered against Sherlock’s inseam, though not lasciviously.

Sherlock pondered this, stroking his thumb up and down along one smooth facet. He would not linger on thoughts of his potential need to release grief or repair whatever resonances—karmic or otherwise—of his past were clinging to his present, or his future. It was all just hocus-pocus anyway, a story designed to sell a rock to an unsuspecting army veteran in order that he could woo an out-of-costume drasha.

“It is very nice to look at. I’ll put it on my desk. Thank you.” Sherlock tucked it back into the box
and set the box on the bench beside him. He looked down at John’s hand on his knee, thumb stroking lazily back and forth across the fabric of his trousers. “You don’t need to bring all these gifts,” Sherlock told him.

“I know.” There was a pause, and Sherlock laid his hand on top of John’s, tucking his fingers around and down until they touched John’s palm. John’s thumb went still and he let himself be held. “How’s your back, by the way?” John asked then, as if he’d only just remembered.

“My back?” Sherlock felt sick for a moment, imagining John had somehow seen through the layers of his clothes to the mottled-violet evidence of his inability to guard himself from harm.

“You said last night, on the phone—‘a half-beat which raised the volume a bit as they both remembered the intimate, explicit turn the call had taken, and their mouths quivered upward into knowing half-grins, ‘—that your back was bothering you.”

He had indeed said that, a breezy euphemism that wouldn’t raise an eyebrow. Everyone had bad backs. Pain in the back could be anything—pinched nerve, pulled muscle, weak spine, irritated disc. Rarely, if ever, would anyone assume a pain in another’s back was the result of an assault. Sherlock let his head drop to the side as he shrugged. “Ah, that. Gets better every day.”

“Good, good.”

Sherlock noticed the shadows under John’s eyes. “How did you sleep?” he asked, and fixed his gaze on their hands folded together on his lap. He was wearing his wedding ring. It hadn’t even occurred to him, as he dressed so carefully for a walk in a park with a man not his husband, that he should take it off. He gave John’s hand a quick squeeze then withdrew, turning slightly away to fuss with the gift box, gesturing up the path as if to ask whether John would like to continue their walk.

“About as well as I ever do,” John reported, and they stood and started to stroll again, side by side, the crunching of their soles against the gravel, or an occasional bird’s song, the only sounds. Sherlock was aware of John’s repeated sideways glances—they weren’t entirely subtle—and felt strangely studied, exposed, but not vulnerable. “You’re. . .” John said, as they reached the footbridge, and he sighed out a quick breath, and shook his head, lost for words.

Sherlock abruptly stopped walking, and turned toward John, closing space between them so decisively that John took a half-step backward before regaining his footing at the very edge of the path beside a wide curtain of weeping willow branches, the leaves just beginning to turn gold. John tipped his chin up to meet Sherlock’s eyes. His face was so open, easy to read, and Sherlock searched for proof of his intention. He looked over John’s recently groomed eyebrows, the soft indentations beside his lips; there was a tiny, red-edged razor nick low on his cheek, close to his ear lobe, and Sherlock reached to soothe it with the tip of his index finger. John’s eyes warmed and sparked, and he smiled as Sherlock’s fingertip alit on his skin.

“I’m. . .?” Sherlock prompted, and stepped forward, reaching around John’s shoulder, and the parted branches brushed against their shoulders as they stepped in behind the drape of withering, shivering leaves. If it had been near silent in the garden, it was almost completely so beneath the bent, trailing branches of the ancient tree. The ground beneath their feet was more earth than vegetation, though not muddy. The daylight was filtered, dancing in coin-sized speckles across their faces.

“Bloody gorgeous,” John finished at last, with an unself-conscious smile. He reached for Sherlock’s wrist, cradled the gangly hand in his palm and raised it a bit, staring hard at its back. “Of course I didn’t expect otherwise.” His eyes flicked to the center of Sherlock’s chest, then up to his face once more. “I wish we had more time,” he said quietly, plainly. “How much time do we have?” The shadows of branches crisscrossed his face, now and then clearing the way for a bright spark of light
to burst and shimmer in his eyes.

Sherlock knew without looking at his watch. “Just under a quarter-hour, if I’m to be on time.”

“And how long if you’re late?” John turned Sherlock’s hand palm-up and raised it to his face, brushed dry lips near the crease of his wrist.

“I.” Sherlock’s voice hitched on breath at the top of his throat, died on his tongue. He slithered his hand from John’s grip, shuffled forward a quarter-step so they were nearly chest to chest, gripped John’s arms above the elbows. His mouth was infuriatingly dry; he thrust his tongue-tip out between his lips to ready them. John just stared and stared—that expression on his face, what was it, desire and something else, could it be. . .awe?—and Sherlock’s heart thwacked a wild beat behind his sternum.

“I’m going to kiss you now, Sherlock Holmes,” John breathed.

Sherlock shook his head, firmly, no, and John’s face began to crumble with disappointment for the half-instant it took for Sherlock to lean down and kiss him.

John clutched at Sherlock as if to keep himself from falling, and perhaps that really was the reason for his fingers digging gently into Sherlock’s right shoulder, his left bicep, given the slight height differential and the way Sherlock leaned forward into him, setting John slightly off balance. Not to mention the surprise, which John expressed with a gently dismayed sound in the back of his mouth. Sherlock held him steady by his elbows, worried John’s closed lips with his own, mildly panicked that perhaps they were too dry, too awkward—he had only kissed one man for the last dozen years and more, and perhaps his habits were bad. His knees felt strangely loose; he held John as much to keep himself upright as he did to steady John.

John hummed and his tongue dipped out as if to moisten his own lips, not at all aggressive, though Sherlock let his mouth open regardless of John’s intention. John’s hands moved from his arm and shoulder to wrap around his back, one drifting up to the back of his neck just above his collar, applying gentle downward pressure to the base of Sherlock’s skull. Sherlock marveled at how a hand at the back of his neck could feel so like an invitation, so unlike the usual demand. A knot of flaming urgency flared in his gut and began to grow, and his instinctive cure for the threat of self-combustion was to kiss John harder, coaxing open John’s mouth with his tongue, breathing fire down John’s throat.

Sherlock leaned back, breath urgent, neck and cheeks flushing hot. John looked much the same, closing his lips tightly and biting down, rolling them slowly between his teeth in a manner that appeared to want to trap every one of Sherlock’s left-behind traces inside his mouth. John smiled, looked knowing. Their hands still clutched at each other’s clothes, muscles shifting beneath each other’s fingers. John’s eyes were soft and wide, searching in vague figure-eight sweeps of Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock kissed him again.

John’s mouth was as pliant as his gaze, though his body was straining tautly upward. Sherlock felt a wave of something fierce roll up through him, starting in his belly, nearly shaking his heart loose from its moorings, up the back of his spine to overfill his head. Not a sensual thrill, not a swelling sentiment—it was something much more familiar, much more akin to dread. He took a step backward, and their hands fell away from each other. The earlier look of disappointment when Sherlock had negated his assertion John was about to kiss him reemerged to turn John’s features downward slightly, throwing new shadows on his cheeks and chin.
“Something—?”

“No,” Sherlock huffed out immediately, and shook his head, trying at a smile, as if he’d taken himself by surprise. “No, it’s. . . I’m.” His body and its endless betrayals—now his hands got in on the act, tossing themselves on his wrists in a gesture of surrender. He felt helpless, then, and longed to run.

John cleared his throat, and frowned with his eyebrows, creases appearing in his forehead. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his jacket and looked at the ground, then gathered himself as if he might leave. Sherlock pressed his palms together, thumbs beneath his chin, index fingers pressing lightly against his lips. He exhaled sharply through his nose.

“No,” John said, as if Sherlock had said anything at all. He held up his hand. “I understand.” He harrumphed again, squared his shoulders. “I never should have—”

“It’s not what you think,” Sherlock said evenly, and dropped his hands by his sides. “It’s really not.”

John nodded, tight-lipped.

“This is. . .” Sherlock started. “This is all I can offer.”

John’s eyebrows rearranged themselves upward. Sherlock ventured to move closer, eased John’s collar aside with the pinky-edge of his hand and laid his palm in the hollow of John’s neck and shoulder. “There’s only me,” he clarified. “If it’s not enough—”

John’s reply came out in a rush. “It’s what I want. It’s exactly what I want.” The earnest, bright-eyed gaze returned, sparkling in the dappled light through the screen of branches. The back of his knuckles brushed Sherlock’s cheek, there low near his jaw, and Sherlock closed his eyes for longer than a blink. John’s hand unfurled and caught the side of Sherlock’s neck and persuaded him closer. Sherlock closed his eyes, let his lips part, held his breath. John surrounded his lower lip with his own eager ones, pressing, pulling, only hesitantly—perhaps even reluctantly—at last releasing. He settled back on his heels. “You’re the man I want,” he said, and it sounded too raw not to be genuine. “From the moment I first saw you.”

Sherlock closed his eyes and dipped his chin. John leaned in and pressed his lips, the tip of his nose, against the side of Sherlock’s throat, the way he’d done to Xie that late night in the salon. Sherlock lifted his head, baring his throat, and John nuzzled and nipped, their fingers reaching and brushing and finding each other, tangling together down at their sides. A cool, soft rush as John inhaled against Sherlock’s neck, and he murmured, “My god, you smell like—”

“A man?” Sherlock finished quietly, through a half-smile.

John breathed then against the soft place at the very back of Sherlock’s jaw. “Like a church.” His mouth came open, dragging tongue, scraping teeth, and he dropped Sherlock’s hands in order to grasp his jaw, the lapel of his jacket, fingers and thumb caressing the fabric there as if it were Sherlock’s own skin. A light, shivering moan floated out of Sherlock’s mouth then, taking him by surprise. He gave himself over to John’s grip on him, John’s mouth on him, but only for a few moments, before he gently straightened up.

“I’m sorry, John. I have to go.”

John made a frustrated sound but leaned away, his fingers still tucked behind the lapel of Sherlock’s jacket, his thumb idly stroking. “Where’s that pretty rock I gave you?” he asked with a gentle smirk. “I’m in a higher state of consciousness and need grounding.”
“I’m inclined for us to never leave this little bower,” Sherlock admitted, and his eyes tracked upward along the shape of the elongated dome created by the drapery of weeping branches.

“Right. I agree. We live here now.”

They both grinned; Sherlock felt weirdly weightless, and he didn’t trust his bones.

“But I do have to go.”

John nodded, though his entire countenance betrayed a desire to protest against it. “When can I see you again?”

“There’s a party Sunday evening I think you’d fit right in with; call Molly.” Sherlock at last made the move to duck out from under the cover of the willow, and John followed. They resumed their way along the path.

“Lovely, I’ll look forward to it,” John said, then turned his head to look at Sherlock’s profile and added insistently, “But when can I see you?”

Sherlock’s face felt warm. “Soon. Will you write me a letter in the meantime?”

“What shall I write about?”

Sherlock grinned. “Surprise me.”

John stepped in front of him suddenly, blocking him and pulling him up short. He took Sherlock’s face in his hands and kissed him hard. Sherlock’s initial shock dissipated in half an instant, and he leaned into John’s body, opened his mouth for John’s tongue. They both came away a bit breathless, and John looked pleased with himself.

“Surprise,” he said plainly, then made a gesture for Sherlock to keep walking. Soon they’d crossed the footbridge, and there was only one more bend in the path before their arrival at the gate would signal the end of their garden stroll. Despite the thunderous ticking of his wristwatch reminding him of the time, Sherlock slowed his pace even more as they neared the last of the path, not wanting it to end, not wanting to walk away from John Watson.

“Sherlock,” John said abruptly, just before they rounded the final turn and were spit back out into the real world, “I know the stakes are high, so I won’t make demands about things like this in future—I promise I won’t—but just this once I’m going to say it, and get it out of my system.”

Sherlock widened his eyes, clasped his hands behind his back, waited.

“Miss your appointment, wreck your day, forget the Icehouse and everything that goes with it—“ John pointedly did not say, forget your husband, but the implication roared between the lines. “—come home with me and let me spend hours and hours getting your smell of incense onto my skin.”

Sherlock’s breath left him in a soft but audible puff through barely-parted lips. The intensity of John’s stare was narcotic.

“Please.”

There was a moment where neither of them spoke. Sherlock teetered on the ledge, peering over, ready to drop, and just as he was about to lean into the freefall, John touched two fingertips to Sherlock’s lips, just briefly, and shook his head.
“I know the answer. Don’t say it.” He tipped his head. “Go on; you’ll be late.”

On firm ground once more, but with a lingering flutter low in his gut, Sherlock nodded. “Can I kiss you goodbye?” he asked.

“Never.”

Not knowing what else to do, Sherlock extended his right arm as if for a handshake. John took his hand, but loosely, and lifted it, stroking the backs of Sherlock’s fingers with his own fingertips. He pressed Sherlock’s knuckles to his lips, then let him go.

“Nice to have met you, Sherlock Holmes,” John said, and his mouth ticked up. “At last.”

Sherlock returned the small smile, nodded, then turned to go. Suddenly remembering, he reached inside his jacket and turned back toward John. He extended the folded-over page from the sketchpad he’d been writing in when John first spotted him.

“A token to remember me by.” He nodded again, smiled again, and this time when he turned away, he kept walking. He heard the soft slip and flick of the paper as John unfolded it, and John’s little chuckle.

“I’ll put it under my pillow,” John called to his back, and Sherlock merely waved one hand beside his shoulder to indicate he’d heard. In the few minutes he’d stood beside the Japanese temple waiting for John to pick him out of the crowd, he’d filled the entire page—over and over, printed and in script, large and small, simple and elaborate—with just two words, Sherlock Holmes.
In chapter 12, our men strolled through the Japonesque garden of which Sherlock is especially fond, and exchanged light-dappled kisses behind a drapery of willow branches. John made a rhetorical plea, and Sherlock gave him his precious name.

*“Cheers, mate, what do I owe you?”*

*“Nah, nevermind. You get the next one.”*

John accepted the oversized but overpriced plastic cup of far-from-stellar lager as Greg resumed his seat.

*“You didn’t miss anything. As expected,” John informed him. Greg had left to use the gents and then visit the bar with two minutes left to play in the first half, trying to beat the line-ups. “I think the sun’s in their eyes,” John added archly, tipping his head toward the sky, far more clouds than blue, as ever it was.*

*“Yeah, in both teams’ eyes,” Greg agreed. “Had I known it would be so dire, I’d have saved you the trouble.”*

John laughed it off, frowned thoughtfully at the beer as he swallowed. *“Not at all. A bad day of football’s better than a good day doing nearly anything else.”*

*“I’ll drink to that,” Greg said, and raised his cup in a vague salute. “Molly would not agree. She’s more the reading on the sofa of a Saturday type. You’re better company for this particular ordeal.”*

John nodded modestly. *“Thanks very much.” He sipped his beer once more, then set it into the holder built in to the armrest. “How long have you been dating? Must be pretty new if she’s still willing to humour you by sitting through a match when she’d rather be reading.”*

*“Nearly a year now, actually,” Greg said. He shoved his hand backward through his silver hair and settled back in his chair. He hadn’t lied about the seats being good ones—close to the midfield line, just high enough to get a good, wide view. “Just last week she dropped a hint about a ring…” He hummed skeptically and looked uncomfortable.*

*“Uh-oh,” John said with a smile, unsure whose side he should take, given how little he knew them. “I mean, of course she would. We’ve been together long enough that you’d kind of expect a woman to start to put the pressure on—fish or cut bait, I understand. And Molly’s young—much younger than me—” He shrugged resignedly at that comment. “Plenty of younger blokes for her to take a stab at if I don’t come across, y’know?”*

John hummed and nodded. The workings of a woman’s mind were fairly mysterious to him, despite the time he’d spent in the company of rather a lot of them. But Greg’s assertions that a woman in her thirties might want to know a bloke’s intentions after a year seemed entirely reasonable.
“Dunno. Not that I see myself with anyone else, not that I’m itching to play the field,” he clarified, and took a pull at his beer as John gave another understanding nod. “Sowed my wild oats and then some, years ago.” Greg shifted in his seat, leaning a bit closer to John by the time he resettled, and lowered his voice to grant them whatever privacy was possible in the crowd. “I always just think marriage was invented as the foundation for a family, and since ‘shlost folk can’t have them anymore. . .” Greg threw up his hands a bit, looking defeated, and John discerned an edge of bitterness in his voice.

“They say a couple can be a family,” John offered. “Even without children. Marriage brings the families of origin together into one bigger family.” He wasn’t sure he believed this line of rhetoric himself—hadn’t given it much deep thought—but it was something people said to comfort themselves now that the drinking water was full of population suppressants and only vlast couples had any real choice as to whether two people were enough to constitute a family.

“I suppose,” Greg said hesitantly, but one half of his face crumpled up in a way that clearly said he didn’t believe it. “I don’t like to think I’m still working out stuff from my first marriage, but. . .” he shrugged and took another long draft of his beer, nearly finishing it.

“Oh, you were married before?” John prompted.

“Long time ago, right out of university. This was Before, of course. We had a mad thing for a couple of months, just desperate sex in the student housing and screaming fights outside the boozer after we closed it down. She got pregnant. We got married.”

John felt his eyebrows rise. “You have a kid? Kids?”

“He was still a little fella when Unity began. We still argued a lot—and without the wild sex to balance it out. When I joined the army, she found a vlast fella she liked better. He arranged the divorce, I was stripped of my parental rights under threat of being sent to America—not on a deployment, mind you—and the vlast bloke adopted him when they married. She and my son were reclassified, of course. And they changed his name.” It was an absolute horror story, but Greg told it with just a trace of wistful sadness in his voice, gazing at his own hand as he worried his thumbnail with his index finger. “I’m sure they’re both happier.”

“But. . .” John was speechless in the face of it, so he only said, “How old would he be now?”

“Twenty-six?” Greg seemed to doubt himself.

“God, I’m sorry. That’s terrible, that you shouldn’t know him anymore.”

Greg’s expression darkened. “Even in a society where everything’s been balanced, in the end the ones with the curr pull all the strings they want. So some rat bastard gave my son his name, and erased me from history. So you’ll forgive me not being too quick to accept Unity’s new definitions of family.”

“Of course, yeah,” John said hurriedly, “I get it.” Greg’s having called his ex’s new husband not just a run-of-the-mill bastard but a rat bastard did not pass John by, and Greg’s dour countenance and crossed arms gave the further impression he might not be entirely a company man.

“Anyway,” Greg said, “As for Molly, I suppose our relationship’s suffered some collateral damage from that situation. I feel a bit fatalistic about the prospect of getting married when there’s no real. . .” He looked doubtful, as if he thought he may be saying too much. “She’s young enough not to remember another way. But for me, marriage meant family. I’d never say it to her, but I don’t really see the point anymore.”
“Understandable,” John affirmed. “It’s true she may see it differently; she’s, what—early thirties?”

“Thirty-one. She was just a kid Before.” He took a final pull on his beer, stifled a soft belch behind his fist. “I suppose I should just recognize that I’m a lucky bastard—near fifty with a pretty young thing wants to tie herself to me—and get on with it.” He shook his head. “She could do better; maybe I should marry her before some vlast high-roller comes in the Icehouse one night and lures her away.”

John felt a need to lighten the mood given the unexpected turn in the conversation; they were only just getting to know each other, at a football game, no less. “I don’t know; seems to me she’d have to be pretty devoted, to come to these matches with you even when she didn’t want to. You’re probably all right.”

“Better, even,” Greg grinned. “Now you can fill her seat so she can stay at home with her magazines.”

By then the second half was underway, and they turned their attention back to the field for a while, occasionally groaning or scolding the players, though it helped not at all as the game remained scoreless and both teams continued their mission to disappoint.

There was a lengthy stoppage while a halfback made a show of having been grievously harmed and the trainer and team doctor were summoned onto the field to attend to his writhing form. John shook his head and muttered, “Let him take a bullet in the gut; he’ll see what pain is then.”

Greg hummed cynical agreement. “You weren’t—“ he started, and John knew precisely what he was asking.

“No, But I was a doctor; I saw more than enough gunshot soldiers while I was over there.” John knew he must tread lightly; in their very brief acquaintance, Greg had clearly indicated the time he’d spent in the Americas was not a favoured topic of discussion. He wondered if Greg might be slightly more forthcoming with another man who’d been there, so kept his posture and tone casual, inviting Greg to say more without pressing him. He added with a frown, “Civilians, too, for that matter.”

“Not sure whose bright idea it was to leave the guns,” Greg muttered. When Unity had made clear its plan to let the Americas essentially expire—with public pronouncements that there were barely people left alive there anyway, which were never given the lie by virtue of strict media and communications controls—it had made no effort to strip the citizenry of its small arms, which were plentiful throughout what was once Canada, the wide middle and south of the former US, and concentrated heavily in big cities south of the equator. The intent, it seemed, was to let them sort themselves by means of flying bullets and the last-gasp territorial claims of starving, desperate people.

“What was your unit’s assignment?” John asked, as casually as he could manage.

“Widows and orphans,” Greg said tersely.

“So you had medics on board?”

“No,” Greg said, tight-jawed, through gritted teeth. “None.”

John only nodded, and finished the last few swigs of his beer. “Shall I get us another round?” he offered, looking to depressurize.

Greg sat back, clearly relieved. “Yeah, great. Sounds good. Ah, now!—Are they making up their
When John returned with the beers, Greg’s demeanour was significantly more relaxed than it had been, discussing his time in the army.

“Ta, mate.”

John resumed his seat and they passed a few more minutes with their attention fixed on the game.

“You come around quite a bit,” Greg ventured after a while, with obviously feigned nonchalance. John wondered if his own leading questions sounded as unsubtle. “To the Icehouse, I mean.”

“I got a decent overage on my last trip to America,” John told him truthfully. “One of the nurses in my unit over there invited me one night. And what can I say?”

“Xie,” Greg replied, with a knowing smile.


“Don’t worry, mate; I get it. It’s a kind of magic Xie has. I’m not immune.”

“No?” John gave him a sideways grin.

“Well, it’s art,” he allowed. “And of course, the whole business is designed to charm the curr right off your IC, isn’t it?” His tone wasn’t judgmental.

“Well, it’s charmed a bit off mine,” John admitted. “That’s true.”

Greg shrugged. “There are worse ways to spend your drinking time. Even if the rest of the group turns out to be dull, Xie’s always nice to look at.”

“Do you and Molly spend any time with. . .” he wasn’t sure how to proceed. “. . .Xie. . .” It sounded wrong; he was talking about Sherlock, but for all John knew, the name Sherlock Holmes was some industry secret. “Outside of work?”

“A bit. Not much. Sherlock is really Molly’s friend.” So there was that question answered. “His one’s just his one, and I’m just Molly’s one. No double dates or anything.” Greg leaned back, sipped his beer, kept his eyes on the midfield. “She seems to think you and Sherlock might be getting—dunno—friendly.”

John cleared his throat. Greg immediately backed off.

“None of my business.” He threw a hand up, surrendering. “Forget I said it.”

“It’s all right,” John said. “I just don’t know what he’d say, so I figure I shouldn’t say anything.”

“The husband’s a real bit of business,” Greg said, as if to himself.

John felt his eyebrows rise and he tried to meet Greg’s gaze. “You don’t like him.”

“He’s my boss. No one likes the boss.”

“Or were you just reminding me there’s a husband?” John challenged, and even he could hear it sounded a bit darker as it came out of his mouth—like it was the Face saying it. He tried to correct with a smile, assumed it was a failure.
“You’ve heard my thoughts on marriage and where it got me,” Greg said with another shrug. “We’re all adults—do as we please.” He turned slightly and eyed John up and down with an evaluating gaze. “You seem a bloke who can handle himself—you went back to America by choice, so you’ve clearly got bigger bollocks than me—but you should bear in mind: Jim Moriarty has as much power as a ‘shlost bloke is likely to have, and part of that is because of who he’s married to. I don’t think they’re the happiest of couples, but I also don’t think Moriarty would just roll over. For anyone. Ever. He likes his lifestyle too much.” Greg ran his hand down his throat, a nervous tic. “Have you met him? Moriarty?”

“I have,” John said. “Wasn’t impressed.”

“What he lacks in social grace he makes up for in off-the-scales rage. I’ve never met an angrier person, and it doesn’t take much to set him off. He fired my second because he wore off-brand boots. Had him carried out—arms and ankles—by guards who’d been working under him ten seconds before. That’s the sort of fella he is.”

“So why would Sherlock—?” John wondered, but didn’t finish. It was too personal, and he found he didn’t even want to hear Greg’s take on the situation.

“He could sell ash to a wildfire,” Greg said quickly. “Charismatic as hell. And I don’t think Sherlock sees the side of him the employees do. I joke with Molly she shouldn’t look at him too long because his smile could peel her knickers right off her.”

John laughed at this. “Now that’s charisma, all right.”

“So no, I don’t like him. And it’s not my business if you and Sherlock are friends or. . .wha’ever. . .but mind you keep Moriarty in your peripheral vision. He knows very well which side his bread is buttered on.”


“Molly told me once he applies for reclassification twice a year,” Greg added in a flummoxed tone. “Thinks he should be vlast because of how successful the Icehouse is, how famous Xie is. It’s all Sherlock’s curr, y’know, keeps them in that penthouse flat. It’s like Unity can’t give him enough to please itself.”

“He said something about that once,” John admitted.

“I reckon Moriarty’s got to be making a Level One ‘shlost wage, but that’s still nothing compared to what Sherlock brings in. So far, I guess Moriarty hasn’t been able to persuade the powers that be to reclassify them.” Something flickered across Greg’s face indicating he wondered if he was talking out of turn. Nonetheless, he went on to add a final note. “Molly thinks maybe it’s Sherlock who doesn’t want to be reclassified.”

“What, like maybe he’s quashing it?” John couldn’t imagine why, if there was an opportunity to be reclassified upward—an event so rare it was essentially an urban legend—someone would refuse it. Even with all Xie’s privileges, Sherlock was still ‘shlost; all those upwardly-goosed curr limits and overage allotments could vanish at Unity’s whim. John was further reminded, as he turned this over in his mind, that Xie—and now Sherlock—was still mostly a stranger to him.

Greg looked distressed. “I shouldn’t have brought any of it up. Gossiping like a granny—I think it’s the beer on an empty stomach.”

John rushed to reassure him. “No, no. You’re all right. I appreciate the. . .” He let it die. “About
Moriarty. But. Of course, me being friendly with Sherlock—you know that’s personal, of course.”

“Yeah, of course,” Greg said quickly. “Not my business to discuss. Best of luck to you both.”

John frown-smiled and nodded. “Appreciate it.”

The game went on for nearly another hour, a continued misery for teams and supporters alike. Nonetheless, it was the only topic of conversation between them until they parted ways at the exit gate with firm handshakes and promises to do it again sometime. John went back to the flat to make notes in the file relevant to Greg Lestrade, and then, on a new page, notes about what Lestrade had told him about Jim Moriarty. Late in the afternoon, his phone buzzed to life on the coffee table where his gun sat in pieces as he cleaned and oiled it.

*Heard you had a mixed result at the football match. –SH*

*Pretty much. Molly booked me into your party tomorrow, btw.*

*She told me. Looking forward to seeing you. –SH*

*I’m glad. What are you doing now?*

*In the dressing room. Contemplating. Tonight it’s politicos. All male & without spouses. –SH*

*Turtleneck jumper, thick veil. Mittens? Try not to smell so delicious.*

*Captain Watson, are you jealous? –X*

*Not a bit. It’s a perfectly reasonable ensemble. Construction boots.*

*You mustn’t be jealous. –SH*

*Only that they get to look at you when I don’t.*

*All right then. I’ll allow it.—SH*

*I’d give anything to hear your voice right now.*

*Have we known each other long enough that I can say I miss you?*

Sherlock was in the shoe cupboard, searching for a particular pair of impossible, rhinestone-encrusted booties with lobster-claw heels he was nearly certain he’d thrown far inside months earlier after a party with a fashion magazine’s editorial staff. He grumbled to himself that he must tell Molly to arrange better lights in the wardrobe; beyond the first few feet inside the door it quickly succumbed to darkness and Sherlock was reduced to finding things by feel, based on sometimes wine-soaked memories of where he’d last seen what he was looking for. Some of the photos pasted to the fronts of the boxes had fallen off as well, and that had to be dealt with. What he really, desperately needed was a fortnight of no work that he could dedicate to sorting all of it—binning the dried-up, cracking make-up; passing on the gowns Xie would never wear again to some of his pet designers to repurpose; amending this dreadful shoe situation. On hands and knees in the back of a cupboard with less than three hours before the guests arrived was not how he preferred to pass a Saturday afternoon.

He used the faint backlight of his phone as a flashlight, hoping for an iridescent reflection in the jumbled pile really rather larger than he’d imagined. The habit of flinging shoes at the back wall of the wardrobe was not one of his more admirable ones, and ultimately did not serve him. The phone went dark, then relit itself as it buzzed in his hand. Two quick texts from John, claiming to miss him.
I’d give anything to hear your voice right now.
Have we known each other long enough that I can say I miss you?

Sherlock sank down from his knees onto his backside, tapped a reply.

I hope so; I feel the same.—SH

It was true; there was a deep thrum of longing all through him, and it was not merely a desire for carnal connection. It was obvious to Sherlock that John was dangerous—though still unclear in what particular way, aside from the illicit nature of their entanglement—yet Sherlock felt wind-tossed and tumultuous. He thought of delicate, off-white wings singed unto destruction merely by close proximity to light and heat, and all at once it was decided: he’d call for papery cream-coloured silk and short-haired fur. He’d sprinkle it with shimmer, and he’d rub ash into the edges.

A few quick flicks of his fingers, and Sherlock unfurled one long leg to shove the cupboard door shut.

“I wasn’t passive-aggressively suggesting you call.”

“I didn’t take it that way.”

“Well, good, then.”

“I have to ask,” Sherlock said, and his voice echoed in a strange slow motion inside the little room lined with shelves full of shoeboxes, and the shamefully high and wide mini-mountain of discarded boots and slippers and shoes.

“Ask,” John said crisply.

“Why the gun?”

There was a pause, and Sherlock heard John inhale a long breath. “Well that cuts right to it, doesn’t it?” he replied, sounding grim. He cleared his throat, let out a grumpy hum, then harrumphed a second time. “I can’t say.”

“On the phone, or at all?”

“Take your pick.” There was a lengthy pause. “I know it’s not a satisfactory answer, but it’s the best I can do,” John offered as consolation. “I don’t want to lie to you. And I imagine you can figure it out, or at least as near as. You being so clever.”

The words could have been snide, but the tone was merely matter-of-fact. Only soldiers and police were allowed guns. John had been a soldier, of course, but it was improbable he’d have been permitted to keep his sidearm when he retired. There were few reasons a sane man would risk being caught in possession of such a thing; no one owned a gun only because it was aesthetically pleasing, or because of nostalgia, or even to make him feel more virile. Unity’s stakes were simply too high. So two options were left: John was not a sane man, or it was John’s intention—perhaps his mission—to kill.

“Who’s it for?” Sherlock asked, just above a whisper.

“No one that matters,” John said, and Sherlock might have imagined the edge of a warning in it, that they were creeping onto thin ice. What he certainly did not imagine was the shiver down the back of his neck in response to the tone. “That’s not all you called for, I hope,” John said.
“I wanted to hear your voice, as well,” Sherlock said, and switched the phone to his other hand. In a hush, he said, “I shouldn’t say, there isn’t time. . .but I’d quite like to—“

“Sherlock?”


John sounded amused. “Just when things were getting good.”

“Why are you in here with the door shut?” As Molly’s face appeared in the widening shaft of light between the door and the frame, she couldn’t have looked more like she’d caught Sherlock with his hand on his prick if she actually had. “Oh! Sorry!”

“Nevermind,” Sherlock gruffed at her, and let his mobile fall away from his ear as he got to his feet. He didn’t attempt further explanation, only shut the door roughly in Molly’s face and leaned against it with his hand. He could hear John chuckling at the other end of the line as he returned the phone to his ear. He let out an annoyed huff.

“She sounded shocked; were you that far ahead of me?” John joked. Sherlock could feel his neck and cheeks burning. Ridiculous.

“I’ll have to speak to you later,” he managed.

“Any time. You know I don’t sleep. You’re a welcome alternative to insomniac insanity.”

“Yes, well,” Sherlock said, and nudged aside a cardboard box with his bare toes. “Perhaps I’ll call you after the party.”

“If you’re not too busy with the middle-aged politicos,” John teased.

Sherlock could give as well as get, so he only said, “Indeed I may be.”

“Until then, Sherlock Holmes.” John rang off.

Sherlock emerged to find Molly fussing unnecessarily with the things she’d brought up per Sherlock’s earlier request. She looked some combination of amused and embarrassed as she fumbled her hands through the pleats and drapery hanging on the metal rack.

“What were you doing in the—“

“I was on the phone.”

She narrowed her eyes, tilting her head diagonally.

“Anyway, I’ve changed my mind,” Sherlock said, with a dismissive wave of his hand toward the mass of blue and green Molly still absently stroked with one hand. He crossed to the make-up table and sat, tugging open the lowest, deepest drawer and beginning to rummage for paint. “Moth to a Flame. I’ll make you a list.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

In chapter 13, John passed time with Greg Lestrade, who shared information about his past as well as his impressions of his boss, Sherlock's husband, Jim Moriarty. Later, in the shoe cupboard, Sherlock phoned John and asked about his gun.

*  

Dear Sherlock,

Obviously I can’t write anything specific regarding what you asked about on the phone, any more than I can talk about it. I can only promise you that you are in no danger because of it. I feel I overstep myself, asking you to trust me, but for now I must. If ever a time comes when it’s safe for me to say more, I will. That’s a promise. In the interim, I’m reminded of a story.

Last time I was in America—not the most recent time, but several years ago—I was deployed to a humanitarian base in what used to be New England, far north up the coast. There are islands there, where the permanent encampment is, with barracks, the mess, offices, and the like. Permanent is relative, of course; it’s nothing like a real city, just the basics for soldiers to fall back to at the end of a mainland mission. It was more of a tent city, really, with unreliable electricity and only rudimentary sanitation. I had a rotation of four days in the field—two each at different forward bases, doctoring, then three days back in the clinic at the base. Those days tended to feel like R & R. Some of the soldiers suffered from exposure to the weather (it was autumn, and at night it would get down near freezing), and a few times there were accidents with tools or knives while doing maintenance that required sutures. One soldier developed hyperemesis related to a quite unplanned and obviously unexpected pregnancy. She lay on a clinic cot with a fluid drip for two days, but I didn’t have the proper medication to stop her vomiting, and in the end she was discharged from the army. I don’t know where she ended up after that.

At any rate, the days in the field were the really interesting ones. The forward bases had two primary functions. The first was to feed people. There was a mess hall where civilians could get a meal, served twice in the morning, twice in the late afternoon, so that unit was working full-tilt nearly around the clock. It was always packed; they tried not to turn anyone away. There was also food distribution—one package per family every third day, I think it was. That unit worked like mad for as long as the supplies held out; most days it was all claimed by mid-morning because it was strictly rationed.

The second function of the forward bases was my bit, the medical clinic. Typically I’d see about a dozen patients an hour. There were so many of them and so few of us it was always a bit of a scramble to get them in and out as quickly as possible. There were admin staff and medics doing triage, directing the flow. The least sick or injured were treated by the medics; nurses got the slightly worse-off ones; and I only saw the sickest ones, the most complicated cases. Imagine trying to care for two people with broken bones, three children lethargic from fever, a diabetic with a gangrenous foot, four asthmatics who haven’t had the right medication for weeks or months, and a geriatric man who’s probably had a heart attack in the past few days—all in a single hour. I did that fourteen hours a day for four days straight. If I had to do a surgery, it felt like I was taking a break because at least then I could more or less set the pace.
What does this have to do with what we were discussing?, I’m sure you’re wondering.

One afternoon just before sundown I was in the back half of a convoy headed for the base, and all at once the world exploded. There were mines, bombs—improvised explosives—buried in the road, and my bad luck had it that I was in one of four vehicles that got cut off from those ahead and behind. I lost track of how many explosions there were once my ears started ringing, but no matter in the end, because a mob of civilian insurgents—several dozen, maybe as many as two hundred—came pouring out of the woods, armed to the teeth and murderous. There were four of us in our jeep, which was armoured but far from impenetrable, so we got as low as we could on the floor, drew our weapons, and prepared to go down fighting. The driver was stupidly young, and I remember being positively furious about it—that she should be no more than twenty and about to meet her fate in the middle of that hopeless mess.

It should have been chaotic, a gang that outnumbered us three to one, small arms fire, bombs, screaming soldiers, fire, blood, but all I felt was focused. I saw what was around me. Deaf as I was from the explosions, their voices sounded far off but I heard the soldiers in my unit shouting to each other, quick and sharp, checking in to be sure we were still alive as much as we were exchanging orders and strategy. We were minimally armed, and it seemed like whoever was meant to arm the big guns up front and at the rear was probably already dead, as all I heard was small arms fire. I couldn’t tell you exactly what happened, moment by moment—my selective memory again—but when the firefight ended and it was quiet, I’d been shot in the shoulder. I couldn’t move my left arm much at all—it wasn’t paralyzed, and I can’t say I felt any pain just then, but nonetheless—I used my good arm to drag my dead squaddies on top of myself, and I played dead. At one point I heard some of the mob nearby, and it seemed that they were looting the bodies of the soldiers for weapons and ammunition. I was sure I’d be found, but more of my weird, random luck kicked in and the whole lot of them moved out before they got to me.

I lay there for probably a couple of hours with my buddies going cool against me, then radioed to the station without any real confidence I’d be retrieved. I got out of my jeep and went man to man, checking pulses. There were none.

In the end, they sent a chopper for me and the last thing I remember of that day is being strapped to a backboard, screaming myself hoarse at a pain that was utterly new to me, and which I’ve thankfully not felt since. Three weeks later, I came to in hospital in Belfast. My wound had become infected along the way; I’m told I was lucky not to lose my arm, or even my life. Probably needless to say, I was discharged immediately upon my release from hospital. Let’s say I’ve been doing odd jobs to support myself since then.

The scars aren’t awful, but there are some.

Do you have any scars with interesting backstories?

More urgently, do you have the power to make the time pass more quickly? I’m gagging to see you again, and then some.

Until then,

John

My dear John,
I have scars, of course—so few of us get to attain a certain age without at least a few—but the stories behind most of them are fairly standard fare. The boring usual: childhood scrapes, insect bites too irresistible not to scratch past the point of reason, those tiny “I don’t even remember getting hurt” smudges of hairless white that turn up here and there.

There is one, though, with a bit of a storied past.

When I was a boy I fancied myself a bit of a scientist, and thought I might aspire to one of those fields: nothing biological—as with your doctoring—but only because I was so shy then I couldn’t conceive of interacting with anything like patients or colleagues (isn’t life just chockablock with irony?). I imagined something where I could research in solitude, and I thought probably chemistry, perhaps synthesizing the medications doctors like you would prescribe to your patients. Something solitary, with predictable results.

At any rate, not wanting to make the biological sciences my career did not preclude me from attempting some ambitious and (I realise now) wholly terrifying—if not downright unwholesome—experiments. When I was ten, I got an idea I’d like to see how my fingers worked. I knew by then the basic structures—muscle, tendon, bone, nerves—but my curiosity could not be fully satisfied with images in books, which were inevitably drawings rather than photographs and which lacked the third dimension and, of course, movement. No matter how detailed and elegant an illustration, I felt they were woefully insufficient. And so one day, I endeavoured to perform a dissection.

Lacking the legitimate tools for proper scientific use and study (my repeated requests that my parents procure on my behalf such items as scalpels, Bunsen burners, hydrochloric acid, and nitroglycerine were routinely met with patronising smiles and noncommittal replies, then promptly forgotten), I gathered those things I had determined were required: a deep bowl of ice water, a fresh-from-the-packet utility razor blade, rubbing alcohol, and several dressmaking pins from the pincushion in my mother’s sewing box.

These I arranged on the surface of my school-boy-sized desk, in the corner of my bedroom. The daylight through the near window was fierce in the morning and would have been ideal, but I could not make myself wait for the weekend and so angled the reading lamp to blare down on the desktop one afternoon between school and tea time, closing the bedroom door under the guise of doing my homework. Into a shallow dish, I tipped a bit of alcohol sufficient to soak the metal tools—the pins and razor blade—for sterilisation, and though at first it was an agony, I thrust my left hand into the bowl of ice water and held it there until my whole body shivered. Sufficiently numbed, I set to work with great seriousness.

I made three incisions in my ring finger, between the lower two knuckles, one lengthwise—about an inch—and two crosswise—slightly shorter—at top and bottom. The ice had done its job; it was essentially painless but for the sting of the alcohol, and weirdly almost bloodless due to the slowed circulation. Using the flat edge of the razor blade, I pulled back the two flaps of skin, and even nearly managed to pin down one side (the pins were too short and I’d neglected to find a surface suitable for pinning; clearly the desktop was woefully inadequate in that regard. I’d do things differently now.).

Suffice to say, in the end there wasn’t much to see, because soon enough the bleeding started in earnest and quickly became really rather frightening. I panicked, and the finger required over twenty stitches (inserted by a doctor I felt was stingy with the numbing agent. . .trying to teach me a lesson, one supposes). The lecture from my father was one of his all-time greatest, in length as well as fury, though his underlying puzzlement was obvious, and when my mother came in to interrupt him because it was well past time for me to go to bed and after such an exciting afternoon too, I caught him throwing an expression to her which clearly indicated he felt they were well out of their depth with me.
The doctor was a bit of a whiz with the sutures, and of course it’s been years (I won’t say how many exactly, but I’m sure you can estimate—then subtract at least five, please, if you wish to stay in my good books), so the scar is only noticeable on close inspection. I wonder, did you notice it? You’ve inspected my fingers quite closely, more than once.

I also wonder what the monthly rent is on the willow bower. Your idea that we could live there has a certain appeal.

Until tomorrow,
Sherlock

“That boyfriend of yours is booked in tonight, I see.”

“Please stop saying that.”

Jim was twitchily stalking Xie’s dressing room, hands in his trousers pockets as if trying to keep himself from touching, bumping, knocking over things he didn’t entirely understand. It was the only place in the world Sherlock had ever seen him uncertain. Most often, Jim strutted into every place as if he owned it, all its furnishings and inhabitants; his personality was forceful and filled every room to the corners with a single exhalation. It was one of the things Sherlock had admired about him when they’d first met, for even when Jim was essentially a kid and had no reason to puff out his narrow chest, he always had. Jim, it seemed to Sherlock, had never had a single second of self-doubt. By contrast, Sherlock was constructed almost entirely from self-doubt. Inside Xie’s dressing room was the only place on earth where Sherlock felt he might—now and then—have the upper hand. Hence, his willingness to answer Jim’s snide comment, though he kept one eye on Jim’s reflection as he walked a slow, small spiral around the room behind the make-up chair.

“Only teasing, Sherlock, lighten up.” Jim nudged the footstool by the red chair with his shin, for no discernible reason other than to expend some energy.

Sherlock hummed, tried to smile into the mirror and mostly failed. Jim wasn’t looking, anyway.

“I have to get dressed,” Sherlock said, the implication being that it was time for Jim to leave, Sherlock needed privacy. He rose and crossed to the rack, checked his fingertips before handling the white gown; it wouldn’t do to have spots or smudges on something so clean and pale. He’d worn gloves while sewing it.

“Yeah, I’m going. C’mere and give us a kiss good night.”

Dutifully, Sherlock moved into Jim’s arms, offered his cheek. Jim pinched his chin between thumb and two fingers, jerked his face to center and claimed Sherlock’s mouth with his own, shoving in his tongue, scraping Sherlock’s lower lip with his front teeth. Once Jim had released him, Sherlock used the tip of one ring finger to swipe Jim’s left-behind saliva from the corners of his lips. He wanted to spit Jim’s kiss right out of his mouth.

Tucking his hands back into his pockets, Jim took a step back, looked briefly at the floor. Sherlock slipped his dressing gown off his shoulders, stood bare-chested in loose, soft pyjama bottoms and bare feet, then went into a drawer to fish for a nude-coloured version of his usual tight-fitting shorts.

“He’s got curr to burn, that one. See if you can’t get some off him tonight.”
The hair on Sherlock’s forearms rose, and though he’d found what he was looking for, he shoved it far back and beneath some other garments and kept rummaging so he could stay hunched there, with his back turned. He vaguely hoped Jim was getting a good eyeful of the fading remains of the most recent, shoe-shaped bruise he’d left. His remorse had long since sloughed off, but it couldn’t harm him to be reminded of his bad deeds now and then.

Jim’s tone was weirdly low and almost loving, as if he was asking Sherlock not to manipulate Captain Watson into generosity with gratuities, but for some much more intimate favour. “It shouldn’t be difficult,” he went on, still cooing, and Sherlock at last figured he’d done as much fake sorting as could be vaguely believable in a small drawer brimming with exactly what he was in need of, and so grasped the small bundle of slick, stretchy fabric and drew himself back up to standing. Jim was against his back at once, an arm tight around his chest, the other possessively fondling his prick and bollocks through the thin fabric of the pyjama bottoms, coaxing a physical response regardless of Sherlock’s opinion on the matter. “Should be easy. You being so pretty, and smelling like flowers, and being such a crafty... cunning... little prick-tease.” The emphasis was not accidental, and Sherlock’s gut turned acid. Jim panted hot damp breath against the side of Sherlock’s neck, and his words came out like love talk even though they were designed to remind Sherlock of his place, and what he was good for.

Sherlock tried to redirect. “That feels nice.”

By now his cock was almost fully hard under Jim’s scrabbling hand, and in its way it did feel nice, though too rough, and too selfish. Nevertheless, it was better than many of the other ways Jim touched him. Jim ground his pelvis against Sherlock’s backside, held him tight across the chest, and now fumbled to tug the drawstring, shoving his hand down inside Sherlock’s waistband when the knot wouldn’t come loose. Manhandling his cock, rolling his balls with manicured fingers, Jim sought not to give Sherlock pleasure but to take what pleasure he could for himself and—even more so—assert his ownership of Sherlock’s body.

“Feels nice, does it,” Jim said tonelessly.

“M-hm,” Sherlock tried to give over to it, closed his eyes, leaned back a bit into Jim’s harsh embrace in an attempt at appeasement.

“Focus, now, Sherlock. Listen to me.”

Sherlock nodded, and the hand on his chest pinched his nipple quick and hard, jolting him out of his cultivated reverie. He gasped. Jim’s hand on his prick tugged, stroked, gathered a few drops of pre-cum that were nowhere near enough to ease the way; Sherlock stayed still and let him.

“Listening?”

“Yes.”

“Plain little fella like your Captain Watson, hanging about here every few nights, spending his overage so he can sit in your salon and moon over you hours on end...”

Sherlock bit his tongue—a different discomfort to focus on than Jim’s sandpapery pulls at his cock, which was softening now, another thing that could set Jim off, if he could be bothered to notice—and waited. Jim pinched his nipple again, and hung on. It was agonizing, and Sherlock couldn’t help but grab for Jim’s wrist, trying to pull him away.

Jim shouted in his ear. “Listen I said!”
“Jim, please. . .”

“Please, oh, please,” Jim mocked, and his voice went back to its normal, even pitch, somehow more distressing than his shouts. “You begging whore.”

Sherlock closed his mouth, tried not to whimper. Tears welled in the corners of his eyes.

“Save it for your frump of a boyfriend,” Jim went on. “I’m telling you, Sherlock. Sweetheart. It’ll be so easy to drain that little fella’s overage. Easy for you, because he likes you so much.” The sneer in his voice made a joke of Sherlock ever being liked. “Just pout your pretty lip.” Jim’s hand at last released his rubbed-raw prick, only to shove four fingers deep into Sherlock’s mouth, nearly making him gag. As he dragged his fingers back out, Jim grabbed Sherlock’s bottom lip and yanked painfully at it. “Make him think you might let him eat your pussy.”

Sherlock fought an urge to vomit, and not only from Jim having gagged him with his fingers.

“No marks!” he gasped, and pushed vaguely at Jim’s forehead. “Please, no marks,” he pleaded, trying not to whine because it only infuriated Jim when he did. Jim released him, but dug his chin into the spot, which was a different kind of pain that made Sherlock writhe in the tight circle of Jim’s arm. He couldn’t help himself, and let out a whimpering noise through closed lips.

“Sure, give him some of that. The poor fella probably hasn’t heard a slut making noises like those on his behalf in quite a while. He’ll appreciate it, I’m sure.” Jim’s hand on his prick was insistent, and Sherlock let himself be carried on the wave of an impending orgasm, just let it be over, just let it be done. Another sound pinch of Sherlock’s already abraded nipple, then Jim licked a sloppy stripe across his shoulder. Sherlock let his mouth come open, let his hips rock up into Jim’s hand, back against Jim’s body, then up again. Just let it be done.

Jim’s voice turned sweet and ragged, an urgent whisper: “That’s it, sweetheart, nearly there, god look at you. Feels nice?”

Sherlock nodded and let go an affirmative moan.

“Sherlock.” It sounded as nice as it felt. “Come on now, sweetheart, show me how nice it feels. Give it to me now.” He shifted his grip—he knew every way there was to finish Sherlock: hard and soft, quiet and noisy, sudden and drawn out—and Sherlock sucked air, wanted to curl forward but Jim still held him tight against his own body. “That’s it. . .come on now. . .” Jim’s lips closed in a sucking kiss in the hollow of neck and shoulder, and Sherlock was done for, the wave cresting up through him in sweet slow motion and breaking in a gusty groan, the force of his breath parting his lips.

Jim released Sherlock and stepped beside him; Sherlock steadied himself on the drawer still hanging open as his knees were weak without Jim’s body supporting him from behind. Jim buttoned his jacket, and made no secret of shifting his erection through the front of his trousers. Sherlock’s tongue dipped out to moisten lips made dry from his panting breath, and to prepare them for what was surely next.

“Oh dear, Sherlock,” Jim scolded in his bullying sing-song tone, letting out a chuckle under his breath, shaking his head. “What a mess you’ve made.” He pointed at the drawer front, and at the
pricey Persian carpet. “You should control yourself better. It’s a bit disgusting.”

Sherlock hung his head and bit his lips shut, feeling his chest burn hot, the flush reaching up his neck and into his face.

“Needy bitch,” Jim scoffed. Then: “I’ll be checking your account. I’d better go to my bed well pleased tonight, Sherlock, I’m telling you now.”

Sherlock didn’t move, didn’t speak.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes, I—“

A hot, loud smack on his upper arm made Sherlock jerk upright and grab for it, instinct wanting to rub the pain away, but it stung like fire and when he removed his hand a bright red shadow of Jim’s fingers and the top edge of his palm was already evident.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, Sherlock, for fuck’s sake.” Complaining, not raging, how could one person have so many moods that all ended with the same punctuation? “I’m your husband; I just made you come; I think I deserve for you to respect me enough to fucking look at me when I’m talking.”

Sherlock met Jim’s eyes, tried to soften his expression into something Jim would approve of.

“You understand what I said about the curr.”

“Yes. I’ll get it.”

“Good girl.” Jim darted forward and kissed Sherlock’s cheek, then turned and left.

Sherlock checked the clock on his mobile and found he couldn’t wait for his hands to stop shaking before he began to paint his face.

John was curious about Sherlock’s suggestion that he would fit in well with the partygoers, wondered vaguely if the guests would turn out to be doctors, or soldiers, or liars, or dangerous men. As he rode up in the lift he checked his reflection in the high polish of the steel doors, flicked his fingers through his hair to rough it up a bit, then immediately smoothed it back into place. He looked down fleetingly and wished his shoes were in better repair. Perhaps he’d splash out on a new pair. Sherlock could likely tell him where was the best place to buy some. He patted his coat pocket to reassure himself the gift was still there, and it was. He’d ventured to buy a card with one of the not-quite-pornographic, but still blatantly erotic ukiyo-e images this time, wishing it was a picture of two men rather than a man and a woman, but there was only so much which could be asked of an ancient culture. He wondered vaguely if there were contemporary versions of the images, with more variety, then reined back his imagination before he went too far down a road which might leave him in an embarrassing physical state when the lift doors slid open and he stepped out into Xie’s penthouse salon.

He was curious, too, if it would feel different spending time with Xie again, now that he’d met Sherlock. Of course he appreciated all the beautiful things about Xie—the artistic presentation of clothing and make-up and elaborate hairstyles; the stunning ability to make each person in the room
feel that Xie was their most intimate friend; the dank powdery floral scent of the perfumed skin—and
the fierce pull of Xie’s particular brand of mystery was unlikely to dissipate. John was nearly certain
he’d still want to unwrap and unravel Xie, peeling away the layers, but he could already feel with
certainty that the way he wished to plunder Xie was different to the equally fervent desire he now
had to get his hands on anything and everything beneath the wool of Sherlock’s well-cut suit and the
criminally tight designer shirt. One was a wish to swim, the other a wish to drown.

He reminded himself again not to venture too far along a particular path, and with heroic effort
shoved vivid memories of touching Sherlock’s hands, smelling Sherlock’s neck, kissing Sherlock’s
lips, tasting Sherlock’s tongue—dear god he was *spectacularly* bad at this—with an image likely to
provoke an opposing reaction from his all-to-eager prick. He thought about his grandmother’s
dentures in a glass of fizzing water. Polishing his army boots. A sandwich full of hair clippings.

That did it. With no time to spare, he was settled back into a more neutral mindset. Then, of course,
the lift doors opened, and his gaze fell immediately upon Xie, and he started in with all his tics:
rolling the fingers of his left hand against a sudden itchy heat inside them, licking his lips,
*harrumph*ing imaginary muck from his throat.

Though being punctual was his default setting, John had forced himself to walk the pavement for an
extra ten minutes because he knew that if he was somehow lucky enough to find himself alone with
Xie before others arrived at the salon, his fury at the interruption would render him unable to behave
normally, and he would instead spend the evening in seething resentment. Allowing time for at least
one or two guests to beat him there was insurance against a night of frustration. Or so he had
thought.

Xie looked—if it were possible—more beautiful than ever John had seen, in a gown of pure white
craftily dyed in a fading gradient from gentle pink to thrilling fuchsia over Xie’s heart in some
complex manner John couldn’t begin to fathom and didn’t wish to really understand lest any of the
magic be removed. Xie was miles tall, as ever; dripping billows of silk, as ever; and the angled face
was painted white, with a blush beginning just beneath he impressive slash of cheekbones
intensifying from palest pink, to petal, to rose, to dark fuchsia pink as the gaze traveled downward
along the lovely throat, ending in a sharply-defined curve just above the breastbone that resembled
nothing so much as the tip of a tongue. The glittering, green-gold eyes peered out from beneath
impossibly long, white lashes dusted with gold, like specks of pollen. Xie wore a perfectly circular
dot of bright, dark, shiny purple-pink in the center of the white lips. The wig rose high and then
tumbled, cascades of thick white waves that shimmered as iridescent threads caught the light. John’s
breath left him. His knees were water. He ached. He hungered. He *wanted*.

“Captain Watson! So lovely to see you again. May I introduce you to a wonderfully interesting
friend of mine?”

The woman to whom Xie—wide-eyed and nodding as if to encourage the further unwinding of a
truly ripping yarn—had been raptly listening, torqued herself around to face John. She had a wide
smile full of charmingly crooked teeth, which John would have recognized anywhere.

It was the crazy one with the knives.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

In chapter 14, the men exchanged letters detailing histories of injury; Jim mixed intimacy and threats; and John arrived at Xie's salon to find Xie dressed like an orchid—and the crazy one with knives.

John cut a glance toward Xie, who merely fluttered eyelashes in his direction, standing with hands clasped amid gathered bunches of papery-looking silk sleeves. The crazy one with the knives had turned completely around on the sofa, in fact was kneeling on it, and she extended her hand to him, palm down, so ladylike.

“Well, hello, handsome!” she sang out enthusiastically, in her clipped-and-rounded South African accent. She smiled with her crooked teeth, then looked over her shoulder at Xie and made a comical stage play of raising the back of her other hand to shield her mouth from John’s view as she mock-whispered, “Look at the face on this one. Cute as hell. God loves us!” Xie nodded, grinning softly with closed lips. John took a reluctant step forward into a familiar old new life.

“John Watson,” the Face said, as if he didn’t know her. She allowed him to shake only the tips of her fingers, as if it were the 1930s and she were delicate.

“Gugu Kriel,” she purred at him. “What sort of captain might you be? Have you got a yacht?”

The Face demurred, tipping his head and half-frowning. “Afraid not. Army captain. Call me John.”

“Call me Gugu, then. Come ’round and sit by me.” She spun herself to sit, her wispy dark hair the last to settle back into place as she landed; she slapped the cushion beside her.

“What can we offer you, John?” Xie asked, summoning a drasha who teetered toward them bearing a cut-glass decanter of brown liquour—the by-now familiar, truly excellent whisky—and a rocks glass.

“Ah, no, nothing at the moment.” John sat on the sofa near enough to Gugu to technically qualify as sitting beside her, but still kept his distance. “Maybe just seltzer.”

“Xie calls you John without even being told—you’re here a lot, are you?” Gugu asked, crossing her golden-brown legs at the ankle, black miniskirt riding high on her thighs, which John reminded himself not to linger in admiration of.

“I wouldn’t say often,” John replied. He tried to remember where last he’d run into this lunatic, and the nearest he could pin down was eastern Europe—ex-Slovakisomething, or the dreary remains of East Berlin. She’d drunk half a dozen men under the table, then danced on it, then committed bloody murder behind the bar, all before last call.

Xie intervened, eyeing John from head to foot with a fleeting but appraising gaze, probably in order to report to him later what the hell he was on about.

“Ms Kriel was telling me she’s recently returned from Casablanca, where she was working as a bartender in a house of repose,” Xie reported. “It was called the bayt aljalid. Can you guess what
that means? Or perhaps you understand Arabic. . .”

Xie’s tone was the same slightly dreamy one John had heard when he’d reported having seen Xie’s image on posters at Russian bus stops and he reckoned he could guess the punch line, but only raised his eyebrows, allowing Xie to do the honours.

“The Ice House.” The voice sounded at once slightly smug and fully awed. “I find that delightful.” There was some whiff of tragedy in the air John couldn’t quite explain, but before he had time to reflect on it, the lift doors opened and three very young men in Italian shoes and tailored wealthy-man’s-casual outfits ambled in, one frowning with a mobile phone clapped to his ear, the other two affecting nonchalant disdain. The clear alpha male had a classically English, slightly anemic look, with pale freckles across his cheeks and a narrow nose.

“Ah, here she is!” he oozed, and John took the opportunity of Gugu clambering over the back of the sofa and into his arms to cross the room to where Xie now stood, near the alcove where they’d shared blossoming tea on one of his previous visits.

“You’re stunning,” John said admiringly, tilting his face up toward the pink-painted chin.

Even Xie’s dismissive shrug was charming. The front of the gown featured a plunging neckline and the pale skin beneath the tongue of fuchsia paint—visible in a long, narrow “V” bordered on each side by the gradient-dyed shades of pink—was bare but for a subtle pearlescent shimmer as the light shifted. John licked his lips.

“You’re putting on a show for Ms Kriel, John,” Xie said quietly. “Why is that?”

“You tell me,” John said evenly.

“You’ve met before?”

John huffed a quick laugh that shook his shoulders and lifted his chest, then raised a glass to his lips, effervescing water spitting up over the edge to tickle his lip as if flirting with him.

“No,” he said, and he cut a hard stare at Xie’s feline eyes. “Never.”

Xie only lifted the chin in a half-nod of acknowledgement, then glided away from him to the computer terminal in the far wall and began scrolling music selections.

The three young men had already plied from one of the apprentice drashas an elaborate glass pipe that stood three feet high atop the cocktail table, its many tentacles each tipped with a brassy metal stem, and they were puffing their chests at each other about the best way to fire it. Within minutes there was a smell in the room—a sharp, tight chemical stabbing—that John found distinctly unpleasant, but which was clearly the byproduct of something blissfully soporific, as their eyes rolled languidly, staring at nothing, and their smiles went wide and slack. The young blokes began a slow-motion melting, spines softening as they sank back into the brocade cushions.

Gugu stepped over and between their stretched-out legs as she passed between the sofa and the table, nearly pulled the pipe crashing down when she caught one of its hoses with the slim, spiked heel of her shoe. The fingers of both hands wrapped around John’s bicep and she stood so close John could smell pulses of her perfume in time with her heartbeat, steady, mellow. She leaned her face close to his, arranging a flirty smile and downcast eyes, and as her wide, naked lips passed by his ear she murmured, “I hear they gave you my little flat.”

She leaned away, giggling through her crooked teeth, and John went along, chuckling as if in response to a flirtatious joke. He purposely avoided glancing in Xie’s direction, not wanting to know
what might be made of this exchange. He ducked close to Gugu, mouth nearly against her hair to
prevent his lips being read, smile wide open as he told her. “If you make a single move in this
building I will put a bullet in your eye.”

“Oh, Captain!” she fluttered, brushing the front of his jacket with one hand, letting her fingers trail
down until they came to land on the hand holding his glass. “Where did you hear such a thing? Tell
me another!” A turn of her head, a whisper. “Tough talk, handsome.”

“Fucking try me.”

She laughed out loud, then, and broke away from him, snapping a crooked salute. “Aye, aye,
Captain Watson! Girls . . .” She turned to address a couple of drashas kneeling by the sofa, removing
the young mens’ shoes. “Watch out for this one, face like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth but you
should hear the dirty things he says!” Her brown eyes fell upon Xie. “Beware,” Gugu intoned, and
jerked a thumb in John’s direction. Xie nodded vaguely, unsmiling. John bit down on an ice cube,
then again, the thunderous racket it created inside his skull a welcome distraction from whatever the
hell was going on.

Gugu’s long, mostly-bare legs picked their way back along the route she’d taken toward him, and
the freckled English one opened glazed eyes long enough to stare at her pert backside swaying before
him as she bent over the pipe and drew a lengthy drag from one of the undulating stems. The young
man’s hand landed on Gugu’s hip and swept in an S-curve over her bottom before it fell back in his
lap. Gugu exhaled blue-grey smoke ceilingward then melted into the indiscriminate tangle of limbs
on the sofa and weaved her way in among them. The four of them immediately morphed into a fully-
clothed, slow-motion orgy.

John held his ground. Motioning with the drink in his hand, he spoke halfway across the room to
Xie. “Thought I might fit in with this, did you?” He was trying for a joke but heard the edge in his
own voice. He tried to clear it out of his throat. “College-dropout vlast junkies and a bipolar party
girl?”

Xie’s hands folded around the opposite elbows, hugging the waist. John’s gaze tracked up from there
along the exposed skin of the chest, to the painted face.

“Things have taken an unexpected turn,” came the reply, with an accompanying wave of the hand
toward the mass of bodies vaguely rolling against and between each other on the sofa. The other
drashas had at some point dissolved away, and now the air between John and Xie was idling high.
John felt he must be the mark for some kind of confidence game, or the butt of a joke, but he
couldn’t grasp it, and couldn’t give anything away or risk the collapse of multiple cover stories with a
single ill-timed phrase.

The corner of Xie’s mouth quirked up and one long palm revealed itself, upturned, fingers aimed at
John. “I’ll take my present now, Captain Watson,” Xie said, low and sweet.

John rolled around a mouthful of the fizzing, slightly salty water before swallowing it; he
concentrated on softening his demeanour a bit and answered, “What makes you think I’ve brought
one?”

Xie’s fingers flexed upward quick, twice, beckoning.

John looked around, indicated with a tilted head the little alcove. “Let’s sit, shall we?” He moved to
settle on the banquette with its squadron of throw pillows, and Xie appeared to float across—or
perhaps above—the floor. To John’s delight, the lanky body once folded onto the cushion beside
him was quite close, their knees brushing and bumping. Xie’s upturned hand rose again, this time
shrouded by the long silken sleeve. John gave a mischievous smile. “Let me see first,” he insisted, mild but suggestive. As if by magic the fabric slid away, slithering forever across the palm of the hand before revealing it. “Brilliant,” he breathed, and leaned to press his lips to the tip of the middle finger.

“Please don’t,” Xie murmured, and John’s eyes flicked up to the exotically-painted face. Xie’s long-lashed eyes cut a sideways glance to the four deeply intoxicated guests piled up on the sofa.

“I’ll try to resist, but it won’t be easy,” John replied, and reached into the inside pocket of his jacket for the envelope. The gift itself was in its own, small flat paper bag, like the sort used to give lucky money—decorated in a beige and brown tartan pattern instead of traditional red and gold—fastened to the envelope with a length of skinny red ribbon. He passed it to Xie, whose carefully-drawn dot of dark pink lipstick cracked apart crookedly as Xie smiled—the broad, slightly toothy one that John had come to think of as a break in character: Sherlock’s smile. The lips settled closed again as Xie turned attention to picking apart the knot with fingernails polished grass green and tipped with gold.

“Always so generous,” Xie murmured.

“It’s nothing.”

“Far from nothing.”

The ribbon slipped free and Xie gathered it, quickly wound it around three fingers, laid the neat loop aside on the banquette cushion. The long fingers plucked up the paper bag and massaged it all over, trying to discern the contents. “Hmm.” A closed-mouth grin. The eyes sparked up to meet John’s and he felt the tension of the unexpected rendezvous with the crazy one begin to melt away from beneath the skin of his shoulders.

“I hope you even recognize it,” John offered. “You can’t have been more than a baby the last time anyone used such a thing.”

“Ah, a mystery.” Xie sounded curious and delighted. John stared at the skin bared by the wide, plunging neckline and longed to press his face against the shadowy edge of a pectoral muscle, inhale forever, then taste. One gilded fingertip slipped beneath the bag’s folded-over edge and tore it across, then dipped and swept and pulled out the gift between the first two fingers.

Xie dropped the little rectangle of patina-speckled silver into the opposite palm, turned it over and over with one fingertip.

“How elegant! A money clip. My grandfather used one,” Xie said. “At the end of every visit we had with him, he would pull it out of his trousers’ pocket and peel off the folded pound-notes for each of us. Two, if it was our birthday or the school fees were coming due. This one looks Art Deco; could it really be so old?”

John grinned. “The shopkeeper said it likely was. I thought it would go nicely with the suit you wore when we met.” He waited a half-beat, the better to savour it, then whispered, “Sherlock.”

“Shhh. . .” a long, low whistle.

John shrugged a bit as he watched the long fingers stroking and turning the silver clip. He said, “I’m beginning to recognize in myself a certain affinity for things that are beautiful and useless.”

“Like me.”

Xie’s murmur was razor-edged and stuck John in the base of the throat.
“That’s not at all what I meant,” John hurried to clarify. “I was talking about this thing,” he gestured at the clip. “The pretty rock, the little car. That egg.” He let his hand drift forward to settle on the sturdy knee that now and then brushed his own. “Why would you say such a thing?”

John retrieved the clip from Xie’s hand; it was weighty for its size, the surface promoted from slick to satiny by years of bumps and scrapes against pocketed coins, keys, perhaps a wedding ring.

“Nevermind,” Xie said quietly, and moved to pick up the envelope holding the accompanying card. As the long fingers worked to open the flap and slide the card free, John reached between them, slid two fingers just under the edge of Xie’s neckline and lifted the fabric away from the shimmering skin. He slid the clip into place there, like a brooch, then caught Xie’s eye as he smoothed it into place, gliding the pads of his fingers upward, one against the silk, three against the skin.

“You can’t really think that’s true,” John implored, and Xie couldn’t hold his gaze. “I wish you wouldn’t say such a thing about the person who created all this—” he motioned outward, toward the larger part of the salon, the Icehouse, the very idea of drasha “—just so I could end up here, with someone I like so very much.” John’s fingers slowed and stopped, resting there along the upper edge of a nicely-defined pectoral muscle. He dared to dip his fingers once again beneath the gown’s neckline, and Xie was still as a statue, warm, breathing through parted lips. John skated the edge, then drifted lower, sensitive fingertips finding a circular plateau of over-smooth skin, then a few inches lower, another. It seemed to him they were shaped like round-petaled flowers, small enough to cover with the pad of one finger.

Xie caught his wrist, collapsed the shoulders forward to draw back, lifted John’s hand away and let it vanish beneath the pooled-up length of sleeve on top of the sturdy thigh, where Xie’s hand covered his, and held it in place.

John wanted to ask about the scars his fingers had found, but decided to put a pin in it for another time, when he might actually get to see them. Probably remnants of something like the itchy lesions from chicken pox, he imagined. Xie held his card between them with the free hand and the miles-long, white eyelashes twitched as the eyes scanned the *ukiyo-e* image on the front.


“Told you there were dirty ones.”

The image was of a geisha and a samurai embracing, neither face visible, hands on each other’s shoulders as they reclined together on a mat, the geisha visible only from the back. It could have been innocent, just a kiss, but as the eye traveled down along the length of the two bodies, it found the geisha’s kimono bunched high around her waist, her bare backside and raised leg only barely hidden by the draped edge of the samurai’s open kimono.

“It’s beautiful,” Xie said, and caught John’s eye.

“It reminded me of you.” John cut a glance at their hands, still stacked atop Xie’s thigh beneath the spill of white silk. “While you’re here, like this. The clip reminded me of the other you, in the park.”

Xie opened the card, and the lashes fluttered as the green-sea eyes scanned John’s brief, handwritten note.

*Precious you,*

*Magically—perfectly—you are both of these beings.*

*And I live in the heat between them.*
Xie inhaled hard, and the green-polished fingertips reached up to stroke lightly across the filigreed surface of the money clip clinging to the gown’s neckline. A bright flurry of white silk, the flash of fuchsia fabric over Xie’s heart, and the hiss and rattle of the lightweight alcove doors sliding shut to enclose them, dimming the small space, light diffused through panes of rice paper. Xie settled on the banquette as close to John as was possible, and through the slip of sleeves the handsome hands gripped John by the wrists and guided him to slide flattened fingers inside the edges of the v-neckline. Xie’s hands criss-crossed to flick the gown off each shoulder, and the fabric sank, baring the upper arms, more of the muscled chest.

“Here, open your mouth,” Xie muttered in a dark, low voice, and took John’s face in the wide palms, steadying him. John did as he was told, quick-licking his lips, then parting them. “Wider. More.” John’s fingers curled and pressed against the firm chest, inching lower by tiny measures. He opened his mouth wider, more, and closed his eyes as Xie’s elaborately painted face came near.

The tip of the tongue, tasting only of the warm inside of the mouth, snaked its way along the inner edge of John’s bottom lip, jittering along the center, then dipped inside, scraping along his upper teeth. John twigged—clearly it was a crafty way to kiss without mussing the carefully-applied lip lacquer—and thrust his tongue forward to meet Xie’s—Sherlock’s—which was urgent, thrusting, sweeping, accompanied by a desperate moan in the throat. John’s fingers on the chest discovered wispy evidence of chest hair, then the tight, rough texture of responsive little nipples. He swiped, then circled, drawing forth a delicious whimper and a hot jab of the tongue alongside his own.

Xie drew away only long enough for them each to close their lips, swallow their mingled saliva. Xie’s hands on the sides of his face were resolute, and John looked straight into the gold-flecked eyes as his fingers scissor-pinched the tight buds of the nipples, now bared by the fallen edges of the gown tight around Xie’s biceps, trapping the elbows close to the body, forcing the two of them close, leaning, tangling their legs, their knees between each other’s thighs, trembling, squeezing.

Their tongues met again, and John was dying to suck, to bite, to trap that crafty tongue-tip between his teeth. He’d never thought for a second about how kissing was made for entire mouths, lips and teeth, suction and breath and the gorgeous push-pull, as if they were speaking without sound, directly into each other’s mouths. He flattened his hands to learn the shape of the chest, stroking, digging in, finding the edges. His prick was thick and aching; his heart threatened to pound out of his chest.

Xie made a gorgeous sound, part whine, part sigh, and John’s hands left bare skin to slide down the torso, settling on the sturdy rack of the hipbones. Xie released his head, which suddenly felt too light and floated backward, and grabbed for his hands before they wandered much farther afield.

“John. . .”

The perfect dot of hot pink lacquer in the center of Xie’s lips was unblemished. The skin of the chest was flushed warm, the nipples—just as Sherlock had described them on the phone that night—the exact shade of brown edges on a pink rose just past its time, and tightly beaded-up from John’s touch.

John leaned close, the wavy strands of the wig tickling his nose. “I want you,” he muttered. “God, I want you. You know this, don’t you?” His lips brushed the curve of the ear. “Sherlock. . .” He leaned away, to look.

The gorgeous long fingers went to work reassembling the façade, lifting the gown back onto the shoulders, smoothing the front over the shimmering skin of the chest, slipping free the money clip.
and gathering it along with the card and the loop of ribbon, back into the envelope for safe keeping.

A shuffle, a thick glassy thud, then a hollow rolling sound.

“Aww...shit...”

“Where’s everyone?”

Xie tucked the envelope behind a pillow on the banquette, ran the flats of the hands down the front of the gown.

“Perfect,” John assured. “You’re a bloody miracle.”

Whispering: “Stay here a moment if you need to. We were only talking.” Then the doors slid apart and Xie vanished through them, shutting them behind. In full voice: “Has it toppled? Don’t mind it. Are you all enjoying yourselves, is the more vital question...”

John scrubbed at the corners of his lips with his fingertips, let one dip in to touch his tongue, looking for a taste of nipple-skin, sharp edges, firm muscles. There was only salt. He took a moment to catch his breath, listening.

“Perhaps I can book you a suite for the evening? Here, my darling friend Dahlia will arrange it in nothing but a minute.”

Gugu’s voice. “What happened to the captain? There’s something about him I’m not so sure I like.” A burst of laughter, too loud, too long. John cleared his throat, quietly, and smoothed his palms down his thighs, setting them on his knees, readying to push himself to his feet. The rice paper doors rattled apart, and Gugu crashed down on the banquette, legs thrust out behind her as she snaked the front of her body against John’s side, rested her chin on his shoulder. When she spoke, her breath was fetid with a high, chemical reek from whatever they’d been smoking, and John held his breath.

“Look at you, captain, you’re so funny. I know what you’re about.”

“I’m sure you think you do.” He kept his voice even and low, eyes narrowed and scanning the room. The few drashas who’d returned were busying themselves at the bar and the computer terminal, lacing the party boys back into their Italian oxfords. Xie perched on the edge of the cocktail table, looking elegant and serene.

“Let’s play a game,” Gugu said, so only the two of them could hear, and she rearranged herself more upright beside him, hands possessively stroking his knee, his shoulder, his hair, she was everywhere at once. She wriggled up under his arm and John caught a glance as her bust bumped against the grip of his pistol, holstered there against his ribs. “Ooh,” she breathed, then said, “Two Truths and a Lie—you know it?”

John nodded tightly. Gugu leaned away a bit, made a show of stroking one hand up her leg from shin to knee to thigh, adjusting stockings she wasn’t wearing. The hem of the little slip dress lifted just enough so John caught sight of a beaten-looking leather strap around her thigh, a knife’s sheath snapped into place at the outside of her leg, then she demurely brushed her skirt back into place.

“Are we comparing whose is bigger?” John asked, a flattened-out husk of a joke. “Because I know I win that one.”

She ignored him, raised her voice so the room could hear. “We’re playing Two Truths and a Lie. Who’s joining?”
Xie pivoted to face them; the young men seemed unable or unwilling to shake off their druggy haze and were largely unresponsive.

Gugu sat up straight beside John, only her knee touching his, and said, “You tell three things about yourself, and the others guess which one is the lie. I'll go first.” She counted on her fingers. “I’m a scary bitch. My pussy has teeth.” She gnashed the crooked teeth in her voluptuous mouth. “Tomorrow I’m buying myself a diamond bracelet.”

“That’s it,” John said instantly, pointing at her as if he’d caught her out. “The thing about the diamonds. That’s the lie.”

She crossed her legs, uncrossed them and undulated in her seat, then recrossed them.

“The second one, of course,” Xie said mildly. “I know a jeweler on the King's Road who does marvelous, delicate work; I’ll have someone fetch you her card. Is it my go?”

John bit the inside of his lower lip. Gugu leaned forward, elbow on her crossed leg, chin in her hand. Xie said, “I’ve been to France. I’m allergic to bee stings.” The green-blue eyes fixed on John. “I know a secret.”

“France!” Gugu shouted, and waved her arms above her head as if celebrating.

John said quickly, probably too loud, barely containing an urge to backhand Gugu with the butt of his gun across her face, “I’ve killed thirty-one men. I’ve killed seventeen women. I’ve lost count of how many people I’ve killed. Why are you here?”

He fixed his gaze on Gugu and she mugged, licking her full lips, rolling her huge brown eyes under fluttering lashes. She ticked off her two truths and a lie on her fingers again. “It’s my night off. I’m working. I just figured out your weak spot.”

Xie had crossed to them, and now gripped each of them by their upper arms, trying to tug them apart. “It seems your friends are ready to retire for the evening, Ms Kriel, perhaps you’ll join them.” It was not a question. Gugu let herself be persuaded to her feet, and Xie guided her by the arm toward the lift doors, where the other drashas had managed to wrangle the three young men, now upright but docile as children, offering no protest. Gugu looked over her shoulder at John, indicated Xie with a quick toss of her head then raised her fingers in a “V” in front of her mouth and rippled her tongue suggestively between them; she winked and nodded, smiling wide. John mimed shooting her in the eye. She laughed.

Xie delivered her to the lift just as the doors opened and three security goons stepped out, herding Gugu, her target, and whoever these other two were into the lift to escort them to the suite.

“Lovely to see you again,” John called to her, crossing the salon as he talked. “Remember what I said.”

“The only moves being made in this building are yours, Captain. Obviously.” Her wide, mad-eyed smile was the last thing John saw as the lift doors slid shut.

The other drashas fled through doors to the exterior corridor; Xie raised the strong shoulders up and then rolled them back before turning toward John.

“Whatever you think you’ve figured out about me,” John said, advancing two steps, pointing down for emphasis. The Face sounded threatening; John felt untethered. “You need to forget it. I need you to.”
“John.”

He shook his head—steady, slow—silencing Xie with a withering look.

“You can’t possibly know; you’ve made a mistake here tonight,” he insisted, low, urgent. “Do you understand? You cannot know.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Do you understand?” John roared. Xie flinched.

“Yes. But I need...” Xie’s voice was quiet, wobbling, and John’s gut roiled black with fierce terror. Xie moved quickly across the salon to a decorative little wooden box on top of a side table. Not from inside it, but from beneath it, Xie fetched up something John couldn’t see behind the billow of the sleeve. Xie made a few long strides and met John where he stood. One hand found his and raised it between them, palm-up, and the other pressed a little stack of plastic cards into it. “I need you to hold these.”

John huffed out frustration. “You have plenty,” he said quietly, but demanding. “Why are you hoarding it?”

“Please don’t ask.”

“Like you’re not going to ask me?”

“Exactly like that. Just hold them. Please.”

John’s lips were tightly drawn between his teeth. After a moment, he closed his hand around the Identity Cards and shoved them in his trousers’ pocket.

“That woman. The woman that was here. That woman is dangerous.”

Xie’s mouth crumpled in a sly grin.

“So are you.”

“She’s dangerous to you. You should never let her in here again. With any luck in the morning she’ll buy her bracelet and be gone back to—where’d you say?”

“Morocco.”

“She booked in tonight? Or one of those blokes?”

“She did. Does it matter?”

John’s jaw ached from clenching it. He shook his head. “No. Nevermind.” He thought about smearing that perfect dot of fuchsia across the white–painted cheek with the pad of his thumb, claiming the mouth with his own, dragging Xie down beside him on the tabletop, the sofa, the floor.

“There’s one more thing I need,” Xie blurted then, and broke away, wringing the hands visibly, twisting the silken sleeves. “One more favour to ask.”

“Anything,” John replied, damn the danger—he wanted.

“I need you to be generous.”
John tilted his head questioningly. Xie turned, walked a few steps away, spoke to the floor.

“A gratuity. It’s expected. And I . . .” John waited for more, but there was nothing. The white waves of hair shook back and forth. At last, Xie added feebly, “I’m embarrassed to ask.”

“No,” John said gently. “It’s fine. It’s only money.” He imagined it must have something to do with the tips-obsessed administrator, the rat-eyed husband. “Hey, look here,” John urged and Xie did turn, looking from beneath the false lashes. “It’s nothing. I don’t care. Whatever you want. Need.”

The distant rumble of the sliding door in Xie’s dressing room, and Xie in an instantaneous panic, wide-eyed, tugging his sleeve.

“You have to go.”

John hated it, huffed a bit, but let himself be lead to the lift. Xie jabbed the button over and over; the doors slid open and John stepped inside. Xie leaned in, hit the button to close the door.

“Thank you, John. More than you know. Thank you.”
“Ran into the Lamia,” John intoned, and hacked up a rattle from his throat to emphasize his extreme irritation. “She said I’m in her flat.”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about,” the Mentor replied with his most condescending smirk. “And if I did I’d likely tell you to set aside concern about any previous occupants of the flat Unity has so generously provided for you, for reasons I also have no idea about.”

“Right. So this is going to be a productive conversation. Talking about the imaginary activities of people who don’t exist.” John turned his folded hands palms up, fingers still tangled. “So. What? Are we in a dream? You’re a figment of my fevered imagination.” He raised his eyebrows.

The Mentor swiped two fingertips across the surface of his enormous mahogany desk, brushing away dust that almost certainly wasn’t there. “No need for sarcasm, Captain Watson. We know why we’re here. I only mean that we should stay on the topic of the job at hand. I have no interest whatsoever in your social engagements.”

“Trust me, it felt like business.”

“In any case. . .you’re here to give your report.”

John cleared his throat and persisted. “Clearly she was there for one of the vlast party boys she brought along to the drasha salon. I just wonder: anyone else?”

The Mentor’s pinched, patience-at-an-end smile emerged then and he looked hard at John. “I don’t handle the Lamia.”

John pointed at the Mentor’s left chest. “Got the number of her handler in your mobile there, I imagine.” He waited. The Mentor didn’t move but the false smile collapsed into a genuine frown. John raised his eyebrows, prompting.

“No one else. Her next assignment is in Sicily. It’s unlikely you’ll cross paths again.”

John nodded, shrugged a bit. “Was she really in Morocco?”

“Can we get to your report please? I’m not running a matchmaking service for hired guns.”

“I’m happy never to see her again,” John assured. “I only ask because it seemed coincidental that I should go literally years and never think or hear about Morocco, or Africa, and then in the span of a
week I hear it mentioned twice. By people in certain circles.”

“Your circle, you mean.” The Mentor’s eyes narrowed at him.

John shrugged.

“It’s an interesting coincidence, to be sure,” the Mentor said, in a tone indicating he was unwilling to travel any further down that particular path. “Do you have anything to report? Or are you only hoping to distract me long enough to make a clean getaway?”

“Spent some time with the Icehouse security chief, Greg Lestrade. He’s no fan of the vlast oligarchs.”

“Let’s try to avoid that word. Unity doesn’t allow for oligarchy.”

John barked out a laugh. “Right. Anyway, his ex-wife remarried; the husband’s vlast and arranged a forced adoption of Lestrade’s kid, reclassified them both. He’s bitter. Called the guy a ‘rat bastard’ which might not mean anything, but put me in mind of those recordings you sent. All the talk of exterminating vermin. They’re not exactly subtle, are they?”

“No.” The Mentor straightened the not-crooked knot of his tie. John wondered which of them would win in a nervous fidget competition. “And it goes on. They stop only just short of direct incitement to mass murder.”

“Give it time,” John deadpanned.

“I’m glad you find this amusing, Captain,” the Mentor scolded. “Have you gleaned anything more concrete?”

“No really.” John hesitated, thinking about the growing stack of fake ICs in the safe at the flat. “Were the locks changed?” he asked suddenly.

“Pardon?”

“The locks. To the flat. After the Lamia left—or whoever was there after her, before me—were the locks changed?”

“I told you, security is minimal.”

“Change the fucking locks. Today. I don’t want that lunatic letting herself in so she can make love to me with a stiletto while I sleep.”

The Mentor half-frowned. “You flatter yourself, I think, Captain. But it’s not an unreasonable request. You could have skipped the vulgarity and asked nicely, though. Your latest trip to the Americas seems to have uncivilized you a bit.”

John shrugged. “The administrator there, the one married to the famous drasha. . .”

“What about him?”

“Bit of a character. Lestrade says he’s violent and angry; stopped short of calling him crazy. I overheard him in the salon one night pestering Xie about money—gratuities, checking Xie’s account balance after a party—and he dropped some unsubtle hints to guests at the salon, too, about tipping.”

John picked imaginary lint off the knee of his trousers, watched his fingers move as he spoke rather than meeting the Mentor’s studious gaze. “Seems weirdly preoccupied considering he’s married to
someone who must be quite wealthy.”

“Some people are greedy,” the Mentor shrugged. “Unity can balance prosperity and favour those—such as the renowned drashaskaya—whose contributions to society warrant it. What it cannot do is change the nature of a man.”

“Just thought I’d mention it,” John said, though his jaw was starting in with its lately-familiar ache. “Given what I was told about curr possibly being laundered—or illegally transferred, or fuck-knows—through the Icehouse. Moriarty’s clearly got a healthy interest in accumulating it, and no one’s got better access to the accounts there than him.”

“Worth following up,” the Mentor allowed. “Keep an eye out.”

It suddenly became clear to John that he had, at some point, decided not to reveal the existence of Xie’s fake ICs.

The Mentor slid forward another square, flat envelope like the one John had received before, with the CD recordings of Deep Sea’s pirate radio transmissions. John picked it up off the desk, flicked the corner idly. “What’s this?”

“More recordings of Deep Sea’s broadcasts. You may be able to ingratiate yourself with these suspected operatives by discussing some of the content.” The Mentor sat back and folded his hands beneath his chin. “We’ve also got recent intelligence from farther south about increased chatter around the phrase low road.”

John gave him a skeptical look, and his phone buzzed in his pocket. Reaching for it, he narrowed his eyes archly at the Mentor and said, “Is this you? Are we sexting now, you minx?”

The Mentor rolled his eyes extravagantly and busied himself briefly with his own phone.

.TXT from [020.496.1130]: Coffee and cake tomorrow morning? –SH

John felt his face positively cracking apart, struggled mightily against it, thought he might sprain his lip trying not to smile over-wide.

His reply was quick:

*Please tell me that’s code for wanting to see me tonight.*

To the Mentor he said, “You’re shameless. Are we done here?”

The Mentor frowned and slid his own phone back inside his jacket. “Your landlady will have your new keys when you return to the flat.”

John made to leave. “You’re sure this Moriarty character isn’t in this? He just seems so…”

“Would it do to have such an obvious villain, Captain?”

“No,” John allowed. “No, I suppose not. Guess he’s just an arsehole.” He shook his mobile in the air. “Try to control yourself in future. I’m not that kind of girl.”

Sherlock was locked in the bathroom, though Jim was sleeping and unlikely to rise for at least
another few hours.

_Not tonight, I’m afraid. There’s a café in Paddington Street near the gardens._—SH

.TXT from [unknown]: _My neck of the woods. I think I know it. I’ll find it._

_9 a.m.?—SH_

.TXT from [unknown]: _You’re sure I can’t persuade you to meet a bit earlier? Say, midnight?_

Jim, grumbling loudly from the bedroom. “Sherlock. Tea, will you.”

Fast as his fingers could manage, Sherlock deleted the texts. It was probably unfair to leave John hanging at that particular moment, but on the other hand, he vaguely remembered from another lifetime that in matters of early courtship, it was to one’s advantage to leave the other wanting more. He flushed the toilet unnecessarily, ran the tap and jiggled his toothbrush under the flow of water.

“Come on now...”

Sherlock checked to be sure the string of texts was really gone from his mobile, then silenced it in case John did not interpret that his sudden lack of response meant it was a bad time for John to reply. He dropped his mobile into the deep, square pocket of his dressing gown, set his expression in place, ignored the racing of his heart and the sharp twang of tension in his gut, and pulled open the door.

“You’re up early. Would you rather tea in the kitchen, or shall I bring it back here?”

John found the café easily; it was not exactly a secret rendezvous, but rather a pleasantly buzzy place: office workers dressed in sharp suits and running shoes carrying bags with their better shoes streamed in, queued up, and then retreated; a few studious types with open notebooks scrawled furiously between sips of tea, bites of scone, and long stares into space; pleasure-district tourists wore the bizarrely blended aura of lost, eager, and carefree that was unique to holidaymakers. John caught his reflection in the exterior window and though it was slightly deformed and quite thin and ghostly, he thought he looked smart. Dark blue button-up shirt he’d been told was the same colour as his eyes; dove-grey cashmere cardigan (his best one; there were two tiny moth-holes in the sleeve that filled him with rage); dark denims of stylish cut and wash. Freshly shaved face, a splash of the chestnutty, cinnamon-heavy after shave. Same old shoes.

He went inside and scanned the room for the angular face, the turquoise eyes beneath the surprisingly heavy eyebrows, the lush dark waves of hair. What caught his eye, though, was a glimpse of long fingers somewhat gently—one might even say daintily—nudging the handle of a cream-coloured tea cup in a half-circle atop its saucer, then gripping it and raising it. John watched as it went, the wrist encircled by the golden-white edge of a shirtsleeve just visible beneath the cuff of a soft-black jacket, and as he tracked the movement of the hand, John next found himself looking at his lean, triangular back, his sturdy neck with one misbehaving swirl of hair settled just right of center. _Turn around, Sherlock, I want to see you._ But his head only tipped ever-so-slightly as he sipped the tea, then his arm carried his hand back down to replace the cup into its saucer with a click John imagined he could hear from across the softly jangling room.

He walked to where Sherlock sat and ducked around beside him with a soft, “Good morning,” which Sherlock greeted with a smile John could only think of as ‘sweet.’ John was about to slide himself into the chair opposite, on the other side of the little blond-wood table, when something
struck him and he reversed course, pulled himself back to his full height.

“Ah,” he said, “Sorry. I see you’re settled and have your tea. . .” If he had a hat, he’d be mashing it between his fists.

“Something the matter, John?” Sherlock asked him, his eyebrows rising up and toward each other.

“It’s just that there’s—did you notice?—there’s a smell of bleach?” John sounded unsure, though with each passing second he was growing more certain of the horrid, burning scent crawling up his nostrils. “There’s a laundry next door.” He gestured. “Must share this wall, actually. And I just.” He grimaced. “I just can’t stand the smell of bleach.”

Sherlock turned his head as if looking for a sound, though he may have scented the air; John couldn’t tell for sure if he was being humoured, and he had a flicker of thought that Xie would have been subtle about humouring him this way. “You know, you’re right. That’s a bit unpleasant.” Sherlock grinned, closed-mouthed, gracious, and started to get to his feet. “I’ll have them put this in a to-go cup while you order for yourself, and we’ll walk a bit. The gardens are right across the street; it’s a pleasant day.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” John prompted, feeling relieved and that he was a sodding infant, both in equal measures.

“Not a bit.” Sherlock assured him, and led John wordlessly to the counter, where he arranged the transfer of his tea and John ordered one for himself, and a not-too-crumbly-or-sticky looking pastry from the case, which the server plopped into a paper bag.

“I appreciate it,” John said as they shifted and ducted around a series of after-you dance steps, then at last made it through the glass door and out into the bright, rainless haze of late morning.

“Don’t mention it. Sensitive to chemicals?” Sherlock asked, as they waited for several bicyclists and two rickshaws to pass before crossing the street toward the wrought-iron gate marking the entrance to the park. “I wouldn’t have thought so.”

Sherlock pressed one long palm gently against the small of John’s back, urging him forward, when it was safe to cross.

John looked sideways at him, at the jut of his chin. “Bit of a long story. I’m thrilled to see you, by the way.”

Sherlock gifted him another gentle smile; it seemed he had an infinite number of variations. “Of course you are,” he gently joked. After a half-beat, he cut a glance of the shimmering eyes and said, “I feel the same.”

They settled on the first bench they came to, backs to the wide walkway, facing a small expanse of lawn and then a pleasant-looking group of staggered, raised flowerbeds planted in sturdy autumnal shades of brownish-violet, golden dark yellow, and bronzy orange. John drew the pastry out from the paper bag, broke it in half, and laid the two pieces atop the flattened bag on the bench between Sherlock’s thigh and his own. For the moment, neither of them touched it.

“The thing about the bleach,” John said, gazing out at the flowers as he spoke. “It’s left over from childhood. Unpleasant memories.”

He sensed Sherlock turning to look at him, then looking ahead, as John was. Sherlock sipped his tea and though he said nothing, John knew he was open to listening. John plowed ahead, figuring it was a calculated risk to reveal one of his odd things. Everyone had them; they all came out eventually. He
didn’t imagine most of his own were deal-breakers but one never knew. He felt absolutely certain
that even the oddest thing that might eventually be revealed about Sherlock was very unlikely to
dissuade him that Sherlock was the most perfectly made man in—at minimum—the whole of the
British Isles.

“My mum used to scrub with bleach, when there were bloodstains,” John said, and he wanted to toss
his shoulders but knew it weighed too much to shrug off. “From my father.”

He caught Sherlock nodding and turning toward him slightly—not only his face but his whole body
gently pivoting, taking the brunt of John’s revelation head-on, with courage and calm—which John
appreciated enough to need a pull off his plastic-lidded paper cup of tepid tea to get beyond it. After
the mouthful was swallowed down, he cleared his throat. “You know, the bath tub. The basin and
the floor tiles. The kitchen floor once—I remember coming down to pack up food for my sister’s and
my dinner for school, and there was a paring knife in the drying rack by the sink, and a half an apple
gone brown, rolled under the table. I was breathing through my mouth, trying not to retch.”

“She was trying to protect you,” Sherlock said quietly. “Thought she could hide it from you
children.”

“Probably. It was obvious, of course, when I got that smell up my nose. That he’d beaten her bloody.
Usually it was her lip or nose. The knife made me wonder. I imagined at the time maybe he’d startled
her—she was always very jumpy around him, naturally you would be, and he was a shouter—and
maybe she cut her finger or hand.” John took a longer pull at the tea, ventured a look down at the
uneaten pastry in lieu of meeting Sherlock’s eyes. “Once she used it on the sitting room rug, so it left
a faded spot, big as this.” He circled the lid of his cup with his index finger, illustrating. “That was
almost worse. Even after the smell was gone, there was this white spot, the ghost of a bloodstain.”

“Well, no wonder you don’t like it,” Sherlock said.

John finally ventured to look at him, expecting to see another variation on the smile: from column A,
pensive; from column B, compassionate. But Sherlock was looking down, past the bench seat,
perhaps at the dirt showing through the thin places in the grass, and he was not smiling. John broke
off a corner of the pastry, tucked it into his mouth, felt the palate-deadening explosiveness of the
sugar immediately, then smelled a bit of nutmeg and lemon peel.

“Did she ever get away?” Sherlock wondered.

John finished chewing, swallowed quick and answered, “Not really,” as he poked flakey, sticky bits
off his back teeth with his tongue. “He died young—forty-eight—from the drink, and she was even
younger and could have got on with her life, but she wore her wedding ring until she died. Always
talked about him in present tense, like he’d be back in a minute, and always fondly.”

“She remembered him when he was nice,” Sherlock offered.

John huffed a small, bitter laugh. “I don’t remember him being nice, ever. The times he even acted
nice, it was fake; it was a lie. He was never nice. He was a mean bastard.” He shifted his spine,
grown tense and uncomfortable against the back of the bench. “She wasn’t much better. The drink
got her, too, six years later. By then my sister was following right along in their footsteps, so that’s
when I knew I was alone in the world. In some way, it was a relief. I was alone, but I was free of it.
Of them.” He turned his face, at last, toward Sherlock’s and asked, “Did your parents get on?”

Sherlock hummed thoughtfully then said, “I’m sure they had disagreements, and they weren’t overly
demonstrative with each other. Nor with us children; expectations were very high. But I never
thought of them as badly matched, or worried about their anger.” It seemed he might say more, but
he only tugged off the tiniest bit of the other half of the pastry, pressed it to the tip of his tongue as if he may not actually eat it, but was only learning its properties. In the end, the tongue dipped back between the closed lips and it looked like he was chewing it with his front teeth before chasing it with his tea.

John watched all this with curiosity and a faint echo far back in his brain, something from his medical training, about disordered eating patterns and odd food-related habits. He reminded himself he was not Sherlock’s doctor, and anyway, a single moment was not a good basis for diagnosis. He was slim and muscular, probably paid attention to nutrition and only wanted a taste. To distract himself from this borderline privacy-invading line of thought, John tore off another bit and ate it, noticing that its flavour was duller now his tongue had already been assaulted once by butter and sugar.

“I’d say they got along, generally,” Sherlock went on then. “Certainly, never were they more unified than when I last spoke to them, which was the occasion of them disowning me.”

It was such a harsh phrase, yet Sherlock tossed it out casually, as if they’d only been calling to wish him a happy new year. John said, “Because of—you told me about the drugs.”

“That’s right.”

“And your brothers?” John queried. “Keep in touch with them?”

“No. My eldest brother was disposed to throw me away, too, when I was on the verge of being reclassified nil. He had no patience for my lack of discipline; I was much too messy for him. And he wanted to be a diplomat, a plan he was scrambling to salvage by weaseling his way into virtually any governmental position Unity would give him; I’ve no doubt he’s highly ranked and well-regarded, whatever he’s doing now.” Sherlock turned slightly away and leaned back, stretching his long legs in front of him, rocking his shoulders back so his chest thrust forward momentarily—leaving John to wash his watering mouth with now-nearly-cold tea. “Staying well clear of me was to his advantage, so he did. The other one died young and so was spared this family drama of which I was the barely-conscious center. I like to think he would have stayed on my side—even if just to spite our brother—though I don’t know if he could have talked them out of cutting me off. Of the three of us, I suppose he was the quiet one. He might have argued in my favour, but only once, and not loudly.”

“I’m sorry. How did he die?”

“It was a freak thing—stung by a bee out at my uncle’s country home, the place I wrote you about. Instant and violent anaphylaxis; he was dead almost before he hit the ground. It’s how I know I’m allergic to bee venom. Not that that’s much of a worry now; I haven’t seen an insect other than a maggot or a cockroach in years, living in the city.”

“That’s quite a sad way to lose someone; how old?”

“He was sixteen; I was thirteen. I took it very badly, stopped eating, became morose. I think one could probably—if one were so inclined—draw a line from his death to my eventual drugs habit.”

John nodded and set his mostly-empty cup down beside his foot on the ground. He turned, crossing one leg over the other, propping his elbow on the back of the bench and his chin on his hand.

“The things we carry,” John said, perhaps a bit wistfully, but talking about these burdens of the past and considering how they reverberated through a lifetime was eye-opening.

Sherlock only said, “Indeed,” in a way that made John reach over and rest the palm of his hand atop the back of Sherlock’s, and sink his blunt-tipped fingers into the spaces between Sherlock’s bony
ones.
In chapter 16, John reported to the Mentor (but kept Xie’s illicit ICs under wraps), then John and Sherlock met for tea and talked about "the things they carry," the losses that made them who they are.

Sherlock let John’s hand rest there on top of his for a long minute, amused and a bit thrilled at the novelty of new and different fingers snuggled down between his own. John’s thumb traced a lazy oval along the edge of Sherlock’s hand, between his own thumb and his wrist, and it sent a delicious, electric shiver up the inside of Sherlock’s forearm. Eventually he raised their entangled hands, rested a quick dry kiss on John’s most prominent knuckle, then reclaimed custody of his hand. John went for another bite of the lemon-scented pastry nestled in a spreading grease stain on top of the café’s paper bag.

“It’s interesting that you’re so famous and yet we’re sitting here and no one’s even looking twice,” John mused. “Well, except for the inevitable double-takes at your completely illegal handsomeness.”

Sherlock felt his neck get warm beneath the open collar of his shirt; his skin—when he was in it—never missed a chance to betray him.

“For the first several years I didn’t give it a single thought,” Sherlock told him. “I was so focused on the work—the artistic aspects required perhaps even more creativity then, given limited resources and the uncharted territory. I was inventing something, and it required intense concentration. When people started to notice the Icehouse, and demand began to grow, Xie developed a bit of...not a following, but a reputation, and what less artistically-minded observers sometimes call name recognition. I was thrilled, of course, but it was then I decided that in order for Xie to really thrive and continue to attract guests to the salon, it was important to maintain a certain level of mystique. If I went public, Xie became just a dressed-up puppet, an avatar. In order for Xie to be a person, I had to stay out of the light.”

John was staring, listening raptly. Sherlock found himself surprised that John should find any of this interesting but he appeared to, and not merely out of politeness or as a means to the end of tricking Sherlock out of his trousers by feigning appreciation. As if to confirm Sherlock’s impression of him, John said, “I wouldn’t have thought of that—the puppet thing. Clever you. When an artist makes a painting, he doesn’t spend the rest of his life standing beside it reminding people he made it...”

Sherlock sat straighter, nodding vigorously, gesturing with his hands. “Exactly that,” he affirmed. “If Xie succeeds in inspiring admiration, making people feel welcome and comforted and pleased. . .if people are struck by the aesthetic beauty and leave feeling that not only was their experience fulfilling, but they have seen something unlike anything they’ve seen before—” Sherlock threw up his hands. “Then I don’t matter a bit.”

John smiled, kind and genuine.

“And now that I’ve got breathing room, and can think a bit philosophically—not just hyperfocusing on making it happen, making it work—I do think I made the right choice. Think of other well-known people. That pop singer Masha the Cat can’t go anywhere without being chased, photographed in...
her Sunday morning coffee shop clothes. It must be maddening.”

“It might be fun for a week,” John mused. “But no, you’re right. Must be difficult to never have a moment that’s just your own.”

Sherlock settled back a bit, slow-motion rolled his hands together as if applying the crushed-pearl hand cream babulya Ishi prepared. “I suppose I could have gone public at some point,” he said, “But ultimately I’m glad I didn’t. There are parts of my life I prefer to keep private.” The words turned leaden and cold on his tongue, and Sherlock had to run a quick replay of the conversation in his mind to reassure himself he hadn’t revealed more than he’d meant to.

John looked thoughtful. “You think of Xie as an entirely separate person?” he wondered, neither demanding nor judgmental; he only sounded curious.

“Not entirely, but mostly,” Sherlock said. “It’s as if Xie is twenty-seven outer layers, but ultimately I’m still there at the heart of it all. Like a matryoshka, a nesting doll. Crack open Xie, and find more Xie, and Xie, and Xie, and Xie. . .then me, the smallest part, hidden inside all the rest.”

“So when I’m kissing Xie. . .?” John asked quietly, eyebrows rising.

“Xie’s never been kissed.”

“Ah,” John said, nodding slowly. He smiled, and there was a lingering silence. “Sorry, now all I can think about is kissing you.”

“That’s fine.” Sherlock looked at his hands. The air between them crackled. Sherlock turned a narrow gaze at John, just in time to see the tip of his tongue vanishing behind his newly-dampened lips. “Your neck of the woods, you said?”

“Yeah.” He tipped his head to indicate, off to their right and behind.

“I have the whole morning free,” Sherlock said then, and the thrill of it was very nearly enough to drown out the thudding terror, the clang of guilt, so he turned up the volume. “And I’d like to spend it with you,” he added, leaving no room for John to misinterpret his intention.

John’s exhalation was audible. “I’d like nothing better,” he said, and reached between them to gather up the carcass of the pastry and its greasy paper bag. “Shall we?”

Though every cell in his body screamed yes, Sherlock couldn’t bring himself to say the word, and so only nodded, and smoothed the front of his jacket as he stood, and let John lead them, side by side.
went on rolling in teasing, lazy waves against John, creating not-quite-satisfying friction through too many layers of clothing. Like teenagers necking with one ear out for their parents’ key in the front door lock, John thought vaguely, and dragged his heel up the back of Sherlock’s calf even as he squeezed Sherlock’s long thighs tighter between his own, restricting Sherlock’s movement and eliciting a grumpy whine. John opened his mouth, accepting another of Sherlock’s bossy kisses to make up for having displeased him.

They’d talked about nothing as they walked from the park to the flat: the new chill in the weather that seemed certain to stay; a revival of an old stage play—seven hours long, the playwright a twentieth-century Shakespeare—that Sherlock wanted to see but was unlikely to find time for. Their hands brushed and bumped, and they threw quick glances at each other, then looked away.

John was walking quicker by the time they turned into Baker Street, and Sherlock practically chased him up the stairs, must have unbuttoned his jacket as they ascended for it hit the lounge floor as John kicked the door shut behind them and turned the lock, no offers of tea, no background music, no time to bother shutting the drapes. Sherlock’s gigantic hands enveloped his face. Sherlock’s roughsoft mouth laid claim to his lips, tongue, neck, closed eye. Sherlock shoved him toward the sofa and pressed him back and down. Sherlock settled himself between John’s thighs and rolled against him. Then again. . .and again. . .and still again. . .his tongue stroking the side of John’s tongue in time with the crest of each wave. John let himself be storm-tossed, pushed and pulled, held under until he was gasping; he’d been longing to be drowned—like this, just like this—and so surrendered himself to the wash of Sherlock’s incense-heavy scent, his dusky voice muttering commands, the weight of him, and all his long angles, and all his surprising, desperate force. Let Sherlock smother him; it was sublime.

Shifting his weight back toward his knees, Sherlock made space enough that John could thrust his hands down, eagerly fumbling for Sherlock’s trousers-button, the hook, the zip, and all at once John’s chest expanded too far because Sherlock had kneeled all the way up between John’s splayed legs, hands on his denim-clad thighs sliding up and down with a determined sort of pressure. It seemed Sherlock would let him open the trousers, and John willed his hands to work better. But all at once there was the distraction of the perfectly soft, beautifully tailored shirt, its slightly opalescent buttons with the maker’s mark etched in, and John’s brain sent up a flare reminding him that beneath all that bothersome clothing was Sherlock’s skin—his skin. John opened his mouth and a hot, low moan slid out. A quick glance at Sherlock’s face (his perfect, flushed-up face) revealed that he had raised one hand to his lips (his gorgeous, kiss-bitten lips) and was worrying the lower one with thumb and forefinger as if deciding what next to do with John Watson, beneath him on the sofa, belly-up and utterly on offer.

John got the shirt button free and pinched at the satiny cotton, tucked two fingers behind the button placket, loosening, and his gaze caught a half-second flicker of skin almost as white as the shirt itself. Sherlock’s great hands clamped around John’s and practically threw them off, as he sprawled against John once more, pinning John’s good shoulder with his forearm, kissing like he was giving orders. Their insistent grinding resumed, now urgent with moaning, and John clawed Sherlock’s plump backside, clenched and softened his grip in time with the muscles working beneath and against his fingertips.

Sherlock’s hand on his wrist, dragging it down between them. “John.” He raised up, making space. “I want. . .”

John was already saying, “Yeah,” by the time Sherlock’s lips closed around his tongue, sucking hard, and at the same time pressed John’s willing palm against the length of his prick, upward-straining behind the front placket of his trousers.
“Will you.” It was not a request.

“Yeah.” John repeated, and stroked, trying to curve his fingers around. “God, yeah. Sherlock.” His voice was ragged with begging but he couldn’t find it in him to care. “Please let me.” John was desperate, combustible, and he wanted.

A flurry of disentangling and rearrangement followed, until Sherlock was sat on the sofa, thighs well apart, trousers open just enough to free his prick and bollocks, and John was seated on the coffee table stripped above the waist to just his sleeveless vest, knees inside and outside Sherlock’s. John’s fingers flattened against the side of Sherlock’s throat as their mouths met in a deep kiss and picked up the vibration of Sherlock’s deep, groaning hum. A strong hand caught the base of John’s skull, and pushed down; John sank.

Sherlock slid forward and down, a languid, loose-spined slump with his head against the sofa back, eyes heavy-lidded but watchful. John took him in hand and thrilled to the sharp sucking noise Sherlock made in response. Shoving aside the tails of the posh, million-thread-count shirt, John looked his fill of Sherlock’s pleasingly weighty, pink-flushed prick and tight-skinned bollocks.

“Fuck me you’re gorgeous,” he moaned, sliding back to fold forward, and set upon him in an instant, mouth slack and wet, adjusting the angle and force of his grip. A shimmer of memory: Sherlock’s voice on the phone—

seawater, then molasses—

—and John’s tongue moved in a slow circle around his crown, nudging back the tight slip of foreskin, making Sherlock hiss. John flicked his tongue against the little slit, tasted, savoured; Sherlock hadn’t lied.

“John!” Long fingers the wrong way through his hair, down the back of his neck to dip beneath the back of John’s vest, scratching a shiver down his spine. Sucking, humming. “John. . .” Quick-circling tongue. “John. . .”

He drew back slow—not far, there was much yet to discover—and let his breath warm the spit-slick crown of Sherlock’s cock as he murmured, “Good?”

In reply came only a gusty, broken groan and fingers tracing John’s jaw, tilting, persuading.

“Oh, fuck yes,” John managed to mumble, “Please yes.” He descended in a slow slither down the side of Sherlock’s silk-soft, blood-hot prick, and in the end John nestled into the bristle of dark hair there, inhaling the clean, heavy scent of Sherlock’s desire. Sherlock bucked a little, trying not to, and John growled, moved quick to encircle Sherlock’s rump in one arm, tugging him forward, closer, one hand steadying as he licked a swirling trail up the hot length of him, painted pre-cum around the plump head with an eager tongue. An astonished-sounding gasp from Sherlock was thrilling, gratifying, and John pulled back just enough to mutter, “Christ, the sounds you make. . .” before closing his lips around Sherlock’s cock, sucking in mid-tempo rhythm, wanting to make Sherlock move, rock up against him, into him, claiming and surrendering to him, both at once.

John had always been good with his mouth. He’d endeavoured to become so, long back, which was no burden because there was nothing about it he didn’t relish. He found in this particular act a unique blend of submission and control: a partner pressed him down onto his knees (sometimes figuratively; often literally), urging him to shut up and kiss until he’d made them shout and shudder, yet in so doing they surrendered to John’s will to speed up or slow down, stop, tease, drive them on, or ease them back. Settling between a lover’s shaking thighs was intensely arousing, and John went at it with such enthusiasm he unfailingly outlasted his partner, always willing to linger just a bit longer, to give just one more shiver, elicit one more mew or cry. Sore throat or tired jaw, cricked neck or aching knees or—certainly, always—his own thrumming need could all be ignored forever, if it meant his lover shattered apart with pleasure under the ministrations of his always eager mouth.
In that moment, hugging tight around Sherlock’s hips to draw him nearer, John’s devotion was rewarded with gorgeous, low moans from deep in Sherlock’s chest and by a rolling pulsation of his pelvis Sherlock seemed unable to suppress. John hummed affirmation that it was good, it was gorgeous, he wanted it, was loving it. He relaxed his jaw to accommodate Sherlock’s semi-reluctant fucking, minded his teeth, breathed through his nose, and all at once Sherlock was muttering his name with a tone of urgent warning, shoving at his shoulder with one hand. In a flash, John realised Sherlock shouldn’t leave the flat with dried spunk flaking off his clothes; there was nothing for it so John tilted his head, drew back to make space, and hummed a loud and certain, “mm-hmmm.” Before he was all the way through it, Sherlock moaned long and deep like he was dying, both hands clutching at John, and the salty heat of his cum flooded over John’s tongue in a few hot pulses, filled the inside of his cheek.

“John…” Sherlock gusted, and melted back into the sofa, working the long palm of his hand slowly back and forth against the back of John’s neck. It occurred to John that Sherlock’s repeated invocations of his name held something in it of possession—no matter the tone, Sherlock could just as well have been saying, mine. He found he didn’t mind it.

John drifted away, smiling, and tugged his vest up over his head, held it to his face to let Sherlock’s cum and his own worked-up saliva slide into it, then dropped it aside.

“Can I kiss you?” John asked, rough-voiced, shifting forward, sliding his knee along the inside of Sherlock’s thigh. He’d barely got the words out before Sherlock’s tongue was in his mouth—sweeping, seeking, tasting the lingering traces of himself—and Sherlock’s slim, cool fingers were swirling over the surface of his back, down his spine, onto his shoulders, then down his chest, finding the edges, skidding over his nipples so they beaded up. John groaned into the kiss, his own prick throbbing inside his still-fastened trousers. As if reading John’s mind—or perhaps employing his trick that was not a trick, of knowing things without being told—Sherlock’s hands went for John’s belt. John reached to help, in a hurry to get free, to get off, he was aching with it, and moved to resettle himself on the sofa. Sherlock quickly tucked himself back into trousers he left open and threw one miles-long leg over so he was straddling John’s lap, leaning down to kiss the side of John’s neck with soft, open lips.

“I’ve been wanting this,” Sherlock murmured, and licked his palm and the flats of his fingers with an undulating swipe of his tongue before encircling John’s aching prick with his big handsome hand, stroking down toward John’s body, twisting his wrist, then dragging back again toward the head, slipping John’s foreskin up and over. John let himself sink, moaned softly into Sherlock’s hair, and Sherlock’s reply was a ragged, “I’ve been dying to feel you in my hand again,” lips moving against John’s ear, his breath hot and loud. John found the low edge of Sherlock’s shirt and thrust his hand up and under, sliding up the side of his taut torso, fingers bumping along the rack of his ribs. Sherlock rumbled, “Your cock feels so good,” then sucked John’s ear lobe between his lips, bit and pulled, let go. The words were plain but the growling urgency in Sherlock’s tone weighted them, sent a shock straight down through John’s body to the tight coil of desire sitting low in his belly. Sherlock growled, low and near-frantic: “Oh, John.. . I want to make you come.”

“Yeah.” John tweaked Sherlock’s nipple beneath his shirt. “Please.. .”

Sherlock made a little mewing hum beside his ear, and John’s hands clung to Sherlock’s hip, messily scrambled through the curls at the back of his head, pulling him close to smell his neck. The hand on his prick was smooth, cool, pushing and pulling in steady time, and John gusted, “Yeah,” against the side of Sherlock’s face. His brain was buzzing, he could feel himself going stupid with lust and pleasure, reminded himself it was Sherlock slung over his lap smelling of incense and nuzzling his ear and murmuring dirty talk. How he’d longed for this, to let himself be dragged under, to give over and inhale deep and let himself drown.
The tip of Sherlock’s tongue was flicking, tickling, in a tiny lapping motion just there in the hollow behind John’s jaw, and it reminded John of the way he would lick a woman, and Sherlock’s hand on his needy cock was steady, sure, dear christ perfect, like that, just like that, just there.

“Sherlock…” His precious name, and then a deep grunt dissolving into a thin moan sliding upward, and John was coming hot against his own belly, even up onto his chest. Bright, jagged bliss bolted through him from his center out along his limbs with such sudden force John felt sure he would be ruined by it, doomed to slouch here on the sofa forever, his every nerve melted into uselessness.

Sherlock’s whispers were tender against the curve of his ear, so soft and slow and warm, yes, yes, that’s it, yes. And John let his head fall back against the top of the sofa cushions as Sherlock nuzzled close and breathed against him, a slow glide from his temple, down over his jaw, the side of his throat, until his forehead rested in the hollow between John’s neck and shoulder. They were still but for their slightly-laboured breath, and John raised his face to litter kisses in Sherlock’s hair, stroke his rounded back while the other hand gripped Sherlock’s sturdy, muscular thigh.

“Here. C’mere,” John whispered, found Sherlock’s chin and nudged him up. “One more.”

Those eloquent hands at either side of John’s head, the forward press of his bossy tongue, and John made space for him, felt the deep pull of Sherlock’s last wave dragging him along. Drowning was bliss.

Sherlock unfolded himself from John’s lap, stretched one long arm to fetch back John’s vest from the floor, wiped it over John’s belly to clean off the cooled, sticky mess; John took over, made quick work, let his shirt fall in a heap in his lap. Sherlock landed beside him on the sofa, their clothed thighs exchanging heat, the soft cotton of Sherlock’s sleeve caressing John’s upper arm. A quick glance revealed Sherlock’s expression to be inscrutable, sleepy-eyed but unsmiling.

“Brilliant,” John murmured. Sherlock hummed something that John took for agreement, though not as enthusiastic as he might like. “Oh, christ,” he said quietly, suddenly. “Sorry. I should have asked if —” He cleared his throat, ventured to rest his hand on Sherlock’s thigh, stroking a bit. “Condoms. It’s just I don’t usually use them—for that.”

“No.” Sherlock sounded something like puzzled. “No, it’s fine. Honestly it never crossed my mind.”

“It’s been a while for me, anyway. But I do take care.”

“I’m not worried,” Sherlock said, and laid his hand atop John’s, followed John’s motion against his trouser leg. “You needn’t be, either.”


Sherlock shrugged, and there was a beat before he prompted, “A while?”

“Few months,” John admitted, saw no point in lying.

“In America,” Sherlock guessed, though John knew it was probably nothing so unsteady as a guess.

“Yeah, a few. In between the bouts of abject terror and chaos, it was pretty tedious. You find ways to pass the time.”

“Soldiers?”

“Not all of them.” John raised their entangled hands and kissed Sherlock’s knuckles. “Does it bother you?”
“I hardly have a right. We didn’t know each other then. And of course. . .” There was no need for him to finish the sentiment. “Have you ever had anything long-term?” He merely sounded curious, but in his pleasant haze, John wouldn’t have minded even if he were prying.

“A few. I’ll tell you about them sometime.” Somehow he felt he owed a bit more, though, so he half-smirked and admitted, “I’m nearly forty, never been married; there’ve been what is probably either an impressive or an alarming number, depending on your point of view.”

“Men and women, both,” Sherlock said.

“Yes. Probably more women, but the longest long-term one was a bloke. To balance it out.” Sherlock let go a short, soft laugh, which was exactly he reaction John had hoped to elicit. “And you? I know you’ve been. . .” It was ludicrous that neither of them was willing to say the words—married, husband, cheating, affair—they should call it what it was, but neither of them seemed able to, so they went on talking around it.

“I had a promiscuous period, in my youth,” Sherlock told him. “Many, many men—rarely the same one twice—but they weren’t relationships. It was transactional, something more akin to extortion.” Sherlock rolled his head to face John. “Once a junkie has run out of legal means to acquire currency, there are precious few avenues remaining. And I was too lazy to steal.”

Sherlock said all this quite casually, but the full weight of what he was saying settled over John, not like the wash of a wave, but like a stack of bricks had been unloaded onto his chest. He connected dots and felt even lower than he had before. “I’m sorry you had to do that,” he said quietly. “And here I come, ignorant arsehole, assuming you were for rent by the hour. . .you should have had me taken out back and beaten.”

“It was another life.” Sherlock waved it away with an elegant roll of his wrist. “You couldn’t have known.”

“But with that in your past. . .”

“You were asking to pass time with Xie that night, and Xie is free of the burden of my past. Or any past. Forgive yourself; you did me no harm.”

“I’ll try, but it’s not easy. I feel like a proper idiot.” John said, and moved to make himself decent. Sherlock did the same, leaned back to smooth his shirttails beneath the waistband of his trousers.

“Anyway,” Sherlock said, returning to the primary topic. “It was an exceptional period of my life, but really quite brief. I met Jim around that time, and there was some overlap, but almost since we met. . .”

“Only—?”

“Only.” Sherlock shrugged a bit, then glanced at his watch in a way that was probably meant for John to miss, though he didn’t.

“I imagine you have things to do,” John offered then, giving Sherlock a way out of discussing those things they were talking around. “Appointments, or preparing for the salon tonight.”

“Mm,” Sherlock agreed, and sat up straighter. He fidgeted with the cuffs of his shirt, smoothed the front.

“Bathroom’s just there.” John gestured. “Bedroom to the right—there’s a better mirror inside the wardrobe, if you need it.” Sherlock half-smiled, nodded, but didn’t move to get up from the sofa.
John fetched his shirt off the floor and pulled it on over his head, shifting it back and forth to settle around his torso. John watched Sherlock for a moment, reminded himself of his promise not to make unreasonable demands, then quickly disregarded it. “Can you stay a bit, though?” he heard himself ask. “There’s—god!—so much more I want to do for you.”

Sherlock clasped his hands together between his knees, cranked the palms against each other in slow motion.

“Nevermind,” John said quickly. “I shouldn’t ask. It’s just...”

“I know.”

“This was fantastic. You’re—”

Sherlock stood suddenly, looked around for his cast-off suit jacket, abandoned in a heap by the door from the landing.

“I only... I don’t know what to do here, Sherlock, honestly. I’ve never been in this situation before.”

Defensive: “Nor me.”

“I know. I know. I didn’t mean to—”

Sherlock snapped his jacket in the air, then shrugged into it, buttoned the top button, smoothed it down over the front of his hips.

“Sherlock.”

His hand was already reaching for the knob. John put the last hour on fast-replay in his head, trying to discover the moment he’d got it wrong.

“I’ll be in touch when I can.”

Something about it stung, but John only nodded.

Sherlock closed the distance between them in a few long strides, and when they were toe to toe, he tipped John’s chin up with one curled finger and kissed his mouth with dry lips.

“You still haven’t said stop.”

“No I haven’t.”

“So when—”

“Call Molly.”

“Yeah, OK. Yeah.”

Sherlock touched the back of John’s hand, and went.
This chapter has been tagged with "dissociation". I feel the depiction here is more akin to extreme distraction/inability to concentrate and does not rise to a full blown dissociative episode, but I want to be thorough in tagging.

It was gorgeous: nearly enough but not nearly enough, rocking his bone-jangled body against John’s, which was made of stouter stuff than Sherlock had imagined. John was fibrous and firm, comfortably resistant, bearing Sherlock easily. Sherlock rolled his hips, digging his knee into the space between seat-cushions for leverage. John’s hair beneath his fingers was soft, but blunt at the ends; he’d recently had it trimmed. Sherlock kissed and kissed, marveling at the way John’s tongue, teeth, and breath even as the dregs of his tea must still be lingering on his tongue. He liked the way John kissed back, with fervour but without demand, as if he thoroughly enjoyed it. The kisses went on and on, and Sherlock experimented with the pressure and tempo of his rocking pelvis, heard the way John’s breathing changed, felt the clutching, petting hands in his hair and down his back, sensed and catalogued the urgency or laziness in each of John’s kisses.

John murmured against Sherlock’s unguarded throat, and then against his chin, and Sherlock found his mouth once more to kiss him again, more, shifting slow between John’s open thighs so their erections slid against each other through the unshed armour of their clothing. It was barely intimate, Sherlock knew, nearly adolescent in its near-innocence, but he relished the almost. The ever-increasing desire for more—more skin, more heat—was exquisite; he wanted to linger there, perhaps forever, because once he tipped over the edge, it all slid quickly downhill to the end, a natural disaster. John dragged his heel up the back of Sherlock’s calf and his thighs pressed closer, trapping Sherlock’s own thighs, disrupting the lazy rhythm, and he protested wordlessly, attempted to distract John with a kiss. To his relief, pressing his tongue into the heat of John’s mouth undermined the play for control: John relaxed back into the sofa, let Sherlock lead them.

It had taken all the bravado Sherlock could muster to suggest they leave the relative safety of a public space, with paper cups and a grotesque piece of cake and casual, we-could-be-anyone conversation to distract from the risk of Sherlock’s infidelity, the relentlessness of John’s pursuit. As John guided their brief walk down the pavements to a shabby, cluttered flat he’d barely left a mark on despite having lived in it for weeks, Sherlock steered the conversation toward neutral nothingness. Cold weather that had settled in for good, a play Sherlock would never make time to see despite his actually quite desperate wish to do so. Their hands brushed as if John might take hold of him; every time Sherlock looked across at him, John looked away.

They hustled through a heavy, black door and up interior stairs, and Sherlock couldn’t have turned back then even if he’d wanted to, and he was already shedding his suit jacket by the time John locked them in. He cradled John’s face and kissed him hard—bit John’s lip, sucked John’s tongue—then opened his mouth against John’s neck (freshly shaved, utterly smooth, softened with lotion that smelled of autumn outdoors), dragged his closed lips gently across John’s eyelid. Sherlock wrapped his hands around John’s biceps, stepped forward so that John had no choice but to step back, and in a moment they were collapsing down to arrive exactly where Sherlock wanted them to be. He settled himself between John’s splayed thighs and rolled against him, licking John’s tongue in time. Sherlock thrilled to feel John surrender—he did it so easily, as if he’d only been waiting for his
chance; Sherlock marveled at John’s decision to trust him—and Sherlock muttered, “Move with me. Kiss me. Mm, yes, kiss me again,” and all his bearing was forward and down. Sherlock vaguely worried the force of his desire would crush John—wanted him in a way that felt murderous, as if Sherlock could crush him, suck out his breath, break his bones. The violence of it would have frightened him except that he knew John was built to take all of it and more and undoubtedly survive.

Something shimmered through him, purple and prickly, and he had to break away, leaned up a bit, lifting his chest off John’s chest, kneeling all the way back and stroking John’s hard thighs even as he reached to open Sherlock’s trousers. Calculations began ticking through his brain, then, of how to bring John along without exposing himself. Sherlock stayed passive in the moment, wanted—desperately wanted—John to be the one to raise the volume, but just as Sherlock became sure John would free him and take him in hand, the elegant fingers detoured upward, and John moaned. Sherlock absently tugged at his own lower lip like a nervous child; John gazed up at him, his expression a strange blend of delirious and determined.

Sherlock’s heart pounded in a different way as John slipped free the lowest shirt button and began tugging at the button placket, to draw out Sherlock’s shirt tails; he couldn’t help but clamp his hands on John’s wrists and yank them away. Before John could protest, Sherlock rode the energy downward, sprawling to cover, pinning John in place with one forearm, kissing him hard. John met him eagerly, jutting his hips up in counter-time to Sherlock’s urgent rhythm. Sherlock pressed up and back into the pressure-point clutch of John’s fingertips digging in against his arse.

An ingenious solution occurred to him then—and anyway he wanted it—so Sherlock made a bold request, dragging John’s hand to press and stroke him through his trousers. He barely recognized his own voice, lower than usual, full of wind.

“I want…” He sucked John’s tongue, guided John’s hand against his trousers-front. “Will you.” He didn’t want to ask and leave room for John to refuse because he was on the verge of madness already, and a rejection would almost certainly turn his murderous impulse suicidal.

“Yeah,” John gusted. “God, yeah.” He groaned Sherlock’s name. “Please let me.” The plaintive, hungry voice sent needles down Sherlock’s spine.

As they reoriented themselves on the sofa, Sherlock opened his trousers only just enough, slouched back with widespread knees and forward-thrust pelvis. John was utterly unself-conscious about shedding his shirt, and Sherlock could see the tracery of brown-purple-pink-white scars peeking out around the narrow band of cotton. His nipples were visibly hard beneath the fabric of his vest, and Sherlock licked his lips, knew that John would take off the vest if Sherlock asked, and considered it.

Settled on the coffee table, John leaned forward, hand gentle on Sherlock’s throat as they met in a fervent kiss. Sherlock felt a familiar, unpleasant panic rise up nonetheless, and he made an undignified sound low in his throat, wrapped it in a stagey hum John seemed to accept as genuine. Robbing himself of the opportunity to entertain a second thought, Sherlock grabbed the back of John’s head and pushed down; John went with not a trace of resistance.

Sherlock’s impulse was to close his eyes but behind his darkened lids his body confused the situation to a distressing degree, so he half-opened them again. John’s broad shoulders. John’s gold-and-silver hair. John’s surprisingly delicate, surgeon’s fingers wrapping around him (Sherlock sucked a shock of breath across his teeth). John’s deep blue eyes downcast, watching his hand as it steadied Sherlock’s prick. John’s voice moaning out an appreciative exclamation as he folded his body back and down, mouth hot, wet, urgent, clearly skillful. Sherlock’s spine melted, his eyes rolled halfway
back and then drifted closed.


“John!” Wide-eyed, he dug his fingertips into John’s scalp then dragged backwards through his hair, all the way down his neck into the back of his vest, scratching at the prominent bumps of John’s spine. Lips tight around him, John sucked and hummed lazily, as if in bliss. “John. . .” That impossibly hot tongue curled quick and hot around the head of Sherlock’s desperate prick, and Sherlock moaned his name, grounding himself there in the moment with “John. . .” and no other.

A hideous moment of broken contact, and Sherlock reminded himself it was John’s breath cooling the spit-dampened head of his cock. It was John bent down before him as if Sherlock himself were somehow worthy of this particular brand of worship. It was John looking up at him with bright blue eyes and gently asking for confirmation that it was “Good?”

The groan that rolled out of him in response seemed to come through him from somewhere else, far off, and he reached out to touch John’s face. John took it for a request, or a command, and whispered, “Oh, fuck yes. Please yes,” and slithered wetly down Sherlock’s length until he was nuzzling into Sherlock’s pubic hair, slow-inhaling, and Sherlock couldn’t keep himself from bucking up a bit.

John’s muscular arm snuck behind Sherlock’s rump, cabled around and drew him forward, closer, John’s mouth shaping pretty poetry up along the length of him, then around his crown. Sherlock must have made a noise—he could only hear the rush of his own blood in his ears—because John drew back to mutter a curse and marvel about “the sounds you make. . .” (had he been making sounds? for how long? what sort?) before resuming his ministrations, hugging Sherlock hard in the curve of his arm, intensity personified.

Sherlock felt supremely selfish, dirty with demand. Asking for what he wanted was no longer part of his usual vocabulary; he only waited to be summoned, manhandled, shoved down onto his back or his knees. Occasionally, if the air seemed right, he would offer himself as a conveyance for pleasure but knew better than to ever expect pleasure returned. That John allowed Sherlock to shove him, grab him, and kiss him hard was a thrill so seldom felt as to seem entirely new. John welcomed Sherlock’s desire in an utterly alien way. Even as the arm wrapped around Sherlock’s arse drew him closer to John’s clearly well-practiced and impressively talented mouth, even as John licked and hummed and sucked, Sherlock’s head echoed a voice he knew as well as his own.

Greedy whore.
Slut.
It’s a bit disgusting, Sherlock.

He heard himself moan then—wanton, shameless, settle down you’re embarrassing yourself—and it sounded far apart from him. He dragged himself down from the ceiling, back into his body, and was near-humiliated to find he was rocking up into John’s mouth, took slight comfort that John seemed not just to tolerate this slutty behaviour, but even to enjoy it. John hummed around Sherlock’s cock, affirmation, encouragement, as if he wanted it, as if he loved it. Did he? How could he? Because John Watson was no one but himself; he had willingly—even eagerly—submitted to Sherlock’s demand (Yeah, Sherlock. Please let me.). And now he seemed just as willing and eager to bring Sherlock this ache, this deep thrum of pleasure, this taut shimmer of

“John. John!”
Sherlock pressed John’s shoulder with one urgent hand, warning him. John only shifted the angle of his head, closed his eyes, hummed out loud and certain that all was as it should be. In the instant those warm vibrations resonated through him, Sherlock succumbed, moaning long and deep, his fingers dug into John’s shoulder and back, thick and throbbing heat rolling through him.

“John. . .”

Not the soft-voiced, brown-eyed lie of wanting to please him, it was John Watson here with wet and eager lips wrapped around him, with unselfish desire rising off him in heated ripples Sherlock could see deforming the air between them. Sherlock rested his palm on the back of John’s neck, and petted him, hand heavy with gratitude.

Sherlock watched him through half-focused eyes as John rid himself of his vest and scrubbed his mouth with it, wearing a smile that might have been smug in some other context. He crowded into Sherlock’s space—his knee nudging Sherlock’s thigh wider—asking for permission to kiss, and so Sherlock kissed him. He tasted different, inside John’s mouth. Sherlock growled, and touched John everywhere he could reach, laying claim to him: bare back and shoulders; hard and soft arms and chest; finally tweaking his nipples with cool fingers, pleased at the response. John made a low, helpless sound and Sherlock reached for his belt. A quick rearrangement found John slouched on the sofa and Sherlock rose to straddle his thighs, leaned to suck at the skin of his neck, pressed his tongue and the edges of his teeth against John’s easily-offered, vulnerable throat.

At times Sherlock found that it felt more real to say things aloud. Once they were out in the world, his feelings became weighted, took shape, existed.

“I’ve been wanting this.” It was true; Sherlock’s desire had grown from something tingly and distracting, easily shut away, into something fierce, with claws, swatting between the cage bars. And now the truth of it was in the air between them, forged into shape by the heat of Sherlock’s breath. He licked his fingers and palm, reached down to find John’s heavy prick silky-hot and oozing proof of his desire. He stroked—gliding palm and gently twisting wrist—and John let go a sweet, quiet moan into Sherlock’s hair. John was so utterly unguarded; Sherlock felt doped and languid with power and he went on whispering, steering John’s responses as much with his words and tone of voice as with the smoothing push-pull of his hand. His confessions settled into the crowded humidity of the space between their chests; he could not—would not, did not even wish to—blow them away. He wanted. . .

“Oh, John. . .”

He wanted. . .wanted, oh but he wanted. . .

“I want to make you come.”

He wanted John to crack apart so he could force himself into the newly-created crevasses.

John’s hand was up under his shirt, scrabbling and pinching. John muttered, “Yeah,” groaned a plea, and grabbed him by the hip, pulled him by the back of his head, inhaled against his neck. Sherlock set the pace, felt himself again rising up and away, couldn’t settle himself back down inside. He barely felt John’s lips or breath against his numb-tingling face (cruel, betraying body, damn it forever) as John gusted out that same gritty, “Yeah.” Sherlock settled in behind John’s jaw, tongue-tip flicking in steady rhythm against that salty soft place John surrendered without so much as a breath in his own defense. John only muttered and moaned a steady stream of encouragement, curses, instruction.

“Sherlock. . .”
Amazed and furious, Sherlock shifted his gaze down to his hand around John’s prick as John came in stringing spurts over the edges of Sherlock’s fingers. What he saw before his own eyes seemed miles distant and there was a ringing rush in his ears as if his own pulse were an open tap rather than an intermittent throb. He forced his lips to shape whispers against the edge of John’s ear, “yes, yes, that’s it, yes,” though he could barely hear himself. John was warm and docile beneath him and Sherlock let his body sink and wallow, inhaled the low scent of John in that state of melting bliss wherever he could find it: there in the hair at his temple, the curve of his jaw, that tender valley down the side of his neck. Sherlock settled his forehead in the curve where neck became shoulder, listened as John’s breathing settled, willed his own breath to thicken and slow. One of John’s hands was on his thigh, and Sherlock focused himself beneath it. John stroked a kind hand down the rounded length of Sherlock’s spine, and he focused himself to flow along with the motion. John kissed his head there, and there, and then there. Sherlock’s face stopped tingling.

“Here. C’mere,” John whispered, and tipped Sherlock’s face up toward his own with a curled finger beneath Sherlock’s chin. “One more.”

Sherlock’s head began to ache with the concentration of reassembling himself into something fixed, tightly bundled, no more than a handful. Pressing forward hard, he had to imagine it was possible to hand over his condensed self to John in the kiss he’d asked for, even demanded. If John wanted him —him—here he was, though he was anything but pretty.

Once they broke apart, Sherlock sorted himself, cleaned up John’s mess, then sat back, feeling drugged and queasy. Itchy. Trapped.

“Brilliant.” John’s voice, soft with satisfaction. Sherlock’s scalp tingled for a moment, because it was he who had done that—filled up John Watson, quieted him, fixed him in place. Awed him? But soon enough—too soon—he’d certainly be back to his senses.

What a mess you’ve made, Sherlock. It’s a bit disgusting.

Sherlock was already half-away as John led them through an exchange of sexual CVs. Of course a doctor of a certain age was careful; Sherlock wouldn’t have worried even if he’d remembered he was meant to. Somehow Sherlock heard himself too-casually admitting to the very worst of his history—long in the past, not at all relevant—and yet there went the words, changing the shape of the air between them as John was reminded of the drunken blunder he seemed to want to wear like a scarlet letter, though Sherlock (nor Xie) neither required nor expected it of him. And despite their best efforts to imagine they were alone in the world—preserved in amber, or at least trapped in the detritus of this flat with its smell of burnt dust—there came a sideways acknowledgement that Sherlock belonged elsewhere at half-eleven in the morning.

“I imagine you have things to do. . .appointments, or preparing for the salon tonight.”

John may as well have pointed at the door. Sherlock took the cue, straightening his back and his shirt cuffs simultaneously. Words failed him and so he hummed, the least argumentative sound he could think to make. John directed him to clean himself up—erase the evidence, eliminate any residual trace of John that might be left on him—and Sherlock bared his teeth, nodded, but felt leaden and couldn’t find his feet. John hid his naked torso, tugging his shirt decisively into place, and stared hard in a way that made Sherlock turn his gaze toward the cold fire beneath the cluttered mantel, then through the window at bricks, grey sky, white smoke billowing from a chimney.

Sherlock’s gut lurched toward the locked door. His breathing had become strange. John’s perfunctory plea for Sherlock to linger came out of his mouth sounding almost wholly sincere; John was a liar, after all, and a dangerous man, and Sherlock had lost any sense of why he was still there
on the sticky, fake-leather sofa when he should be at the tailor, or the barber, or tucked away safe in the
dressing room with his fingers deep between the supple waves of a heavily-embellished wig.

“There’s . . .” John cursed. “So much more I want to do to you.”

And there it was. A reminder of Sherlock’s function in the world as a thing to be done unto.
Sherlock clutched his hands together, scrubbed his palms hard to remind himself where and who he
was.

John dismissed his own suggestion that Sherlock stay though he made no apology for reminding
Sherlock of his place, and Sherlock replied with words meant to comfort John and keep him tame. At
last their gazes broke, loosening the air between them, freeing Sherlock. He rose to his feet so fast he
worried his head would hit the ceiling, or go through it. He spotted his jacket on the floor, wondered
what the hell had possessed him.

John was having second thoughts. “I only . . . I don’t know what to do here, Sherlock, honestly. I’ve
never been in this situation before.”

“Nor me,” Sherlock defended, and even to his own ears he sounded indignant, which was not what
he wanted at all. John Watson was something to draw close, not to push away, and though Sherlock
knew this in a deep, lizardy bit of his brain, not one cell elsewhere in him seemed able to grasp it or
react to it properly.

John made noises of apology and Sherlock snapped his jacket in the air, shaking off the smell of
dust, the possibility of vermin. Arms in, button done, and flat palms smoothed him into place. He
reached for the door knob.

“Sherlock.”

He had to get out.

“I’ll be in touch when I can.”

How had he got it so wrong? Despite all the lies John Watson had told him—or tried to—Sherlock
had taken all of this for evidence of some deeper truth. But now they’d both got off, so what else was
there?, and Sherlock’s hand was on the door. He had to. . .

Three quick strides, and Sherlock lifted John’s chin, kissed him.

John’s dark blue eyes. The creases in his forehead.

“You still haven’t said stop,” John reminded him.

“No I haven’t,” Sherlock replied, quick and plain. He hadn’t had the luxury of refusing an advance
in fifteen years or more, and found it a difficult habit to break.

John hesitated even as he started to ask, “So when—“

“Call Molly,” Sherlock told him. There was an ache in Sherlock’s left eye. He needed a shower. He
needed time and space and quiet.

“Yeah.” John was defeated, finished, not bothering to articulate the obvious. “OK. Yeah,” he
shrugged. His smile was small, tight, and forced.

Sherlock touched the back of John’s hand, Nevermind it; it’s all fine, and threw himself out the door
before either of them could say another word.

*

*Just making sure you're up; senior staff meeting today, I know.* –SH

*TEXT from IcehouseAdmin: Already at my desk. Where are you?*

Sherlock dialed, tried to hail a rickshaw but was ignored and passed by several, and so went on walking.

“Just came from my tailor.” He’d postponed the tailor a fortnight. “Next: organizing the Dreaded Shoe Cupboard,” he said this in a stagily ominous tone. “If you don’t hear from me by half-three, send a search party.”

“I’ll put it in my schedule to follow up,” Jim told him. “Let’s have breakfast tomorrow.”

Sherlock’s shoulders tightened. He turned and waved and at last a bicycle-rickshaw stopped alongside him.

“Sounds nice,” Sherlock allowed, though he wouldn’t know whether it would really be nice until he saw Jim’s face sitting across from him, next morning. To the rickshaw puller he said, “The Icehouse; you know it?” He got a firm nod and a quick, careful sizing-up in return.

“All right, sweetheart,” Jim said, in his dismissive, *I’ve got work to do* voice. “My assistant will impale me if I don’t get to this meeting—as if they could start without me—so I’m off.”

Sherlock bit his lips.

“Best of luck in the cupboard.”

A quick exhale, and Sherlock might even have smiled. “I’ll need it.” A beat of silence. “I love you.”

Jim had already rung off.

*Put the three-button dove grey suit, a lilac shirt, socks, and the beige-gold Chopard wristwatch in the dressing room within 45 minutes.* –SH

*Please. –SH*

*TEXT from Molly: No trouble. Party of 16 tonite. 5 other drashas scheduled. Let me know if I should get more in.*

*Five should be sufficient. –SH
Thank you, Molly. –SH*

Because Greg was in the senior staff meeting, Molly knew that Jim would be tied up for at least another hour. She let herself into the flat with the key she’d had since the day Xie had sat her down for a chat about how she was perhaps not ideally suited to continue on as an apprentice drasha. She
closed the door quietly, not sure why—there was no one at home to hear her, and it wasn’t unusual
for her to be in and out of the flat. Instead of turning down the hallway toward the bedrooms, though,
she headed straight through to the twin offices with doors facing each other across the corridor. Both
were open, and she stepped quick and light into Jim’s, knew exactly what she was looking for and
going straight for it. She knelt, pulled open the lowest of the three desk drawers, and ducked her head
to find the narrow, hidden shelf suspended from the bottom of the second drawer. The slim
accounting ledger she’d found there before was still in its place, and she nudged it forward with the
tip of one finger until she could catch it in her opposite hand and slide it out.

Her long cardigan had deep, square pockets on the front, and from one of them she drew out a small
notepad and a pencil. Opening Jim’s ledger at random, Molly flipped forward three pages, scanning
for anything to jump out at her indicating what the nonsensical entries—Willow, Center, Tandem—
might stand for. She could not quickly identify any pattern, and so set to work noting in her own
book as many entries as she dared: dates, those inscrutable placeholder words, four and five digit
numbers in columns that were almost certainly currency: income and expenses. The little bit she’d
been able to memorize last time had not been enough for the cryptographer who’d eventually
received it, passed from Greg, to another contact, and onward, a tightly folded scrap of paper torn
from the back of the book where she kept meticulous notes about Xie’s ensembles.

Her pencil point hovered above the page for three or four seconds, and she listened. The flat was still
and silent, only a soft hum from the heat vent beneath the bookshelves. She went back to work,
decided to copy just three more entries, then put the ledger back and go fetch the clothing Sherlock
had texted her about.

Molly had volunteered as soon as word had come back that the code-breaker couldn’t decipher the
meagre information she’d committed to memory; she may have made a mistake, though she’d been
careful and focused, despite a slight flustered panic when Jim came in unexpectedly, with her on her
knees in front of his desk and surely no good reason to be there. Greg had tried to dissuade her and
ultimately she may have left him thinking she was not going to follow through. This was as low as
he risk would ever get—neither Sherlock nor Jim at home, nor expected—and she was prepared.
Another perked-up listen, then she copied out the final entry on the page to which she’d randomly
opened, and tucked her pencil and pad back into her pocket.

She slid the ledger back into its hiding spot, checked the decidedly un-sturdy lock on the metal
strongbox which was the only object in the bottom drawer. It was shut tight. She picked up the box a
few inches between flat hands, shook it forward and back a few times, heard a heavy, dull thud of
something moving only very slightly within. She set it back down, scrubbed the sides she’d touched
with the folded-over sleeve of her cardigan. On her way out of Jim’s office, she nudged the drawer
shut with her foot.

It still wasn’t much, Molly knew, but perhaps this time it would be enough.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

In chapter 18, we saw John and Sherlock’s first sexual encounter from Sherlock’s perspective, and found him reaching out to reconnect with Jim.

* 

A lovely long chapter this Floating World Friday the 13th. Enjoy!

“Think, if you will, about your childhood. Maybe you were a child Before, but even if not, certainly there was that magic time in your young life when nothing troubled you. You had none of the worries of adulthood. Think of the first time you climbed a tree, or rode a bicycle, the chums you had at school. Think of the wonder of learning new things—do you remember when you realised you could pick up a picture book and read the words all on your own? Remember those times when you felt loved and safe. Life was sweet.

“Now think of how Unity has robbed you of the choice—even the chance—to create those safe and loving moments for your own children. Unity stole your choice, poured poison in the water that assures you will never teach your child to read that picture book you once loved. When is the last time you heard a child’s joyful shout outside your window? When is the last time you saw a child? Can you even recall?

“Here’s where I let my personal feelings come out; you know I try to talk in these broadcasts about the issues we face, about the things we all think, so that we can—I hope—gain better understanding of ourselves and the world, and of what we must do. But now and then—and I know from some messages I’ve received that it’s not entirely unwelcome—I really have to speak straight from my heart. Because this is no small thing we’re discussing. You know that. I know—believe me, I know—that you understand. Unity is not peace. We say that a lot—I saw it painted on a wall the other day though it was washed away by the time I passed the same wall a few hours later. Unity is not peace, has not brought us peace. And I’ll tell you, of all the ways Unity has failed us...population suppression is the one that breaks my heart most.

“I never thought about whether I wanted children, when I was young. Never really crossed my mind to ponder it. You don’t think about those things when you’re a kid. But then I got into my twenties, and I found the love of my life, and I can’t tell you the nights I held her while she cried her heart out—cried her heart out—with longing to be a mother. And not only did her heartbreak cause me a kind of pain I’ve never known before—but it made me think about what the world looks like now, with no children. The vlast folk have them—as many as they want. Many as they can afford, which is just as many as they want. Keep them behind the walls of their suburbs. Surround the schools with armed guards. Drag them around to pleasure districts designed so no one without a ticket can even hear the carousel music. But when I walk down the streets in my residential district, all I see are working people, and of course that’s fine. It’s fine. I’m one of them. My friends, my siblings... 

“Think about how long it’s been, though, since you saw a face that wasn’t already marked by the worries of the world. Think about the last time you were asked a delightful, silly question, like does my schoolteacher live at school?—I asked my mother that one, I remember. And here’s what I think, friends...it’s taken away my hope for the future. Does that sound dramatic? Is it a cliché? I don’t care. Honestly, I don’t even care if it sounds like sentimental nonsense. It’s how I feel. What future is
there, with no children to grow up and become something. Discover something. Change something. For us ‘shlost folk, is there a future?

“And who took it from us?

“And who did they give it to?

“I have a harder and harder time these days thinking that the vlast rats deserve what they’ve got. Did they earn those privileges? Or did Unity favour those who were already wielding more than their fair share of power because of wealth, social status, or bargains struck in alleys under cover of darkness? That’s where rats live. In the dark. In the garbage. How is a rat more valuable than all those lives—all those precious children, the children you’ll never have, I’ll never have? Tell me how. Make me understand that a rat is more important than the children Unity robbed us of before we even dreamed them?

“I’m going to take a break and think about the sorts of poisons that bait rat traps.”

John switched off the CD player and blew out a fierce sigh. Of course these recordings were evidence. Clues. Background information. He was meant to listen to them for things he could use in conversation that might get him in with whatever Deep Sea operatives there were at the Icehouse. And he would. That was the job. But damned if he wasn’t just a bit rattled by it. This man on the pirate radio, this chat show host with his smooth, bloke-beside-you-at-the-bar tone, sounded so reasonable. His emotion sounded—perhaps even was—so genuine that John was caught up, carried right along. It was very seductive, this incitement to murder. To—what?

Of course, he had precious few happy memories of his own childhood, though he had been reminded of a book he remembered reading to himself, when he was very young and had probably only recently learned to read silently in his head, a skill which had seemed almost magical to him at the time. Hearing the sound of the words inside his head with no one saying them aloud: not him, nor his sister, nor his teacher. The story was about a dog who went to sea, and below decks he had a hook for his coat and a hook for his hat, and put his boots under his bunk while he slept. John remembered the pictures—the dog on two legs, yellow slicker and rain hat, red boots, his red tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth.

John did try to remember the last time he’d seen a child. Of course, it was the time he’d shot a suckling infant’s mother in the back. Years before. And though it had never occurred to John to parse it his way, the radio-host had a point: the absence of children in day-to-day life did sort of drain hope away. John got up from the threadbare armchair and stretched himself a bit on his way to the kitchen, ran the tap until the water was cold as it got, filled an empty jam jar, and gulped the cool water down fast. He wondered a moment if that was part of why he was so willing to be who he’d become. No hope for the future.

On his return trip to the chair, the headphones, and the unmarked CD in its battered portable player, John glanced across the room toward the sofa, imagined he could see the seat cushions still slightly deformed from the weight of two bodies recently, variously arranged upon them. He licked his lips, remembering Sherlock’s low moans and long fingers and voracious kisses. So. Perhaps not no hope for the future.

John had the stack of files beside him on the tea table, and once he’d got the headphones back over his ears, he drew the files down into his lap and began to shuffle through them. There was a silent pause between the recorded tracks; the second one, when it began, was much less clear and professional sounding, with static and some high-pitched electronic squealing now and then nearly drowning out the voice of a woman with an accent he couldn’t quite place.
“There’s many roads to the sea. Every road leads to the sea, sooner or later. You can’t walk forever before the sea takes you [a shrieking blast of interference] –faster than others! The low road is the way to preserve your safety. Peace of mind walks the low road. If you have a heart [several seconds of static] who would clamp a machete between her teeth as she swam out to sea. Every rat in the ship [an ear-splitting, electronic whine] You know what is right. Walk the low road. Walk the low road.”

There was silence again, and John paused the player, drew his phone from his pocket and dialed. The file on Greg Lestrade was open across his lap, and John was three pages deep in his military personnel record.

“How do I owe the pleasure of an unscheduled phone call? Or did you misdial the curry shop for your takeaway order?”

John really was half-convinced the Mentor was in love with him—all his flirting, and the eyebrow always going up.

“Is the recordings you sent—is that you, all the static? Trying to disrupt the broadcasts?”

“I haven’t the technical expertise.”

“Not you personally,” John clarified, mentally adding, you ninny, which he was sure came through in his tone even though he didn’t articulate it. “Your colleagues. The other girls in the typing pool.”

“I’m sure I don’t know.”

“Can you find out what happened to Lestrade’s son? The one that he had to sign away his rights to? It would have been twenty-some years ago.”

“What benefit could it possibly—“

“Can you?” John pressed.

There was a pause, and John could just see the Mentor’s pursed lips, disapproving of him.

“It could help me get in with him. That’s all.”

The Mentor inhaled audibly, and was silent another half-moment before he said. “I will find out what I can. In the meantime, I have to momentarily distract you long enough for a minibreak to Manchester.”

“Jesus, no.”

“A courier will arrive within the hour. I will expect a report—“

“Is there—“ John started, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and two fingers. “There’s no one else? Isn’t the Geek up that way? Or, whatsis—that poisoner, with all the earrings up her ear.”

“Have you forgotten you are on a telephone at the moment?”


“It’s half-again as much as your normal rate if you report within thirty-six hours.”

The Mentor knew that money talked. John’s shoulder was pinned so surely to the mat, he actually felt the weight pressing him down even as he sat there in the red armchair in the dingy flat.
“Yeah, fine,” John surrendered. Demanding, he quickly added, “I want a good bed. Poshest hotel they’ve got.”

“I understand.”

“Not one of these places that’s all nightclubs and casinos. Upper floor. I want quiet.”

The Mentor’s soothing tone was practically a croon, “I assure you, it will all be arranged.”

John shook his head, annoyed that even if he could say no to the Mentor without risk of termination, his own single-mindedness prevented him from ever saying no to the money. He didn’t want to go to fucking Manchester, no matter how good the bed was. Not today. Something occurred to him.

“I called you, just now.”

“Yes, I remember the way my heart leapt when I saw my phone light up with your name.”

“But you’d already scheduled a courier?”

“It’s my job to know who you are. And I most definitely do.”

John felt resentful; Unity knew everything, even in a flat with minimal security and no surveillance. And the Mentor could practically read John’s mind, always had done.

“What colour shoes am I wearing?” John challenged.

“You only own one pair of shoes. They’re medium brown brogues that have been re-soled twice; the left lace has broken but you simply re-threaded the broken lace through and now tie the shorter lengths, twisting the frayed bit between finger and thumb so it doesn’t look ragged. In the flat you prefer to wear only your socks, so this is likely a trick question, which I sincerely feel is beneath both of us. I’m vaguely disappointed in you, actually. Your socks are black, bought in bulk, all the same so that they’re easy to pair up. No matter, you just dump the lot in a drawer and fish out pairs as needed.”

It was a good thing they weren’t meeting in the extravagantly-furnished office; John wanted to shove his mobile down the Mentor’s throat.

“Report in 36 hours. No later.”

The Mentor rang off.

With the phone in his hand and the memory of Sherlock so recently sprawled atop him, kissing him with that roughsoft mouth and making his delicious sounds, John found himself scrolling to Sherlock’s number, wanting to send a text. But of course there was the husband to think of, and although they hadn’t discussed it aloud, a silent agreement existed between them that Sherlock should be the one to text first, to prevent sending an ill-timed message. He set the phone on the arm of his chair, replaced the CD player’s headphones and went back to the recordings.

After a pause long enough to make him wonder if he’d reached the end, yet noisy enough to make him think there must be more, at last he heard the same sort of fired-up, evangelical shouting he’d heard on the first batch of tapes—perhaps it was even the same person preaching; he couldn’t decide—and behind it, aggressive, heavy rock music. John felt the voice like a finger jabbing his chest, pressing him back and provoking him, at once.

“We are a hundred-foot wave, heavy as a truncheon upon the head of every vlast rat, crashing hard
to shake them loose and make them run! We are the sea, sharp as a knife-blade! We are the sea, loud as a gunshot, a grenade, a bomb! We are gathering, chopped-up and churning as a storm gathers, and the vlast rats must feel the hair rise on their backs in panic as they huddle in the hold of Unity’s sinking ship. Unity cannot stop a tidal wave. Unity cannot shift the wind, and we blow like a hurricane! The sea is deep and every rat will flee; every rat will drown. Not one will survive. Not one rat left to spread the disease. We are the sea, deep and dark as a nightmare! Not! One! Rat! Survives!"

It cut off. John still couldn’t quite get his head around the risk involved in broadcasting these incendiary, anti-Unity messages. And the tone of these recordings was more ominous than even the previous ones. Deep Sea—if that’s what it was, and it certainly seemed to be, if not the original group, at least one that aspired to imitate it—must feel confident that it had strength in numbers.

Leaving the headphones in place, he skim-read more of Lestrade’s military personnel record and found not much of interest for several pages. Lestrade had not earned himself many accolades, nothing outstanding, but he’d been well-reviewed and promoted at the expected pace. His squad did engineering—assigned to build bridges and dams, link remote places with cities by new roads that made almost every place look like spokes on a wheel, with a central major city surrounded by suburbs in concentric rings, and then dissolving into exurbs. Eventually, though, John got to a mini-sheaf of four pages clearly prepared by some entity other than the army, as the typeface—even the weight and colour of the paper—was different and instead of the tickboxes and rote signatures on standard forms, he was looking at tightly spaced blocks of text, a narrative that must have been redacted from the official file.

John scanned through it, then stood and walked the floor as he went back to the start and read through the whole thing again.

No wonder Lestrade didn’t like to talk about his time in America.

Sherlock stood facing the inner edge of the open door, hands at the inside and outside wrapped around each doorknob, steadying himself. Molly stood behind him, left leg stretched out ahead of her as she leaned away from him, digging in her right heel, pulling the loops of the long, sturdy strings.

“Are you sure you want it laced up so—“

“Yes.”

Sherlock’s reply came through gritted teeth. Molly drifted forward, worked her fingertips in behind the crisscrossed laces, tugging the center of each “X” toward her; none of them gave even the tiniest bit of slack. She gripped the looped tails in one hand, slid her other hand up along until her fist was against Sherlock’s back.

“How will you get out of it? You’ll have to call me back.”

Sherlock movements were harsh as he reached behind himself, swatting Molly’s little hands away and clutching the strings between his own long fingers. He yanked both tails hard, fixed the knot, which Molly pressed her fingertip against to hold tight to his back as he made the loops and tied the bow. She wriggled her finger to slide it free.
“I’ll be fine,” he said offhandedly, ready for her to be gone. Something about her presence was distracting him in a way it normally didn’t. On the make-up table his phone went, buzzing in a slow crawl toward the mirror, its little square display strobing sickly yellow-orange. Sherlock stared it down until Molly fetched it and handed it over. She went for her notebook and started scribbling, glancing up at him now and then to make her notes of the evening’s ensemble. Sherlock held the phone to his ear, turned his head but kept himself firmly planted where he stood. “Everything all right?” he asked.

“Fine, sweetheart. I’m checking to see you’re not buried under the shoe racks.”

Sherlock held the phone away and exhaled annoyance through is nostrils, then drew it back. “I was only joking,” he said gently—though he felt anything but gentle at the moment—“You didn’t really need to check up on me.” And certainly not four hours late, he thought but did not say. Molly’s glance lingered on his face, and when Sherlock caught the stare, she dropped her gaze to the book in her lap, drew a little “o” as if she’d only been taking note of the lip lacquer or the lashes, though it was clear she was not actually writing. Sherlock took a few steps away, made his voice melt even more, and quickly added, “But thank you. It’s very kind of you to remember.”

“Course it is,” Jim told him, and his mouth was full of something that rattled against his teeth and soaked his tongue with too much saliva. A mint, or one of those hard candies that tasted like gin and turned Sherlock’s stomach. Jim bit down with a loud crack. “You’ll be late? I came up to the flat to eat and now I don’t feel like going back down. Think I’m in for the night.”

Of course, Sherlock knew what was really being asked.

“Ah. . .” he kept his voice light. “Actually, quite a big ‘do this evening; party of sixteen. I imagine I could be fairly late, yes.”

Jim sounded annoyed, but only mildly. “Hrm. Yeah, all right. Nudge me when you come in, then.”

“I can’t bear to wake you up once you’re asleep,” Sherlock said, and was surprised by the tone of his own voice—a near-whisper—as if they were together in bed already, with the sheets tucked around them and the lights out.

The candy in Jim’s mouth shifted back and forth, clicking loudly against his teeth. Sherlock heard him sucking saliva off it. “You know I don’t mind.”

“Maybe I will, then.” Sherlock bit the corner of his lip, reminding himself not to let the smile get away from him. “But even if not, we’ve a date in the morning. For breakfast.”

Jim snarled, “I’ll have you for breakfast, I think.” then crunched hard, again and again, sublimating frustration. Sherlock imagined it was precisely how his own bones would sound, grinding between Jim’s teeth. “Make an early night of it if you can, will you,” Jim said, sounding bored, giving direction. “Sherlock?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He had to finish. The guests were shortly to arrive. Molly was hanging about. And now here was Sherlock, half-hard in Xie’s clothes when he should already have vanished.

“Be good,” Jim said, low and growling, more invitation than threat, and Sherlock would have collapsed was he not being held upright and then some by the corset and the tight grip of the rest of the clothes. “Be a good girl.”

He’d ruined it. Sherlock made the expected noise, a little mew of acquiescence, and rang off. He
turned to drop his mobile back on the countertop and caught sight of his wedding ring in its little
dish; he laid his hand on the back of his make-up chair to keep himself from tipping over as he closed
his eyes.

“If you need me to come back—” Molly offered.

“I’ll be fine.”

“All right then.”

Molly did something odd, then. She stepped forward and reached for Sherlock’s arm, patting him
three times with her little hand there above his elbow. “But do call if you . . .” She withdrew her hand
and smiled, back to her usual self. “Get stuck,” she finished, and she looked knowing and a little
amused.

Sherlock only shook his head, let his shoulders drop a bit.

“Good night.” She blew him a little kiss—his eyes stayed shut but he heard the tiny smack of her
lips.

“Good night, Molly. Thank you.”

Once she was gone, Sherlock thought to sit in the make-up chair to remind himself who he was
meant to be, but of course, sitting was out of the question. Instead he turned to face a full-length
mirror, braced himself with tented fingertips resting on the wall in case of vertigo, and shut his eyes
long enough to focus on three slow—but necessarily shallow—breaths.

Since the morning spent with John Watson—breathless, kissing his own lips raw against John’s
pliant, open mouth—which seemed now to be in the middle-distant past, Sherlock had a lingering
feeling of uncomfortable disconnection from himself. Perhaps someone more romantic would say he
was in the clouds, walking on air, but it had Sherlock disquieted. If he couldn’t embody himself, he
thought at least what was left of him could vanish into Xie, and perhaps when the evening ended
he’d be back to normal. This nervous detachment was distracting, sending him into too-frequent
episodes of low-grade panic that he might never feel right again—a feeling which persisted despite
scolding himself for being ridiculous. He could not go back to the flat still carrying this sense of
watching himself from a distance, face tingling, hands hollow, no footfall satisfying as it struck the
floor. Jim would know something was wrong with him, would become enraged when Sherlock
didn’t have a satisfactory explanation for it.

He opened his eyes and took a systematic inventory, beginning with his feet, which were already
aching in slim-heeled, platform boots laced up his shins. The pain was real enough, and would be a
good reminder of how it felt to be inside his skin. He’d had the boots built to suit, of impossibly
supple suede, its nap shifting from teal to royal blue when smoothed in one direction or the other.
The laces were silk ribbons dyed to match; the platforms three inches high, the heels eight. He raised
the toes of one foot an inch or so off the floor, felt the shank of the boot hug his tightened calf muscle
as he did so, then did the same with the other foot, noticing then how the boot snugged up along the
length of his shin. After so many years, it shouldn’t amuse him anymore, but nonetheless he grinned
to himself remembering one of the most crucial lessons he’d learned, becoming Xie: boots first, then
corset. He and Jim had laughed about it, so many years ago. Sherlock tight-laced into an off-the-rack
cincher one evening and then begging Jim to buckle faux-leather boots he could not bend over
enough to fasten. Once they’d gathered themselves from the giggling fit and the boots were snugly in
place, Jim had scrawled the motto on the wall beside Sherlock’s make-up mirror, and there it stayed
for the next two years or so, until—at last, at last—Unity offered to move the Icehouse into its
current, luxury high-rise.
The gown was shorter in front—just below the knee—than in back, where layer after fluffed-up layer descended into an extravagant, ruffled train, each panel of which was hand-painted (not by Sherlock; he’d hired an artist to execute his vision) in shades of emerald, gold, sapphire, aquamarine. He brushed one foot backward to nudge the train lined in burnished gold metallic silk, and it settled back into place with a soft shushing noise. Eyes travelling upward toward the corset, Sherlock felt something within him gaining substance, like a downward drift of feathers, but gathering and becoming dense. Beneath the full, extravagant skirt of the gown, he wore opaque tights in a shade of teal to match the boots, even though with care, the legs would never show themselves.

The corset was a thing of beauty, perfectly, meticulously-matched panels of rich, dark gold brocade embroidered with images of peacocks roosting, their extravagant tails curling below them in shades of blue and green. Its lower edge skimmed the hip bones; its upper edge was high, just below the level of his nipples. Tightly laced in back as it was, the torso was shaped into an enticing hourglass, the illusion of a silhouette the body would never naturally manage, all the internal organs crowding upward against the diaphragm. It was not comfortable by any means, but the way so much of the body was held tight from every direction was Sherlock’s shortcut to feeling grounded, contained and—quite literally—compressed. Uncomfortable, certainly, yet in its way, comforting.

Above the upper, ribbon-wrapped edge of the corset was the gown’s bodice, fitted close to the chest and back, with a high, tight neckline nearly to the chin; it, too, laced up the back, snug but not strangling, urging the long neck to stay long, the chin to stay proudly lifted. The sleeves were fitted, coloured in the bodice’s same shifting shades of peacock-breast jewel tones: night-blue, forest-green, iridescent gold, and the tight fit brought internal awareness of the shifting muscle of the moving arms, the skin and hair. The sleeves were overlong but gently pushed back up the wrists, affixed to the fingertips by rings of hidden elastic, fabric gathering slightly to disguise the true shape and width of the hands while leaving fingertips free to manipulate playing cards, or tea pots, or the violin bow.

Hair slicked back tight to the scalp, sprayed with glue and encrusted with glitter dust like shattered stained glass. Face only slightly lightened by cream and powder in a skin tone more porcelain than his naturally pink-toned shade of pale, but with a beauty make-up in dark jewel tones: wickedly arched, royal-blue eyebrows defined by glued-on jewels, shadow and liner and lashes all swept upward and outward in hugely exaggerated shape, the tip of each long, curled eyelash adorned with a tiny bead like a black dewdrop. Cheekbones carved with a dark sweep of purple-blue, lips darkly painted and then pressed into a plate of roughed-up glitter so they looked sugar-frosted, catching the light, texture both off-putting and inviting. Affixed into the hair with hidden pins, elaborately draped strings of gold chain, dotted with sapphires, emeralds, blue diamonds, with a peacock-tailfeather’s eye made of gems, draped to rest in the center of the forehead. A third eye, a reminder to look inside.

A reedy exhale that would have been a sigh if the inhalation had not been so unnaturally truncated by the presence of the corset—squeezing, squeezing, holding tight—and the blue-green eyes scanned the reflection one last time, generally satisfied with the presentation. A gentle curl of a smile, Welcome friends, I’m so glad you’ve come!, and Xie was ready to make an entrance, appreciate the guests, and make them feel at home. One hidden hand swept the train back and away, just to be sure, and Xie crossed the dressing room, slid aside the inner door, and stepped through it.

Dear Sherlock,

I wanted to be in touch sooner but I don’t want to text you first in case it turns out to be a bad time for you. Just know that I have wanted nothing but to talk to you since the minute you left. I don’t
want you to think all I want is to get a leg over. This morning was fantastic but there’s more to it. So much more. I want to know you. I want to hear all your stories—every last one—from the earliest thing you can remember until all that’s left to tell is what’s happened in the few hours since I’ve last seen you.

By the time you read this I’ll be on a train to Manchester. Not my choice to go, but duty calls. I won’t be gone long, just a couple of days, three at the most. I’ll put a call in to Molly about when you might have room for me at the salon. I had to leave my mobile, so I won’t be able to answer if you call, but a message from you would be appreciated. In every manner you can imagine. (I promise I did not wink there, but my eyebrows may have risen a bit before I could stop them.)

Speaking of stories, shall I tell you the story of my longest long-term one? Nothing torrid, no intimate details, I promise.

His name was Will; I met him in the army. He was a field nurse, hilarious and always looking for a reason to smile even when there seemed to be none. He made a friend of everyone he ever met. He joked a lot, gave everyone nicknames (I learned later it was because he was terrible at remembering names so he quickly assigned his own; he called me Doc, easy enough, and later admitted that although he’d caught on to Watson after a few days, from reading it off the patch on my jacket, he’d spent a month or more thinking my first name was Gerard). He could make a joke at your expense and be so charming about it you’d only laugh, and possibly even thank him. Handsome, too—wavy blonde hair and dimples in his cheeks when he smiled that were more than dimples; they put his smile in parentheses.

His tour was up three months before I got wounded, and after I was finished convalescing and was discharged back to England I moved in with him. We said it was only temporary, until somewhere along the way we stopped saying that. He had a rough time with his civilian job assignment; Unity put him in as the medic at one of those spa-and-exercise retreat places. They barely had a use for him except to put plasters on blisters and dispense icepacks to vlast housewives who overdid their knees on the exercise bikes. He wanted to work with kids, even asked to be put in as a school nurse, so at least the plasters and ice would go to children. But it turns out They only let vlast folk work in vlast hospitals and pediatric medicine centers, for fear of ‘shlost people harming the vlast kids out of spite. When he’d been turned down for four pediatric nursing assignments, he thought he might go into hospice nursing, and started making applications for jobs in that vein.

Meantime I was being recruited into my present line of work, which I was not allowed to talk to him about, which led him to believe I was having affairs (I was not; once I make a promise, I keep it, which is why I don’t make them lightly). The stress of the arguments and keeping secrets from him gave me most of the grey hair I have today, and wrecked my already poor sleep, once and for all. I don’t mind telling you, I was more in love with him than I had ever been with anyone, and it killed me to watch us falling apart. And it really did feel like watching, for all I could do to make things right—which given the secrecy I was sworn to and the danger the truth would have put him in, was absolutely nothing. Will started looking farther and farther from home to find a job assignment he could tolerate; first on the continent, then eventually in Russia, and as far away as Japan. He talked about re-joining the army and asking to be shipped back to America, which gave us a whole new thing to argue about.

We were together for two good years, plus slightly less than one awful year.

One day when I got home from a job after having been away from home about four days, Will was gone. I have never been able to entirely convince myself that he left me, though I’m sure I was meant to think that, and it is certainly possible. Ask me to tell you the rest sometime when we are together alone—you understand.
So why do I tell you this story? Partly to prove that even though I am far from an ideal choice of partner, I am capable of loving someone and being with him alone—entirely—contentedly. Partly to admit that it’s hard for me to balance my life with my work. (I won’t be working much longer, but I can’t quit tomorrow, either.) Partly because I like remembering Will, because when it was good between it us, it really was lovely, and because he was a good man—a much better man than me—and should be memorialized whenever the opportunity presents itself. And, finally, because I think you will appreciate a love story, even an imperfect one, even mine.

In future days that find me falling in love with someone—if I do—when I do—one thing I’m sure of is that I will never again stand by and watch things fall apart because of someone else’s secrets, money I will never spend, and whatever black madness it is in me that lets me (makes me?) do what I do. About that, I am resolute. Just so you know.

I will be thinking of you while I’m away; please, if you can, send me a note or leave a message in your gorgeous voice for me to find when I return.

your,
John.

The target was hard to pin down: kept odd, unpredictable hours; lived with a partner; and worked in a small but fairly bustling house of repose, in one of the drasha salons.

John didn’t like the job. After he’d spoken to the Mentor, complaining about the travel but unable in the end to turn down the promise of extra curr that came along with it, a courier had arrived within the hour bearing a package containing an entirely clean mobile phone the Face was meant to bin on his way out of town; an identity card bearing his own photo but a false name, loaded with enough currency to cover expenses; and a single-page dossier on the target, who had the bad judgment to be blackmailing one too many low-level politicos with illicit photographs of compromising situations. It seemed less urgent on its surface than the Mentor had made it sound, and John wondered if he wasn’t being shuffled around for some other reason—to get him out of London for a bit, though he couldn’t imagine why. He made a mental note to check the flat for newly-installed cameras and listening devices when he returned.

He arrived late afternoon, found a pub for a pint of dark and a plate of lamb vindaloo so hot it made his eyebrows sweat. He checked into the uptown hotel that had been arranged: quiet neighborhood, upper floor, bed huge and pleasant-smelling and acceptably firm. He kept his overnight bag on the countertop in the bathroom, seeing no need to spread out, and took a long, hot shower. He shaved, splashed on some after shave, combed his hair into place, and dressed himself well—but-not-too-well. He was booked in for a private party in the only salon at the house of repose, which was called the North Star. The target was a drasha, and that was primarily what John didn’t like about the job.

Taller than John even in flat slippers that had seen better days (John was distracted by a momentary thought for his own too-worn shoes), the target was not delicately built, and the make-up was applied with a heavy hand. Thick pancake cream on the face that didn’t match the skin of the neck; ashy patches of maroon-pink powder in nearly clown-like circles on the cheeks; and eyelashes mascara’d into thick, painful-looking spikes all added up to a look that was less an illusion of beauty or a work of art, and more a slapdash attempt at disguise. The kimono, cut in the traditional shape—long and straight—was of inexpensive, slippery fabric that John swore gave off a faint smell of petroleum. The wide-open, deep V of the neckline bared skin enough to cross beyond “enticing” well into the realm of vulgarity.
As John settled himself on a lumpy, threadbare sofa and sipped reluctantly at watered-down, cheap whisky barely worthy of the title, it occurred to him that Xie would be positively horrified to see this slovenly creature calling itself a drasha, this sleazy little room being called a drasha salon. It was not just a mistaken impression of what drasha should be, or a downmarket imitation of a higher-quality salon in an upscale house of repose like the Icehouse. It was so poor as to border on parody. John felt insulted on Xie’s behalf.

Within ten minutes of his arrival, the reason for the haphazard way the salon and its drasha—the target—were put together became imminently clear.

“So whatcha like, luvvie?” The target had a hard-to-place accent—some mishmash of dialects and cultures that John couldn't add up—and as the question was asked, the kimono’s neckline was pulled aside to expose a nipple, ridiculously hot pink with rouge. “You look clean, luv. So. Half-and-half, you can go bareback? OK with me, if you want.”

John bore no grudge against sex workers—made no moral judgments (society hadn’t judged it since Unity took power, even if he’d been personally inclined to), had hired them now and then in times of need when he couldn’t muster the energy for the preliminary chat-up—but now that he had gained a better understanding through his acquaintance with Xie, this flagrant corruption of the elegant, thoughtfully-created floating world of drasha offended him on Xie’s—Sherlock’s—behalf. He came to a boil as the target reached to push raggedly-manicured fingers through his hair, and John dodged away from the unwelcome touch, sitting forward to set down the glass of cheap whisky.

“How much to choke you?” the Face asked, his voice a dark growl.

“No way, luvvie. But how ’bout you can tie me up? I’ll call up a guard to stand by the door. Just in case. Nothing personal, luvvie, don’t be sad. You tie me up, smack my bottom, huh?” The target kept trying to touch him—reaching for his shoulder, leaning close enough to almost-kiss his neck, sliding one thick ankle along the side of John’s calf. “You got a big cock? Let me see it. Let me lick you—then you pay me and fuck my boy-pussy.”

The Face stood, shaking off the target’s gripping hands and stale smell of stage make-up and unwashed clothes. In one smooth movement, the Face liberated the pistol from its holster there beside his ribcage, turned back toward the sofa, and aimed squarely at the target’s left eye.

“You’re a disgrace.”

A quick inhalation as if to scream, the squeeze of the finger, and the job was done.
In chapter 19, John listened to more recordings of Deep Sea's pirate radio broadcasts and found something in the file on Lestrade that caught his interest; Sherlock laced up tight in an effort to reassemble himself; a letter from John detailed a past love affair and its protracted ending; and John didn't like the job in Manchester.

Jim was being nice.

After Sherlock’s party of sixteen had listened to Xie’s violin, drunk gallons of good Italian wine, and broken into small groups for lively games of cards and little sing-songs, Xie had bid them goodnight and spent what felt like fingertip-numbing hours unraveling all the tight laces, peeling away the clinging fabric. Somehow, in the end, Sherlock had emerged in one piece, safely sunk into his skin. He’d dressed in his own clothes, his softest shoes (his feet were creased from the inner seams of the boots, his toes red, his ankles swollen and stiff), and persuaded Jim to leave their flat long enough to come down and sit with him in a quiet corner of the quietest of the Icehouse’s bars, all mahogany and blue velvet. They picked at a shared plate of sashimi and exchanged barely-veiled innuendos as they drank warm sake that seeped into Sherlock’s bones and loosened the over-tightened connections between them. After, they stumbled back to their flat, snogging in the elevator with hands brazenly groping at each others’ bodies in places they really oughtn’t to in public, and at last had a giggly, good-time fuck, never even bothering to turn down the bed. Jim held Sherlock’s head on his chest afterward, and toyed with the waves of his hair, and the whole evening felt just like it always used to—back when they laughed together every day; had one long conversation that lasted months and was only interrupted for a little food, a little sleep, and a lot of sex; and imagined themselves the very center of the universe.

They’d kept their breakfast date the next morning by ordering something from one of the restaurants downstairs (Sherlock only just barely persuaded Jim to wrap himself in a towel before opening the door). They brought breakfast back to bed with them, sipping their tea and knocking their knuckles together when they both reached for the same raspberry from the fruit plate. Once the teapot was empty, Jim set the tray on the floor and kneeled naked at the foot of the bed, face full of mischief as he went at Sherlock’s bare toes with damp lips and warm tongue, took his time on the way up the entire length of him—legs, hips, belly and chest, then up his throat—until inside every tingling inch of his skin, Sherlock felt as if he were made entirely of warm caramel, boneless, breathless, and begging as Jim kissed him and murmured over and over, *yes. . .yes. . .yes*, and more than acquiescence or agreement, each *yes* sounded like a promise.

When everything was sweet, Sherlock let himself imagine it had always been that way, could always be that way. He ran calculations in his mind hoping to weigh their time together in favour of times like these, when Jim told him he was beautiful and kissed him reverently everywhere. Sherlock talked as little as possible, read Jim’s cues, lay passively cradled in the erotic haze that had always felt like Jim loving him. No matter how angry Jim got, no matter how thoughtless, no matter the quantity of hurtful words he spat at Sherlock, Jim Moriarty was still the man who’d more than got down on his knee—he’d crawled across the floor and hugged Sherlock’s ankles, kissed his insteps, looked up with tearful brown eyes—as he begged Sherlock to be his for the rest of their lives. He was still the man who used to stand on a folding chair wearing Xie’s gowns while Sherlock knelt
pinning the hems. He was still the man who’d rubbed Sherlock’s leg cramps away, lay cool flannels across the back of his neck as he vomited, and held him through his shakes, all those years ago—the only person on earth who’d seen that Sherlock was worth something, and helped him instead of throwing him away.

“I love you... I love you...” Sherlock chanted, lifting his face from his folded forearms, his entire body pendulum-swaying in lazy counterpoint to the tempo of Jim’s rolling hips. “I love you... I love you...”

And Jim stroked one hand soothingly across Sherlock’s low back, until it came to rest on the opposite hip, and Jim sighed, and hummed, and it was all just perfect. Perfect.

Molly had left the afternoon’s mail for him in the dressing room—half a dozen glossy magazines, a packet of fabric samples from one of the designers with whom he was creating a new gown, a few notes of thanks from recent partygoers. And a note on plain paper, a bit torn at one corner.

Dear Sherlock,

I hope to see you soon; I’ve left Molly a message and I’m waiting to hear when a good time might be for me to come to the salon. In the meantime, please—if you want to (please want to, Sherlock) you can text or phone me anytime. I don’t sleep, so don’t worry about disturbing me if it’s late—I keep my mobile right there by the bed. Even if it’s only for a few minutes, I’d love to hear your voice. Or—honestly—just to hear you breathe.

I wish our time together here had been longer, and that you hadn’t had other places to be. If you have even a little time to meet me, I’ll go anywhere, anytime. Do I sound as if I’m a bit taken with you, Sherlock Holmes?

I am. Oh, I am.

your,
John

Sherlock folded the letter into a tiny rectangle and set the final crease by pressing it between lips curled around his teeth. He rose from his red armchair and crossed to the make-up table, tucked the letter under the dish where he kept his wedding ring.

He held his mobile in one hand and found he couldn’t settle on the right words to send, or who he should even be sending them to. His thumb pressed in steady rhythm, over and over, on the down-arrow, and each name in his contacts list was highlighted in its turn. On the third pass, he finally tapped “go” and started to type.

I wish I could have stayed longer. Maybe we can meet at my barber tomorrow?—SH
I’ll have them save the chair beside me, you can get a decent shave.—SH

He set his phone on the table facedown, unwilling to let himself stare at the screen waiting for a response. He forced himself to his feet and through the two sliding doors (and the empty little corridor between them he called the airlock) to the salon. It was empty and quiet, bright-lit by the last of the afternoon’s daylight flooding through the west-facing windows. The cleaners had been in that morning as usual, and so the soft Persian rugs were all combed in the same direction; he left prints in the shape of his Italian leather soles as he walked. All the little scatter pillows had been arranged
prettily on the sofas and chairs and banquettes, karate-chopped in the center of their top edges to plump them. The books in the cases had been dusted and their spines aligned to form little walls of leather and silk. Cut-glass decanters lined up like diamond-draped showgirls in a chorus line behind the bars had all been filled to precisely the same level. The mirrors and the glass in the picture frames and every droplet of crystal suspended from a lampshade or chandelier sparkled and flashed. Sherlock wondered if it might be soon time for some redecoration—nothing extreme, it may suffice to rearrange the existing furniture.

Through to the dining room, and he dragged two fingertips along the edge of the table as he strode the length of it, checked for dust and found none. He pinched the thick velvet fold of a heavy window curtain and smoothed down toward the floor, straightening what didn’t need to be straightened. Beyond the windows, the city was beginning to light up as afternoon faded into evening. Soon enough the sky would be dark orange-blue and utterly without stars, and Sherlock would vanish into the ether while Xie entertained the guests.

Satisfied that all was as it should be, comforted by every familiar inch of the place arranged to exacting specifications, he made his way back to the dressing room, sliding the doors shut behind him. He checked his mobile for a reply to his texts and found a message that he’d do whatever he can to be there—not wholly satisfying, but something to look forward to. Molly had already brought up the lavender-grey gown and hung it on the rack; the box with yet another pair of torturous, beautiful shoes was set on the floor beneath. The wig was also a silvery shade of palest violet, long and gently waving, and was already pinned to its stand on a shelf beside the bathroom door. Sherlock went into a drawer, seeking a few baubles he might pin into the wig, and began a slow-motion stirring of the contents: silk ribbons, dull-tipped hairpins (some antique), artificial flowers, brooches made of coloured glass, all manner of clips and beads and feathers and little nonsense things specifically acquired to match a particular look: dice, plastic and metal springs and gears, faceted spheres covered in mirrors. The sounds that emerged from the drawer as he rummaged sent a pleasant tingle over his scalp and across his shoulders.

A soft knock at the door. Sherlock said, “Come,” but didn’t turn around. He cut a glance at the make-up mirror to see over his own shoulder.

“How are you today?” Molly asked, and sat down on the edge of the red armchair.

“Very well,” Sherlock replied.

“Look at your face,” she said merrily. “I’ll say you’re very well.”

Sherlock schooled his expression. “I’ve no idea what you mean.”

“You’re grinning like a schoolboy.” She tilted her head, still meeting Sherlock’s gaze in the mirror as he hadn’t turned around. He affixed silk-winged butterflies to one side of the wig with hair pins. “Might have something to do with a fella, I reckon,” Molly teased.

Sherlock hummed, but even with his lips pursed he still smiled, remembering his sweet and peaceful, lazy morning with Jim.

“He’s called me twice,” Molly said then, knowingly, still pertly grinning, and Sherlock was momentarily puzzled.

“Why would Jim—?” he started, but almost simultaneously twigged. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Molly echoed, and looked puzzled. “I thought you and he might be—”
Sherlock wheeled, his guts a boiling acid bath, his throat tight with something too much like panic. “Stop.” It was all he could think to say.

“Sherlock. . .” She looked wounded. “Nevermind; I only thought you’d been having a bit of a flirt,” she said meekly, and shrugged. “No harm in it. I didn’t mean to imply you’re. . .” her voice trailed off and she got to her feet. There was a moment where neither spoke, and finally she crossed her arms in front of her waist, hugging herself, and quietly ventured. “You don’t have to say, of course. But. Are you?”

Sherlock pulled on the front hem of his jacket, then tucked one hand into his trousers’ pocket, rubbed the other hand behind his neck, massaging away a knot of tension.

“Am I what.”

“Sherlock, you’re my closest friend,” she said then, and it seemed to Sherlock to be a non sequitur. “You can tell me anything. I won’t judge it, and I’ll never betray a secret.”

“Who says I have a secret?” Sherlock challenged, but it came out deflated and quiet, and he could see there was no point in argument or denial. He sidestepped, then back, and leaned on the edge of the make-up table. “Since neither of us has said, I feel I should clarify: it’s Captain Watson you’re talking about?”

“Yes. He wants to visit the salon. As soon as possible, he said. It sounds like he very much wants to see you again.” She bit her lip, then released it. “I didn’t think there was really anything to it, or I wouldn’t have been so blithe about it.” She ducked closer to him, keeping confidences. “But there is? Something to it.”

Sherlock nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Well, that’s. . .”

“You don’t have to say you approve, Molly. I don’t know that I approve of it, myself—”

“It’s not for me to say.”

“—and yet there it is,” Sherlock finished, as if she hadn’t even spoken. Then, picking up her thread, he said, “Of course you have an opinion on spouses having these sorts of. . .entanglements.” He frowned at his own euphemism. Some strange urge was making itself known, low in his chest, to tell her every detail, to unburden himself of his guilt, to finally take out and examine all his fear. Perhaps he sought approval for this current result, seemingly arrived at by a series of decisions he couldn’t even remember having taken. He held the urge at bay by keeping his mouth shut, biting his lips between his teeth.

“Are you and Jim having a rough patch or something? Or. . .” She was struggling for the right words, it was obvious. “You’ve been together a long time. People get accustomed to each other. I won’t say bored but. . .”

Sherlock shook his head and huffed out his nostrils. “Please stop,” he begged. “I don’t need to be reminded of my shortcomings.”

“All right,” Molly allowed, though she sounded hesitant. “It’s none of my business.”

Sherlock scrubbed his hands through his hair, then landed his fists hard on his thighs. He regained his feet and started to pace. “No,” he huffed, “It really isn’t any business of yours. Please note that I haven’t confessed to any specifics. Captain Watson and I have. . .”
“Sherlock, don’t explain.”

“Spoken out of turn,” Sherlock finished, inventing a euphemism. “Just—you say you’re a friend.”

“I am.” He caught a glimpse of her face as he paced past her; she looked distraught.

“Then please forget all of this, and for god’s sake keep your mouth shut.”

“I wouldn’t say a word.”

“It’s...” He should say it was done, finished, over—of course he should—but he found he didn’t want to. “It’s my own mess. I’ll straighten it up.”

“All right, fine,” Molly agreed quickly. “I’m sorry I joked about it; it won’t happen again. When I call him back, though, what should I tell him?”

Sherlock stopped, facing away from her, crossed one forearm over his middle and pulled at his lower lip with the thumb and forefinger of the opposite hand. “The salon’s fully booked for the foreseeable future,” he said at last. “Tell him whatever you need to, to keep him away.”

“All right,” Molly said, and Sherlock couldn’t discern whether she was as shocked as he to hear him say she should wave off further visits from John. Molly busied herself digging her notebook from the drawer where it was kept, and said to her hands, “He’ll be terribly disappointed.”

Sherlock said nothing, only locked himself in the little bathroom. After a minute or two, he heard the door close as Molly left.

What time will you be done tonight? I’ll wait up for you. —SH

TXT from IcehouseAdmin: Don’t bother.

I love you. —SH

TXT from IcehouseAdmin: All right Sweetheart. Bit busy just now. See you when I can.

A card from John, bearing an old ukiyo-e woodcut of a samurai with a mad look in his eyes and his sword held at a diagonal angle, slashing downward. He looked fearsome and heroic, righteous anger distorting his features. In the background, atop a distant hill, was a little tea house full of geishas; one of them stood in the road outside gazing down as if awaiting the samurai’s return.

Dear Sherlock,

I won’t make demands of you. I promised I wouldn’t and I know it’s complicated on your end. But if you can phone me, or send a text...or a letter...please, please do. Even if only to tell me, at last, to stop. I would hate it, but I would understand. (But I would really hate it.)

I had a call from Molly that sounded as if you don’t want me to come to the salon. I hope I’m wrong. Or, if I’m right, I would like to hear it from you, so there’s no misunderstanding.
I know things felt a little “off” when we said our goodbyes the other day, and I’m sure we both know why that happened. But I didn’t think at the time—and don’t think now—that things were coming to an end.

Please tell me what I should be thinking here, one way or the other.

In the meantime, I think about you, oh, endlessly.

and I am still your,
John

Sherlock tucked it inside his desk, and drew out a few sheets of his monogrammed stationery from another drawer, then took up his grandfather’s fountain pen.

Dear John,

I wonder if you’ve ever thought about reincarnation?

I am a bit too fatalistic and rational to believe in any sort of spiritual afterlife, but there is a certain attraction (even for a fatalist) to the idea that in return for attaining some spiritual enlightenment during a lifetime, one might be rewarded in the next, or if not rewarded, at least to have one’s marker moved up a few spaces on the game board’s path to ultimate peace. I understand, for example, that the Buddhists believe vegetarianism in one lifetime will save a person ten thousand lifetimes’ reincarnation, as empathy toward the suffering of non-human beings is a waypoint on the road to Nirvana. A path toward self-improvement the only fallout from which is to better this lowly physical world and its inhabitants seems to me quite a gentle approach to what is, in the end, a selfish wish to end one’s own suffering once and for all.

The inverse also holds its own unique appeal. Bad deeds in this life may be punished in the next—or in many to come (dependent upon the severity of the offense). The idea of justice meted out to the violent, the cruel, and the simply mean is a comfort—particularly when one too often sees justice thwarted, subverted, or left undelivered in our own violent, cruel, and mean world. Of course, such a theory also serves as at least a warning, if not an effective proscription, against bad behaviour, and could—one supposes—lead a soul to suffer only all the more, given the enormous task of daily struggling to weigh up consequences of one’s every action. Not to mention the willful blindness many of us engage in when it comes to estimating in advance (or evaluating in hindsight) the deleterious effects of our own choices on others.

I do wonder, though, about the inefficiency of a system that does not allow for a full view of the playing surface—we can neither see back into the previous lives to remind ourselves which boxes are left to tick off the checklist of good deeds and pure, enlightened thoughts. Nor do we have a clear view of the goal—is it close, or hopelessly distant? We only float here in the contextless present and—one hopes—do our best for here and now. Perhaps it is in this present nowhere that Hope is born.

Anyway, I expect nothing exceptional from the unseeable future, and neither regret nor sentimentalise my past. I only float, doing my best, in the here and now.

So while considering such a philosophy is a pretty distraction and perhaps a bit of mental exercise, I subscribe to no religious belief and so only admire it from a distance. All that said. . .

If. . .

I think if I was afforded a choice in the matter, or were forced to choose, I should like to come back to this realm as a Portuguese Man o’ War. Do you know anything about them? I have only read,
and seen a few photos in one of those old nature magazines from Before, back when I was a child, but a deep impression was left upon me.

It is quite like a jellyfish, with a blue-tinged, sail-shaped, translucent bladder which floats on the ocean’s surface, and beneath the waves its wispy-chiffon tentacles drift and sting, gathering such food as sustains it.

To drift, passive, cradled by the water below and dwarfed by the massive, empty dome of the sky above, without a decision to take, with neither need nor desire for control over anything, and a quiet mind. . .it seems to me that is the very definition of ultimate peace. Quiet, with no demands upon me, serving no one, only floating, floating, endlessly in silence, I can imagine no better way to come back to Earth, if one must, though one hopes one must not.

Ah, but. . .

“One hopes.”

Warmly,
Sherlock

At the moment when he should have been folding it to fit into its envelope, instead Sherlock tore the letter into the smallest possible pieces and let them drift like snow from between his long fingers into the bin beside his desk.

At least in this lifetime, Sherlock had not earned the luxury of drifting.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

In chapter 20, Jim was being nice; John wrote two unanswered letters; Sherlock confessed to Molly that things were complicated between him and John; and Sherlock wrote a meditation about the nature of past, present, and future, but destroyed it rather than sending it to John.

* 
Please note this chapter contains depictions of emotional and physical domestic abuse.

Sherlock was in bed with an oversized book—really the exhibition guide to a museum’s display of the revolutionary crimes of fashion perpetrated by one of Sherlock’s particular favourite designers from Before—propped up on his bent knees when Jim came in at the end of the night. The sound of his keys hitting the small table inside the front door made Sherlock sit up a bit and listen harder. There was barely a shush of Jim’s soles against the carpet as he approached the bedroom. Sherlock laid an etched metal bookmark in the spine of the book and folded it shut, reached to place it on the floor beside the bed.

“Told you not to wait up,” Jim said as he came into the bedroom, the knot of his necktie already loosened, the top button of his shirt undone.

“I haven’t been home long,” Sherlock replied. “I was just reading.”

“Were you just,” Jim said, not even half a question. He shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it over the arm of a nearby chair, then toed off his loafers.

“Missed you at the barber,” Sherlock said, and he might have drawn his knees up ever so slightly closer to his chest. “How was work?”

Jim shrugged and made a little half-sneer, let go a noise of mild annoyance. He twisted the cufflinks free of his shirt cuffs and dropped them on the nightstand by his side of the bed, then drew his shirt up and over his head, dropped it on the floor. In just a clinging white vest and his grey flannel trousers, he sat on the bed with his back against the headboard, ankles crossed, wriggling his toes inside their black socks.

“Why the fuck did I quit smoking,” he intoned, rubbing his closed eyes with the two middle fingers of each hand. “I’m absolutely gasping for a cigarette right now.”

Sherlock started to get up. “Do you want a drink?”

Jim’s hand landed on Sherlock’s wrist as he was swinging his legs over the side of the bed, thinking of heading for the bar out in the sitting room, to fix Jim a gin gimlet. “No, it’s all right,” Jim said in a sweeter tone, and pulled gently at Sherlock’s wrist. “All I really need right now is a pretty boy in my lap.”

Sherlock smiled at this, and reversed course from getting out of the bed to crawling across it to settle himself with one knee on either side of Jim’s hips. He was already undressed; he’d been waiting up
for Jim to get home, for this.

Hands with nails bitten to death slid up Sherlock’s thighs, around to his backside, and squeezed, drawing Sherlock closer. “Very nice,” Jim told him. “Give us a kiss, then.”

Leaning in, Sherlock moistened his lips, and Jim’s fingers dug hard into the flesh and muscle of his buttocks, his mouth opening against Sherlock’s, tongue thrusting, sharp-edged teeth scraping against the tender insides of Sherlock’s lips. Sherlock walked his knees forward a bit, but even so Jim kept squeezing, grasping, and his fingertips would surely leave bruises. Sherlock whimpered a bit, tried to make it sound like pleasure. Jim’s kiss was wet and aggressive, and Sherlock drew back from it, but Jim’s hands went lightning quick from their grasp on his arse to clamp around Sherlock’s head, pulling him in so Jim could shove in his tongue to lick Sherlock’s own, biting down hard on the bottom lip and pulling.

Sherlock steadied himself with hands on Jim’s shoulders, stopped himself whining as tears sprang to his eyes. At last, Jim released him from the kiss, but kept his hands where they were, covering Sherlock’s ears, fingers tangled in his hair.

“Shh.” Sherlock tried to soothe him, stroking one hand down his chest to finger his nipple through his undershirt. “Tell me what you need,” he whispered, and Jim released him; Sherlock nuzzled up against his temple.

“First, I need you to shut the fuck up because I’m tired of listening to people talking at me after I’ve been working all fucking night.”

Sherlock nodded against the side of Jim’s face, willed himself to be soft and pliant so that Jim would be calm. Jim’s hand came up between them and knocked Sherlock’s fingers away from his nipple. “Quit tweaking me like I’m some bitch.”

Sherlock made a tiny nod, just so Jim would know he was listening and intended to be obedient, not so Jim would think he was getting out of line. Jim didn’t usually object to Sherlock touching him there, but Jim’s rules changed every time, every night. Every day. Sherlock could only barely keep up.

“You’ll stay quiet with my prick in your mouth, won’t you?” Jim huffed a flat laugh. He wasn’t really asking, so Sherlock kept silent and still.

“Get to it, sweetheart. Lie up here so I can look at you.”

Sherlock nodded one last time and moved off Jim’s lap. Jim settled himself down lower on the bed, stripped quickly out of his trousers and pants while Sherlock arranged himself on his side, head down by Jim’s pelvis, legs bent and open near his pillow so his thickening erection was in Jim’s view. He told himself it was nice that Jim wanted see his body, that Jim still wanted to look, to watch.

“Good,” Jim muttered, and gripped Sherlock’s knee, pushing it back a bit to open him wider. “Stroke it for me. Let’s see you.”

Sherlock did as he was told, took himself in hand even as he stretched his neck and cranked his head at an odd angle to work his mouth against Jim’s bollocks, the base of his prick, and then up and around, settling in to please him, help him relax.

Jim held Sherlock’s thigh in place with one hand, tangled up his hair messily, too tight, with the short, blunt fingers of the other hand. He started to talk—the way he liked to talk, the things he liked
to say. Sherlock began to hum and moan, filling his head with rumbling vibration to help drown out Jim’s grunted muttering.

“That’s it, sweetheart. . .You like that, don’t you? You’re such a slut.”

Sherlock focused himself on the task at hand, tried to enjoy it. His neck was sore and he shifted up a bit, trying to gain leverage against Jim’s shallow hip.

“Settle down, Sherlock,” Jim scolded, and pinched the inside of his thigh just above his knee. Sherlock released him to suck a gasp, fresh tears burning his eyes. “You’re always daydreaming like a girl.” Jim shoved at his knee; Sherlock’s legs had been falling closed. Sherlock blinked hard a few times, to clear the tears away, then closed his eyes and licked a stripe down the side of Jim’s length. “Good. Better.”

John Watson—John—said things that pulled Sherlock closer. Jim’s words pushed him away, made him will himself deaf, forced him out of himself.

“Look at you stroking your prick for me. Showing off like a whore.” Jim’s hand at the back of his head pressed down as Jim’s hips rocked up, and Sherlock eased into it. Jim always became furious if he gagged or pulled away. He tried not to hear, tried to make things go quicker. “Look how hard you are; you love sucking my cock. You love it.” Jim ratcheted his pelvis up, back, quick, hard, and tears streamed nonstop down Sherlock’s cheeks as he concentrated on opening his throat, minding his teeth, letting Jim do as he liked, tried to keep stroking—Jim liked to watch—though he felt overloaded with input and wished it was over.

There was a weird glee in Jim’s voice. “Dirty cocksucker. Lick it, slut. Swallow it.”

Sherlock’s orgasm jolted him; it was all crackly and too loud and he couldn’t breathe. Jim’s hand in his hair steadied him as his prick stabbed up into Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock was aware he was a dirty mess: cum on his thigh, probably on his pillow, saliva flowing out the corners of his mouth onto his chin and down into Jim’s pubic hair. No wonder Jim talked to him that way; he really was disgusting.

“You filthy whore,” Jim muttered. Then, the awful singsong tone that made Sherlock feel off-kilter and afraid. “Oh, but you’re repulsive. Why do I let you near me?”

His litany of cruelties was bringing Jim close; Sherlock could feel him swelling, and so let out a long groan, thinking the low vibration might put Jim over the edge once and for all, and it did.

“That’s it. You dirty bitch. You slut. Take it,” Jim chanted, in time with his forceful, final thrusts. “Take it. That what you want? Is it?” Jim yanked Sherlock’s head back painfully by a handful of his hair, and he came in sticky-hot splashes across Sherlock’s open mouth and closed eyes, chanting in time with the pulsation of his orgasm. At last he panted, “Mmm. . . sweetheart,” and it stabbed Sherlock deeper to hear it than all that had come before. He knew better than to move or speak, and so Sherlock only waited, eyes closed against the cooling ejaculate sticking his lashes together. After a few moments, Jim’s hand pressed hard against his temple, shoving him away.

“Clean yourself up,” he said, newly quiet, bored with Sherlock now that he’d gotten what he wanted.

Sherlock found his own corner of the bed sheet and scrubbed his face clean of Jim’s cooling spunk, then scraped at his own, already dried and flaking off his inner thigh and between his fingers. He’d gotten what he’d wanted, too, he supposed, what he’d been waiting for. It hadn’t been sweet, but it didn’t always have to be; sometimes Sherlock liked it dirty and a little rough. He liked to feel used up.
and finished and exhausted.

Jim lay back against his pillows, threw an arm over his head to cover his eyes. “*Hm...* the dirty talk always makes you come so hard,” Jim said, sounding pleased with himself, as if he believed his stream of insults was all in good fun.

Jim was soft and sleepy in his post-orgasmic haze, so Sherlock only replied with a soft, “*M-hm,*” as he settled himself into bed by Jim’s side, sliding close, wanting to nestle his head onto Jim’s chest, wanting Jim to hold him.

“I can’t sleep with you all over me,” Jim complained, and turned over, putting his back to Sherlock.

“Good night,” Sherlock said quietly, and turned onto his side, shifting closer to the edge, enlarging the space between them.

It had only been a few days, but clearly Jim was already done being nice.

“Yeah, hi. Hello. This is John. . .from the. . .barber shop? Calling for Sherlock Holmes. We’ve, uh—sorry, I’m new at this—there’s a terrible, uh, flu going through the shop and they’re asking me to reschedule some appointments. You’ve got your standing one Friday, I know. Says here in the book. And, *heh-hem,* could you just please ring me here—same number. The number you have. Of course it’s the same number. Could you ring me so I can be sure you’re—that I’ll be seeing you. If you can. Please just phone back.”

It was ridiculous; something a kid would do. John clenched his fist and pounded the flat, thumb-side of it against his forehead, then again. Again. Again. He thought for a moment he’d call the Mentor, see if They could retrieve the message somehow, erase it, remotely murder Sherlock’s mobile phone, *something.* If Sherlock wasn’t already thinking that John was a nutter, an obsessive who wouldn’t leave him alone despite every silent signal that John was being shoved off, with that pathetic stunt John had just given him every reason on earth to write him off once and for all.

He looked again at the little display; it was nearly three in the morning. Sleep deprivation was making him stupid. He should leave his phone in the lounge, not keep it by the bed so he could pick it up in the dead of night and make a fool of himself. But what else was there? Sherlock a married man, and all. John told himself he only wanted to hear it from Sherlock, that he should stop—and then he would, he would stop—but John had self-awareness enough to see that what was really driving him. He could put up with a lot, but he couldn’t tolerate for there not to be an ending. Like Sherlock’s fairy tale, about the little liar who nearly got himself torn apart by a wild dog because nobody believes a liar, this story required “The End” to finish it off. Otherwise, John was left bewildered and alone, with an awful, nagging hopefulness that maybe it wasn’t really over. That was the bit that made him itch, wrecked his sleep, drove his mind in endless circles around the memory of Sherlock’s big gorgeous hands; the church-like smell of him; the endless repetition of his name on a folded piece of paper that even now was—as John had casually promised—tucked under his pillow, Sherlock Holmes, *Sherlock Holmes, Sherlock Holmes.*

His phone rested on his chest beneath the loose curl of his hand, and it buzzed, glowed, and he snatched it up with widening eyes, drawing a deep breath in preparation for *Hello?* But it died as suddenly as it had sprung to life.

*Missed Call from [Sherlock Holmes]*
John sat up, let the blankets pool in his lap as he drew one ankle up beneath the opposite knee, adjusted the pillows behind his back. He stared at the screen until it dimmed itself to black. John waited for him—willed him—to call again, or to send a text, and didn’t realise he was holding his breath until it gusted out of him, all at once, and he felt slightly dizzy and let himself slump backward, and slide down. The phone stayed silent and dark.

Sherlock was stood by the kitchen worktop near the kettle, waiting for Jim’s tea to steep. He tapped his thumbnail against the little square display screen of his mobile. It went dark and he went on tapping, then slipped it inside his jacket while he stirred the tea, added the tiny sprinkle of sugar Jim liked. He started to carry the mug into the bedroom, leaving the door open behind him to let the light in. It was nearly one in the afternoon, and Jim was still asleep, naked and warm, all his muscles soft. The room was as dark as if it were the middle of the night, the weighty velvet drapes pulled tight against the invasion of light; they were night people and never wanted to be awakened by the morning sun.

Sherlock set the mug on the table at Jim’s side of the bed, far enough over that it wouldn’t be bumped if Jim should reach over, still half-asleep. Sherlock laid his hand on Jim’s shoulder, stroked down over his tricep.

“Good morning,” he said softly.

“Mmph.” Jim rolled his face farther into the pillow, curled his back.

“It’s nearly one,” Sherlock told him, and leaned to press a quick, dry kiss on the back of Jim’s shoulder. “You said you had to be in the office.”

Jim moaned into the pillow, “Tea.”

“Here on the nightstand.”

“Mpf. . . Hey, c’mere.”

Sherlock heard the implication, the demand, and moved away, walking around the bed as if to fetch something from his own night stand. “Tempting, but you’ve got work, and I do want to start culling some of the older clothes from the vault.”

“Shh. . .” Jim whispered. “Just c’mere. There’s time.” His voice was soft with sleep, and he pulled back the blankets on Sherlock’s side of the bed.

Sherlock slid open the narrow drawer of his side table, rifled a bit, then slid it closed again.

“Quit crashing around, and get your clothes off, and come. . . here.” Sherlock’s neck felt tight even though Jim was being playful; he did seem perhaps slightly annoyed at the little bit of noise Sherlock was generating.

“I want to—” Sherlock lied. He did not particularly want to.

“But,” Jim said. “Fuck’s sake, Sherlock, where have you got to be other than here on your back with your ankles on my shoulders, hmmmm?” Jim rode out the hum forever, and he pressed himself up onto his elbows, as if he were hovering over Sherlock’s prostrate body. Beneath the blankets, Sherlock could see his hips rolling.
“I’m already dressed,” Sherlock protested, and started for the door to their wardrobe. He was unhappy with his choice of wristwatch and wanted change it.

“I see you’re dressed—you look so handsome,” Jim snarled, and there was an explosion against the back of Sherlock’s shoulder. Hot tea soaked his jacket, right through to his shirt, and splashed his bare neck. The heavy thump of the mug as it hit him was not so different in size and weight from a fist, but much warmer, and smoothly rounded, and then came the noise and the wet heat and the shards of ceramic scraping his jaw. Sherlock half-ran the last few steps to their dressing room, quickly stripped off the jacket and let it fall, then the shirt, because the tea was hot enough to burn—he could feel his skin reacting, flushing up angry red where the soaked cotton clung to his shoulder and upper arm and shoulder blade.

“Now you’ll get undressed, won’t you?” Jim shouted, and Sherlock was relieved to hear him still at a distance, still in bed, not coming after him. He balled up the shirt and dried himself with it. There were red blotches, but no blisters. His skin radiated heat, and it itched painfully as he brushed it with his fingertips. Sherlock looked at the door. Jim might come through it, spitting fury, wild-eyed, and so Sherlock thought perhaps he should shut it and turn the lock. But if Jim wasn’t up and out of bed already, closing the door on him now would seem like a challenge, or an insult (“oh, what, now you’re afraid? Open this fucking door. Open this door, Sherlock, or I will break it down and when I get in there I will fucking kill you. *Open the fucking door!*”). Frozen to the spot, time slowed so that Sherlock could hear his eyelashes crashing together as he blinked, taste the oxygen molecules abrading his nostrils and throat.

“Get out.”

Sherlock’s hands shook as he wrenched free a fresh shirt from its hanger.

“I said get out, *get out*, get the fuck out of here, I don’t want to fucking hear you breathing.”

At last the shirt came free, and Sherlock sucked air. Inside his head he was screaming at himself to move, and it took enormous effort to get one foot in front of the other and take himself out of the dressing room. He walked quickly, clutching his shirt across his chest in folded arms, kept his chin up but his eyes on the floor in front of him. Just a dozen long strides and he’d be out.

“Jeezus, Sherlock,” Jim whined. “I only wanted to fuck, but don’t you always have to go and be a bitch about it.”

He was nearly out.

“Ruin a perfectly nice—”

Out of the corner of his eye, Sherlock saw Jim’s body jackknife up and forward, and one arm swung, and Jim’s mobile phone smacked against Sherlock’s elbow. He flinched, stopped short for a half-second as a screaming lick of pain radiated down his forearm all the way into his little finger. The sound of Jim’s phone thudding onto the carpet shocked him back to life and he moved again. Just a few more steps and he’d be out the door.

“You just love to make me angry, Sherlock. You live for it. There’s something wrong with you.”

He was out of the bedroom, striding down the main hallway.

“You’re mad!” Jim shouted after him. “You know that, don’t you?”

Sherlock ducked into the guest bath, shut and locked the door, pulled on the shirt and did up enough buttons, jammed the tails into his trousers. He kept his back to the mirror; he knew there was no
blood so there was no need to look. Once he’d got the shirt on—it was white, his trousers black, he’d never wear a white shirt with this suit (his ruined jacket in a heap on the floor), it made him look like a casino cocktail-server—he checked his reflection. His eyes were red. He splashed cool water on his face, then blotted it with a hand towel he refolded and hung on the bar, squaring the corners. He adjusted a few locks of his hair, more to soothe himself than because they were really astray. A hard blink, a hard swallow, and he was fine. He was fine. And anyway, he had things he needed to do.

TXT from (unknown): Hope you’re well. Please be in touch if you can. Wondering why I haven’t heard from you.

Sherlock’s thumbs hovered over the tiny keyboard and he was aware of his distraction, of staring at nothing. Eventually he tapped:

I’m sorry

And immediately backspaced to delete it.

You mustn’t try to contact me anym

He deleted that, too. In an attempt to stop himself obsessing about it, Sherlock dropped his mobile into the make-up drawer and slid it shut, then opened a different drawer in search of nail varnish to complement the evening’s attire, which was a hanfu gown of deep, emerald green accented with burnished gold embroidery and a long sash of silk shot through with threads of real gold. The party was to be a small one, comprising elderly women, early for tea and cakes. Some kind of reunion. School chums or former work colleagues. It was just as well, Sherlock felt weighted down, heavy and exhausted by emotions he refused to name but were almost certainly close kin to disappointment, and regret.

He fished out the phone once more.

Will you come

He deleted and tried one last time.

I can’t see you anymore because it’s all too dangerous and my entire life will be ruined.

He pressed hard and held down the backspace key until all that remained in the display was the blinking cursor.

I don’t want this anymore.

He deleted it.

Stop.

His finger rested on the backspace key, twitching, itchy. He hated himself indecisive, hated his emotions in a tangle he couldn’t pick apart, sort out, and compartmentalize properly, when he’d worked hard his whole life at keeping them in strict order.

Delete? Send? He knew which he should do, which he should want, but then he couldn’t help but envision what he shouldn’t want. John Watson. Again. More. John Watson beneath the solid crush
of his own clothes-rack body. John Watson open-mouthed, groaning out loud, gratefully—easily—
taking all Sherlock put on offer and then silently requesting even more. Sherlock couldn’t bring
himself to do what he really should, really must if he was to survive it. He believed John when he
said he would keep up his pursuit unless and until Sherlock told him to stop. And certainly John
Watson, the liar, was a man of his word.

Sherlock deleted his text.

The phone buzzed alive in his hand, the sudden shock of reality so startling he nearly dropped it.

TXT from (unknown): Sherlock. Please. I’m sorry. I don’t know what you’re waiting for me to say.

Sherlock tucked the phone back into the drawer, shut it a bit harder than was strictly necessary, and
the metallic bang soothed his nerves. Once he got his feet under him, he fled the dressing room.

John was frustrated, with something else worrying at the edges of it that was much softer and which
occasionally sighed out loud. And even further out from that center of frustration, where he could
fairly easily ignore it except when he was in the shower or trying to fall asleep, there was a creeping
idea that perhaps it was time to let go and move on. He should ask for—no, demand—a new
assignment. What was being broadly hinted at was nothing short of armed revolution for fuck’s sake,
and he was no intelligence operative; he was just a former army surgeon with a shaky left hand,
currently employed as a hired gun with a steady right. Either the Mentor and his cronies didn’t take
the whole business seriously, or there was something John wasn’t being told. Whatever the case, the
job was wildly beyond his scope, and his sleep was plenty poor without adding a nagging suspicion
there was a full-scale genocide in the offing. If he was free of the job, he could. . .if not move on, at
least move away. . .from the Icehouse, and the drasha salon, and the inscrutable living sculpture that
was Xie, and from Sherlock Holmes.

Haunted as he was by memories of Sherlock’s angular, handsome face (his thick, slightly unruly
eyebrows were an especially charming surprise), dappled with fractured daylight when they’d stood
beneath the willow tree in the Japonesque garden; and by the sensation of his warm hand against the
small of John’s back, guiding him across a busy street; and by the salty-hot taste of him flooding into
John’s eager mouth, John had a vague worry he had become more than casually infatuated. With an
asset on a job. He’d tried to warn himself off it, early on; why couldn’t he

And there was something else, too: something thrilling, terrifying—a deep, loud longing to know
more, to know everything there was to know about Sherlock Holmes. There was a faraway
familiarity; he’d felt all of it before, once or twice. For weeks, he’d tried to ignore it.

Anyway, I’m downstairs. At the Icehouse. If you’re free for a drink or something.

He felt more than a little pathetic, sending texts he’d promised himself he wouldn’t send because of
the risk of Sherlock’s husband intercepting them. Sending letters that had (so far) gone unanswered,
when all his past ones had been replied to within a day. Just that morning he’d gone out walking—
ostensibly for decent coffee and some kind of sustenance—and found himself lingering in front of
the window display at the shop where he’d bought the little green toy car for Xie those weeks ago,
and considering which of the items there might make Sherlock’s smile break through the paint on
Xie’s carefully-crafted face.

Maybe it was all his stupid, blurted fumbles about Xie being for rent by the hour, implying Xie was
beautiful but useless, or his co-opted, half-true stories about the exurban wedding and the pack of feral dogs. Those alone could have been enough, John reflected, for Sherlock to decide John wasn’t worth the time and effort required to fix him—and god knew he needed some upgrades if he was going to try to live full-time in polite society, let alone in the extremely rarified air of Xie’s vlast-inhabited, elegant floating world.

He’d replayed their morning together on the faux-leather sofa, which had seemed to be going spectacularly well right up until the moment it wasn’t. But even their last awkward moments together (had it been as awkward as he now remembered? Sherlock had kissed him; Sherlock had reassured him he wasn’t saying John should stop) had not been what John would normally have considered signs that it was goodbye. He’d felt discomfited, adrift about how to make Sherlock feel like everything was all right (of course it wasn’t all right), but he hadn’t foreseen this sudden, utter silence.

Then again. He’d been left in a silence like this before, without a word of explanation, by a man with whom he’d been deeply in love. So perhaps his track record of ability to correctly assess the emotional temperature of a situation was not the best. It was impossible, anyway; Sherlock was taken, and John was a professional liar almost certain not to last the year.

You know what, nevermind. Best of luck. I enjoyed getting to know you.

Easy as that. A quick motion to the bartender calling for another, even as he sipped the last of what was in front of him, then chewed the ice.

Once he was out of Xie’s dressing room, Sherlock didn’t know where to go or what to do with himself. Leaving the Icehouse was impractical; Xie had a party in a few hours. John was somewhere downstairs—in one of the restaurants, or the casino, or in one of the bars—and Sherlock wasn’t ready to face him, wasn’t entirely sure he ever would be. The few days without seeing him, only hearing his voice on that ridiculous message he’d left (for one who had proven himself something of a fabulist, his acting skills were seriously lacking), had allowed Sherlock time to center himself and remind himself who he was. He was not a man who cheated on his spouse. He was not a man who floated away on daydreams that things could be different, let alone better. He belonged here, in this place he’d built from the ground up by the sweat of his painted brow. Everything else was trivia. He’d eventually forgive himself for having drifted.

Arriving at the reception desk outside the offices was like waking from a trance; even as the woman there nodded at him, smiling and with the phone held to her ear, Sherlock wondered why he was there. She waved vaguely behind her, go right in, and Sherlock went. Down the hall. Jim’s office door was open. Sherlock stepped into the doorway. Stopped.

Jim was looking down at files on his desk, tapping a heavy silver pen against a stack of paper in a quick, smacking drumbeat rhythm. “Have you got the proposals for the renovation of the ballrooms, yet? I want to see at least three, no more than five, though.”

Sherlock hummed. “Afraid not.” A smile, a soft one, not because he’d forgiven him—Jim wouldn’t even seek forgiveness for a trivial fight like the one they’d had after Sherlock had woken him—but only to indicate things were normal.

“Oh. Sherlock.” Jim sat back in his big leather chair, scrubbed his forehead with one hand. “Didn’t know if I’d see you.”
“Party at half-eight.” Sherlock stepped into the office, not far, and did not sit. “Hungry?” Sherlock’s gut was in knots but he could heat up something the chef had left, sit with Jim while he ate it.

“I’ve a dinner meeting,” Jim said dismissively, and his arm went awkwardly beneath his desk. He grimaced, then yanked. “It’s good you stopped by though. Here, close the door.”

Sherlock did as he was told, and when he turned around again, Jim leaned forward, elbow on the desk, with a stack of white plastic Identity Cards in his fist. Sherlock hesitated a moment, then reached for them.

“You know what to do,” Jim said, drawing his hand back too quick for Sherlock to touch his fingers. He dropped his gaze back to the work on his desk. “Call your drab little soldier and cast your spell.” He shooed Sherlock with one hand. “Sooner the better. Can you get him here tonight?”

Sherlock held the ICs by their edges, riffled the stack with the fingers of his opposite hand, fidgeting. “I don’t think . . .”

When he didn’t finish the thought, Jim looked up at him, frowning, fixing him to the spot with an expectant gaze.

“He may not come back.” Sherlock barely shrugged his shoulders.

“He will if you tell him to.”

Sherlock shook his head. “I don’t—”

“You do and you will. I’ve told you before—you’ve got him. He’s so smitten he can smell your pussy through the phone.”

Sherlock’s throat ached. He tucked the ICs into his jacket.

“Go on, then. I’m working.”

Sherlock bit his lips, nodded, and left without another word. Skipping the detour to the flat for food he didn’t want and wouldn’t be able to swallow even if he tried, Sherlock returned to the dressing room and went into the drawer where he’d left his phone, ostensibly to text Molly instructions on what to fetch from the vault; it was nearly time to dress and he hadn’t given a thought to the evening’s ensemble. There was a text from John, telling him to nevermind, and wishing him luck.

Sherlock had to sit down.

I’m not free at the moment but will you come to the salon tonight? Eleven. –SH

He waited, feeling urgent, and not just because the weight of the dozen or so plastic cards in his pocket felt like a brick, must surely be bulging out a mile from this chest. He didn’t want to nevermind. He didn’t want John to wish him best of luck. He juggled the phone in his hand, tossing it so it landed in his palm now face-up, now facedown, over and over, and his knee bounced beneath the edge of the make-up table. Seeing John Watson again, near enough to hear his breathing, near enough to smell him; letting John touch him, whisper and kiss him, would certainly destroy whatever small amount of resolve Sherlock had conjured in the past few silent days. He didn’t care. He wanted the heat and the danger. He wanted John’s fingers-slotted between his fingers. He took off his wedding ring and tossed it in the little crystal dish.

Text from (unknown): I should say no but I won’t.
Text from (unknown): I can’t.
Text from (unknown): So.
Text from (unknown): Yes.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

In chapter 21, Jim was through being nice; John reached out, reached out, and finally turned the page; and Sherlock summoned him back.

Chapter Notes

Please note this chapter contains a description of Sherlock's nude body, and that he is a victim of years of domestic abuse.

“You’re a sky full of stars.”

Xie’s costume was a high-waisted gown of black silk velvet soft as water, cascading sleeves of chiffon edged with wide ribbons of satin. Draped over the shoulders and partly-bare chest, a bib of dazzling diamonds—round stones centered inside starbursts of triangular ones pointing out toward infinity, all hung from a web of blackened-silver chain—resting from sternum to clavicle, a sparkling waterfall reaching nearly to the waist in front.

“The most beautiful one I’ve seen.”

The wig was raven-wing black shot through with threads of silver that twinkled in the light they caught, molded in upward-swept whorls, displaying the long neck to good effect. Chandelier-like diamond earrings trailed down and down, swinging with every tilt and nod of the head. The pale face and throat shimmered as if powdered with diamond-dust, eyes dark and glittering, lips so purple they were nearly black.

John’s face was full of awe, and of hunger; Xie’s lips curled in a mild smile and the face tilted down, gazed at the hidden hands worrying each other beneath a puddle of fabric. In the heart of the illusion, Sherlock was—to his surprised dismay—coming undone. Despite what he’d told himself about being able to set aside their dalliance as a momentary weakness, a mistake, over and done, now that John Watson was sitting close and looking straight into his eyes (the only bit of Sherlock that still showed—impossible to hide—in Xie’s salon) it could not have been more clear that those lies were impossibly fragile, a web of gossamer that could never bear the weight of reality, of the two of them close enough to smell the desire that rippled off their skin like heat rising off metal in high summer. The air between them crackled so Sherlock worried it was audible to every guest in the salon.

John sat as near as he could—Xie’s skirts spread around their knees like an oil spill, overtopping the sofa cushions—and he leaned his head to speak low as if they were alone rather than in a drasha salon full of vlast politicos and their spouses, two army generals, and a ‘shlost former employee of the Transportation Ministry with a false identity card and a directive to report every word she heard.

Xie’s hands were still folded in the lap, vaguely wringing among the billows of satin and chiffon. “You’re too kind,” Xie said mildly, almost bashful.
“God, I want you.”

“Captain Watson. Hush.”

It was hardly a scold; Sherlock’s blood shimmered hot beneath Xie’s glittering skin.

“What changed your mind?” John pressed on.

“Why must you insist?” Boundaries were being broken down; Xie sat up straighter, scanned the room for an excuse to move away.

“You should really keep talking. Otherwise I might kiss you.”

“You know you mustn’t.”

“I’d hoped they’d all be gone.” John gestured toward the others, in small groups scattered here and there about the salon, chatting and laughing, some guided in games by junior drashas.

“Soon,” Xie soothed. Sherlock was much too near the surface, and willed himself to recede. Xie would distract John from this line of inquiry. “One of the guests is not as they seem, Captain Watson —” A transparent redirection, but one which might engage John at least temporarily. “Do you see it?”

Though he seemed reluctant to do so, John turned his gaze away from Xie’s folded hands and looked around the room, frowning.

“Bunch of vlast so-and-so’s,” he said dismissively. “Some probably having affairs, beating their children.” He looked suddenly hopeful, a bit mischievous. “Tell me one of them’s a pervert—locked up in one of those latex bodysuits. . .or sucking his thumb while the Mistress spanks him and calls him ‘baby’?” His mouth crumpled in a half-smile.

“Well, naturally there are cruel, or adulterous, or adventurous people in any cohort,” Xie said smoothly. “But there’s someone here who’s actually interesting.” Xie rose to stand and in that simple act, commanded the attention of the entire party, who hushed and looked up expectantly at the painted face. “I’m sorry to say our time together is near its end.” Xie sounded truly regretful and swept the gaze to meet every pair of eyes. “I’ve found your company absolutely delightful; I shall be sad to see you go, and do hope you come back to visit again soon.”

There was a susurrance of affirmative murmuring, and even a smattering of light applause, which Xie acknowledged with a settling gesture.

“Before we bid our goodbyes, though, I would like to introduce you to a dear friend, Captain John Watson, who has a bit of a gift for storytelling.” Xie gestured toward John, who grimaced something like a smile at the others and straightened his spine. “I wonder, Captain Watson, if you have a tale to tell about promises made, and kept?”

A drasha appeared at John’s side, bearing a small tray with a crystal glass of the too-good-for-him whisky, which John accepted but did not immediately sip. He cleared his throat and finally said, “Probably not what’s wanted, but actually I’m reminded of a fairy tale.”

Xie smiled. “Delightful. I’m sure we’ll all enjoy something a bit fanciful we can carry with us tonight into our dreams.” Xie perched on the arm of a nearby sofa, head tipped just slightly in expectation.

Clearing his throat once more, John took a pull from the glass and exhaled audibly, throwing Xie a glance that was a blend of amusement and something like distress. Xie raised the slender, painted-on
“There was a handsome young man who stole a witch’s wand,” John began. “He had a sweetheart, and the two ran off together after the handsome young man’s mother tried to kill him.”

“How handsome?” One of the vlast women, giggling at herself.

“Oh, blindingly handsome,” John replied, finding his way into the telling of the tale. “Tall and slim-hipped, dark hair that shone auburn in the sunlight. His eyes were tricky and changed from silvery grey to green or blue, but not with his moods or the weather. He smelled of frankincense and when he spoke—even off the cuff—it rolled out of him like poetry, every word carefully chosen, as if he were reading out a letter he’d already written in his elegant, slanted cursive.”

“Had himself a sweetheart, though, what a shame,” another woman put in, and there was light laughter throughout the room.

Xie’s folded hands began to roll over and under each other in slow motion beneath the satin and chiffon of the gown’s sleeves but the face was schooled, placid, smiling.

“The mother gave chase; she was the witch whose wand the handsome young man had stolen,” John went on. “She nearly caught them up, but the handsome young man was more clever than you can imagine, and he used the wand to change his sweetheart into a pond, and himself into a swan gliding over its surface, and when the witch—his mother—came upon them, she didn’t know them. So she took off on another road, still searching.” John sipped at the whisky, licked his lips, and at the heart of twenty-seven layers of Xie, something low and growling came alive in the pit of Sherlock’s chest.

“Once she’d gone, the handsome young man and his sweetheart resumed their usual shapes, and made promises to each other under the moon that they would stay together always. Then they ran on. Because the witch was clever and furious, and had a heart full of murder. In fact, the very next day the handsome young man scented the witch’s perfume in the air, so he stopped them beside a hedge of tangled thorn bushes and used the wand to make his sweetheart into an expert violinist and himself into a snow-white rose tucked deep among the thorns.”

“What about the sweetheart? Pretty?” one of the vlast men ventured, and a few others in the room grunted approval of his demand for details.

“He wasn’t as handsome, but full of charisma. Seductive. A real salesman,” John said, and Xie looked at the floor, careful to keep a neutral facial expression. “The witch approached the fiddler and asked him to reach in and get the rose for her. Because he was really the handsome young man’s sweetheart—and a crafty gigolo, at that—he agreed, but on condition she might listen to him play a bit. The witch acquiesced, but the moment the violin’s first notes sang out, she realised her mistake. There was dark magic in the tune, and soon she couldn’t help but dance and leap wildly, thrashing all around, kicking her feet. . .in no time at all she was hopelessly tangled in the thorny hedge. The thorns tore at her skin and she bled to death from the ten thousand cuts.”

“So the young man could stop running away, then,” Xie offered in a low, strange voice. Several of the partygoers looked on curiously; Xie’s gaze stayed fixed on John.

“Indeed. But doesn’t freedom usually come at a price, as we see in the next bit of the story,” John replied, and took a long pull of the whisky, rolling it over his tongue before swallowing. “The handsome young man’s sweetheart said—once they’d come back to themselves—that he would make them a home to share, and the handsome young man used the wand to make himself into a dull stone marking the crossroads where they stood, and said he would wait for his sweetheart to come back for him—to take him to their home and marry him. They parted with a promise of faithfulness
and devotion.” John flicked a glance Xie’s way. “The sweetheart went into the nearest town, and almost instantly fell under the spell of another handsome young man. And an older, elegant woman. And a man dressed in woman’s clothes. And a woman who couldn’t be trusted. And a man with more money than sense.” John shook his head, shrugging, regretful, and the partygoers laughed knowingly. “And so the handsome young man, who was now a dull stone by the side of a road hardly traveled by anyone, eventually gave up hope of waiting, and changed himself into a flower with prayers someone might come along and crush him underfoot.”

One of the women let out a sound of distress, part sigh, part gasp.

“Not long after, along came a man who was no good to anybody anymore. When he saw the flower that was really the handsome young man, he thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and so plucked it and took it home and put it in a clay pitcher so he could see it every day. Sometimes he would hear sounds behind him, or catch movement out of the corner of his eye, and he had a brand new feeling all through him that all was well. What he didn’t know was that the flower sometimes changed back into a handsome young man, and the handsome young man loved him because he’d saved the flower instead of destroying it. The handsome young man’s love was the quiet sort, but there was power in the quiet.”

“The man who was no good to anybody anymore found an ancient book of magic, and, following its instructions, one day he heard sounds in his house when it was only him and the flower at home and threw a blanket over the source of the noise to trap it, breaking the spell. The handsome young man had no choice but to reveal himself. He poured out his story of the murderous witch—his mother—who tried to murder him, and the wand he had stolen, and his sweetheart who had made promises but then betrayed him. The man who was no good to anybody anymore was enchanted and offered for the handsome young man to stay and share his home, said that they would find a way together to be happier tomorrow than they’d been yesterday.”

John paused for dramatic effect, and to wet his mouth with the whisky. The room hung on his words, and all was quiet, air taut with anticipation.

Xie touched the gown’s bodice, and a flicker of fingertips flashed blue-white beneath the black satin and chiffon before they vanished again. “The young man said no,” Xie said, and all heads turned. Xie held John’s gaze; he looked as if Xie had just bested him in a strategic game.

“That’s right, as a matter of fact,” John said. “The handsome young man refused because he had made a promise to be true to his sweetheart. And so the man who was no good to anybody anymore offered to take whatever there was to have, and the handsome young man stayed, but kept his heart half-hidden, and it wasn’t a perfect arrangement, but it was good enough.” He cleared his throat and turned his attention to the rest of the guests, once more.

“It came to pass that the handsome young man’s sweetheart had become quite the big man around town, and was having a party in his own honour. The handsome young man was reluctant to go; half his heart was hidden and the other half was broken. But in the end, he put on his handsomest suit of clothes, and did a thing with his handsome dark waves of hair, and couldn’t tame his eyebrows completely but it was part of the charm of his face and so he allowed it, and he went to his sweetheart’s home. And in that crowd of champagne-drinking snobs, the handsome young man’s sweetheart smelled the frankincense-scent of his skin and picked him out, and demanded the handsome young man return to him. ‘I’ll have no other!’ Standing in his sweetheart’s shadow the handsome young man dimmed and quieted, but he had made a promise and he would keep it. And so he stayed.”

“A happy reunion, then!” said one of the vlast men. “Promises made and kept, like Xie said.”
“I think what Captain Watson’s story is meant to point out,” Xie said, rising to stand and sweeping the full velvet skirt around and behind, where it trailed like a fall of black water, “Is that a promise can come at a price.”

John nodded, crunching ice between his back teeth. “What good is a promise of faith, made to a faithless person?” John summed up. He smiled easily, and spread his hands in a questioning gesture. “But it’s only a fairy tale, made to entertain children, probably more about the magic and the murder than the moral, don’t you think?”

“It was delightful to listen to you, as ever, Captain Watson, and from the bottom of my heart, I thank you,” Xie gushed. “Alas, friends, I must bid you good evening. My friends here—” Xie gestured. “Butterfly, Poema, Valentin. . .will show you out. Thank you, again, each and every one, for a lovely evening. I’ve so enjoyed your company.”

Xie swept the skirts aside once more, and as the crowd waved, raised glasses, nodded good-nights, then busied themselves with the last of their drinks, the final bites of whatever they were eating, Xie glided toward the sliding door at the far end of the salon.

“Good night, Captain Watson,” Xie said silkily, and John’s mouth crumpled in confusion, until he noticed, by Xie’s hip—hidden from view of the rest of the party—a thrillingly bared hand, and an elegantly curled finger twitching, once, twice. . .then three fingers extended to indicate John should allow a few minutes’ head start. As Xie glanced to confirm he had seen, his expression changed from dismayed to wide-open and bright, eyes sparkling, licking his lips.

“Night, then,” he said, and the sardonic tone would have been plain to anyone in earshot, had anyone but Xie been listening.

Another drasha slid aside the ornately carved teakwood door, exposing an ill-defined space, dark but for a faint bluish glow, and Xie vanished behind it, the trailing train of the gown barely inside before the door slid shut. Once inside the second sliding door, Sherlock crossed the dressing room in a few long strides, checking that the door to the exterior corridor was locked, then settled on the edge of the red armchair, raising the hem of the gown’s many layers of skirt in order to immediately remove the boots, which were knee-high, black burnt-out velvet in a vaguely Art Deco floral pattern, with tall platforms and towering heels. Once free of them, Sherlock rolled his ankles, flexed his toes, then rose to go at the fastenings of the gown—a hidden zip, a few hooks-and-eyes, and it was easy to shake loose and let fall, the sleeves dragging away from Sherlock’s bare shoulders as they went. He stepped out of the left-behind puddle of silk velvet, chiffon, the rumpled tulle of the underskirts. The wig went next, easily unclipped from the edges of his own hairline and the cap that covered most of his own hair, and he didn’t bother to arrange it on its stand, only dropped it on the make-up table to be dealt with later.

Sherlock found his red cashmere dressing gown on a hook in the little bathroom, venturing a glance at his face in the small shaving mirror as he put it on. He shook his hair out of its brushed-back flatness with the tips of his fingers until it looked more—though not exactly—like it should. His face was still painted; there wasn’t time. And the elaborate bib necklace that covered his entire upper torso, even out to his shoulders and down almost to his navel, was too precious to take off; he’d have to call a guard up later to walk him down to the vaults, tuck it away for safe keeping in an interior safe. The necklace was worth more than even Sherlock was allowed in overage, and was on loan. He’d keep the earrings, too; each swing or brush against his jaw sent an erotic jolt straight through him. He tied shut the dressing gown in front, crossing it so he was covered below the waist, leaving it mostly open in front.

He checked the lock once more, then hauled up the bundle of the discarded gown off the floor and
tossed it over the back of his make-up chair. A triple-knock on the sliding door, which shimmied, echoing dully where it hung in its track.

“Xie. . .” Cleared his throat. “Sherlock?” He was almost whispering.

The door slid aside and even though he’d expected it John drew back blinking against the light from the dressing room, for the little passageway was almost completely dark. He stepped back to make way and Sherlock’s slim frame—not as tall as Xie, but still sturdily tall, the shoulders pleasingly broad in contrast to the narrow hips—was silhouetted briefly in the doorframe as he turned to slide the door shut behind him. All John saw of the dressing room was part of a gaudy crystal chandelier, the gown Xie had been wearing draped over a chair, two closed doors and a third partway open. The door rumbled shut, and they were in almost complete darkness: a single, small bulb recessed in the ceiling gave off a weird blue glow, casting strange shadows on Sherlock’s face, which John now saw was still Xie’s face: shimmering, with darkly hollowed eye sockets around the glittering blue-green eyes, lips nearly black and shiny with lacquer. The glittering diamonds swinging from the earlobes and draped across the bare, pale chest beneath a partially open robe added a glamorous element of surrealism.

“What changed your mind?” John asked, repeating his question from when he’d first arrived at the salon. He was speaking quietly, but even so, Sherlock hushed him.

“Shh.” He whispered. “We must be quiet while there are still guests and drashas in the salon.” He side-stepped and raised one hand to the wall beside the door. “And the shadows, under the edges of the doors.”

John cut a glance down and behind him, at the slight gap between the door and floor covered nearly edge-to-edge with one of the thick Persian carpets. Before he could look back at Sherlock, the feeble blue glow vanished with a click. John blinked into the utter darkness.

“You said there was more you wanted to do to me,” Sherlock whispered, and suddenly there was a palm pressing against John’s chest, stroking outward and up, until fingertips curled around the top edge of his shoulder.

“For you,” John whispered back, and the smell of Xie’s perfume was tickling the air around him, and he felt the solid presence of a body in front of him. The hand slid up his shoulder to the side of his neck, found his jaw, and the index finger dragged forward against the lower edge of his ear, the thumb sliding in a half-circle across his chin. “I said there’s so much more I want to do for you,” John corrected, and the pad of Sherlock’s thumb was soft against his lower lip, feather-light brushing, side to side. “Is that what you heard?”

Silence. Utter darkness. The tip of the thumb found the center of his lip, dipped in, pressed down, stroking damp as it retreated. John ventured to let his tongue-tip lap softly at it, catching on the smooth edge of the nail.

“Who are you here?” John murmured, and there was a clatter of glassware and dishes from the salon, drashas—or someone—cleaning up the leavings of the party. “Xie, or Sherlock?” He circled the tip of the thumb with his tongue, and heard a sharp inhalation of breath, a clue to how close their bodies were; if John just leaned, their chests would touch.

“Neither. I’m no one.”

“Just my sky full of stars, then,” John whispered.

The hand slid down his chin, tracing his throat, and John bared it, and the fingers squeezed ever-so-
slightly as if helping him swallow, then smoothed upward again to catch his jaw. The other hand found his forearm in the darkness then, skipping down to catch his wrist, his hand, pulling, setting John’s palm on a shock of naked hip. The dressing gown had been shed after the light went out. John’s fingers curved tight, not digging in, not moving, and a low sound rolled out between his lips.

“White sky full of stars,” he murmured, envisioning Sherlock’s tall, taut body draped in diamonds, bare but for a dusting of shimmer across his collarbones. That painted, perfect face. “What a rare vision you are.” The hand that held his jaw tightened, and raised it, and John let his lips stay apart, dipped his tongue out to wet them. “Sherlock.”

The breath caressed him first, and then a quarter-second later, the lips and tongue, wet and demanding against his mouth. The body came after, pressure and force meeting John at breast and belly and hip and thigh, a long bare foot settled between his ankles. He let himself be kissed, let himself be shoved, crushed back against the wall. Sherlock’s mouth was slick with rosewater-scented lacquer John wanted to chew off of Sherlock’s lips and swallow. Sherlock’s tongue rolled deep against his, and John surrendered to the kiss, hands possessively curving around Sherlock’s buttocks his only assertion.

“I need a promise,” Sherlock whispered into his mouth, and then caught John’s bottom lip between his teeth and worried it back and forth before sweeping the tongue in again. There were voices in the salon, bland questions and quick responses, male and female, how many John couldn’t tell and didn’t care.

Sherlock drew back, released John’s jaw in favour of gripping his hips with both huge hands, pinning him back against the wall, and leaning hard with his pelvis against John’s waist, one bent leg insinuating itself between John’s legs.

“What’s the price?” John managed to parry back, though he was beginning to feel stupid and drunk and really rather wanted to slither to his knees, all the way to the floor, and lick Sherlock’s feet in supplication. Just hours before, hadn’t he blithely told Sherlock to nevermind? What an idiot he was.

Sherlock’s solid torso shifted against him, a welcome crush, seeking a proper angle as the diamonds caught and tugged at the fabric of John’s pullover. John’s grip tightened against Sherlock’s backside, giving him leverage as his hips rocked up, and up, and Sherlock’s mouth came open against John’s neck, then brushed hot against his ear. “Please promise.” One forearm brushed the top of John’s shoulder as Sherlock braced himself with a flat palm on the wall beside John’s head. “Please. . .I need. . .”

“Yes—Sherlock—yes, I promise.”

Sherlock exhaled the words against the side of John’s face. “Don’t ask.”

John couldn’t imagine, didn’t care. His prick was aching, desperate. Sherlock was naked and shoving him against a wall, smearing painted lips against John’s neck, and John’s hands were cupping smooth-hot-soft-hard buttocks that rolled and flexed against his palms.

“I promise,” John whispered again, and tipped his chin, ducking his face in search of Sherlock’s rosewater kiss. Their mouths met, open, messy, and John groaned as Sherlock’s bejeweled chest scraped upward against his own clothed one, threatening to press the breath out him. “Can I? I want to touch you.”

Sherlock nodded, nose and chin brushing John’s cheek, and his body dropped away just a bit as John removed his hands from Sherlock’s rocking, thrusting backside and dragged both stretched palms up the muscular length of his back. Sherlock shivered, and his back bowed so his chest
pressed even harder against John. John’s fingers skipped and skidded, and Sherlock practically
writhed.

“All right?” John whispered, and brushed his mouth against the plane of Sherlock’s cheek, the blade
of bone, smooth skin that tasted powdery.

“Don’t ask,” Sherlock whispered, and it was urgent, harsh. “Don’t ask. No questions. Don’t—”

John’s hands smoothed up onto the flat expanses of his shoulder blades, then down again. There
were divots, and slick-smooth hairless spots, and ropey protrusions. Scattered, coin-sized patches of
flaking rough. Scabs? *Scars.*

“Sherlock.”

“*Shh.* You promised.”

Sherlock kissed him again, not as hard, and slower, like a plea. John met him there, offering
obeisance. He let one arm cradle Sherlock’s back, and made space enough between them to lay his
palm in the center of Sherlock’s chest, sliding it up beneath the web of body-warmed chains and
surprisingly heavy gems, and felt Sherlock’s chest expanding with each panted breath, heart
thudding hard beneath the heel of John’s hand.

“It’s nothing. It’s nowhere, here. We’re no one,” Sherlock whispered, and reached for John’s hand at
his chest, raised it to his mouth to drag tongue and lips across it, hips rolling and shifting against
John’s clothed groin, moaning into John’s palm. Sherlock guided John’s hand down, and John
turned his wrist, pressed his wet palm against Sherlock’s prick to flatten it against his belly, then slid
down to curve around his bollocks, then back up. As John at last wrapped his fingers around,
Sherlock shuddered and stifled a groan in the curve of John’s shoulder.

“You’re gorgeous,” John breathed into his hair. “I want you. . .want to see you.”

“*Shh,*” Sherlock hushed; John’s whispers were rising in volume as Sherlock rocked up hard against
him.

“Turn on the light.”

“Hush, now.”

“Sherlock.”

The rosewater lacquer had all been smeared away and Sherlock’s lips—searching out John’s mouth
in the dark—tasted instead of John’s own whisky-stained saliva. John’s fingers dug into the slots
between Sherlock’s ribs, there at his side, and the feel of Sherlock hot and silky in his other palm was
crazymaking.

“Please, I want to see you,” John begged, barely above his breath. “My white sky—*mn!*” Sherlock
palmed John’s erection through his trousers and John bucked up into it reflexively. “White sky full of
stars. . .” John ignored his own sex-clouded nonsense, his mind churning up poetry he’d have
sneered at except that his heart was thudding, his blood burning, his brain—what?—melting. Shifted
his focus down to the feel of skin and bone as he slid his hand down Sherlock’s back, squeezed one
alternately tightening and slackening buttock, reached under the muscular thigh to pull Sherlock’s leg
up closer, harder, between John’s own thighs.

“Wait,” Sherlock urged, and he withdrew his hand from the front placket of John’s trousers,
encircled John’s sliding fingers with his own, guiding him. He hummed, long and low, then pressed
his teeth against the side of John’s throat, and then licked the spot he’d bitten. “Just wait.”

John waited, let Sherlock roll against him like a storm tide. All sharp angles, heavy, hard, hand planted against the wall beside John’s head. Fingers entwined with John’s, taking what he wanted, what John would give because this was nothing like drowning, it was exactly like drowning, surrendering, letting Sherlock wash and tumble over him like water, rosewater, wet mouth, tongue sharp. Teeth white. Body white. A white sky and these diamond stars catching and pulling, shredding, mouth again, hot, open, gasping, gasping, bitten lips, humming, urgent, desperate, Sherlock please. Please. Sherlock please. Waited, couldn’t wait, let me see you Sherlock please, bitten lips beside his ear, hoarse, moaning, wet, hot, sticky hot, and the sharp oceanwater smell of it, Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock please

“Shhh. . .shhh. . .” Sherlock’s deff fingers went to John’s button and zip, sank in and drew him forth, gently wringing, two-finger tracing, and a slow-squeezing drag was all it took to finish him in the corner of Sherlock’s upright hip and forward-thrust thigh.

They breathed against each other, wanting to sink, sinking, falling together, falling and falling until Sherlock suddenly drew back, the drip of jewels down his chest tugging the front of John’s pullover away with them, until at last they were broken apart. John moved to tuck himself away, fasten his trousers in the dark, listening to Sherlock’s breath somewhere in the near distance.

John knew he was ruined.

“You’re so beautiful, Sherlock. You’re gorgeous.”

“You can’t see me.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m lying.” John strained to listen, stared at the crack under the door. “I think they’re gone.”

Sherlock, still whispering: “They are.”

“Turn on the light.”

There was a silent second. John ventured a half-step forward, and his extended hand found warm skin, rough faceted faces of jewels he slipped his fingers beneath. Here a rack of ribs, an elbow, and just the hint given by his hand showed him the shape of Sherlock’s body so that it was easy to slide an arm around his back, rest a hand on the side of his throat, thumb his jaw and draw him down into a kiss. A lingering pull at the sturdy bottom lip, then he drifted across to find Sherlock’s ear, raised his fingers to swing the weighty, dangling earring. Sherlock sharply sipped air.

“Mm?” John wondered, and caught the swinging earring between thumb and two fingers, stilled it. Gently pulled. Sherlock let out a quiet groan. John dipped his head, insinuated the tip of his tongue around the slender wire, just at the spot where it looped through Sherlock’s ear lobe. Sherlock went utterly still, but his breath thickened.

All at once, a spill of words in his full rumble of a voice. “I feel like you’re trying to destroy me.”

John’s lips brushed his ear, the wire. “Never,” he whispered. “Tell me to stop, though, or I’ll fall in love with you.” Kissed him there beside his ear, jaw smooth and soft. “Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s hands rested at John’s hips, and his fingertips dug in and retreated, pulsing.

John drew back from his ear. “Everyone has scars. I have scars. Here,” he reached for the hem of his jumper, started to untuck his shirt tails beneath. “Turn on the light and I’ll show you. Only fair.”
Sherlock found his hands and stilled them. “You don’t have to.”

“I don’t mind.”

A shifting slide, and Sherlock vanished from in front of him. A beat, two, and the door to the dressing room slid open a hand’s width. John blinked against the flood of light, rubbed his eyes with the flats of his fingertips. Once he’d adjusted to it, he found Sherlock leaning on one shoulder against the wall, an arm hugging his own waist, the other resting diagonally across his chest with long fingers massaging his own shoulder between the chains of the diamond bib. His chin was tilted down and his gaze was hooded by painted eyelids, dark smears of purple-black lipstick on his cheeks and chin, lips swollen from kissing, looking bruised.

His long white body was a riot of purple and pink and white scars—some flat, some raised, some dug into the surface as if carved there—from knees to hips, up his abdomen and chest, staining his arms from shoulder to elbow. All those marks, dressed in that constellation of diamond stars. John refused to gasp, wanted to shout. He let his lips part, schooled his breath. Sherlock turned. His back was a road map of suffering, red and blue, thick and thin, random tangles of new and old. Someone had recently burned his shoulder. Someone had many times cut him with a razor. Someone had put out about a hundred of their cigarettes on him.

John was suddenly very aware of the gun nestled against his own torso, under his bicep. His chest was on fire. His eyes were prickling. He wanted to roar. He knew better.

Sherlock dropped the arm that had been slung up over onto his shoulder, drawing John’s attention to the elegant fingers, the angle of the hand. Someone had broken his wrist.

“You promised you won’t ask,” Sherlock murmured, monotone, and after another moment he shoved the door open the rest of the way and walked into the dressing room, straight across to fetch out another dressing gown from a hook on a door. He draped it over himself, tied it at the waist. John stepped through the doorway, but just barely. I’ll put a bullet in him, I’ll put a bullet in him, I’ll put a bullet in him. His brain was clattering rage, but a display of violent temper was out of the question. He tamped it down, packed it tight. He’d had a lifetime of practice. They both spoke at once.

“You need to wash your face.”

“God, you’re beautiful.”

Sherlock shook his head, exhaling a protest through his nostrils. He plucked white cloths from a plastic box on the make-up table, passed them to John and motioned to the mirror over it. “Don’t kiss a drasha and think you can keep it a secret,” Sherlock told him, half-smiling. John looked at his reflection; his upper lip and chin, his cheeks and jaw and throat were stained with smudges of dark purple. He started to scrub; the cloths were damp and smelled of lavender.

“Don’t fall in love,” Sherlock said, and John caught his eye in the mirror.

“Tell me to stop, then, before I do.”

Sherlock said nothing.

John wiped at his neck, again and again, until the skin was clean but inflamed, raw. It felt good. It matched. “I thought not,” he said, and half-smiled. Sherlock smiled back, fingering the chains of the necklace absenty.

“What will we—?” Sherlock began.
John shook his head. “Don’t ask.” He tossed the balled-up, purple-stained cloths on the countertop, turned and reached for Sherlock, who wound arms around him easily, ducked down for a kiss he somehow knew John was about to offer, as if they’d rehearsed it—as if they had history. “I know you can’t stay all night,” John offered, before Sherlock had to start making excuses. “I’m about to go, only because I have to. For no other reason. Understand?”

Sherlock nodded, and kissed him quick, and pulled away. “One thing,” Sherlock said, and his voice was quiet, edged with hesitation. He lifted up a little metal dish from the make-up table and from beneath it, slid a white card. Tucked it into John’s trousers pocket, pressed the edge with his fingertips until he was sure it was safe. He met John’s gaze with pleading eyes still elaborately, darkly made-up. “Just one. It’s only one.”

“Can’t ask about that, either, I suppose,” John said flatly, though by now he’d mostly given up wondering. Nothing was as it seemed, after all; everyone he met was drowning in secrets, so why should Sherlock be any different? They had it in common.

“Just this one,” Sherlock begged, and leaned in to kiss him again. “I won’t. . . I hope I won’t—”

“Nevermind,” John soothed. “I have to leave now, or start asking.”

“Good night, then,” Sherlock murmured, and released him. John trailed Sherlock through the open door and the narrow passage. Sherlock slid open the door to the salon; they crossed to the lift and Sherlock pressed the button. They embraced and exchanged lingering, soft kisses until the doors slid open. John stepped inside, and they exchanged meaningful nods, soft little half-smiles. Once the lift doors closed, John counted to twenty before he punched the brushed steel surface of the door as hard as he could, denting it deeply, staggering back, cradling his throbbing fist.

*I’ll put a bullet in him. I’ll put a bullet in his beady little rat’s eye.*

*

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The fairy tale John retells in the salon is a loosely reinterpreted version of the Brothers Grimm's story, "Sweetheart Roland"
In chapter 22, John returned to Xie's salon, and had an urgent reunion with a nude but diamond-draped and still-made-up Sherlock in the darkness of a little floating world between two sliding doors. Sherlock revealed his scarred, abused body, and John controlled his urge to react with violent anger until he was out of Sherlock's sight.

* 
Please note this chapter includes allusions to war crimes against women and children (but no graphic descriptions of such).

**TEXT from [unknown]:** I've just bought you a gift.
**TEXT from [unknown]:** When can I see you again?
**TEXT from [unknown]:** Please say “in the morning.”
**TEXT from [unknown]:** That tea shop next door the laundry, maybe.
**TEXT from [unknown]:** Or whenever, as soon as you can.

The texts from John were waiting when Sherlock emerged from the steam-filled little bathroom, one towel wrapped around his hips, a second draped around his shoulders, and another turbaned around his head.

*You bought me a gift at two in the morning? –SH*

He called the security office, arranged a guard to escort the borrowed jewels down to the safe, then set his mobile aside while he dressed. He was already slipping into his shoes by the time it buzzed back to life with John’s reply.

**TEXT from [unknown]:** I’m walking back to mine. The shop was open.
**TEXT from [unknown]:** Saw it in the window and had to.
**TEXT from [unknown]:** You never said who the interesting person was at the party.

Sherlock thought about phoning him, but then he would want to keep talking, to hear John talking—for hours if not for the rest of the night—and the guard was already on his way up.

*Can I phone you in a bit? I know it’s late. –SH*

**TEXT from [unknown]:** Do you really think that needs asking?

The knock came just as Sherlock was deleting their texts.

“Come.”

It was Greg Lestrade.

“Didn’t know you were working tonight,” Sherlock commented, offering his hand. Greg shook it and his eyes went to the open box containing the extravagant diamond necklace, still open on top of the make-up table.
“That’s quite a little something,” Greg commented, with raised eyebrows.

Sherlock hummed absently. “Mm. It looks well with the gown. This shouldn’t take long; I’m sure you’ve other places to be.”


“Of course,” Sherlock said, shaking his head at himself, then reaching to slide the cover onto the necklace’s box. “I’m sure the jeweler won’t miss the stones I pried out,” he said evenly, and Greg immediately caught the joke and laughed. Sherlock patted his pockets for phone and keys. “I’ll carry the necklace, though there is something I can give you,” he said, and went into the narrow, central make-up drawer, reaching behind tiny pots and cracked compacts to remove a plain envelope, folded in half. “I was going to give it to Molly, but since you’re here.” He offered it to Greg without further explanation.

“About time,” Greg said grimly. He didn’t bother to check the contents, only half-knelt to slide the little packet into the shank of his boot, tugging his trousers-leg down firmly over it again before he stood.

“It’s not up to me,” Sherlock said, and tucked the jeweler’s black box of pebble-textured leather under his arm.

“Nevermind,” Greg told him. “D’you know how many?”

“About a dozen, I think.” Sherlock was itchy beneath the top layers of his skin, longing for the transaction to end. Once they were outside the dressing room, there were cameras in every corridor, some with sound recording, and he wouldn’t have to think about it anymore as Greg’s mouth was forced shut.


Sherlock nodded tightly. “I don’t want to know any of the details—didn’t Molly tell you?”

“Right, sorry.” Greg did not sound sorry. “Anything else?” he prompted, and Sherlock knew he was asking for information—dates and times, who and where—and Sherlock was glad he could answer honestly.

“He doesn’t know anything; he’s not involved. It’s only me. And I prefer to know as little as possible.”

Before Greg could press him further, Sherlock turned the doorknob and gestured for Greg to go ahead of him into the corridor.

“Yeah, aw’right.” They made their way toward the lift that would take them all the way down to the underground vaults. “Anyway, thanks,” Greg said, his voice low and his face barely moving. Then, with an air of finality, he added, “It’s just.”

Sherlock tipped his chin as if in agreement, but the truth was that he didn’t care about what was just, or about whatever scheme was afoot aimed at a huge, tragic disaster. There was a number in Sherlock’s head, and he was nearly there. He could see it from where he was, and then beyond it, he would be free. His was only to collect and pass on, skimming his tiny share each time. The rest was just politics, and politics had never interested him.
“You’re not too tired?”

“Don’t I wish.” John was in bed, undressed, with the lights out. Whether he could sleep was anyone’s guess, but he was willing to not even bother trying if it meant he could have Sherlock Holmes’s silky voice in his ear for a bit. “Where are you?”

“Bed.”

John thought to ask about the whereabouts of the rat-eyed husband but obviously it was none of his business.

“He texted me he’s sleeping in his office,” Sherlock offered, as if reading John’s mind. “Which means he’s definitely not sleeping, and probably not in his office.”

John could feel the tamped-down, compressed rage inside his chest throb and glow, like metal in a forge, but he refused to let it flare up; he would not take it out on Sherlock, who’d clearly already had more than his share of another man’s rage taken out on him. He said, “You don’t have to tell me anything.”

“I appreciate that you didn’t ask.”

John breathed, and heard Sherlock breathe.

“In bed together at last.” John joked quietly. Sherlock hummed, long and low.

“Do you sleep any better with someone else?”

“Don’t know. Since Will vanished, I haven’t had someone in bed with me all night.”

“You don’t spend the night?”

“They don’t.”

There was a pause, and John heard fabric rustling, hair against a pillowslip. “The ginger-haired woman in the red dress. She has an Identity Card that says she’s vlast, has a government job, but she’s doing intelligence ops for an insurgent group.”

“What, at the party tonight?”

“M-hm.” Sherlock sounded bored.

“Well, you’re right; that’s actually interesting. How did you know?” John asked.

“Her Russian is imperfect in a way that could be explained by not having been born a native speaker, but which is much more likely attributable to having learned it from people who, themselves, were never allowed to properly learn it.”

“‘Shlost folk.’”

“Da,” Sherlock replied. Then added, “Molodezh’—young ones—who’ve probably never actually heard a conversation na Russkom.”

“You speak Russian.” John was impressed.
“Da, konechno. Most of the guests at the salon are vlast; of course Xie would want to make them comfortable by conversing in the common tongue. Some of the young ones speak nothing but Russian, now—even those born here in England or on the continent.”

“Clever you,” John murmured—the dark room and his very good bed seemed to want whispering—“Cleverer by the minute.”

“You’re generous with praise,” Sherlock commented, as if cataloguing him.

“There’s a lot about you that wants praising,” John said plainly. “Tonight—earlier—that was . . .”

Sherlock let go a quick, inquisitive hum—hm?—and John imagined he could see one of the unruly eyebrows rising.

John couldn’t find the words. “Can I ask one thing?” he ventured. “Not about . . .”

“All right.”

“You said—the first time, when you gave me . . .you said a dangerous man was just the sort of man you need.”

After a moment, Sherlock prompted, “That’s not a question.”

John clarified. “To save you?”

“No.”

“I’ll do it. Say the word.”

“Shh.”

John turned over, flipped his pillow, drew in a long breath and sighed it back out. “I shouldn’t have said that; I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

“It’s not. I won’t . . .obviously you don’t want to discuss it so I won’t bring it up again. I’m being a callous and selfish idiot.”

“You’re quite hard on yourself, John,” Sherlock whispered. “You deserve more compassion.”

“I am the very last person who could ever be considered deserving of compassion.”

“You’re not a bad person.”

John huffed a bitter half-laugh. “I thought you could see people for who they really are. With your not-a-trick.”

“I’ve met quite a lot of people. Some of them were very bad people indeed. You’re nothing like any of them.”

John bit down on any more flippant replies. He and Sherlock were creeping hand-in-hand through a minefield: the revelation of Sherlock’s nude body, and the story it told, and all the questions inspired that John had been ordered not to ask. What he wanted was to whisper into the dark that Sherlock was magnificent; Sherlock was a prize; John was half in-love with him already. . .not a stupid, condescending threat to “save” him. Of course, it wasn’t that simple—for either of them.
What he really wanted to say was that he respected Sherlock enough to let him make his own fate. And if it was all right, if no one minded, John would like—somehow—to be beside him.

Setting aside the misguided notion that he was not a bad person, John said, “I know you don’t need saving. You make your choices and keep your promises and whatever else you do to make a life. Same as anyone. But still, I want to be clear. . .” John rubbed the bridge of his nose between thumb and fingers, squinting hard. “Nothing’s changed about what I want, or how I think of you, or how I feel—”

“Nothing?”

“Of anyone, Sherlock, I think I understand how complicated these things are. I only wish. . . Same as anyone would—of course I wish bad things hadn’t happened to you. Not to you, nor anyone, but especially—because of who I am, and because of whatever this is between us—especially not to you. I don’t want to save you, and I don’t wish you were any different. But.”

John gave up. Everything he tried to say edged into territory that could be construed as him rejecting Sherlock—his scars, the choices that got him where they were now. John knew it was a trap.

“You’re perfect. I only wish. . .”

“I’ve done all the wishing there is to do, John; don’t waste your time.”

“I mean it, Sherlock. You’re perfect. Do you believe me?”

“No.” It was utterly unadorned, a plain, flat statement of fact. John doubled back to take another path.

“Wish you were here; I’d like our arms around each other,” he murmured, and his eyes were at last growing heavy, and he turned one of the pillows sideways to clutch against his chest, nuzzled his nose and cheek into the pillow under his head.

“That sounds lovely,” Sherlock agreed. “When I’m finally there in your bed, I promise I’ll stay the night.”

Something in John’s chest flared. “Good. I’m dying to learn the smell of you first thing in the morning.”

“After you’ve had me,” Sherlock added, teasing, but without promise.

“Whether or not,” John told him. “I want to know absolutely everything—like I said in that letter—and so far on that front, I know Xie’s perfume smells of jasmine and your cologne smells of incense. I want to smell your skin. Just you and nothing else.” John recognized an edge of pleading in his voice—not so much a plea for Sherlock naked beside him, though there was probably that in it, as well, but a plea for his motives to be believed pure, his sincerity to be trusted.

Sherlock’s hushed voice was as sweet and watery as the velvet of Xie’s black gown as he said, “Soon as I can manage it.”

There was an automatic urge to give a dismissive reply that Sherlock needn’t go out of his way, shouldn’t take unnecessary risks, but John bit down on it. Whatever it took, he wanted it, and he couldn’t bring himself to discourage it.

“When you asked about my mother,” John almost-whispered, “that morning in the park. Asked if she got away. And then you said she was trying to protect us kids. That wasn’t really about her.”
There was a long pause, in which Sherlock breathed three times.

“John, please don’t ask.”

“It wasn’t a question.”

Sherlock deflected. “You don’t seem to have much compassion for her.”

“I have some,” John said. “But she had an obligation to us. We were just kids. I can’t help feeling . . .” he had to be careful, but still tell the truth. Eventually he finished, “She could have done more to keep us safe from him. From the way he was.”

“She kept herself alive.” It landed in John’s gut with a thud like a mortar; funny he hadn’t heard the whistling as it approached.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Did she never leave him? Not even for a while?”

“No,” John answered immediately, then something occurred to him. “Well. I guess maybe she did. When I was quite small—not even at school yet—there was one Christmas holiday with her sister’s family that went on and on, for weeks. She said my dad had to stay at home because of work. He came for the day, for gifts and dinner, and then left. That seems odd, now I think about it. And then one summer when I was a bit older, we stayed in a caravan at the seaside for an entire month without him. I don’t remember even asking why he wasn’t with us; it was such a relief to be away from him. She was much different when he wasn’t there.” John turned over on his back, rested his hand on the center of his chest. “I never thought about it. I suppose maybe those were times she did try to leave.”

“He probably said he was sorry and promised to change.” Sherlock’s voice was a quiet monotone. “She wanted to believe him because she’d made promises to him, and because she depended on him. And she remembered when it had been better, and wanted to think it could be that way again. Because he was her husband, and she loved him.”

John knew Sherlock was saying two things at once.

“Yeah. Probably. You’re right.”

“You can see why I issued a frank challenge, rather than giving you a creeping explanation,” Sherlock said evenly.

“Sherlock. . .” An unguarded moment; John wanted more than ever to touch him, hold him, look in his eyes while he said the words. “You worried I’d be, what, disdainful?”

Sherlock hummed.

“I can understand why, but you have to believe me when I say that there’s absolutely nothing you could show me or confess to me that I would react against. Not now. Anymore. Because honestly, Sherlock—”

“Shh. . .”

“—I’m already there.”

“Go to sleep, Captain Watson, will you? We can talk again tomorrow.”

“Yeah, all right.” John was flushing hot; it was far too much to say, and much too soon. Sherlock
didn’t need to contend with it, might not even want it. It seemed the dark was as bad as the drink for loosening John’s tongue in potentially disastrous ways.

“Go to sleep,” Sherlock whispered, “One thing I can assure you, though—as we’re, as you said, together in bed at last—is that you’re not there alone.” A soft click of his lips parting, with force, with purpose. “Goodnight.”

Good morning. I hope you slept. I did not. –SH
Thinking about the things we carry. –SH
There’s a lot. –SH

TEXT from [unknown]: A lot to think about, or a lot to carry?

Both. –SH

Sherlock made sure to miss Jim, shaved and dressed and arranged his hair carefully but half-again as quick. All this midmorning when he knew Jim was likely—wherever he’d really slept—to still be asleep. He left a note on Jim’s pillow.

J—
Missed you last night. Off to Babulya Ishi’s, then meet Ivor & Viv RE: ball gown/headpiece. Negotiating appearance in Bath; H of R just so-so but offer is very generous. Maybe we can make it a mini-break? Call me later.
—S

The note was a little less than half-true. It was true he was going to see Babulya Ishi, and had a meeting with designers about work they were doing on a look Xie would wear during the upcoming Unity Day festivities. Since they hadn’t taken a holiday together in years, Sherlock was confident Jim would reject the idea of making one of Xie’s guest appearances into one, which served, since there was in fact no such appearance upcoming; that bit was wholly untrue, and something in Sherlock’s gut fluttered as he put his lie to paper—like sickness, like butterflies. He couldn’t say whether he’d missed Jim the previous night. Probably not.

“Hardly as impressive as the seats you provided,” John joked, passing Greg a tall can of beer, which Greg popped open with a satisfying crack and sigh, “But at least there won’t be a queue for the gents’.”

“I appreciate the invitation,” Greg assured him. John settled into his usual armchair, set his own can of beer on the side table. Greg added, “Any time away from the Icehouse is time well spent.”

“You have a flat there?” John pointed the remote at the television set, tuned it to the right channel for the start of the South Cross match.
“Perk of the job. Or so They say. Have you ever lived in the same building where you work?”

John grunted a laugh, but answered, “I haven’t, no.”

“Yeah, well, avoid it if you can. At home, I’m still at work. I can feel the beat of the place all around me, even in my sitting room, even in my bed. Molly has a flat there, too. Being at hers is a bit better—at least it’s clean there, and smells nice.”

John grinned at this; he’d only barely shared living space with women since leaving home, but he knew precisely what Greg meant. Their bedrooms never smelled like old socks under the edge of the bed, covered in dried-up spunk and days-old sweat. Their kitchens had things in them like cinnamon and vanilla instead of overflowing rubbish bins full of crusted takeaway curries. He glanced around and wondered if the crazy one with the knives had sprayed her perfume about the place, or if the scent of her shampoo had lingered in the steam of the bathroom after she showered. If either had been the case, it was all long gone now. The place wasn’t stamped with the particular stench too common to a bachelor’s flat, but nor was there a trace of femininity to be found except perhaps the weighty velvet drapes that hinted at something grandmotherly. It was a nowhere place; blank and dull as the back room of a library or history museum.

They turned attention to the match as it got underway, drained a couple of beers each and talked only about the game for the bulk of the first half. South Cross scored one, nothing flash, but any point was a good one. The two threw up their arms and shouted cheers, flashing wide smiles at each other.

“That’s the way to do it, boys,” Greg exhorted the miniature figures on the screen. “Carry on, then. Carry on.”

“Another?” John offered, crossing to the fridge.

“Maybe a glass of water?”

John nodded and obliged, filling two of the least-grimy, though mismatched, drinking glasses and returning to the sitting room.

“How’s your girl, then?” John asked casually.

“Good.” Greg’s smile was even wider than the one he’d spent on the South Cross goal. “Yeah, good.”

“More talk about getting her a ring?” John ventured, mugging a bit as if the topic was horrifying.

Greg looked sheepishly into his glass, swirled it a bit as if the topic was horrifying.

Greg looked sheepishly into his glass, swirled it a bit. “Nah. She seems to have given up on that line.”

“Ah, well then,” John said, as if the matter was settled in Greg’s favour.

“But I’m thinking of buying one, anyway.”

John lurched forward in his chair, extended his right hand for a shake. “Well, congratulations, then!”

“Thanks, mate,” Greg allowed, and his handshake was firm and sure. “Well. Time will tell if I’ve got the bollocks to go through with it, but I had a long talk with myself and I’d be a fool not to give a girl like her whatever the hell will make her happy.”

John tapped the side of his nose with his finger tip. “You’re a smart man.”
“I don’t know about that, but for once in my life maybe it won’t all end in tears, eh?”

John raised his glass of water and they drank to Greg’s good sense.

They checked in with the match for a minute or so, and without looking away from the action, Greg said, “Listen, I want to apologise for being—you know—short with you, before. About my time in the army. In America.”

John immediately waved it away. “No, no, don’t apologise. I’ve been there; I should know better than to ask questions.”

“Well if I was going to talk about it, it’d more likely be to someone who’s been there. It’s just that I don’t.” He shrugged. “Talk about it.”

“Really, don’t worry about it. I should apologise to you for even asking.”

John crossed his arms in front of his chest, kept his eyes on the match.

Greg shifted heavily in the leather armchair, making it rustle and squeak a bit beneath him. “You know how it is there.”

John got the sense Greg wanted to talk, but reminded himself to tread lightly, so he only said, “Yeah.”

“I told you my unit was doing the widows and orphans circuit,” Greg offered, and ran his fingertips in a hard scrubbing motion over the knee of his trousers, back and forth, expending nervous energy. John only hummed acknowledgment. “And that we had no medics.”

“Right,” John replied, bracing himself for what he imagined was going to be the sort of war story veterans never shared with civilians. He’d heard his share, never told one—he had never trusted anyone enough—but there were things soldiers had seen, especially in the Americas, that would raise the hair on anyone’s neck.

Greg swerved away from whatever he might be on the verge of saying. “Can I—I’ll get us another?” He started to rise, gestured toward the kitchen.

“Sure, sure, help yourself,” John said. “Though if you’re up for it, there’s decent whisky right there on the mantel.” He gestured with his chin, and Greg followed the motion with his eyes.

“Join me?” Greg offered.

“Yeah, of course.”

They exchanged grins as if they were getting away with something, and Greg poured them each a couple glugs of the whisky into what was left of the water in their glasses. Greg resumed his seat, and they turned attention back to the match, nearing the half-time, and sipped the whisky with quiet exclamations in praise of its quality.

“Turns out my squad was full of psychopaths,” Greg said suddenly, but without emotion, merely stating a fact. He cut a glance at John, who raised his eyebrows, inviting him to continue but reserving judgment. Greg took a pull of the whisky and grimaced. “We were put at a forward base that was essentially meant to be a shelter for women and children—lots of orphaned kids, or kids tagging along with some mum that wasn’t their own—but we had not a single resource, not even food to give them.”
He paused and chewed on the skin next to his thumbnail, then finished what was left in his glass in one go, gripping it so hard John could see the tendons inside his wrist were taut beneath his skin. Greg retrieved the bottle from the mantel and quickly splashed more whisky in the glass. He kept his back turned as he went on, though John could see the top half of his frowning face in the mirror that hung above the fire. Greg’s eyes were closed.

“What it really was,” Greg said, “was a bloody rape factory.”

He tipped the glass again, and swallowed audibly, then resumed his seat. John’s stomach churned but he schooled his expression.

“You don’t want to hear it,” Greg said next, dismissing his confession. “I should never have said.”

John was quiet. “You’re all right. I mean—” He cleared his throat. “Whatever you want to say. Just that much and no more.” John had never heard that phrase before—“rape factory”—and nothing he’d seen or heard outside his own woefully under-supplied clinics would rise to a level that would invite such a gruesome title. But he believed anything was possible over there; it was a stinking hellhole in every calculable dimension. For all the good it might do, John said, “I was there.”

Greg stared at nothing, halfway between himself and the floor, lost in his own thoughts. “I didn’t—” he started. “I wasn’t about that. I never. . .”

John waited.

“Well, what more needs to be said?” Greg said, shrugging though his expression and tone were anything but casual. “The women prostituted themselves. . .or other women’s children. . . and sometimes their own. In exchange for food, tampons, soap. The men in my unit—”

John felt queasy; he could imagine it happening, only too easily.

“Or if the women and kids wouldn’t be bought. . .That never stopped them—the men—no brothers of mine, you understand.”

“No,” John agreed immediately. “No, of course not.”

“You’re sure it’s all right for me to say?” Greg asked, and at last met John’s eyes. John struggled to maintain the gaze, for he had never seen a man he wasn’t in the middle of having sex with look so entirely vulnerable, like John could kill him with just a cruel look or misplaced word.

“Whatever you need to say,” John assured, nodding to confirm it.

Greg nodded back, and the look of relief that came over his face collapsed it, and even sank into his shoulders and down his arms.

“All night, most of the day. . .you’d hear them crying. The women sweet-talking, trying to protect the kids. And. . .you’d hear the men. Grunting like animals. Shouting, beating them.”

He hung his head.

John said, “It’s not—” and every word that might have come next was ludicrously inadequate. “That’s shit,” he said after a long pause. “It’s complete shit and I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well,” Greg said, and again tried to shrug it off, which of course was impossible, but John knew the feeling. “I reported it. Three fucking times in two months I reported it.”
“And They didn’t do anything,” John finished for him, nothing like a question because he knew how responsive Unity was to anything other than reports that a particular area was empty of people and ready to be plundered.

“Of course they didn’t,” Greg said bitterly. “In the end all they did was move us. The base stayed, all the civilians. Some of them cried as we left—the women—thinking these monsters were their boyfriends and would take them away back to the world. Another squad rotated in to replace us. I’m certain nothing changed.”

There was a long, silent pause, while Greg stared into his glass, swirling it slowly, and John only watched him. Job or no, regardless of whether Greg Lestrade was an asset, a potential target, or the fucking general of the resistance army, what John saw in Greg at that moment was a man as broken as he was, in his own way, and by similar circumstance. Men like them were the price the world paid for Unity’s three-day work week and pleasure districts and houses of repose. Unity was peace for some. Not for the two of them, sat in this low-grade flat trying to watch a football match but somehow in the end talking about life-wrecking trauma handed them courtesy of Unity. So what if he’s Deep Sea? John figured. If anyone had a valid reason for wanting to destroy Unity, it was him. Let him do what he would.

Greg’s head snapped up suddenly. “You can’t tell anyone,” he said.

John rushed to reassure him, shaking his head decisively. “No. I wouldn’t. And there’s no—“ he swirled his hand in the air. “Don’t worry; the flat’s not monitored or anything.”

Greg looked relieved, then puzzled. “Why would it be?” he asked.

“No, it wouldn’t,” John said. “But... you know, I checked when I moved in because you never really know. And even out those windows—“ he hoped he wasn’t sounding as scrambly as he felt. “There’s no cameras aimed this way, or anything.” He set his glass aside and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Look. Sorry. That sounds mad, I know. The point is.” He clasped his hands. “Of course this is between us. I get it; I understand.”

“You can’t tell Sherlock,” Greg clarified.

“Yeah, no,” John agreed.

“If you’re still friendly, I mean.”

“We... yeah, we are. But I wouldn’t tell him. That’s your story. It’s yours to tell. Or to keep.”

Greg looked relieved and sat back, scrubbed both hands up and down his cheeks, blew out a huffing breath.

“Thanks,” he said, and there was weight in it.

“Yeah, of course.”

John thought someone more experienced with intel, smoother and more confident about how to work an asset rather than about how to simply terminate a target, would probably know how to exploit this moment of male bonding and charged openness to somehow get “in” with Greg, a suspected (John now thought likely) member of a resistance movement bent on violent revolution. That, however, was not his area of expertise, and so he acted on his instinct. He stood, and offered his hand.

Greg looked at it for a long second, then at John’s face, held serious and respectful of a fellow soldier, a fellow veteran of the hell of the Americas. Greg stood, and they shook. Greg nodded
tensely and John leaned forward and wrapped his free arm around Greg’s back, thumped him a bit. Greg returned the gesture, and John knew by instinct the meaning held in this outwardly not-terribly-intimate male posturing.

They were proper mates, then. The intel could wait.
In chapter 23, John and Sherlock exchanged coded declarations, and John heard Greg Lestrade's confession.

* Please note this chapter details a character's experience of a panic attack.

“This absolutely cannot wait.” The Mentor’s hands were resting on the arms of his enormous chair, slightly pushed back from his enormous desk to allow for legs crossed in what John would have derided as a womanly fashion, had he less respect for women. “You say you’ve developed a decent rapport with Lestrade. Perhaps the time has arrived for a bold gesture.”

“Right. I ask him the best way to earn my Deep Sea mad bomber merit badge, turns out your hunch is wrong, I’m arrested for treason.”

“Keep my number on speed dial. You can almost certainly reach me in time not to be executed.”

John tipped his head, grimacing, and shook his finger in oh you scamp fashion. “You should work that up for a cabaret. That wit.” He shook his head.

The Mentor narrowed his eyes a bit. “Are you unaware, Captain, that there is an insurgency brewing which risks countless lives, as well as threatening governmental stability?”

“You’re threatening my stability,” John shot back. “Did you get that information I asked for? About Lestrade’s son?”

The Mentor uncrossed his legs to lean forward and shuffle what little there was cluttering his desktop. He drew out a grey folder and made a move as if to hand it over, then drew it back, letting it hover beside his shoulder. “I have a dossier here: name, work history, vital statistics.”

“Excellent,” John said, not giving the Mentor the satisfaction of reaching for it.

“It’s strictly informational, of course. What Lestrade chooses to do with that information is at his discretion.” The Mentor attempted a staredown, rapidly failed, and extended the folder, which John accepted and set on his knee without looking inside. “This file is delivered without implication or promise.”

“Yes, I get it. You’re not going to be hosting the family reunion.”

“I do so enjoy our little chats, Captain Watson. This lively back-and-forth, our special affinity. . .”

John rolled his eyes. “Anything else?”

The Mentor sat back again, dragging one fingertip in slow swirling patterns across the desktop. “Unity Day approaches—”

“I’ve already ordered a cake.”
“—as you know, and there is solid intelligence that something is planned for that day.” The Mentor’s eyes met John’s, and there was a gravitas in his gaze that knocked John’s fresh-mouthed bravado down a few clicks. “Something massive, and potentially disastrous. All roads lead to the Icehouse, Captain. You must insinuate yourself, and find out anything and everything you can, as soon as possible. I know you’re not averse to taking risks.”

John half-shook his head. “Nope.”

“Take one.”

Sherlock had borrowed a rolling rack from one of the guest room bellmen and piled three of his suitcases on it—one for wigs, one for shoes, the smallest for make-up. Two garment bags hanging from the rail above would hold the miles and miles of silk gown, and the long gossamer coat that complemented it. He’d done it dozens of times; it should have been routine, but instead he found himself crisscrossing the flat, getting halfway to his office before remembering something he needed from the bathroom, or sliding open the drawer of his nightstand and immediately forgetting what he thought he would find there. The suitcase he normally used for wigs held socks and belts and two wristwatches; a stack of coffee table books; grid paper and coloured pencils and the scissors with Fabric ONLY written on the blades in permanent ink. The case meant for Xie’s shoes was full of his shoes, but each time he passed he removed a pair and replaced it with a different one. In the case for Xie’s make-up: sky blue air-brush paint that had separated, nail varnish in the same sorry state, and lipstick that smelled sour and looked as if it had sweated itself to death, all left there after Xie’s last out-of-town appearance, which had been in Manchester nearly a year earlier.

From the slim middle drawer of his desk, Sherlock took the cards and letters he’d saved, most recently—but not all—from John, and his grandfather’s fountain pen. He’d want his cologne, of course, so strode back to the dressing room and plucked it off the marble top of the central island. Neckties. No, but suits first. And shirts. A comb. His toothbrush. No, but suits first, he was already here. He scanned. Dark grey wool; blue windowpane check; matte black three-button; indigo, with the powder blue shirt—or was that at the dry cleaner?

His phone came alive in his pocket and shocked him back to reality. He dumped his handful of letters and the half-gone bottle of cologne into the make-up case, then pulled open the zip on a garment bag as he answered.

“What time’s your train? I’ll come up and say goodbye.”

“Don’t bother; I’ll stop by on my way out. You’re in the office?” Sherlock grabbed five suits at random and hung them in the first bag, pacing back and forth between the rolling rack and the wall where his clothes were hung.

“For a bit, but I’ve got meetings. Are you in the flat now? I’ll come up in a quarter hour.”

“Finishing up here, then the salon dressing room, and the vault for the clothes.” Shirts, at least a half-dozen, at least one white. Sherlock hung those in the other garment bag. The shoes in the second suitcase caught his eye again, and he wanted to swap the mahogany wingtips for the oxblood.

“All right, fine. Call me when you’re on the way to the vault and if I’m free I’ll come out.”

“Good. Sounds good.” Sherlock sat on the bench at the foot of the bed, dropped his forehead into his
hand, but immediately dragged himself back up. If he let himself stop, or even slow down, he’d never even make it out of the flat.

“All right, sweetheart.” Jim’s voice indicated he was already fully distracted by something other than their conversation, and he rang off without giving Sherlock time to say goodbye.

Sherlock dialed Molly, then started toward the bathroom for his toothbrush and some other thing he’d already forgotten, but he’d know it when he saw it.

“Molly, you remember the fair-weather clouds gown? Pale blue, with the white underskirts? There’s a corset dyed to match, and a coat. Detachable train.”

“It’s an old one, though?” Molly replied. Every drasha-related discussion with her was easy; it was like they’d been having one long conversation for several years, with pauses but no real ending.

“It is a bit,” Sherlock allowed. So old he didn’t care what happened to it. “Can you have it in the dressing room, soon as you can? And if you could scare up a couple of empty boxes or bins or something? I have some things I need to...” He was on his way back to his little office. “Contain.”

“What, the overgrown bramble-bush of shoes? At the back of the wardrobe?”

“Something like that,” Sherlock replied, forcing a smile around it.

“Easy enough. Just a tick, then.”

He thanked her and rang off. In the lowest drawer of his desk was a thick envelope on which he’d long ago scrawled, IMPORTANT. He fetched it, and then the oil-slick coloured chunk of quartz John had given him that afternoon in the park when Sherlock had forgotten to take off his wedding ring, and written his own name fifty times, and kissed John beneath a willow tree. Across the corridor, then, to Jim’s mirror-image office. The nearly-empty shelves were filled with books Jim had never read, knickknacks that held no sentimental meaning to him, and a framed photo of the two of them together, smiling—so young—with their arms around each other’s shoulders. Sherlock took that, too.

John had meandered a bit, took his time getting back to the flat after an hour spent poking his finger under the ribs of the Mentor, trying to make him flinch, with even less success than usual; by the time he arrived back in Baker Street it was just the leading edge of dusk, the sun still above the actual horizon, but below the artificial one created by endless, packed-together buildings. At the top of the stairs on the landing was a small table, and John found set upon it a loaf of cake on a chintz plate, under cling film, with a tented note beside it telling him the landlady had baked a few extra and she hoped he’d enjoy it with his tea. John smiled as he fetched it up, tried to sniff it through the plastic wrap. Such a normal thing to do—leave a cake for a bachelor neighbor—it warmed him with gratitude, and he ignored the cool frost of shame that followed it. He was so far from normal. Then again, she’d been the landlady of this flat for a long time. Maybe she knew.

In the door and he locked it behind him, cling-filmed dish on the kitchen table, coat on the back of a chair, holster unstrapped, gun in the nightstand. Cuppa and cake, don’t mind if I do. Switched on the kettle, went into the cupboard for a mug and tea bag. When he peeled back the corner of the cling film, the cake identified itself as apple and spice, so pure and sweet and homely John bent down over the plate just to inhale it before it got away. He broke off a good chunk from the corner, no bother
with a knife or plate though he did cup his right hand beneath to catch the crumbs. He groaned out loud, because he was hungrier than he’d realised, and it was just sweet enough, soft and slightly oily, warm with cinnamon and nutmeg and allspice and clove. He’d have the whole thing eaten by morning, surely.

As he moved to pour the water for the tea, the buzzer went. John froze on the spot, flicked a glance toward the bedroom and his pistol. He left it, figuring that given his belly full of nice cake, if it turned out he’d made a mistake in judgment, at least his final minutes had been pleasant ones. Once he was at the bottom landing, he made a mental note to tell the Mentor how ridiculous it was that there was no peephole in the front door of a flat primarily used to house government operatives, kept his body behind the door as he pulled it open.

“He thinks I’m in Bath.”

“Ah, Sherlock.” John let his smile do as it would, which was to stretch itself wide and show his teeth.

“I should have called, or sent a text, but I was afraid I’d lose my nerve.” Sherlock had a garment bag draped over one arm. Behind him, at the edge of the pavement, a rickshaw puller was hovering near the back of his taxi with one hand on the handle of a suitcase. “Is this...?” Sherlock started, then seemed to second-guess himself and take a different tack. “I shouldn’t have assumed, of course.”

John pulled the door wide and leaned to motion at the rickshaw puller to bring Sherlock’s case.

“Come in,” he grinned, and laid his hand on Sherlock’s elbow just beyond the edge of the garment bag. “This is a wonderful surprise.” He stepped aside for Sherlock to pass into the front hall, and fumbled for his own IC to swipe a gratuity for the driver as he took custody of the bag.

“Just a few nights. Or. Just.”

“I’m thrilled,” John assured him as he shut the heavy door behind the driver and hefted Sherlock’s suitcase. He motioned upstairs. “You remember the way.”

Once they were inside the flat, John set Sherlock’s case just inside the door, and Sherlock draped his garment bag over the back of the red armchair in the lounge. John took his long, dark coat from him and hung it on the hall tree, on the way grabbing his own coat from the kitchen chair where he’d left it. They stood at a distance, neither of them seeming to know where to be.

“Drink?” John offered. “Or. . .I’m having tea. And there’s cake.”

“Tea would be nice,” Sherlock replied. He was dressed in a slate grey suit, blush-pink shirt open at the neck. His shoulders were slightly raised, the creases in his forehead deeply pronounced.

“Sit down, if you like. Make yourself at home.”

Sherlock hummed, looked around and eventually settled on the grey leather armchair. He sat, set his ankle atop the opposite knee.

“A few nights, you said?” John felt like he’d won a prize he hadn’t entered a contest for, tried to keep his tone from venturing into the realm of giddiness.

“It was presumptuous; I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Not at all. I told you I’m thrilled, and I know better than to lie. How do you take it?”
“Milk, no sugar.”

“Cake?”

“God, no.”

“It’s quite good,” John offered, breaking another hunk off for himself. “The landlady baked it.”

“Thanks, no. Just the tea.” Sherlock gave him a small smile as he accepted the mug John offered. John sat in the other armchair opposite Sherlock, didn’t lean all the way back so as not to crush the contents of garment bag.

“I was going to order a takeaway later, for dinner,” John said. Sherlock nodded, half-smiled with closed lips.

“It’s good to see you,” Sherlock said quietly, and John could tell that it wasn’t small talk; he wondered what precisely it was they weren’t talking about but was willing to wait it out. Sherlock sipped the tea, wrapped his long fingers around the mug as if to warm them. “I told my husband Xie would be doing a special appearance at a house of repose in Bath, at twice the normal appearance fee. He doesn’t expect me back for three nights.”

John immediately imagined Sherlock, tangle-haired, asleep in the slant of morning sunlight that fell across the pillows of the very good bed, and smiled as he chewed the last bit of the apple-spice cake.

“I’ve left him.”

Sherlock set his suitcase on a small wooden parson’s chair in the corner of John’s bedroom, slid open the zip and lifted the flap to rest it against the chairback. John was in the kitchen, washing up tea mugs and wine glasses and the mismatched flatware they’d used to eat Chinese takeaway from paperboard containers. Sherlock’s eyes ached as he shifted rolled-up silk socks and a stack of pocket squares from the case to the top drawer of the chest. John had cleared out two already half-empty drawers for him, as well as shoving aside his few things on the rod in the wardrobe so Sherlock could hang his suits and shirts. Inside his garment bag was Xie’s old sky-blue gown, and behind it, safely hidden in case anyone were to check, the suits and shirts. Sherlock took inventory as he went, the careless, haphazard way he’d packed now obvious as he tried to mentally match belts and shoes, handkerchiefs and shirts. He had an armful of clothing but only one or—at most—two complete outfits. He’d forgotten his comb, wished he’d brought his tank watch, regretted having brought not even one white shirt.

“I don’t think I’d even decided,” he’d said into a glass of over-sweet red wine after picking his way through a few bites of lemon-and-honey-sauced chicken and a few forkfuls of rice. John went around the flat clicking on lamps as the daylight faded once and for all. “At least not until after I’d brought it all to the dressing room and stowed the boxes Molly brought in the back of the shoe cupboard.” He’d repacked everything once he was in Xie’s dressing room, most of it going into two cardboard boxes and left behind for safe keeping, just the one garment bag and the smallest suitcase going with him when he left.

John’s eyes were soft with sympathy, and Sherlock would have felt sharply self-conscious and feared being pitied except that he so desperately needed sympathy just then.

“He’ll tear the flat apart trying to figure out where I’ve gone. Once he knows I’ve left.”
“That’s why you put your papers and that in the dressing room?”

“I have the only key to that cupboard, so even if someone lets him the dressing room, it should be safe. Last time, he ripped up the only photos I had left of my family.”

John’s lips tightened and he shook his head; Sherlock could tell it was purposely controlled. John was coming close to a boil every few minutes as they talked, then cooling back down before bubbling up again.

“How many times. . .?”

“Three.”

John nodded, sipped his wine.

“Once, he found me by getting the desk clerk at the hotel I was in to admit I was there—probably by charm or bribery. He packed my bags, all the while calling me overdramatic and ridiculous, and I didn’t argue. I’d used up all my energy getting the nerve to go, so when he came to reclaim me it seemed inevitable. The next time, I went back on my own because—” Sherlock stopped, met John’s gaze and then flicked his eyes away, settling them on the mantel clock, which was stopped at ten past four. “I wanted to have sex with him one last time. But then once I was home of course I couldn’t bring myself to leave again.”

“I understand,” John said quietly.

“You don’t,” Sherlock corrected him immediately, “But it’s all right that you don’t. The third time, I managed to stay away for two weeks, but eventually I had to go back to work, and he wouldn’t stay away, made a scene in the salon that could have ruined me and the reputation of the Icehouse. I couldn’t get him to move out of the flat. I felt like I would lose my entire life—the salon, my career—and I couldn’t bear it. What else would I do?” Sherlock looked to John as if for an answer to this impossible question he’d asked himself off and on since the very first time the back of Jim’s hand came smashing across his cheek. John clearly had nothing to offer so Sherlock quickly let him off the hook. “The answer is, nothing. There’s nothing else I could do. Or would want to do. And Jim built the whole thing with me.”

“You felt obligated to him,” John offered.

“I just couldn’t imagine—still can’t imagine—how the place would exist without him in it, to run it, just as much as I can’t imagine the Icehouse without Xie in the penthouse salon. It just doesn’t. . .” Sherlock grimaced. “. . .fit.”

“So you went back.”

“In fact,” Sherlock corrected, “I was willing to keep trying to imagine it. I thought if I just talked it through with him, he’d understand we’re too toxic to be together. . .”

“He’s too toxic,” John said firmly, quickly, cutting off Sherlock’s explanation. “It’s not you together that’s the problem. It’s that he’s a—”

“John.”

A gust of breath out his nostrils, a sip of his wine, and John closed his eyes for a moment, composing himself. “[I apologise. But.”

Sherlock wouldn’t let him go on, instead resumed what he’d been saying as if John hadn’t
interrupted. “I thought he might let me go, we’d get divorced and he could ask to be reassigned to another house of repose—he really is a good administrator, he could work anywhere—but he made it clear he wasn’t going anywhere. It ended in an argument, and. Well.” Sherlock shrugged. “In the end, I resigned myself. If I wanted all the rest of my life—what there is of it—I must have him, as well. And he isn’t always like that.”

John nodded, cleared his throat. “So what’s different now? A dangerous man with a gun.”

The hairs on Sherlock’s forearms rose, prickling at the sudden cool edge to John’s voice.

“If you don’t want me here,” Sherlock began, though his heart was thrumming out his desire—no, his need—to stay right where he was, at least until he’d sorted things out a bit, made a plan.

“That’s not it. I do want you.” John scooted up to the front edge of his chair and reached across to rest his hand on Sherlock’s thigh just above his knee. The weight of his palm and fingers was a relief, and Sherlock instantly felt more real.

“When you said,” Sherlock started. But. What had John said? A jolt went down Sherlock’s spine. John hadn’t, actually, said. On the phone he’d rushed out a jumbled tangle, trying to reassure Sherlock that his scars didn’t matter, the contraband ICs he kept dumping on John without explanation didn’t matter, but in the end. . .he hadn’t actually said. Sherlock felt queasy and set his wine glass on the side table.

John’s wide eyes narrowed and his eyebrows dipped toward each other over the bridge of his nose. “All right? You look a bit pale.” He moved his hand toward Sherlock’s face, perhaps to feel his cheek for fever? A doctor’s reflex. Sherlock jerked out of his reach and John withdrew, apologising. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s fine,” Sherlock stammered. He needed to move. He couldn’t breathe. “I’m fine. Only.”

“You’re shivering,” John said, and this time he pressed two fingers against the side of Sherlock’s neck, and Sherlock let him. “Heart’s racing?” John asked.

Sherlock’s eyes were hot, his throat was tight and filling—he was going to choke. He could hear his breathing, sharp and quick through his nose, and suddenly his entire upper body seized and it was as if he was vomiting air—an urgent, shuddering exhalation that broke into several pieces. His palms were slick with damp, and he clutched at the sleeve of John’s shirt, felt the sturdy forearm beneath the weave of the fabric. Everything was hazy grey; his vision was closing to a pinprick.

“Head down, or you’re going to pass out,” John said—calm and serious—miles away—and his hand pressed the back of Sherlock’s neck. Sherlock let himself be guided, still clutching John’s arm, until his belly touched his thighs and his head dangled between his knees. John’s hand stayed at the back of his neck, cradling the base of his skull. “Just try to breathe normally. Having a bit of a panic but I promise you’re safe. All right?”

Sherlock shook his head No. The pressure as blood rushed to his head made his eyes feel strange and buggy, so he closed them.

“Have you had panic attacks in the past?”

Sherlock shook his head No again.

John’s hand moved in deliberate, small undulations down and up Sherlock’s neck. “That’s all this is. I know you probably feel sick, but you’re all right. I promise you’re all right. This will pass in a
minute. Just breathe.”

“I need to get out of here,” Sherlock said urgently, and started to raise his head. John’s hand was firm.

“Just another minute. If you get up you’re going to faint. Just think about breathing.”

“I have to go,” Sherlock repeated, and he had never in his life felt so strong a need to get the hell away from anywhere. But it wasn’t that he needed to get away from John, or the leather chair he was doubled over in, or the shabby flat. He wanted to run away from himself. He wanted out of his skin. He wanted to get away from this feeling, whatever this was, this weight in his body that felt like doom. “I need to go home.” He forced himself back up to sitting. “You don’t understand. I have to. I have to.” His fingers clutched the leather armrests, his clammy palms sliding uncomfortably. He scrubbed them quickly down the front of his trousers. “I can’t...”

“Sherlock,” John said, and he was standing beside Sherlock now—when had he gotten up from his chair?—and put his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder.

“I’ve made a terrible—”

“Breathe.”

“—a terrible mistake. I’m sorry.” The doom was rising up out of him, slowly evaporating away. But there was something else; he was going to shatter apart. “I shouldn’t have come.”

“Shh, you’re fine,” John said. Sherlock shook his head furiously. “Really not.”

“Your colour’s coming back already,” John told him. “Drink this; it’s better than nothing.” John handed him his wine glass and Sherlock’s hand trembled as he raised it to dry lips, ready to gulp. “Slowly,” John prompted, and Sherlock only sipped. The hand on Sherlock’s shoulder gently squeezed, moved, squeezed again. “Feeling a bit better?”

Sherlock shut his eyes and was surprised when he felt a tear stream from one, all the way down his cheek to drip off his jaw. His skin felt tight and cold in the trail of it.

“Well, that’s embarrassing,” Sherlock murmured, and didn’t open his eyes. John’s hand kept up its rhythmic, here-and-there squeezing of his shoulder, upper arm, and neck, reminding Sherlock of his parameters.

“Not at all,” John soothed. “It’s a lot, what you’ve done today. Anyone might have a bit of a breakdown.”

Sherlock needed to finish what he’d started to say, or lose his nerve and leave a live wire hanging over their heads, buzzing and dropping sparks.

“What’s different is that you said things...that reminded me what it’s supposed to feel like. And it was as if, all at once, I let out this massive breath I didn’t even know I’d been holding for years. And then I just carried on breathing. And it’s different.”

There. That would do. Sherlock opened his eyes but didn’t look at John, couldn’t bear to.

“I’m glad,” John said softly, and his hand that had finally stopped squeezing drifted up the back of Sherlock’s neck a bit, and his fingers insinuated themselves into Sherlock’s hair there, winding and
gently pulling at the curls. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you need. You can have the bedroom, if you need privacy, time to think. I’ll kip on the sofa.”

Sherlock wasn’t sure at all that he wanted John anywhere so distant from him, now he’d taken the great leap out of the penthouse salon, but did appreciate that John was giving him space.Choices.

“When will he miss you?” John asked gently, and one fingertip made a tight swirl against the back of Sherlock’s neck as he fiddled with Sherlock’s hair.

“No until the day after tomorrow, at least.”

“I’ll put your things in the bedroom,” John volunteered, and his tone became a bit businesslike, taking the situation in hand. Sherlock was grateful for how normal it seemed. “You can unpack a bit and get sorted while I wash up in the kitchen.”

And so as it neared midnight, Sherlock tucked socks and belts and handkerchiefs into John’s chest of drawers as if everything was normal. He couldn’t remember being so tired, so early in the evening for a very long while; the momentary panic had wound him tight as he could go, and once he’d unspooled, he found it difficult to gather himself back up, and thought he might as well give into it. Once he’d hung his shirts and suits in the wardrobe and zipped the garment bag shut beside them, he moved to sit on the edge of the bed. He unbuttoned his shirt cuffs, then leaned over to untie his shoes.

John’s shadow fell across the floor by the toes of Sherlock’s oxfords; he leaned against the doorframe, not actually stepping into the room.

“Flat’s all locked up,” he said. “Downstairs, and the doors here.” He motioned with his thumb over his shoulder. You’re safe here, John said without saying, Even if he finds the place, he can’t get in. “Do you need anything?”

“No, nothing. Thank you.” Sherlock toed off his shoes, nudged them under the edge of the bed. He reached out a hand, and John stepped through the door to take it, and they drew each other near. Sherlock sighed into their embrace. “You don’t have to stay on the sofa, of course.” Sherlock leaned back to look, and John’s eyebrows had risen, questioning.

“You’re sure? I don’t mind. I don’t want you to feel. . .overwhelmed.”

“I don’t,” Sherlock assured him, and guided him sideways, turned him a bit, crowded him until he had no choice but to sit, and then lean back, and then lie down against the pillows, as Sherlock stretched out beside him and leaned over him, nuzzling his forehead against John’s temple and then littering little kisses along his jaw and cheek, the corner of his mouth. “I don’t feel overwhelmed. I feel like I can finally breathe.”
In chapter 24, Sherlock showed up at John's flat with a suitcase and a garment bag. He panicked, and then later unpacked, and eventually pushed John down on the bed.

Face to face in bed in the dark, each with an arm around the other, kissing hard and soft, whispering affirmative nothings, bringing each other off with slick palms and curled fingers, and John wished for it to go on and on but nevertheless there was a cascading sense of relief at the finish, a desperately needed release of tension that unpolluted the air around them. Afterward, they stretched and wriggled, discovering their places, flipping the pillows, tugging and tucking the blankets. John nudged his big toe up and down Sherlock’s calf, unsettling and smoothing all the little hairs. His arm rested across Sherlock’s slim waist, the tip of his chin in the hollow of Sherlock’s shoulder. They were quiet, but neither slept.

“You’re sure it’s all right,” Sherlock eventually dared to whisper.

John reflexively dipped his face to place a kiss, small and quick, on Sherlock’s shoulder. “What is? You being here?”

“Mm.”

“Of course it is.” Sherlock slipped his hand up from its resting place on his own thigh to catch John’s forearm there at his middle. John asked quietly, “Do you feel safe?”

“I do.”

“Good then.”

They’d carried on, in barely-there voices, sometimes with long pauses as they tried in vain to sleep. John asked about nights Xie might miss in the salon and Sherlock explained he’d had Molly reschedule a few parties for his usual nights off, a few weeks hence. Sherlock confessed an urge to go back, just to retrieve more clothes; John suggested he could arrange with Molly to have them sent, or that John could meet her to pick them up. Sherlock worried about not getting Xie’s mail. He said he didn’t like all the loose ends; it made him feel frantic, as if he had fled.

“I keep thinking I’ll never see the inside of the salon again,” he whispered, at last, and the daylight was just beginning to creep in, the pigeons starting to coo on the roof. His voice was tight and breathless, and his hand went quickly to his face, the flats of his fingers swiping his cheek.

“You will,” John whispered, and braced himself up on one elbow to stroke a hand down the center of Sherlock’s chest, over and over, slowly soothing. “Of course you’ll see it again. All this will get sorted, and you’ll be right back where you belong.”

“He won’t just let me go,” Sherlock said plaintively. “He won’t just...”

“Shh.”

“. . .give up.”
John, having already asked—in so many words—if Sherlock wanted Jim killed, somehow still felt he may be overstepping even as he suggested, “You could report it.”

They both knew the likely result of involving the authorities—detailing the abuse, showing even a fraction of the marks Sherlock wore as a result of it—would almost certainly be immediate conviction and execution; it was just how things worked. Unity was peace, and violating the peace of an individual also violated the peace of society; those who did so were quietly, decisively—immediately—removed from society.

“I can’t,” Sherlock murmured, and it sounded so like an apology, John wished he could stuff his stupid suggestion right back in his mouth.

“I understand.”

“Of course you don’t,” Sherlock said gently.

John didn’t understand, not fully. His finger itched with wanting to squeeze the trigger that would propel a slug into Jim Moriarty’s glassy eye, end him, free Sherlock, tie up the whole mess in one of those ribbons he’d lately been so choosy about as he wrapped gifts for Xie. For Sherlock, this remarkable puzzle of a man lying naked beside him in the dark. But he thought about how love rose and rose like a maypole amid the tangling, tightening ribbons of troubles, still and solid there at the center even as it was enrobed—enmeshed—in the tightly-woven fabric of a thousand disasters. Picking apart the knit-together strings would eventually show it to be rotten underneath, impossible to maintain and too weak to stand. But in the meantime, it bore the illusion of solidity. Love too often seemed made of sturdier stuff than it actually was.

John settled again beside him, both on their backs with their thighs and upper arms touching, and neither of them spoke anymore as dawn quietly threatened and the city began to grind its gears.

An eyeblink later, the room was full of filtered sunlight, and John was too warm beneath the weight of the blankets and with the heat of a body beside him. Sherlock’s face was turned away as he lay on his side—nearly on his stomach—the squiggles of his dark hair stark against the white pillowslip. Lower leg stretching down for miles, upper leg bent, elbows bent, one forearm tucked under the pillow. John slid one hand across the mattress, thumb skitching over a spot or two of the crusted leavings of the previous night, up onto Sherlock’s lower back and then onward to the crest of his hip, leaning close behind him, ostensibly to check the bedside clock—it was nearly ten; John calculated he must have slept five consecutive hours, which felt like a victory—then opening his mouth against the back of the bare shoulder, palming Sherlock’s buttock and sweeping his hand down toward the tender place where backside met thigh.

Sherlock exhaled audibly, and his head moved to bare his neck for John to kiss, and John did kiss, and dragged himself closer to Sherlock’s back, fitting in against the angles, splaying fingertips through the hair of Sherlock’s thigh as his hand brushed down, then up.

Sherlock’s jaw worked as he licked his teeth, wet his lips, swallowed, and then coughed a bit. John moved to tuck his arm beneath Sherlock’s bent one, fingertips spread against his bare belly, then up onto his chest, thumb brushing over his nipple.

“Sleep at all?” Sherlock mumbled, and reached back to catch John’s thigh and stroke it, pull it closer against his own.

“Just woke up,” John confirmed. “Sorry to wake you.” He tucked his nose into Sherlock’s hair halfway between his ear and the nape of his neck. He inhaled, then hummed out contentment. Sherlock smelled warm and salty and only faintly perfumed.
“It’s all right,” Sherlock assured him. John levered Sherlock’s arm up, skidded his body down to rest his face against Sherlock’s shoulder blade, sniffed three times—mh-mm-mmhf—and Sherlock laughed and rolled forward trying to get away. Dank and not-quite-dirty. John shivered hot and let out a low growl. “Really, now, Captain Watson,” Sherlock scolded, and it wasn’t really Xie’s tone, but there was inarguably an echo of it there. John reached to roll him over, face to face, and when they raised the edge of the blankets to keep them from tangling or coming between their bodies, up wafted their mingled scents of musk and sleep and leftover sex.

“I want to know every bit of you,” John muttered, and Sherlock ducked to kiss his throat, scraped the edge of his upper teeth across the stubble there below his jaw. “Every molecule, at every time of day, every sound you make, every thought in your head.”

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise around John’s nipple, and tugged the blankets higher up around the back of his shoulders as he continued to suck and nip. As it looked like he was abandoning the one to move on to the other, John reached behind his own neck to firm the pillow under it and through lazy lips urged, “Tell me a story.”

Sherlock’s head tilted, eyes straining up to meet John’s gaze, tongue tip extended between parted lips to circle John’s nipple. His eyebrows rose.

“As you can,” John grinned, and his fingers went into Sherlock’s hair as if compelled to do so, swirling between the strands and scraping gently against his scalp. “I like to hear your voice,” he clarified, and Sherlock’s hands slid down the sides of John’s torso, curved in beneath the arch of his low back as if to draw him up closer, or to hold him in place. “And I want to know you—like I said. So, tell me one of your stories.”

Sherlock braced himself with hands flat on the mattress and shifted up along John’s body to settle atop him, chest to chest, then leaned to kiss the corner of his closed mouth. John kissed back—quick, tight-lipped—and dragged fingers down Sherlock’s forearm, across the back of his square hand. Glancing down the length of John’s body as if to plan his route in advance, Sherlock dropped aside onto one elbow and began setting down landmarks in the form of soft kisses over John’s face—the tail of one eyebrow, the divot beside his nose, behind his ear, beneath his chin. Between these, in his low voice made even more gravelly by virtue of having only recently awoken, he began his tale.

“Once I’d got a little curr to spare, not so long after Xie’s debut—I was perhaps twenty-two or –three—I decided it would be to my benefit to study some classical dance. Ballet.” An open-mouthed kiss on John’s throat. “Odori.” A drag of his warm, damp lips along John’s collarbone. “Berezka. . . Because I imagined it might make me more graceful.”

John kisses, too, when and where he could—Sherlock’s neck or ear lobe, or a passing fingertip; once, his thumb. Sherlock blazed a trail of kisses down John’s right arm, gently pinching skin between his teeth now and then, leaving pink-violet marks he could later follow to retrace his way back to the start. He went on speaking in between.

“There was a Japanese woman, Naoko, on the other side of the river, who had been a geiko called—” Here, Sherlock made a delighted humming noise as he rocked his lips over the knot of bone at
John’s wrist. “—Momiyuki, in the 1960s in Kyoto. To put it mildly, she was unconvinced of my premise.” Sherlock nuzzled his nose against John’s inner elbow. “But in the end I think she reckoned it was better teaching a big flat-footed Englishman to curl his fingers prettily, than to let her knowledge go to waste entirely. She agreed to meet with me twice weekly, at some ungodly early hour of the morning.”

Sherlock loomed up then, and rearranged himself on his knees, nudging John’s thighs apart so he could settle between them. He glanced at each side table in turn as he inquired, “Something slippery?”

“Jesus,” John gusted out—that particular line of questioning held enormous promise—then pointed Sherlock toward the correct drawer—the one without John’s handgun tucked inside it. As Sherlock leaned and stretched toward it, John rose up just enough to kiss Sherlock’s side, licking in along the hollow between two of his prominent ribs. John took in all Sherlock’s curves and angles as he resettled himself between John’s knees. Sherlock’s sturdy shoulders, taut chest, his skin milky-pink in the filtered daylight.

“Naoko taught me to pour tea in the traditional manner, and to float my hands gracefully through the air.” With the little green foil packet tucked between his fingers, Sherlock made a series of elegant gestures: rolling his wrists, diagonally dropping his palms as if hushing, turning his hands over and curling the fingers back one by one as if counting. Just as John was beginning to feel a bit light-headed at the images these pretty signs and gestures stirred up—of Sherlock’s hands smoothing down his own chest, or clutching John’s backside and pulling their bodies close together, or wrapping around John’s aching prick and bringing him carefully along—both of Sherlock’s drifting hands rose to his mouth as if hiding a giggle. He caught the corner of the packet between his teeth and ripped, forcefully spitting the scrap of foil so it sailed off to the West, past the edge of the mattress. “She’d have hated that,” he deadpanned.

John offered his upturned palm, but Sherlock shook his head a bit. “Let me,” he murmured, and John felt his eyebrows rise, even as his prick twitched needily at the thought of Sherlock’s big gorgeous hands in a wet slide all around him. John reached up to trace the shape of Sherlock’s pectorals, fingers skidding softly over what he now recognized as cigarette-burn scars white and dotted, shaped like tiny round-petaled flowers. He flicked experimentally at Sherlock’s pink nipple with the edge of his fingernail, watching his fingers and the way Sherlock’s nipple tightened under his touch, the way Sherlock’s belly momentarily quivered and then settled back into the rhythmic expansion and contraction of his breathing. Sherlock squeezed the packet of slick into his palm and carried on with his story.

“It bears mentioning that Naoko was exceptionally petite, perhaps four-foot-eight, so in the platform okobo sandals she made me wear, I positively towered over her to an almost alarming degree. After an interminable number of weeks in which she had gradually schooled me in bits and pieces, she at last assembled the lot into a bit of choreography.” He rubbed his fingers and thumb together, warming the minty-smelling gel between them, elegantly coating his palm and the flats of his fingers. John watched, open-mouthed, touching Sherlock’s forearm, barely brushing fingertips down his shoulder, longing to pull him down to feel the sturdy weight of Sherlock resting against his own hipbone. “A little story I could tell with just the gestures of my hands.” Sherlock fitted the tight loop of thumb and two fingers over the head of John’s cock and smoothed down, dragging back John’s foreskin, impelling him to arch his back and let out a loud groan. Sherlock set a lazy pace of firm downward strokes and lighter upward ones, his hand gliding easily over John’s skin thanks to the generous coating of slick. John’s gluteal muscles squeezed and released as he began to roll up into Sherlock’s hand, and his breath came hard.

“The timing was very unusual, utterly foreign, and despite my being rather musical, my mastery of
the movements was far from instinctive. There was a bit that was almost like a waltz—”

Sherlock was at last beginning to sound just a bit breathless, while John struggled not to pop off at a moment’s notice, given the sure and steady way Sherlock was stroking him, the sonorous tone of his voice, the mere fact of him being there, on John’s very good bed, knelt between John’s legs, in the light of midmorning.

Sherlock hummed out a bit of nonsense, a simple melody in waltz time, “Dah, bah-dahdum, dah-dahdum,” and he squeezed a bit tighter on the emphasized beat so that John’s eyes went quite wide as he looked at Sherlock’s handsome face, pale eyes staring back at him, amusement playing at the edges of his lips. “Dah, bah-dahdum, dah-dah-dum, but then it would shift strangely, Dah. B’bahbah, ba-dahdum,” he sang, and the pressure and tempo of his stroking followed along and John sucked air.

“I can’t keep that promise I made,” John gusted, propelling himself up and forward to catch Sherlock around the back of the neck with one hand. “Not to kiss you. I have to. I have to.”

Sherlock let himself be drawn forward but only so far. “I’m telling you a story,” he said quietly. “Like you asked, Captain Watson. Please be polite and let me finish.” Their eyes were wide open, face to face as if they were sharing breakfast conversation instead of first-of-the-morning sex.

John half-smiled, half-grimaced, and let himself fall back on the pillows. Sherlock’s grip on him loosened, and his long body shifted, stretching one long leg behind him, leaning up on the knee of the other, planted outside John’s thigh. He steadied himself with one hand beside John’s upper arm, and then came the hot slide of his prick along the side of John’s, both of them encircled—barely—by Sherlock’s perfect hand, and then his hips were rocking in time with his memory. John watched his face hovering just out of reach of John’s kiss, half-smiling, eyes open in a way that made John feel exposed and raw. It was thrilling. John thrust up into Sherlock’s hand, up against the hard heat of his cock, and every exhalation came out of him as a little, “Ahh.”

“I was terrible, made a mess of the thing, and Naoko was annoyed, of course. But the shifts in tempo were quite foreign to me and try as I might—Dah, bah-dahdum, b’dahdah dum—I just kept landing in all the wrong places.”

“Your hands,” John huffed out, proving he was paying attention, though by this time even with the strangely broken motions of Sherlock’s thrusting cock and sliding hand, John was making a rapid ascent toward the peak of his pleasure.

“Indeed, my hands were in every wrong place,” Sherlock agreed, and lowered himself from his palm down onto his elbow, so the sides of their bellies touched, and he offered his two middle fingers, and John sucked them hard into his mouth, just to the middle knuckle, perfect, gorgeous, John rolled his tongue around them then thrust it between before closing down to suck hard.

“But the best bit came when I found myself overbalanced on the platforms of those accursed okobo, and suddenly I was tipping too far forward—” He thrust his entire body up against John’s, bringing his face closer to John’s face, the skin of their chests stinging where it had begun to adhere with a thin layer of perspiration between them. John’s hands clutched hard at him, one behind his back, one grasping his buttock, riding the waves of the muscle as his pelvis rocked, thrusting their cocks together in the slick circle of his hand. “And I toppled right over, and that poor tiny thing tried to—ca—catch—me.” His voice hitched and hiccupped, he was close.

“I’m going to kiss you.”

“I’m t—telling. Your. Oh! Story.”
John could no longer move to press up against him; the weight of Sherlock’s body pinned his hips to the mattress as he thrust and thrust, the drag of his cock against John’s perfectly uncomfortable, delicious and irritating, John wanted it to finish and to go on forever, like an itch being scratched, perfectly satisfying even as skin got a bit too raw.

“Tell it quick then,” John urged. “I want to kiss the breath out of you.”

Sherlock moaned and his head dropped so his hair brushed the side of John’s face. He looked up again and their eyes met. Those green-ice eyes. The weight of him. The smell of him.

“Sherlock.” It came out cautionary. Next would be a scold.

“She tried to catch me so naturally we both ended—up in a heap. On the floor. She pinned my shhhh. . .”

Sherlock drew his hand away and John whimpered at the loss. He messily licked his palm and fingers to get the slick going again, then caught them both up and resumed fucking up against John’s prick, working his hand forward and back to counter the movements, somehow never losing track of the slightly-imperfect tempo.

“Pinned my shoulders to the floor. So I lay flat on my back and drew—drew—drew my pictures in the air with my hands. John! And at last I found the—pace.” He rocked back, paused, then thrust against John in complicated rhythm that should have been all wrong, but somehow made perfect sense, and he groaned in time with it, nothing like humming, nothing like singing.

“Fuck. I’m sorry. I have to kiss you. C’mere.” John urged Sherlock’s head into position with fingers tangled hard in his hair, and Sherlock went on rocking against him and opened his mouth eagerly, couldn’t close it, they were both panting, and John sucked his bottom lip hard until he had to release it to shout because he was coming between their bellies, over Sherlock’s fingers, and Sherlock dropped his hips back to thrust up, up, up, and shuddered and let out a low moan against John’s chest, his teeth digging in, saliva pooling and running toward John’s neck. “Jesus, that’s gorgeous,” John muttered, still gripping Sherlock’s hair probably too tight, and so he let go, pulsed his fingertips against Sherlock’s scalp. Sherlock shivered.

Sherlock scrambled forward, up, built himself a foundation, held on to John for dear life. He kissed and kissed, humming, groaning, all but devouring. John held him close and tight until he quieted and his kisses became less urgent, his limbs looser, his sounds more contented. They made cursory moves to wipe away the worst of the mess, found their places under the blankets, ankle on calf, hip to hip, hands resting here and here and here. When one of their mobile phones started buzzing out in the sitting room, jittering on the table top just loud enough to hear, they ignored it, petted and pecked, and John dozed as Sherlock drew swirling patterns across his chest with the tips of two fingers.

TXT from IcehouseAdmin: Where are you Sweetheart?
TXT from IcehouseAdmin: Phone me.
TXT from IcehouseAdmin: Where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are y
TXT from IcehouseAdmin: Where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are y
TXT from IcehouseAdmin: Where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are y
TXT from IcehouseAdmin: Where are you where are y
TXT from IcehouseAdmin: WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU
“Sherlock?”

John was half-afraid to even say his name aloud, for fear there’d be no reply. In the cold light of—what—early afternoon, it must be by now, perhaps Sherlock would begin to have doubts about having left his husband, fled with next to nothing to John Watson, a man probably even less worthy. John rolled and stretched, working his legs free of the tangled bedclothes, vaguely shocked that he’d taken a nap. A vigorous shag was a miracle, in its way.

“In here.” Sherlock was in the en suite bath; not far at all. The door came open a bit and there was a quick waft of soap and shampoo carried on steamy air. “Mind if I borrow your razor? Can’t stand the stubble when it comes in.”

John swung his legs over the edge of the bed, sheet trailing across his lap, and scratched his chest. “Can you not?” he asked, half-smiling despite no one there to see it. “I wouldn’t mind seeing you a bit scruffy, I don’t think.” It was a nice mental picture: Sherlock with a few days’ worth of beard, with his shirt collar open, sleeves turned back to reveal his forearms and sturdy wrists, looking relaxed, maybe sitting with his ankle on his knee in that big leather chair in the sitting room. A very nice picture, indeed.

“Given the amount of time I’m likely to spend kissing you in the next little while, Captain Watson,” Sherlock intoned from the bath, where John could hear the tap running, “I think you’ll appreciate me preventing you suffering a stubble-rash.”

That mental picture, of a great deal of time spent kissing Sherlock Holmes, was even nicer. “In that case. . .” John allowed, and ducked his head in the partially open door.

“I didn’t know whether to wake you,” Sherlock smiled at him. He had a towel wrapped around his waist, one draped over his shoulders, and there was a third one hung over the shower curtain rod that he must have used on his hair, which was wild and damp around his ears and forehead. “I hope you haven’t missed any pressing appointments.”

“Not that I know of,” John grinned back. “Hungry? Haven’t got much in, but I can go downstairs and fetch something from the café, if you like.”

“Whatever you please,” Sherlock replied. “Do you need the shower? I can—”

“In a bit; you’re fine. I’ll get dressed and find us some sustenance. You’re all right on your own for a bit?” He didn’t want to dwell on the reason Sherlock was there in John’s dusty Unity-sanctioned flat, about to shave his handsome face looking into the pitted mirror, but he wanted to be certain Sherlock felt safe. He imagined that creeping doubt might scare Sherlock right back to his old life; John didn’t have much to offer, compared to the Icehouse and all that went with it, but at least he could protect Sherlock from fear.

**Chapter Notes**

In chapter 25, we left our men dozing together in bed after a pleasant go-round, blissfully unaware of some very demanding text messages from Sherlock’s husband.
“Absolutely fine.”

“Any requests, then?”

“Don’t suppose they do an *escargots cargolade,*” Sherlock ventured.

“I’ll ask.”

Sherlock found John’s razor much duller than he would have liked, adjusted grip and pressure to account for it, and started shaving while John dressed and otherwise rattled about the little flat, fetching keys and billfold, scraping a kitchen chair back to sit while he tied his shoes (the shoes were so worn, and appeared to be his only pair; Sherlock wondered if there was a sentimental connection to them). As Sherlock made a second pass at his right cheek, John called a goodbye, and Sherlock listened for the reassuring sound of the deadbolt thudding into place as John locked the door behind him.

Once he’d shaved and dressed and arranged his hair so it wouldn’t dry badly, Sherlock moved into the kitchen, with an idea that he’d make tea to accompany whatever John brought back to eat. After filling the kettle and switching it on, he searched for cups, saucers, tea (it was clearly too much to hope that John had laid in loose tea, but sachets would do), and possibly a teapot. Nothing made sense in the cupboards: dried pasta and cans of soup shared a shelf with mismatched coffee mugs, another one stood entirely empty but for a glass mixing bowl full of rectangular paper packets of sugar, salt, and pepper. There were about eighteen dinner plates, but only three salad plates. He was mildly surprised to find a teapot, in the back of a cupboard bursting with chipped china cups and saucers, and two crystal dishes such as Sherlock’s grandmother used to fill with gherkins and olives to go with the cheese board after Christmas lunch. The tea, in the end, was found in a box on the worktop.

On the coffee table in the sitting room was a wooden tray full of papers, takeaway menus, and a paperback book with a garish orange cover that looked as if it must have come with the flat, it was so old and its corners so soft. Sherlock relocated its contents into a neat pile on the coffee table and brought the tray back to the kitchen. There was neither a milk pot nor a sugar bowl and so he improvised, using a cobalt-blue glass measuring cup, and a ceramic ramekin (sunny yellow on the outside, white inside).

He sniffed the milk in the carton, and it was fine (inside the fridge were also a fourth salad plate with butter on—uncovered, it was sure to reek of absolutely everything—a nearly-full jar of lemon curd, a nearly-empty jar of all-berry jam, eleven cans of beer, and four small apples. Sherlock liberated one of these and bit into it as he returned to assembling the tea service. Eating something now would save him having to eat much of whatever John brought back, which was almost certain to be a nutritional disaster. He rinsed the teapot of dust, then filled it with hot water from the tap to warm it. He’d never be able to do anything decent for more than just the two of them, given the utterly random collection of hollowware, but for the moment he could make do.

He found two cups that weren’t at war with each other—one white with thin blue stripes around the rim, one with an all-over voile pattern of blue on a white ground—and two white saucers, though one had a gold rim. He placed these on the tray with the cups’ handles both directed at ten o’clock. Two of the luncheon plates were white, one with the same blue stripes around its rim as the teacup already pressed into service, and he fitted those onto the tray as well, for the pastries or bacon sandwiches John would bring from the café. Sherlock dropped a few tea bags into the pot and then, once the boiling water had settled down a bit, poured water over them and clinked on the lid. The teapot was squat and round and homely, buttery yellow with a gold pinstripe up each side of the spout, and an allower squiggle-pattern of gold across the surface of its topmost quarter. The little lid’s
knob was gilded to match.

After a bit of sifting, Sherlock found three teaspoons in a drawer that were all siblings—heavy-handed, ornately floral at the tail ends—and laid two of them on the saucers, set the third down in the makeshift sugar bowl, then went to work tearing open sugar packets five at a time to fill it, between large bites of his apple. He binned the core, and just as he was about to stir the pot and fish out the teabags came the sound of John’s key in the lock.

“I’ve made the tea,” Sherlock said over his shoulder as John set down a rather heavy-sounding, string-handled paper bag on the kitchen table. Having shaken more than enough sugar out of the paper packets, he lifted the tray from the worktop; nothing rattled. “Here at the table, or. . .?”

John only smiled. Sherlock kept on talking in case John was about to say something affectionate yet juvenile, which they’d both find embarrassing.

“I thought in the sitting room? Does the fire work?”

“Haven’t tried it,” John said, shaking his coat off and hanging it on the hall tree instead of on the back of a kitchen chair. Sherlock was already on his way to the sitting room. It got more daylight than the kitchen through the windows on the street side, and anyway, the kitchen’s overhead fluorescent was woefully unkind. He set the tea tray on the pretty little cabinet beside the leather armchair. John brought the heavy paper bag and reached in. “Got a couple of bacon sandwiches, couple of pastries, and a couple of little buckets of soup. What do you like?”

“Sandwich, please,” Sherlock said, and raised one of the small plates. John set the sandwich on it, still wrapped in wax paper and sealed with a round sticker with the date written on in grease pencil. He looked sheepish.

“Cake, too? One’s got cheese and the other some kind of fruit—maybe raspberries?”

Sherlock declined, passed John the other plate and busied himself pouring the tea. Once John had claimed his chair and the cup of tea Sherlock offered on its saucer, and they’d each settled and sipped, John offered, “It’s a pretty little set-up,” gesturing toward the tea tray. “I’m impressed.”

Sherlock shrugged, though he felt a tingle of pleasure at the base of his neck, for John having noticed the make-do tea set. John went gustily at his sandwich, cradling it in its pocket of folded-back paper. Sherlock carefully unwrapped his; the bread was nice, probably baked on-site, and happily for him, not buttered. He hadn’t had brown sauce in longer than he could remember; the tangy smell of it was enticing. With as little mess as he could manage, he tore the thing in half, planning to eat just a quarter or so.

“I should have looked for—” Sherlock started.

John was already extending his arm across the space between them, offering a handful of paper napkins.

On the mantel, one of their phones buzzed to life, and they both looked up to see. John’s was flashing sickly orange, its screen face-down. He got up to fetch it, flipped it over and fiddled a bit.

“Ah, text here from Greg Lestrade, inviting me to watch the football match with him tomorrow.”

John sounded at once pleased and regretful. Sherlock offered only an, Oh, of mild interest. John switched off his phone and set it back down. He laid his hand on Sherlock’s mobile.

“Need to check?” John asked.
“No, it’s fine,” Sherlock said. He rather liked the idea of John’s strange little flat as a haven, a bubble around the two of them and whatever-this-was. A little floating world where Sherlock simultaneously existed and didn’t. He was real because of the way John smiled at him; because of John’s light snores as he dozed into a late morning catnap; because of John’s desperate hands smoothing over Sherlock’s flushed skin. But his reality could really never be proved, as there was not another soul on earth who knew Sherlock was there. “In fact, switch it off, will you?”

“No need,” John said after a moment. “Battery’s died.”

Something occurred to Sherlock at the mention of the phone’s battery. “Has it? And me having forgotten a charging cable.”

“Maybe mine will fit it.”

“Doubtful. Yours is one of the Japanese brands; mine is Finnish.”

John resumed his seat, wadded up the now-empty sandwich wrapper. Sherlock had managed two bites while John’s back was turned. “Well, we can get you a new one, easy enough.”

“It can wait,” Sherlock assured. Setting his plate aside on the arm of his chair, he narrowed his eyes at John, which had the desired effect of focusing John’s attention. He held his saucer in front of his chest, used two fingers to adjust the angle of the teacup’s handle before he lifted the cup to sip from it. “You know, in all the… “—he rolled his wrist before returning his fingers to rest on the cup’s handle—“I’d nearly forgotten about it.” Sherlock raised the cup but didn’t sip it; Naoko’s choreography was flooding back to him now.

John turned his head a bit and narrowed his own eyes. “About…?” he prompted.

“You bought me a gift at two in the morning.”

John let go a light laugh. “I did, in fact.”

“I’ll have it,” Sherlock said, and his mouth bowed up. “Please.”

The sound John made then, as he rose from his chair to retrieve the gift, had at least an ounce of desirous growl in it, which gave Sherlock to know the geiko’s choreography hadn’t lost its charm. The tea when he sipped it was perfect in every way; he let his eyes close as he swallowed. When he opened them again, John was settling back onto the edge of the chair opposite, holding a box about the size of one for shoes, though it was decorated and clearly meant for gift-giving rather than utility. The box was bronze-coloured, dully metallic, with a dark brown fleur-de-lis pattern. The forest green satin ribbon around it was in an offset cross, smooth and flat, with no visible knot or bow. Sherlock set down his cup and saucer on the tray as John held out the gift. He looked a bit pleased with himself, and Sherlock had no doubt he himself looked at least a smidgen eager; he schooled his expression.

“Thank you, John,” he said lightly.

“Like I said,” John said, “Saw it in the shop window and just had to.”

Working quickly but not greedily, Sherlock found the knot of ribbon underneath and worked it open, left the ribbon itself trailing over the arm of his chair. The lid was lifted, the layer of tissue drawn aside, and Sherlock hummed a quiet sigh.

“Oh. That’s lovely.”
Sherlock noted John’s gaze switching back and forth between Sherlock’s lightly smiling face and his hands lifting the gift from the box and then passing it from palm to palm. It was a set of wooden nesting dolls in the Russian tradition, though they were painted with Japanese geishas instead of the traditional babushkas or peasant girls.

“You told me once about the real you, beneath all of Xie’s outer layers, and you mentioned these. When I saw them, I couldn’t pass by.” John sounded pleased with himself, and well he should be. The dolls were exquisite, obviously handmade with care; each geisha revealed as Sherlock opened them was beautifully, delicately painted, and the varnished wood was smooth as glass. There were five in all, the first four dressed in colours and patterns of the seasons. The little one at the heart bore two faces back to back, both chubby cheeked children—the little girl moon wrapped in a blue blanket of stars, and the little boy sun enrobed in fiery yellow and orange.

“They’re absolutely stunning,” Sherlock said. “Thank you. Very much.” He stood, and lined them up on the mantle, tallest to smallest. “Do you know the matryoshka story?”

“No. Is there one?”

Sherlock held up the smallest doll. “Of course this relates to the traditionally painted dolls, usually Russian peasant women and girls,” he began, “But the story is of a little girl who liked to run down the mountain from her family home. She wore a brightly coloured headscarf, and as she ran down the mountain one day, her older sister spied the bright babushka straying much too far from home—” Here he slid the next doll closer to the tiny one, then lifted its top half off. “There were wolves down the mountain, you see, very dangerous.”

“It’s always wolves, isn’t it?” John asked in amusement.

“It does seem to be. Anyway, the older sister told the little one, If you run too far, the wolves will get you. I’ve come to take you back home where it’s safe. And she led her little sister home.” He dropped the little one inside the next, and then replaced the top half and slid them across to be with the others. “Next day, though, the littlest sister went off running down the mountain.” He removed the little one and set it farther down the mantel. “This time the middle sister came along as well, and the two of them said, If you run too far, the wolves will get you. Better to be at home where it’s safe. And the two of them brought the little one home.”

John sipped the last of his tea as he watched Sherlock fit the three dolls one inside the other: little sister, older sister, middle sister, and slide them back home. He retrieved the little one and moved it away again. “The little sister was either a spunky free-spirit, or an enormous pain in the arse, depending upon your viewpoint, and she went off again the very next day. The oldest sister accompanied the other two, and she scolded, If you run too far, the wolves will get you. We’ll take you home where it’s safe. And the three of them together herded the smallest one back up the mountain.” He nested the four dolls together, and moved them again.

“If that was the oldest sister,” John ventured, as Sherlock opened the dolls to free the small one once more, “that just leaves...the mum?”

“Worse! The grandmother. Who, of course, in the way of folk tales, was a very wise and more-than-a-bit witchy old woman. She followed her three granddaughters on the chase after the smallest one, and when they caught up to her, she was quite far down the mountain—farther than she’d ever been before. When they caught up to her, the grandmother said, If you run too far, the wolves will get you. Your sisters tried to hold you close and keep you safe, but no more. If you come home, I’ll sew your hair to your bed with magic thread and you’ll never run away again. Or stay and take your chances with the wolves. Now your fate is in your own little hands. And she and the three sisters left the youngest one behind.” Sherlock nested the four dolls together and moved them away from the little
“So what did she do?” John asked, with a half-smile.

“Probably the wolves ate her,” Sherlock said with a shrug. “Or maybe she went home and had her head sewn to her pillow. Neither one a very appealing choice.” He started to gather the empty cups and tea-spotted spoons, John’s plate covered in crumbs, and his own with most of a sandwich still on it. “Your turn in the shower, I think,” he said, slyly casual. “Then meet me in the bedroom, and you can tell me one of your stories.”

John got to his feet and caught Sherlock’s wrist; Sherlock let himself be guided so they were hip to hip, chest to chest, and John’s hands rested in his low back. It struck Sherlock as strange, how easy it was becoming for the two of them to find the ways in which they fit together; sometimes a thrill, sometimes a comfort, but in the back of his mind was a nagging sense that none of it was real, or even possible. As John smiled up at him, Sherlock’s face began to tingle. He tried to settle his breathing.

“In the bedroom, you say?” John’s voice was low and full of promise, and he caught the tip of Sherlock’s chin between his lips, briefly.

Sherlock stroked his hands up and down John’s biceps. “Too much longer out here and I’m going to have no choice but to clean the place,” Sherlock threatened. “Don’t you have a girl?”

John laughed. “I’ve barely got the flat, let alone someone to tidy it.” John’s hand moved from his back to the lapel of his jacket, gently worrying the fabric between his fingers and thumb. “I know it’s nothing like you’re used to,” he said apologetically.

Sherlock shook his head, dismissing John’s concerns.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I. Thank you for the gift.”

“Thank you for the tea,” John grinned. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder and started to break away. “I’m going to. . .” he said. “Doors are locked; check if you want.” Another strange thing: how John seemed to have a sort of compassion for Sherlock, and an understanding of his discomforts, that he hadn’t expressed in the few discussions they’d had about John’s mother, who probably had scars of her own that John never had to see. Was that the difference? That John could see with his own eyes the weakness of Sherlock’s betraying body, and the history told on its surface? John’s concern didn’t feel like pity; it wasn’t John looking down at him and shaking his head at the shame. . .what a shame. Rather, Sherlock had a deep sense that John was there. John was with him. Not pulling, not pushing, and certainly not clutching. Only embracing. But Sherlock wasn’t sure he knew how to be held without feeling trapped.

Hopelessness opened its vast hollow space in his belly, and he busied himself with tidying the remnants of their tea, desperately feeling for ground.

In just the time it had taken John to clean himself up—even shaving in the shower to save time—the difference in Sherlock was obvious. He had already slipped away a bit, begun to turn inward. Barefoot and jacketless, his shirttails out, Sherlock reclined on the very good bed with pillows behind his back and one ankle crossed over the other. By the time John joined him, towel wrapped around
his waist, hair damp but combed into place, mouth sterile and minty from a swish and gargle, Sherlock was tugging at his bottom lip, and though Sherlock smiled at John and patted the spot beside him as he turned onto his side, in the split second before, John had noticed him staring off at nothing, through narrowed eyes.

Of course Sherlock had much to think about, and why shouldn’t he take the time John was otherwise occupied to work at sorting it? But just a little over twenty-four hours later, John knew as soon as he reached the landing that it had all changed right then and there, on the very good bed, Sherlock’s fingertips worrying at his lip.

Sherlock had insisted on a story from John, whispered against his ear to make it dirty one, I think we’ll both enjoy that, then went about a methodical, maddening tease with licked fingers, puckered lips, edges of teeth, and warm damp breath beginning at John’s neck and trailing down his chest and belly, then his thigh where the overlapping edges of the towel around his waist slit apart. John detailed a particularly memorable encounter he’d once had with a green-eyed man much too young for him. They’d met at a bar and soon enough were bringing each other off in the gents’, pressed between the leaky sink and an open window high on the wall, biting each others’ lips between muttered demands.

When John lost his breath as well as his place in the story because of Sherlock’s tongue and fingertips going after his nipples, Sherlock prompted him to continue with a demanding hum. And later, when John’s head dipped to watch Sherlock suck him off and his story degenerated to mindless, wordless groaning, Sherlock kept at it but managed to tilt his head, open his wide eyes and raise his eyebrows, indicating John must carry on with the telling of the tale. John got to the part in the story where he’d nudged the green-eyed man’s thighs apart to finger him, and Sherlock broke away to quickly finish undressing, then straddled John’s lap to stroke their cocks together in one hand, with John’s hand clasping his wrist, the story forgotten in favour of their own urgent pleasure.

A few distracted kisses, a minute to catch their breath, a swipe with the cold, damp bath towel to eliminate the worst of it, and then Sherlock had gathered his trousers and shirt on his way to the loo, When Sherlock didn’t come back to the bed, John eventually got up and dressed, vaguely surprised it was already verging on dusk. Five hours of sleep and then a nap had caused him to lose track of time completely. He’d heated the soup from the café and offered some to Sherlock in a mug so he could stay where he was, folded up in the leather armchair. John fiddled with the fire and did eventually get it going; it gave off a hot, musty smell. He turned on lamps as the flat grew dim, and shuffled some of the clutter around, including his files on the Icehouse, which he nonchalantly slid to the corner of the big desk, close to the wall, and covered with papers and an old, leatherbound book.

Sherlock poured the last of the wine from the previous night’s bottle, and they toasted each other with a mild, cheers. John wondered about the wisdom of the two armchairs arranged as they were, facing each other down. What had felt cozy as they’d eaten their late breakfast together now felt confrontational and too close. Sherlock’s knees were drawn up in front of him at a diagonal; John crossed his arms between sips from his wineglass.

“Forgot my comb,” Sherlock mumbled at last, and looked rueful. John’s heart sank a quarter-inch at the tone of Sherlock’s voice.

“I’ll add one to the list.”

“I took this picture,” Sherlock said flatly, “from his office—in the flat, not his business office—can I show you?”

“Course,” John agreed. Sherlock strode to the bedroom, then returned holding a small photo frame. He resumed his seat, didn’t offer the photo, nor look at it.
“I say, and I say,” Sherlock murmured, as if to himself, looking past John to some spot on the bookshelf over his left shoulder. “That he’s not always like that. Not always . . .” John waited. “Mean.”

A child’s word. Not nearly heavy enough to hit with the impact the matter deserved. Mean was a backhanded compliment. A backhand to the face was so much more than merely mean.

Sherlock went on. “And I know I unfairly favour thinking about the good times. And I’ve lowered my standard for what constitutes a good day, a good night. It’s relative.”

John nodded slightly, thought Sherlock might at least catch it out of the corner of his eye, though he made no indication he was paying attention to John at all, or even addressing him.

“Now—and for a very long time—years—he’s only nice because he wants something. And even when he’s nice he still calls me bitch. Reminds me I’m stupid and useless.”

“You’re anything but.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, nodded, but it was clear from his expression he’d barely heard, let alone agreed.

“This picture is my favourite one. Of us.” He held it out without looking at it, and John took it. Sherlock and Jim, much younger, smiling, arms around each other. Not much to see in the background, though it looked like they were outdoors, near water. “We were up in the lakes district, for a wedding—someone Jim knew at university, they made a whole weekend of it. This was before we got too busy and people stopped inviting us to things because they knew we’d say no. Before we stopped having friends.”

John glanced down at the photo again, then back at Sherlock. “It was a nice weekend, though. We’d been married just a few months; we called it our honeymoon because we never took one. There wasn’t anything really special about it—a simple room in an old inn, lots of being shuffled around to different wedding related activities, sneaking sips off the little bottles from the mini-fridge while the bride’s aunties made speeches at luncheons, that kind of thing. Nothing special.”

John remembered a few times he’d spent with his Will that had been much the same. Just being away from home and out of the routine of one’s days made even nothing-special a bit of something special.

“Anyway, we got home, got back to work, and . . . since then, I’ve tried to determine the moment, or the. . . what was it? I feel like if I could just find what went wrong, what thing I said or did that changed everything . . .”

John was dying to remind him there was nothing to find, because it wasn’t his fault, it was just that his husband was a monster, and had always been bound to go bad at some point, then or otherwise, and it had nothing at all to do with Sherlock except that he was the unfortunate one in Jim’s orbit. But he knew better, and so said nothing.

“It was only a few days after we got back from that trip that he hit me the first time.” At last, Sherlock looked at him. His eyes were wide, as if he couldn’t believe it. John rested the photo frame on his knee, and his grip around the edge was too tight; he had to make a conscious decision to relax his fingers a bit. “That picture was taken a dozen years ago.” Sherlock pointed, then dropped his hand back through his hair. “That was the last time he was nice.”

John didn’t know what to say, but needed to say something, and settled on, “I’m sorry.” He meant it. He was sorry that anyone should be so brutally betrayed by a person he’d loved and trusted. He was
sorry that Sherlock was struggling through the ugly ending of something important, something that had once been good. He was sorry that Sherlock’s heart was probably aching. That was the last time he was nice. It was objectively sad; anyone in Sherlock’s position was certainly someone to feel sorry for. There was an itch beneath John’s skin, though, pushing every little hair up into gooseflesh, and he couldn’t help but wonder if Sherlock becoming maudlin about having left—once and for all? John hoped, but that was far from a secure feeling—was the start of a slide into the sort of regret that made even the bruised and scarred return to the one who’d done the harm. The sort of regret that had made his own mother go back to his father, who had also been mean, but who his mother had insisted wasn’t always like that.

Sherlock’s eyes shimmered and he sniffed hard.

“Oh. Sherlock. . .”

“I’m sorry. You’ll excuse me?” His voice was a tight whisper.

“Yeah, of course, if you like. . .” John offered the photo back to Sherlock, and his long fingers reached to take it as he bolted past John, through the kitchen, and into the bedroom. He closed the door, and John had not seen him again until morning.

Sherlock’s eyes were deeply shadowed when he emerged into the kitchen, wearing the previous day’s trousers and a fresh shirt, open at the neck, but he smiled at John, and even embraced him lightly from behind as John stood at the sink filling the kettle, and dropped a kiss in his hair. A closer look showed the purple pinpricks of burst capillaries all around Sherlock’s eyes; he’d cried, and not a little.

“All right?”

“A bit better, actually,” Sherlock told him, and liberated another apple from the fridge, this time combing through drawers for a paring knife, and setting the apple on a plate as he sliced it four ways to core it, then cut each segment into slim half-moons. “You didn’t have to sleep on the sofa.”

“It’s fine; thought you needed a bit of space.” John made them tea, pouring the water straight from the kettle into the cups. He used a single spoon to swirl the teabags in each mug. “Listen, Sherlock. . . I don’t want to push you to discuss things you’re not ready for. But do you have a. . .” He cleared his throat and fetched the milk. “I don’t know—a plan? Or.” He tipped a little milk into each cup. “I’m just wondering what the next few days or weeks look like? I mean,” he hurried to add, not looking at Sherlock for a reaction, in case it was one he didn’t like. “You’re welcome to stay here. . . take your time. Long as you like. But you said he might miss you as soon as today, and that he’s tried to find you, when you left in the past—”

“I’m still working it out,” Sherlock said quietly.

“I know you want to get back to the salon,” John offered, and set the mugs at each of their places, then slid into the chair opposite Sherlock. “Your normal life. I just want you to—”

“Be happy?” Sherlock finished.

“Well, yes. And if I’m honest, I’m selfish and of course I want to keep you.” John knew there were less threatening ways to say it, but at the moment he couldn’t be arsed to choose his words carefully, because he’d barely slept all night and he was dizzy with it. He longed for the freedom to say to Sherlock all the things they didn’t ever say—because of who Sherlock was, and because of who John was, and because all their time together, every conversation and every exchange of breath and body fluids, had been little more than imaginary, in the floating worlds of the salon and the willow
bower and the pages of their letters—now that they were in a real place, shabby and cramped and full of mismatched flatware. They had decisions to take, and plans to draw up, and agreements to reach, and soon, if whatever this was, were to move into the real world. And here they were, by chance or design, at a formica-topped table in the real world. John went on with his uncareful words. “If I had my choice your husband would disappear as soon as it could be arranged, and Xie would still be in the penthouse salon in the evenings, and all the rest of the time I’d get to have you here with me. In the sitting room. Here in the kitchen. On the sofa, at this table, in that bed. I don’t want what started the other night when you showed up at the front door, to end.” John tapped his thumb in a quick jitter against the handle of his mug. “So that’s what I want. Tell me what you want, and we’ll make it happen.” He knew he sounded demanding, impatient. He was both of those things, and more besides.

Sherlock had eaten only one or two of the narrow slices of his apple. He arranged the remaining pieces carefully, fanned out across the center of his plate.

“I want. . .” he’d begun, earnestly, quickly, in response to John’s prompting. The bridge of his nose wrinkled. His eyes were trained on his fingers as they worked to settle each slice of apple with care and precision. He didn’t—or perhaps couldn’t—say what he wanted.

John recognised he was being unfair. Sherlock had things to sort out that had nothing to do with John; John’s fate was to stand in waiting—he was not a thing to be sorted, he was only the thing that came next.


“You’re one of the wolves in the valley,” Sherlock said, and gestured slowly but broadly, to include the whole city—maybe the whole world—outside the flat. “And he’s the family who’ll welcome me home but sew my head to the bed.” Sherlock’s expression flickered misery but then settled again into handsome inscrutability.

“There are other ways to go than down that particular mountain,” John told him. He took his cup with him on his way to the bedroom to dress. “Anyway, make me that list and I’ll pick up your phone charger and comb and whatever else you need. Write down some foods you like; you’ve barely eaten since you got here.”

John had asked and asked if Sherlock would be all right without him for a couple of hours while he tracked down the right sort of charging cable for Sherlock’s mobile, and Sherlock assured him he would be.

“You’re safe here, of course. It’s boring, I know. The telly. I’ll bring back a newspaper, maybe some magazines? But in the meantime.”

“It’s fine, John. I’d come with you but I can use the quiet to think.”

And Sherlock really was safe. It was unlikely Jim Moriarty would even think of John Watson as a potential destination, but even if he somehow did, the info in the Icehouse computers from John’s identity card having been swiped was all false aside from his name. The address was in the middle of the Thames. Nonetheless, John felt ill-at-ease as he kissed Sherlock goodbye and then heard Sherlock turn the lock behind him.
Ill-at-ease with good reason, it turned out, for he could see as soon as he was in view of the landing that Sherlock’s coat was gone from the rack. The door was shut but the deadbolt lock was not engaged; Sherlock didn’t have a key and so couldn’t have locked it as he left. John reached across his chest and unsnapped his holster, then unlocked the knob. Nothing forced; no one had broken in. He tried to shake the dread that Sherlock had changed his mind, gone back to his husband and his imperfect but in many ways superior life. Perhaps he’d gone downstairs for food (even though John had clearly been right when he’d diagnosed him with an eating disorder, a coping mechanism developed in reaction to the abuse). Perhaps he’d just gone for a walk up the street to stave off feeling cooped-up (even though it was drizzling and the air was uncomfortably sharp and got in under the hem of John’s jacket and between the teeth of the zip).

John dropped the bags he was carrying on the floor just inside the door.

“Sherlock?” John called out, though he didn’t really hope he’d get a reply. Sherlock was gone.

He’d cleaned the dishes and set them in the drying rack. He’d straightened all the corners of the towels hanging in the bathroom. He’d made the bed. His little suitcase still stood on the floor beside the wardrobe. In the sitting room, his mobile phone and the nesting dolls decorated with geishas were still on the mantel. The three or four throw pillows had been arranged artfully on the sofa. Everything on the desk had been arranged in square-cornered piles.

The files. Oh fuck, the files. Sherlock had found the files that gave John away as an intel operative, the murderous square peg jammed into the round hole of information-gathering that should have been filled with someone—almost anyone, really—other than him. Without John’s explanation, it would look to Sherlock like he’d been spending all that time flirting with Xie in the salon—and romancing Sherlock everywhere else—just to get information.

But, no, the files were there just as John had left them, in a pile against the wall with a heavy book on top. He exhaled relief. But if not that, then where the hell was Sherlock? He leaned against the edge of the desk, massaged the back of his neck with one hand. Looking up again, he had a view out the window to the split where Baker Street met the Park Road. And what caught his eye at the corner was the unmistakable figure of Sherlock Holmes in his long, dark coat, looking in every direction except back toward the flat, shaking his head, touching his forehead with a gloved hand, then dropping it to touch the bent back of a man on his knees with his hands clutching the coat at either side of Sherlock’s waist and his animated, pleading face turned up toward Sherlock’s.

John ground his teeth together, drew his gun from its holster. He was a good shot, but he knew it was too far. He’d go down, jog up behind them and have it done before anyone had time to protest. A call to the Mentor and it would be taken care of—body removed, currency balance reassigned, like James Moriarty had never existed. The bastard. John squared his shoulders, lifted his chest.

But then Moriarty was getting to his feet, and Sherlock was suddenly nodding his head instead of shaking it. Moriarty took him by the elbow as if he were infirm and needed guidance, and steered him toward a waiting palanquin. Sparing no expense; they’d have space inside for a celebratory fuck in honour of their reunion on the way back home. John felt everything at once, and it coalesced into sick. Somehow Jim had found Sherlock—or, worse, uglier, Sherlock had summoned Jim—and after a transparently dramatic pantomime of I’m sorry, I’ll change, it will never happen again, I love you, please come home, Sherlock (weak, pathetic, ungrateful, insane) had let himself be persuaded, and gone back up the mountain to take his chances with the family that would welcome him home.
In chapter 26, John spied Sherlock through the window of 221B, leaving with Jim.

Please note that this chapter contains a significant amount of the emotional manipulation that often goes hand in hand with physical domestic violence, and a brief but graphic description of physical violence.

Sherlock just kept making right turns, vaguely in search of a wine shop, but mostly using the rhythm of his steps, his breath, and the squares of pavement to lull himself. Tidying John’s flat had not soothed him enough; the bath towels and unmade bed and Xie’s old gown in the wardrobe only reminded him of things from home that he’d never see again. The silver-shot black granite vanity tops he’d agonised over the selection of. The pretty black and white photograph of an Italian fountain that hung in the bedroom. The vault full of Xie’s gowns. The crystals dripping from the lamp shades in the salon. His precious violin.

Walking helped a bit, soothed the recurrent surges of panic about having lied, and having left. Sherlock reminded himself he had walked out, not run away; it seemed a vital distinction. By the time John got back to the flat with a cable to charge Sherlock’s mobile, it was almost certain to be full of angry messages from Jim, who would be missing him by now and would have worked out—that there was no appearance in Bath. Sherlock had told him he’d be back that morning, and tried to be vague about the train schedule but talked himself into a corner and assured Jim he’d be home by half-eleven, I’m sure you’ll still be in bed, I’ll try not to wake you when I come in. Jim would demand to know where Sherlock had gone; Sherlock would not tell him. He’d threaten to kill Sherlock; Sherlock would know the threat was hollow, for Jim had threatened to kill him dozens of times. Eventually he’d tell Sherlock he was fool to try, because he was of no use to anyone in the world, only good for one thing, and no one would want his bony, used-up arse anyway and he would starve, he would end up in the gutter where Jim had found him, using, hustling, you slag, you disgusting whore; Sherlock would not listen to his lies. Sherlock would hang up and not answer Jim’s calls anymore. This time, he really would file for divorce. He would get Jim out of the Icehouse. Somehow.

*How?*

*Somehow.*

There must be a shop somewhere up ahead, people were passing in the opposite direction carrying bags. With any luck it would have wine or whiskey, and Sherlock wouldn’t mind a little something—a couple of biscuits or a little square bite of dark chocolate. . .

“Sherlock?”

*No.*

“Sherlock!”

He slowed, against his will. The palanquin stopped at the edge of the pavement. Sherlock smelled
every oxygen molecule abrading his throat as he inhaled. He turned; he planted his feet.

“Having yourself a little tantrum, are you, Sherlock? Sweetheart?” Jim emerged onto the pavement and smoothed the front of a cashmere muffler that had been a Christmas gift from Sherlock, hung carelessly-on-purpose centered on his chest, his coat left unbuttoned. Sherlock gritted his back teeth to keep from screaming. “Run away from home to teach me a lesson? About how I don’t love you enough, that I haven’t been spoiling you lately.” Jim’s voice was not loud, not cruel. He sounded merely curious, a little disappointed. It was terrifying. “You haven’t been answering your phone.”

Sherlock moved to put his hands in his coat pockets, but realised to do so was tantamount to tying his own wrists behind his back, and so only tensed his fists, then released them. The palanquin pullers lit smelly, drug-laced cigarettes and leaned against the poles with their ankles crossed; Jim must have paid them to wait. Jim moved closer, but stopped when Sherlock sidestepped, defending his intimate space.

Jim looked up the Park Road, back the way he’d just come, then circled his gaze around them. “There’s nothing on in Bath; did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Sherlock asserted.

“Doesn’t matter now,” Jim said. He had a smirky grin on his face as if he weren’t angry. “Of course not now, Sherlock. Now I’ve found you. Think I deserve better, though, after all these years, than to have you tell me a lie and sneak out to come out here to the arse-end of nowhere and hole up with your friend, that drasha,” Here Jim snapped his fingers and frowned, as if trying to call up the name, “whatsit. . .Tesora.”

Tesora was no friend of Sherlock’s; the only reason he was even aware of the far junior drasha was because of Icehouse rumours that Jim had fucked Tesora, probably several times, or it wouldn’t even have warranted a blip on the rumour radar. But Sherlock would let Jim go on thinking he was staying there; it served him. If Jim believed that, he must not know about John’s shabby and cramped little flat, just yards off, over Sherlock’s shoulder. The back of his mind set up a buzzy, prayer-like wish that John would not round the corner, spot him and call out his name. “...the first floor flat at 221B Baker Street was the only safe place for Sherlock in the entire world. Obviously. He would do whatever he must to keep Jim from finding it out.

“So if you’re trying to get my attention, well fine sweetheart, here you are, you’ve got it.” His tone was quiet, with something like defeat in it. “Sherlock. . .” He stepped closer again, and this time Sherlock let him. “I know I’ve been spiky lately—probably unkind. It’s just these renovations coming up, on top of all my other work, and. . .you know this time of year is hard for me.” Jim’s mother had died one autumn when they were young and just starting out, but Sherlock couldn’t remember him mentioning her even once since her passing. “But. . .” He looked up at Sherlock with sad eyes and a pleading half-smile. “You can’t really mean to—”

“I’m not coming back,” Sherlock said, and it rang frantic in his ears, though it was meant to sound firm.

“You have to.”

To Sherlock’s surprise, Jim wasn’t ordering him home. He was—could he be?—pleading.

“I want—” a divorce, Sherlock could not bring himself to say. “I want you to move out of the flat.” There. That was out; the rest of it was easier. “I hope you’ll do the right thing, and ask to be
reassigned. Any house of repose would thrive, with you in charge.”

Jim’s eyes went wide. “What?” Sherlock felt as if the ground was shifting beneath his firmly planted feet. Jim looked truly heartbroken; his wide, dark eyes shimmering and damp. He took a half-step backwards. “No.” He shook his head. “Come home. Come home, and we’ll talk about it.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Sherlock replied instantly, automatically. But it came out weak, only a whisper.

“You don’t want to leave me, sweetheart. Not really,” Jim said, disbelieving. “Everything we made, together—made a whole world! Don’t—” his voice broke, and he scrubbed his hand down his face, gripping hard at his own jaw. “Don’t say you can leave it behind. The world I made for you.” Jim touched his arm, and Sherlock let him. “Everything I’ve ever done has only been for you. I love you more than I love myself, Sherlock. I need you.”

“Please, Jim, don’t.” Sherlock knew what was coming and tried to steel himself. As hollow as Jim’s threats to kill him had always been, his threats to kill himself were leaden.

“I need you, sweetheart. I couldn’t survive without you.” He shook his head, frowning hard, and wiped at his eyes roughly with the pads of his fingers. Clutching hard at Sherlock’s coatsleeve, he almost whined. “I’m nothing without you.”

“I can’t do it anymore.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. You know I’m sorry. I’ll try harder. I’ll try so hard.”

Sherlock shook his head. His throat was filling; his eyes prickled. Jim was always so sorry.

“If you leave me, I’ll hang myself.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s only you and me, sweetheart, always has been. We’ve got no one else. And without you, what reason do I have? You know me, Sherlock.” Jim leaned close, and Sherlock’s arms ached with wanting to embrace him. “You know who I really am. You know who I was when we met. I’d have offed myself a hundred ways by now if not for you.”

Sherlock wanted not to listen. He wanted to walk away, but where would he go? He couldn’t go to John’s flat and give it away. And if Tesora really did live in the neighbourhood, he had no idea where. If he walked away, Jim would follow Sherlock forever. Jim would always, always come after him, to fetch him back home.

“You’re not who you were then,” Sherlock said quietly, and he couldn’t help himself; he reached around Jim’s back, cradled Jim’s neck and drew him close. “You’ll be all right; we both will. All we do is break each other’s hearts.” Sherlock, the constant disappointment: never good enough, smart enough, rich enough. And Jim, hardened by having to hide his vulnerabilities, his sadness and insecurity exploding into frustrated fury.

Jim shook his head, his face pressed into the lapel of Sherlock’s coat. “Just come home and talk a bit. I promise I’ll be better. I won’t let myself get so angry.”

“You can’t help yourself,” Sherlock intoned. “I think you’ve forgotten how to be any other way.”

Jim looked up at him then, and Sherlock could smell his aftershave, noticed that his lower lip was chapped. “I know I can be better. Just let me try.” And then, to Sherlock’s horror, Jim got down on
his knees, clutching hard at the sides of Sherlock’s coat. “Please, sweetheart,” he begged. “Please. I can be better. I know I’m bad; I’m garbage. I’m a broken person—”

“You’re not.”

“I am. I am. Always have been. And you’re broken, too. But you saved me. Didn’t we save each other, Sherlock? We fit together—all our broken places.” Sherlock glanced nervously up and down the street; people were staring as they passed. He looked up at the sky, blinked away his own tears. Jim’s words were a rush, a cascade. “Just come home and, you know what? If you want me to leave for a while, I will. I will. I’ll take another flat, and we’ll start over. You can have your space, I’ll work to win you. It’ll be like the early days. I promise I’ll do everything right this time. I’ll take such good care of you, sweetheart. I’ll try like anything.”

Sherlock rubbed at a headache forming between his eyebrows. Jim wasn’t going to let him walk away; he would follow, maybe on his knees. The very last thing Sherlock could do—the very thing he desperately wanted to do—was to go back to John’s flat. If he went with Jim to the Icehouse, he could get more of his things: his clothes, wristwatches, perhaps even his violin. They could have a drink in one of the bars and talk; Jim would never get loud in public, especially not in their own house of repose. Sherlock would settle Jim down, reassure him, then he could leave again later, when it was safe to come back to Baker Street where Jim couldn’t find him. If only he’d stayed inside!

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“You can have the flat, Sherlock. Some time apart—you’re right—it could be good for us. If that’s what you need to sort your head. Losing you would kill me, you know it would. You’re the only family I have. We’re all we’ve got. Please come home.”

Sherlock had no choice but to go with him. And every minute that passed with the spectacle of Jim pleading on his knees on the pavement risked John returning from his shopping and making himself known. Then Sherlock would be left with no safe place in the world.

“Yes, all right,” Sherlock acquiesced. “Just to talk.”

“You won’t regret it, sweetheart,” Jim promised, and got to his feet. Sherlock let himself be guided into the waiting palanquin, and studiously did not turn to look back toward John’s flat, which was as difficult as walking out of the Icehouse had been two days previous. He was not going back to Jim, in that much he was resolute. But he did owe it to him, after all their years together, to explain himself, and to try to end things in an honest way instead of just sneaking off. It was true they were the only family either of them had, and that meant something. Jim had begged on his knees for just chance to talk, so Sherlock would talk. He was not going back. He was only going to sort things out.

John’s fingers around the gun grip clutched ridiculously tight; his knuckles were pallid. He squared himself, braced his right wrist on his perpendicular left forearm and squinted to get Jim Moriarty in his sights, but it was useless. In every way, it was useless. Sherlock was already inside the palanquin—he was going, leaving, clearly he was going—and Moriarty was a hundred yards away at least, and John was not that sort of marksman, his gun was not that sort of gun. His next impulse was to smash his hand, pistol and all, through the windowpane, just to have somewhere to put the insane fury he felt, with a heart of helplessness that only made him more furious. It was the same helpless way he’d felt for his first seventeen years, and it burned. It shrieked. It was a hot whirlwind, and it filled the barrel of his chest, and he hated it. That it was Sherlock who made him feel it again now was an added insult. Sherlock, with his bare skin confessing who he was, offering himself to be
brought home and healed—*not saved; he did not need saving*—and with his freely-given stories and his well-guarded weeping in this very room where John had begun to let himself imagine Sherlock prowling nightly, perhaps forever; with his nimble hands and open mouth and his ankle resting on John’s in bed together as if was as easy as that. . .That monster dared to haunt Sherlock, to harm Sherlock, and now Sherlock had allowed that monster to put him in a box to be carried away, perhaps forever, without even a backwards glance.

Through gritted teeth: “*Fuck. You.*” And it was at least a few seconds that John pressed the gun muzzle against his own temple in the blindness of his helpless fury. He wasn’t even sure who he was cursing, and he jammed his pistol back in its holster, and then beat his head with both fists. He would *never* understand it. He’d done his best and still—clearly—it had not been enough to make Sherlock stay. How did a grown man who obviously had so little self-protective instinct even manage to survive? *He put out his cigarettes on you. He broke your bones. He cuts you, and calls you she, and makes you out to be a whore when what you really are is magnificent, and still you go back?*

It was complete shit, and John could not—would never—understand it. Sherlock was obviously damaged beyond any hope of repair if he was willing to let Jim Moriarty put a hand on his elbow and show him where to go. John was finished. It had all been crazy, anyway—only imaginary. No one would believe the story if John told it, of how he tried to rent the drashaskaya, then became a spy when he was only meant to be a killer, and met a man in a mask whose turquoise eyes saw straight through him.

It was a stupid story, a bucket of lies, and left John Watson holding a gun to his head. *The fucking end.*

“To what do I owe the pleasure of an unscheduled phone call?” The Mentor was especially oozy.

“I need a job. Here in London, and as soon as possible.”

“I’ll see what’s on offer.”

“I’ll do it for half.”

“Oh, Captain Watson. Don’t sell yourself short. With your skills—”

“Tonight would be good.”

The Mentor paused long enough for a breath. “What about that risk I suggested you take?”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s just moved up to the top of my To-Do list, but I also need a fucking job. Right fucking now.”

“Language. . .I’m sure I can find something. I’ll send a courier within a few hours. Might I inquire as to the reason you’re suddenly so urgently available for an extra assignment?”

“Sexual frustration. Unless you might help me out with that? I’ve always thought we had something special.”

“Undoubtedly. It would be such a shame to ruin it, though.”

“Send the courier. Name the price. Whatever it is, it’s fine, I’ll do it. *Tonight.*”

“Understood.”
Sherlock wrung his hands together through the entire ride to the Icehouse. Each time he glanced aside, Jim smiled a little, hesitant, with his eyes still glistening. Sherlock was serious about leaving this time, and would not be dissuaded; clearly Jim sensed that he could not, this time, scare Sherlock off from his decision with shouted threats or even bodily violence. Jim was docile and appeasing, giving Sherlock space, keeping quiet. Sherlock had to tamp down a rising feeling of pity for Jim.

“I’ll have them arrange a quiet table for us. A bar? Or the café?” Jim drew his mobile from the inside pocket of his long, camel coat.

Sherlock wanted to keep his wits. “Café.”

Jim arranged it, not quite barking down the phone, but certainly brooking neither argument nor questions. Sherlock gave him a sideways glance, and Jim looked sheepish and said a less-than-sincere thank you before ringing off.

Once they were settled with a pot of tea and a plate of shortbread biscuits neither of them bothered with, Sherlock sat back in his chair, affecting a posture of casual self-assurance he was not sure he actually felt. He did not want to give Jim too much room to speak; he knew all the right things to say and although Sherlock wanted to remain resolute, just the thought of Jim sweetly crooning at him dismantled a little of his confidence in his ability to do so.

“I want you to move out,” Sherlock said plainly.

“I will. I already said I will.” Jim raised his hands to show Sherlock his empty palms. “Whatever you want. I just want a chance to prove myself before you do anything final.”

Sherlock could imagine it, actually, despite himself. Jim wooing him, taking him on dates, sending flowers, being attentive and gentle and looking at him in that way he never did anymore that made Sherlock feel as if they really were the only two people in the world. But no. Before he could go too far down that path to certain disaster, Sherlock spoke.

“I have to be able to work. Whatever else happens, the salon—”

“Yes, of course. Of course. I wouldn’t dream of interfering.”

Sherlock sniffed; it was a ludicrous assertion, and Sherlock did not believe it, even slightly.

“I’m only asking that you let me try, sweetheart,” Jim said softly, chagrined by Sherlock’s skeptical expression.

Sherlock bought a few moments, sipping his tea.

“You’ll be fine,” he said at last. “You’ll be happier. I’m not the right sort of person. You need someone with a less demanding career, who can be more available to you. I...” Sherlock wanted to be firm, but he wanted to be honest, too. “I love you, but it can’t go on like this.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart,” Jim said in an urgent rush. “Sherlock. You’re all I’ve got and anything you want me to do, anything at all to keep you, I swear—”

“You can’t...” You can’t keep me. I’m already gone. I’m just petting you so you’ll settle down and I can get the hell away to the only place in London—in England, in the world—where you can never find me. “Let’s just try not to make this more difficult than necessary.”
“Of course it’s difficult; you’re breaking my heart. But just let me try. You’ll see,” Jim said eagerly.

Sherlock sipped his tea again; it was already too cool to be palatable but it kept his mouth shut.

“You wouldn’t leave without kissing me goodbye,” Jim said, almost playfully, but still with the undercurrent of pleading. Sherlock pointedly did not look at him, his face surely bearing the same expression of sad hopefulness it had while he begged Sherlock on his knees. Sherlock needed to get the hell away before he weakened.

“Jim.” A mild scold. A memory surfaced then, unbidden and unwelcome, of the two of them—not at all long ago—flirting over cups of warm sake, Jim’s hand on Sherlock’s knee beneath the table, two days and nights spent high as he’d ever been on affection and heat, Jim’s lilting voice in his ear saying all those wonderful, terrible things that always tricked him right back into the trap.

“Come on, Sherlock. I’m not going to stand in the way of you taking some time, getting your pretty head sorted—I understand, you’re having a moment—” The words were snide, but his tone was neutral. “But just one kiss to hold me over.” Sherlock glanced across at him, and Jim gave him a sweet, rumpled grin that made his heart twinge. The crinkled skin around his eyes was more pronounced now, but Sherlock could see in his face the brash young bloke he’d fallen for those years ago, and had to shove away that bright memory. They’d finished their tea, so Sherlock stood and draped his coat over his arm. He turned his face, just a quarter turn, presenting his cheek.

“Ah, now. You know that’s not what I mean,” Jim smirked. “Come up to the flat.”

“No.”

Jim made the same gesture of surrender, throwing his hands up in front of his chest, and took a half-step back from Sherlock. “I’ll just come in and pack a bag; I’ll leave you my keys. I can arrange a little place for myself in under an hour and be out of your way.”

Sherlock decided he could wait him out for an hour. After Jim had gone, he could get some more shirts and his comb, check on his violin in its cabinet in Xie’s dressing room. Go back to John’s flat and be done with it. He did not want to kiss Jim, but knew he might have to. He was definitely not going to have sex with him. But at all costs, he must keep him calm. Let him think whatever he liked so long as it meant Sherlock would have a chance, later, to slip out without Jim following him.

Jim had draped his own coat over his shoulders, and he gestured toward the exit.

“You can’t stay. Pack a bag. That’s all.”

“And a kiss goodbye,” Jim said. His eyes filled, and he grimaced, coughed into his hand, used his pocket square to smear at his tears before one of the employees saw. He laid his hand on Sherlock’s low back and Sherlock felt himself tense away from the touch. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, for everything,” he said quietly. “You do what you have to do.”

Sherlock put the hand not holding his coat into his trousers pocket, then immediately took it out again. Jim stood aside and Sherlock led the way to the lifts.

After the Mentor, John’s next call was to Greg Lestrade.

“Can’t make it for the match; sorry to get back to you so late. I did get the text yesterday, but I was...
“No, it’s fine. Another time, then. Get a pint or something.” Greg sounded affable, completely unoffended that John had not returned his text in anything like a timely way. John figured he could use a bit of time in the uncomplicated company of a mate. And there was this risk he must take, as well, for which Lestrade seemed the logical conduit.

“Tomorrow, maybe?” John suggested. “There’s a pub near mine, the Black Fawn, lively but not too loud. If you’re free.”

“Ah, excellent,” Greg agreed. “How’s half-seven?”

“Brilliant. See you then.”

He rang off. No sign of a courier from the Mentor, but it had been less than an hour. His gaze flicking here and there around the flat, John saw Sherlock’s fingerprints everywhere. There was more evidence of Sherlock, who had lived there less than two days than there was of John, who’d been there for weeks. The geisha-painted nesting dolls on the mantel. The way every pile of casually tossed-aside junk had been squared up neatly. The tea towel folded in thirds and hanging from the oven door handle, its creases sharp and its corners aligned. John decided on a hot shower to pass the time, and to wash off whatever of Sherlock’s mark was left on his skin.

But of course Sherlock was there in the bathroom, too, in the way the towels were hung as if a hotel maid had restocked them while John was out dragging himself to three different places to find Sherlock’s phone charger and wooden comb. The ghost of Sherlock smiling softly at John as he stood before the still-steamy mirror preparing to shave with John’s razor. He’d be all over the bed sheets, too, and the pillowslips. His socks were in the top drawer of the chest. His beautiful suits still hung in the wardrobe. John knew it was unfair of him to be angry, but anger was easy and comfortable, so he decided to stay there a while. Sherlock Holmes was an enchanting, handsome mess, but John’s life was more than messy enough without him.

The water was hot and the suds plentiful, and when John was through, his body—at least—was free of any trace of Sherlock. He’d ditch the rest soon enough. It wasn’t much.

Jim was fiddling with his mobile, exchanging text messages with the assistant administrator in charge of the residences about securing himself a flat. He stood aside while Sherlock unlocked the front door, then followed him inside.

It seemed to Sherlock that three things happened simultaneously:

The door thumped shut behind him.
There was a dark explosion of pain in the back of his calf just below his knee.
His hands in his pockets—depositing his keys—left him helpless to break his fall, and his cheek slammed the corner of the hallway table as he collapsed hard to the floor.

_Stupid._ He really was so fucking _stupid_. Jim sweet and sorry. Jim with tear-filled eyes. Jim on his knees, begging. Sherlock had let himself believe it all because Jim seemed to want to win him back instead of wanting to hurt and intimidate him, because Jim hadn’t called him names or told him he was useless. Sherlock (_so stupid!_) had allowed himself to be taken in by all of it, and now Sherlock was on the floor, and Jim was screaming, spitting, kicking him _everywhere_, punching him with the
phone still clenched in his fist, not taking the least care to leave Sherlock’s hands and face unmarked so Xie could still work.

This time, Sherlock was utterly certain, Jim was going to kill him.
Chapter 28

In chapter 27, Jim talked Sherlock into returning to their flat at the Icehouse (to his detriment), and John demanded a job "here in London. Tonight." from the Mentor.

Please note this chapter contains graphic descriptions of partner violence, physical injuries, and paralyzing fear. There are also brief but graphic descriptions of marital rape.

It was raining; John could hear the rush of water through the drainpipes outside the bedroom window, and the occasional sloshing of rickshaw wheels passing, down on the street. He’d given up on sleep by half-two; the adrenaline dump from the job combined with his (still-present, despite having wanted to use the job to erase it) bitter tangle of feelings in the wake of Sherlock’s abrupt departure were proving more than he could manage to fight off. He’d abandoned his pillow, switched on the light, and tossed Sherlock’s open case on the foot of the bed.

First he’d emptied the drawers of socks and pocket squares, a belt and two neckties, left all of it neatly folded and rolled as was, then laid it inside the suitcase with care. He’d send the lot back to the Icehouse the next day, in care of Molly Hooper to save Sherlock possibly having to explain where it had come from. Sherlock’s framed photo was already inside, along with a pair of scissors marked “Fabric Only,” a couple of oversized, glossy books on fashion and design, and a box of coloured pencils.

John passed through to the sitting room, turning lights on as he went—he may as well call it morning, now; it was near three and as good as—and retrieved Sherlock’s things from the mantel. The nesting dolls with their intricately-painted geishas he fitted together and tucked into the crook of his arm like a cradled infant. He took up Sherlock’s dead phone, then fetched the carrier bags he’d abandoned by the landing earlier. After dropping bags and phone on the bed, he carefully settled the dolls into a cushion formed by rolled-up socks, nestling the spines of the books up close to one side so the matryoshka was held firm between the books and the side wall of the case, to minimize jostling. He tied one plastic bag shut around the wooden comb for Sherlock’s barely-tamed hair and the charging cable he’d at last found to fit Sherlock’s Finnish mobile, then fitted the bundle into the suitcase like part of a jigsaw puzzle.

He opened the wardrobe and was confronted with Sherlock’s suits and shirts hanging with the same sharp-creased precision as every dish- and bath-towel. John backed away and sat on the foot of the bed, rubbing his thumb and first two fingers against the bridge of his nose. He wondered if he’d somehow telegraphed his doubt that Sherlock could truly leave the abusive old life behind, and his skepticism had eroded Sherlock’s confidence in his decision. John had tried so hard to be available, steady, open. To give Sherlock room while still offering to embrace him and hold him up. Whatever he needed. But John had wondered almost from the moment Sherlock’s foot hit the landing if it would really stick. If Sherlock had sensed his doubt, it may have been hard for him to feel John was entirely trustworthy, that John could be relied upon.

No matter now, though; he’d never know. Another affair ended without a word of explanation, and none likely to be forthcoming. At least this time he’d seen him go.
The Mentor had sent over details of a simple, by-the-numbers job with solid intel that led the Face straight to the target’s poker table in the smoky upstairs room of a quasi-legal gambling parlour. A few coded words in the ears of the monsters standing guard at each door on the way in and up, and the Face was nodded through without even a change in their grim, vaguely threatening expressions. The Face strode in straight-faced and square-shouldered, and when he locked eyes with the target, it was clear he knew the Face was there for him, and why, and how it would end. He lay his cards face-up on the table while the other players looked on, bewildered but silent. Every man in the room knew better than to get involved. As John reached into his jacket, the target slid an unstylish, wide gold ring off his left hand and tossed it toward the man across from him. It slid before coming to rest on the green felt tabletop.

“Make sure my wife gets that, will you, Reg?”

“Course, mate.”

The trigger resisted, then surrendered. The bullet flew. The target’s head fell back, then forward, and before it slumped all the way down to the tabletop, the Face was already on his way down the stairs. Before he had reached the next intersection, John knew it had all been a waste. His first thought was of returning to his neatly-made bed, but even more than that, of the hands that had tucked and smoothed it. The job hadn’t erased a thing, hadn’t reminded him who he was. He phoned in his report, grouchily demanding the curr be in his account by ten the next morning. Just another job, and at two-thirds his usual rate.

Skating the weird, wobbly edge of insomniac exhaustion, John felt a giddy rush in his head as he got back to his feet and zipped open the garment bag hanging in the wardrobe. He was surprised to find more clothes inside—a pale blue gown that spilled like a rush of water out of the open zip as he guided it forth with both hands, stroking down and toward himself along the back until he had a clear view of the entirety of it. It was of silk fine and feathery as a dragonfly’s wing, with indistinct patches of white here and there, like fair-weather clouds in a bright sky. John stroked the front of the cascading skirt, pinched the fabric at the side of the waist and worried it a bit between his fingers. Sherlock had left his old life with just a few shirts, a few suits, three pairs of shoes, a framed photograph of the last time he’d been safe, and one gossamer gown of pale blue silk. It was nothing. Compared to what he had—what he was accustomed to—it was nothing. Sherlock couldn’t possibly have thought this was going to carry him through the rest of his life; it wouldn’t have lasted the week. Jeezus, John had bought him a comb to fill a gap the size of a high-rise mirrored skyscraper called the Icehouse. He snorted a bitter half-laugh, shook his head at his self-indulgent, naïve optimism in the face of Sherlock on his doorstep—announcing that his husband thought he was in Bath—with all this nothing. Wanting to erase his own stupidity, he tucked the spill of the gown back into the bag, grabbed the suits and shirts by handfuls and pressed them all in, quickly tugging the zip back up to hide it all away as quickly as possible. Of course he’d had doubts Sherlock would stay; he couldn’t have.

John fitted the two left-behind pairs of shoes into the little case. He took up Sherlock’s dead mobile phone and tugged at an elasticized pocket in the lid, meaning to drop it inside. There was a soft-cornered, oversized envelope in the pocket, and John drew it out far enough to see IMPORTANT in block letters written on its front. Almost automatically, without conscious motive or even a sense of intrusion into Sherlock’s privacy, John liberated the envelope, shut and zipped the case and set it on the floor beside the wardrobe, then settled back against his propped-up pillows. He slid bare feet beneath the blankets as he bent back the little metal wings holding the flap closed.
Jim’s ankle was on his shin. Jim’s arm was across his chest. Jim’s lips and nose were touching his shoulder. Sherlock had lost track of the time; past midnight, surely. The only light in the room came faintly from behind the mostly-closed door to the bath, far on the other side of the dressing room. Sherlock’s lips, dry and sore and split where they’d been crushed between fist and teeth, were turned down hard at the corners—he could feel the shape of his mouth as he covered it with his trembling hand. Tears streamed continuously from his eyes, down his temples and into the swirling architecture of his ears. He blinked hard, and fat drops oozed between his lashes. The fingers clamping against his cheek were shivering as if from the cold. He inhaled long and deep through a nose partially clogged, willing himself to settle.

He conjured a memory: a time when he was a child and his mother sat beside him on the edge of a bed that always felt too wide, stroking fingers through the hair near his temple, hushing him through a massive thunderstorm with great rumbling booms that rattled the windowpanes and flashes of lightning unpredictable and terrifying—half-second blasts of noisy daylight when it should have been dark and quiet.

“It’s all right to be afraid. It’s frightening. But it will be over soon, I promise.” She’d crooned it, long and low, trying to soothe him. But with Jim caging him in the bed, Sherlock’s own inner voice drowned out the remembered voice of his mother, and instead of soothing, it scolded.

“Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid.” He was certain that if he couldn’t calm his fear, he would die of it. It wasn’t that he’d thought his mother was wrong—in fact, she was probably right, even this would be over soon—but rather that every beat of his heart threatened to explode him. Every next flash of white could be the one that blinded him. Every hair on his body was at attention; he was electric with terror.

In the near-perfect darkness the words echoed in his mind. “Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid.” But the tears streamed on. It would all be over soon, no doubt, and Sherlock was going to die. Afraid.

Jim inhaled loudly and Sherlock jumped, and his grimacing mouth widened in a horrified rictus beneath his palm. He tried not to shudder as a sob broke out of him, making his chest and belly spasm.

There were his limbs draped over Sherlock and a silver kitchen knife under his pillow, and no phone in the bedroom, and a muttered promise to slit his throat if Sherlock tried to leave again. Sherlock was too tender to touch, nearly everywhere, and to discourage any attempts to run, Jim made him sleep naked. Jim had kicked and kicked at Sherlock’s knees and ankles, and hours later they still sang agony; at least one knee cap was out of place—when he gently trailed two fingertips over it, it felt wrong, and at that his gut threatened to rebel, so he didn’t touch it again.

The darkness was smothering him, his chest sinking under the weight of it. Sherlock couldn’t even be sure Jim was really asleep; he might only be lying in wait for Sherlock to make a move, to give Jim a reason to rear up with one clawed hand digging hard into Sherlock’s shoulder, the other swinging. Slashing.

Don’t be afraid. . . Don’t be afraid. . . Don’t be afraid. . .

He’d wait for morning, and then he would run. Naked, bruised, with aching ankles and ruined knees. . . he would. He would. In the daylight, when he could be certain that a lull in Jim’s fury was real and could be trusted, he would. He would run. It was only a few dozen long strides to the front door.

Jim let out a complaining hum and Sherlock bit down on his knuckle to keep from screaming.
The pub was busy but not raucous; there was no football—only analysis and conjecture about the previous day’s match and what it meant for the one upcoming—on the television sets clamped high on the walls in two corners. John and Greg, facing each other across a small round wood table, tucked into delightfully greasy baskets of fish and chips, all salt and vinegar and pleasant memories. Their pints of lager stood watch at easy reach.

“Sorry again about not getting back to you,” John said, “but there’s just... I have a lot...”

“Saw’right.” Greg’s expression was jovial.

“There’s just a lot of punches on my ticket at the moment,” John finished. He shoved three chips into his mouth, chewed twice, then tongued them aside. “Bought that ring for your girl yet?”

Greg grinned, sly, and said nothing, but John caught the meaning.

“Good on you, then,” John told him. “Best of luck to you both.”

“Appreciate that. How’s things with you and—”

“Didn’t work out.”

“Oh. Too bad then.”

“Married,” John reminded.

“Right. Of course. So that’s probably for the best.”

“Rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind,” John shrugged.

“Fine. Whatever you like.” Greg sipped his beer, frowned approval at it. “Ah, that’s hitting the right spot.”

“Yeah? Good.” John reached for his own glass and drew from it. They went on eating, talking about South Cross football, the beer, the food, nothing much at all, until they had nearly finished their meals. Then John cleared his throat and wiped his mouth with a crumpled paper napkin and dropped it on the few remnants of his dinner before pushing the basket aside. He had the file from the Mentor folded inside his jacket, and he reached to withdraw it, careful to keep his body angled just enough that Greg wouldn’t catch sight of his pistol, nestled there beside his ribs. He lay the folder in front of him on the table and smoothed the long vertical crease.

Greg’s eyebrows rose and he sat back away from the table a bit.

John looked hard at him. Cleared his throat again.

“So I’m about to take a risk here,” John began, continuing to slowly stroke the front of the folder with one hand, while the other held it in place by its corner. “But I feel confident my instincts are right.”

“What’s this?” Greg asked tonelessly. His eyebrows dropped toward the middle, knitted with some degree of suspicion.

“I was on the continent a bit before I came back to London. Heard things—well, who hasn’t heard
them?—radio broadcasts, mostly, and some chat here and there. . .” John glanced up then, trying to get a read on Greg’s reaction; his jaw was set and his dark eyes were steely. John plunged on. “Chat about these vlast rats. How they walk on our backs to get where they want to be.” He leaned in and lowered his voice, his tone intense to better sell his conviction. “Poisoning our water in exchange for a four day weekend. Controlling what we read, and see on television—” Here he gestured vaguely toward one of the sets hung in the nearest corner. “—all so that they can blind us to our own exploitation.”

“That’s inflammatory,” Greg said through barely moving lips. “What you’re saying; it’s treasonous.”

“Fuck that. Treason. What name is there for the crimes they forced good men like you and me to commit over in the Americas?” He let that one land, and Greg shifted his shoulders. “And what do we get for it? Nightmares and drinking problems and a lifetime of guilt. A little bit of overage on our ICs, take a rest, mate, see a show, hire someone to give you a blow job, you’ve earned it, and then we’re swept out with the rubbish.”

Greg crossed his arms in front of his chest, but he didn’t protest or call for a cop, didn’t point out to John that the things he was saying could cause him to disappear. He was listening.

“I think you agree with me that it’s time for mass extermination.”

“I have no opinion.”

“Right. Right. Why should you trust me, when so many soldiers got swept up into Unity jobs—policing, spying, snitching. . .probably doing their trial-free executions, too.” John let his index finger fall with a thud onto the folder in front of him. “This. This is why you should trust me.”

“What is it?” Greg asked, almost casually.

“First let me just say I got this at serious risk to myself, just for this reason. So you know I’m legitimate.” He cleared his throat. “As it happens, I am one of those former soldiers working in the shadows for Unity.”

Greg pursed his lips and nodded and did not look surprised. Rather, it seemed John had just confirmed a suspicion.

“And I did some dealing. Don’t mind telling you, put my arse on the line, because we’re mates, and because, like I said, I think my instincts are pretty sound in thinking you agree with me that these vermin need to be put out of their misery. Our misery.”

Greg said nothing. John picked up the folder and offered it to him.

“But when the traps start snapping, there’s some we want to keep safe from harm,” John finished, and nodded toward the folder, which Greg took, hesitantly, then held open in front of him, eyes darting between the pages and John’s face.

“What is this? Who is David Piper?”

“It’s your son.”

Greg’s mouth opened slightly and his head moved fractionally backward on his neck. He said nothing. After a stunned second or two, he went rifling through the pages, too fast for anything on them to register. John tossed him a life ring.

“You’ll see his original birth certificate’s there, marked up when the changes were made.”
“It...they would have destroyed it when...the adoption. He got a new one.”

John pressed on. “With your name, and his mother’s. The official record of the termination of your rights, adoption by her new husband, the new name, and new birth certificate. School reports, medical record.”

Greg had stopped shuffling the papers, only stared.

“This is?” He started, and his voice caught. He bit his lip and tried again. “This is him? This photo. This is him?”

John wanted to touch him; he seemed to need a bit of grounding, or a clap on the back. But at the moment John was not Greg’s friend; he was a Unity operative trying to prove his legitimate desire to overthrow the government by genocide.

“He looks like you, I think,” John said, and noticed Greg’s eyes were glassy. “Says there he’s a dentist. Married just over a year to a woman called Isabella.”

Another quick shuffle of papers, and Greg’s face made it obvious he was accepting it as true; the photo alone should have convinced him—the young man had medium brown hair, but his face could have been Greg’s. Then the suspicion reared up again. “How did you get this?”

“I told you, I work for the government.”

“Even still, no one’s just giving this to you.” Greg was challenging him, but didn’t sound truly antagonistic; he wanted to believe, John could tell.

“Just say I now owe several favours,” John told him. “Do what you want with it, just keep my name out of it, will you?”

Greg was staring at the photo again. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, of course.”

“Just wanted you to know I’m—” John started, looked around as if to check whether they were being eavesdropped on. He leaned in closer and dropped his voice. “I know something’s coming. Something big. And big things are expensive. I’ve got overage. I want to put it to good use. So if you know how that can be arranged...”

Greg shut the folder and his expression became grave. He nodded tightly. “Can you come to my office, day after tomorrow? We can talk there.”

Naturally, John thought, the man employed to spy on tens of thousands a year passing through the world’s most famous house of repose would have arranged to have an office where he would not be spied on. Clever.

John agreed then went into his pocket for his wallet, offering to pay for their meals. He made sure his jacket came open enough that Greg could see his holstered—and highly illegal—gun.
headpiece to his slicked-back hair. Now and then, tears threatened to well up—usually he could tolerate at least his face in the mirror, but Jim had blackened his eye and split his lip, and even through the paint Sherlock was certain it still somehow showed—so he tilted his head back, blinking fast to drain the tears away before they streaked down his face. He adjusted the chin-length veil of elaborate black lace over the bad eye, brushing the split and swollen edge of the lacquered lip.

Jim lolled in the red armchair, one leg thrown over its arm, texting orders, keeping the Icehouse running in his absence from his office. The knuckles of his right hand were bruised.

Xie wore a loose, A-line gown of iridescent royal purple satin that darkened to inky-black as it moved. Gloves of silky black leather with only the black-manicured fingertips exposed covered the hands and forearms—bruised, bitten, scratched—and the flowing sleeves did the rest. Xie would be careful in the manner of movement through the salon to ensure the ankles stayed covered beneath the bell-shaped hem. There would be no way to sit—not gracefully—because of the knees; they had already been swollen and purple from repeated kicking when Jim thrashed at them with a wooden clothes hanger, purple-faced, rage-crying, Why? Why, Sherlock? Why? Why?

The face was painted pale and glistening—mother-of-pearl—with great galaxies of black and purple dotted with rhinestones and flecks of silver foil surrounding both eyes, to make them match. Lips equally dark, painted just outside their natural shape, to camouflage the cuts. Xie would not smile, even if Sherlock could have, because nearly every movement of the lips opened the wounds, flooding the mouth with the taste of stale copper and sea salt.

Staring at the apparition in the mirror, Sherlock fixed a gaze at the base of the throat beneath the dangling laces of a black leather neck-corset covering plum-coloured fingerprints. It was one of few untouched places left on his trembling body. Sherlock thought the image of Xie was all wrong, ghastly.

“Don’t you look pretty,” Jim said, nothing in it. The next came out in the familiar sneer, though. “Clever you.” He went back to his phone.

Less than two hours before, Jim had slapped Sherlock’s cheeks to rouse him from semi-consciousness in the narrow alley between Sherlock’s side of the bed and the wall, and Sherlock thought he must be dreaming when Jim barked, “Get up, bitch. You’re going to work.”

He’d woken that morning to a hand in his hair, tangling, pulling so his neck cranked too far back, another clutching his hip with dug-in fingers, and Jim grunting as he rutted between the backs of Sherlock’s thighs. Minutes later, Jim let go of his hip and his arm circled tight around Sherlock’s neck, and Sherlock began to moan and whisper in an effort to placate him. Once Jim had finished, he dragged Sherlock to the floor by a handful of his hair, forcing a scramble on hands and knees as Jim harangued him about all these beautiful things I’ve given you, yanking out drawers and flinging their contents, tearing the seams of Sherlock’s carefully tailored suits, throwing his treasured wristwatches against the wall. When that proved unsatisfying, Jim wrenched his bare foot into one of Sherlock’s shoes and ground the crystal faces of the watches beneath its heel. All the while, Sherlock cried and begged him to stop, what good is it anyway, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, and his sniveling only enraged Jim more, and he dragged Sherlock partway up only to knock him sideways against the center island, where Sherlock’s bicep crashed against the edge of its marble top.

Jim spent hours ruining Sherlock’s clothes, spitting on him, shouting at him, stomping on his feet. He picked off every single button from every one of Sherlock’s shirts and pelted Sherlock with them.

“The fuck are you doing?”

Jim’s sharp voice woke Sherlock from the mirror-induced reverie. He’d just slid off his wedding ring
and set it in the dish.

“I always—” Sherlock murmured. “Xie doesn’t wear it in the salon.”

“Wouldn’t want them to think you’re taken, would you?” His voice was quiet but the tone was deadly. “You fucking whore. You suck every prick that walks in there.”

“I don’t. You know I don’t.” Sherlock struggled to soothe him, keeping his voice low. “It’s just here for safekeeping.”

Sherlock’s hands twisted each other tightly, wringing in his lap beneath the puddles of the long sleeves.

“Slut,” Jim spat, and in a single motion he was up and out of the chair, leaning across the countertop to snatch up the ring. “Want to keep it safe? I know a way. Open your mouth.”

Sherlock shrank back, but Jim gripped him hard by the neck and pulled him closer.

“Open your fucking mouth, whore, or I. will. choke. you.”

Sherlock’s lips parted as he sucked in a gasp, but before he’d filled his lungs, Jim had shoved the ring deeply between his lips with two fingers and thumb, then clamped the hand over Sherlock’s mouth and nose.

“Swallow it.”

Sherlock felt his eyes widen, struggled to roll his wedding ring against his front teeth using the tip of his tongue, and held it there.

“Swallow the fucking thing. You want to keep it somewhere safe? Keep it safe, then. Swallow it.”

Sherlock’s throat made strange burbling sounds and he tried to shake his head No but Jim was holding him too tightly, pressing him against the back of the chair, knee on Sherlock’s thigh to trap him. Sherlock’s ears pounded out his pulse, loud and rushing. Jim’s face was red, his mouth set in the M-shape it took when he was raging. Sherlock’s wedding ring was a cold circle around the tip of his tongue; it tasted like old coins. All at once Sherlock felt overwhelmingly tired, and he thought about lying down on the soft Persian carpet under a sofa in the salon, curling around himself like a cat.

Jim shook him by the throat. Through gritted teeth: “Swallow!”

Sherlock curled his tongue, dropping the ring onto the back of it. Fighting the pressure of Jim’s hand, he managed to choke the ring down his throat with a noisy gulp. Jim released him, and he gagged.

“Fix your face,” Jim said with disdain. He fetched his mobile off the floor and went back to work, pacing the dressing room.

Xie made an appearance only long enough to greet the guests; introduce them to James Moriarty, the administrator of the Icehouse, visiting us tonight to ensure you are all enjoying yourselves. As such, the next round of drinks is on his tab; play a melancholy sonata on the violin; and then beg forgiveness for leaving such dear friends so soon. Jim reminded them to tip generously, then took what he wanted, which was Xie—gown torn apart, make-up smeared into a bruise-coloured blur, weeping into a wadded up sleeve—there on the dressing room floor.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

In chapter 28, John met with Greg to try to ingratiate himself to him as someone committed to Deep Sea's revolutionary cause. Sherlock, at the flat with Jim, suffered abuse at his hands.

Please note this chapter contains graphic descriptions of domestic violence and marital rape. This is the last chapter in which these things occur, so I hope to see some of you readers who have needed a break back for chapter 30.

Four years old, not yet at school, wearing starched-and-pressed short pants that pinch his tummy and a pale blue shirt with a white rounded collar other children say is girly and babyish, but which his mother says is the kind the princes wear and if it’s good enough for the princes it’s certainly good enough for the Holmeses.

His mummy is beautiful, with long golden hair Sherlock likes to brush; he sits on the edge of the sofa and Mummy sits on the floor with her long legs stretched out with her ankles crossed, and reads to him. Children’s classics, she says. Peter Pan is his favourite, though Mummy skips some bits which use mean words. Sometimes while he is pulling the brush through her long, silky hair, Mummy lays the book in her lap, marking the page with one hand and when Sherlock leans far, far to the side he can see her eyes are closed. Sometimes he stands in the doorway by her vanity table (the tufted stool has a scratchy lace skirt which he is just becoming too big to hide beneath during games of Hide and Seek) and watches her put on make-up. She wears a bit for every day, but now and then she and Daddy go out to party, and then she looks extra special, sparkly and mysterious.

They are at a garden party; it is Easter. Sherlock has kept his knees clean until after the family photo in front of Gran’s roses. The three Holmes boys fidgety in their special suits of clothes; Daddy looking relaxed and handsome, always holding his pipe even as his hand rests on Sherlock’s shoulder to hold him still, just a minute now, sonny jim, you can stand still just a minute, and Mummy in a gauzy dress, pale yellow with red strawberries on twining vines all over; white patent belt and open-toed shoes to match; and a white straw hat. Her necklace has pearls that look like buttermilk as they soak up the yellow from the dress. She smiles with lovely straight teeth and all the adults kiss the air beside her cheek and tell her she looks smashing, straight off the telly, like a fashion model. And she does.

The photos done, Sherlock finds a rock to sit on, just tall enough, just wide enough, and digs his way out of stiff, shiny shoes with buckles (which are girly, princes or no) and white socks. The grass is sharp-edged and ticklish between his toes, and Sherlock wants to run, run, run, and so he does, and sometimes other children—cousins, friends, his brothers—chase him, or run beside him, or tag him even though he is not playing tag. But Sherlock knows he is the fastest and best runner there is and does not stop running until his father catches him under his arms and says oof! as he lifts him, swinging Sherlock in a wide circle so that his bare toes brush the puffy white clouds and his mother scolds, “Darling, you’ll make him sick.” But she is smiling.

When he is done running, he is hungry, and there is a long table with trays and bowls and platters of food that adults like, but nothing much for him. Sherlock takes a bread roll and knocks on its hard
outside to hear that it sounds hollow inside, and this holds his interest for a few minutes. Eventually he digs one fingertip into the bottom where the crust is weakest, and is a bit surprised to find there really is bread inside, white and soft and stretchy, just right. He balls it up—it is tiny, like a marble—and pops it in his mouth. Lunch.

Mummy lets him have lemonade now that he needn’t be tidy, and he gulps and gulps it from a clear plastic cup, so sweet and sour, lemonade is the best thing there is, then scoops up more from the punch bowl, makes sure to catch a skinny wheel of lemon that’s floating in it, so he can suck on it and shock himself and make his lips pucker. After he drinks, he drags the back of his hand across his mouth to dry his lips, and there is that other table, smaller, round, with so many sweets piled on it Sherlock is sure there must be more people coming later to help eat them. There are lemon pies that will get a dollop of cream later (mustn’t leave cream outside when it is warm, we’ll pop it in Gran’s fridge ‘til we have our dessert, all right? You’re such a help, Pet, don’t get dirty); piles of cookies in the shapes of rabbits and ducks; a tray of little square chocolates his auntie makes and tops with flowers you can eat (Sherlock doesn’t trust it; he will throw them on the grass just to be safe); brownies and fudge; jelly babies in every colour. And at the back of the table, in the center, on a tall stand made of pale green glass (glass that is not clear is very interesting to Sherlock, as clearness seems to him to be the primary feature of glass), is his Gran’s twelve-layer chocolate cake, wearing its robe of thick, fudgy icing, shiny, just wet enough.

No one will mind. No one will mind if he just goes close to look at it. He will sniff it a bit. He won’t touch; it’s not time for sweets yet.

Sherlock ducks under the table, careful to keep his head down, and comes up on the other side, too far away, a bit, so he steps forward until he is eye-to-eye with the chocolate cake. It’s taller than a normal birthday cake, and there are daisies all laid out around the bottom edge on the cake stand, which Sherlock now sees are not real daisies at all, but only fraying silk, with scratchy plastic stems and all the leaves exactly alike. He can smell the dark, sweet aroma and when he closes his eyes, he can see how it looks inside: so dark brown it’s almost black, crumbs moist and oily and barely holding together, and between every layer a film of cherry preserves, tart and bright. At first he only brushes the tip of his finger—just barely—across a little peak of icing, and only gets a tiny bit, smaller than the tip of his tongue when he licks the squishy speck. It is buttery and dark and he will just try a bit more, tiny, tiny, it won’t even show.

On his fifth or sixth pass, Sherlock breaks through to the cake itself, catches a few crumbs in the slick of icing on his index finger, and it looks just as he remembered it. Gran hasn’t made this cake since Christmas. Mummy always says, “I really shouldn’t,” but her eyes close when she tastes it. Daddy always says it’s just like he remembers, because Gran is Daddy’s mum, so he’s got to have her chocolate cake for years and years—forever—and Gran pats him as if he is still a little boy. Of all the unfair things in the world, the fact that his parents and brothers have had more of Gran’s cakes than he has, just because they have been around longer, seems to Sherlock to be one of the most unfair of all. He loves the cake more than any of them, he’s sure of it.

Mummy and the aunties are trying to organise the children for an Easter egg hunt. His brothers, who are really too big for it, will get the most eggs and will only share them if Sherlock cries, so Sherlock gets ready to cry. But before that, just a bit, just a bit more lovely cake. He can’t wait. Now that he’s had a taste he can’t possibly wait for Auntie May (whose real name is Mary Agnes) to slice it and offer it first to the adults, who will probably eat it all before Sherlock even gets any. He tries to be neat, but all he has is his fingers, no knife or fork because he did not plan ahead and he is not allowed knives, anyway, except the little one to butter his toast. He points his finger very stiffly and pretends it is a knife, and cuts himself a slice, just from the bottom half there at the back of the cake, and icing smears all over his fingers, but that’s fine. He has to use his hand like a scoop to free his piece of cake, and it is nothing like the long, narrow slices Auntie May makes. No matter, though,
because it is the most wonderful thing he has ever smelled, ever tasted, and Sherlock is in ecstasy as he chomps his way through the hunk of cake in his hand, trying to be sure every bite has just the right amount of cake, icing, and jam, almost getting it right every time, but never really getting it exactly as he wants. He thinks he can manage it with just a few more bites, and so he digs out a bit more—he has already made a bit of a hole there, a little cave for a fairy—and tries again. Then just a bit more, just enough cake to cover his three fingers, not a whole piece of cake. No one will mind.

“Sherlock! Come and get a basket, Pet,” Mummy calls. “See if you can’t fill it up with eggs.” Sherlock quick-licks all his fingers, but the icing sticks in the creases of his knuckles, and the divots between his fingers, and under the edges of his fingernails, like mud. The inside of his mouth tastes so sweet and chocolaty he thinks he will never be able to taste anything else, ever again.

“Sherlock? Where are you, sweetheart?” Mummy calls again. He can see the brim of her white hat on the other side of the garden, past the cake, the mountain of sweets, the flowered dresses and seersucker jackets, and Gran’s roses where they bow toward the sun. His tongue is ruined with cherry jam and chocolate, and his brain is humming, and his whole self is gently vibrating, and the sun is warm on the backs of his legs, and the grass is brittle under his toes. Daddy’s ice clinks in his glass as he laughs with the uncles, and Mummy’s shoes and belt are prettily shiny, and his brothers and cousins are shouting, laughing, running but not as fast as Sherlock can run, and Sherlock has never-ever-ever felt so happy.

Jim’s words steamed out of his mouth in a cloud of sugared petrol. His eyes were black rimmed in pink set in a hollow of shadow. A slit in the drapes revealed it was still night. How could it still be night, though? The night had already gone on forever.

“. . .Teach you to mind. . .”

Sherlock’s ears rang a high whine that he could not shake off. His knees, *god*, his knees. There was a horrid crust between his legs he could not think about.

“Listen. It’s a game. *Listen.*”

They were on the bed. The big, beautiful bed he’d special-ordered from Moscow. The gorgeous, soft-as-skin sheets were damp under his back. Sherlock realised he was sweating. He shivered. He was freezing.

“Don’t burn my sheets, Sherlock.”

Jim was so far away. But so loud. Slurring his words, but barking. It hurt Sherlock’s ears. Far away, but so loud. But then, *oh*. Not so far away at all because he struck a match, and dropped it, and before Sherlock could focus on the bright, falling flame, it was on him. He slapped his belly where it landed, and brushed the dead match away.

“That’s all. You can do it.”

Sherlock wanted to sit up, but his arms were. . .gone? Numb? Weak. He was weak. His eyes fell closed again. When had he last eaten?

A searing stab of agony near the center of his chest, and he swatted at it reflexively, smothered it in the bedding.
“No good. Listen. Keep me happy, it’s what you do.”

Sherlock’s lips crackled with dried blood, chapped raw from dehydration. He licked them with a too-dry tongue and they tasted faintly of rosewater-scented lipstick. When had he last had water?

“I’m not happy with my bed on fire, sweetheart. You let that one drop.”

Struggling up onto one elbow, Sherlock squinted hard at Jim, kneeling up beside him. Jim clapped him on the ear and he collapsed back to the mattress. Then he pinched Sherlock’s upper arm hard enough to make him gasp. There would be a bruise. There would be a hundred bruises. A thousand bruises.

Sherlock heard the match striking, got the whiff of sulfur, opened his eyes. It landed between his ribs and he blistered his fingertips grabbing for it; it skittered—it hurt—it went out. Jim struck another and flicked it away from himself so it hit Sherlock’s neck, and there was a smell of burnt hair, Sherlock batting with one hand, rolling his head toward it against every instinct, trying to smother it.

Jim made a disgusted grunt, pinched Sherlock’s thigh, struck another match. How many matches were there in a pack?

Mummy asks him to choose something—just one thing, Pet, just to get your head out of your books a bit—and so Sherlock chooses to swim. Three mornings a week and Sunday evenings, when the pool is empty, or mostly so. Pensioners walking around in water up to their chests, relieving the pressure of gravity from their arthritic knees and reconstructed hips. A few other people doing laps: a new mum who has told her husband she wants to get her body back but who really just enjoys the time alone; a former top juniors competitor who’s been eliminated from anything more serious due to his gullible acceptance of performance-enhancers from a coach who favoured the less-talented but more willing teammate; a man entering midlife who hates the way it has reshaped his flesh into something he barely recognizes, soft and unruly.

Sherlock drops into the pool like a bone-knife after a single stride off the deck, barely varying his pace, not bouncing on the balls of his feet, not jumping, not diving. Straight down, and he lets his arms drift up overhead, lets the water slow his fall, until he reaches that sweet half-moment of stillness before the pressure shoves him up again toward the surface. Shakes out his goggles as he slicks his hair away from his forehead, fixes them in place, breathes the humid air. The gentle undulations of the water’s surface could hypnotise him if he let them, so he braces the feet his mother insists he will grow into against the pool wall and pushes off.

The water rushes over his head, past his ears, and he reaches, hands shaped into curved paddles, thighs close together as he propels himself forward with toes pointed, pressing the soles of his feet up toward the surface, minimizing drag. Every third stroke, he turns his head and fills his lungs, and by the fourth stroke of his arms, everything is in perfect harmony. His body moves through the water with a force he seldom feels while moving it out in the world, where he is upright, reserved, longing to be elegant but usually merely aloof. As with the elderly bodies enjoying the altered gravity and pressure, Sherlock’s body becomes lighter, stronger, and its place is obvious. Here. Now. Relentless forward motion that takes him nowhere at all.

He reaches, ducks his head and rolls, finds the wall, fires himself like a bullet back the way he’s just come. There is only the sound of his breath, and his heart beats grateful and hot inside his long chest. Every inhalation of breath is like saving his own life. The lull of his body in motion—forte, grazioso,
penseroso—is a welcome respite. He knows every inch of himself, inside and out, here with his arms reaching and pulling, his legs propelling him, the organs in his chest breathing and pumping his blood, with nothing to see but his own rippling shadow dropping away from him as the depth increases. He has never felt so at peace.

Jim had him by the hair again, both sides of his head, pulling outward to keep him from trying to shake free. Sherlock clamped shut his eyes, held his breath, bit his parched lips to seal them. Just when he became desperate to breathe, thought he might have no choice but to inhale, swallow, gag and choke and drown, there was a pause long enough to release his lungful of air and suck to replace it. His nostrils were full and he had to blow, reluctant to waste the precious air. Finally, Jim released him. Sherlock wiped himself with the inside of his elbow, dragging it down the length of his face even though it made every bruise throb (panic rose in his belly, thinking his eye socket may be broken). He coughed, spit, turned his head as rivulets ran down the bridge of his nose, down his neck. His hair was sopping. The pools at the inner corner of his eyes might have been tears; he couldn’t be sure, and it hardly mattered.

Sherlock slow-motion rolled to one side, wanted to draw his legs up to his chest and huddle around himself, protecting his belly and face, but his knees would not bend. He groaned and raised his hands to cover his face.

Jim was panting, sitting on the floor with his back against the closed bathroom door. It seemed he’d spent his energy, at least for now. He nudged Sherlock’s thigh with the toes of one bare foot.

“Something to say, sweetheart?”

Sherlock drew his hands down his face and curled his hands into fists in front of his chin. He shook his head.

Louder, Jim prompted, “*Hm*?”

“No.” Sherlock’s voice was a croaking whisper.

“Right.”

Jim got slowly to his feet, as if he were exhausted. And maybe he was. It was daylight again. He stepped over Sherlock’s legs.

“Fucking starving. Anything in?”

Sherlock’s boxer, who is northern and unemployed and whose mates call him Bones, who kisses Sherlock hard and whose bed squeaks but who owns a stereo nearly loud enough to drown them out, has a glittering look in his eyes that makes Sherlock’s gut tilt crazily. He’s gorgeous at the moment but Sherlock doesn’t demand a kiss, or even ask for one, or offer. Instead he shifts himself closer, makes the bed creak and groan as he rearranges his legs to get as near as he can. His boxer, who has a tattoo on his hand, holds Sherlock’s wrist, turns his palm up and studies it as if he will read Sherlock’s fortune in the lines and curves. His boxer’s eyes are bright blue and his hair is close cropped. Just a glimpse of the back of his boxer’s neck sends Sherlock nearly insane with desire. He
has never felt so brittle, so juicy, so full-to-bursting as he does in his boxer’s orbit. Sherlock wants to
lick him all over, wind around him like a vine, climb inside him and sleep in the hollow of his
ribcage.

It’s always his boxer’s way or no way—don’t try to hold my hand, don’t say you’re my boyfriend,
I’ll make it up to you later, pretty boy, don’t you worry—but Sherlock is prickly and hungry and
(jeezus, fuck) burning every waking moment and so he doesn’t mind it. Waking moments are
plentiful; he doesn’t want either of them to sleep when they could be sucking, stroking, sweating,
panting, and so he stays awake, keeps them both awake. Now that it’s all legal, they try every single
chemical designed to keep them up—in every sense—all night. Two nights. Three.

His boxer says his name, then drags one thick-knuckled hand up the pale, hairless inner edge of
Sherlock’s forearm, and grips him around the elbow; his fingers go almost completely around.
Sherlock wants his boxer to push him backward, handle him roughly because even though Sherlock
looks fragile, he isn’t, not a bit. But there is that glimmer in his boxer’s eye, and his bruised hand
with its indigo tattoo wrapped around Sherlock’s bicep, and the thin-lipped mouth that says whatever
comes to his boxer’s mind with no regard for consequence. Sherlock skims his own lips with the tip
of his tongue and lets them stay apart. His boxer reaches his free hand toward his own lap, unbuckles
his belt.

Sherlock shudders, a sudden thrill, and they both laugh, just a little, to let the tension go. It’s all
drawn up, glass and steel, with a dewdrop at the slender, hollow tip. Sherlock’s vein stands out stark
and thick inside his elbow, and his boxer gives him a quick, crooked kiss on the mouth.

Sherlock holds his breath, and the pinpoint starburst stings, pinches, and for a second he feels
nothing and knows they’ve been duped, but then oh god then. .

Sherlock thinks he might be saying something. His boxer laughs again, far away, and Sherlock leans
forward and forward and forward until at last his forehead rests upon his boxer’s shoulder. The
strong hand holds the back of Sherlock’s neck, at least until it moves to push him gently away, and
Sherlock falls and falls and falls down onto his side, and the bed is miles deep and holds its tongue.
Sherlock thinks his boxer might be saying something. Sherlock knows in his bones, in every cell,
that all he wants ever again is nothing else but just this feeling endlessly, all the time, forever, with
his gorgeous boxer here in the noisy, narrow, cozy bed. This is how it feels. This is how it feels, but
this is more, so much more. How can there be more? But this is how it feels, but more. This. Bliss.

Jim had a belt around his neck, stood on a stepstool they used to get to the highest row of cupboards,
up along the ceiling, where they stored the summer bedding and other rarely-needed things. He was
trying to fix a knot around the bar where Sherlock’s suits had hung, before Jim tore them all down
and yanked off their buttons and ripped them up the back.

“It’s no good,” Jim droned in a dull monotone, both hands working to tangle the length of the belt
around the bar. “Look what we’ve done.”

“Nevermind it, Jim.” Mucus bubbled from Sherlock’s nose. He dragged himself close enough to
wrap his fingers around Jim’s ankle. “Please.” Jim blurred into three of himself until Sherlock
blinked his tears away.

“No. No. No. No.” Jim shook his head in time with it. “Sherlock, fuck’s sake. Turn away if you
want to.”
“Please!” He wailed it, and held tight to Jim’s leg, as if that could do a thing to stop him. Jim yanked on the coiled belt—two hard, quick tugs that Sherlock felt in his belly—testing it. Sherlock got both hands around his calf, dug his fingers in, “No!”

“Don’t look, sweetheart.”

A noise rose out of Sherlock’s throat like none he had ever heard from himself, knife-edged, a banshee cry.

“Shh. . .” Jim whispered, soothing, and his shoulders went round and his head dropped forward. “Hush, sweetheart. Just turn away.”

“Kill me first.”

“Don’t say that, Sherlock.”

“I can’t—I couldn’t live with it.” Sherlock sobbed, and pressed his face against Jim’s ankle, felt the little knot of bone there against his temple. “The knife under the pillow.” He was blathering, he knew, and he needed it over but Jim, but Jim, he couldn’t watch, he couldn’t turn away. “Or a belt around my neck.” How did he get here? Again? Again? How did they turn into, into these people, how did they, how did they, how? “Let’s both. . .” Sherlock sobbed. Jim. The words rushed out on a gust of an exhausted sigh: “Let’s just both.”

Jim wept then, and slipped the loop, and crumpled to the floor, and became so very small there in the circle of Sherlock’s arms.

Shooting up in front of this boy—this man, they’re men now, Sherlock forgets—is the first time Sherlock has felt ashamed of what he has always told himself is a glamorous habit. This boy’s—man’s—name is James Moriarty—call me Jim, sweetheart—and he has a tall forehead even at his age (23? Sherlock guesses, or 24?), and the edges of his teeth make Sherlock want to be bitten, just hard enough. His eyes are so brown they are practically black, and within the first fifteen minutes of their conversation, Sherlock knows he is going to make James Moriarty his man. But first there is this problem of being a—truthfully, less-than-glamourous—junkie. Sherlock starts to explain that he isn’t getting high, he can’t anymore, what it would take to get him high would be more than enough to kill him—he’s just trying to keep from getting sick. He can’t meet Jim’s eye as he mumbles all this, and holds his finger over the spot so it won’t bleed too much, and quickly packs the works away in the stupid, special pretty wooden box his boxer gave him. What a ridiculous thing, to make a gift of a box in which to keep his silver spoon and brass lighter and stolen syringes. He feels coated in slime. Even so, he wants to fix just a bit more. Jim only looks at him like he is something rare and astonishing, the expression on his impish face somewhere between amused and awed, and he half-smiles, and then asks if Sherlock will show him his sketchbook.

On a night off, their first in weeks, they are lying head-to-foot on the bed, Jim with his notebooks full of lists and figures and notes-to-self, Sherlock with glossy magazines from which he rips page after page, then tears them in pieces and reassembles new things from only the best bits. Jim has a pen in his hand, and one on the bed by his hip, and one behind his ear, and a cigarette between his lips. He flickers through several pages, searching, then absently drops his hand onto the top of Sherlock’s pointed foot for a few seconds, and gently squeezes. Once he’s been released, Sherlock swings his legs around and arranges himself upright, then ambles out toward the kitchen so narrow the fridge door can’t open all the way, to make them tea or pour them wine—he isn’t sure which yet—and as
he is nearly there, he senses himself being followed. When he turns around, he is looking for Jim where Jim ought to be, but Jim is walking on his knees, with a quirky smile on his lips Sherlock has never seen on him before. His hands are in front of his chest, folded as if he is praying, and Sherlock smirks and asks what in the hell he’s doing, and Jim rambles Sherlock, sweetheart, I don’t deserve you, I know I don’t, but would you please—please consider—will you—just think it over. Sherlock’s eyes and nose prickle, and he laughs and says get up from there, but Jim persists, in fact bows down until his forehead is resting on Sherlock’s bare toes, and he kisses the top of Sherlock’s foot, then looks up, from way down there on the floor, and asks, Will you please do me the honour, Sherlock Holmes, of letting me be your husband?

Married, just the two of them in the registry office with the receptionist as the witness, wearing grey suits—Sherlock’s steel and Jim’s dove—and silver neckties. Red rose buttonholes. Rings. They make vows: I will always be kind, I will always be patient, I will always take care of you. Every day I will endeavour to make you happy. Forever and always, I am yours. Forever and always, you are mine. They kiss and the receptionist claps her hands. They go home and hang up their suits and melt into each other’s arms wondering does it feel different, do you feel different, do I, and discover that it is sweet and deep and perfect, as it has always been, because this room is the world, and they are alone in it together, and together in their world they are a pair of kings. Jim rolls them over, and slows them, and stares with his eyes so brown they are nearly black, and his voice is round and soft as he murmurs, sweetheart. . .sweetheart, and Sherlock knows in his bones one thing that is absolutely, certainly true: he has never been so dearly loved.

What roused him was the agony of his knee protesting the bend as Jim pushed his thigh back, prone on the bathroom floor, stinking, aching. . .god, throbbing. . .stinging, stabbing, with matted hair and crusty eyes and with the ringing in his ears a half-tone higher than it had been. Jim’s hand was firm on the back of his thigh, Jim’s knee digging into the other to keep Sherlock pinned and open. A cold, wet ooze ran down, and then there was Jim’s finger, shoving the mess inside him. Sherlock sucked a sob.

Jim’s voice had a tone of mild, amused surprise. “You’re so tight for an old whore.” Jim’s fingers—more than one now—were a thoughtless invasion, and Sherlock’s gut clenched in anticipation of pain. Jim shifted himself there between Sherlock’s spread legs, leaned close to Sherlock’s chest as he guided himself in and thrust, gasping, grunting, eyes closed, mouth slack. Sherlock turned his head, not wanting to see. His cheek met the base of the toilet. It was smooth and cool against his aching face, and Sherlock let his neck bend—with any luck it would break—as Jim drove their bodies against the marble floor, the skin of Sherlock’s back sticking and pulling as he was shoved forward, then dragged back, by increments.

He is lying beneath the wooden workbench in the shed where his cousin has locked him. Sherlock is not afraid. It’s quiet and smells interesting. He watches a spider wrapping her prey with silk threads. Of course he is not afraid. Why would he be? It’s fine here. It’s lovely.
“Here you are, handsome.” Molly gave Greg a plastic-lidded paper cup she’d brought, and then a folded-shut paper bag with two chocolate-dipped shortbread biscuits inside. He kissed her cheek and when he returned her smile, all the best lines in his face appeared—starbursts from the outer corners of his eyes, smile lines from the corners of his nose to the corners of his mouth defining the pleasant surprise of the apples of his cheeks, which were just then covered in a few days’ worth of dark-and-light stubble.

They stood at the back of a room where two dozen screens monitored by security staff showed views of the Icehouse from cameras mounted in every restaurant, casino, bar, lift, and corridor. The drasha salons—all except Xie’s penthouse, per Sherlock’s preference—were monitored, too, in a separate room with still more video screens. It was the quietest part of the day, a few hours’ lull between lunchtime and the cocktail hour when the drasha salons filled up. Molly was waiting to hear from Sherlock about what he’d need from the vaults; soon she’d stop in the mail room for his and Xie’s mail and bring it upstairs and if she hadn’t got a text by then she’d knock on the door. It might be that he was sleeping in, or already up and out, keeping appointments or having meetings; Molly was grateful for the bit of extra quiet time in her day.

She and Greg exchanged chat about the day so far, agreed to meet at hers for takeaway and telly after his shift ended and Xie had been attended to. Molly’s coffee was over-bitter and she wrinkled her nose at it.

“Yours all right?” she asked, and crossed to drop her cup in the nearest bin.

“It’s fine. Well, you know, not great. But the same.”

Molly shrugged, and her gaze drifted over the bank of video screens; it was easy to become hypnotized by the changing views on each, or to begin to fixate on a particular area or person, and start to follow their movements. Molly always felt guilty when that impulse took hold, and so she tried not to look too long at any one screen. There was something, though, that caught her eye for an instant, but the image changed before she made full sense of it.

“What was that? Can you go back? This one.” She reached up and to her right to tap the screen, and the staffer seated to her left began to type commands into his computer.

“What is it?” Greg’s forehead crumpled into a frown.

“I thought I saw someone. . .sick, maybe? Or could be passed out drunk, I suppose. Lying on the floor.”

Greg nodded. “Can you find that view again, Mailer?” He joined Molly in staring at the screen she’d indicated, as different views of the residential floors flashed upon it, a second or two at a time.

The staff member’s tone was ominous. “Guv, you should look at this.” He pointed not at the wall of monitors but at the screen of his own computer.

Xie has never looked more elegant, avant garde, strikingly beautiful. Xie is a work of art, from the custom crafted platform shoes of butter-soft leather, to the gown’s cascades of rich silk, to the jewels at the throat, the glimmering flowers adorning the elaborate wig, the face painted to absolute perfection.

The salon’s furnishings have been rearranged so that every place a guest might stand offers within
easy reach a place to sit and relax into conversation, a surface on which to set a drink or a lady’s handbag, an appealing view of the city through the windows, and an equally pretty view of the salon’s interior in its many sensuous shades of cabernet and claret, cerise and cinnabar. Through the windows, the lights of the city sparkle like jewels and the night sky is clearer than it has ever been; one can even see the stars. Xie welcomes the guests and each of them is a particular favourite of Xie’s many dear friends. Here is the French-accented reporter from the fashion magazine who pronounces Xie’s name perfectly and who is chic beyond measure in a white—white!—cocktail dress, chatting away in a burble with the actor and actress who’d told the story one evening of how they met and immediately disliked each other, then had to act as lovers and as the play ran on for weeks and weeks to great acclaim, night after night the words they spoke on stage became weighted and charged, and in the end, they fell in love; they were so charming and witty in the telling, listening to them recount their real life had been like taking in a two-person play, right there on the damask sofa. And on that very damask sofa now sits a refined elderly man in a three-piece suit with a watch chain and a brass-topped walking stick who Xie would have imagined to be long dead—yet here he was, flirting with the drashas and talking about the bride he’d brought back from Normandy, who had died young, but who he had loved so deeply he spoke of her as if she had just left the room and would return directly to sing La Vie en Rose in her soprano voice just as sweet as any angel’s.

Xie moves among the guests, pouring tea and offering champagne flutes, making an occasional flirtatious comment, starting guests on games-playing or story-telling, making each one at their perfect ease. In an alcove a glitter- and leather-covered Japanese rock band who were some of Xie’s first and most frequent guests, in the earliest days of the Icehouse, lean over each other in unruly fashion, grabbing at liquor bottles and noisily sniffing the backs of each other’s hands until Xie drifts over and they sit up straight like schoolboys, eager to please, each offering marriage proposals and promises of a life spent reclining, being worshipped. They are darling and Xie lets them see the barest pink tip of the tongue, and winks, and they collapse into stagey swoons; how could Xie not adore them? Naughty, lovely boys.

Xie takes up the violin and plays a gentle, romantic song, which quiets the entire party and elicits sighs and inspires lovers to pet and kiss their beloved ones. The elderly gent closes his eyes, and his head sways on his neck. A man who once told Xie a comforting story of spiritual oneness sits straight-backed and smiling beside a woman whose presence has power and grace in equal measures. The song ends, the party applauds, and Xie dips a curtsey.

Far across the room, by the wall where hangs a small painting of a country scene—a white cottage with crooked stone walls—stands a man much taller than his height, sturdier than the breadth of his shoulders, with eyes of deep blue and a visible ripple of dangerousness radiating off him in violet waves. Captain Watson. John.

Xie starts to approach, but every step taken seems to move the body inexplicably backward; John recedes rather than advances. And yet here is the smell of John’s after shave tickling the powdered nose, and the taste of John’s tongue inside the lacquered mouth. The crowd of party guests shifts and bobs, constantly blocking the path to him, and Xie’s heart beats hard beneath an impossibly heavy pendant of onyx and burnished gold. John rocks up on his toes, back on his heels, hands clasped behind his back, and his eyes scan the room but never seem to find Xie, never meet Xie’s desperate gaze.

Look at me. John, I’m here. I’m coming to you.

Crossing the floor is like walking on thin ice that shatters and shatters; Xie stumbles and sinks, catching balance only at the last moment, and moving a scant inch forward despite the long stride.

How do you not see me, tall as a tree, high-contrast, glittering?
Someone has offered John a drink and he sips it; it’s the whiskey he likes, and his eyes close in appreciation of its complexity. There is something he doesn’t know—about the way it ended—and he simply must, he must know, he must understand. Xie’s legs are impossibly heavy; moving through the salon is like swimming through tar. And now everything hurts.

Xie keeps up the forward motion though it is the very hardest thing to do. But John is there. He has scars, too. And he must know, he must understand.

When Molly saw what the guard was indicating on his computer screen, she wheeled and headed for the door without uttering even a single word.

Greg followed, issuing rapid-fire orders, “Send medics—now. Get an ambulance on standby in case we need to transport. See if you can get ahold of Jim Moriarty, tell him his husband’s unwell and he should come up to his flat at once. I’m on the radio, or call my mobile.”

It’s the wig, so Xie tears it off and hurls it to the floor. Not enough. It’s the chain holding the pendant, so that is quickly broken and flung. Another step closer, and this time it feels like progress, but it’s the shoes, so Xie walks right out of them. John. Something changes in his expression—a narrowing of his eyes—and Xie can tell that John is nearly making out the image, but not quite. It’s the gown, so long fingers tear it down the middle, shred it, shed it, and John’s mouth opens a little but he’s too far away to hear. It’s the false face; a swipe of the hand is all that is needed to wipe it away. Another long stride forward and John’s arms are open so Sherlock steps into them, and John holds him, holds him up, holds him, Sherlock, you did what you had to. Sherlock, you’re beautiful. magnificent. perfect. Sherlock.

“Sherlock!” Molly ran from the lift because what the fuzzy, black-and-white video had not shown was that Sherlock—lying halfway out the front door of the flat, naked, too still—was a riot of bruises such that his bare arms and chest showed more purple than rosy-white. His face was swollen, bloody, black-and-blue, barely his face at all.

“Sherlock, oh my god!” She knelt beside him, afraid to touch him because there wasn’t any place to touch that didn’t look like it would be an agony for him. She leaned close to his face, listening for his breath. “He’s alive,” she said, with numb surprise at the necessity of saying it. Blood trickled from the corner of Sherlock’s mouth, and Molly bunched up the cuff of her cardigan to gently dab it away.

Greg shouted into his radio. “Medics to the thirty-fifth floor, now. We’ve a man unconscious. Badly beaten.” He took a knee beside Molly and muttered, “Jeezus,” as between the two of them, they managed to get Sherlock’s head and shoulders onto Molly’s lap.

“Sherlock,” Molly said, firm and loud. She wondered why she wasn’t crying. “Sherlock, can you wake up?” She stroked his cheek with two fingertips; to touch him more than that seemed like a cruelty, but he needed to be touched in kindness, that much she knew.

“He did this,” Greg spat, and flew to his feet, swinging a punch into his own fist. “Moriarty.”

“Shh. Greg. . .”
“That cowardly piece of—” He kicked hard at the wall beside the door, raising a puff of dust with the steel toe of his boot, leaving a hole. He shouted, “I will fucking murder him!”

“Stop it right now,” Molly scolded. “Do you think he needs to hear you raging? Calm down.”

“I’ll kill him. Where is he?” Greg leaned in the doorway, taking care not to jostle Sherlock as he lay there, now softly moaning. “Moriarty!” There was no answer. “I’ll kill that rotten little fuck, I swear to—”

Sherlock made an urgent movement, as if he might try to get up, though only his upper back moved, and that just barely. “Nnnn. . .”

“Calm down, or leave,” Molly commanded, through a tight jaw, and petted Sherlock’s hair, which was matted and sticky. “He’s not going to kill him, Sherlock. He’s only angry because Jim’s hurt you. He’s not going to do anything to him.” Sherlock quieted. Molly looked hard at Greg, and he stared back, seething, but eventually acquiesced and looked away.

“I’ll get him a robe or something? A blanket?”

“They’ll bring something,” Molly said. The lift doors slid open and medics poured out, rolling a gurney and quickly taking over. Molly couldn’t stop telling them, “Be careful. He’s hurt, be careful. That hurts him!—can’t you be more gentle? Can’t you see you’re hurting him?” They got Sherlock bundled onto the gurney, and he groaned, and it was then that Molly finally began to cry. “Sherlock, you’re safe. You’re going to be all right,” she reassured, walking beside the gurney. “I’m going with him,” she told Greg. “He’ll be at Victoria Hospital, that’s where his doctors are. Come when you can.”

Sherlock’s jaw was moving, he was agitated, trying to roll or sit. Molly rested a hand lightly on his shoulder. “Hush, Sherlock. You’re safe.”

“John.”

Just before the lift doors closed, Molly snapped at Greg, “And call John Watson.”
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

In Chapter 29, the happiest memories of Sherlock's life flashed in slow-motion before his eyes as he slipped in and out of consciousness while still being held Jim's captive in their flat. By chance, Greg and Molly discovered him, and summoned John to his side. (Also relevant: in ch. 28, John found an envelope in Sherlock's left-behind suitcase marked "IMPORTANT".)

Note: this chapter contains NO graphic descriptions of violence. Thank you for being patient even if you needed to take a break from the story. You're safe now.

* 
"At Night in the Floating World" was born one year ago during the fandom- and fic-drenched bacchanal of 221B Con 2015 (quoth Poppy one bright day: "Has anyone written geisha!lock?"), and the rewrites on this chapter were done at 221B Con 2016. I'm posting it from the Atlanta airport as I await my flight home.

Thank you, fellow Sherlockians, creators, consumers, and friends. You and your engagement with my work in general, and this story in particular, mean the world to me.

“Where is he?”

John was frantic, felt flayed and scrubbed with wire brushes, and the palms of his hands were itchy for something—anything—useful to do. He rolled the fingers of his left hand against the tremor he’d brought home from the Americas. Greg’s voice on the phone, probably meant to be sympathetic, was ominous. John’s anger had leapt up when Lestrade started talking—Yeah, Watson, it’s Lestrade. Listen, it’s about Sherlock—and John had huffed hard out his nose, started to say that he wasn’t interested, don’t bother, it wasn’t his concern anymore, but Greg charged on, talking over him. Sherlock beaten and left for dead. Sherlock naked and half-alive. Sherlock bruised and bloody and taken in an ambulance to Victoria Hospital. By the time he rang off, John was already out of the flat and onto the pavement, frantically hailing a rickshaw.

He stood with Molly and Greg outside the open door of an empty, still-made-up room in the critical care ward. Molly’s expression was pinched and frowning, but her voice was steady, something like soothing. “He’s safe,” she assured, and put her hand on John’s shoulder, approaching him sideways, utterly nonthreatening. “They’re doing scans to check for broken bones or internal bleeding.”

“When did they take him?” John looked around the corridor for a wall clock.

“As soon as we arrived—bit over an hour ago. Triaged him en route and then rushed him off. They said we should wait for him here,” Molly reported, still stroking his upper back with her delicate hand. John recognized it: the tone of voice, the concise imparting of information in but a succinct few words, the hand on his shoulder; his ex had called it “nurse-voice.” He might have felt condescended to if it wasn’t actually serving to calm him.

“I want to see his chart.” John had only just remembered that in addition to being the recently abandoned lover, he was also a doctor.
“I’ll ask them,” Molly assured, “But I don’t know if they’ll give it to you. It’ll be in Russian, anyway.”

“Yeah, I thought this was a vlast hospital,” John mused. “How did he end up here?”

“Special consideration for the drashaskaya,” Molly told him through a small smile. “He’s getting excellent care. Anyway, you don’t need to be his doctor, he has plenty of them—good ones—you only need to be his friend.”

Something inside John’s chest crumbled and collapsed. “More than his friend,” he replied, and it was mucky and too quiet.

“I know,” Molly replied, and squeezed his shoulder, then lower on his bicep, and finally let him go. “He’s in good hands.”

John looked from Molly’s face to Greg’s, then back again. “How did you. . .?”

Greg, who had been standing by with his lips pursed, simmering, motioned for them to move a bit down the hallway, farther from the nurses’ desk.

In hushed tones, the two relayed how they’d discovered Sherlock—by an accident of luck—barely conscious on the floor halfway out his front door, and now thought he must have dragged himself to it and managed to open the door before passing out. Jim had been nowhere around.

“I think he must have thought Sherlock was dead, or why would he have risked him being found, to possibly report him?” Greg said at last. “Before we got upstairs, I told my men to get Jim on the phone and tell him Sherlock was ill. . .obviously he already knew.” He shook his head, arms folded tight across his chest.

A sour taste rose in John’s throat and he demanded, “They got hold of him?”


“Can you find out?” John remembered to ask, instead of barking an order.

Molly looked puzzled. “Why does it matter?”

“I don’t think he’ll dare show his face here,” Greg offered.

John looked hard at Greg. “If you found out someone you’d meant to kill was still alive,” he posited. “What would you do?”

Greg twigged, and his posture changed, turned soldierly. “Right. I’ll get some security organised.”

“He won’t want the authorities,” John said absently, wondering if that was still the case. “He didn’t want to report it.”

Molly looked stricken. “You knew about this?”

“Just the past week or so. He left him. Came to me for a few days, but—”

“Jim found him,” Molly said.

John still wasn’t sure, wanted to hear it from Sherlock’s own mouth. “He went back. However it happened.”
“I’ll get some of my off-duty staff here, then,” Greg offered. “Pay them off the books or trade some
time off. We can keep it quiet for now if you think that’s really what Sherlock wants.” He and Molly
both looked at John expectantly, as if awaiting his approval, so he nodded, rolling his fingers into
and out of his palm against the persistent, itchy tremor.

There was the soft ping of a lift door at the far end of the corridor, and its doors slid open to reveal a
man and woman in immaculate scrubs steering a gurney. The body on it was the right length to be
Sherlock’s but was tucked and covered with blankets. There was a blinking monitor resting on the
mattress near his feet, and one by his head, making it further difficult to see him given the distance
and his position—flat on his back with only a thin pillow under his head. The three started to walk
toward the stretcher as it approached, but a stern-faced nurse with her hair scraped back tightly on
her head stepped in their path.

“Net posetiteley,” she gruffed at them, shaking her head in the negative to emphasise her disapproval
of them. “Slishkom pozdno.”

John intoned, “English, please,” even as he rose on his toes, straining to see over her shoulder.
Sherlock was utterly still on the bed—asleep, or unconscious.

The nurse’s shoulders seemed to expand outward, making her bigger, sturdier, impossible to pass.
“Visitors are allowed in this ward between ten and four. It is nearly five. No visitors.”

“I’m not—” John started, “I’m his—”

Sherlock was wheeled by them as if they weren’t there. John couldn’t see his face, just the shape of
his lean body, unmoving. The crown of his head was just visible as they entered the room, hair
clumped and greasy-looking. The woman steering the left side of the gurney shut the door behind
them.

“You,” the nurse demanded, staring down Molly now that John was no longer trying to get by her.
“—are his wife?”

Greg and John both reacted to this by flicking their gazes at Molly, who did not hesitate as she
replied. “Yes.”

“You can come in. Just for a few minutes.” She beckoned and Molly followed, throwing a tight-
lipped grin of reassurance at them as she, too, vanished behind the closed door.

“Can you find out if anyone at the Icehouse got in touch with Jim?” John prompted then. “If he
thinks Sherlock’s dead, I imagine he’ll stay away, but if he knows he survived and could report him
—”

“Could be trouble, you’re right,” Greg finished, and pulled out his phone. He drifted away a bit, and
John trailed him. Greg had a brief exchange with whoever he’d reached at the Icehouse, revealing
nothing even as he tried to extract the information he needed. He closed with, “Yeah, just hold the
phone up so I can hear it; I’ll wait.” He held his phone against his chest as he told John, “They’ve
got a recording of the phone call to Moriarty’s mobile. He’s going to play it. Here.” He switched his
phone to the speaker but lowered the volume so he and John had to lean their heads close, the phone
held between their two faces, to hear it.

“Jim Moriarty.”

“Sir, I’m calling from the Icehouse security office. Greg Lestrade’s told me to phone you. Your
husband is ill.”
“Oh, is he?”

“Apparently badly so. Lestrade thought you’d want to come immediately. Are you in the building? Or shall I arrange a cab?”

“No, not at all. Poor Sherlock. And me so far away.”

“Sir?”

“I’ve got a meeting in Bath.”

“I’ve just got word they’re taking Mr Holmes to hospital.”

“Is that right? Shame. What a shame.”

“Shall I call you if there’s any news?”

“Don’t bother. I’ll get to him soon enough.”

The staffer’s voice returned. “That’s all there is, Guv.”

Lestrade thanked him and rang off. Another nurse was standing, leaning over the desk, staring disapprovingly at them from halfway down the corridor. Greg gave her an apologetic wave and the two turned their backs to her.

“What do you make of it?” Greg asked.

John’s stomach was roiling; his neck was hot. “A meeting in Bath, that sonofabitch,” he muttered. “He could be anywhere. He’s being cagey. Knew he was being recorded?”

“Yeah, all the calls in and out of the offices are recorded.”

“That’s what Sherlock told him when he walked out—made up a lie that Xie had an appearance in Bath.”

Greg shook his head, his expression a disgusted frown.

“Right,” John announced, and marched down the corridor, fetching a chair of metal and molded plastic the colour of rust, which he set in the space between the doors of Sherlock’s room and the next. He sat down, back straight, knees parallel, with his elbows on the chair-arms and his hands on his thighs.

“What, you’re going to sit there all night?” Greg asked.

John lowered his voice, leaning forward so Greg would be sure not to miss a word. “If someone I’d killed rose from the dead to possibly report me—especially one bearing scars I left on him—I couldn’t rest until the job was done. Call your men, keep an eye on the place, and who knows—a coward like Moriarty might not even show up here, as you said—but I’m staying put until Sherlock leaves here or Moriarty’s no longer a threat.”

Greg nodded his understanding. “You must know someone. . .” he said meaningfully.

John shook his head. “Not without Sherlock’s say-so. It’s not my place. Nor yours.”

“Yeah, no,” Greg said instantly. “I wouldn’t know where to begin.”
“So. To answer your question: yes, I’m going to sit here all night.”

The stern nurse emerged from Sherlock’s room then, and sized up John in his seat by the door. “This is not allowed.”

“Try and move me,” John said icily.

She looked for a moment as if she might try to take him up on the challenge, but in the end threw up her hands and marched away, muttering in Russian under her breath.

“Need a coffee or anything?” Greg offered.

“Nothing. Call your men. Take your girl home.”

Greg clapped him on the shoulder. “Bad timing, I know,” he said, serious but apologetic, “But what we talked about yesterday. At the Pub. Once this is sorted a bit, we’ll get back to it?”

“Yeah,” John replied, “Yeah, of course.”

“I only mention it because time is an issue.”

“You’re all right,” John assured, dismissing it.

Greg stepped away again, went back to his phone, and John scanned the surroundings. Lifts, two, accessible only once one had passed the main reception—two young women at the desk, one overweight security guard in a glass-walled office to one side—and three visible sets of fire stairs; seventh floor, no access from outside. And he was sat there, and would be, as long as it took.

“I’ve got six men on their way to cover the exterior, two more will loiter about inside, make rounds. Should be enough,” Greg reported. “They’re good men. Steady. They’ll keep it quiet, too.”

“Thanks for that,” John replied, and meant it; he was grateful.

The room door shushed open then and Molly came out, looking paler than she had before. As John gained his feet, she gave him an anguished look, then walked straight into Greg’s embrace; both closed their eyes. When she pulled back, Molly’s eyes glistened, but she fought it.

“The nurse and I were trying to clean him up a bit,” she reported, struggling almost successfully to put on her nurse-voice again, though clearly she was settled in her role as Sherlock’s closest friend. “Sponge bath. It’s hard to jostle him too much, he just moans and moans, he’s bruised all over.” She flicked a glance at Greg and her voice turned urgent. “Horrible bruises. Almost black, some of them. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Greg nodded and reached for her hand. “How did I not know this before?” she asked no one in particular, sounding quietly bewildered. “How did I never see that he was...”

John shook his head. “They’re good at hiding it,” he said. “I’ve seen it before.”

She nodded and swallowed hard. “He wouldn’t say much, in front of the nurse. But once she left, I was washing his hair—they gave me a basin—and it was so sticky, and smelled so bad. I wasn’t thinking, I suppose, just talking to talk, and I asked him what was in hair. He said...” She inhaled hard, steeling herself, and John clenched his gut in sympathy and anticipation. Molly looked away from him, past his shoulder, as she finished in a brittle voice, “Jim held him by the hair. And pissed in his face. He said he felt like he was drowning.”

She frowned hard, almost gave into it, but then let out a shuddering breath and seemed to reassemble.
Greg moved closer and put a protective arm around her. “No internal bleeding, though; that’s heartening. He’s badly dehydrated. Hairline fracture between his wrist and elbow but it doesn’t even need splinting. It could have been much worse, I suppose.”

John hummed. He knew she had to say it, and he had to hear it, but he had heard just about as much as he could stand, and hoped there wasn’t much more.

“I told him you’re here,” Molly reported. “He seemed a bit calmer after that.”

John pinched the bridge of his nose but couldn’t bring himself to say anything, didn’t know what he would say even if he had the energy to expend on it.

Greg persuaded Molly that the two of them should go, and with promises they would both return as soon as Sherlock was allowed visitors next morning, they said their goodnights. John barely registered the exchange; he was trying to predict Moriarty’s next move.

John resumed his seat, erect and alert, with the reassuring weight of his gun against his ribs. What was Moriarty, then? Quick to anger, controlling, exuding—when it suited him—that oozy charm people seemed to fall for, a social striver, motivated by money. A fucking coward who repaid devotion with cigarette burns and broken wrists. A man like that, in a fix like this—bad job, Jim; he survived—would look to save his own skin, and quickly, but from a distance. Keep his suit pressed and his fingernails clean. He was wealthy. Probably didn’t have many confidantes, not likely to trust anyone in his immediate circle (John thought first that the obvious choice of triggerman would be Lestrade: ex-military, giving off the scent of treason and disillusionment, perhaps susceptible to threats or blackmail, but likely Moriarty would realise Lestrade was too close to home). He had plenty of access, though, to plenty of information; John figured there must be thousands of people coming through the Icehouse every week, tens of thousands in a year. Moriarty might look only as far as his assistant’s computer screen to find a few likely candidates. So the question then became, would he return to the Icehouse a concerned spouse, worrying for the fate of his badly injured husband just long enough to retrieve a few mobile phone numbers, and make arrangements? Or would he stay away, maybe disappear altogether? John reckoned either was possible.

“Captain Watson. To what do I owe the pleasure of another unscheduled phone call from you? If it’s an invitation to dinner this evening, I’m afraid I’ve already made plans. In fact, I’m on my way out just now and you’re likely to make me late.”

“Shouldn’t have answered the phone, then.”

“I wouldn’t miss you for the world.”

“I need to know who’s freelancing.”

“Officially, no one. Working without a contract is severely frowned upon.”

“Yeah, but who? I need a list. British Isles and western Europe. Anyone more than a day’s journey away isn’t a concern.”

“A concern for whom, exactly?”

“Only me. Sooner the better.”

“I’ll send a courier.”

“No, that’s—I’m not at the flat.”
“I’ll send it wherever you are.”

“Ring me back and read me the list. I can figure out the rest.”

Sherlock’s envelope was the sort to hold unfolded sheets of paper; the stack was not terribly thick, and among them was his birth certificate; several official documents in Russian—one John recognized as an identity certificate, the others of which he wasn’t sure about—a marriage certificate in both Russian and English; a handwritten note comprising just an unbroken string of 24 digits that could mean anything; a small, slim notebook with a brown leather cover; and one letter-sized envelope with folded documents inside. There were also ten copies of a letter, dated six months apart, the next one apparently meant to be sent after the first of the new year.

To: Alexei Malaev, Deputy Identity Minister
Former Houses of Parliament
London

Dear Sir,

Shortly your office will receive a Request for Classification Change (Form UIDM:315) from James Moriarty 894-551-75(s), currently on assignment to the Icehouse, a house of repose in London, as Administrator. I am writing to strenuously object to Mr Moriarty’s reclassification, and to urge you to deny any such request received by you or your staff. I have neither will nor desire for my spouse or myself to be reclassified at this time. In the past your office has been cooperative with my request for such denials, per advice of the Culture Minister and the Identity Minister. Further supporting documents, including my signed statements of 2002 and 2005 are on file with those offices and can be made available for your review upon your request to those Ministries.

I appreciate your consideration and anticipate you will heed my wishes, as you have done in the past.

Regards,

Sherlock Holmes, professionally known as Xie, Drashaskaya
632-409-77(s)
Icehouse PH1
London

John set the letters aside with the government-issued documents, and took up the slender notebook, no more than fifty half-sized pages. Its first page bore a neatly handwritten phrase in Russian, perhaps a title, though John could not read it.

мое наследство

On the first page, just above the center, was written Xie, 1998. Beneath Xie, to left and right of center, were written two more names: Inocencia and Leaf, and beside each was a parenthetical notation, (Icehouse [the first]). On the next page: Xie, 1999, with four names beneath, one of which had another name branching off it, all of them labeled (Icehouse). John paged through, watching the branches grow and expand, every other page noting more of Xie’s apprentices, more of their apprentices, after a few pages beginning to bear parenthetical notations of different houses of repose. By the end of this complicated family tree, near the back of the book, there were dozens of branches,
hundreds of leaves: *Hamako, Aisling, Luz, Machi, Gan, Cherry Blossom, Star, Harmony, Musique*. . .on and on.

With that number of drashas, the many houses of repose throughout the pleasure districts of the British Isles and abroad, certainly Sherlock would not have been faulted for having surrendered responsibility, lost track, lost count. But this carefully-constructed book was proof of how highly he valued a pristine record of the entire history of Drasha, his life’s work, his masterpiece. John knew he was holding something precious, and he handled it more gently the longer he looked at it. It was an intimate glimpse into the heart of the man.

John read every name, lost the threads of who had apprenticed to whom, though he did see that Xie had personally imparted the secrets of the floating world to no fewer than three hundred drashas, now working at the Icehouse and in houses of repose in pleasure districts the world around. Once he’d been through the whole book, even turning the last few blank pages, he closed it with something like reverence, and laid it carefully aside.

Finally, there were the pages folded into the envelope. John slid them out. Another letter: typed, undated but signed. And two sheets covered edge-to-edge on both sides with neat, impossibly tiny block printing. There was so much information on those four sides of paper that had it been written in an average-sized script, it certainly would have gone on for pages and pages.

Struck with thrown vase. (back; bruise)//Called stupid.//Cigarette burn on bicep.//Cigarette burn on hip.//Called useless junkie.//Struck with fist. (chest; swelling, bruise)//Forced to have unwanted sex lest be cut with kitchen knife.//Kicked with shod foot. (abdomen; vomited, bruise)//Cigarette burns x 2. (thigh)//Struck with thrown drinking glass. (upper arm; cut shut with glue)//Struck with open hand. (thigh; red mark in shape of fingers)//Called whore.//Cut with kitchen knife. (inner thigh; cut sewn shut)

John read and read until his stomach felt sick, then read on until the words blurred together and lost meaning, and yet there was still more left to read, so much more. It must be a record of most of the abuse Sherlock had suffered over the entire long course of his marriage. It was beyond John’s comprehension.

John shifted his attention to the typed letter that accompanied the torture record.

To Whom It May Concern,

This letter is written in contemplation of my death, which will inevitably come at the hands of my spouse, James Moriarty, with whom I created the Icehouse.

It is my wish that James Moriarty should be removed as administrator of the Icehouse upon my death, though it is of vital importance to me that the Icehouse carry on as the birthplace and heart of Drasha. My paramount desire is that Molly Hooper, my trusted friend and man-of-all-work, maintain this legacy in my absence. If she would choose not to be administrator of the Icehouse, she should be consulted on the assignment thereof, and have final say. I trust her judgment on this matter implicitly and know she will carry on the true tradition of what I have created with grace and care. She should be considered my proxy, wholly respected and venerated as the drashaskaya by every drasha still engaged in the art, until such time as she names a successor, should she so choose.

I have nothing of value to bequeath but this, which is more valuable than can be measured.

Affirmed and signed,
“Within a day’s journey of London, the only reported freelancers are the Gate, the Lamia, the Duck, and the Pilot.”

“I thought the Lamia was going abroad. When she showed up at the Icehouse, you said she was headed for Italy.”

“Maybe so, but I’m told she’s in London. The Gate’s in Calais, The Duck and the Pilot are both near Manchester.”

“Damn. It has to be her.”

“Am I ever to be enlightened as to why this information is so vital?”

“Dunno. Not now, anyway. Can you be in touch if anyone sees her on the move?”

“Certainly you realise, Captain, that I have other matters to attend.”

“And I’m sure you realise I don’t care.”

“I’ll keep you informed.”

“Appreciate that.”

Nurses went into and out of Sherlock’s room throughout the night, and shortly after dawn came a doctor, frowning at a chart (and at John), but keeping mum. At nearly half-nine, a young nurse who John determinedly refused to think reminded him of his ex took pity on him.

“Would you like to go in and spend some time with him? He’s asleep but you’ve been waiting a long time.”

“Thanks,” and a tight nod was all John could manage in response. Neither of them acknowledged the vast understatement of the length of John’s vigil. He stretched himself gratefully from the chair and the nurse stood back against the open door as he passed, then pulled it shut to give them privacy.

The attempt to brace himself for seeing Sherlock’s battered face was woefully inadequate, and John was momentarily relieved that Sherlock was not watching as John was confronted with it; certainly his shock showed in his expression. He stood a few feet back from the edge of the bed, breathed, wondered where his doctor’s professional distance had flown off to. It took a conscious decision on his part to assess the wounds: cut upper lip that didn’t need sutures; both eyes blacked, the left more than the right (Moriarty must strike harder and more often with his favoured right hand); skin abraded on his forehead and jaw. There were flakes of dried blood visible inside his ear and John wondered if he’d had any signs of concussion.

His chart hung in a metal pocket at the foot of the bed and John took it up; it was in Russian, as
expected, and of no use to him except that he could see the Intake and Triage section was lengthy, listing Sherlock’s visible injuries with so many, many commas between the notes. There were x-rays tucked in behind, and John took them to the lightbox on the far wall, slipped them in and up under the clips meant to hold them, and switched the thing on. Three views of Sherlock’s forearm, with the hairline fracture of his ulna that Molly had reported. A view of his skull revealed nothing troubling and all his teeth were in place, but there might be another minor, spidery fracture near his eye socket. Film of his belly showed organs looking all right, but there was a very distinct, bright oval low in his large intestine that John couldn’t decipher. John pulled them down and shut off the lightbox, returned the films to their place.

Moving to the head of the bed, John reached over the siderail to touch him—found that all at once he needed desperately to touch him—but worried for a place to touch that wouldn’t hurt him. Resting his arm on the pillow, he leaned close and stroked Sherlock’s fringe back a bit, not touching his scalp or forehead, but coaxing the hair aside with curled fingers, then going back again. After a few passes, he whispered, “Sherlock? It’s John. I’m here. Just want you to know I’m here.” The barely-encouraged fringe stayed far enough to one side that John found a patch of unbruised skin, streaked though it was by the soft-as-they-ever-got forehead creases. He bent, and pressed his lips to the spot, and lingered a bit.

“It’s all right,” he whispered against Sherlock’s forehead. “You can sleep. Just wanted you to know.” He regained his full height beside the bed, and resumed stroking Sherlock’s hair. John rapidly found himself lulled by the hiss and pulse of various monitors, the dull drone of the ventilation system; his sleepless night on watch was catching him up. He shook his head, cleared his throat as quietly as he could manage, and blinked hard several times. When his gaze next fell on Sherlock’s face, there were trails of tears streaming from the corners of his eyes, sliding down his temples into his hair.

John’s fingers ghosted across Sherlock’s forehead, beneath his waves of hair. “Hey,” he hushed. “Hey. Waking up?”

Sherlock’s eyes came open, though his lids were swollen and bruised, and scanned in a vague circle until his gaze fixed on John’s. John managed a small smile, grateful for the proof of life. “Hi,” he said. “You made it.”

Sherlock’s eyes screwed shut and his shoulders jerked.

John went on stroking him, kept his voice just above a whisper. “Ah, no. Don’t cry. It’s fine now. I’m here and I’m not leaving.” His free hand came to rest gently on the middle of Sherlock’s chest, which shuddered with another sobbing breath. With some effort visible in his already deeply wracked expression, Sherlock drew his arm out from under the blankets and found John’s hand resting there over his heart, and held it.

“I’m sorry.”

“No. M-nh. No.”

“I shouldn’t have left.”

“Nevermind it.” John gathered the edge of the blanket and gently dabbed at Sherlock’s wet eyes. “You’re safe; that’s all that matters.”

Sherlock’s fingers squeezed harder around John’s hand on his chest. Glancing down, John noticed Sherlock wasn’t wearing his wedding ring anymore. A feeling of unease crept through him that he didn’t immediately comprehend.
“I’m glad to see your beautiful eyes open, but can we clear away the tears?”

Sherlock nodded, and ducked his head to rub his nose against his shoulder, drying it on the hospital gown.

“The ring,” he croaked, then, and looked anguished.

John raised his eyebrows, inquiring without pressing.

“He made me eat it.”

The bright spot on the scan, in his intestine.

“I know,” John decided to say. “It won’t do any harm.”

“Can they cut it out?” Sherlock’s gaze was soft and needy, eyes wide as they could go between his puffy lids.

“There’s no need,” John reassured.

“I don’t want it.”

“It’s safer to let nature take its course.” John’s fingers threaded through Sherlock’s hair, and he remembered what Sherlock had told Molly as she’d been helping to clean him up. John cleared rising fury at Moriarty from his throat, harsh and loud, ended it with a pat grin, begging pardon.

Sherlock’s eyes were closed again.

“Tired? You can go back to sleep. I’m not going anywhere.”

Sherlock hummed, and his eyes stayed shut, but his grip on John’s hand remained firm.

“I do need to ask you something, though. And it might not make sense to you, so don’t mind it, but. . .” he wound a lock of Sherlock’s hair gently around his fingertip. “Does Jim know the Lam— . .ah. . .Gugu Kriel?”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

In chapter 30, John sat an all-night vigil outside Sherlock’s hospital room in order to keep him safe, then in the morning greeted him with, “You made it.” In his thoughts during that long night were the contents of Sherlock’s envelope full of documents, including his last will, and a family bible of Drasha.

The nurse who’d taken pity on him found John a piece of paper, a pen that made thick black lines, and a few strips of sellotape; John block printed,

*Privacy Requested*
*Please Knock and Await Response*

and stuck the sign on the door at eye level. He shut the window blinds against the overcast daylight and dimmed the lights in the room. Sherlock slept on, mostly peaceful, unsurprising given there was analgesic as well as hydration running through his IV line. His lips were parted and dry; John fetched a flannel from the stack in the restroom and soaked it with warm water, then gently dabbed it against Sherlock’s lips, which made him twitch a bit, and roused him.

“You’re all right,” John said instantly, softly. “In hospital. Perfectly safe.”

Sherlock hummed and turned his head a bit, hazily blinked his eyes open.

“You mouth looked dry,” John explained. “Think you could drink some water?”

“Mm,” Sherlock acquiesced, and John offered him a plastic cup from the nearby rolling table, guided the drinking straw between his lips.

“I’m trying to convince them to let you out of here later today. I’ve shown them my credentials, and once you’ve finished up the fluids—” John gestured up toward the hydration bag hanging from its pole as he set the plastic cup back in its place, “—there’s not much more they can do for you here that I can’t do for you back at mine. It’s just a matter of time and rest, really.”

Sherlock’s voice was hoarse with disuse; he’d been sleeping well over twelve hours. “I didn’t tell him where I’d been. Your flat. He thought I was staying with a drasha from the Icehouse who must live nearby.”

“That’s good,” John replied. “So long as he doesn’t know about it, it’s still safe. Probably even safer than being here.” John reached for Sherlock’s hand, resting by his hip on the bed, and cradled it, stroking his other hand over the back of Sherlock’s fingers; there were scrapes and bruises on his knuckles, one gash at the base of his index finger. Defensive wounds. “I’d feel better with you there.” He lifted Sherlock’s hand and dipped his head to meet it, pressed a kiss to the back of it. “I need to ask you something, Sherlock, and it’s only because I’m worried you may have injuries that need looking after.”

Neither Sherlock nor Molly—nor John—had uttered a word to the hospital personnel about what had happened to Sherlock—not even to lie. Saying he’d been attacked on the street or that he’d been in a
traffic accident would have had them calling the police, and Sherlock still refused to involve the authorities. Surely there were suspicions, and one doctor had pulled John aside shortly after Sherlock first awoke and demanded to know who had beaten the drashaskaya with fists and feet, obviously not for the first time. It seemed he might have suspected John as the perpetrator, but John must have been convincing in his pleas of ignorance and eventually the doctor retreated, shaking his head. As far as John knew, no one had even inquired as to whether injuries other than the obvious were a possibility; he was sure that they would have, if the patient had been a woman. When the worst was over, John was going to write a very angry letter.

Sherlock closed his eyes. “Don’t ask,” he said, just above a whisper. “Yes.”

“Will you let me do an exam? Just to have a look. Just in case.” Between each utterance, John felt his jaw clench as he bit his teeth together, struggling to stay doctor. The other part of him—most of him, really—nearly all—threatened to let out a raw, endless howl.

Sherlock let out a quiet moan that sounded almost thoughtful. He kept his eyes closed. After a hard swallow, he nodded.

“I’m sorry.” John adjusted his grip on Sherlock’s hand. “But it’s important. And I didn’t think you’d want them involved.” He tipped his head toward the door, indicating the hospital staff. Then, quietly: “I’ll help you turn over?”

Slowly, with great care, they maneuvered Sherlock onto his side. One knee was splinted to stabilise a dislocated kneecap that had been pressed back into place by an orthopaedist shortly after Sherlock’s intake exam. Sherlock lay on that side, keeping the splinted leg straight. The other knee was also badly bruised and still swollen, but Sherlock managed to shift his thigh toward his chest, bending the knee just enough. Standing at the bedside—now with Sherlock’s back to him—John could see that Sherlock’s two-handed grip on the side rail was ferocious, white-knuckled, and he was softly panting; just rolling up to his side had taxed him greatly.

“Just going to put my hand on your shoulder, all right? So you know where I am.”

“All right.” Sherlock’s voice was soft and frayed at the edges. John reminded himself he must be a doctor, just for the time being. If need be, he could fall apart later, out of Sherlock’s sight and earshot. He rested his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, then slid it slowly down his arm, over his waist, onto his hip, and let it settle there. The hospital gown had the familiar soft-stiff feel of industrial-laundered cotton. The shape of Sherlock’s hip, too, was familiar—sharp and sturdy.

“I know you’re uncomfortable,” John reassured. “It won’t take long, then you can lie back and stretch that leg. Next you’re going to feel my other hand at your lower back, just to loosen the gown, I won’t touch you without telling you first.”

Sherlock nodded his head and breathed a little sound to signal his understanding.

Keeping his hand reassuringly planted on Sherlock’s hip, John pulled loose the strings at Sherlock’s low back and made sure the upper edge of the hospital gown wasn’t tucked under him. He raised it up out of the way, watching Sherlock’s hands clutching the side rail, his head rolling to press his face deeper into the pillow.

“All right, that’s out of the way.” A quick visual assessment of Sherlock’s thighs, buttocks, and low back showed some mild-to-moderate, scattered bruising, and two dark, round black-and-blue marks, one on the back of his thigh, one at the top of his buttock. “OK. You’re going to feel my fingertips —”
“Wait!” It came out on an urgent rush of breath, and Sherlock’s shoulders tensed, and his hip shifted forward beneath John’s palm.

“Yes, OK,” John said immediately, gently, and dropped the gown back to cover him. “When you’re ready, Sherlock,” he said. “You’ll let me know when you’re ready. I promise I’m not going to hurt you.”

Sherlock nodded, and his grip shifted a bit on the rail but did not loosen. John left his hand resting on Sherlock’s hip, and watched the second hand sweep around the face of the wall clock. Sherlock sniffed now and then, and once drew in a sharp inhale as if he might speak, but instead only choked on a mild sob. A few times, he withdrew one hand from the side rail and brushed it across his face. He wiped his nose with the corner of the bed sheet. John waited. It was excruciating, interminable, knowing Sherlock was weeping, struggling to gather his courage, and John wished he could be on the other side of the bed as well, stroking Sherlock’s hair and offering his own hand to be clenched in that terrified grip.

Silent and still, patient, John waited.

Nearly three entire minutes passed before Sherlock at last said, “OK.”

“I’m going to lift the gown again, then,” John told him, and did so. “All right if I rest my other hand on your lower back just so you can get used to me?”

“Yes.”

John laid his palm at the top of Sherlock’s buttock, fingers pointing toward the foot of the bed. “Next I’ll need to use my fingers to make space, just to have a look. Tell me when that’s all right for me to do.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m not going to touch you in any way that might hurt you.”

Sherlock nodded. “I know. It’s all right.”

“You’re going to feel my fingertips . . . gentle pressure just on your buttock here. . .” John tilted his head and did a quick visual exam. “It’s not bad. Not at all,” he reported, and tried not to let his own relief creep into his tightly controlled, professional voice. “Some minor injury, but nothing that needs sutures. We’ll just keep it clean and it will heal itself, in time.” He moved his hand away and replaced the gown. “Restroom visits will be unpleasant for a few days, maybe two weeks. Otherwise it’s not worrisome.” He helped Sherlock straighten his bent leg and resettle onto his back. His forehead was sheened with perspiration, his eyes glassy and pink-veined.

John went to wash his hands and Sherlock said to his back, “It wasn’t only. . .ah.” He sniffed again. “I had to. . .just to keep him calm. . .”

John wiped his hands dry and returned to Sherlock’s bedside. “You don’t have to explain anything. You did what you had to. Tell me as much or as little as you want, but please know, Sherlock, that you don’t owe a single explanation to anyone. Least of all me.” He dipped his fingertips into Sherlock’s hair and leaned to kiss him quickly at the corner of his eyebrow, then breathed against his temple, “My god, you’re a brave man.”
The trip back to John’s flat in Baker Street—in a bicycle rickshaw with curtains drawn around them, after dark, Greg Lestrade not far behind to make sure they weren’t being followed—had been predictably bumpy and jarring and took nearly an hour. Despite Sherlock’s prophylactic dose of sedative and painkiller—

“No narcotics.”

“It’s not morphine. Quite a low dose, and I think given the circumstances—”

“No.”

—he’d arrived in Baker Street near-delirious with pain. The trek upstairs was eternal, John holding him up, trying to find spaces to fit his arm, hip, and hand that didn’t press up against injuries. Sherlock’s splinted knee meant mounting each step twice, planting one foot then raising the other to meet it, then pausing for breath while Sherlock bit down on disgruntled-sounding hums. The stair was too narrow, and John longed to just heft Sherlock onto his back—a wounded soldier—and tote him up to the landing, but didn’t dare suggest it.

At last Sherlock was settled, reclining on a few pillows, on his preferred side of the very good bed (John would adjust to his newly reassigned bunk space), and had even been persuaded to accept a top-up of the pain meds. John sat beside him on top of the blankets, ankles crossed, listing provisions he would later order delivered from a shop two streets over.

“Tell me what you eat,” John prompted.

Sherlock mumbled, “Lean protein. Fish is best. No sauces. No pasta. No white rice or potatoes.”

John scribbled even as he said, “OK...and what do you like to eat?”


“Excellent.” John reckoned Sherlock may be persuaded to eat more than a nibble if he was well-tempted.


John smiled and set aside his pad and pen. He swept Sherlock’s fringe aside with the tips of his fingers and gave his forehead a bit of a feel along the way. Sherlock wasn’t feverish; it was only that the meds and his exhaustion were making him dreamy.

“You’ve got a sweet tooth, then,” John said quietly. “Which is your favourite sweets shop?”

“Phoenix...” Sherlock slurred it. “Rising.”

“Don’t know that one.”

“Scutwith.” John wondered if that was the address, or the baker’s name. Just when it seemed Sherlock had succumbed to sleep and wouldn’t say more, he finished, “Ketamine.”

John laughed a bit. “What, you mean...cut with—are you talking about heroin?”

“Mmmmm...” Sherlock hummed as if the memory itself was delicious.

“Well, you’re not having that, darling,” John told him sternly, half-smiling. “But I’ll see what I can
do about a chocolate cake.”

“Mm. Thank you, Captain Watson,” Sherlock murmured, low and clear, then said nothing more.

Having been awake for two days and nights, running most recently on the adrenaline of worry for Sherlock and rage at Moriarty, John felt destined for a wall-crash unlike any he’d had in recent memory—probably since his days in the Americas. Now that Sherlock was safe in bed beside him, behind locked doors to which John had the only key, in a flat only Unity—and a few hired killers—knew about, fatigue pummeled him like a rockslide. He stripped down to his boxers and vest, laying his gun on the bedside table, grip angled just so. Sliding beneath the blankets was a sensation so deep and pleasurable as to be nearly erotic, and John shivered as he turned toward Sherlock—not quite touching him—and dug his nose into the pillow. He ventured a hand, sliding it across the mattress to find Sherlock’s arm, and curled his fingers lightly around the inner elbow. Sherlock breathed deeper—just once—and John murmured, “Nevermind, Sherlock. It’s only me.”

John is well-fed, pleasantly drunk, flush with curr, with his gun nestled close by his side. One lovely, plump woman with corkscrew-curled hair and glossy red lips is knelt before him, tending to him with tongue and lips and not a trace of teeth. His face is buried between the quaking thighs of another beauty, wispy ginger hairs tickling his nose as he licks, tastes—jeezus she’s delicious—and behind him a hard-chested, ropy-armed bloke has his impossibly perfect, slick, curved, thick, hard cock up John’s arse, rocking, hitting the spot, that spot, dear god, dear god. . .

Out come the knives, and thick-fingered hands clamp shut his nose and mouth, clench around his throat. The one sucking him is skinning him; the delicious one presses the muzzle of his own damn gun right between his eyes. His nose burns hot with the stink of frying blood, black powder, cooked plastic. It’s chaos in the dark and he has lost all sense of time and direction, he’s blinded, deaf, and when he shouts nothing comes out but a whisper, dear god, dear god. . .

“John!”

John’s eyes flew open at the sound of his name, the feel of a hand touching his knee beneath the weighty blankets of the pretty good bed. Sherlock’s forehead was creased. John had forgotten to turn off the lamp.

“You were restless,” Sherlock told him quietly. “I thought I should wake you; I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s all right.” John dragged a hand backward through his hair, heaved himself up on his elbow. “Any idea what time it is?” His thoughts began to coalesce. “Why are you awake? Having pain?”

“It’s not unbearable.”

“It doesn’t have to be unbearable.”

“I’m fine. Around two a.m., I think.”

“Well past time for you, then.” John righted himself, shook off the nightmare as he shambled to fetch a glass of water from the kitchen and the non-narcotic pain relievers from the bathroom cabinet. He returned to find Sherlock attempting to rise, palms braced on the mattress by his hips, straightening his back; quickly setting aside the glass and the pills, he offered Sherlock his hand.

“All right?”
“I just need...” Sherlock glanced toward the bathroom door.

“Right.” John pulled back the blankets and helped guide Sherlock’s legs around, minding the splinted knee, and let Sherlock use him as a handhold as he rose. John was still afraid to touch him much, lest he accidentally hit a tender spot. “Dizzy?” he asked, his doctor-self attendant to the “likely” concussion with which Sherlock had been half-diagnosed while in hospital. “Pain in your head at all? Nauseated?”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock replied automatically, though it was at best a half-truth. Once his feet were planted, he hesitated, fussing with the edges of the hospital gown he still wore as a sort of robe over another one tied shut behind his back. “I’m going to need far better quality loungewear for the remainder of my convalescence,” he said mildly, looking sideways at John as if to gauge his reaction to the joke. “These are absolutely appalling.”

“As you like,” John said, and tucked Sherlock’s hand around his elbow, escorting him to the bathroom. “I’ll get you some silk pyjamas, maybe. Silver-grey to match your eyes. White—what did you call it?—piping.”

“Cotton will do, as long as it’s got a respectable thread count; it seems more appropriate to the occasion,” Sherlock replied. “I’ll call my tailor in the...”

Sherlock stopped speaking midsentence but his mouth stayed open, and his gaze was fixed over John’s shoulder. John had completely forgotten—damn, damn!—about the mirror. Trying to keep his expression neutral, he started to reach for Sherlock’s hand.

“Hey...”

“Don’t say anything,” Sherlock murmured. He stepped closer to the sink, and both hands gripped its curved edges so he could lean closer, tilting his chin and slowly turning his face. “You’ll excuse me,” he said, more demand than request.

“Yeah. All right. Call me if you need an escort back to bed. I’m going to, ah...” It was the middle of the night, what pressing need could he possibly have? In the end, John merely gestured toward the hallway and then left through that door, crossed the entire flat to the windows on the far side of the lounge. He nudged the drapes aside and tipped his head to have a look at the street-lit view of the Park Road intersection where he’d so recently watched Sherlock being stolen away.

Under the cool, blue-tinged light from the fixture above the bathroom mirror, Sherlock was still taking inventory. He pressed two fingertips experimentally against the outer edge of one eye socket; a jolt of pain made his shoulders jump up. Xie sometimes wore a glued-on gem on the spot beneath his index finger—a beauty mark meant to catch the light—because it served the dual purpose of drawing attention to the high, defined cheekbones and light to the pale, chameleon eyes. Beauty mark. What a grotesque phrase it seemed, now that he was covered head to toe in marks, not a single one beautiful.

His lips were badly chapped, sore and cracking. Swollen. Split. He pursed them, elicited a throbbing ache. His chin and upper lip were stubble-riddled and for a moment he lost himself in the search for any silver whiskers among the dark ones. Normally he would have been relieved to have found none, but in the moment he felt nothing about it one way or the other, except that he hated to see the days’ growth of beard, feeling unkempt and lazy. He’d shave in the morning. A troubling mass of tiny scabs speckled the edge of his chin and jaw, with a sunburned look to the surrounding skin. The rug in Xie’s dressing room. He’d have Molly get rid of it. He never wanted to see its lotus-blossom pattern again—even from his full height.
Letting his fingers trail through the hair framing his forehead, Sherlock exposed another abrasion, but could not recall specifically how it had come to be there. His head ached in a piercing pinch directly behind the scrape, a headache cutting a jagged path up and over his scalp, then digging in like a fish hook at the base of his skull.

He had a sudden, urgent longing to be back in the salon, pouring the wine, listening to the stories. To escape into Xie, everything orderly, everything beautiful. The sclera of his left eye was flooded red where it should be white. Sherlock’s stomach lurched, and he remembered the ring. Jim’s hand on his throat. Jim’s throat wound round with a belt. He dropped his chin, thinking he might be sick—not that there was anything inside him, to bring up. At least that much was under control. Had John said some odd thing about cake?

Sherlock turned away from the mirror and did as he must, then washed his hands, taking his time rolling them under and over each other, a motion that reminded him of smoothing Xie’s crushed pearl hand cream into the creases of his knuckles. Surely, babulya Ishi had a remedy for the quick healing of bruises. She’d feed him sour, medicinal tea and chant a prayer over him, resting her little hand on the crown of his head. Except that he couldn’t get to her because he couldn’t leave the flat. Jim could be anywhere.

“John?” He dried his hands, leaning his hip against the sink-edge as he was suddenly so tired he thought he might slip straight off to sleep, even on his feet. John appeared then, pushing open the door as he knocked lightly on it. Sherlock did close his eyes then, and asked, “Where is he? Is he looking for me?”

“Come back to bed,” John murmured, and offered his arm. Sherlock looped his wrist in the crook of it, grasped at his bicep with the opposite hand and began a stiff-legged shuffle back through to the bedroom. “We can talk a bit once you’re comfortable. Do you need anything? Tea?”

Sherlock shook his head. He moaned a bit settling into bed, and John rearranged the pillows behind his back, tucked one up behind his neck so he could recline. John covered him with the blankets. “Warm enough? Can I just have a feel of your forehead?” Sherlock nodded, feeling exhausted and like his brain was wrapped in cotton wool—as if he couldn’t quite join up one thought to the next. John’s hand was dry and warm against his forehead, then his cheek, and then his neck. John gazed off into the high corner of the room as he felt for Sherlock’s pulse. “No fever, that’s good. But let’s get these pills into you.” He retrieved the water glass and pain medication from the nightstand and offered them; Sherlock was obedient in taking the medicine, then kept the water glass in hand, resting on his lap. John walked around the bed and got under the blankets, propping himself up on his side to face Sherlock. His index finger traced light, curlicue patterns over Sherlock’s forearm from elbow to wrist, then lazily back again. Sherlock hummed, encouraging.

“Do you think he knows I’m here?” he asked then.

“No, I don’t think so. He does know you were in hospital, though. Before anyone realised what had actually happened, Lestrade had someone in his office ring and tell him you were ill, and were being taken to hospital.”

“Ill?”

“Hurt.”

Sherlock sipped the water, swallowed. “The call was recorded; you heard it?”

“Yeah, Greg and I both did.”
“What did he say?” Sherlock asked, and he wasn’t wondering if Jim had expressed—or even felt—remorse, nor whether he was surprised to learn Sherlock was alive. It was a strange, distant curiosity about the unfolding of the story, as if all of it had happened to someone else. “Where was he?”

John’s finger shifted its path along Sherlock’s forearm and he frowned a bit, meeting Sherlock’s gaze, then breaking it before replying plainly, “He said he had a meeting. In Bath.”

Sherlock let out a bitter, quick sigh through his nostrils. His thumb worked slowly up and down the smooth outside of the water glass.

“He said he’d get to you eventually,” John said quietly, seriously, but immediately followed it with, “But you know I’ll never let that happen. Never in a million years will I let him touch one hair on your handsome head.” His palm closed gently around Sherlock’s wrist. “You can believe that.”

“I do believe it,” Sherlock said, and gratitude welled up in his throat, pricked a bit at the back of his eyes. He blinked, then again, then let his eyes stay shut for a few long moments. It was a struggle to hold them open, his lids still swollen, and even the dim light of the bedroom seemed shrill and bright; resting his eyes was a relief.

“Well…” John started, then pursed his lips thoughtfully before continuing. “Do you have an idea where he might go?”

“He keeps a flat in Stevenage he thinks I don’t know about. Aside from that, I can’t imagine. I don’t think he’d walk away from the Icehouse easily, though. He won’t have gone far, or for long.”

“I’m sure it was clear to you that night at the salon who Gugu Kriel is. What she’s like. What she does.”

“She’s like you.”

“She’s nothing like me, thanks much.” Sherlock cast a sideways glance; John was smiling, unoffended. “But yes, she does the sort of work I do. That’s why I asked you, in the hospital, if Jim knows her. You remember me asking?”

“No. What did I say?”

“You said you didn’t know.”

Sherlock took a long, deep draught from the water glass, nearly finishing it, then set it on the table beside the bed. He let his head drop back deeper into the pillows, huffed his dismay at the effort required to adjust his hips lower down the mattress. John’s hand slid away from Sherlock’s wrist to settle on the back of his hand, and his fingers curved around. “I don’t know if he knows her,” Sherlock agreed at last. “I suppose he might. All I know of Ms Kriel is that she arranged the party with those young men she brought, and that she stayed that night in a suite—the following night as well, though I didn’t see her again.”

“Had she ever been to the Icehouse before, do you know?”

“She’s nothing like me, thanks much.” Sherlock cast a sideways glance; John was smiling, unoffended. “But yes, she does the sort of work I do. That’s why I asked you, in the hospital, if Jim knows her. You remember me asking?”

“How did you say?”

“You said you didn’t know.”

Sherlock hummed another slight sigh. “What are you thinking about her, then?”

“Speaking frankly….” John’s hand began to slide over the back of Sherlock’s hand, slowly. “I wonder if Jim might hire her to find you.”

“Find me,” Sherlock prompted, having deduced enough to be skeptical.
“Well. Kill you.”

“Right.” Sherlock’s voice was flat, emotionless, even to his own ears. It was utterly surreal to think of someone out there in the world who’d take money to take his life, and anyway he was too tired to be afraid. He’d already spent all his fear, back there on the marble floor of the master bath.

John’s hand stilled again, and he held onto Sherlock’s just tight enough. “She used to stay here—I’m not sure when—but she knows I’m here now. And she said that night in the salon—do you remember?—that she’d discovered my weakness.”

Sherlock’s lips curved up a bit. “Me?”

“I’m very weak for you, indeed, Sherlock Holmes,” John said in his most gentle voice, and Sherlock opened one eye, let his grin widen even though it pulled at the barely-healed cut on his lower lip. He raised his head and tried to angle his body more toward John’s. When that proved less than fully successful, he settled for touching John’s face, resting a finger beneath his jaw and tilting it up. John looked doubtful, almost bashful. “Can I?”


John wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, and raised himself up, still holding Sherlock’s hand. He leaned close to press his lips between Sherlock’s in a kiss just the outer edge of chaste, so impossibly soft, completely undemanding, an offered comfort. He drew back, gently smiling.

“All right?” John checked in, rearranging himself on the bed a bit.

“Very nice. Thank you.” Sherlock’s headache was subsiding; the pills were taking the edge off the pain. He steered back to the prior discussion. “So Ms Kriel knows where you live, and that you. . .or rather, that I. . .”

John took pity on him. “That I care about you, yes. So I imagine if she and Jim were to meet, they’d put two and two together pretty quickly. But I had the locks changed weeks ago.” There was something he wasn’t saying, Sherlock could feel it in the way his thumb shifted tempo as it scraped the back of Sherlock’s wrist.

“You had the locks changed, but.”

“Doesn’t mean she couldn’t get in,” John admitted. “But she hasn’t got a gun, and I have. And she knows who I am, just as well as I know who she is. As long as I’m here with you, you’re absolutely safe, I promise. If I thought different, I wouldn’t have brought you here.”

“I think this is the safest place in the world, John,” Sherlock told him, truthfully.

“I’m glad you feel that way.” John let go of his hand so he could stretch, rolling onto his back, his flexed feet raising the blankets a bit. “I don’t want you to be afraid. You don’t need to be. But I also want you to know where things stand.”

“I appreciate the honesty.” Sherlock let his eyes close again. His bodily exhaustion was seeping into his brain again and sleep seemed quite close, indeed. “So. It seems that even over finding him, discovering the location of Ms Kriel is paramount.”

“It’s funny, you calling her that. Ms Kriel. A guest at the salon. Honestly, she’s barely even a person. I’ve always thought there’s something wrong with her. Know what They call her?”

“Hmm?” Sherlock was drifting.
“The Lamia. Are you familiar? I had to look it up.”

Sherlock rocked his head in the negative. “No.”

“It’s a demon: half-woman, half snake. It eats children, drinks their blood.”

“Charming,” Sherlock commented. “Very colourful. And pray what do they call you, then, Captain Watson?”

“A story for another time,” John said gently. “Will you sleep a bit more? It’s nearly three now, I think.” His yawn was deep and low, though he tried to stifle it behind his curled fist.

“Mm.” Sherlock allowed. “But speaking of stories. Perhaps you have one? Just until I fall asleep. Won’t take long.”

John reached for the bedside lamp and switched it off. There was streetlight around the edges of the window shades; there was a light left on in the sitting room and the bedroom door was slightly ajar, so a faint pool of paler darkness hovered around it. Sherlock exhaled: long, soft. John lightly punched his pillow and slithered deeper into the blankets.

“You remember the story of the handsome young man, running from the witch?”

“His mother.”

“Right,” John said, and found Sherlock’s thigh beneath the blanket, touched it gently through the layers of hospital gown, and let his hand come to rest beside it. “There was the man in the woods who offered to love him, but in the end the handsome young man went back to his lover—the big man around town—and each of them only settled for what he could get.”

“M-hm.”

“There’s another bit, after that,” John said quietly, and Sherlock willed himself to stay awake to listen. “I didn’t tell it that night. I’ll tell it to you now, if you like.”

“I’d like that. Very much.”

“The handsome young man was dim by his lover’s side, but he wanted to honour a promise he’d made, and no one begrudged it. The other man—the man who was no good to anyone anymore—went back to his home in the woods, and even though he was angry and disappointed, he told himself it was all for the best to be rid of the handsome young man, and tried to get on with it. Some time passed, and the handsome young man saw he’d chosen badly because his lover was unkind, even after all the promises they’d made, and all the time that had passed between them; without their common enemy to fight, it would never be like it was before. His lover sensed the handsome young man’s disillusionment, though, and rather than let him go he built a tower, and stuck the handsome young man all the way up at the top, and chipped apart the stairs with a hatchet, and sealed up the doors with stones.”

Sherlock’s eyes burned, and his throat was thick. He slipped his hand beneath the blankets, found John’s hand there beside his hip and drew it up into his palm, not clutching, but not gentle either. John’s fingers curved tight to let him know he understood.

“Shall I stop?”

“No. You tell it so beautifully. To send me to sleep.” Sherlock could not stop himself sniffling, just once.
“It gets better; we’re nearly there,” John assured him, in hushed tones, then carried on. “The handsome young man determined he was going to be finished with his lover once and for all, but it was miles to the ground, and the stairs were in ruins, and anyway there was no door anymore for him to run out of. One afternoon, the sun shone through the window just right and his cheeks burned hot and he knew his time had come. After some time and no small effort he found himself outside the tower—hanging on by his fingertips to the window ledge.”

“Afraid to let go,” Sherlock murmured.

“Well, who wouldn’t be?” John replied on his very next breath. “He’d lost his mother the witch’s wand, the one whose magic he had used to save himself in the past, but he knew magic didn’t rely on tools—all he needed was the belief. So even without the wand, he conjured himself a pair of enormous, soft white wings, and as soon as he felt them straining at his back, he shut his eyes and bit his teeth together and his heart swelled up with courage, and he let go.”

John paused, and his thumb brushed the side of Sherlock’s index finger in slow, calming rhythm.

“At first, he fell. And it felt as if he would fall forever, what a mistake he’d made, it had been so foolish even to try. But his wings worked, and in the end he glided safely to the ground, far out in the woods, near enough to the home of the man who was no good to anyone anymore that the handsome young man could smell the smoke from his chimney. The wings folded up then faded away, and he was just himself again. And so he was saved.”

“Magic saved him,” Sherlock said quietly, indicating he’d stayed awake, and heard the ending, and understood. But John corrected him.

“His courage saved him.”

“Because of the man who’d offered to love him. The man in the woods.”

“Er, maybe,” John allowed, and Sherlock could picture the squinting look of skepticism on his face just from hearing the tone of his voice. “But I think it might be because he remembered: life is sweet.” John drew their clasped hands up to his face, and pressed his lips against Sherlock’s knuckles. “Sherlock, I, ah—” he hummed, and swallowed, and in the end instead of saying anything more, kissed Sherlock’s hand again.

“Good night, John. Thank you.”
In chapter 31, Sherlock began his recovery, first in hospital, later at John's flat where he was confronted for the first time with his own reflection in the bathroom mirror. The two talked about what Sherlock likes to eat (dessert), and what Jim's next steps might be, and then John sent Sherlock to sleep with a story about remembering life is sweet.

* 
Please note this chapter contains a few passing, but specific, references to acts of domestic abuse.

John flung his arm out toward the wrong side of the bed, groping for his gun, cranking his head around to identify nearby threats. There was nothing. Pigeons cooing outside the window, the rustle of his own hair against the pillowslip, Sherlock breathing through a half-open mouth beside him. No one in the flat. No threat. Just the shock of waking from the deep end of sleep, when normally he couldn’t even find his way into the shallows.

Seams of midmorning light shone around the edges of the window shades and the bedside clock read half past eight. He gathered himself up on his elbow and looked over Sherlock’s face. One of his black eyes was just beginning to go yellow at the upper edge, and his eyelids were far less swollen; his eyelashes were short and sparse, auburn, a soft place to land. Red-violet fingerprints blared down the length of the sturdy neck, and John felt it in his back teeth. It would be weeks before Sherlock was free of the copious evidence of his three days in Hell. John found it shocking, was grateful for his shock, hoped he would be shocked again and again to see it, until every trace of it was gone. It stoked him up, fury burning hot and tight in the center of his chest, and he’d need that soon enough.

Leaving Sherlock to sleep on, John carried fresh clothes into the bathroom, showered, shaved, and dressed. He started the kettle and scrounged for anything on hand that was remotely edible. Ultimately he came up with two apples sliced into thin wedges; a small, slightly stale baguette he tore open and set in the oven to revive it; and some butter, jam, and a half-used jar of bronzy honey beginning to go cloudy and thick. He dolloped these last few in little mounds side by side across the center of a dinner plate, chucked the sliced apples on one side and hunks of the now less-sad bread on the other. It wasn’t as pretty as what Sherlock might have done, but it wasn’t bad.

John set the plate on the nightstand; Sherlock had turned his face away in his sleep. He pulled the bedroom door mostly-closed behind him and went to fix his tea, slathered a reserved hunk of the toasted bread with an heroic amount of butter, then took both to his favoured arm chair in the sitting room. He tuned the telly to the morning news—none of it ever bad, only a bit of it informative, never remotely interesting—just to have somewhere to put his focus.

He’d long since finished his toast and gone back for more, and was down to the dregs of his second cup of tea when at last he heard Sherlock stirring. There were the sounds of muffled grunting and breath sucked sharply across gritted teeth, then of the doors to the bath closing, and finally the thudding ring of the pipes as they warmed. Nearly twenty minutes passed, and John began to worry that Sherlock and his likely concussion may have passed out, or fallen. Setting Sherlock’s tea on the nightstand, John noticed most of the sliced apples were gone, along with two bits of the toast, which
Sherlock must have dipped into the honey and jam, since John had—he now realised—failed to deliver any cutlery. There wasn’t so much as a dot left of either, nor of the butter. *Sweet tooth, indeed.*

A groan from inside the bath, and John called lightly, “All right?”

“All right.”

His doctor-self longed to warn Sherlock to be careful, go slowly, but he bit down on it. The door opened and Sherlock appeared, smiling wanly between grimaces as he bore weight on his splinted knee. John reached for his elbow.

“You’re white as these sheets. Whiter.”

“Am I?”

“Sit.”

John helped him settle on the edge of the bed but Sherlock seemed disinclined to lie down against the pillows. John reached to feel his forehead and found it clammy.

“Really, I’m all right. Just need to...” Sherlock didn’t finish, and eventually shrugged a bit and shook his head. “Thank you for breakfast.”

“Here’s tea, as well,” John offered, gesturing.

“Thank you. That’s lovely.” Sherlock leaned to reach for it, and his hand was shaking, and he said, “Oh...” in a tone of interested wonder, then swooned and started to fall. John caught him under the armpits, slid him backward toward the pillows.

“Sherlock.” He blew hard, staccato puffs of air at Sherlock’s face to rouse him but Sherlock’s eyes were already fluttering open. “Hey. *Sherlock.* Hey there.” John slipped his forearm beneath Sherlock’s knees to help him get his legs up on the bed, then tucked two pillows under his feet. The colour started creeping back into Sherlock’s lips.

“Got dizzy for a moment,” Sherlock said apologetically. “Everything went a bit grey.”

“Just keep your head down for a minute.” John smiled at him, and smoothed his hair back from his sweating forehead.

“You’ll likely want to know, Doctor,” Sherlock said, and his eyes flicked down toward the foot of the bed, avoiding John’s gaze. “That, *ah,* nature has taken its course.”

John frowned, then caught on to Sherlock’s meaning. “Oh, right. Of course. All right, that’s good.” He’d left all the supplies he’d been able to beg or outright steal from the hospital in a basket atop the toilet tank: exam gloves, numbing cream, alcohol and Betadine swabs in little foil packets, a kidney-shaped plastic basin, even a shower cap and two small bars of soap. No wonder Sherlock had been so long; John shuddered to think of the pain he must have had—so intense it had left him on the verge of fainting. Busying himself needlessly adjusting the pillows under Sherlock’s ankles, John feigned detachment as he offered, “We can boil it, or, did you find the alcohol—?”

“It’s gone,” Sherlock said, and touched his face in a way that suggested he’d wanted to rub his eyes but then remembered the deep bruises around them.

“Oh,” John said, and stood straight again. “You... didn’t want to save it then?”
“No.”

It was said with finality, and John recognized that further discussion of the topic would be unwelcome. He found himself a bit sad about the idea of anyone willingly flushing his wedding ring, and simultaneous relief—it felt like proof Sherlock was determined to shake himself free this time, for good.

“You can probably sit up now, if you like. Have your tea. Head’s all right?”

Sherlock hummed affirmation and they got him rearranged. He held the sugar packets John had tucked in between cup and saucer in a small tight stack, whacked them lightly against his opposite palm, then tore them open and dumped the lot of it into his tea. When he took up the cup on its saucer, his hand was steady.

“I wonder if you still have my mobile?” Sherlock sipped. “Mmm. And did you ever find a charging cable for it?” His roughed-up grin was nonetheless charming.

John moved to lift Sherlock’s small suitcase onto the nearby wooden chair. “I did, in fact.” He noticed he sounded a bit pleased with himself. “Shall I?”

“Thank you.”

“You can stop thanking me,” John said as he opened the case and found the charging cable, still packaged and wrapped in a plastic carrier bag, laid carefully in among the things Sherlock had left behind.

Sherlock said plainly, “But I’m grateful.”

As he dipped his hand into the elastic pocket for Sherlock’s phone, John had a twinge of guilt about having opened Sherlock’s envelope of vital documents. Setting the phone on the side table by the mostly-finished breakfast, John went after the overly complicated plastic packaging around the charger; it was a relief to have something to keep him busy. “Well, I just mean... I’m happy to do it. Of course, but...you know what I mean.” It felt wrong in his mouth, and he quickly added. “Not the reason for it, of course, but...”

Sherlock only smiled a bit over the rim of his tea cup, and sipped again.

John got the phone charging and rounded the foot of the bed to settle in beside Sherlock, who reached for his hand and squeezed it, then resumed drinking his tea. Even bruised-knuckled and scraped, his hands were impossibly elegant, every movement graceful, nothing wasted. John brushed away thoughts of kissing those long fingers, licking their tips, sucking two—three—into his mouth. No rush, of course, but something to look forward to.

Sherlock’s mobile let out a jaunty little jingle of beeps and pings to announce its awakening, drawing both of their gazes. Sherlock set the tea cup aside. The phone buzzed twice, and beeped. Buzzed again. Beeped. Buzzed, beeped, buzzed, beeped. John wondered if there was something wrong with it, and started to rise with an aim to check that the charger he’d bought was really the right one. Sherlock caught him lightly by the arm.

“It’s just his messages. When he was trying to find me.”

“Ah,” was all John could think to say, and he sank down again.

At last the thing went silent, and the absence of its clamour made the room feel strangely empty and too quiet. The hair on John’s neck bristled, and he felt a familiar, elevated alertness; he was listening
to the whole flat, then—the whole building—the whole street—and his spine stiffened. He took mental inventory of the location of his weapon, the last time he had secured the locks on the doors, the shut windows, the alternate exits. The aroma of Sherlock’s hyper-sweetened, milky tea reached his nostrils, along with the scent of apples going brown, and toasted bread, and his own sour nerve-sweat.

“John,” Sherlock said then, breaking the spell, though he gave no indication he’d noticed the change in John’s demeanour. “You can, again, if you like.” John looked at him questioningly, and Sherlock laid his fingertips against his lips for a moment. “Gently. That is, if you don’t mind…” The fingertips gestured in a vague circle beside his face.

“You’re gorgeous,” John said, then, and turned, leaned closer. His fingers drifted up to tickle gently over the skin of Sherlock’s cheekbone, feather light. “Your amazing eyes, my god.”

Sherlock closed them demurely, instinctively, and tipped his head away.

“All I see is the handsome man I met that day in the park.” John slipped his hand beneath his own pillow. “Look, I told you I’d keep this here.” He held up a folded-over sheet of sketchbook paper, worked it open one-handed. Sherlock’s eyes went wide, and his smile did, too, until he flinched at the strain on the stitches inside his lower lip and reined it in. The paper bore the name Sherlock Holmes again and again, in Sherlock’s elegant cursive. Sherlock plucked it from John’s hand and set it aside on the mattress. The tip of his tongue rolled out to moisten over-dry lips. John moved close, as close as he could get without Sherlock’s face blurring out of focus. “I feel lucky to kiss you,” he assured, and his gaze flicked back and forth between Sherlock’s mouth and his eyes. “I probably always will.”

Sherlock woke to a throbbing ache in his left side; he’d rolled onto it during sleep. Jim had kicked him there, punched him there, and the current deep pain in his ribs was ugly and familiar. His headache had flared up again, as well—sharp and bright behind and above his eye, wrapping over the crown to jab in at the base of his skull. The pills—whatever they were—made him dozy and stupid, and he wanted to put them off as long as possible. There were things that needed his attention—first, the situation of the hospital gowns, which were beginning to ripen—and now that he’d got his mobile going again he could at least make calls and send texts, even if he’d miss his standing appointments at the barber, and likely need to postpone other scheduled meetings until he was more presentable.

“John?”

He hated how brittle it sounded.

“In the kitchen,” John replied, sounding coolly normal. “Putting away the shopping. They delivered it just now. Something you need?”

Sherlock grinned at the kindness, then sucked a breath as he repositioned himself. After what was surely too long a pause, he remembered to indicate in the negative. John appeared to offer his bent arm as a handhold.

“I went a bit mad ordering sweets; the kid made a joke about how it must be someone’s birthday. Anyway, I thought we might be entitled to cake for tea today. They only had German chocolate cake—in my defense, though, I did ask if they had one with cherry jam.”
Sherlock’s headache flared shocking blue-white behind his closed eyes and he inhaled sharply. “Did I . . . ask for that?” He had a vague memory of some mad list of desserts.

“You said you liked it. You were specific about the cherry jam.”

“My grandmother used to make a cake like that,” Sherlock explained, “When I was growing up. I wrecked one once, and my brothers were angrier than when I learned knots and tied together every shoe they both owned.”

John laughed. “You did that? What a—”


“I was going to say arsehole.”

“I was my mother’s pet, I admit.”

This drew another gentle laugh from John. “I believe it.”

Sherlock leaned to fetch his phone from the nightstand, and winced as his torso lit up with various protests.

“I’ll get you some more meds,” John said, matter-of-fact, and started toward the bath.

“No, I’d rather not.”

“I can see you’re in pain, Sherlock. You don’t need to be.”

“I have things to do.” Sherlock waved the phone in the air in front of his chest. “My schedule is going to be a wreck; I have appointments to reschedule; Molly must be at loose ends with nothing to do.”

John’s face was contorted in a way Sherlock did not like. Frowning. Incredulous?

“All of that can wait. I mean, it will. For you. You’ve got a few weeks’ recovery ahead of you, at least.”

“I can’t afford the luxury,” Sherlock told him, and a slight shake of his head both emphasized his point and caused the headache to sink its claws deeper. “I have to get back to work.”

“At least take a half-dose,” John said, and it was more offer than order, but still staunchly insistent.

“Maybe in a bit,” Sherlock allowed, though it was not his intention. “I’m used to it.” He turned his attention to his phone, texting Molly to please send a courier with a copy of Xie’s calendar, in the morning, so they could discuss rescheduling missed parties. Scrolling through his contact list, he highlighted the number of his tailor, with an intention to order a few suits and shirts, at least enough to get him through a full week. The tailor would either be delighted or devastated to learn he must remake Sherlock’s many, expensive suits—the entire collection now ruined, some almost certainly beyond repair. Sherlock was about to press “Call” when he noticed John had sunk down on the edge of the bed beside him, and was studying him with the now-familiar, puzzled expression. Sherlock let his hand drop onto his thigh. “Something wrong?”

“You’re used to it.”

Sherlock widened his eyes; it made his forehead ache in a different way.
“You just said you’re used to it? Pain.”

“Yes.”

“Not like this.” John swept a gesture from Sherlock’s head to his foot.

“Not...” Sherlock hadn’t even noticed himself saying it, so focused on the calls he needed to make.

“No, not like this.”

“I’m...” John shook his head.

Sherlock reached for his hand. “I know,” he said. He didn’t want to hear how sorry John was about what Sherlock had brought on himself by not walking away years before, the very first time he’d been knocked aside with the back of a hand. Sherlock didn’t deserve the sympathy. He petted John’s forearm a bit, then picked up his phone again. “Two calls—short ones—and then,” he began, back to business, for what else was there? “Would you help me in the bath?” He wondered if John was even willing to look at his nude body now that it was more ruined than ever, and an impulse welled up to remind John all this was only temporary, and while he’d still have scars—with a few new ones, at that—he wasn’t completely ruined. But, wasn’t he? Hadn’t he always been? Shoving it aside, Sherlock finished, “I can’t subject you to sleeping another night beside me if I don’t shower.”

“Right, what do we owe you?”

John fumbled for his IC to swipe payment for the package already tucked under his arm, as well as a gratuity for the courier, whose suit was so sharply cut and shirt so obviously expensive it seemed bizarre to even consider he might be living off tips.

“It’s taken care of, sir. Wish Mr Holmes the best from us, if you don’t mind.” The kid half-smiled and nodded in a mildly obsequious way John found disconcerting.

“Right,” he said, and waved a hand. “Thanks, then.”

Sherlock’s tea—two miniature caramelised onion tarts John had reheated per the instructions on the box, a slice of beautifully-oily looking bread spiked with needles of rosemary, and a tiny wedge of stilton—had been picked and nibbled at until it was about half-gone, which John rated satisfactory. They’d each drunk a fraction of a glass of Italian wine; John told Sherlock he was prescribing up to two glasses per day as needed for pain. The white saucer that had held a thin slice of the German chocolate cake bore nothing but a few crumbs and small smear of icing beneath the downturned fork. John was pleased, and couldn’t help smiling.

“Your tailor and...whoever else is there with him,” John began, wondering who the “us” actually was, “Send their regards.” He handed over the package—flat and pliable, wrapped in crisp brown paper and tied with white and blue twine—and Sherlock went right at the knot. “That was quick,” John observed. He removed the tray he’d used to serve the supper, couldn’t decide what to do with it, and eventually set it on the floor outside the door as if room service would be by later to pick it up.

“Baratunde is a wonder with the needle and chalk, but he’s also no fool. I explained I’m thinking of retooling my entire wardrobe and he caught his breath in a way that sounded downright lewd.”

“Phone sex with the tailor, is it?” John joked, and settled on the bed with one foot on the floor and the other leg bent and crossed in front of him. He caught the dragging end of the twine and began to
wind it around his fingers in a loose loop.

Sherlock let out a little sigh of a laugh that ended with, “Ow.” Peeling away the stiff paper revealed a bundle of stacked clothing: two sets of pyjamas pressed and folded into perfect squares with dangerously sharp edges; and a sapphire blue dressing gown of cotton so highly polished it looked like satin. “Ah. Lovely,” Sherlock commented, and quickly refolded the empty paper then tucked it into the slim vertical space between the bed and the nightstand. He liberated one pyjama shirt and held it up in front of him—John noticed he didn’t raise his arms very high—to have a better look. One set was bottle green, with a simple, upright “SH” in black thread on the pocket, and the one in Sherlock’s hands was cream-coloured with five pinstripes of various thicknesses in shades of ochre, grey, and brown. John imagined each set of pyjamas must have cost at least as much as a bottle of that excellent whisky he’d recently become so enamoured of, those nights in Xie’s salon.

“I’ll help you with those,” John offered. After a shower (John had helped him step in, then out, then gingerly towelled him off, assessing the healing of his various injuries—silently—as he went), Sherlock had settled into the bed without dressing, readily accepted John’s offered dose of pain relievers, and fallen straight to sleep, waking shortly before tea time and letting John sit him up in bed with the blankets pulled up under his arms. Of all the injuries tapestried across Sherlock’s body—raw-looking little burns, bruises of every size and shade, scrapes, small cuts—the ones John found most distressing were the all-too-obvious hand- and fingerprints. Sherlock had been held tight around the upper arm. He’d been slapped hard on one shoulder. His abdomen and thighs and forearms had been pinched. John’s jaw clenched each time he noticed the shadows of that monster’s hands lingering just beneath the surface of Sherlock’s skin.

Sherlock arranged the pyjama shirt over his chest and arms, as if to try it out. “Mm, in a bit.” He was noncommittal. Just the idea of Sherlock getting out of bed, of all that moving about, was a truly daunting prospect, certain to awaken every little agony and exhaust him.

“How is it?”

“If I stay absolutely still,” Sherlock replied, lips curving slightly upward, “It still hurts like hell everywhere.” He toyed with the shirt buttons, slipping one in and out of its buttonhole again and again. “The knee is the worst—well, both knees—and my back, here and there. But moving about makes it all much more intense.”

John made a sympathetic noise.

“And of course even without the bathroom mirror I’m acutely aware of the shameful state of my face.”

“How is it?”

“Hideous, then,” Sherlock corrected himself, and shook his head to cut off any further protest from John. “Honestly, I don’t know how you can bear to look at me. And I don’t mind telling you—” he cut himself off so quickly it was obvious he actually minded telling him—minded it very much. In a less sure voice he finished, “I spend most of my waking hours worrying if I’ll ever look like myself again. What do you think, Doctor?” His gaze was penetrating; he was really asking.

John folded his arms across his chest and sat up straighter. “There’s a very small chance your left eyelid might become lazy or droop a bit.” He hated saying the words, but from the very first,
Sherlock had made it clear not only was he intolerant of lies, but also that he could spot them readily and with great accuracy. “The scars on your lips where they’re stitched will be on the inside, but if the tissue hardens or thickens it’s possible the shape of your mouth could change a bit—only at rest, and no one but you would likely notice. The bruises will heal in time. Leave those scabs alone, where you’re scraped up, and you can avoid anything lingering there, as well. I suppose you could say it’s ‘lucky’ your nose wasn’t broken.”

John watched, waited, as Sherlock took this in.

“I know why you’re worried—ugly mug like mine gets a scar or a burn, it’s probably only an improvement—but you make a living with your face. I understand. If I thought there was anything worth worrying about, I’d tell you. Honestly, I would.”

Sherlock hummed. “I believe you would. Thank you for the reassurance. And your mug, as you say, is not ugly. Not in the least.”

“Oh?” John grinned and cocked an eyebrow. “You flirt.”

Sherlock actually looked slightly caught out; it was charming beyond description, and John shuffled closer to him.

“I’d like to check on those sutures, by the way,” John said, still grinning. “In your lip? If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Shall I open my mouth?” Sherlock smirked.

“Oh, yes.”

Sherlock poked his tongue at the sutures, which made his lower lip pout forward, then retreat. John slipped a hand against the headboard beside Sherlock’s head to steady himself, and kissed him. He was feeling affectionate, wanting to offer kindness and reassurance, and was surprised to find Sherlock delivering heat, his tongue insistent, his hand curving half-tight around the back of John’s neck to keep him close, keep him kissing. At last John drew back just enough to say into Sherlock’s barely-open mouth, “You’re all right?”

“Just stay with me,” Sherlock whispered, and pressed forward into another kiss. John nodded, hummed, gave himself permission to settle in and enjoy the moment, neither worrying for the future nor dwelling in the past. Sherlock was letting out occasional low hums, not quite moans, more commanding than needy. John shifted his body closer, their chests lightly touching with the pyjama shirt still between them. When Sherlock broke away, his breathing was audible through parted lips. “I’ll stay with you, too,” he said quietly, and Sherlock was nodding so John returned the nod, dipped in for a quick kiss, fell back again to await orders. Sherlock’s eyes were alight but not with lust or even mischief; John read determination on the angular, shadowed face. Before he could wonder what it meant, if it meant anything at all, Sherlock’s graceful, battered fingers reached across to his far shoulder and peeled away the pyjama shirt, discarding it over the edge of the bed.

There was a dotted, angry red ring-shaped mark on the skin stretched over Sherlock’s pectoral muscle that could only have been left there by teeth. John leaned to kiss it, as if he could undo it, cancel it, transform it. The mark would linger, of course, after he’d finished kissing, but John set himself a mission to tattoo over its cruelty with fervent worship. Sherlock sighed and cradled John’s head in his hand. John shifted, even as he kissed his way lower, to circle a pink nipple with the tip of his tongue, and he knelt beside Sherlock’s blanket-covered thigh. Long fingers languid in John’s hair, on John’s neck and shoulders and back, Sherlock sighed, and sighed, and sighed.
Do you imagine Ivor and Viv will rage at me if I tell them I’ve changed my vision for the Unity Day Ball ensemble?—SH

TEXT from Friday: Viv, maybe a bit. Ivor, definitely, he always plays to the back of the house.

Related—what do we think of feathers?—SH

TEXT from Friday: Probably lovely to look at, ticklish to wear, heartache to tidy up after.

Absolutely true; I gladly suffer for beauty; the heartache, dear Molly, is all yours.—SH

TEXT from Friday: All true enough!

Sherlock set his mobile on the mattress beside his thigh. It was nearly midnight and John—unashamedly naked; smelling earthy, low, delectable—was asleep, curved gently on his right side, breathing against Sherlock’s shoulder. Sherlock felt a bit smug about it: here was Captain Watson, who boasted at every opportunity about his monstrous insomnia, sated and lightly snoring, and still early—only the witching hour.

In contrast to their every other coupling—all fervid and grasping—given the myriad tender and sore places on Sherlock’s body, John had been gentle to the point of reverence, and Sherlock—through the force of will and the intoxication of pleasure smoothly layered over lingering agony—had stayed in his body throughout, which married a sense of victory to his smugness. John’s kisses, warm and kind. John’s touches, light as mist. The brush of John’s lips against the tips of Sherlock’s toes. Nips and sucks up the length of his leg, dipping low into the bend of his knee to nuzzle and exhale cool air against bruised skin. John’s sure hands guiding Sherlock’s thighs apart, and John’s murmurs, seeking confirmation: this all right?...still OK?...tell me if anything hurts you. Ridiculous, in a way—everything hurt him, endlessly, in ways he’d never imagined—but also compassionate, stunningly so, and Sherlock couldn’t help thinking he didn’t have to. He shouldn’t have.

John, working his way steadily up the length of Sherlock’s body, had skipped over the best bits, and Sherlock growled, then laughed. John laughed, then growled, and sucked gently at Sherlock’s throat, sprinkled kisses in patterns Sherlock recognised but refused to name. John had wasted hours, entire nights, at least a week, making love to Sherlock’s nipples until Sherlock was frantic, clutching John’s shoulders tight enough to leave marks (leaving no marks). John hummed satisfaction and licked him there again, and then once more, and then one last time before nuzzling in against Sherlock’s belly and affirming aloud, sounding ludicrously pleased, Sherlock’s neatly—apparently pleasingly—inverted navel.

John’s fingertips through the trail of dark hair. John’s nose and closed lips and dragging cheek and jutting chin. John’s hands on Sherlock’s hips, holding him still and soft. John hushing him, telling him to be still, just lie back, close your eyes if you like, here hold my hand, that’s right, god you’re beautiful, relax and let me...John’s kisses...perfect...John’s mouth...yes, just let me, mmm... Behind his closed eyes, Sherlock saw the beautiful crystalline shatter of light cast by the chandelier in Xie’s dressing room—it flared and receded, flared again, then flickered out—and as he caught his breath, John whispered nonsense, opened his own trousers, rested his head on Sherlock’s pillow. No, nevermind me, just—will you just—I want to hear your voice. Just talk, please, and let me—ahh—listen.

Sherlock had stayed with John, and in his haze he talked and talked, talked right up to the edge, yes,
John, yes, yes. . . John, I . . .

Sherlock had caught himself just as he began to fall, and anyway by the end John likely hadn’t been listening terribly closely. It didn’t matter.

His phone vibrated against his thigh, two quick pulsing buzzes.

TEXT from Friday: Oh, god, is this your way of telling me **I** have to deliver this news to Ivor and Viv?

If you don’t mind.—SH

TEXT from Friday: Good night, Sherlock. xxx
In Chapter 32, Sherlock flushed his wedding ring; and allowed John to feed him up on sliced apples with honey and jam, and German chocolate cake. Sherlock started reaching out to business contacts such as his tailor and his "girl Friday"; and John reenacted his phone-sex fantasy from early in their courtship, "gentle to the point of reverence."

To John’s surprise, he was largely content to be locked up in a three room prison with a semi-invalid Sherlock. In the immediate wake of his release from hospital, John had been in crisis mode—serving as primary caregiver for one so grievously injured—but Captain John Watson, army surgeon, thrived in crisis mode. Crisis mode was his second home. He was focused grace under pressure, unwavering courage in the face of danger, and coolly logical when everything around him was going to shit. Keeping vigilant and alert while simultaneously managing a dozen disparate duties was as familiar and comfortable to him as his only pair of shoes; all that was missing was a half-dozen grunts to whom he could bark orders. As the days rolled on, and Sherlock’s physical recovery was matched by his obvious determination to get on with things—refusing (or at least delaying) pain medication, insisting that he must get out of bed and hobble on his splinted knee around the flat every hour or two, making his calls, exchanging endless texts regarding goings-on at the Icehouse in his absence—John began to feel a bit comfortable. Despite the hovering threat of Jim Moriarty almost certainly close at hand, acquainted with Gugu Kriel, and threatening to catch up to Sherlock eventually; and the fact John was already treading water—as it were—with Deep Sea, with only time to tell whether he’d swim or drown, he felt secure there in the cramped flat behind locked doors, with his gun near to hand and a handsome man knitting himself back together in John’s very good bed.

Naturally, that peace of mind was doomed to destruction.

TEXT from The Mentor: James Moriarty has recently been in contact with the Ministry of Culture about resuming his duties. Gugu Kriel’s handler reports she checked out of the Excelsior Hotel this morning.

TEXT from Greg Lestrade: Free for a pint in the next day or two? You know Moriarty’s back in his office? Door’s locked all the time. Cowardly piece of shit.

John had been in the midst of washing up he’d neglected for the previous four meals when the texts came, almost simultaneously. He half-dried his hands on the sides of his trousers and made for the bedroom, and despite the fact nothing had actually changed within the walls of 221B Baker Street, John felt as if he’d been activated, given a directive, and he marched straight for his weapon.

Sherlock, who John had left dozing an hour earlier after a half-dose of pain meds following one of his thrice-daily tours of the flat, was semi-upright. He thrust his mobile at John and said, “Look at this.”

Grimly accepting the proffered phone, John glanced at its tiny backlit screen.

TEXT from IcehouseAdmin: I’m home, sweetheart. What time shall I expect you?
John slapped it face down on the table beside the bed.

“You all right?” he asked, and beneath his skin, his veins filled up with a desperate, instinctual throb: *Gun*. He resisted, held his ground, though his eyes flicked to the other side of the bed, the closed drawer.

Sherlock nodded. When he spoke, his tone was of resignation: “I knew he couldn’t stay away. Wouldn’t.”

“He doesn’t know you’re here,” John droned, hardly reassuring. “He doesn’t even know this place exists.” He barely had room for it in his head, which was screaming, *Gun, Gun, Gun*, and he rounded the foot of the bed and slammed open the drawer. The second his fingers closed around the grip, he felt like himself again. With steady movements, he checked the clip, the safety, ran his fingertips along the top of the barrel just to sense the smooth solidity of the thing. He let it rest in the hand dangling at his side as he retrieved his holster. John slowly became aware of Sherlock watching him, and he felt explanations and reassurances bubbling up from his gut, crowding along the length of his tongue, but kept about his business, kept his mouth shut. Once the gun was secure in its cradle against his ribs, he turned his gaze to Sherlock’s intently watchful face.

Sherlock’s eyebrows edged up. John’s chin jutted down.

“It’s safe here,” John said, and believed it, but he felt infinitely better with his pistol close by, where it belonged. Sherlock nodded and made motions to get out from under the blankets. In a more normal tone of voice, John offered, “Let me help.”

“I’m fine.” With some effort, Sherlock got himself out of bed, smoothed the sheet and quilts and coverlet neatly into place, fluffed a few pillows, and sat again. John slid one of his own pillows under Sherlock’s knees, then settled on the edge of the bed and stroked Sherlock’s shin through the soft cotton of his new loungewear.

“Greg Lestrade texted me,” John said. “He says Jim’s locked up in his office; probably for the best as Greg clearly doesn’t feel terribly forgiving toward him.”

“I don’t want—” Sherlock looked mildly panicked.

“I know. No one’s out for him, I promise. But if you want to get back to the Icehouse, one way or the other he’s got to go. And far. And for good.” John heard his own overbearing tone and knew he should attempt to rein it in but his rage had been pried loose and was avalanching. “Lestrade’s a solid bloke, and feels pretty intensely about the lines between right and wrong.”

Sherlock hummed flatly and slow-rolled his eyes as he looked away, toward his mobile, which he started to reach for but left.

“Listen,” John said, and his tone softened—*just us two*—and he waited for Sherlock to meet his gaze before he went on. “I know you want to get back to work. But you must realise. . .don’t you? You can’t possibly go back until he’s. . .” John sighed hard and quick through his nose, quickly shuffling phrases about in his head. “Until we’re sure there’s no threat of harm.”

Sherlock smoothed the hem of his pyjama shirt with both hands—a needless, elegant motion that reminded John strongly of Xie—and squared his shoulders. “Our marriage is over; that’s clear. But I think, so long as we keep things professional—”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’ll just arrange it so we’re never alone together. Do you realise how many people there are in the
Icehouse at any given time? Outside our flat, we were never in the company of fewer than half a dozen other people. Ever. Not even for a minute.”

“Sherlock, listen to yourself.”

“It’s not as if he’s going to harm me in public. He never has. In all these years, never once.”

Sherlock’s tone was matter-of-fact, almost dismissive. In a knee brace, with a likely head injury and a purple, pummeled face, dressed in pyjamas in the middle of the afternoon, Sherlock raised his chin and said with quiet defiance, “I won’t let him touch me again.”

John couldn’t keep from shaking his head; Sherlock was deluding himself.

“You wrote your will!” he blurted. “Of course he’ll touch you again. You know he will. And he won’t stop until you’re dead, and you know that, too. There’s no way you can think you’re going back there to be—what?—his colleague. His business partner? Can’t happen. It’s impossible.”

Sherlock’s arms were folded across his middle. His eyes narrowed. “How do you know I wrote my will?”

John deflated. He scrubbed his hands over his face and admitted, “When you were gone—I thought you left because you wanted to leave—I packed your things. I was angry.” He looked up, trying to read Sherlock’s expression, which was somewhere between accusatory and merely inquiring. After a moment, he ventured with a self-protective half-smile, “Who wouldn’t look in an envelope someone scrawled Important on in huge black letters? It may as well have said Drink Me.”

Sherlock rolled one hand vaguely through the air. “I suppose that’s true. I forgive you.” He sounded as deflated as John felt. They were both back to themselves; the tension had seeped away.

“I’m sorry.”

“I already said I forgive you.”

John rested his hand on Sherlock’s thigh, gently, not knowing exactly what tender spot might be lingering beneath the weight of his palm. “That drasha family tree is impressive. I read every page.”

Sherlock tilted his head, looked amused. “Did you.”

“Every name,” John assured. “It’s amazing you’re able to keep up with so many, some so far away who you probably never even met.” Sherlock’s icy countenance was melting into something much warmer, sun-kissed. John thought he’d never met another person so susceptible to even the mildest praise as Sherlock Holmes; the moment reminded John of a time when he’d mentioned seeing Xie on posters in Russia, and how Xie had delighted in even the scant details John related about them. In honesty, without intent to manipulate, John added, “It was a privilege to see it. I felt like I understood something about you that I hadn’t before.”

“Oh?” Sherlock inquired, eyebrows rising and with a slight shrug as if he really didn’t mind whether or not John went on, when it was painfully clear he was desperate to hear more. John took his hand, turned it over and gently massaged the palm with his thumb.

“I mean, I knew you’d created the whole thing—but to know you’re so meticulous about keeping its history, and in that letter—” He didn’t say “will” again, purposely. “You were so specific about what you wanted to happen to the salon and the Icehouse—and your legacy—naming Molly to be the one to carry on, and all that. I think I know now what it all means to you. The weight of it. It’s not just your job, and it’s not just an idea you had and shared; it’s your life’s work. You have purpose and meaning from it, in a way that most people don’t have from anything they do, or create.”
John looked inquiringly at Sherlock and found he’d closed his eyes—whether from John’s thumb working against the palm of his hand, or from hearing what John had to say, he couldn’t be sure—but after a moment he lazily opened them, and smiled a bit. “You do understand something about me, then,” Sherlock confirmed.

“Do you have a favourite?” John asked slyly, grinning.

“I’m not allowed to have favourites,” Sherlock answered, and his grin matched John’s. “They’re all my favourite. They’re all perfect and wonderful.”

“I’m sure,” John agreed. He felt the earlier tension draining out of his shoulders and neck, down his spine, as he went on massaging Sherlock’s hand. “If I were asking, though, whose salon I should visit, in my ranging and frequent world travels...any recommendations?”

Despite his assertion of having no favourite, Sherlock’s reply was decisive and immediate. “Silke. She’s at the Paramount, here in London, which has a 1970s theme; perhaps you’re familiar?”

John shook his head. “I’d never been in a drasha salon before that night I made a fool of myself.”

“What, never?” Sherlock’s expression was a blend of disbelief and personal offence.

John shrugged a little helplessly.

“She’s absolutely delightful. Willowy and blonde—Swedish—with an astonishing voice. She sings torch songs that break hearts with half a phrase. She has a penchant for décor, as well, and her salon manages clean angularity while still feeling inviting and intimate. Her parties are boozy without being rowdy, and she moves through a room with such self-possession it borders on intimidation—yet never crosses that line. She’s like ice, but the sort that fills a rocks glass, not the sort that causes mountaintop disasters.”

“You attend parties in other salons? As a guest?” This had not occurred to John.

“Every now and then, by invitation, and generally only with the most senior drashas. Miel has a special place in my heart. He came begging apprenticeship very early—the current, high-rise Icehouse was still under construction—and he was so timid I turned him away repeatedly. But he wouldn’t go away! He behaved as if he was my apprentice...really, as if he was already a drasha in his own salon. He prefers a very traditionally cut kimono, but his choices of colour and texture were always astonishingly creative. He brought clothes and jewelry to show off to me—never looking for my approval, only sharing his vision—and drew a floor plan of the salon he dreamed of, and held out his wrist for me to smell the delicate perfume oils he custom-blended. Before I knew it, he was serving tea to my guests with his white-painted face, always smiling, and with the most startling, golden eyes. That’s where the name came from—it’s the Spanish word for honey. His timidity, it turned out, was merely an exceptional calm. His parties are almost exclusively teas, often completely silent, meditative, gentle, so incredibly soothing it’s like being rocked in a cradle. He never wastes a word, or a movement, and he exudes kindness. His eyes always smile. He strikes me as a highly-evolved person; if there is such a thing as reincarnation, he must be on the very cusp of Nirvana.”

“You’ll have to take me along with you next time,” John suggested.

“I’d like that.”

Sherlock’s phone vibrated and pinged, begging for his attention. He ignored it.

“You should write this down—more than just that family tree you made. The stories.”
“Hmm. . .” Sherlock looked as if he was considering it. “I haven’t got the time, though, for a project like that. Maybe someday.”

“Something to do for a few weeks while you get well,” John offered.

“I haven’t got weeks to get well,” came the reply, with a dismissive wave of one hand. John rose, with an intention to check the locks, draw all the drapes, then go back to the washing up. It seemed Sherlock was determined to get back to the Icehouse, Jim Moriarty or no, and since it was clearly impossible for Sherlock to coexist with him, John was going to have to sort something—and apparently, he did not have weeks in which to do it. Sherlock’s phone went again, and John picked it up on his way out of the bedroom, passed it without looking to Sherlock, who glanced at the new messages and passed it back.

TEXT from IcehouseAdmin: I’m having the flat cleaned so I’ll be in suite 7C. Time to come home, sweetheart.

TEXT from IcehouseAdmin: I’ve got a lovely present for you, by the way. Don’t make me sleep alone.

“Can you block it?” John asked.

“I’ll just ignore them.”

John thought Sherlock sounded like a career drunk asserting that he’d have just a belt or two then call it a night. John remembered his grandmother once telling his mum you can’t expect anything to change if you keep letting him treat you that way, and his mum replying that she had it all in hand. He felt crackly and cold beneath the skin. He wanted to press further: you really mustn’t reply; he beat you nearly to death not a week ago please just let me shoot him in the eye, Sherlock; I can’t bear to go through this again because I—

“Do you have a pad of paper and a pencil? I need to sketch something and have it couriered to Savile Row before the designers I’ve commissioned for the Unity Day Ball make up the utterly wrong thing, at great expense to me.”

His reverie broken, John replied. “There was a pad and some pencils in your suitcase, I think?” He’d have to keep an eye on the situation of Moriarty contacting Sherlock, but for the moment left it aside as Sherlock seemed to feel the matter was settled.

“Ah, you’re right! Just the thing.” Sherlock made to rise, and John waved him back as he went to retrieve Sherlock’s art supplies.

Unzipping the bag, John offered, “There’s still a bit of the chocolate cake left.”

“Very tempting,” Sherlock replied. “Maybe in an hour or so, after I’ve got this sketch done. You’ll join me?” He sounded strangely tentative about the invitation, as if he actually expected John might refuse.

“Of course.” With a smile he hoped was reassuring, John delivered the notebook of grid paper and the flat, square box of pencils. He dropped a kiss on Sherlock’s temple. “I’m going to finish with the mess in the kitchen; I’ll leave you to it.”

As he waited for hot water, John’s phone jittered to life in the breast pocket of his shirt.

“Gugu Kriel has just taken up temporary residence at the Icehouse.”
John held the phone flat against his chest and hissed under his breath, “Of course. Of course she fucking did!” He crossed the flat to the far side of the lounge, to be distant from Sherlock and perhaps not be overheard.

“I am inclined to find this at least mildly interesting, given your insistence upon knowing her whereabouts, and your current assignment. You wouldn’t be involved in extra-curricular activity outside the scope of your Unity contract, would you, Captain?”

“I’m hurt. You know I think of us as exclusive,” John said in a voice a half-step quieter than usual.

“That’s the last I’m willing to relay.”

“It’s all I needed to know, anyway.”

“As for your actual assignment, Captain Watson, I do expect to hear progress has been made, and soon. Tempus fugit.”

“Yeah, I get it. You’ll just have to trust me.”

“Oh, Captain, would that I could. But there is not a single person in my sphere who I can trust even to hold a door open long enough for me to pass through; I must always assume the free hand holds a knife, destined to be planted in my back.”

“You need to move to a better class of sphere.”

“You’ll phone me if anything in your neck of the woods comes on the market.”

Once they’d rung off, John stood at attention, tight-shouldered, firm-chinned, feet planted so that he was immovable as a tree. His breathing was slow and deep. His palms were dry. The most impossible thing in the universe just then was that he could remain still and unmoving, though; he was as sure of it as he was of his own breath. Sherlock was safe, but he was a prisoner; Sherlock had these three rooms, and Moriarty—that monster—had the rest of the world. John would reclaim the world for Sherlock, who deserved to live in it, own it, drive it mad with pleasure. He would; he must.

Just the once, he allowed himself the indulgence of a tiny lie.

“Hey,” he said, leaning around the bedroom door frame with just his head and shoulder. “I’m going to run out for a few things—wine. . .and you know? I could really go for a beer. . .” he laughed to punctuate it. “Paracetamol. And I was thinking I’d fry us up a good breakfast in the morning, so I’ll get some eggs? Tomatoes?”

Sherlock, frowning at his hand as the pencil flew across the page of the sketchbook folded on his lap, barely looked up. “Lovely.”

“I’ll lock the doors, and I’ve got my phone. The landlady would probably be happy to come up and keep you company, if you like.”

“No, no. I’m fine. You won’t be gone long, though.” It was obvious from the way his hand slowed and his shoulders rose that Sherlock wanted to be reassured without actually asking for reassurance.

“But at all.” John drummed his fingers on the door frame. Sherlock’s profile was a thing of beauty, even painted as it was then in all the wrong colours. “Back in no time.”

“Mmm,” Sherlock hummed around a blue pencil he’d stuck between his teeth while he used a green. “All right. Maybe chocolate biscuits if you can find some?”
“Your wish is my command.” John took a last look at him, imagined lying down with him later, in the dark, certain he was safe not just there in the little flat, but anywhere he chose to be. That, undoubtedly, was worth a white lie. He ducked away from the bedroom door, grabbed his coat off the hall tree, patted his holster as he turned to lock the door behind him.

The rickshaw puller had been gasping after double-timing all the way to the Icehouse and John made sure he saw John swipe him exorbitant compensation for his trouble, then marched past the doormen on the pavement and through the revolving door big as the flat’s sitting room. He found the right bank of lifts and punched the button, eyes scanning one hundred and eighty degrees as he waited with his back to the lift doors. A cigarette girl passed, her heels tapping metallic against the marble floor, her lips painted in extreme angles like an arrow pointing at her cleavage. She smelled of rose perfume and someone’s spilled vodka cocktail. The lift doors opened and John stepped inside, pressed the “7” and cleared his throat, licked his lips, flicked his fingers through his fringe when he caught his reflection in the polished metal of the doors.

Having imagined he would have to bluff his way into suite 7C, John was mildly thrown when his three thuds with the knocker were met with a door swung wide by Jim Moriarty himself, dressed in a black suit with his necktie and highest shirt buttons tugged loose. There was smear of red beside his mouth, and as he let go a sarcastic, half-laughing, “Oh, no, it’s you!” his breath was stained with the juniper-laced reek of gin.

John stepped into the little entryway, forcing Moriarty backward. John kicked the door shut. Around the corner—not three strides—and there on an overstuffed, extra wide armchair, with her lipstick partly worn off and smoothing her skirt back in place down her thighs was none other than the crazy one with the knives—Gugu Kriel, the Lamia—with her knife in its garter-belt sheath lying just out of her reach on a glass-topped table. Her face contorted into a patently false, kittenish expression, licking her lips and batting her eyes.

“How do you figure?” John played along with the Lamia instead, ignoring Jim but keeping him in
sight. He side-stepped, on his way to picking up the whisky.

“You’re not going to like me anymore, after I cut off your girlfriend’s prick and stuff it in the slit I cut in her throat.”

In the time it took him to say, “I don’t like you now,” John had liberated his pistol, straightened his arm, and put a bullet through the Lamia’s left eye. Her head lolled heavily and her body followed into a facedown slump on the floor half-under the glass table.

He turned the gun on Moriarty, who looked mildly surprised, but still not fearful.

“You two didn’t get along, then?” He shook his head. “That’s a mess it’s going to take some poor chambermaid just hours to clean up.” He reached, and offered the glass of whisky to John, who did not reach for it, refused to engage, kept silent, kept a steady aim at Moriarty’s face. “You didn’t come here to kill me or I’d already be dead. Isn’t that right?”

“You’re going to pack your designer bags and fuck off somewhere,” John told him evenly, “Or—yes—I fucking will kill you.”

“She wouldn’t like that.” Moriarty rose to stand and John tracked him with the gun. “Oh, now. You can put your big cock back in your trousers, soldier; nobody’s impressed.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” John sneered. “Look at Ms Kriel. Knocked her right out.”

“I’ll say,” Moriarty said, with an expansive eye roll. He shook his finger at John, “You interrupted just before we got to the good part; now I’m going to have to call up one of these drashas to open her kimono for me.”

“They’re not whores,” John said automatically.

Moriarty snorted. “She told you that? So naïve. So sweet. Our girl.”

“Back to the point: you’re going.”

Moriarty looked theatrically skeptical. John had a bright vision of smashing his nose with the gunbutt, the crack that would echo, the soft thud, the hot bubbling blood that would stream down onto Moriarty’s clean shirt front. “Not going anywhere, actually. I made this place. It’s mine. And it’s taken me years to set it up to dump curr in my accounts by the bucketload. You say they’re not whores, soldier, but that’s exactly the dirty little secret we keep from Her Majesty The Queen.”

John shook his head. “Nope. Sherlock wouldn’t allow it.”

“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

“Say ‘she’ again and see what happens.”

“What? You’ll shoot me? Go ahead.” Moriarty lifted his chin, challenging. “Didn’t I say you wouldn’t?” He stepped around the back of the sofa, picked up a small bottle of gin and spun the metal cap to open it. He took a long swig, grimaced as he swallowed, then grinned. “Between the slags upstairs and these deluded revolutionaries—” he made quote marks in the air with his fingers, even as he clutched the bottle “—I’ve set myself up quite spiffily, you see, John—can I call you John?—because there’s always customers when there’s sex for sale. I mean, you know. You must. How much did you spend to get yourself fucked and sucked into oblivion when you came out of the army? Half your allotment, probably. Like all our brave men in uniform. Why not, you’ve earned it.”
John imagined wrapping his hands around the short, pink neck, leaving fingerprints that would linger as his thumbs squeezed shut Moriarty’s wind pipe. He lowered the pistol to hang in his curled fist by his side, and stood his ground, listening.

“And now I’ve got this curr flowing in from these clowns who think they’re going to massacre all the vlast politicos and their wives and babies, running it through the legal wash, as it were, before it gets spit out the other side. You wouldn’t believe the commissions on those transactions. And all I have to do is take payment in this hand—” he raised his right hand and closed his fist “—swipe away my cut, then pass it along from this hand.” He made a throwing motion with his left. “If you think I’m giving up all that, you don’t know me all that well.” Moriarty smoothed a hand through his hair. “Though you do, actually, probably know me fairly intimately. I’m sure you know by now how I like my cock sucked, and how I like to get off with her pretty hand. Taught her everything she knows, didn’t I?”

John would throw him off the balcony if he didn’t worry some poor sod might get killed breaking his fall.

“Where’s the money go?” John asked; he’d nothing to lose by it, and Moriarty was clearly in a talkative mood, but Moriarty only shrugged, dismissing it.

“Dunno. Don’t care.”

“You can run those games anywhere. You’re moving on,” John insisted.

“I’m not. And I’m going to have my husband back.”

“You don’t want him; you nearly killed him.”

“A misunderstanding,” Moriarty said, brushing it aside.

“I’ll make you understand what it feels like to take a furious beating,” John threatened, and damn, but he wanted to. He was dying to. “I’ll make you understand what it feels like when your bones break. I’ll make you understand what it feels like to be in pain and afraid.” He was hissing through clenched teeth by the time he’d finished, and he was coiled to spring.

Moriarty shook his head, and his shoulders rose in a slow motion shrug, even as he took a step closer to John. “I already know all that. I already know. I’ve seen it on her face.”

John was on him instantly, shoving him backward, pinning him to the sofa with a heavy knee and a forearm across his throat. He reared back and punched the beady-eyed rat’s face, felt the jaw grind sideways. Sherlock would forgive him. He’d have to forgive him.

“Request permission to terminate James Moriarty, administrator of the Icehouse,” he snarled into the mobile he’d fumbled from his coat while Moriarty lay dazed in the wake of John’s heavy roundhouse.

As John spoke, Moriarty unfurled a knowing smirk. Infuriated anew, John backhanded him across the face with the hand gripping the gun, then shoved the muzzle up against the inner corner of his eye.

“The Mentor’s voice was firm, nearly shouting. “Permission denied!”

“Request permission to terminate James Moriarty!”

“Permission denied, Captain. You will stand down.”
“Request immediate permission—”

The Mentor’s voice was as near a shout as John had ever heard. “Stand _down_ or you will be subject to termination.”

John shoved his phone back in his coat, growling out a shout of frustration. Moriarty carried on smirking even with the red imprint of John’s gun muzzle on the skin of his nose and eyelid.

“Told you not to, didn’t he?”

John smashed the gun butt against Moriarty’s nose, and the wet, sharp sound of it as it broke was even better than he’d imagined.

Moriarty moaned and writhed on the sofa as John thrust himself back to his feet. “You’re going, one way or another,” John promised, and holstered his gun. He raised his knee as high as he could get it, and stomped his foot down on Moriarty’s gut. “You’re fucking _going._”

Sherlock was asleep on top of the blankets when John returned, with his notebook and pencils stacked with squared-up corners on the night stand beside him. John untucked the blankets from his side of the bed, folded them over Sherlock’s loose, warm body, and rather than risk waking Sherlock with his endless tossing and turning, went to spend a sleepless night on the sofa with the dregs of his bottle of only passable whisky.
In chapter 33, Sherlock asserted his desire to return to Xie’s salon at the Icehouse as soon as possible, even as Jim returned to it and began sending texts that made it clear he wanted Sherlock home. John confronted Moriarty and the Lamia at the Icehouse.

“They’re using the Icehouse to launder money through Moriarty and his off-the-books prostitution racket, and as a base of operations. Lestrade’s got an office there that’s not set up for any kind of surveillance; not even a window.”

John had already been talking for about ten minutes and the Mentor hadn’t given the slightest impression he even remembered the previous night’s rather heated exchange as John pressed the muzzle of his gun against James Moriarty’s eyeball and the Mentor threatened to have John taken out if he didn’t stand down. John couldn’t wait any longer for him to bring it up, as it seemed he may never do so.

“Explain to me why Moriarty’s off the table,” John demanded. “When I reported weeks ago I thought he must be in this thing, you waved it off—said none of the intel pointed that way. You acted like it was the first time you’d ever heard his name, for fuck’s sake, and now he’s too valuable for me to put a well-deserved end to?”

The Mentor rolled his watch chain between thumb and finger and he narrowed his eyes at John in a way that suggested he had, in the past, used this slit-eyed stare to intimidate people sitting in the button-tufted leather armchair John currently occupied. John was not intimidated, only held the Mentor’s gaze and waited for an answer. At last the Mentor flicked his hand through the air dismissively and said, “He’s an asset.”

“Yeah,” John said skeptically, twisting his mouth, “That’s not enough for me, actually.”

The Mentor looked mildly exasperated. “Drasha salons that double as brothels are, as you know, illegal—prostitution is regulated to ensure everything from Unity’s percentage of income, to wage controls, to preserving public health—yet there is a rampant black market. Moriarty is an informant on others, like him, who manage these black market sex rings.”

“So he’s a snitch.”

“He also provides information which has several times prevented sensitive situations from becoming public scandals when certain customers have been caught in compromising positions.”

“And a blackmailer. The guy’s a fucking prince, isn’t he? No wonder you’re protecting him.”

“It’s nothing to do with me,” the Mentor defended casually. “You know my primary job is facilitating contract work like yours. That said, there are certain, shall we say, fortunately placed assets who are clearly identified, so that in the unfortunate event one of these assets is threatened, Unity can intervene to assure the threat is eliminated.” The Mentor gave a small, tight, and obviously false grin that gave John to know further discussion of the subject was unwelcome.
“I imagine your clean-up crew took care of the Lamia by now,” John offered.

A different, equally false smile from the Mentor framed his reply. “I don’t handle the Lamia. But yes, her handler arranged for her remains to be returned to her next of kin. How unfortunate an accident, to befall a woman so young.”

John grunted a laugh. “Yeah,” he muttered, “I was shocked when I heard. Cried my eyes out.”

There was a ridiculously ornate, enormous grandfather clock in the corner of the room John couldn’t stop checking the time on. He’d promised not to leave Sherlock alone in the flat for more than three hours, and he didn’t have much time left to keep his promise.

The Mentor, who John noticed was not taking notes, redirected the conversation by asking, “Did you get an impression about Lestrade’s rank in the organization?”

“He said he’s essentially a general. Big man. The plan wasn’t his, but he’s directing it. Turns out he was in communication with that missing army squad all those years ago. The legends are true: they vanished into the South American jungle and emerged elsewhere as the first cells of the modern Deep Sea movement.”

“It’s actually rather elegant,” the Mentor allowed, “Simple movement of currency through an already-established organised crime syndicate affiliated with a lucrative house of repose—where income fluctuates but is generally high relative to other entities. There are few other establishments that could absorb the amount of curr Deep Sea must be infusing, without someone sending up a flag that things are amiss.”

John grunted an allowance that what the Mentor said was probably true.

“Obviously there are rumours, and our intelligence division has vaguely outlined what they can surmise about the plot that’s afoot, but did Lestrade detail specifics?”

“They’re whipping up ‘shlost folk with the pirate radio broadcasts, secret meetings, leaflets, all the usual insurgency tactics,” John reported. “Aiming for a genocide. Anyone who’s carrying an IC saying they’re vlast is going to be killed on the spot and in the end—somehow—Deep Sea will get control of the government. They want true fiscal equality—no more oligarchy—judicial reform, new policies in the Americas, and to eliminate the population controls.”

“How quaint.” The Mentor gave a pinched, sarcastic smile.

“So they’re building up arms caches, and on Unity Day, it all kicks off.” John brought his closed fists together in front of his chin, then exploded his fingers outward with a loud puff of breath.

The Mentor frowned. “I’m glad to see you’re taking this seriously.”

“I can barely get my head around it,” John admitted, “But I don’t doubt for a second it’s real. I’m in for half a million on Unity’s behalf, by the way.”

“Half a million?” The Mentor sounded grouchy.

“It seemed like a believable amount if I’d been hoarding overage, but still impressive enough to make Lestrade think I was serious. I doubt he’d have been so free with information, otherwise.”

“Arms caches?” The Mentor prompted.

“From America, guns,” John said blandly, “And from Africa, machetes.”
The Mentor went stone still for a long moment. John rolled the fingers of his left hand. He checked the clock again.

“That’s everything he told me. Can I go?” John rose from his chair.

“One last thing, Captain. I’m sure you can anticipate what I’m going to say.” The Mentor sat back a bit in his chair and looked pointedly at John. He drummed his fingers once, lightly, on his desktop.

“Aww, no. . .” John protested, and waved his hands in front of his chest.

“Remuneration will be exceptionally generous.”

“Not me, though. Come on. He’s my mate.”

“He is a criminal, a traitor, and a threat to every citizen of the Unified Territories. This plot, if successful, sheds the blood of millions, and risks anarchy. You said he’s the general.”

“Yeah, I know, I mean, he says he is, but. . .” John ran a quick scan of his earlier meeting with Lestrade; he’d seemed sincere, passionate, determined. John did not want to believe that the only friend he’d had in a dozen years was bent on mass murder, but how well did he know Lestrade, really? There was the bit with his son being stolen from him, and the resentment of Unity he’d started simmering during his army days. . .John was sure there must be something he’d missed, or taken the wrong way. The plan was insane, and Lestrade seemed so normal. Well, not entirely normal, but at least normal in the way John was normal. John, a dangerous liar with a gun. Damn.

“If not you, I’ll assign another contractor,” the Mentor told him. “But you’re uniquely placed, with easy access and under no suspicion. For you. . . easy.”

John folded his arms across his chest. “It will not be fucking easy. I just told you, I like the guy.”

“Give me your decision; I can see you’re in a hurry to leave.” The Mentor cocked an eyebrow, stared.

John pursed his lips and then bit them. He didn’t want the job. But if he accepted it, maybe he could put it off a bit, find a way to put a spanner in the works. Or persuade Lestrade away from the whole mad situation—maybe through Molly. If the Mentor assigned someone else, someone who didn’t know the details and didn’t know him, Lestrade would likely be dead in a day. If John couldn’t divert him, at least he could buy Lestrade some time.

A headache gathered behind the middle of John’s forehead.

“Yeah, all right.”

Sherlock had reassembled the harmonious-but-mismatched tea service and was steeping tea in the yellow tea pot. Hot jolts of pain in his knees and ankles as he hobbled about did not deter him from a busy turn about the little kitchen; he needed the distraction to prevent him constantly checking the time. John had been gone nearly three hours, and Sherlock was beginning to feel three hours was the outside border of his tolerance for being left alone. John had handed off Sherlock’s sketches to a courier at the downstairs door then left; shortly thereafter, Sherlock got a call from a very irate couturier, who then passed the phone to his slightly more compassionate partner so that Sherlock could elaborate on his new design for Xie’s Unity Day Ball ensemble.
The discussion had eaten up the better part of an hour, and then Sherlock had spent time rifling around in the bathroom to locate rudimentary tools with which to trim and file his fingernails; his most recent missed appointment at the barber would have included attention to his hands and feet and although they had offered to send someone to him, Sherlock didn’t feel their discretion was completely assured and had declined the offer. He made do with an imprecise nipper and an ancient but serviceable metal file. Once that was done, he shaved his face, and found some rather good moisturizing cream—certainly not John’s; someone before him must have left it, maybe that Ms Kriel—in the back of the cabinet that he took time applying to his hands, elbows, and neck. It smelled of lavender, and the familiar motions soothed him into a sort of lull, with the comforting notion he would soon be back in Xie’s dressing room, making similar motions at the start of a transformation. Sherlock reminded himself to check with Molly about having the rug replaced.

He was giving the tea bags a final stir before removing them when the door lock turned. Sherlock jumped, and the spoon clanged unpleasantly against the side of the tea pot. A quick side step and his hand reached for the handle of a drawer he knew was full of knives.

“Ah, you’re up.”

Sherlock hummed affirmation and made sure the handles of the tea cups were properly aligned.

“I had a pint with Greg Lestrade; he and Molly send their best wishes.” John hung his coat, then tried to nudge his way in beside Sherlock. “You shouldn’t be too long on your feet. Let me. . .”

“Not at all, it’s nearly done. Have a seat,” Sherlock invited, and gestured at the kitchen table. “Did you find any chocolate biscuits last night? I forgot to ask.”

John was momentarily confused; the previous night had been spent eliminating the Lamia and breaking Jim Moriarty’s nose. He schooled his expression when he remembered he’d told Sherlock he was going out to the shops for provisions.

“Oh. . .no. Afraid not,” he grinned, and Sherlock turned slowly, limping in a tight spiral, holding the tea tray. “Please let me help. You shouldn’t be carrying something so heavy with that forearm fracture.”

Sherlock ignored him, set the tray on the table and lifted the pot to pour.

“At least sit down,” John urged.

Sherlock shook his head a bit and finished pouring, wiped the spout with a neatly folded kitchen towel before setting it down. “Sugar or honey?” he offered, lifting John’s saucer and placing it before him, spinning it just a bit until it was parallel to John’s chest.

“Sugar, but it’s fine, I can—” He reached for the little improvised sugar bowl; Sherlock’s elegant hand touched his and gently pushed it away.

“You enjoyed passing time with Greg?” Sherlock asked—a carefully constructed inquiry which engaged John yet demanded no details. John had given no indication he’d follow his pub-date with a meeting in the Mentor’s wood paneled office. Nor, indeed, had John ever mentioned the Mentor, or that he was a Unity operative, or even what he actually did. . .though Sherlock had clearly discerned if not the details, at least the generalities.

Sherlock offered milk by raising his eyebrows and the blue glass measuring cup he used as a pitcher, and John nodded. Sherlock tipped the milk in until John held up his hand. “Yeah, it was fine,” John allowed. “He’s keeping an eye on Jim.” Sherlock stirred John’s tea with a spoon held delicately
between his thumb and two fingers, dragged it slowly across the lip of the cup, then lay it on the saucer.

“I trust he is,” Sherlock said lightly, giving away nothing. “Can I get you biscuits? Or if you like, there’s a bit of that cake left.”

“Thanks, no. Please sit down.”

“All right.” Sherlock’s reply was quiet and flat, acquiescing, and he drew back his own chair and slid into it, extending his splinted leg beneath the table, reaching for the tea pot to pour his own cup. “I’ll join you?”

“Yeah, of course.” John frowned. “You don’t need to fix my tea, wait on me.”

“It’s no trouble.”

John raised the cup to his lips and sipped. “Oh. Milk’s gone off,” he said, and Sherlock immediately started to rise from his chair.

“I’ll get you a fresh cup.”

“Sherlock, it’s fine. I’ll get it.”

“No, no. Would you rather—”

“Sit!” John snapped, and Sherlock stepped quicker away from the table and toward the cupboards, as if John’s sharp syllable had shoved him.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock blurted, and his movements were jagged as he went into the cupboard for another cup. “I should have—”

John’s hand on the table top was clenched in a fist; he released it, forced a slow exhalation. More quietly, he said, “Sherlock, I’m sorry. I’m tense. It’s nothing to do with you. I shouldn’t have raised my voice.”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock said automatically, and returned with the cup, which he fiddled with, turning it his way and that on the saucer with a shivering hand. John reached for his wrist and Sherlock’s fingers splayed in a sudden upward jerk. John withdrew, placed his hands on his knees and stilled himself. Sherlock poured him another cup of tea, dripping a bit on the saucer and the tabletop. He made a small noise of dismay and reached for the towel, daubing at the spots. “I’m sorry,” he repeated.

John kept his voice low. “It’s all right.” Then, after a moment, he added, “I’m not angry.”

“No, of course not,” Sherlock said quickly, and half-smiled, but it was obviously forced. He spooned sugar into John’s tea, stirred, and replaced his cup, set the first one back on the tray and turned the saucer upside down atop it. He lowered himself to sit once more, and his breath caught in a way that made John know he was in pain.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” John apologised. He longed to reach for Sherlock’s hand but kept still.

“No, it’s fine. I’m too easily startled.”

John let that sit a moment. What he wanted to say was that he was not Jim—was nothing like Jim—and he would pierce his own eyes with needles before he would do a single thing to harm Sherlock.
But he knew that some things were inevitable, that he could only stay the course, and that only time would prove he was a very different sort of man. Eventually, Sherlock would know it, and trust it, and his body would, too—one day he would no longer jump at a sudden movement, nor his hands shake in response to a raised voice. Rather than start rambling justifications, John redirected. “Heard from your dressmaker, then? Ivan, was it?”

“Ivor. Yes; he phoned as soon as he received my revised sketches and shouted down the phone at me for a while, but we smoothed things over. I have faith he and Viv will be finished in plenty of time.” Sherlock stared into his cup.

“Ah, good.”

They drank their tea in silence for another few minutes. Finally, John said, “We needn’t worry about the Lamia anymore.”

Sherlock nodded at his tea cup, fingers resting on the rim. “Where did you go last night?”

“I’ve just told you.”

Sherlock nodded again.

“Any more texts?” John asked, and they both knew he meant texts from Jim. It occurred to John Sherlock hadn’t said Jim’s name aloud since he’d come to that first morning, back at the hospital. *Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.*

Sherlock seemed to consider how to reply, making it obvious to John that the short answer was yes.

*TEXT from IcehouseAdmin: I haven’t felt so alone since before I met you, sweetheart. Please come home.*

“He always used to apologise,” Sherlock said at last, considering it even as he spoke, “Send flowers, love notes…” He dipped his pinky finger in his tea, dragged the fingertips across his bottom lip then pursed his lips together in a tight line, briefly, and rolled them against each other in a motion that reminded John of one applying lipstick. “But he’s acting like nothing happened.”

“Maybe he knows sorry doesn’t matter this time,” John said quietly.

*TEXT from IcehouseAdmin: I thought you’d be home by now. God, I want to kiss your pretty mouth.*

“I don’t know how long I can ignore him.”

“Block his number. Or…we’ll get you a new phone. New number.”

“I’ll have to speak to him eventually,” Sherlock said, as if it was an obvious rather than an insane assertion. “To work out what happens with the Icehouse. I’m back to work in a few nights—”


“Just a small party, six ladies of leisure having dessert with me and showing off their new resort wear after a shopping excursion.” He glanced up. “Xie has several elaborate headpieces that will obscure what the paint can’t cover.”

“But he’s there,” John protested. He could see how important it was for Sherlock to get back to Xie’s salon, but it was so soon, and Sherlock’s painful vulnerability was crystalline.

“You’ll come.”
“What, as your bodyguard?”

Sherlock dragged himself to standing, pressing palms flat on the tabletop to raise himself. Once he’d achieved his full height, he only smiled mildly at John as if the matter was settled. John could see there was no point in arguing. “Might I trouble you to escort me back to the bedroom?” Sherlock asked, with something like flirtation in it, under the spell of which John was grateful to slip. His neck and jaw were aching from tension. He didn’t want to think about anything outside the walls of the flat: not Moriarty, not Lestrade, not the Mentor nor the Icehouse nor even Xie, of whom he was usually very fond. John offered his arm and Sherlock snaked his hand inside John’s elbow, leaning a bit harder each time he bore weight on his splinted knee.

John let Sherlock go ahead of him through the bedroom door. Half-smiling, he ventured, “Having a kip, or. . .?”

Sherlock leaned close to his ear and his breath was suggestively warm and damp as he murmured, “Let me undress you, and then we’ll decide.”

Late night, in the dark, and Sherlock’s long finger drew lazy, meandering spirals through the hair on John’s thigh as they lay beneath the blankets.

“How are you with puzzles?” John asked, his voice hushed.

“Rather good, actually,” Sherlock said, sounding mildly surprised. “Why do you ask?”

“There’s a book—a ledger—in the safe upstairs where I’ve got those ICs you wanted me to hold,” John told him, and then let out a long, contented hum as Sherlock’s dragging fingertip was joined by a second, and skimmed down toward his knee, petting him. “It’s in code.”

Sherlock exhaled curiosity. “Not something you see every day. Where did you get such a thing?”

“Lestrade. But it came from your flat.”

Sherlock laughed. “Of course not.”

“That’s what I’m told.” John had to stop himself telling Sherlock of Jim’s criminal side-business; it wasn’t clear how much Sherlock knew, and if the fact at least some of the Icehouse drashas were also prostitutes was unknown to him, John hoped fervently it would not be him that would break the news. “You’ve heard the rumours—in the salon, or maybe elsewhere, out in the city—that there’s some weird political stuff simmering. Greg Lestrade’s involved.”

“I know.”

John sifted through many reactions to this remark and what floated to the top was, “Are you?”

“Politics doesn’t interest me.”

“Aha. Well, Greg gave me this book for safekeeping, and apparently none of his people can decode it. It’s nonsense to me, but if you need something to pass the time, maybe you can have a look.”

“Perhaps,” Sherlock half-agreed. “You do still have those identity cards I asked you to hold?”

“Of course.” John’s voice dropped; the dark wanted whispering, and the post-sex hormone haze was
laying a gauzy veil over his adrenaline-jagged inner landscape. “It’s—which, your bug-out money?”

“Bug out?” Sherlock echoed.

“Run away,” John clarified, “Escape. Get the hell out.”

“In that case, yes. I’d been skimming my own bank account, siphoning off salon gratuities just a little at a time. He always had a close watch on my balance and I didn’t want him to notice anything odd. I was nearly there, to the figure I’d set in my head. Another few months and I was going to leave.”

“And go where?” John asked idly, and found Sherlock’s still-petting hand, drew it up to his mouth, kissed the bony knuckles.

“St Petersburg, I think. I hadn’t decided.”

“Because you speak Russian.”

“Da. And it’s otdalennyy—far away.”

John had his doubts Sherlock would have ever followed through on such a plan; even now, with two bad knees and burns all over his torso, he was clearly discomfited being away from the Icehouse and in a hurry to get back to it, despite the danger. But the fact he’d planned to go—regardless of how likely it was he could go through with it—was heartening.

“I have something similar, actually,” John volunteered. “A number in my head.”

“And then what?”

“A normal life.”

“What’s that?” Sherlock’s tone was cheerless.

John murmured, “I don’t know if I remember.”

“I’ve had to fire the cleaner, the gardener, and now even the nanny. I just worry for the kids, you know? Like, are they really safe with any ‘shlost folk in the house? With the rumours and everything. . .”

“I know, I barely take Caroline anywhere anymore, just in the pram around the housing block. I asked Charles to look into building a panic room but he says it’s just talk and I shouldn’t worry so much.”

“Ah, but we’re here for a bit of fun. Let’s not talk about it. More bubbles? Butterfly, dear—you’re so lovely—could we trouble you for more bubbles? The Veuve, I think. Don’t you think, girls? Veuve?”

“Mmm. . .yummy!”

“More for me, as well, why not.”

“Will Xie join us soon? I can’t tell you how I love visiting.”
“How many times have you been?”

“Oh, I’ve lost count. I am absolutely mad for Xie’s parties.”

Behind the sliding teak door, Xie stood with hands clasped under a cascade of rough silk the colour of John Watson’s eyes—deep blue about to turn violet—hearing but not really listening, closed-eyed, breathing. Six ladies—a few old friends, the first time guests certain to be just as lovely—only dessert and tea and (apparently) champagne, and some light conversation. A gentle imposition on frayed nerves. Imminently achievable. Xie inhaled to a count of six, held it.

Sherlock and John had walked in through the front door, chins up, at a normal pace, across the main lobby into the lift that would carry them straight to the salon. If anyone had made a double-take at the state of Sherlock’s battered face, it hadn’t registered with him. His eyes were focused straight ahead even as he made certain to keep John in his peripheral vision. Sherlock had scoffed at the suggestion he might use a cane; of the few suits he had at John’s flat, the one with the widest-cut trousers just allowed enough room for the brace. Upstairs in the salon, Greg Lestrade met them with two of his security staff, each with wide shoulders and thick forearms and youth on their sides. They would keep the corridor outside the dressing room door free of passersby (it wasn’t until later, while Sherlock was petting the crushed-pearl cream onto the backs of his hands, that he became aware no one had ever said what—or who—he was being guarded against). Lestrade would walk the corridors and check that the lift was kept locked; and John would stay in the salon, but keep to the periphery, as girl-talk about clothes shopping was not his forte.

Xie’s dressing room, once secured, would remain sacrosanct. Molly was steaming a few last creases from the gown when Sherlock arrived, and he tolerated a long embrace from her, and a kiss on his jaw that was probably meant for his cheek. They’d reviewed the list of what was needed for the evening’s ensemble, and once it was established all was at hand, Molly had said goodnight, and left him alone. The rug was the same. He’d forgotten to tell Molly he wanted it changed. He changed out of his shoes into Xie’s slippers inside the little bath rather than feel its slippery, silk-velvet texture against the skin of his bare feet.

“Let’s drink to...what?”

“Time spent with friends.”

“Oh, indeed! Cheers to us!”

Xie exhaled long and slow, forever. Good evening, my dear ladies, how lovely of you to invite me to your party. Xie’s lungs empty, the bodice of the gown loosened slightly as the ribs and belly collapsed. It was restrained-Rococo, with a low, square neckline inset with hand-appliqued lace and fine mesh to the clavicle; sleeves tight to just above the elbows which then flared into rippling, layered bells that covered the fingertips in front, reached halfway to the floor in back; a heavily petticoated, bell-shaped skirt flaring out from the natural waist, with a wide, single ruffle at the hem, which brushed the floor. Good evening, ladies, don’t you look beautiful, I trust you’re comfortable? Xie inhaled to another count of six, held the breath, reached for the door. The throat and face were thickly painted—blue-tinged opal—and an extra-wide velvet choker with a central cameo of a skull surrounded by roses embraced the long neck, covering it. Cascading down the back was a false tail of thick, wavy hair, brown-black with a shimmer of auburn only in certain light. Ah, my precious friends, good evening. I’m so glad you’ve come. Xie exhaled.

“Those shoes are gorgeous, by the way.”

“They’re last year’s but I love them so much I can’t let them go!”
“You shouldn’t; they’re amazing. The classics, you know.”

“Anyway, in a blink they’ll be vintage and then you’ll be a trendsetter.”

Xie’s face and head were caged: a cunning arrangement of criss-crossed ribbons and wires strung with jet, black pearls, sapphires, and hematite encircled the head, obscured the face in sparkling X-shapes. The eyes were only half-hidden and had been painted generously, dark, all the way down the cheekbones to harlequinesque points. Xie’s mouth was lacquered regal deep red, like blood straight from the heart, and tasted of lavender pastilles and pale golden wine. Just a bit, to settle the nerves. Dull the pain.

Ladies, I’m thrilled to see each and every one of you—Welcome.

I’m always so glad when such lovely friends come to eat a bit of cake with me; you’re so kind.

Good evening, my sweet friends, what a treat to have you here with me.

The rumble of the door as it slid was startling, gut-clenching. The salon’s lights were dimmed as usual for an evening affair, yet blinding after the utter dark of Xie’s little airlock. Xie blinked thick banks of false lashes, wrenched the corners of the mouth upward. The feet in narrow, hand-embroidered slippers with a motif of hummingbirds in thread of real gold crept forward, twice, three times, and the thick, stiff fabric of the gown shushed and sighed.

“I . . .”

The women turned smiling faces toward Xie, their legs crossed at the ankles, and adjusted the glossy locks of hair beside their faces, and raised their champagne glasses. At the far end of the room, between the lift and the sliding doors to the dining room—which were shut—John Watson rose from a dining chair he’d brought in, and stood beside it. He gave Xie a tight smile, which was not what was wanted.

“Ladies, you—”

It was the start of something longer Xie could not force up the throat and out between the lips. One of the junior drashas appeared at Xie’s side and proffered a champagne flute. Xie stared at it a moment, and the gut roiled, and the guests shifted in their seats and looked expectant. Xie’s face warmed, and pins and needles sprang up across the cheeks and chin, tingling the lips. The chest heaved in quick, panting breaths and there was a rushing sound in Xie’s ears.

“I beg your pardon.”

Sherlock came to clawing at the beaded cage around his face, the lace décolleté, and his elbow hurt in new way, and his knees and ankles in the ways he’d lately become accustomed to. The guests were hovering, on their knees, one fanning him with a magazine, another with red, wet eyes.

“I have to go,” Sherlock said urgently, and found John’s face among the crowd; he was on one knee beside Sherlock’s chest, feeling up and down the sides of the bodice, perhaps to loosen it. “In back,” Sherlock told him, but John didn’t catch on to his meaning. “I can’t breathe. Take this off.” He yanked at the mask, and one wire sprang loose so that beads rained into Sherlock’s eyes, but he couldn’t get free of it.

“Xie’s a bit under the weather, it seems,” John said, falsely cheerful, Sherlock could hear it. So grateful, though, to hear him say the name. The name that belonged there in the salon. “Excuse me. Could you—?” Addressing another drasha, who encouraged the ladies to gather their things, they’d move to another salon so that Xie’s friend the doctor could attend to whatever unfortunate ailment
had caused the drashaskaya to faint.

“Get it off!” Sherlock begged, and pulled.

John found the ribbons that tied the whole thing together, attached to a corona of black pearls at Sherlock’s crown, and pulled the loose end until the bow unraveled, and at last Sherlock yanked the thing away and threw it to the floor. John’s voice was hushed, soothing. “You passed out, but you’re all right now. Think maybe you had another panic attack—like at the flat that night? Heart racing, feeling light-headed?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I have to leave.”

John offered a hand for Sherlock to grasp, braced Sherlock’s back with the other and helped him sit.

“Just here a moment,” John insisted. “Don’t stand.”

“I need to go home.”

“I know,” John gentled. “Soon as we can. We’re perfectly safe here so take a moment and get your breath.”

Sherlock reached behind his neck and tore apart the snaps that held the choker in place, and it slithered down into the crumpled froth of skirts bunched over his lap.

“I need to go. I just have to…Help me up, John, please.”

John got behind him and reached under his arms to hoist him up. “Mind your knee. There, up you get. Onto the sofa.” Sherlock insisted on sitting on the sofa’s edge, his body taut and poised to act. John laid a hand on his shoulder and said, “It’s normal to want to get away from it; want to crawl out of your own skin right now, do you?”

Sherlock felt his eyes widen. “Yes.”

“It will pass. Here, just look at me, look at my face.”

Sherlock did look at him, and after a few long seconds, reached his hand up to cover John’s hand, resting there by the base of his neck. John was looking him over, perhaps trying to discern if Sherlock’s colour was good, but it was impossible to tell, through the layers of paint and glimmering powder. He gave Sherlock a weak smile.

“I’m ruined. I won’t be able to—” Sherlock gestured with his other hand, only his fingers finding their way out from beneath the draped sleeve, indicating the depth and breadth of the salon.

“Of course you will,” John said quietly. “It’s just a bit soon.”

Sherlock’s metallic fear was melting down, cooling and hardening into weighty, impenetrable sadness that settled like a stone in the center of his chest. He said, “I want to go home.” As he rose to stand with a hand from John, he caught John’s questioning expression.

Hesitant, John prompted, “Uh…”

“With you,” Sherlock clarified. “Home with you.”
Hours later they were tucked back in John’s very good bed, and Sherlock had accepted a full dose of pain medication, and finished nearly all of a second glass of the prescribed two glasses of wine as needed for pain. As they’d left the Icehouse after Sherlock showered and redressed himself in his own clothes, they’d found Jim stood just far enough off their chosen path to the front door, nattily dressed and coiffed, as ever, but with a broad swath of white tape across the bridge of his nose, his face bruised around it. He fixed a forlorn stare on Sherlock—his watery brown eyes following Sherlock’s every move from the lifts to the door, a trip which it seemed to Sherlock took hours—and Sherlock tried not to look, but their eyes met once, even though Sherlock was surrounded by a phalanx of not-at-all-subtle security guards as he went. Jim’s mouth bowed up in a sad smile and his eyebrows rose pleadingly. Sherlock’s hand gripped tighter at John’s elbow and he looked away, at the floor in front of him—just the next step, and the next, on his way out the door.

In the rickshaw taxi on the way back to Baker Street, his phone made a nuisance of itself, with texts from Jim every few minutes.

TEXT from IcehouseAdmin: I was hoping to find you in our bed after Xie’s party, sweetheart.

TEXT from IcehouseAdmin: I miss your big feet blocking my view of the television set.

TEXT from IcehouseAdmin: Sweetheart. My sweetheart. You know we’ve only got each other.

Sherlock shut off his phone because he hated that he actually missed him. His resolve to stay away—to save his life, he knew it was to save his life, but even still—was as yet only a skimming layer of ice over the bottomless sea of missing the times with Jim that had been sweet. It was nothing strong enough to stand on. Not yet.

The phone sat silent, distant in the sitting room, on the mantel beside John’s. Sherlock was dozy, grateful for the dulling of sharp-edged pain he’d awakened by overexerting himself in his hurry to get back to the Icehouse, to Xie’s salon. To Xie, who was both the foundation of his own strength and a comfortable escape. John had made certain Sherlock saw him turn the door locks, and had fed him toast with butter and honey, and a warm cup of chamomile tea with its scent of apple blossoms carried on the wafting steam.

Now John sat beside him, freshly showered, smelling of cedar and artificial musk, dressed in a clean, dusty-green t-shirt and pale blue boxer shorts. They’d kissed until the sterile flavour of mint and salt from the toothpaste faded and they tasted only each other, which was better, and then lay down with their fingers touching. John had only just turned off the lamp; to the newly arrived darkness, Sherlock said, “I had a dream. . .or. . .an hallucination. When I was trying to get out of my flat. Or just before, perhaps. It’s hard to remember how it happened, at the end. He left, stepped over me as he went. I slept and woke again and again, I don’t know how long. Hours, maybe. I really couldn’t say.”

John hummed just a little to indicate he was listening, and stroked the back of his knuckles up the smooth inner surface of Sherlock’s forearm.

“I dreamed a party full of my favourites. This old man—he was old ten years ago, I’m sure he’s dead—who was so dapper, and loved his wife. An actor and actress in love. A man who tried, so gently, to teach me about the interconnectedness of being. And you were there, across the room, but I couldn’t get to you.”

“Hate those,” John whispered. “Those dreams where you can’t move.”

“That’s exactly it,” Sherlock said dreamily; he wanted to sleep, but he wanted to tell John the story of his dream, because it had driven him on despite a deep desire to stay still, to succumb. “I had to strip
away all of Xie—the gown, the wig, the paint and jewels and even, my god!, the most beautiful shoes! Shoes I can only dream about.”

This enthusiastic aside drew a small laugh from John.

“To get to you, I had to let go of all of it. All the pretty things that make Xie. As each bit dropped away, I got closer, and I could see you looking, as if you were making out the shape of me as I approached through a fog. I needed you, more than anything I’ve ever needed; I could feel the need echo down the whole history of my life. Does that make sense?”

“Not a bit, but I’ve felt it, so it must be real whether it makes sense or not.” John’s voice was a brisk breeze through fallen autumn leaves. Sherlock wondered what the willows in the Japonesque garden looked like now, as autumn further unfurled, and imagined the dipping sway of the branches by now half-undressed.

“And only when I was naked, just myself, did I reach you. And you held me—held me up, I was collapsing from the effort of it—and you told me I was magnificent—”

“You are.”

“—and beautiful. And perfect.”

“You are.”

“No.”

“That and more.” John leaned up on one elbow between the pillows, nuzzled Sherlock’s cheek with his nose, found his mouth and kissed it, close-mouthed and soft. “You rescued yourself. I’m in awe. You’re the bravest man I’ve ever known.”

“No.” Sherlock shook his head a bit and John squeezed his hand, and kissed him again and again, kisses between the words: “Dreams are just dreams, of course. . .what it means, I can’t say. . .but I know what it doesn’t mean.”

“Mm?”

“. . .doesn’t mean you have to give up Xie, for me to see you. . .or to hold you. . .It’s my honour to hold you. Hold you up, if that’s what you need.”

Sherlock stole a kiss for himself, deeper, and he mewed despite himself, ashamed that for all these days, and surely for more to come, John holding him up was precisely what he needed.

“Put me where you want me, Sherlock Holmes, and that’s where I want to stay.”

“Here,” Sherlock whispered, and nipped at John’s lips with his own.

“Here in bed?” John joked lightly, breaking tension, and their bodies eased a bit.

“Here beside me.”

John gave a soft nod Sherlock felt against his cheek, and John’s breath warm beside his ear as he murmured, “I promise.”
In chapter 34, John reported to the Mentor about a meeting with Greg and was given a job he didn't really want. Xie returned to the salon, but not triumphantly. John gave a promise to always stay beside Sherlock.

* 

**TEXT from TheMentor:** Am I to assume that, as is too often the case, your report is late? I cannot possibly imagine that you are procrastinating in getting the job done.

**TEXT from IcehouseAdmin:** Can’t wait to have you back, sweetheart. Invite me to your next party.

**TEXT from him:** While you’re out and about, could I trouble you for stationery?
**TEXT from him:** Notecards with envelopes.
**TEXT from him:** Oh, and a fountain pen if you can find one.—SH

**TEXT from Watson:** I need a meeting. Gave SH that book to look at, says he’s good with puzzles. Can you send over whatever leads your people have on it?

**TEXT from Friday:** Are you sure you’re ready? I just wonder if you couldn’t use another week or two to recover. Take care. I’m here.

**TEXT from Captain Watson (John):** I’m glad you’re taking my advice, of course, but I should warn you it’s probably best not to, in future.
**TEXT from Captain Watson (John):** After all, who am I to say?

**TEXT from him:** A brilliant man. Back soon?—SH

**TEXT from Captain Watson (John):** On my way to the posh paper shop. Then home. Behave yourself, all right?

**TEXT from him:** I’d try to reply with entendre but really that just made me smile.—SH

**TEXT from Captain Watson (John):** Good then. See you in a bit.
Sherlock laid his phone face down on the pretty little table beside the leather armchair. No longer confined to the bed, he’d installed himself in the lounge for a bit, thumbing through the ledger book he could not deny was in handwriting he knew well—weighty bursts of staccato block printing (Jim had done maths and some engineering at university; Sherlock had come to know that evenly spaced, like-sized block capitals were a dead giveaway that the writer had been an engineering student), occasionally interrupted by joined-up o’s and t’s. A pad of lined paper rested on the arm of the chair, and Sherlock had a stuttering, last-legs biro behind one ear. He’d been taking up the book for an hour or so at a time, in the past few days, and found the puzzle it presented an interesting one: cracking the code of the unrelated words accompanying apparent currency amounts, in basic expense/income style, with only scant information about who had created it (Jim, but who else might have seen it?), what it might be for (laundering Deep Sea’s money, John had said, but what was being bought or sold?), and who was meant to comprehend it (if Jim made it only for his own reference, the code would likely be different to one created for the use of a group) was a challenge Sherlock relished, his brow growing warm with the intensity of his concentration. He forgot, for stretches of time, not just his pain, but also his anxiety, which had been threatening to spiral beyond his grasp ever since his disastrous last turn in the salon.

He’d thought of matching the words in the book’s entries: *Redfoot, Liszt, Tinderbox,* to names of the alleged players: Greg Lestrade, Gugu Kriel, James Moriarty, and a few others—strangers to him—John had named; Sherlock had even plugged in his own name, and John’s. Unable to make the pattern fit, he’d abandoned the theory, at least temporarily.

He’d tried rearranging the letters in the words, but only a few could be made into any English word other than itself. He’d thought to try words in other languages—Russian, French, Italian—and also made no progress. He’d looked closely at Jim’s handwriting, teasing out a string of letters that appeared strangely formed, oddly spaced, or written with a heavier or lighter hand, supposing that a message may be spelled out using these outliers; this was another failed hypothesis. Lately his theory had been that the words might stand in for place names—ex-nations, ports, or even rail stations—or perhaps signified words associated with revolution. He still had his doubts such a thing was likely, or even possible, but John’s voice when he talked about it took on a military cadence: droning, marching, weighed down, and the look in his eyes was one Sherlock found chilling. And so he kept after the puzzle of the ledger.

**Tinderbox Tiaret**
**Gauge Gaziantep Ganjou**
**Redfoot Reading Riems Reykjavik**
**Liszt Linares Limerick Lima Libreville Likasi**

It couldn’t be that simple. But then again, if the code was meant for Jim’s eyes only, it didn’t have to be unbreakable; perhaps he’d encoded it only one layer deep. And John had indicated Jim’s role in the whole thing had been to funnel currency into the Icehouse, then right back out again (minus his cut), so it seemed quite possible the notations indicated cities where the currency was being diverted, which would—or at least should—coincide with whatever information there was about locations of Deep Sea cells awaiting shipments of arms for mass distribution. Sherlock recognized he should be frightened at the prospects, but at that moment he was merely a bit thrilled to have possibly solved the puzzle, and he was eager to share his discovery with John. He tried a few more just to be sure (Tar, Tambov; Hilltop, Hildesheim; Plug, Plock or even Plymouth), then lifted himself with some difficulty out of the armchair and crossed to the bookshelves looking for a book that might help him—an atlas, encyclopedia, or even a good dictionary should have references for city names.

He was halfway through his left-to-right scan of the second bookshelf when his mobile went—not
buzzing to indicate an incoming text, but the electronic jingle of its ringtone. He limped the few steps, imagining John would be checking in about which brand of pen Sherlock preferred, or inquiring whether he needed to buy separate cartridges. The ring seemed more insistent each time it sounded. Forgoing a look at the screen, Sherlock depressed the Answer button with his thumb even as he lifted the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

There was a pause just the edge of too long.

“Sweetheart.” He sounded surprised. Quiet. “Didn’t think you’d answer.”

Sherlock’s nervous system went dead. His face flushed and prickled. His mind shrieked, End call, but his body did nothing to obey.

“Say something, sweetheart, I miss your voice.”

Sherlock thought of a thousand and one things he needed to say, starting with, Goodbye, Jim. What came out, after an electronic-echoing ice age was, “No.”


“I got it wrong,” Jim said quietly, near-whispering, and Sherlock’s eyes drifted closed, so he opened them. “Neither of us should have ever left the flat.” His breath was audible between the words. “Come home and we can just—” An audible shrug. “—end it. Something easy and quiet. Together. I’ll kiss you until the end. Right up until the end, sweetheart. I’ve loved you so much.”

Dying still had a glimmer of appeal. Just a faint one. But dying beside Jim, with Jim’s hands on his body, Jim’s mouth against his mouth. . .the thought was repulsive. Sherlock’s gut churned. His skin crawled. He felt stained with blood and grit, sticky, cracking, scraped and itchy.

“Don’t call me again.”

“You made me promises.”

“I’m breaking them. I was lying. Forget them.” Sherlock felt himself teetering on the edge of saying too much. Worse, of listening too long. Jim could pull him under like a riptide, until he didn’t know which way was up, couldn’t catch his breath, would grasp at anything that might pull him to the surface. Anything at all. A hand with knuckles bruised from punching him hard enough to break his bones.

Jim sniffed again, thicker this time, and said. “We’ll go away. Start over. It’s this city, sweetheart. It’s poisoned us.”

Sherlock pursed his lips. End call. End call. His chest heaved like he’d been running.

“Don’t be stupid, Sherlock,” Jim said in that sneering tone that made Sherlock feel small. “We both know you’re coming back. I’ve seen your bloody calendar. Sweetheart.”

Whore.

Bitch.

“Stay away.”

Jim laughed.
“Stay. Away.”

Sherlock rang off, shut off his phone, shoved it between cushions of the chair. Despite his breakthrough, he found he didn’t want to look at the ledger anymore, at that handwriting he’d seen on so many two- by three-inch cards spelling out, I’m sorry, you know I’m sorry. He left the ledger there on the chair’s arm, with the pad of lined paper, and abandoned his search for an atlas. He poured himself two-thirds of a glass of wine and took it with him, back to bed.

After Sherlock’s fainting episode, and the later retelling to John of the dream of letting go of Xie, John practically begged Sherlock to reconsider taking up his regular schedule at the Icehouse while Jim was still there—in his office, in their flat, having had a meeting with the Lamia that had clearly been about more than just her raised skirt and his open shirt collar—but in the end the best he’d been able to get was a concession from Sherlock that he would put off returning another week or so, to let his body recover. Sherlock, tugging at his lower lip with fingers and thumb, worried aloud that if he didn’t get back to work soon, he may never manage it; he was afraid of another panic attack, a series of them, public discussion of them, damage to his reputation, rumours that he was washed-up or had gone mad.

“Why don’t you invite the ones from your dream?” John had suggested gently, sitting sideways on the bed, massaging Sherlock’s shoulders and the back of his neck, avoiding the faded violet ghosts of fingerprints still lingering here and there on the sturdy throat. “Have a party of just your favourites? It might take some of the pressure off, if you go into it knowing they’re guests you’ll enjoy.”

Sherlock had hummed and let his head drop, luxuriating. “I suppose. . .” He didn’t finish the thought aloud. Sherlock’s thinking was often loud enough to make itself known, though, and John had kept quiet and let him. At length, Sherlock had said, “It is really a rather lovely idea.”

“Well, you’re welcome to it.” And John had leaned forward and planted a kiss on a jutting vertebra at the top of Sherlock’s back.

My dear friends,

I cannot express how delightful I found your kind company, as you shared the story of your romantic history that night you visited my salon. I am indulging myself a bit by inviting a few of my most charming acquaintances as my personal guests, and I do hope you’ll be able to join me. . .

My darling friend,

Have I ever told you how I adore every last thing about you? Chic beyond imagination, worldly, effervescent—with just the right amount of bite. Really, my dear, you are the perfect cocktail! As such, I wonder if I might trouble you to join me for a special party comprising all the most delightful people I’ve had the pleasure to meet over the years. . .
My dearest friend,

It has been far too long since I have had the pleasure of your warm company, though I know the fault is entirely my own. You tried once—I’m certain you remember it as well as I—to teach me a lesson I was then woefully unprepared to receive. In the intervening time I dare say my vision has expanded significantly, and I long to spend time with you again. It is my sincere wish that you will join me as my guest... 

My dear John,

Through your insight, I find myself in the happy circumstance of hosting a special party for my most cherished friends, and I hope that you will join me so that I might have the opportunity to show you off as one of the finest storytellers my salon has ever hosted, as well as the most stout-hearted, kindest, and (dare I say?) most thoroughly stimulating man I have had the good fortune to meet...

After supper of takeaway sandwiches and small bags of vinegar crisps—Sherlock still didn’t eat even half of what he was given, but if John kept him chatting he ate more, absently, between the words—they retired for dessert in bed.

“I hope you like this; I know you’re sweets-mad, but I’ve never even seen these.” John had a small white bakery box tied with red-striped twine he began to untie. “I asked for vatrushka and the woman looked at me like I must be a tourist, then persuaded me my lapochka would like this better.”

“Lapochka, is it?” Sherlock laughed, pronouncing the word much more beautifully than John had.

“Her word.” John could not repress his grin, feeling a bit school-boyish despite not even knowing specifically what the word meant. Of course, he had an inkling. “It’s a bad one?”

“Not at all.” Sherlock leaned sideways and their shoulders bumped before he sat upright again. “Ja rad byt’ svoim lapočkoj... A ty budeš’ moim?”

John had no idea, but it sounded honey-coated as it slipped off Sherlock’s tongue. “Ahh... Yes,” he said decisively.

“Khorosho. It’s settled then,” was Sherlock’s reply. He leaned over and his long fingers found the edge of the box’s lid, and eased it open. He let out a small, delighted gasp. “Oh, that baker’s a lovely woman. She’ll come to the salon as my guest.” The next word was a reverent, murmur. “Churchkhela...” He reached in and lifted out what looked like a bright yellow, plastic-coated sausage. There were about a dozen in the box, all in unnatural shades of orange, fuschia, violet, and green. “Knife,” Sherlock prompted, and John leaned over the edge of the bed to fish his pocket knife from his rumpled, left-behind jeans. He handed it over, and Sherlock carefully cut a few thick, coin-shaped slices. “Pecans,” he noted approvingly.

The tip of the knife was offered, with the little disc balanced on the flat of the blade, and John used his front teeth to carefully liberate the confection. He chewed thoughtfully. Not too sweet, chewy but not sticky, with the creamy snap of the pecan at the center. “S’nice,” he said through half a mouthful. Sherlock was lying back against two pillows, chewing with his eyes closed, his hand curled loosely around John’s pocket knife resting on his thigh. He was smiling. John set the pastry box between them on the bed, and turned, leaning on his elbow. “I have an idea. Don’t say no right
away.” He reached over and liberated his knife from Sherlock’s hand, took up another of the sausage-shaped candies and made a few quick, thin slices.

“*Hmm?*” Sherlock opened his eyes lazily. John held a bite of the candy between finger and thumb, and Sherlock obediently parted his lips to receive it, his tongue-tip warm against John’s thumb.

“What if we forget everything else, all the real world stuff, and just spend every day from now on in bed together while I feed you sweets?”

“You want to fatten me up? Like Hansel and Gretel in the witch’s candy house,” Sherlock countered, grinning, closed-eyed.

John set the sweets and the knife out of the way and moved close enough to press his lips against Sherlock’s jaw, just in front of his ear. “I just want to sweeten your mouth. Here, give it here.”

Sherlock swiveled his neck, and John raised himself up so they met halfway. John found Sherlock’s mouth was indeed honey-sweet as their tongues touched and then withdrew.

“All that sugar will rot my teeth away,” Sherlock said with sly merriment.

“We can work with that. I’m sure you realise the potential. Don’t make me say the clichéd jokes aloud.”

Sherlock turned more, as much as he could, and pulled at John’s arm, and at his back, until John moved up on all fours, caging him in with knees beside Sherlock’s hips and hands gripping the head of the bed. They kissed, and when they broke apart Sherlock curled his lips around his teeth and smacked his mouth comically.

“That’s it exactly,” John joked, and settled back not so much that he was resting on Sherlock’s thighs, but just enough to reach for the buttons on his custom-tailored pyjama shirt and begin to pluck them apart. “*OK?*” he asked quietly, seriously, and Sherlock hummed and nodded and stroked John’s bare thighs, insinuating his fingers under the hems of his boxer shorts, disturbing the little hairs there, raising gooseflesh. John leaned to kiss an exposed patch of pale skin over Sherlock’s pectoral muscle.

“Close the wardrobe?” Sherlock prompted then, and John looked back over his shoulder. The door of the wardrobe sagged open, and inside it hung a long mirror, reflecting back the image of rather more of John’s own backside than he was used to seeing, hovering over Sherlock’s outstretched, pyjama-clad legs. John’s back. Sherlock’s sleeve, and his bare chest. Sherlock’s face: turned away.

“Yeah, of course,” John said, and kissed Sherlock’s chin before clambering off the bed and clicking the wardrobe door shut. As he turned back, Sherlock was reaching for the bedside lamp to shut it off.

John had noticed that once Sherlock could be trusted not to fall in the shower or while dressing, he’d been covered up and all but hiding from John’s gaze—excusing himself to change in the bath, or shutting the bedroom door—and that sex had happened mostly with the lights off. After he’d found the bed’s edge with the back of his hand, his eyes adjusting slowly to the darkness, John settled back more or less where he’d been, this time with one of his knees planted between Sherlock’s, bracing himself with the headboard and winding the other hand behind Sherlock’s neck, tucking the edge of his index finger beneath the waves of hair that brushed his nape. Sherlock found John’s mouth and delivered one of his typically bossy kisses, which John gratefully accepted.

“Tell me if anything hurts,” John offered, and let himself sink a bit, so more of their bodies touched.

“Everything does sooner or later,” Sherlock whispered, “But I find I don’t much care.” Sherlock’s
hands skimmed up along the sides of John’s torso, then up over his shoulders and biceps, and he pressed his tongue into John’s mouth. John let him, relished it.

“You amazing man,” he breathed. “Keep kissing me like that, you’ll never be rid of me.”

“Mm, good.”

Sherlock tipped John’s chin back with his thumb, opened his lips against John’s throat—sucking, biting—then soothing the bitten and sucked places with the tip of his tongue.

Letting Sherlock guide them, John surrendered to the pushy way he kissed, the hands that pressed and pulled until John was exactly where Sherlock wanted him, hovering inches above him, on knees and one elbow, both of them still at least partly dressed even in the dark. Sherlock fumbled for a bottle in the nightstand and drizzled their fingers, the spillover dripping onto the dusting of dark hair below Sherlock’s navel. Each took himself in hand with a moan—kissing—stroking—their hands and wrists now and then bumping. When their breathing became too rough to sustain the seal of their kisses, they let their lips part to make space, only licked each other’s necks, muttered against each other’s faces. John let his head drop onto Sherlock’s shoulder, whimpering, needy, and Sherlock rumbled, that’s it, that’s gorgeous, keep it up, until John filled up with—then let go—an irrepressible shout, then pressed his teeth around the rope of muscle running down Sherlock’s neck to his shoulder. He could feel it working there under his bite as Sherlock stroked himself. I’m jerking my prick with your cum in my hand, it feels so good, John, oh, mmm, and John shuddered once more, Sherlock’s ragged voice sending hot tingles through him that made him gasp and shiver. John licked a wide, wet trail up Sherlock’s neck, dragged his lips over Sherlock’s jaw, fuck, John, the smell of you, and opened his mouth for Sherlock to lick his tongue, and Sherlock caught John’s lower lip between surprisingly sharp teeth, then expelled sweet breath into John’s mouth, and John moved his hand to feel the sticky warmth pulsing into his palm, and Sherlock murmured, oh yes oh yes, John, oh . . .

John was lazy about mopping them up (John, the smell of you), but as he went about it, swiping with his discarded vest, drawing Sherlock’s pyjama shirt closed in front so Sherlock could refasten the buttons, shoving down his boxers and kicking them overboard, he felt emboldened by the darkness, and so ventured, “You know I think you’re gorgeous. Possibly the handsomest man I’ve ever seen. All of you is perfect . . . so . . . There’s no need to hide.”

Sherlock inhaled and exhaled audibly, a sigh of consideration. “It’s kind of you to say, and I believe you,” he began, and John settled down beside him, arranged the blankets over them. “But I’ve hated my body for years. I’ll probably hate it for the rest of my life.”

“I understand, but—” John said, and stroked the back of his hand in a three-fingered spiral. “I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t.”

Sherlock hummed, wistful, a near-laugh. “I appreciate the sentiment,” he said, and John knew it was sincere. It was too matter-of-fact to want pity, and John certainly knew how a man of a certain age might become set in his ways—whatever those ways were. It was fine. He admired Sherlock enough for them both.
Xie, you brilliant star,

Of course I gratefully accept your invitation to the salon—to be listed among your favourites is an honour, and I can’t imagine anyone but a mad man (or a dead one...I wonder, did you reach your elderly friend?) would refuse. Your particular brand of magic, from the fabric of your gowns to (I feel privileged to know) the taste of roses on your painted lips to the intoxicating scent of jasmine that deepens and warms when your heart beats harder, is positively stunning to me.

Not to mention that if it were not for you, in black leather, with an allover (???. . .hmm. . .) green metallic-flake paint job, I would never have met one Sherlock Holmes, a man of surpassing grace and intelligence, who has since carved out a Sherlock-shaped space in me and taken up residence. I hope never again to feel any other way but full up with him—his standing barber appointments and his hard chest and his kisses that remind me what it is like to be given orders. His stories. His mysteries. His courage and determination and his unblinking, silver-flecked eyes. And I have you, Xie—supernatural creature, breathing work of art, clever and witty and crafty weaver of countless intriguing threads—to thank for showing me the heart of him, with space enough for me to fall (deeply, completely) into.

And haven’t I just?

Your most humble servant,
John Watson
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

In chapter 35, texts flew, pressure on John cranked up, Sherlock had a tense phone exchange with Jim, and Xie invited all the favourites to a special party.

“Yeah, hello, Watson here.”

An unforeseen late afternoon interlude that had left John’s jaw—and then, just after, Sherlock’s fractionally fractured wrist—beautifully aching meant that John had neglected to abandon his mobile in the sitting room where it wouldn’t rouse them in the dozy aftermath. Sherlock, who had lately progressed in his recovery to the point of lying comfortably on his side, rolled lazily onto his back with a grumpy hum, his arm and hand dragging away across John’s naked chest as he went. John sat, squinting at the bedside clock.

“You have seventy-two hours captain, and not a moment more.”

“I know, I know,” John protested, swinging his feet to the floor and leaning over to catch his rumpled boxer shorts between the tips of two pinching fingers, flinging them up onto his lap and steadying the phone against his shoulder so he could turn them right-side-out and frontwards before dragging them up his legs. “I told you I’ll—oh, fuck.” He fumbled the phone to the floor and half-knelt to reach under the bed for it. “I’ll do it. I will. I just want to have a pint with the man before... beforehand.”

“I recall advising you weeks ago not to get personally involved. And now not only are you procrastinating a top priority contract, but I’m told you’ve moved a paramour into the flat, which is strictly against regulations.”

Sherlock had thrown one bent arm across his head, covering his eyes. The shirt of his forest green pyjamas was mostly open and John had an entirely inappropriate urge—to give who was calling to remind him to murder his friend at his earliest convenience—to rub his nose and lips in among the spindly, surprisingly fair hairs peppering the center of Sherlock’s chest. Tearing his gaze away, John finally ambled out of the bedroom, lowering his voice. “He’s not a paramour, for god’s sake. Despite appearances to the contrary, you and I are not actually in a film noir. You do know that, right?”

“It’s because I find our chats so amusing that you have not been taken off this job already.”

“Besides, you told me when I took the place that I could have guests.”

“Do all your guests stay three weeks and never once even step so much as their little toe out onto the stair landing?”

“Far as I can tell, it’s none of your fucking business,” John growled. “Pardon me. None of your fucking business. Hunh. There I fucking go again.”

“Be as annoyed with me as you like, Captain. Only get the job done. I’d miss you if you were suddenly gone.”
John’s head began to throb. So much for a lovely, long sleep after a delicious, dirty shag. He crossed to the mirror above the fire and tilted his head, raising his chin to see if any suck-marks were evident on his throat; he was mildly disappointed to find none. Stretching his neck in a certain way made his mandibles twinge, and summoned the memory of Sherlock’s big hands wrapped around his head, urgently guiding him, and of Sherlock roaring a shout as he came. . .

“I get it,” John dismissed the Mentor. “Seventy-two hours. I’ll get it done. Sorry, meant to say, *I’ll get it fucking done.*” He didn’t wait for a reply and rang off.

Sherlock appeared then, walking gingerly but with a less stilted gait since John had cleared him to try going without the brace. In his right hand he carried a pad of lined paper he’d lately been scribbling on, and the black ledger book Lestrade had handed over. Sherlock glanced at John’s mobile abandoned on the mantel but didn’t comment. Instead, he tilted his head a bit and asked, “Is it possible it’s city names?”

John shrugged. “Seems as likely as anything,” he said. “Money laundering. I’m told—” Respecting Sherlock’s professed lack of interest in what he referred to as politics, John did not say by whom he was told. “—it’s to do with shipments of supplies.” He was rather pleased with himself having omitted the word “weapons” without making a liar of himself. “When things are shipped, they usually go somewhere.”

Sherlock settled into the leather armchair, and as John took a seat across from him, he briefly wondered if the tacky old thing could support the weight of two grown men. If not, he decided, there were other options: one bent over it, or one on his knees in front of it, or. . . Before he wandered too far down that path—had they not just been at it an hour ago? But then again, imminent danger always had got his sap running, and there did seem to be plenty of that to go around—he steered himself back to the present conversation. “You think you’ve cracked it, then?”

“Perhaps. It’s strange though, because you mentioned there were connections to Africa and the Americas?” Sherlock sounded all the way past doubtful to concerned. There were deep creases in his forehead, and one fingertip strummed the corner of the ledger as if it were flipbook.

“Far as I know,” John confirmed.

“The only way it works for cities, is if they’re all cities here in England.”

“What—all?” John agreed with Sherlock’s assessment it was strange. Why would Deep Sea be cycling currency round and round on this little island when their scheme was coordinated to encompass every major city of the Unified world?

“I’ve copied out a neat version, here, you can share with Lestrade,” Sherlock offered, and he tore off a single page from the pad, with tiny but legible handwriting covering one entire side and half of the reverse. “Or whomever else it concerns. The city names are noted parenthetically.”

John scanned it. “Marrakesh didn’t fit the code?” he asked. “Or, I don’t know, Buenos Aires? New York?”

“No. The first two letters of each of the ledger’s entries correspond with the first two letters of the city represented, which is barely a code at all—easily decrypted. But the only way to have that method work consistently throughout the book is to use English city names.”

Folding the paper in thirds, then in half, John moved to slip it into his breast pocket before he remembered he was only wearing his boxers. Sherlock caught the motion and gave a little laugh. Half-smiling, John raised an eyebrow and suggested, “Back to bed? I’ve nowhere to be for seventy
one and three-quarter hours.”

Sherlock returned the sly grin but demurred. “Molly’s already receiving responses from Xie’s
damn why you”

favourites about the party—to say nothing of the lovely note I found on my pillow—and I’ve got to
start making arrangements for it. I’m having one of my pet designers work up a gown and I’m
expecting photos of the mock-up to be delivered by courier within the next few hours.”

“Not that furious one you’ve driven mad,” John prompted.

“No, I need Ivor and Viv focused entirely on the look for the ball. Time is of the essence and god
knows I’m paying them enough. I imagine the atelier is shut for the foreseeable future while they
work on it.” Sherlock waved his upturned hand through the air, elegantly curved fingers and gently
rolling wrist clearly reminiscent of Xie’s mannerisms. The second the hand returned to rest on the
arm of the chair, Xie was gone. “I’ve a conference call with my preferred chef, the service captain,
and the wine and tea sommeliers this evening.”

“Tea sommelier?”

“Of course.” Sherlock shrugged.

“You know such interesting people.”

Sherlock gave John a knowing look. “Don’t I, though.”

John got to his feet, still clutching the folded-up paper covered in Sherlock’s decoding. As he moved
away toward the bedroom to retrieve the rest of his clothes, he said over his shoulder, “I’m putting
the kettle on. We’ve black tea, or one that helps you sleep. They both taste and smell entirely of tea.”

“That tea sommelier should fear for her job security,” Sherlock called lightly after him. “You’re
brilliant.”

“You are.”

“You can’t go back there alone. Let me make arrangements with Lestrade for security.”

“I have things to do; I need access to my sewing machine, I have the milliner coming to show me
headpieces. . .I cannot do all my business by telephone.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“He’s going to come around, bothering you. At least! He’s still texting you twenty times a day.”

“He isn’t. And anyway. I’ll just send him away. I have no interest in getting caught up in discussion
with him; there’s nothing more to discuss until we arrange a formal meeting about the future of the
Icehouse. Now that we’re—”

“Would you listen to yourself? If it was as easy as just sending him away you wouldn’t have been
holed up here for nearly a month, covered in bruises. If you could avoid getting caught up in
discussion with him, Molly wouldn’t have had to wash his piss out of your hair.”
“For god’s sake, I have lived with him for over fifteen years. I think I know how to deal with him by now.”

“You know, you sound just like my mother used to. Whenever he got going, throwing his dinner on the floor, and she herded us to bed and kissed our foreheads and told us she’d take care of daddy, and no matter what we heard, we mustn’t get out of bed because she was going to take care of it. It’s like she’s talking out your mouth right now.”

“John.”

“No. Stop it. You have a blind spot about this, Sherlock, wide as a movie screen. Please. You have to stop thinking you can manage him. Please. Please. You minimise the risk, but as someone who cares for you, I can’t—I can’t—let you take it.”

“He’s not even interested in my work. He wouldn’t bother. And there really are things he and I have to reconcile.”

“Some things are impossible to reconcile. He’s hopeless. You aren’t going to—no matter how long you look—no matter how many keys you poke into him trying to find—there’s no magic key to turn; there’s just nothing you can do to make him any different. He’s just a fuck-up. You can’t fix him. And anyway, if no one’s ever told you, I will: it’s not your job to fix broken men.”

“Yes, well. Neither is it yours.”

John had to brace himself with both hands on the back of the kitchen chair, hanging his head down between his shoulders and blowing out a gust of hot, stale breath. He was exhausted from worry, from banging his head against the wall of Sherlock’s stubborn insistence he could manage James Moriarty, from the difficult job of not raising his voice—but he hadn’t, not once. When he looked up again at Sherlock’s face, still yellow-green at the jaw and purple beneath his left eye, Sherlock looked defiant and afraid. His chin was raised, but it quivered.

“You’re not.” John shook his head to emphasize it. “You’re not broken.”

“If he’s a useless fuck-up, and I’ve been married to him all this time. . .what does that make me?” Sherlock challenged flatly, but it was clear all the fight had gone out of him. He folded his arms in front of himself, though his shoulders remained square and open, his feet planted, leaning just slightly back against the worktop. Two cups of overbrewed tea with the bags still in sat near his elbow, no longer giving off steam.

John wanted to say, a hostage, but he knew it was more complicated than that.

“Just think about what I said, and about what’s happened, and—I don’t know—if you’re able, try not to see it the way you’ve always had to, to survive. What if it wasn’t you and him, but someone you love. What if it was Molly, in your place?” John wanted Sherlock to press up against him until he had no choice but to either step back or surrender: to the strong-armed embrace, the fingers cradling his skull, the demanding, sharp-toothed mouth. He’d spent more than enough time in this web, struggling only to find himself more tightly ensnared, impossibly tangled; he was ready to be devoured, to be put out of his kicking, thrashing misery by the gorgeous, green-eyed spider that weaved it.

Sherlock was worrying his bottom lip between thumb and two fingers, staring down and to one side, thoughtful. John wished he could delete the whole conversation; he hadn’t meant to pick at Sherlock, guilt him for defaulting to the very coping methods that had kept him alive this long. He only wanted to keep him safe. He couldn’t let it go unremarked upon, though, so while he could see Sherlock was
working something out in his head—normally John would have left him to it—he said, “You’re not a victim, Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows rose at this, then dipped close together and the bridge of his nose collapsed into creases.

“I don’t want you to think that’s how I see you. It isn’t, at all. I didn’t mean to make it sound as if—”

“I understand,” Sherlock replied.

“Do you, though?”

“It’s fine. I’d say all the same things to someone—to Molly. If she were in my place.” He sighed heavily, and his arms dropped as he turned, retrieving the cold mugs of tea and setting them inside the sink. “It’s just that the salon is my refuge. I’m desperate to get back to it.” The weight of his need was obvious in his tone, and John felt the stab of it in his own chest.

“I know. I want you to. I’m trying to let it happen. Help make it happen. But the salon will always be there; it’s only a little bit of time. Things to sort out. Then—as soon as possible—I promise—you’re right back there, dressed as a zebra or a pine tree, or... you know... that yellow tea pot there.”

John gestured, and smiled slightly, and Sherlock let go a laugh.

Sherlock’s mobile buzzed in the pocket of his dressing gown and he drew it out, glanced at the text message, dropped the phone back. John didn’t need to ask, to know who it was from.

“Beryl May and Oscar Davies, my dear friend Nina Raymonde. Between them, Beryl and Oscar have over one hundred stage credits, though I’ll leave it to them to say who has more; I understand there’s a friendly competition, and the discussion can become contentious! Nina has recently been made editor-in-chief at Rose, and has three daughters, all of whom are excelling in graduate programs, every one as beautiful and charming as their mother. I know you’ll all get on famously. My friend Ashanti is bringing more champagne; I hope you’ll excuse me a few moments.”

Xie’s gossamer gown floated and fluttered with even the gentlest movements, and as such Xie had not been still since entering the salon. In watercolour shades of copper, rust, and burnished gold, the tissue-fine silk was shaped into a slim column with a fluted hem, and designed to conjure thoughts of autumn leaves in the golden light of an October afternoon. Over the gown, a voluminous robe was gathered into a looping, loose bow at mid-chest, but cocoon-like and excessive in every other measure, with Xie’s usual exaggeratedly long sleeves, layers of skirt, and a deeply draped, rounded back. Thigh-high, ultra-shiny patent leather boots in a bronzy shade of brown were a secret for Xie alone, as the gown cascaded from the shoulder to the floor and then some, puddling around the platform-raised feet balanced on slender heels.

The headpiece was of branches, leaves dusted antique gold, chrysanthemum flowers, and rust-coloured roses just past their prime, with brown-edged, crinkling petals; the entire profusion of it supported a fine-mesh veil of chocolate brown, which trailed voluptuously down Xie’s right side, even winding snakelike around the arm before vanishing into the train of the gown, and which partially obscured a face painted for beauty: creamy buttermilk skin, extravagant lashes of brown-black Italian lace, lips a sepia-toned red with a powdery finish.

Xie drew out the violin from its elaborately inlaid wooden case; the gown and the case were
perfectly matched.

“My friends, it does my heart and soul such good to have you gathered together this way, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for indulging me.” Xie’s gold-capped fingertips were visible beneath the cuff of the sleeve as the hand rested momentarily over the heart. “Mere words of thanks cannot do my gratitude justice. Will you let me play for you?”

The assembled group comprised the married actors, the magazine writer-turned-editor, a scientist, a spiritual teacher, a woman who designed memorial statues, two of Xie’s former apprentices—now in-demand drashas with their own successful salons—Xie’s vivid memories of the old man who’d loved his wife. . .and John Watson. They all responded with delight to Xie’s timid request to be allowed to play, and amid a flutter of fabric like butterfly wings, the violin was laid in place, the bow rose, and the tune rolled forth, bewitching and warm-spiced, with a smell of woodsmoke and the touch of cold fingers in the palm of one’s hand. It whispered an affectionate ghost story, laughed and chased wind through bare, prickly branches of trees gone nearly to sleep. It smouldered: white-hot embers were kicked into a shower of sparks, lit little fires everywhere, glowing hot and bright, drawing one closer, closer, and closer still until one was caught up in a fierce kiss, blanketed, enveloped, soothed, but not to sleep—not yet—for there are so many other ways to keep warm.

As the bow came to rest, the guests applauded and exclaimed as Xie nodded graciously, with downcast eyes. The junior drashas drew the attention of the party with an elaborate presentation of carts bearing tea and desserts, and Xie spent an extra moment letting the fingers drag over the smooth body of the precious violin before shutting it up in the case once more.

“That was absolutely glorious.” The most favourite of all: John.

“I feel lucky to have remembered the whole thing; I haven’t played it in a year or more,” Xie replied, gently smiling at the self-deprecating remark.

“The party’s lovely, too. I’ve been chatting with different ones; I can see why they’re your favourites.”

Xie extended a hand and John offered his, aiding the graceful but precariously steep step down from the stage-like alcove where Xie had stood to play. The bad knee made itself known but was sturdy enough, and Xie realised it was the first time since emerging into the salon that a thought had risen to the surface about the aches and pains, the strategically placed guards outside the doors, any worry at all. A successful party, indeed. The lightness Xie felt was carried in the way the long hand rested just enough on John’s proffered one to assure a steady maneuvering.

“They are the most adorable people, though I’m afraid I’m still missing one,” Xie said smoothly, and the silver-green eyes scanned the room, counting heads. “Molly said he’d accepted the invitation. . .”

“There’s time yet,” John reassured. “Who is he?”

“Don’t be jealous, Captain Watson,” Xie teased, though John looked genuinely—albeit mildly—chagrined. “Only a friend. A dear one, though, from long ago, with such a tender heart. . .His instinct for self-preservation asserted itself just as my own instinct failed me.”

John looked curious, trying to decode the poetry, and a half-round movement put Xie’s back to the room as the voice dropped and the face moved closer to John’s. “He knew my first black eye was not from walking into a door in the dark, and that my wrist wasn’t broken in a fall, and he couldn’t bear to see it. So he held my hands and bid me goodbye, and told me he hoped to hear from me again someday, when I was free.”
“Ah,” John said quietly, nodding, “The tough love thing.”

“I suppose so. We really were thick as thieves—I should have appreciated it more at the time—but as it turned out, he was my last and only friend,” Xie said quietly. “I was angry at his gall, and then wounded by the abandonment. But wisdom comes with age.” The hands were wringing beneath the watery drape of the sleeves. “He was right; and I was foolish. Do you have any lifelong friends?” Xie asked then, and John was obviously taken by surprise, and stammered.

“Uh. . .Well. I. Had friends—at school, in the army, all that—but none I still keep up with. People come and go.” John shrugged a bit.

“Anyone you wonder about? How things turned out for them, what kind of work they do, if they remember the pleasant time you passed together?” Xie steered them subtly toward the rest of the party, walking slowly side by side across the salon toward the sofas and tea tables where the other guests were sipping tea and nibbling petit fours.

“Not really, no,” John admitted. “I suppose I’ve never been that close to anyone. Will, maybe. Sometimes I wonder if. . .” John trailed off. “Well, I wrote you in a letter that I wasn’t sure he really left me. So I wonder about that. But it’s hardly the same as what you’re asking.”

“I had my brothers, of course. And my friend, too, was very like a brother to me—but better, because he didn’t rob me of my mother’s attention, nor did my father favour him.”

“Now I really am feeling jealous,” John said, smiling. “A long, meaningful friendship. I’d like to try it sometime.”

As if the moment had been scripted, the lift door slid open just as John asked, “So this friend had a name, I imagine,” and Xie’s answer was a quiet exclamation as an elegant, fine-featured man in a cashmere turtleneck and tweed jacket stepped into the salon.

“Alex!” And then a pained sigh: “Oh. . .”

“This is him, then,” John said pleasantly, but Xie was already taking long, slightly stiff strides to cover the distance, arms outstretched beneath the exaggerated sleeves. Heedless of any disruption of the illusion, the sleeves were flicked and shaken away so Xie could greet the new guest by grasping both his hands and drawing them toward the bodice to rest over the heart. Turquoise eyes scanned the old friend’s face, and the dusky red mouth smiled almost enough to show teeth. John saw Sherlock there behind the painted masque for a long, obvious moment, in the shape of the smile and the way the eyes narrowed—studies—and then all at once softened vulnerably, wide open. The new guest stared back, and his eyes glittered wetly.

John kept his distance, accepted a proffered cup of tea redolent of cinnamon, rosehips, and wine-poached pears, but watched intently; it was the first time he could recall seeing the membrane between Sherlock and Xie so gauzy thin.

“I came late because I knew I would weep, and I didn’t want to rain on your party,” Sherlock’s old friend said, and his voice was quite gentle, even sweet.

“I was afraid you’d forgotten me. Or couldn’t forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, of course. Of course there’s not. And how could I forget you? What a silly thing to say.” The guest reclaimed one of his hands, which were still being held tightly though no longer clasped to Xie’s heart, just long enough to brush away tears from beneath his eyes with the pads of his two middle fingers, then surrendered it again to Xie’s grasp.
Perhaps thanks to sensitivity born of countless evenings as Xie’s glittering shadows, the junior drashas had diverted the other guests with a few ribald jokes that had them laughing loudly, shouting cheap double entendre then making noises of scandalised shock, then laughing even louder. None—aside from John—seemed to notice the reunion going on beside the window near the lift.

To John’s surprise, the deep voice he had lately begun to imagine dirty-whispering in Russian—a language John was forbidden to learn but which he thought he might get the gist of, if he nipped at the right spot, made the right shapes with his hands—suddenly let fly a quick flurry of German. “Ich hätte wissen müssen, dass du weinen würdest. Bitte weine nicht, sonst muss ich’s auch.”

“Das sind Glückstränen, glaub’ mir,” came the reply, with a shaky smile.

Xie’s face swiveled toward John at last. “Come, Captain Watson, meet my dearest friend.” Xie released his hands, but maintained contact via a hand on the back of his shoulder. “Alexander Nussbaum, Captain John Watson.”

“Call me Alex.” They shook hands.

“John.”

Alex was sandy-haired, delicate and plain—came off a bit mousey—dressed like a professor. John marked him out as no threat and decided to like him. Flicking his gaze back to the glamourous, towering figure looming between the two of them, John was stunned by the clarity with which he saw Sherlock sink away again, and Xie rise to the top. The only time he’d been more certain of the presence of Sherlock in Xie’s salon, Sherlock had been licking John’s tongue behind a closed, rice paper-paneled door.

“Everyone... I cannot express how happy it makes me to introduce you to my long-time friend, Alexander Nussbaum. Once upon a time, Alex taught me to draw so that now I litter the Icehouse floors with wadded-up paper covered with my attempts to sketch gowns, shoes, and floral arrangements. The toilet roll in the entire building is thanks to diligent recycling of my many failed drawings.”

This drew a burble of laughter from the assembled. Xie’s hand, now covered once again by the gold-and-russet silk of the sleeve, was firmly tucked inside Alex’s elbow, and Alex covered the hand with his own. The two of them reminded John of a pair of grannies out doing their Sunday shopping together, gossiping, clutching each other so neither would fall over, and the thought was amusing but also a bit heartwarming. Sherlock, with an old friend to lean on: surprising and perfect.

As greetings were exchanged and Alex was given tea and a plate of bite-sized fairy cakes decorated with sugared flower petals—which he immediately offered to Xie; an intimate friend indeed to know that every one of Sherlock’s teeth was the sweet one—Xie settled beside him on a tufted settee of blood-red brocade, still with the hand tucked around his elbow. Turning to an upright, stylish woman John would have taken for a retired fashion model, Xie said mellifluously, “Dr Roth, I wonder if you’d share that uplifting tale you once told of your young patient—I think I remember she was a girl?—whose life was saved by your novel approach to treatment of her lung ailment? It gave me such joy to hear the happy outcome, I’ve carried it with me ever since I first heard it.”

The woman—not a fashion model, after all, but rather (apparently) a pulmonary specialist—began a story about a girl with such bad lungs her lips were nearly always blue. John’s phone buzzed to life inside his jacket and he removed himself to a far corner of the salon to check the text.

*TEXT from Lestrade: Moriarty shouldn’t be a bother—sleeping one off in his office. Meet me in mine for a bit?*
John quickly replied, then approached the back of the sofa where Xie sat like the loveliest pile of fallen autumn leaves ever assembled (John turned away ideas about diving inside), and leaned over Xie’s shoulder to speak into the pale shell of the ear.

“All’s well; I need to step out for a few minutes. You’ll be all right?”

“Yes, of course,” Xie murmured, and the chandelier earrings of topaz and rubies swung gently, catching and throwing the light.

“I’m glad you have your friend back,” John added, and laid a reassuring hand on Xie’s arm, and gently squeezed; the bicep flexed invitingly beneath the silk, and Xie reached up for a brief touch on John’s wrist.

“Life is sweet,” Xie replied, with a little shrug and a disbelieving shake of the head that made the leaves in the headpiece shiver and rattle. “Don’t stay away long.”

“No longer than I have to.” John turned away, and the Face headed for the lift.

A receptionist directed him, and the Face gritted his teeth, squeezed his fists as he marched toward the far end of the suite of offices, many with shut doors and the lights off. Very few people around, not that it mattered. He’d have to go straight to the flat afterward, text Sherlock and send a taxi for him. With any luck, the panic that was likely to erupt once the thing was done—no silencer, the Face didn’t use one—would distract anyone from trying to follow Sherlock out. He’d text him to cover his face when he left, dark glasses, a hood, a wig, dress himself like a woman maybe, just to get the hell out. Fucking complicated mess. Not ideal. Far from it.

He’d look at Lestrade’s forehead, or his chin. Not in his eyes.

A thick inhalation, his hand inside his jacket, unsnapping the holster, and in through the door.

“John! How’s Sherlock? Everything all right up there?”

He hadn’t expected Molly. Sherlock wouldn’t forgive him. Probably wouldn’t either way, but definitely not for Molly. Stay in it. Get rid of her. No hurry but. Tell her something.

“Going very smoothly, I’d say.” Not that, you fucking pillock. Tell her he needs her, send her on an errand. Sherlock would never forgive it.

“I had a good feeling about it,” she grinned. She was sitting in Lestrade’s chair behind the desk, swiveling gently back and forth. Lestrade was sat on the desk’s edge beside her; he stood and came around to shake John’s hand.

“Good to see you. Shut the door, eh?”

The Face turned and shut the door. He bit his lips, then licked them.

“Shouldn’t we be talking privately?” Squaring himself up to Lestrade, looking just at his shoulder, the top of his ear.

“She’s in it,” Lestrade said.

“Fuck me. Are you?” He looked at Molly as he asked. Couldn’t do it anyway, because of Sherlock,
so at least he didn’t have to avoid her gaze.

She nodded; her face was serious, her thin lips pursed tight.

“What did Sherlock think of the book?” Lestrade again. He’d crossed his arms over his chest, planted his feet beneath his shoulders, made himself big as he got; he clearly suspected something was foul.

“They’re English cities.” The Face was scrambling to figure how to play it; every second that passed got him closer to bailing out, so he reverted to being a big-money benefactor of Deep Sea’s genocide. “Why are they?” At last he fixed his stare on Lestrade’s eyes, a disgruntled financier demanding answers.

“Fuck if I know; Moriarty’s a snake.”

“He told me he was laundering Deep Sea’s money, mixing it with some shit he’s got going with prostitutes in the drasha salons.”

Lestrade shook his head, gruffed a humourless laugh. “Deep Sea’s curr went from his hands to mine. If he was skimming to ship it around England, it was for his own purposes. Christ. His cut was fucking generous, given what’s at stake. How much does he bloody need? The greedy little fuck.”

“But it’s all still on, yeah?” The Face demanded.

“Hundred percent. Thirty-seven days until the world gets set right.”

The Face shook his head. “Really wish you’d said different, mate,” he said ruefully. Reached into his jacket, wrapped his hand around the grip, and turned to Molly. “You should leave.”

“What? Why?” The air changed; she sat up straighter. Lestrade’s soldierly instincts kicked in and he went for something on his belt—a stun gun or some other toy—as the Face drew out his pistol and leveled his arm.

“Fucking now, you should leave.”

“John!”

“Watson, no. You’ve got it wrong!” Lestrade threw up his hands. The Face took a half-step forward, aiming for Lestrade’s eye, and all credit to the man, he didn’t flinch.

“I haven’t fucking got it wrong.”

Molly lurched up and wrapped herself around Lestrade; he tried to peel her off but she wouldn’t be moved.

“You have got to leave,” the Face roared. “Don’t make me—”

“Don’t you fucking touch her. She’s pregnant,” Lestrade blurted, holding one hand up to show John his empty palm, still tugging at Molly’s arm with the other, trying to get her out of the way, get her behind him.

“She can’t be,” the Face retorted. “Molly. For fuck’s sake. Move.”

“She is. She is, though.”

“I am.”

“Sherlock’s doctor confirmed it. I have papers, upstairs in my flat.”

“‘Shlost women don’t get pregnant anymore.’

“Sherlock arranged it so I didn’t have to use the water. He has connections.”

The Face snorted. “Special dispensation for the drashaskaya,” he muttered, though he was starting to believe them. Wanted to.

“Yes, of course;” Molly said quickly, and at last Lestrade got her at least partway around him, sheltered her under one arm, though she clung to his side, and watched for any sudden moves, ready to throw herself in harm’s way. “He’s always had access to things like that. His family. . .”

“His family threw him away years ago,” the Face scoffed.

“They did, but they’re vlast. So is he.”

“He’s fucking not.”

“He asked for reclassification before he and Jim were married; he didn’t want any more to do with his family, and Jim was fixated on the idea they should be reclassified, even then. Sherlock didn’t want to feel used. Jim never even knew he was vlast.”

The Face’s mind reeled.

“He’s your friend, and you’re in this?” he demanded, and he turned the gun on Molly momentarily, which tore a growl from Lestrade’s throat. Ignoring it, the Face demanded, “Were you going to shoot him? Or—what—hack him up with a machete? Cut off his head?” His brain was hot; his hands itched.

“No!”

“We’re trying to stop it,” Lestrade said then, urgently. “You heard those radio shows—about the Low Road? Have you?”

“Yeah. What about them?”

“Counter-insurgency. Our faction’s been disrupting arms shipments, diverting currency. . .the Low Road is—it’s like a code, same as calling vlast folk rats. As soon as Deep Sea started talking genocide, dissenters split off and we’ve been working against it, but making it look like we support it.”

“This is fucking madness. . .” the Face trained the gun on Lestrade again. “You’re lying. You’re lying so I don’t do it. I don’t fucking want to, but you’re in this Deep Sea thing, you’re a general, you told me. . .”

“Because you came around waving your overage about, saying you wanted to kill the rats. We needed the curr.”

“What for?”

“Intercepting arms shipments. We’ve been sinking boats. Getting out the message to take the low road, keep it quiet, follow your conscience. Our faction is Deep Sea Blue; the ones bent on genocide we call Deep Sea Red. I can give you—your bosses at Unity—intel on all the major players,
evidence of what we’ve done to disrupt them, the entire plan, from both sides. Deep Sea think we’re fully on board; meantime we’ve been fucking them.”

Molly’s eyes were wet; Lestrade’s voice was urgent. “I’m telling you the truth, mate.”

“I’m not your mate.”

“Yes you fucking are. I can see you want to believe me. I’m telling you, Watson, I don’t want this insanity anymore than you do. Killing women and kids—you think I want that?” His eyes narrowed, staring hard.

*Fucking rape factory, was what it was. Women selling themselves, other mothers’ children, for tampons or a bar of soap. Three times I reported it. Those men were no brothers of mine.*

John lowered his gun.

“*Jeezus.*”

“Watson. . .”

“Fuck me, I came here to kill you.” John paced in a tight circle, a caged beast.

“You wouldn’t have.”

“Molly. . .”

“Nevermind, John. Say you believe us.”

“They’ll send someone else. When they find out I haven’t done it. There’s no time.”

“We’re so close, though; just another three weeks and the whole thing fails. Guaranteed.”

“They’ll send someone to kill you tomorrow.”

“Greg, we have to give it over to them.”

“What? Unity? They’ll execute everyone who’s even suspected of being Deep Sea, and they won’t differentiate the good guys from the bad. We’re dead either way, if we go to them. Us and too many others.”

“No,” John interjected. “No. I know someone. A good man. We’ll go to him and he’ll send it up the chain in a way that keeps you and the others in your faction safe. He’s a good talker—persuasive. I trust him.”

“Why?”

“He’s had endless opportunities to fuck me, and he never has. He’s an arse, but he’s honest.”

“I don’t see what other choice we have, if they’re going to send someone after you. Even if it doesn’t go the way we’ve been planning, at least you’ll be alive.” Molly embraced him again; John looked away. “We’ve done all the work we can. We’ve done *really good* work, Greg. And I need you.”

“You really think you can trust this guy?” Lestrade intoned.

“I do.”
Lestrade scrubbed his forehead and then his chin with the flats of his fingers. “Yeah, then. Arrange a meeting.”

“Thank you. Greg. Thank you.”

“You won’t regret it.” John bit the knuckle of his thumb. “I’m so sorry.”

“Just doing your job.” Lestrade actually reached for his hand then, and shook it.

“Yeah. Some fucking job,” John muttered. He reached for his phone, dialed the Mentor.

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Endless thanks to the dazzlingly, multiply talented serpentynka/theartofforensics, author and artist behind the sprawling, gorgeous Sketchy, for letting me borrow Alexander Nussbaum, the most charming, engaging, and fully-realised original character I have ever encountered in Sherlock fanfiction. I am deeply in love with him, but aside from that, what serpentynka has done is a singularly touching and important gesture: she gave Sherlock a friend. If you have not dived into Sketchy-verse, I encourage you to do so as soon as we’re done here!

Thanks also to my darling Charly for help with the German!
In chapter 36, Xie hosted a party for the favourites, and The Face confronted Lestrade and Molly, who disclosed life-changing secrets.

John delivered Greg and Molly to the Mentor early the next morning, and he paced the room behind the enormous guest chairs facing the desk while the two of them laid out the details of not just Deep Sea’s genocide plan, but of their “Deep Sea Blue” counter-insurgent factions’ work to undermine the mass murder, through disruption of weapons-shipments and employment of subversive propaganda. The Mentor did not take notes; Greg and Molly also had nothing in writing save Moriarty’s ledger, at which the Mentor raised an eyebrow, though he withheld comment. Every now and then the Mentor excused himself to send a text on his phone, prompting his underlings to fact-check intel such as reports on recently sunk cargo ships, influxes of curr to certain houses of repose (not only the Icehouse, though that was the primary base of Deep Sea Blue’s operations), diversions of overland shipments by rail and road, dates and times, places, names.

“There’s more to do,” Greg was saying, as the meeting wound to a close. “And everything’s in motion as we speak. Only Watson knows about this, ah, our . . .” he reached for a word.

“Debriefing,” the Mentor instantly filled in. “Intelligence-sharing session.”

“I never would have done this if Watson hadn’t said you’re the man to tell. He says you can get this sent up through channels in a way that doesn’t end with Unity massacring every suspected Deep Sea operative it can find regardless of allegiances.”

The Mentor frowned theatrically, his nose crumpling as if he smelled something bad. “Unity does not commit massacres, of course,” he corrected.

John interrupted. “Listen, this isn’t a time for parroting the bullshit party line, all right? Lestrade’s just given you more than enough to prevent this madness. At least act like a person. I know you have it in you. I believe in you.”

“Thank you, Captain, for your input.”

“We can carry on as we have been; less than three weeks and the movement’s completely destroyed. No weapons to distribute, anyway. A lot of whipped-up ‘shlost and nil folk spoiling for a fight, but at least it won’t be mass murder,” Greg offered. “We’re already starting to disrupt the propaganda, breaking up the communication lines; the leaders are talking but fewer and fewer people are hearing it.”

The Mentor leaned back in his chair. “It’s troubling, though, to think that given there’s a date in place for it all to—in Captain Watson’s colourful words—kick off, there’s likely to be at least an attempt to enact the plot, regardless of the availability of weapons. Perhaps not guns and machetes—” John thought the Mentor might have paled a bit just saying the words. “—but virtually anything can be made a weapon. . . hammers, boots, and fire can be just as destructive.”

“I reckon a strong showing from the police—maybe the army—could prevent all but the extremists
from carrying on. A huge part of what makes this happen is the mob mentality. Keep the mobs from massing, keep a gag on the radio transmissions. . .suppression should be, if not easy, at least achievable.”

The Mentor hummed thoughtfully.

John was impatient. “That’s all for Unity to figure out, though, and we’ve got lives to lead. What I need before I leave here are three things.”

Greg and Molly both looked uncertainly toward John, who stood with crossed arms between their two chairs. The Mentor put on his woe-is-me face.

“Naturally, Captain, your immediate personal needs are my top priority, even above preventing a genocidal revolution. So please, enlighten me.”

“Lestrade’s made clear they want their people’s safety guaranteed. This isn’t some free pass for Unity to round up hundreds of Deep Sea operatives, to hang on television every hour for the next month.”

“I’ll put a note in my report that you said so.”

“More importantly, these two need a personal guarantee of protection. We’ll have it now.”

The mentor waved his hand in the air dismissively. “It doesn’t need saying.”

“It really does,” John insisted.

“No harm will come to either Gregory Lestrade or Molly Hooper as a result of their having brought the Deep Sea genocide scheme and its mirror-image counter-revolution to the attention of Unity officials,” the Mentor droned, as if by rote. “They are not subject to arrest; they are considered intelligence assets and as such shall be protected to the degree deemed necessary.” He shot a pointed gaze John’s way. “You said there are three things you need?”

“Right,” John said crisply. “Next, a guarantee—”

“This is not Mad Malcolm’s Electronics Emporium, Captain, I am not in the business of doling out guarantees.”

“—a guarantee,” John continued, “that the evidence I’m about to turn over on another matter will not result in a death sentence for the perpetrator.”

The Mentor looked suddenly quite curious, as did Molly and Greg.

“Short of that, do as you like,” John said, and crossed to an enormous credenza where he’d dropped a drill-cloth satchel he’d had since his army days, and withdrew from it a small metal strong box. Presenting it to the Mentor by setting it in front of him on his desk like a birthday cake, he added in a tone of oozy sarcasm, “Or, rather, do as the law allows.”

The strongbox had been in the safe, in the upstairs bedroom at 221B Baker Street, just as long as the ledger had been; Greg had liberated it from Moriarty’s desk in the penthouse flat on the day Sherlock was taken to hospital. John had given it to Sherlock in the wee hours of the morning, when they’d finally arrived back at the flat after the party full of Xie’s favourites had broken up and John had shared—there alone together in the very good bed—the story of his assignment to terminate Greg Lestrade, and the revelations that had followed. Sherlock listened, not interjecting, not questioning much, all the way through to the end.
“There’s one more thing, they found it in your flat, in Jim’s office. I think you should look at it, before anyone else,” John had said as the tale wound down. He’d trudged up the steps then and returned with the box—it was locked, and Molly and Greg claimed not to know its contents—which he passed to Sherlock. Under the blankets again, John let his foot rest on Sherlock’s shin.

Sherlock held it, shook it gently, weighed it in his hands. “Gun,” he theorized.

“That was my guess,” John agreed. “Any idea about the combination for the lock, there?”

Sherlock looked at the simple combination lock: five digits, zero through nine. He huffed a bitter half-laugh. “Easy,” he said, and rolled his thumb up and down along each of the rollers. “It spells *Bitch*. He thought of it like pet name for me. Used it for all his passwords.”

John had grimaced, and found it necessary to hide his balled-up fists beneath the blankets. He feared he would always feel a barely-contained fury every time Moriarty’s abusive treatment of Sherlock came up. He set aside a fantasy of picking the monster apart with hot fireplace tongs to focus on the issue at hand. Sherlock set the last digit in place, slid the latch sideways.

Sherlock stared into the open box for a long moment, and so did John.

“Oh, Sherlock. . .” he said quietly. “I’m so sorry.”

“What is this? I don’t understand.” Sherlock dipped in his hand. Inside was a tight bundle, comprising four piles of identity cards each a few inches thick; John reckoned there were easily a hundred. Lifting the bundle out, Sherlock quickly slipped off the rubber bands holding it all together, shifted one pile of cards into his hand and fanned them, slid them one behind the other. “What does this mean?” he breathed.

Every card was the same. Each bore Jim Moriarty’s picture beside the name *Sherlock Holmes*.

Sherlock rifled through each little stack, dumping them in a pile on his lap, where they slid down the blankets, a hundred copies of Moriarty’s smarmy, rat-eyed face staring up at them.

“What was he. . .?”

“If I’d known,” John started. “Someone else should have seen this first, to tell you.”

“John,” Sherlock demanded. “What does this mean?”

Sherlock was picking through the cards, turning them over, gathering them into piles and squaring the edges with his long fingers.

“I think. . .I mean, I guess. . .he was going to be you. After he—” John was shocked to find it was suddenly hard to say aloud what they’d both said many times over the previous few weeks. “After you were dead, he was going to use your identity.”

“But. . .” Sherlock’s right hand hovered in the air, holding one of the fake ICs, and when his eyes met John’s they were pleading, wild. “What for?”

“Your money, I suppose. And since so few people know who you are, that it’s really you behind Xie. . .” John didn’t want to finish, but Sherlock was still staring at him, looking for an answer. “It would have been easy to say he was Sherlock Holmes. Who would know he wasn’t?”

Sherlock’s face flickered tragedy for a full second before he rearranged it into something like resignation—or amusement. “That’s true. Xie’s a celebrity but I’m no one.”
“Sherlock. . .”

“No, it’s fine. It’s fine. That’s how I arranged my life.”

“I’m sorry,” John said again. Insult to injury, he thought, to the tenth power.

Sherlock, business-like, began to gather up the cards, stack them, bundle them back together. After a moment of fussing with the ICs, he said, “He’ll be furious when he finds these are missing.”

“I can’t imagine how much curr those represent,” John put in.

“Or who it belongs to,” Sherlock added. He finished bundling the cards and laid them back in the box, a solid brick of them, four of Moriarty’s photos staring up from the top of the stacks. Sherlock lowered the lid and spun the locks. “Who should have it?” he asked primly, taking John by surprise.

“I don’t know. The police, I suppose.”

“You’ll take it to your friend at Unity,” Sherlock said, and set the box in John’s lap, smoothed the blankets over his own.

“He’s not my friend.”

“Your liaison, then,” Sherlock corrected. “That box is brimming with evidence of criminal activity—counterfeit identity cards, stolen funds, identity fraud—clearly it should be handed over to the authorities.”

“Sherlock,” John said, gently, trying to break through the strange wall Sherlock seemed to have thrown up around it. “You can imagine what might happen, if I give this to Unity.”

“I can, in fact. I prefer not to be made a widower, as you know.” His voice was strange, his affect distant and stiff. He looked at his hands fiddling with the blankets, the buttons on his pyjamas, the corner of his pillowslip. “Anything short of that. . .Well. He brought it on himself.” He slid his palms against each other twice, three times, then clasped his hands and set them in his lap. He turned his face toward John.

“Are you sure?”

Sherlock’s face fell, his lips turning down at the corners, but he nodded. His eyes closed for longer than a blink. “I’m sure. It’s over. Everything’s over. He can’t be trusted to run the Icehouse.” He gestured at the box. “Obviously. And I don’t want anything more to do with him personally. So.” Another nod, quick and firm. “The authorities can do as they will. You’ll take it with you tomorrow? When you go with Molly and Greg to see him?”

John had set the box aside on the table. “Yeah, of course. Whatever you want.”

The Mentor sifted through the fake ICs bearing Sherlock’s name and Moriarty’s photo, his expression skeptical, even mildly annoyed that John was troubling him with it.

“That photo’s James Moriarty,” John told him. “The cards are all counterfeit, the currency on the accounts is mostly—or all—stolen, and it seems he was bent on identity theft.”

The Mentor closed the box and slid it aside with two fingers. “I’ll see that it’s dealt with, Captain, as thanks from Unity for your having introduced me to your associates here present.”

“Yeah, speaking of,” John said, and turned to Greg and Molly in turn. “Could you excuse us a
“Actually, I think we’re through here,” the Mentor said, and rose to stand, coming around his desk to shake hands with both Greg and Molly in turn. “I’ll be in touch.”

Once the two had gone, the Mentor crossed to the credenza John had stored his bag on, and slid aside a front panel to reveal a heavy, cut-crystal decanter and several matching glasses on a heavy silver tray. “You’ll like this one,” he said casually, as he lifted the tray out and set it on top of the imposing, dark-wood cabinet. He pulled the round stopper from the bottle’s neck. “Aged twenty-three years in oak previously used for a French beaujolais.” Quickly but neatly, the Mentor poured out two generous slugs of caramel-gold whisky and offered one to John on his way back to the desk. He gestured for John to take the chair Molly had just abandoned, and leaned himself against the edge of the desk, with his ankles crossed. He unbuttoned his suit jacket and sniffed deeply at the liquor in his glass.

“Yeah, thanks,” John said, and sniffed briefly, then sipped. He curled his upper lip appreciatively. “Nice.”

“So what’s this final demand of yours, Captain Watson, I’m simply giddy with curiosity.”

John took a long, slow draw from the glass, rolled the whisky over his tongue a few times before swallowing. At last, he said with a shrug, “I’m done.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Lose my number. I’m closed for business.”

The Mentor tossed his head upward slightly, made a scoffing sound. “Nonsense. You’re the best I’ve got.”

“Appreciate that,” John said, and swirled his glass. “Going out on top, then.”

There was a long moment of silence before the Mentor said, “You’re serious.”

“As a bullet in the eye.”

“May I inquire as to the reason for this unexpected early retirement?”

John gulped down the last of the whisky, grimaced admiringly at the empty glass, and set it on the edge of the Mentor’s desk. He braced his hands on the arms of the chair and shoved himself to his feet.

“I’ve found something worth living for.”

The Mentor looked John up and down appraisingly, and in the end, raised his glass slightly and said, “In that case, I wish you well. You know where to find me.”

“And you, me,” John retorted, fetching his now-empty bag and folding it quickly to tuck under his arm. “I’m keeping the flat.”

The Mentor rolled his eyes, but clearly more in amusement than annoyance. “Of course you are.”

“I’ll change the locks myself, this time,” John said with a nod. He thrust out his hand the Mentor shook it. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

“Likewise. Best of luck, Captain, with your something worth living for.”
“Is this all right?”

A dreamy, affirmative hum from Sherlock, and he rolled his hip open a bit so John could reach him better.

Having first become rather deeply acquainted with the thin, sharp scent of the skin behind Sherlock’s ear, John had kissed down the back of his neck—wound a curl of Sherlock’s damp-from-the-bath hair around the tip of his tongue—and then over the curve of his shoulder, down his spine, John’s hand resting first on Sherlock’s hip, then moving on to knead his strong thigh. John sucked, licked, and nipped with teeth-edges at the inviting sharp dip of Sherlock’s waist. Sherlock had sighed and caught a sharp breath, rocked his pelvis back as he drew up his knee. A sideways drag of John’s lips across the very lowest part of his back, there above the drawstring-tied waistband of Sherlock’s polished cotton pyjama bottoms teased a promise, but John had reversed course up along the length of Sherlock’s back, kissing, tasting, nuzzling with nose and chin, cheek and open lips.

Up on his elbow, close as he could get to that beautifully-muscled, triangular back, and John had reached around for the tail of the drawstring, pulled until the knot fell apart, found Sherlock’s prick beneath the fabric and held it, sliding up gently to find an invitingly damp spot on the fly, teasing him a bit with his fingers through his pyjamas until Sherlock’s long fingers wrapped around his wrist and urged him to slide inside. John tickled the sensitive skin beneath the scruff of hair, his own breath against Sherlock’s shoulder blade coming in gravel-scraped gusts.

Together they had slid the pyjamas down, baring the plump behind, and John surged against it, his own erection drizzling sticky damp against Sherlock, who rocked lazily back to meet him, still gripping John’s wrist. He guided John’s hand to his mouth, where he slicked John’s palm with an over-wet tongue and then thrust it back; they had gasped in near-unison as John took him in hand and stroked slowly, dragging the velvety skin over an enticing firmness, then back.

“Is this all right?” John murmured, and Sherlock hummed and rolled his hip, making room. Flushed and too warm, John kicked the blankets down so they were bare, and the cool bite of the air in the bedroom was delicious, raising gooseflesh on their thighs and forearms. Sherlock rolled his neck, craning his head back.

“Kiss you,” Sherlock demanded, and John shifted closer to his back once more, rising up to present his mouth, still stroking, his hips pumping gently so his cock moved between their bodies against Sherlock’s rump, now sticky-slick with the oozing evidence of John’s fervent desire.

Once they’d kissed themselves breathless, their necks and shoulders protesting the awkward angle, Sherlock let his head fall back onto the pillow and John sank down, lapping the back of Sherlock’s shoulder blade in time with the movement of his hand.

“Mmf, your cock feels so good in my hand,” he muttered, and Sherlock groaned luxuriantly in response, so John carried on, “So hot. So hard. Fuck. Sherlock, you’re gorgeous.” Sherlock swung his arm around to find John’s body, and his hand rode John’s rolling hip for a few moments, pulling him forward even as Sherlock rocked his arse back to meet him. “More slick?” John prompted, and Sherlock reached away to fetch a packet off the nightstand, tore it open with his teeth, squeezed it into John’s waiting palm. John leaned away to slather his own cock first, and when he settled in against Sherlock’s back, angled it to thrust along Sherlock’s cleft and between his thighs. When his hand found Sherlock’s prick again, it slid deliciously quick and smooth, and John shifted lower to press his teeth against Sherlock’s shoulder blade, fucked hard into the non-space between Sherlock’s
stacked thighs. He moaned, bit down, jerking Sherlock in quick rhythm as he let his prick slide against Sherlock’s skin. “Jeezus, you feel so good. Your cock in my hand. Fucking you this way. . .”

Sherlock made a high sound with a closed mouth, and his head rolled, turning his face into the pillow. His hand landed again on John’s wrist, but held tighter this time, squeezing hard.

“God yeah. Sherlock.” John grunted as he thrust with urgent force between Sherlock’s closed thighs. “You feel so good. You feel so good.”

Sherlock thrust up into John’s hand. Edging close, John let go of Sherlock’s prick to dig fingertips deep into his hip, rocking hard against his arse.

“No. Stop. Stop. I don’t—”

“Hm?” John’s reverie was broken by the brittle demand in Sherlock’s voice. “What is it?”

Sherlock rolled away from him onto his stomach, hugging the edge of the bed. Into the pillow he said, “I don’t like that.”

“Oh, jeezus, I’m sorry.” John touched his shoulder and Sherlock’s back curled so he withdrew.

“It’s not. . . just. . . I don’t like you behind me. That way. Just now.”

“I’m sorry,” John said helplessly. “Sherlock, I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Sherlock said, and he turned his face away from the pillow so his voice wasn’t muffled. “You couldn’t have known. I didn’t know. It’s too much like. . .” John could hear the shake of his head, the way his hair brushed the pillowslip.

“You don’t have to say. You said stop, that’s all you have to say.” John dropped down onto the pillow, as close as he could get without touching Sherlock. “Let me know when it’s OK to kiss you, all right? Touch you? I feel like petting you a bit, but only if you want.”

“I just need a moment.” Sherlock said. “I need to. . .” He didn’t say what he needed to do, only did it, which was to turn over so they were face to face. Once he was resettled he reached for John, wrapping warm bony fingers around his upper arm, and dipped forward to kiss him, pressing John’s lips apart with the tip of his bossy tongue, but kissing sweetly, more affection than heat.

“I’m sorry,” John said again.

“S’fine,” Sherlock murmured, and tugged John’s lip between his teeth, catch and release. “Here;” he said then, and he wet his fingers, stroked his own cock to get the slick going again. He found John’s hand and guided it between them. More kisses, deeper, messy. “Get me off.” A demand. Another kiss. “This felt good. Your hand on me.” John slipped the circle of his thumb and fingers down until they met Sherlock’s body, the now-damp hair, Sherlock’s bollocks tight-skinned against his knuckle. “Yes. Make me come. John. Get me off.”

John’s gut had clenched at Sherlock’s sudden withdrawal, his protests, and now as he felt him thrumming hot, his cock swelling rapidly back to life, John warmed and melted, relaxed back into the pleasant otherworld of the heat between them.

“Here.” Sherlock raised his thigh away, and his spidery fingers clutched the back of John’s thigh, drew it up between his own and clutched it between his knees, and then began to spiral his fingertips through the hair on John’s leg, tickling it in every wrong direction. “Ah, so nice. I want you to feel me coming.”
“God. Please.”

Sherlock’s fingers stuttered, his shoulder shook.

“Get me—get me off. Make me—ah—come.”

John, desperate for Sherlock’s mouth, wanting to let him lead: “Sherlock, will you kiss me?”

Sherlock’s tongue snaked out and flicked against John’s open lips; he sucked, then drew back on a harsh gust of breath.

“Feels good?” John ventured.

“Mmm.” Sherlock’s hand slid up the back of John’s thigh and his fingers clutched John’s buttock, urging him closer; working against Sherlock’s eagerly thrusting cock, John’s wrist began to ache as he squeezed twisting strokes along its length. Sherlock drizzled steadily, and John caught pearls of thick fluid in his palm, and he groaned.

“You want me to come for you,” Sherlock muttered, not really asking.


“Good.” It rode out on a grunting whisper, and Sherlock did come, his prick throbbing hot in John’s hand, spilling onto John’s thigh in short, warm bursts.

“Beautiful. . .Sherlock. . .”

“Mmm. . .” Sherlock licked his palm again and reached for John, not sweetly, stroking in steady time. He gave a low command: “Now give me yours.”

A throbbing chill shook John then, a shuddering response to the words, the sensation, the un-shy way Sherlock stared at him, his lips suck-swollen and dark pink. John’s head filled with Anything you want, anything, anything, I’ll cut out my heart and hand it to you, anything at all, it’s so good, feels good, so good, but his panting breath wouldn’t allow even a single word.

Sherlock hummed again, sounding appraising but not satisfied, then commanded, “Give it to me. I want to feel it. . .hot. . .wet. . .all over my fingers.”

John was on the verge of combustion; he grabbed hard at Sherlock’s arm, at the bed sheet down between their thighs, and sobbed a groan.

“Open your eyes,” Sherlock whispered then, low and gentle, contrasting the relentless motion of his hand. Sherlock’s gaze was unwavering, those changeable eyes beneath the generous, manly brows. The next command was issued in full voice. “Don’t hide.” A new twist of Sherlock’s wrist made John whimper. “I’ll paint my lips with it, give it to me.”

John was done for; his hips jerked forward hard into the clutch of Sherlock’s gorgeous big hand and held there, his cock surging, coming on Sherlock’s belly and in the hair at the root of his long, pink prick. John shouted, then hissed through bitten lips, and at last panted himself back to quiet.

In the dim light, John watched as Sherlock dragged the side of his index finger along his lower lip, then the tip of it traced the mirror-arch across the top one. A shimmering thread from his lip to his fingertip broke prettily as he drew his hand away. He licked and pressed and sucked at his own lips, still fixing John fearlessly with those wide, staring eyes.
John let out a moan. “Jeezus. . .” He gripped Sherlock’s chin and kissed his mouth wide open.

After a few moments, their breathing had settled, and they gazed intently at each other, fingers and knuckles brushing each other’s chests and upper arms.

“Sorry, again.”

Sherlock shrugged, a small crooked smile bending his lips for just a moment. “We’re fine.”

“I’m glad you spoke up,” John said, after a while, quietly, and traced the shape of Sherlock’s pectoral muscle with the tip of his middle finger, imagining he could just make out how his nipple wrinkled tight and gooseflesh appeared around it. “You should—please—if there’s anything you don’t like.” Sherlock was touching his cheek, so he turned his face to catch two fingertips between dry lips for moment, then released them. “You know, Sherlock. . .or, I hope you know. . .I would rather lie down in the road than ever do a single thing to harm you.” John pulled the covers up over them, settling closer so their knees touched. “I’m protecting you from harm.”

Sherlock stretched languorously, let go a hum that wanted to turn into a yawn. “Mmmm, Captain Watson.” Sherlock swept his fingers through John’s hair, then down his neck until his curled hand rested in the hollow of his shoulder. “I believe you’re just the man I need.”

TEXT from Friday: Doing your mail. Shall I send it? Wish I could just bring it. How are you feeling?

Open it. JW worries *himself* might follow you; I defer. I am upright and dressed, quite near normal.—SH
I should ask you the same.—SH

TEXT from Friday: Very odd. All right. Bit sick now & then. Thx for asking. And John?

Very odd. All right.—SH

TEXT from Friday: Tell him Hello from me. There’s a big one here from your solicitors.

Send it. Enclose the updated timeline and contacts for the Ball, any personal correspondence, and apprenticeship requests.—SH
Please.—SH

TEXT from Friday: I thought I might fix up the shoe cupboard at last?

Stay well away from the shoe cupboard, it could give you a fright that curses your child.—SH

TEXT from Friday: It’s kind of you to care.

Just over an hour later, Sherlock was indeed upright and dressed—though casually—in trousers and a silver-grey shirt with the monogrammed cuffs left unbuttoned, feet bare despite the cold floors. John brought an oversized, tear-resistant envelope and joined him on the bed, sitting beside Sherlock’s shin with one leg drawn up and the other dangling.

“Thought we’d order in tonight, if that’s all right?”

“Whatever you like,” Sherlock answered. “Knife?”
John passed him his pocket knife, and Sherlock slit open the package, then dumped the contents on the coverlet and started sorting. He piled up the already-opened envelopes—handwritten notes from potential apprentice drashas (Sherlock had long ago decided to refuse clinical things like résumés as a way to filter the true artistes from those looking to climb their way to extended overage rights by taking up careers in the pleasure districts); a few thank you notes from salon guests; a card from Alex gently suggesting they meet for tea and a long-overdue chat, as soon as you’re feeling well enough, dear, I’ve missed you more than I can say (Alex’s signature was smudged; as disposed to tearful outbursts as ever, I see, precious friend); and a packet of the amended timeline of preparations for the Unity Day Ball, including all Sherlock’s appointments beforehand, and contact information for his support people: designers, milliner, cobbler. . .it went on for pages.

Once all these had been arrayed on the bed, Sherlock took up the envelope from his solicitors’ office—pale grey that nearly matched his shirt, with his name and the penthouse address handwritten in dark blue ink, its flap sealed with wax embossed with his personal solicitor’s monogram. He slid his finger beneath the flap to break the seal, and flexed his foot to stroke John’s thigh.

“Is that a day’s worth?” John marveled, sweeping his gaze across the assembled mail.

Sherlock hummed affirmation, adding, “After Molly’s removed the unnecessary ones.”

“Blimey,” John said. He shifted a bit and took Sherlock’s foot in his hands, started to work his thumbs up and down the sole. “This all right?” he asked.

“Terribly,” Sherlock replied, and made a little moue of his mouth, blowing a kiss. John carried on massaging.

What slid out of the grey envelope was a flat stack of paper, several smaller packets fastened together. On top of it all was a letter in formal style, which Sherlock could see had been multiply signed and witnessed, and bore the embossed seal of the Ministry of Justice. He read it silently, tugging at his bottom lip absently with his free hand.

___

Dear Mr Sherlock Holmes:

I am directed by the Deputy Minister of Justice for the city of London to inform you of the dispensation of the criminal case against your spouse, James Moriarty, now closed and complete.

WHEREAS, James Moriarty was found to be in possession of identity cards (qty: 112) determined to be counterfeit by virtue of (i.) false name, (ii.) currency in excess of allotment, (iii.) multiple cards issued to single citizen, and (iv.) false home address/false employment assignment listing (qty: 28)

And WHEREAS, James Moriarty was found to be part of a conspiracy to launder currency acquired through illegal means

And WHEREAS, James Moriarty was found to possess currency in excess of his allotment, and even in excess of his overage allotment

James Moriarty, formerly of PH1, the Icehouse, London, was sentenced as follows:

RECLASSIFIED: Class status NIL
BANISHMENT, to be served at the following location: THE AMERICAS.

Punishment was enacted immediately upon delivery of sentence.

As a named victim in this case, stolen currency has been remitted to you. Your solicitor and banker
can provide details as to amounts and disbursal dates. Your overage allotment has been adjusted to
shelter this lump sum remuneration.

Any further question or comment should be directed to the office of your solicitor. This letter serves
as official record of the outcome of this case.

Sincerely,

Rudyard Mayes,
Secy to the Dpty Minister of Justice,
City of London
---

Sherlock passed the letter to John, who raised his eyebrows and scanned it, the hand massaging
Sherlock’s foot slowing, and eventually stopping.

“What—already? Banished already?” John said, and Sherlock could hear him trying to keep his
voice disinterested.

“Apparently so,” Sherlock said casually, ignoring John’s searching expression. Instead of further
discussing it, he scanned the next packet of papers, which were forms already filled out by his
solicitor and ready to be submitted to the magistrate. There were chartreuse-coloured, temporarily-
stuck-on arrows pointing to places requiring Sherlock’s initials and on the last page, his signature. He
patted his shirt pocket. “Could I trouble you to find me a pen? Blue better than black ink, if we have
it.”

John obliged, standing to rummage in the night table briefly before he left for the kitchen, and
eventually brought a plastic biro with blue ink from a mug of writing implements on the table in the
lounge. Sherlock began initialing each page of the form, and finally, scribbled his signature and
wrote the date. He began working his way backward through it, peeling off the arrows, which he
stuck to each other in a little pile and then affixed to the discarded envelope.

“There,” he said, with a firm nod.

“Hm?” John prompted, showing curiosity without prying.

“I’m divorced,” Sherlock said. “Or, I will be, once this is filed. Tomorrow or the next day.”

John’s eyes widened. “You’re. . .” he started, and frowned. He laid his hand on Sherlock’s ankle and
worked it beneath the cuff of his trousers, slowly up his shin, then down again. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Are you. . .you’re all right, then?”

Sherlock started to shuffle the remaining papers: an acknowledgement of receipt of his remuneration
from the Justice Ministry for him to sign; designation as owner of whatever real property of James
Moriarty remained in the marital home; a blank application for reclassification (with a note clipped to
it from his solicitor practically begging him to reinstate his vlast status). He hummed. “Just fine,” he
said lightly, then set the papers aside and beckoned for John to come closer. Sherlock brushed aside
the neat piles of letters with a sweep of his arm and slid sideways to make room for John to recline
beside him, face to face, John’s head resting on Sherlock’s bicep. His deep blue eyes searched
Sherlock’s, and he fiddled with Sherlock’s shirt buttons, dipping his finger into the placket between
them, worrying at it with his thumb.
“Not sad, then?” John prompted.

Sherlock shook his head. “Well, of course, my heart is broken,” he allowed. “But, no. I’m not sad.”

“Banished to the Americas,” John said, and shook his head. “I’ve always said I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.” Sherlock anticipated the next part of that sentiment—that John had changed his mind and now did, in fact, wish it on someone—and appreciated that John had left it unspoken.

Sherlock let his eyes fall closed, and John stroked his jaw with one fingertip. “This is the last I want to talk about it. At least for a while. If I change my mind I’ll let you know.”

“Fair enough.”

John’s finger brushed the crease of Sherlock’s mouth, and then rested on his chin, the gentle pressure coaxing his lips apart just before John kissed them, gently, lingering. As they drew apart, Sherlock saw that John looked strangely unhappy.

“Suppose you’ll be going back, then,” John ventured. “To your flat there at the Icehouse. No need to keep hiding out here, now he’s gone for good.”

Sherlock leaned in to claim another kiss, steeling himself to reply. “I thought I might stay, actually.”

John nearly laughed. “What—why? A penthouse flat in the Icehouse must be quite a bit more suited to your style than this grotty hovel.”

“I’ll want to change some things there,” Sherlock explained, thinking immediately of gutting the master bathroom so he would never again have to see the marble floor that had tugged at the skin of his back; his closet—empty of his now-ruined clothes—where Jim had threatened to hang himself; the bed he’d custom-ordered from Moscow with its mattress burnt in black smudges from Jim dropping matches on him, the memory of a kitchen knife under the pillows. If Sherlock was ever to live there again, it would all have to go. “And anyway, working and living in the same place has as many drawbacks as it does advantages. To be able to spend time somewhere outside the maelstrom of the Icehouse. . . it’s a pleasant bubble—a little floating world—here.”

“Here? It’s dull as dust.” Their hands were wandering over the hills and valleys of each other’s hips, shoulders, chests, keeping them grounded there together.

“If you don’t want me. . .” Sherlock ventured, half-smiling, knowing what the response would be.

“Of course I want you. Stay as long as you like. Stay forever.”

“Just let me be your houseguest a while, and when I get the penthouse sorted, I’ll repay the favour.”

“Excellent,” John murmured, and kissed him so sweetly Sherlock knew with certainty the only place he ever need be, aside from Xie’s salon, was right there in Captain John Watson’s very good bed. “I’m sorry for your losses, Sherlock. I really am. None of this is easy, I know. And I’m sorry your heart is broken. But I’m glad you’re not sad.”

Sherlock hummed against John’s lips, and they shared a few more kisses before Sherlock said decisively, “As much as I do like being here. . . I think I’d like to go for a walk. Outside.”
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

In chapter 37, John retired, Jim was banished, Sherlock filed for his divorce, and John invited him to stay as long as he liked in 221B.

* To hear Xie’s introductory music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDTp_YQizqE

John had taken control of Sherlock’s rolling case and one garment bag—the other still hung in the wardrobe back in the Baker Street flat, holding the blue gown and matching coat—as soon as they’d stepped out of the rickshaw taxi in front of the Icehouse, so all that was left for Sherlock was to spin his key ring nervously around his index finger as they rode up to the penthouse in the gleaming lift. John tried to catch his eye, wanting to at least give him a reassuring smile, let him know John was with him and that everything was going to be fine. Sherlock looked at the floor, his nostrils flaring. All the bruises on his face had healed, and he no longer limped, though after a typically busy day—and certainly after a night in Xie’s shoes—he would usually sit with his feet up, and sometimes accept over-the-counter pain relief.

Sherlock had not had time to devote much thought to his redecorating and remodeling schemes for his flat given preparations for the Unity Day Ball and a full schedule of parties at the salon and had put off returning, not stepping foot inside it even when he’d spent a fourteen-hour workday in the Icehouse. About a fortnight after Sherlock had filed his divorce papers, John noted he’d not yet visited his old flat, and then kept noting it for another two weeks, not asking about it, selfishly happy to have Sherlock in bed with him every night at Baker Street even as he began to wonder that Sherlock might be avoiding the place.

It was just a few strides across the wide corridor from the lift to the front door of the flat; there was a little table outside the door, with a spare arrangement of spiky flowers in a tall, austere vase, and a neat stack of mail. Sherlock glanced at the mail but didn’t move to pick it up; John stood by as Sherlock fitted his key into the lock. He gave the door a little shove with three fingers and it swung partway open. At last, he met John’s gaze, but still did not speak, offering only a tight smile.

“Shall I wait out here, or—?”

“Come in.”

The entry was carpeted, all done in shades of silver and pale grey from the walls and console table, to the framed art on the wall—black and white photographs, stark and abstract, odd angles and extreme close-ups that distorted the subjects or reduced them to their most basic lines and shapes. Sherlock looked around a bit, as if he wasn’t sure where he wanted to go. In the end, he moved straight ahead to the foyer’s end, where it opened into a tall-ceilinged, large-windowed sitting room and massive gourmet kitchen; a wide central island separated the two spaces. The kitchen was white, with dark countertops the colour of pavements after soaking rain; the sitting room furniture was black leather and chrome, low-slung, posh and Scandinavian.

Sherlock wandered as if he were unfamiliar with the place, taking a slow turn around the far side of the island, dragging his fingers along the edge of the worktop. They stuttered and he paused to look;
the edge was chipped where something had been dropped—or thrown—against it. He said nothing, continued his stroll. He opened the refrigerator door and closed it again, so quick John couldn’t imagine that its contents had registered in Sherlock’s mind. John suddenly noticed Sherlock’s bags were still in his hands; he set them down beside the sofa and kept himself close to the archway where they’d entered. The view out the floor-to-ceiling windows was magnificent, blue sky and city architecture. John didn’t comment.

As he approached, Sherlock gestured to the sofa. “I was sitting there when I opened your gift of the little car,” he offered, and his voice was strange—soft, slow, as if they were inside a church underwater. John wondered how much of Sherlock was really present at that moment, and longed to sweep him out the door back into the world. Sherlock flicked open the button on his suit jacket.

He passed John, back into the entry and veered left down another hallway. John trailed him, at a slight distance. Sherlock took a sharp right and vanished through a doorway too far for John to see what the room was. Within a second or two, Sherlock reappeared, crossed the hall, and vanished again. When he emerged, he was carrying something small in one hand, which he slipped into his shirt pocket. “My favourite pen,” he said. Then: “I’m thinking of reconfiguring this so these two offices and this little hall are all one space, a guest suite.”

John said, “Ah,” and nodded.

“Not sure yet,” Sherlock said. “I’ll have to meet with an architect and an interior designer. The flat could have better flow; I’ve always thought so.”

“Mm,” John agreed, though he was still so impressed with the sheer scale of the place and the obvious expense of every stick of furniture, appliance, and bit of finishing he’d seen, he couldn’t conceive of how it could be improved. Sherlock shushed away down another short corridor and through a double-door to what John figured must be the master bedroom. He followed, and the hair on his forearms stood up. Sherlock was big-eyed and languid; his subdued motions and extreme quiet were eerie.

Sherlock stopped so suddenly just inside the bedroom doors that John nearly walked into his back, and had to sidestep to land beside him. Tugging at his lower lip, Sherlock stared at the bed. It was huge, low, a mattress on a black lacquer platform with an imposing headboard that rose to points, weirdly ornate, reminding John of the rounded spires of Russian cathedrals. It was hotel-neat, with white sheets and duvet, fluffed pillows, and a sharply folded, ink-grey throw resting at an angle across it. The bedside lamps were centered on the nightstands. There was no dust.

Sherlock made a half-strangled humming sound in his throat and abruptly marched on, through another door. John followed, keeping his distance, hands behind his waist. Sherlock’s neck was pink. Somehow it seemed he had receded, that he was less and less opaque. He nervously worked his palms together, fingertips to wrists, and John could hear the hush and drag of his skin. The far wall boasted racks full of clothes; the near side was just long wooden bars full of empty clothes hangers, evenly spaced. The central island with its pink marble top was gleaming. Sherlock yanked out a drawer and the noise was shocking; John flinched. A black leather tray hit the countertop with a heavy slap. There were wristwatches inside, resting in velvet. Sherlock laid his hand on top of them, splay-fingered, and tilted his face up toward the ceiling as if beseeching. His hand dragged as he walked away, keeping contact until he couldn’t anymore, toward another door opposite where John stood. Sherlock reached inside with one long arm and clicked on a light, scanned, and turned away, never having put so much as the toe of his shoe across the threshold.

Jerking his thumb sideways to indicate behind him, Sherlock muttered, “That’s where he killed me.”

Before John could respond, Sherlock passed the island and flung the tray of watches with a violent
sweep of his hand; they flew, and scattered on the carpet. In a thick drone: “He ruined everything I loved.”

Without breaking stride he brushed past John, who could feel Sherlock’s radiant heat as their chests brushed, see perspiration on his upper lip. He marched to the head of the bed and grabbed a fistful of the bedclothes, yanking them down as he walked, left them in a trailing heap on the floor. Through gritted teeth: “This is a lie.”

John jogged after him; Sherlock was out of the bedroom in an instant, hands in his hair, pulling furiously. Back in the entryway he slapped his palms down hard on top of the narrow, tall table set against one wall. “This is a different fucking table!” he growled. “I walked in that door—” He pointed, jabbing his finger accusingly. His face was going red. “And put my hands in my pockets like an idiot, and then he stomped me and I hit the table on the way down—” He whirled, slammed the sides of his fists down on the tabletop again and again, punctuating. “And this is not—that—table.”

John’s hand itched and drifted up, but slowly, and didn’t actually touch him. “Sherlock…”

“What is this? what?—and spinning on the spot. “He paid someone to walk in here and make it look as if he didn’t kill me. Clean my blood off the walls—did you see where the carpets were patched?—change the burnt, bloody sheets so the bed doesn’t stink of his cum—and even put a new fucking table. The empty hangers. My broken watches.”

His face was contorted with anguish. And rage. Veins were standing out on his temples and in his neck. His eyes, John noticed, were dry.

“All those texts without apologies, as if nothing had happened.” He gestured widely. “Nothing had. He deleted it. He made it go away.”

John stepped closer. Softly, he said, “Hey.”

Sherlock’s hands went into his hair, and he pulled, both sides at once, and his shoulders collapsed forward. “And now he’s just left.”

“Sherlock. He hasn’t just left. It’s his punishment.” John kept his voice steady and low.

“It doesn’t erase what he’s done,” Sherlock insisted, as if John needed convincing.

“No. Of course not.”

Sherlock blew a heavy breath through tight lips, seemed to gather himself for a moment while he stared at the floor near John’s feet. Lifting his chin, he reached inside his jacket and withdrew a folded handkerchief he used to wipe sweat from his upper lip and forehead before tucking it away again. He buttoned his jacket, settled his shoulders down and back, then shook his head as if to clear it.

“Forgive me. You shouldn’t have had to see this.” He waved his hand helplessly, indicating himself. “Me like this,” he clarified.

“I don’t mind.” John longed to step forward and close the space between them, hold him. Hold him up.

Sherlock said, “I need to…” and strode past John to the door, and then through it. “I’ll phone you in a bit; we’ll meet for tea before I dress for the salon.”
It seemed clear Sherlock wished to be alone, and though he hated to let him go, John only nodded and shrugged. “Sure. Yeah,” he said, hoping it had not come out sounding as helpless as he felt. The lift doors began to slide closed as he shut the penthouse door behind him, checking the knob to be sure it was locked. He heard Sherlock on his mobile, saying, “I need a meeting with Archer and Kent, Architects, as soon as you can make it; tell them it’s for me. And the interior designer who did Xie’s salon. . .”

John was pacing the sitting room, a short looping trail from the edge of the desk in the lounge to the kitchen door then back again. The fingers of his left hand were itchy; he stretched and curled them.

“Yeah, all right. Go ahead then,” he said, and cleared his throat.

Sherlock sat very still in the leather arm chair, with his legs crossed at the knees, wearing a dressing gown tied shut over a pair of slate-grey wool trousers cut scandalously close to his thighs and pleasingly low on his waist. His hair was a bit wild, having dried naturally after a shower in Xie’s dressing room, followed by a vigourous snog in a rickshaw taxi; it was after two in the morning but neither man was yet ready for sleep. A letter from the Mentor with no return address, no official seals, no monograms—indeed, no markings of any kind—had arrived a few days earlier. Inside: a note reading *As regards the whereabouts of William Campbell,* and an envelope sealed shut with a wax seal in a generic oak-leaf design.

John had been carrying the thing in his breast pocket for three days, and at night kept it next to him on the bedside table. Sherlock had offered to read it on his behalf but wanted John to be sure that knowing the truth would be better for him than whatever story he’d told himself to this point, to make his abandonment bearable. John had needed time to turn that over his mind.

He’d lived without Will this long, and more significantly, lived without answers—without that airy concept of “closure” which John tended to think was just more New Age bullshit—and he was fine, or had learned to be. Earlier that day, before leaving for a cocktail party in Xie’s salon (aperitifs and hors d’oeuvres with four elderly couples before a retirement dinner; Xie was disassembled and Sherlock back in Baker Street before midnight), Sherlock had suggested that John should seriously consider what would change, if he knew the truth.

“If he’s alive somewhere, and left you, never in the intervening time having gotten in touch—what do you do?”

“Probably nothing. If he’d wanted to speak to me, he probably could have. Obviously I’ve been a bit of a vagabond—was in the Americas twice, all over the bloody world, rarely in one place very long—but he knew all my London places, knew people in common. . .In all those years, he could have, I think, if he’d wanted to. So. No. I don’t think I’d try to get in touch with him when he clearly doesn’t want me to.”

“And if he isn’t alive,” Sherlock prompted. “What would you do then?”

“Dunno. Keep a good thought for him. Maybe visit the grave, if there is one. Probably feel a bit guilty; if he’s gone and has been since that day, it’s probably to do with me. What I am.” He wet his lips and corrected himself. “Was.”

“You can’t fix that, or change it,” Sherlock reminded him.
“No,” John agreed. “I knew what the costs could be, going in. And if I have to feel guilty about one life lost on account of...my whole history.” He cleared his throat again, slipped the drapes aside with two fingers and flicked a gaze up and down the empty street. “I suppose that’s fair enough.” He sighed. “There’s plenty in my life to feel guilty for, but I don’t. A bit of guilt might do me good.” He paced and fought the tremor in his hand. “Go ahead, then.”

Sherlock broke the wax seal and slid out the folded sheet of paper inside. He opened it and scanned the contents. Before he said anything, he looked one last time at John, trying to be sure.

John prompted, “So?”

“He’s a hospice nurse, near Lausanne.”

John nodded. He needed a minute to swallow it. “Aha...anything else? In there about him?”

“Married a vlast woman and was reclassified; four children in five years.”

Will had left him. John had kept secrets from him, lied to him, but also assumed he’d wait, and cope. Instead, someone he had deeply loved had simply walked away without so much as a goodbye. John realised in that moment that he had, in fact, always assumed Will was dead. Somehow, having it made clear he’d been wrong felt worse.

John made a little noise of assent. “Hm. Well.” He tried to clear a lump from his throat, but it wouldn’t go. “That’s fair enough, too.”

Dear John,

You are asleep beside me as I write this, breathing on my elbow in thin cool streams that tickle the tiny hairs on my arm. That gooseflesh rises on my skin when you are near is nothing new, and yet I find it thrilling, even now. You are my fortress.

There are things I have not said, even though they are true, and which are elemental, sprinkled down into even the smallest atoms of me. They are these:

I am flawed: I starve, and I am scarred, and I feel more at ease in a mask—or in the dark—than in my own, defective skin. I have come to think these are immutable, intrinsic.

I am apart: I have created a world to inhabit where I exist, and cease to exist, at once. To spell it out, describe, and label it makes it out a sort of madness and it is likely I am (at least a little) mad. Mad or not, it is both escape and refuge to me, and I am unlikely to ever surrender it. My place apart is my sacred ground. If that sacred ground were made of actual soil, I would kneel every day to kiss it. I would eat it. You understand.

I am alone: There is not a single soul anymore tethering itself to me by even the thinnest of threads. I am only my own. A person truly alone is, I think, perhaps a weightier burden than one other soul can comfortably carry.

But, of course, you could say all these same things of yourself. Do you see yourself in it? I see you there, and I find I am perfectly comfortable with your starving (starved of rest, starved of dreams), and with your scars (not all of them visible, even when the clothes fall away), and with your darkness, and with your mask. Your darkness thrills me. Your mask enchants me. I see your world
apart—the things you can never say aloud, the escape you made for yourself—and I would never carelessly tread over your sacred ground; I lay my hand over my heart in respect of the home you have made there upon it. I see how you drag along all the broken threads that once tied you to other souls, and how much you are to carry, in only the cupped cradle of my own two hands. How I want to. Dear John, please let me.

If ever two souls were but shattered halves of a whole, urgent to be reassembled, surely they are yours and mine. We are imperfect for each other.

In truth, I am your
Sherlock

“Your man at Unity’s been in touch,” Greg said, laying his knife and fork at an angle over his empty dinner plate. “Which I have to say is a bit weird, seeing as how I didn’t give him my mobile number.”

John half-smirked. “He’s many things, but he is not my man,” he said lightly. A server in what looked like elegant pyjamas—black silk brocade, frog closures at one shoulder, silvery (what John now knew as) piping in all the seams—topped off champagne glasses for him and Greg, and another server poured sparkling water for Molly. “Anyway, what’s he had to say?”

“Couple of incidents in different places; St Petersburg had rather a bad one, I take it—basically a riot, lots of looting, property damage, some injuries, only one death but could be incidental. Tokyo had some weird stuff—suicides and something that looked like a die-in? People dropping on the pavements in the squares.”

“Nothing local, though,” Molly put in. “Quiet all over England.” She dropped her voice and leaned closer to John. “It was meant to start here at the Ball, though, at least in London.”

John cast a glance at the long wall several dozen yards behind her, noted uniformed police stationed every dozen feet or so. He’d already clocked a handful of plain-clothes ones in the crowd as well, and assumed there were probably many more. “Security’s quite obvious here, and I could see it out in the streets all day today. The build-up over the past few days, actually. Bit unnerving but probably for the best.”

Greg nodded, and put his arm across the back of Molly’s perspex dining chair as he sat back. “I think we may have actually done it.” He rapped his knuckles on the table top, though the muffled thud against the thick cloth was less than satisfying, and it was anyone’s guess whether the table beneath it was even made of real wood. “Not getting too puffed up about it just yet, but so far it bodes well.”

John raised his champagne flute and said, “To peace in our time.”

“Peace in our time,” Greg echoed, and Molly joined in, the rims of their glasses ringing against each other.

The servers were clearing dinner plates with silent precision, all over the giant ballroom—really four smaller ballrooms with the dividing walls removed—and the orchestra began playing slightly peppier tunes, inviting couples to take a moderate-tempo turn on the dance floor. Long tables seating forty guests apiece stood three deep along three walls in a U-shape; the inner ring was of smaller, round tables that seated from four to ten guests each, and in the center was the dance floor. At one end of
the room was the stage, two-thirds of which was taken up by the musicians, and which had a long runway jutting out in front, stepping down every now and again so that it eventually met the dance floor. The décor was shades of silver and grey, with the clear chairs, clear vases for the centerpieces, clear crystals dripping from the floral arrangements and chandeliers—everything steely or sparkling. They’d been served dinner on thin slabs of slate, clear crystal salad plates edged in hematite, speckled-granite bowls, and transparent dinner plates shot through with veins of what looked like mercury. Everything was icy and cool but also slightly earthy, like the peak of a mountain, without the expected over-reliance on shades of white. Of course, Xie had supervised the design down to the last detail—it was not just a ball to celebrate Unity Day; it was Xie’s biggest party of the year.

The servers were all clad in black, and shushed about the place on slippered feet; the drashas in attendance were dressed in whatever fashion pleased them—from tuxedos and gowns, to traditional kimonos, to dramatic costumes—but all adhering to the black-only clothing aesthetic. The guests at the ball had been invited to wear “creative black tie,” hence most men in tuxedos of more and less daring cuts, with emphasis on interesting accessories, and most women in elaborate evening gowns, from the mundane (retro, puff-sleeved, dusty rose satin that rumour held had once belonged to a certain princess, Before) to the avant garde (draped rows of jet beads barely hiding the shimmering skin of one ingénue socialite’s voluptuously curved derriere, to say nothing of the blatant pink of her nipples staring at some poor, flustered fellow across the dinner table).

Molly’s strapless column of copper-coloured watered silk emphasized the roundness of her still-small but obviously pregnant middle, and her upswept hair drew attention to her impossibly delicate neck and small, pretty features. If John had initially had his doubts about the truth of the couple’s assertion of Molly’s condition—against all expectations and hopes, given the presence of population suppressant in the drinking water for so many years—he doubted no more; Molly was radiant, with clear skin and full cheeks. John found himself wanting to get closer; she smelled especially lovely, and there was some air of magic about her. Sherlock had been a bit fussy over her in the preceding few weeks, suggesting she hire an assistant, an idea she rejected with a laugh—the assistant’s assistant! she’d scoffed, and Sherlock teased, I thought you were the Artistic Director.

Greg looked smart in a modern tux in brown-black with a golden-white shirt and champagne-coloured necktie and pocket square. It was obvious when he was standing, though, that his shoes were new, and pinched him. For his part, John was wearing his first new pair of shoes in years; Sherlock had insisted on taking him to his cordonnier (they’d made the rounds—not only the shoemaker, but also the tailor and haberdasher, the Japanese babulya with her lotions and potions and her tiny hands for some reason digging around in John’s hair, and finally, the barber, where John got his first properly manly hot-towel shave with a straight razor). In the end, John had come away coiffed, manicured, with a smooth face and a tingly feeling in his scalp that lasted nearly a week. On the morning of the ball, a courier had brought round a sharp new suit in matte off-black in a mid-weight silk: flat-front trousers with a six button placket and a break in the cuffs Sherlock and the tailor had argued over; a jacket with just the narrowest shawl collar and single-button closure; along with three shirts with monogrammed cuffs. He’d chosen a crisp white shirt and narrow, black silk necktie with fine diagonal pinstripes in dark cranberry. Sherlock had arranged his cranberry-and-olive paisley handkerchief in a manner that struck John as quite pretty, and tucked it into John’s breast pocket with his long, pale fingers.

John reckoned he cleaned up pretty well, and the shoes were incredibly soft on top and sturdy below, perfectly fit and elegant but not fussy. He’d tried on the suit right away, under Sherlock’s intense, appraising gaze, and when he’d done up the jacket button it occurred to him the tailor had not accounted for his secreted weapon.

“No room, ah, for my. . .” he’d said, eyeing himself in the mirror inside the wardrobe door.
“Yes, well, Baratunde did anticipate you dressing to the right, Captain,” Sherlock said silkily.

John laughed. “My gun,” he clarified. “The trousers are fine. It’s the jacket I’m worried about.”

“But you’re retired,” Sherlock said, and stood behind John, checking his reflection, tugging at the shoulder seams and then sliding pinched fingers down along the lapels.

“Me being retired doesn’t mean there’s no danger.”

Sherlock looked wicked, and flicked his tongue-tip against John’s ear before he said, “I’ll say there’s danger...of me shredding this suit to bits with my teeth just to get to you, before we even step foot out the door.” John let his head tilt away as Sherlock pressed small, sucking kisses along the side of his throat, and Sherlock insisted on hanging the suit properly even as they hastily undressed on their way to the bed.

In the end, John attended the Unity Day Ball without his weapon, though it was clear to him it would be a very long time, indeed—if ever—before he became accustomed to not feeling it there between his bicep and ribs. As it was, he still kept it in the nightstand rather than locking it in the safe, though he had taken time not only to clean and oil it, but also to unload it, the last time he’d put it away.

The three were seated at a small table near the edge of the dance floor. The fourth place setting remained undisturbed and the name calligraphed on the place card was Sherlock Holmes. John appreciated the gesture of having it acknowledged, in even a small way, that he was not attending the ball unescorted; on the contrary, his companion was certain to be the most beautiful creature in the room.

The orchestra stopped playing for a moment to clear couples away from the dance floor, and the room dimmed; a spotlight fell on a bare corner of the stage, and one of the drashas crept onto the bandstand and knelt beside a flat, wooden harp-like instrument and began to pluck and stroke the strings, drawing forth lilting tones that sounded sweetly melancholy, with a sense of anticipation—even longing. The room was in an absolute hush, lit only by blue-white light hidden in and muted by the floral arrangements on each table, with the spotlight trained on the empty corner of the stage. There were a few moments of dramatic thrill in the otherwise gentle song, raising tension in the air, and it seemed every person in the room was holding in a breath. John’s back straightened.

A fluid rush of melody like a brook flooded with melted snow, and all at once, a vision appeared.

All of silvery-white feathers carefully shingled over its surface, the gown’s silhouette was columnar and close to the body, nipped in at the waist and clinging at the hips and down the thighs to the just below the knees where it burst out into an exuberant, ruffled train that made Xie appear to be floating across the stage on a fair weather cloud. Overlaying the shoulders and the front of the bodice was an arrangement of similarly shingle-styled, feather-shaped, silvertone metal plates that looked like an armoured breastplate, tapering to a point in front of the narrow waist. Fitted, long sleeves of white silk ended in more of the cloudlike ruffles. Xie’s face was painted stark white, shimmering as the planes and angles of the elegant face caught and reflected light, with glittering lips and lashes dusted with snowy glitter that looked like sparkling sugar, and a neck-corset of more white feathers. Xie’s hair was combed straight back and painted white, to accommodate the wearing of an elaborate headpiece impossibly high, of white spindly branches speckled with shimmer dust.

As Xie approached the center of the stage, the applause of the crowd drowned out the koto-player for a moment or two, until Xie’s gentle hand movement persuaded the room to quiet. The elegant face was hidden by a draped and punctured veil of delicate, hand-embroidered lace suspended from the vertical branches, then gathered over the shoulders and trailing down Xie’s back. Molly had wept as the lace was run through and—to some extent—ruined; piercing and shredding a piece of fabric so
lovingly, painstakingly handcrafted and so terribly expensive felt tragic, somehow, but the ultimate effect was visually stunning. “We suffer for beauty,” Xie had reminded her as the veil was draped into place, and Molly wiped at her eyes with a hanky before stepping down from the stool she needed to reach high enough to be helpful.

Xie arrived at the front edge of the stage and went still for a moment. John swallowed hard; Xie was so beautiful it made his heart ache. One hidden hand reached across to drag the veil away from the glittering, ghostly face, and there was a collective, quiet gasp.

“Dear friends, how kind of you to join me at this celebration of Unity,” Xie said in the still-surprising dark-velvet voice. No microphone, John noted; just Xie’s voice carefully projected over the rapt, silent room. “You’ll forgive my late appearance; I prefer to arrive just in time for dessert, my favourite meal of the day.” There was a ripple of gentle laughter. “I trust my friends have been taking good care of you this evening, and that you are warmed through by good will—and good wine.” A junior drasha in a black evening gown glided out from the wings to present Xie with a champagne flute. Xie in full regalia was at least nine feet tall, and with those cloud-like sleeves, the glass appeared miniature as the elegant fingertips gripped its stem.

Once the drasha had vanished again, Xie went on, “We’ll all be dancing until dawn, I promise, but if you’ll indulge me two tiny things before then, I’d be so grateful.” The pale eyes scanned the room as Xie spoke, drawing in each guest individually; to John it felt like a spell, or a preternatural power Xie had to make even hundreds of people feel as if they each were alone in a room with Xie’s undivided attention.

“First, a toast.” Xie raised the glass, and the guests did likewise. “To our peaceful, happy lives thanks to Unity; to our time spent together in such charming company, here in our floating world; and to our futures, may they be healthy, joyful, brimming with love. To you, my darling friends. I drink to you.”

Glasses clinked merrily everywhere, and a murmur went up as guests toasted each other, Unity, and Xie.

“Peace in our time,” John repeated, and Molly and Greg echoed him as the rims of their glasses rang together. “Hear, hear. Peace in our time.”

Xie took the smallest sip and the flute was whisked away by the silent junior drasha. Xie made a low, smoothing motion of the hands, and the room quickly fell quiet.

“My second indulgence, if no one minds, is to share a story with you which I find heartwarming, and which I hope will bring you sweet memories of me after we have made our farewells.” Xie, an armoured bird walking on a cloud, descended the first few steps and slowly drifted forward along the runway, still catching eyes.

“A man had an exquisite bird,” Xie began, and made a lightly comical, self-referential motion as if only just discovering the feathers of the gown, eliciting light laughter. “. . .which he kept at all times in a filigree cage, though he was adamant that anyone and everyone he happened to meet should peer between the bars at his beautiful prisoner, which preened to show off its remarkable plumage, and sang so sweetly listeners would clutch at their hearts and shake their heads, swooning so.” Xie rested one covered hand in the center of the metal-plated chest, angled the eyes up and away as if overwhelmed with emotion. Easily navigating the next few stairs, Xie went on.

“The bird’s pretty cage sat near the window of the man’s hut, and one night, the bird spied a wolf outside, pacing in its arrogant, loping way, back and forth and back again, now and then looking at the bird, but keeping a respectful distance. It circled and settled to sleep within sight of the window, which unnerved the bird. At dawn, the wolf rose and stretched, yawning to show all its vicious teeth,
and ambled away into the forest. It returned that evening, and then night after night, only strutting past the window, then sleeping nearby. After some time the bird became less distressed by the wolf’s nearness, and was able to sleep peacefully as well, there in the pretty, delicate cage.”

Xie descended the last of the steps, appearing to float, the lace veil trailing down from the shivering white branches to cover one arm, and Xie drew it up between two fingertips, dipping the face a bit, the veil a wing where a bird might tuck its head to sleep.

“After many nights sleeping in sight of each other,” Xie continued, and the veil dropped away again. “To the bird’s surprise, the wolf spoke in a voice redolent of the forest and of a lifetime spent on the hunt. ‘Fly away, bird,’ the wolf said, but not unkindly. ‘Why don’t you fly away?’”

Xie had reached the floor and now began a slow circle of the room, telling the story to every face, all of which were turned up, reflecting a little of Xie’s light back, enchanted by the magnificent, sweet-talking work of art.

“The bird was puzzled by this, and replied simply, ‘I am in a cage and cannot possibly fly away,’ in a voice of crystal-shard sadness. The wolf stalked closer—just a bit—and said, ‘The door is open, pretty bird, and always has been.’ And the bird looked, and saw it was true, and wept a blood-tear that splashed on the floor of the cage. The bird’s chest filled up suddenly with a desire to fly away that was so strong, the bird feared it would burst entirely apart. ‘But you, wolf,’ the bird protested, ‘you’ll snap me up in your vicious teeth; I know all about your kind.’”

Xie clasped the hands together beneath the fluttering sleeves, the shoulders collapsing slightly together as if in fear or worry.

“‘No, pretty bird,’ the wolf answered, and circled, and lay down as if to sleep. ‘I have longed my whole life to love a thing even half as beautiful as you are. You are a treasure, a dream made real. I am a danger to every other pretty little thing in the world, it’s true, but you have nothing to fear from me.’ The wolf rested its big jaw on its paws, and though it did not close its eyes, only stared with admiration at the beautiful caged bird, its body was soft and slack, as if it were already asleep.”

Xie had floated halfway around the dance floor by then, and the crowd was still completely rapt, near silent.

“The bird was by now stirred nearly to madness with its desire to fly, and its claws worried the perch, its wings twitched, its tail fluttered. At last, the bird made a leap of faith and out it flew, through the open door, through the open window, into the open air of the evening. At first, flying felt like falling, and the bird was terrified. Soon enough, though, it remembered the joy of its wings.” Xie’s gaze traveled upward and seemed to track some dream of flight, circling above all their heads. “The wolf watched, and the bird flew and flew, but as its wings were far out of practice, it soon became tired. ‘I’ll carry you when you need to rest and be held,’ the wolf said then. ‘I don’t mind.’ The bird’s new freedom was exhausting, but its faith had already been once rewarded, so it did take the chance to alight on the wolf’s warm, sturdy back.”

John reached into his jacket for a handkerchief—white, embroidered with Sherlock’s monogram, for it was his, and even smelled of him, his incense-and-rosewood scent, like a church—and clutched it in his fist. His throat ached.

Xie was near now, just a few more pairs of eyes to meet before the turquoise gaze would meet John’s gaze, and John’s own eyes prickled in anticipation of the moment.

“The bird was free, and flew as it liked, anywhere it wished to go. When it was tired, the wolf was there waiting, a safe place to rest. After some days—when the wolf would lope along beneath the
soaring bird, keeping watch, whispering words of admiration and adoration—and nights—when the bird would nestle into the wolf’s fur, finding the sweet softness beneath the prickly exterior coat—the bird whispered in the wolf’s ear as they settled down to sleep.”

Xie’s eyes met Molly’s then, and Greg’s, in turn. “‘Thank you for saving me,’ the bird murmured sweetly.”

“The wolf shook its furry head a bit,” Xie went on, and fixed those changeable, silver-flecked eyes—Sherlock’s eyes, the only part of Sherlock that was impossible for Xie to hide—on John’s face, which was smiling, though he worried it might soon crack apart, laughing or weeping, he wasn’t sure. Such a perfect work of art as Xie worked on him in strange and wonderful ways. “‘You saved yourself,’ the wolf replied. ‘All I did was tell you the truth.’”

Xie’s hand reached out and John met it with his own, clasping palm to palm beneath the cloud of ruffled sleeve, and the room erupted in applause for Xie’s tale having come to such a satisfying end. Xie withdrew and John cleared the lump from his throat. Molly touched his sleeve but he could not acknowledge it, even with a glance, as he did not wish to make a fool of himself—again! it was another special brand of Xie’s magic that drove him to it, one he found amusing and frustrating at once—by weeping in front of every vlast so-and-so who could afford a ticket to Xie’s most glamorous party.

“Aren’t you kind,” Xie said then, and tipped the chin, dropping the eyelids shut, placing the hand over the armoured heart once more. “Thank you all ever so much for allowing me to interrupt the festivities with my little fairy story.” Once again appearing to walk on clouds, Xie half-circled to nod and smile gratefully to as many guests as possible, and finally stood by the base of the runway, ready to ascend. “Now—at last—everyone please have some of the beautiful cake, and every other sweet thing you can manage to find; you all deserve sweetness. Thank you again for joining me on this special night. I hope to see each of you again very soon.”

Another burst of applause, and Xie turned to drift up the steps, back toward the stage, still spotlit. At the first steady, upward movements, quiet gasps were heard from every corner of the room. The back of the gown bore a diamond-shaped cutout that bared the beautiful angles of pale-skinned shoulder blades, the descending chain of the spine in rounded shadows and highlights—and a riot of red and pink and violet scars, giving the effect of something having been violently, carelessly cut away.

Wings.

Molly let out a little cry, and Greg reached for her hand, stroked the back of her fingers. “Oh, you gorgeous, brave man...” John sighed, and the image of Xie’s rising, retreating back blurred and shattered as his eyes filled, then spilled. He pressed the handkerchief hard against his closed lids, gathering himself. When he looked again, Xie had receded farther away, so upright and sturdy, long-necked and with the chin held high. As the guests watched, Xie mounted the stage, turned one last time with a sideways sweep of the trailing skirt, and blew a kiss off the tips of the elegant fingers. For Captain Watson alone, Xie spared a wink, which got heads turning, guests straining to identify where the gesture had been aimed. In another moment, Xie circled, floated, and vanished.

The orchestra struck up a swinging melody, the lighting rearranged itself, and giddy partygoers streamed toward the dance floor even as the servers wheeled out carts heavily laden with sweets, and others with clear tea pots bearing sculptural blossoms inside. Only those with trained eyes and ears noticed a scuffle in one corner of the room, or that half a dozen black-clad servers were quickly hustled away by security guards; in just seconds they were gone, new guards standing in place of the old ones, servers claiming abandoned sweets-carts, as if nothing had happened. John exchanged knowing looks with Molly and Greg, and absently patted his side, which resulted in a brief panic
before he remembered his recent retirement.

“Xie was absolutely stunning,” Greg volunteered, mostly to Molly, who he tended to credit quite a bit for the way Xie’s ensembles turned out. “The prettiest I’ve seen, I think.”

“That armour bit had a back on it, last I saw,” Molly said. “That was a bit of a shock.”

“Which way to the dressing room?” John inquired, tucking away the handkerchief. “I’d like to say hello.”

“Come!” Sherlock’s booming voice through a closed door, and John was surprised to find it unlocked as he let himself in.

The dressing room was quite basic, nothing like Xie’s beautiful little room off the salon, and was generally used for wedding parties to ready themselves before events held in the ballrooms. There were several mirrors of various shapes and heights; a multi-purpose worktop currently cluttered with a trunk’s worth of make-up, broken branches, fallen feathers, and other beautiful refuse; a pair of overstuffed, brocade sofas, and a few mismatched wooden chairs. Xie stood leaning forward over the worktop, scrubbing at the face with a damp terrycloth towel, which served both to remove the paint and to bring roses to the cheeks. Silvery false lashes were stuck hastily to the surface of the mirror; the headpiece lay on one of the sofas, its tattered, priceless lace veil arranged prettily across the tufted back. The sleeves were shaken back to bare the big hands, with their white-lacquered nails. Clearly the cloud of skirt hid quite tall shoes; even partly disassembled, Xie was of intimidating height, near seven feet.

A glance and smile in the mirror, over the shoulder at John, was entirely Sherlock.

“Impossible,” John blurted, but quietly. He stepped forward, minding the train of the gown, watching closely as the make-up was scrubbed away. He hadn’t noticed the dangling ropes of diamonds fixed to hang from each ear lobe, before. They swung and sparkled as the face turned this way and that, the flannel working in light, quick circles over the jaw and lips.

“I thought if I was quick, I might be able to at least join you for tea before the party’s over,” Sherlock said then. “And I do want piece of that cake. It’s been in the works for four months—eighteen tiers, nine flavour combinations; I’m gagging to have it at last.” He grinned at John’s reflection.

“Then you shall have it,” John grinned.

Sherlock’s hair was still slicked back and painted white, and the gown took up nearly half the floor space. John puzzled at the hourglass shape of the torso, assuming a corset or similar must lay beneath the close-fitting gown; the way it hugged Sherlock’s bottom bordered on miraculous and John found himself intensely longing to pluck every feather and let them fall. Perhaps save just one with which to tickle Sherlock in lazy curlicues all over his belly and thighs.

The reflected, pale eyes were still smudged black around the rims as they fixed John with a narrowed gaze. “You can hang your jacket there.” Sherlock gestured over one shoulder, to a rolling metal rack with a few empty hangers on it. “I’ll have you on that sofa, then a quick shower, and at last my cake.”

John’s eyes went comically wide—he caught sight of it in the mirror. “Have me?” he sputtered.
“Mm. Please.” Sherlock’s voice was sly, and so low John felt it reverberating below his belt. “You’ve been dying to undress Xie since the first night we met. So.” A little shrug of the shoulders made the armoured breast plate rattle, and the long fingers reached behind the neck for the fastenings at the back of the feathered neckband.

John flicked open the button on his jacket, slid it off his shoulders and let it fall on the floor. He stepped forward, and gently pushed the skirt’s ruffled cloud of a train aside with his shin, trying to get closer to Sherlock’s back, side, anywhere, closer. Sherlock dipped his middle finger into a pot of night-sky blue and smeared it onto his lips, pressing and sliding them to spread it. John growled and reached for the narrow waist.

Sherlock turned slightly toward him, then, and he was still miles tall and the gown was magnificent, delicate and shapely and John couldn’t imagine where to even begin unwrapping his prize from within it.

“How do I . . .?” Beneath the palm at Sherlock’s waist, John felt metal stays, and then he slid his hand down the side of Sherlock’s hip, smoothing impossibly soft white feathers as he went.

Sherlock collapsed his shoulders forward, shook the sleeves out of the way of his hands and maneuvered the breastplate off by unhooking something John couldn’t even see. It was dragged and dropped onto the table with a weighty, rippling sound like a length of chain being lowered onto a solid surface. The long fingers reached for the center of the rounded neckline, which was quite high, covering the notch between the collarbones, and fiddled about a bit there. Sherlock got hold of something between thumb and two fingers, and held it as he ducked down, muttering, “Open your mouth.” John did as he was told, and Sherlock offered one of those lipless kisses he remembered so well from a night in the salon when they had taken advantage of a drug-stupoured orgy in the main room to steal time together in an alcove. Sherlock’s tongue-tip circled John’s, and then flicked against his lower lip. This time, though, with no real need to be careful, Sherlock slotted his painted lips between John’s lips, and sucked a kiss that left John stained blue around the mouth.

“Here,” Sherlock said quietly, and reached for John’s hand, moving it to grasp a tiny metal zipper-pull. “Hidden zip; just pull. Tell me why you want to.”

“It’s all so pretty, and wants touching,” John murmured, and began a gentle tug downward, feeling the tiny catch as each tooth in the zip let go, “But underneath…” He hummed, and Sherlock cradled his face in both hands, tilted it up and kissed his mouth thoroughly. The zipper split from the top down, baring the pale center of Sherlock’s upper chest, the valley between his pectorals coming into view, with its sprinkling of medium-coarse hair. “Underneath, I knew there would be hard muscle and heavy bone beneath the skin, and I wanted to feel it. Touch you all over.” He stopped pulling the zip just long enough to skate his fingers down from the base of the neck, through the chest hair, tracing one upper edge of a pectoral which was, in fact, pleasingly hard. Sherlock dipped down to open his mouth against the side of John’s throat, scraping with teeth, dragging his lower lip. “You smell so good,” John said, as he resumed the downward slide of the zipper, relishing the way his fingertips dragged through the ticklish feathers that so cunningly hid it. “Xie’s jasmine scent, warm because your heart’s racing.”

“It is.”

“I wanted to smell you, though—you know that now; remember I told you?—all those guarded places where you smell most like a man. I wanted to find them.” The gown was open enough to expose that there was, in fact, a waist cincher with steel bones, and wide flat straps with delicate metal buckles down the front—nothing that would interfere with the lines of the gown. John tucked the tips of his first two fingers into its top—satin-ribbon-edged—and slid them to one side; Sherlock
sucked a breath, giving John room to move. Drawing his fingers out, he edged the gown open and held it, baring one of Sherlock’s nipples. “Here,” John murmured, and nuzzled the pink skin with the tip of his nose, then applied a quick, damp curl of his tongue. His hand moved, and he delved in deeper with his nose, near the pit of Sherlock’s arm. “Here, too.” He inhaled slowly, and hummed. Sherlock’s shoulders jumped as if to get away from it, but he wrapped his arms around John’s neck and leaned to kiss the crown of his head. John kissed his bare chest in return, humming a little as he went.

“Shall I help?” Sherlock asked quietly, and released his hold on John’s head and the back of his neck to reach for the buckles on the corset.

“Imagine you’d better.” A soft smile against Sherlock’s sternum, and a closed-lipped kiss. “I can handle this bit, though,” he added, and went back to pulling the zip. Their eyes met and they exchanged small smiles. Sherlock made quick work of the cincher, and groaned gratefully as he snaked it out from inside the gown and flung it away onto the floor. John bent to kiss and lap at the reddened impressions on Sherlock’s abdomen from the stays and seams. “Perfectly gorgeous innie tummy button, of course, hello there,” John said quietly, and pressed a kiss just beside Sherlock’s navel. They both let go little laughs, and Sherlock raked fingers backward through John’s hair, down his neck, into the back of his shirt collar only as much as John’s necktie and shirt buttons would allow.

John’s voice changed to a breathless moan. “Oh, and this . . .” He raked his own fingertips downward from Sherlock’s navel, through the beginnings of the trail of dark hair, and tilted his face up, in search of Sherlock’s mouth. John growled and licked Sherlock’s lips; Sherlock answered the kiss by forcing his own tongue forward into John’s mouth, silencing him. John’s searching fingers met the elastic waistband of Sherlock’s typically tight undergarment, and then the thickened firmness of his upward-pointed prick trapped beneath; he palmed it and brushed firmly up and down, groaning into their kiss. “This has got to come off,” John breathed, and Sherlock momentarily leaned away, reaching for something on the cluttered makeup table beside them. Gleaming steel scissors with Fabric ONLY written on one blade came open at the waistband, slid quickly down one thigh with a soft swishing sound, and Sherlock dropped the scissors back onto the worktop. The stretch fabric couldn’t part fast enough for its own liking, and Sherlock dropped his trousers down onto the floor. John’s hand slipped around behind him to cup his arse from both sides, and they met again in a messy kiss that made quick work of swiping Sherlock’s lips clean of the lacquer.

“You gorgeous—” John muttered. “Let me. . .” A hand on Sherlock’s hip urged him down, and in a moment Sherlock was on his back in the cloud of soft white ruffles, feathers brushing the sides of his torso, his thighs, his arms. Kneeling between Sherlock’s knees, John tugged at the knot of his necktie to loosen it and opened the top button with one dexterous hand, even as he gripped Sherlock’s firm thigh with the other. He ducked to suck and bite at the inside of the taut thigh and Sherlock let it fall open wider for him; John made an appreciative sound and settled himself low, ran one hand down the shank of the patent boot, grabbed it by the heel and persuaded Sherlock to drape it over his shoulder. “I’m afraid we’re not going to make it to the sofa,” John smiled at him, then sucked a breath, watching Sherlock’s nimble fingers reaching down to shove the ruined pants well out of the way, cupping and caressing his own bollocks for good measure.

“I don’t mind,” Sherlock replied, and ran a hand over his eyes as if he were shy, dragged his forearm
down across his chest as if to hide it.

“Shh,” John whispered, and stroked his cheek along the sticky-smooth surface of the polished leather boot before ducking down to dig his greedy nose into the hair at the root of Sherlock’s prick, then opening his mouth, wide and wet, to slide up Sherlock’s length and finally wrap his lips around the oozing crown. He sucked, rolled his tongue around, sucked again, and Sherlock shuddered and let his arm fall away from his chest, to touch John’s hair and face.

“Suck hard,” Sherlock commanded, and John eagerly obeyed. Sherlock’s neck and chest arched and his head rolled, his hips rocking down so that John had to chase him. John wrapped one arm tight around Sherlock’s thigh, and let go a moan around Sherlock’s prick; the broken contact drew a frustrated whine from Sherlock and he wrapped fingers and thumb beneath John’s jaw. “So good,” he panted. “Deeper? Please, John.”

“Mm, move for me,” John replied, and licked his lips. His cock ached against the front placket of his trousers and he shifted the angle of his mouth to accommodate Sherlock’s rocking hips. John flattened his tongue, closed his lips, and countered Sherlock’s movements to take him even deeper. Sherlock’s hands held him at the back of his head and at his jaw, and he braced himself with one high-heeled foot against the floor. John’s eyes teared, so he closed them, and hummed encouragement around Sherlock’s pleasantly salty cock.

Sherlock began to hiccup little needy gasps around John’s name: “John. . . John. . . John!. . .” and John let his tongue curl, drawing back with tight suction. He felt Sherlock’s thighs go taut, and his hips stuttered out of rhythm and he let out a delicious, low Othhhhh that went on and on, filling John’s mouth, sweet-salty and blood-hot. John swallowed; and then swallowed again. He kissed Sherlock’s prick, the inside of this thigh, the soft inside crook of his knee as he reached to unfasten the trousers’ infuriating six buttons, which had seemed a good idea back at the tailor’s.

Sherlock hummed and slow-motion wriggled on the soft, now-slightly-squashed mound of the gown —John vaguely hoped it wasn’t ruined but was quickly distracted once more by his raging need. He finally freed himself from the trousers, worked his prick out of the front of his pants (some close-fitting but mostly boxers-shaped designer things Sherlock had chosen, so as to maintain nice lines in the suit), and licked his palm and fingers before wrapping them around his throbbing prick and pulling in firm, downward strokes. As Sherlock’s leg had long since fallen away from John’s shoulder, he shifted himself upward, lapping hot at Sherlock’s nipple, eventually settling his face into the hollow of Sherlock’s neck.

“That’s it,” Sherlock encouraged, and wrapped an arm around John’s back, let his fingers rest on John’s forearm as he stroked himself, drizzling thick drops of his desire onto Sherlock’s low belly. “Very nice.”

John barely processed Sherlock’s words, even as he kept up a stream of murmured encouragements that bordered on demands. Half out of his head, John could feel a knot of heat tightening deep inside him, and he licked at Sherlock’s neck sloppily, and chanted, “Beautiful man. . . you beautiful man. . . beautiful—oh—you beautiful man. . .”

John came on Sherlock’s hip, in the scruff of dark hair, and over his softening prick, and Sherlock held him through it as he shuddered, shouted, and then bit his lips.

They lay in their embrace, exchanging soft kisses and murmured exclamations of approval and appreciation. Eventually, Sherlock nudged John’s shoe with the inner edge of one platform boot. “We should get up; I need a shower.”

“Xie’s gown. . .” John said apologetically, as he rolled away onto his back, arching up to drag the
ruffled train out from beneath his thighs.

“Well worth it,” Sherlock grinned, and as he rose to sit, gathered it up like a blanket across his lap, held it with crossed arms against his chest, which was flushed pink.

“You’re so gorgeous,” John said, and sat up, leaning to kiss him. “That was a treat,” he admitted, and drew up the length of one dangling earring to snake over and across his fingertips, which made Sherlock shiver. “It’s only you I want, Sherlock.”

“I know.” He kissed John’s jaw. “Now. I very much want that cake, so if you’ll excuse me.”

Molly was a bit giggly when Sherlock and John at last rejoined her and Greg back in the ballroom, unable to meet their eyes, but scanning them up and down as if taking inventory of them. Sherlock was sure she must have come looking for them while John peeled back Xie’s layers to expose him, and heard them through the dressing room door (he imagined she may have even opened the door, but it was too intimate an idea and he shoved it away from himself as quickly as it had occurred to him). He found he couldn’t bring himself to be bashful or apologetic about it; John was his man, and he was John’s. Jim was gone. The criminal element had been rousted out of the drasha salons. Sherlock had begun to choose a new group of apprentices and Xie’s schedule was bursting. Loveliest of all, John welcomed his continued stay at the cozy flat in Baker Street for as long as he liked.

A server brought him three small slices of the massive, eighteen-tier cake so he could sample different flavours (cardamom and ginger cake with espresso cream filling; vanilla sponge with white chocolate ganache and strawberry compote; dark chocolate with tart cherry jam that was nothing like his grandmother’s cake, but would have to do). He was also given a cup of the blossoming tea that shimmered pearlescent and smelled faintly of lavender and apricot, and a narrow silver tray containing petits fours and artisan chocolates. He nodded approval and dipped the silver honeydripper into the crystal pot, drizzled golden honey into his tea cup in a figure-eight.

The party was in full swing, tipsy politicos and oligarchs seemingly without care, dancing with each other’s spouses, and cheering at each pop of a champagne cork. Sherlock knew a properly opened bottle should sigh like a well-satisfied lover, but the explosive sound and running streams of bubbles were what delighted partygoers, so he allowed the sommeliers to indulge the guests in this little burst of festivity, so long as they used only the second-best champagne. Sherlock dug away a little corner of the spice cake with the side of his fork and offered the first bite to John, who allowed himself to be fed, then caught Sherlock’s wrist and kissed the backs of his knuckles before letting him go. His man was still dangerous to every other pretty little thing in the world, but he watched Sherlock’s every tentative flutter of wings with admiration in his blue eyes, and Sherlock always slept quiet and safe curled up beside him.

Life was sweet, indeed.

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Epilogue

A Year On...

John poured two cups of strong tea from the gilded, bright yellow tea pot into matching cups Sherlock had made a mission of scouring junk shops to find—they could now comfortably serve themselves and three guests (four if one didn’t mind doing without a saucer). He sweetened both cups and tipped milk in, then carried them to the table. John never bothered with the tray, and Sherlock watched in amusement as John made several round trips from the worktop to the table with the tea, plates of sandwiches or scones or sliced apples sprinkled with cinnamon, spoons he’d forgotten on earlier trips, the sugar and milk.

Passing Sherlock his dog-eared, scribbled-in appointment book, John asked—as he did during every noontime breakfast—“So, what’s on today?”

Sherlock’s mobile phone began to buzz and jingle needily from its place on the mantel in the sitting room as it did during every noontime breakfast, late luncheon, tea, and midnight supper. As he did whenever he and John were eating together, Sherlock ignored it.

“If we did apprenticeship at half-one,” Sherlock reported, sipping his tea and humming appreciation at it. Once the drasha salons had been emptied of prostitutes—some weeping apologies, others bitter and defiant—in the wake of revelations about his ex-husband’s extracurricular role as a pimp, Sherlock had decided he must restructure his approach to apprenticeship, taking on groups of new drashas and putting them through what amounted to Drasha School. He felt that by putting his fingerprints directly on more of their early careers, rather than letting them be trained by third- or fourth-generation drashas, not only would each drasha have a higher, purer quality of knowledge, but also that fewer would be tempted to go bad—in whatever shape that may take—because they would feel stronger loyalty and connection to Xie, the drashaskaya.

Sherlock sipped again, and turned the handle of his cup just so after setting it on the saucer, a fidget John remembered from their early courtship, catching a glimpse of Sherlock’s long, sturdy back as he sat in a coffee shop awaiting John’s arrival. It made John smile and reach to give Sherlock’s wrist a squeeze.

“Oh, hello,” Sherlock smiled at him. “Good morning, Captain Watson, by the way. Thank you for the tea.”

“It’s my pleasure,” John replied, then prompted, “I know that’s not all you’ve got in that book of yours.”

“Of course not. Phone meeting with my therapist at three-fifteen, for half an hour.”

“Good,” John said, and meant it. Sherlock in the wake of his divorce after his years of abuse seemed to be gaining much insight through regular meetings with a compassionate professional. John had attended one session and came away feeling the woman was wise but not overly serious, firm but understanding, and only made him feel slightly as if he were a moth pinned to a board having his soft belly poked at.

Sherlock offered, “So that will give you a quiet afternoon on your own; will you write?”
“I think I probably will. Alex sent over those drawings the other day, and I’ve got ideas I can work on, for at least two of them.” Since Sherlock’s reunion with his old friend, the three of them had hit upon a collaborative project to memorialise some of the highlights of Xie’s looks over the years at the Icehouse. Sherlock would drag out a gown from the vault and with the help of Molly’s invaluably detailed notes, recreate the look so that Alex could make drawings of it while Xie reminisced about the inspiration, construction, memorable events at the salon, and so on. John made notes of what Xie said, and then wrote text to accompany each set of drawings, both technical specifications and more fanciful short passages, usually in the form of a retold—or entirely created—folk tale, anecdote, or fairy story. Once the looks were photographed, drawn, and written-up, the component pieces were passed on to some of Xie’s favourite designers to be repurposed, hence also cleaning out the vault, as Sherlock had been threatening to do for years. The work would be collected in an oversized, glossy book to be published in cooperation with Sherlock’s friend Nina Raymonde at Rose magazine and its parent publisher; they’d already decided profits would go to charitable causes in defense of the arts and to benefit partner-abuse victims.

John was also working on a novel; Xie just happened to know a literary agent more than excited by John’s talent for writing gritty, underworld dirty-dealings with a fair sprinkling of sexy romance. Buoyed by Xie’s praise of his storytelling during parties at the salon, John found confidence to make dab-hands at writing some of his own, and found that not only could he spin a yarn, but that he loved the feeling of being carried along on the flow of the act of writing, itself. When he was really ripping along, words coming as fast as he could type—or sometimes faster—he felt a sense of contented calm he’d rarely found elsewhere, and sought the sensation whenever he could get it, whether for silent hours in the flat or stolen minutes in a coffee shop. He was beginning to let Sherlock introduce him as a writer (he frequently said, “my pet writer,” but John didn’t mind).

“A new position on the Board of Overseers had been created in the months after the averted disaster of Deep Sea’s intended vlast genocide: Minister of the Populus. The position was created for and held by Greg Lestrade, who was meant to bring a ‘shlost point of view, which had previously gone unheard, to the highest levels of Unity government. While John admired Lestrade’s intelligence and dedication, as well as the seriousness with which he undertook the new appointment, John also suspected the hand of the Mentor had likely been involved in the creation of the new position. Lestrade’s major area of focus was a massive, top-to-bottom justice reform, and while there was no chance of a return to anything like representative democracy or a popular vote, Unity was looking at some of the legal systems in countries that had existed Before, and incorporating their less punitive, more transparent methods of meting out justice to the criminally inclined.

In the wake of the failed Unity Day plot, there had come the happy announcement that Population Control had been a great success, such that balance had finally been achieved, and the population suppressant additives in the drinking water were being phased out. Certain people in the know recognised this as a concession to Deep Sea Blue’s political wing, wrapped in pretty propaganda, but most citizens were ignorant and jubilant in equal measures, and the ‘shlost baby boom had already begun. One tiny celebrity had already crowded every luminary of the Floating World off magazine covers worldwide: Violet Hooper Lestrade was the first publicly acknowledged ‘shlost baby, and her first stroll in a pram pushed by her proud parents, as well as her half-birthday, had been
photographed, filmed, and written about in a way that reminded John of the way the royal babies’ had been Before, when John himself was a kid. It was often noted with a bit of cheeky delight that since Violet’s dad had a grown son with a son of his own, little Auntie Violet was actually eighteen months younger than her own nephew.

“Party tonight?” John asked around a mouthful of toast.

“No,” Sherlock said, making a note in his book with the pen he kept fastened to it with an elastic string. “Didn’t I promise three nights off each and every week, Captain Watson?”

“You did. Months ago. I’ve yet to see a week like that.” John was teasing.

“Things come up!” Sherlock protested with a grin that acknowledged both his naughtiness and that he knew he was forgiven.

“Anyway, we’ll sleep here tonight,” John clarified.

“Mm. I have plans for you, after my dinner meeting,” Sherlock said slyly, looking up from under his lashes in that positively coquettish way he had. “That is, if you’re free. . .”

“Everything I might have had, just cancelled,” John said quickly, flipping invisible pages in an imaginary appointment book.

“Tomorrow and the next three nights at the Icehouse, though,” Sherlock said, turning pages. “Maybe four. Five at the most. I’m waiting to hear about some group from Tokyo who may want drinking games and flirtation with the junior drashas.”

“But not with Xie,” John teased.

“Of course not with Xie,” Sherlock replied. “But I have to be there to keep watch over my children.”

“So, six nights for us in the penthouse,” John mused.

They had only recently begun spending nights there, renovations and redecoration having taken just over ten months. The layout was so different it barely seemed like the same flat (Sherlock had not returned to it after his lone visit with John in tow, until the place had been stripped down to the studs, just open walls and supporting pillars, a completely blank slate). Sherlock praised the improved flow from room to room, and the new aesthetic was well away from the sleek, two-tone-and-chrome look it had worn before. Sherlock had redone the flat in a fashion he termed “Gentleman’s bungalow,” which turned out to mean lots of built-in cabinetry, wood furniture with welcoming leather and velvet upholstery, fabrics and finishings decorated with images of leaves, flowers, still ponds, and trees (the new headboard was elaborately carved in the shape of a round-topped tree with dozens of branches, lit from behind so the cut-out spaces shone softly between the shapes in honey-toned wood). There was thick stained glass in the bathroom and a few of the smaller, decorative windows, which served the dual purposes of being beautiful and keeping the morning light from waking Sherlock too early. A plush-carpeted den with comfortable armchairs, a massive desk, and an antique globe on a stand was a favourite room of John’s, and Sherlock’s new dressing room was already nearly filled with his refurbished wardrobe of tailored suits and shirts; John had recently bought him a beautiful tank watch with a sizeable chunk of his quarterly overage allowance.

“I’ll have plans of my own there, for you,” John said slyly and went to retrieve the tea pot from the worktop (another round trip!), to warm their cups.

“I’m beginning to think you have a checklist,” Sherlock hummed, mock scolding. “The shower. The guest shower. In front of the windows in the sitting room.”
“Shame on me, we’ve yet to do anything with that settee in the dressing room. And I’m trying to figure out a use for that globe.”

“You’ll get there, Captain. You’re clever that way.”

John suspected Sherlock had designed the flat in order that John would want to make such a checklist. Not that he had made one. He’d worked in the shadows for Unity long enough to know better than to put things in writing.

“Anyway, we have plenty of time,” John said, and tangled up his fingers with Sherlock’s, stroking his thumb over the prettily filigreed tattoo encircling the third finger of Sherlock’s left hand, then splaying his own fingers to admire a similar one on his own hand.

“Indeed,” Sherlock agreed. “We have all our lives.”

*

A cup of blossoming tea and a flower-topped fairy cake for all the Lovely Readers who have spent time in the Floating World. I have enjoyed every minute here, with all of you. Your kindness and generosity every day humbles me. Thank you. Thank you. From the bottom of my armoured heart, Thank you.

“Well only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms and the maple leaves; singing songs, drinking wine, diverting ourselves in just floating, floating; caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along the river current; this is what we call the floating world.”
– Asai Ryōi

End Notes

    tumblr: fuckyeahfightlock
    twitter: @FicAuthorPoppy

Works inspired by this one
    Vroom Vroom by Corbinian, Cover for The Jewel in the Tower by 11jane11

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