Patterns of Silver Birds

by SincerelyChaos

Summary

In which love could really be considered a chemical defect and aeroplanes are nothing but silver birds.

Notes

This story is set about a few months after The Great Game, and exists in its own little verse after that, although some details concerning the characters that originates from later episodes have been incorporated into the story.

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It turned out that this was a rather challenging story to tell in a way that felt accessible, and if it hadn't been for the suggestions, editing, observations and encouragement of pennypaperbrain on this story, I'm not sure that I would have continued this strange tale.

(I'm very happy that I did, as this story has led to some rather exceptional things.)

//Trigger warnings for several matters of mental health issues including - but not limited to - those tagged.//
It doesn’t start with love, low serotonin or obsessive thoughts. Those are the consequences, not the catalyst. The catalyst, it would seem, is a Rubik’s cube.

[If silver birds are circling the sky, the end is near. Remember that an aeroplane is nothing but a silver bird.]

John glances over the top of his paper. There’s a wrinkle between his eyebrows and his eyes are slightly crinkled - worry. Sherlock watches John through his own lashes, pretending to be lost in his mind palace. John relaxes a fraction, lowers his paper an inch, still eyeing Sherlock, who is lying motionless in the sofa. There’s an almost invisible twitch at the left corner of John’s mouth - plotting something - before the paper is once again covering Sherlock’s view of his friend - course of action decided.

His interpretation of the pattern of John’s expressions is proved to be correct a few hours later, when Sherlock finds a Rubik’s cube nestled in between the cushions of the sofa. Another one of John’s attempts at keeping Sherlock’s brain from rotting out of pure boredom, then. It’s part of a game John started a few months ago. Whenever Sherlock’s bored more than a few days, odd little puzzles and riddles show up in different locations in the apartment. Mostly they’re too pedestrian for Sherlock to even consider, and the jigsaw puzzles tend to get him rather obsessive, so John had to get rid of those. Now John’s got him this visual-spatial puzzle. The colors of it are too sharp to Sherlock’s eyes as he holds it up to look at it.

Dull, childish toy.

Estimated time needed to solve Rubik’s cube based on previous data: 36 seconds

Actual time taken to solve Rubik’s cube: 57 seconds

The difference between the estimated and the actual time is so unaccountable that a retrial is called for.
Sherlock frowns. The discrepancy between the estimated and the actual time is unacceptable, since it would suggest a significant and disturbing decrease in his executive functions. At age 16, he solved the toy in 26 seconds. Now, at age 32, it took him 51 seconds, and that was on the re-trial.

“Has that thing offended you personally?” John asks, nodding at the Rubik’s cube in Sherlock’s hand as he enters the sitting room, shoulders stiff from the shift at the chilly clinic - the thermostat there must be broken again.

Sherlock doesn’t answer. The question is irrational, but holds an annoying amount of truth. But no; the cube hasn’t offended him, the impairment of own fragile mind has. And he would rather be offended by an inanimate object than his own brain, even if being offended by an object per se would mean that his mind was failing in perception and interpretation of his senses. Unfortunately, he does frequently feel offended by objects; their shape, their nuances or the colors they radiate. Cognitive impairment not responding to logical reasoning.

John doesn’t wait more than a few seconds for the answer that he must realise won’t come. Instead he sighs, heading into the kitchen. His footsteps are effective - tired but set on getting his tasks done before he leaves to meet Lestrade and some other friends at the pub. Sherlock doesn’t have to look to know that John has an air of purple around him. Deep, but not saturated. Eminence rather than Sherlock’s preferred shade of John-purple; Tyrian purple. Sherlock tries to mentally distance himself from the thoughts of John’s coloration; they are distracting and Sherlock doesn’t need more impairments in his executive functions than those he just has discovered.

There could be several different contributing factors to this apparent decrease in part of his executive functions, but no matter how many factors he weighs it doesn’t change the unacceptable result. His mental abilities may be deteriorating, and he isn’t sentimental or protective of his own ego to a degree that would allow him to rationalize this fact by fudging the result by including factors such as possible damage arising from previous drug use, age, lack of practice or lack of sleep. Self-diagnostics needed to be run, and the cause of this problem needs to be identified and properly dealt with.

Sherlock Holmes is a man who lives for solving puzzles and noticing patterns. Anything that jeopardizes that ability needs to be eliminated.

* * *

When Sherlock was fourteen he vowed to examine every thought or sensation with logical reason. That might not eliminate the existence of his irrational thoughts, but it would lessen their impact. It would be enough to keep him in control of the thoughts, instead of the other way around.

When Sherlock was seventeen he was forced to admit defeat in that regard.

* * *

After several hours of research on his laptop, Sherlock has finally found what seems to be the most
likely cause of his problem. The cause is in itself something that Sherlock needed at the time in order to correct certain other problems. While it was indeed necessary at the time, Sherlock now finds that controlling a problem by reducing its negative effects is not the same thing as eliminating the problem. The solution he used to amend the problems actually made his knowledge about the width and the extent of the problems less exact, and Sherlock loathes things that are imprecise. And besides; he is much more equipped to deal with those problems now. He doesn’t need a problem covering up the original problems. The original problems are of an intellectual sort, and there is nothing wrong with his intellect, even if his executive functions seems to be slightly affected, but that is the reason that this elimination of the problem is vital.

To start with - approximately the first few weeks according to research - the elimination of the problem could be having a few unfortunate side-effects in form of increased severity of the original problems, but it is nothing that he won’t be able to handle. He’s seen his best friend covered in semtex and for a second thought him to be a master criminal, and he survived his first year at senior school. Compared to those two things, this would be a child’s game.

Sherlock doesn’t expect the transition to be in any way pleasant, but he doesn’t expect to find that he missed more than one variable in his calculation of the possible outcomes. As it turns out, he missed more than a few variables. As a consequence, the result is nowhere near the estimation.
Cold Turkey

Sherlock’s in the bathroom for the third time that day, leaning on the toilet seat while his body attempts to spill out the contents of his already empty stomach. The tremors in his arms makes it difficult to steady himself, but John’s right behind him and Sherlock doesn’t want John to see the state he’s in. He leans even further over the toilet in an attempt to hide at least some of the shivers but it doesn’t help and the tremor is still very prominent.

“Alright, that’s it, Sherlock. What have you done to yourself this time?”

John’s voice is commanding, with a hint of resignation. He runs cold water into the sink and drops a flannel in it, then wrings out the excess water before using the flannel to wipe away the curls from Sherlock’s forehead. The cold and wet mixed with the rough texture of terry cloth distracts Sherlock for a few seconds until the next bout of retching takes a hold of him. Nothing emerges, but Sherlock feels the burn of gastric acid in his esophagus and imagines how it’ll corrode the epithelium. It feels like it’s already corroding. Soon his esophagus will have no epithelium and the food he attempts to digest will be leaking out in…

“Sherlock, breathe. That’s it.”

And Sherlock lets John’s hand guide him until he’s sitting against the tiled bathroom wall next to the toilet, to which he wants to stay in very close proximity. He holds the flannel to his forehead and tries to breathe in a steady pattern. It’s doesn’t quite work, but at least he’s not hyperventilating anymore. The tiles are cold, and ground him even through the fabric of his pyjamas.

“What have you done this time?” John repeats, voice a bit softer this time – deep shade of blue. “And don’t give me that shit about eating bad shellfish for a case. This isn’t food poisoning; it’s been going on for days now. You’re shaking, you’re even more irritable than usual and you’ve been puking for two days. And I’ve actually noticed you taking paracetamol, which I’ve never seen you do before. So I’m asking again; what is it this time?”

“I don’t want to talk right now John, can’t you see I’m busy?”

He presses the flannel even harder to his forehead, dragging his knees up to support his elbows. He hadn’t planned for this. He had read about some possible outcomes, but he hadn’t expected it to actually affect him like this. It’s like his body is actively trying to rid itself of every trace of the chemicals he’s stopped taking.

“Oh, we’re going to talk, Sherlock, trust me.”

After extensive research on the subject, Sherlock had decided to disregard all the guidelines he’d found and simply go about it the way he did when he rid himself of the drugs; cold turkey. The phrase ‘cold turkey’ might not be the correct term in this case since the use of Clomipramine is neither a destructive habit nor an addiction, but the methodology is still the same; quitting abruptly without reducing or replacing. The cold turkey method is said to have the advantage of not replacing
the addictive substance with a substitute, but Sherlock’s motive is simple; he’s impatient and can’t be bothered to gradually lower the dosage, plus he wants the contingent withdrawal period to be as short as possible.

That’s why Sherlock decides to go from a dosage of 175 mg Clomipramine one day to taking none the next day. That’s also why he - on the second day without the tricyclic antidepressant - is bent over the toilet in a desperate and rather undignified manner while John doesn’t believe a word he’s saying about bad shellfish. Well; John might know that he’s lying, but he’d rather John know that he’s lying then know the real cause of Sherlock’s sudden onset of nausea, anxiety, dizziness and irritability. If John hasn’t found out about the psychotropic drugs in the year they’d lived together then there’s no reason he should find out now, since Sherlock’s quitting them anyway.

The problem is that John watches him suspiciously whenever they’re in the same room, and Sherlock might be able to hide the fact that his nerves seems to have moved from the inside to the outside of his body and that his insomnia is even worse than usual, but he can’t hide the vomiting or the dizziness, and after three days it gets hard to blame acute food poisoning. John’s not buying Sherlock’s explanations, but Sherlock refuses to admit any other reason, so John seems to settle on the theory that Sherlock’s done something even more stupid and reckless than eating bad shellfish with full awareness of the fact that it was indeed bad, and is now too proud to tell John. It’s true, in some aspects, so Sherlock’s not correcting John on his theory.

Sherlock knows that the sensations he’s experiencing are usually labeled ‘anxiety’, but he’s never been able to relate to that word. What he experiences is a surge in his body, increased heart rate, tremors, extreme discomfort in his own skin and irrational, desperate thoughts that he’s unable to divert. Anxiety doesn’t even begin to cover it.

It’s the third day since The Decision, and when he’s not sick to his stomach from the abstinence he’s nauseous from the feeling of unease. The unease creeps under his skin and forces him to think about things that he has no wish to ever think about. Things that makes him desperate for something to take the edge of the reactions his thoughts provoke.

Something. Anything.

"So, are you gonna tell me what it was this time?"

John's voice doesn’t sound all that demanding - he knows he probably won’t get an answer. Resignation? No, not resignation. More like he feels that he should attempt to find out, even though he knows he probably wouldn’t like the answer anyway. Good deduction.

“Tea?” Sherlock asks, filling the kettle.

“Yes, thanks,” John says, dropping the subject for now.
John will feel reassured by the fact that Sherlock ingests tea, and that’s just what Sherlock needs, since Lestrade has been inquiring about a case that the Met might need his assistance on if they can’t solve it before tomorrow.

It’s the fourth day of withdrawal and Sherlock’s stomach seems to have readjusted itself slightly to the reduced inhibition on the serotonin reuptake. The increased reuptake causes the amount of free serotonin in his synapses to decrease, which in turn leads to his cells binding and activating less serotonin molecules. In other words; his brain is once again in a state of below average serotonin levels. His stomach might have begun to acclimatize, but his brain will take significantly longer to readjust. The constant feeling of unease and discomfort - ‘anxiety’ - invaded him on the second day, but he was too sick to give it any thought. Now, as his stomach is slowly adjusting, the desperate unease comes in fits and is almost paralyzing.

Sherlock’s not exactly looking forward to what he knows will come next; increased severity of the original symptoms. He’s not looking forward to it, but he regards himself as well prepared for it. He hadn’t expected the anxiety - still an appalling word - to be this intense and for some reason this miscalculation makes him feel even more appalled. Apparently, he couldn’t even make a correct estimation of the degree of withdrawal symptoms that would likely affect him. After spending another hour re-reading the electronic versions of the leaflets for the medication and a few research articles, he regards himself as more prepared for the strong possibility that the sudden loss of serotonin re-uptake could induce a depressive state. It’s nothing he hasn’t experienced before, at least, and that means that he’s prepared for what to come.

(He’s not, however, prepared for the fact that withdrawal from tricyclic antidepressants will have a few added side effects on his brain which won’t be mentioned on any leaflet.)
“We could have just walked, you know,” John says as they walk to the cab waiting outside 221B.

Sherlock’s mind is focused on keeping his facial features under control in order to not give away the fact that the cloudy day is too bright for his eyes. The cold, harsh light seems to sear his retinas, making them thinner and thinner, slowly letting the sharp light burn it’s way through his optic nerve right into… No. It is important that John doesn’t notice any discomfort; he’s been hesitant enough about going to a crime scene after the past five days. The previous day was pleasantly free from vomit, but Sherlock’s stomach still isn’t in favor of any solid foods. He hid this fact from John by accepting some offered toast and then binning it as John left the room to fetch his phone - restless. It’s childish, but one tends to regress when one is frequently hunched over a toilet, spilling out whatever amount of liquid that still remains in one’s body.

Just as Sherlock gets the door open on the left side of the cab - the Right side - he hears a plangent sound above him. It surprises him for a second, because it isn’t an aeroplane. No, not today. Today it’s a silver bird making its way across the sky, leaving two lines of white smoke in its wake. Sherlock lifts his head and traces the lines of smoke until he fixes his eyes on the silver bird.

There’s a familiar sense of vibration in his bones coming from a pressure that’s building up inside of him, instantly threatening to erupt. He needs to relieve some of that pressure. Suddenly, it seems like his sternum might burst. He knows it’s impossible, but resisting the pattern seems even more impossible.

Silver bird - The Sign of The End - all that’s left is orange Spring light on an empty surface that used to be the Earth - then Nothing.

It only takes Sherlock a few seconds to think through the implications of every part of the phrased pattern and some of the sudden pressure is eased. Not vanished, but manageable.

He redirects his eyes from the sky - hateful, piercing grey - and slips into the cab, eyes compulsively flicking back towards the pattern from the silver bird. As Sherlock enters the cab, John - transparent ocean green - looks like he’s waiting for an explanation of what caused him to stop in the middle of the street, staring at the sky. Sherlock meets his friend’s gaze while he’s taking off his gloves and getting his phone out, but pretends that he hasn’t noticed John’s unspoken question. There’s still a pressure behind his sternum and a creeping feeling tingling in his lower arms, but there’s nothing to be done about it now.

This was expected, but it’s still a sign of cognitive failure and lack of control over his own thoughts. Therefore it’s unacceptable, and needs to be surmounted. Not right now, though; now there’s a case and John’s finally beginning to let go of his suspicion about Sherlock’s recent behaviours. He will
simply have to quarantine this problem until after the case. The dopamine and adrenaline from working the case should allow him to pause the urge to relieve more pressure by pursuing more patterns.

In the seat beside him, John is now changing from ocean green - *too light and unsaturated* - to a rather exquisite blend of forest green and royal blue fading into each other. Somehow that makes the pressure worse.

John asks him questions about the phone call from Lestrade and Sherlock answers, but his attention is still on the sky outside the cab window. He’s trying to follow the lines of white smoke from the silver bird, but the car roof and the high buildings that surround them are obscuring the view. He can’t see the aeroplane or the smoke pattern, but he’s trying - he’s not avoiding - so it counts. The rational thing to do, according to several studies, is to attempt not to follow the compulsion, but Sherlock can’t afford that kind of exposure right now; not when there’s a case that will need his full attention.

After five minutes they arrive at the crime scene; a coffee shop that has recently gone out of business. There’s a man lying dead in the broom closet - *mid thirties, muscular build, big drinker but not alcoholic, recent ski vacation, former smoker, well done tattoos and expensive but slightly outdated clothing*. The man’s tucked in between buckets and a vacuum cleaner - *older than the coffee shop, probably belonged to the owners before they bought a new one and placed their old one here* - with his right leg resting on an economy pack of garbage bags - *industrial style, probably bought through a supplier*. There’s a distinct smell of cleaning aids and a slight trace of old rubbish in the air, which is frowsy and feels heavy. It’s something that he perceives as pressuring about the quality of the air, but Sherlock knows that no one else will notice it. The frowsy smell and the tightly packed air make his stomach remember that it’s still upset and he struggles not to let his face give away any discomfort. The whole abandoned coffee shop is a blend of the grey, sharp light coming through the huge windows to the street and the dim shadows where the light can’t reach. The electricity seems to be turned off, so no soft yellow light makes up for the harshness of the daylight - *cold sharpness* - and the dark angles - *restful warmth*.

“So, what do you think?” Lestrade asks, leaning in beside him in order to be able to observe the body.

Sherlock isn’t thinking anything. Well, he isn’t thinking about anything relevant to the corpse in front of him. Instead he’s watching John kneel down by the body, first doing an ocular inspection, then putting on vinyl gloves - *right hand first, then the left, always the right hand first* - before examining the body closer. Just as John puts his fingers to the pulse point of the body, a thought rushes through Sherlock.

*If the world ends, John ends too.*

His stomach coils and there’s a sudden loss of breath. His eyes are fixed on John and his mind is in a state of slight panic from impact of those six words. *Six*. Of course it had to be six words. *Now it’s even worse.*

Usually, he would just go through the pattern of a thought and then put it away, but this time he can’t. This is a new one, and he hates the new ones. They are always more intense and
overwhelming than the older ones, since he’s yet to figure out the pattern he needs in order to deal with them. The draw in his stomach increases, and he can’t tell what’s the nausea and what’s the consequence of not being able to put away the thought. It just hangs there in the air now, tipping the balance more and more the longer it lingers there.

He makes himself go through three other thoughts, following their patterns. It won’t make up for the one he hasn’t found the pattern for yet, but it will buy him some time. He takes a breath, filling his lungs with the heavy air from the broom closet, looks at the victim and starts to voice his deductions at breakneck speed.

At least that’s something that’s still working, and some patterns that are cooperative and useful.

If the police had brought Sherlock in on the case earlier, when the first two murders had been connected, there wouldn’t have been a dead man in a broom closet now, but Sherlock’s too close to eruption to even comment on this fact. It doesn’t matter. The case is solved - three hours forty-three minutes - and John’s studying Sherlock closely from where he stands against the wall in Lestrade’s office.

Sherlock wants nothing more than to get out of here - the people, the lights coming in from the half-closed blinds, the urge to focus all the discomfort in one single, physical spot in order to overrule the constant noise coming from the tingling in his... No. The pressure seems to fluctuate constantly and uncontrollably and it's appalling, because Sherlock knows that this is not real. He should be able to override these patterns and Not Right feelings. This time he's prepared for them, but still they seem to be taking him by surprise. Miscalculation. Weakness. Foolishness. Worse.

He tries to take deep breaths, keeping enough oxygen in his bloodstream to prevent the physiological manifestations of panic. This is all just a chemical reaction to increased reuptake of serotonin. His brain will adjust in somewhere between two weeks and one year, based on an average from the studies he’s read. Two weeks would be preferable.

As soon as Lestrade finishes the last phone call needed to confirm that the suspect lacks an alibi, Sherlock supports himself with a hand on the desk, rises and nods at the police inspector.

“That’ll be it,” he says in an uninterested but determined voice, holding up a hand to stop the protest that Lestrade is going to blurt out. “There’s been a poisoning that I need to take care of, if you don’t mind.”

Not listening to any of the protests, Sherlock nods to John, who is actually trying to hide a smile, and they leave Scotland Yard together; John with an apologetic smile to Lestrade and Sherlock with a dizziness that resembles the symptoms of a fever. In the cab, John turns to look at him.

“A poisoning? Really?”

Sherlock hears the laugh in John’s voice even when he’s got his eyes closed, and it’s too much, but the sound still manages to ease some of the strain over his lungs.

“There was a poisoning. I’m still recovering. Look; tremors. I’m still poisoned.” Sherlock holds up his hand, forcing his eyes open too. The fine tremor is clearly visible.
And John is still suspicious, but he laughs in the same way he does when he shouldn’t be laughing at a crime scene, and Sherlock feels another kind of dizziness, and the pressure decreases a bit for a few seconds. John is deep, saturated royal blue with emerald green fused in, and when Sherlock’s distress returns, the thought from the broom closet returns too.

*If the world ends, John ends too.*

Chapter End Notes

Wikipedia defines "intrusive thoughts" as follows:

An intrusive thought is an unwelcome involuntary thought, image, or unpleasant idea that may become an obsession, is upsetting or distressing, and can feel difficult to manage or eliminate. When such thoughts are associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), depression, body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), and sometimes attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the thoughts may become paralyzing, anxiety-provoking, or persistent. Intrusive thoughts may also be associated with episodic memory, unwanted worries or memories from OCD, posttraumatic stress disorder, other anxiety disorders, eating disorders, or psychosis. Intrusive thoughts, urges, and images are of inappropriate things at inappropriate times, and they can be divided into three categories: "inappropriate aggressive thoughts, inappropriate sexual thoughts, or blasphemous religious thoughts".

Wikipedia on "obsessions" (from main article "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder"):

Obsessions are thoughts that recur and persist despite efforts to ignore or confront them. People with OCD frequently perform tasks, or compulsions, to seek relief from obsession-related anxiety. Within and among individuals, the initial obsessions, or intrusive thoughts, vary in their clarity and vividness. A relatively vague obsession could involve a general sense of disarray or tension accompanied by a belief that life cannot proceed as normal while the imbalance remains. A more intense obsession could be a preoccupation with the thought or image of someone close to them dying or intrusions related to "relationship rightness." Other obsessions concern the possibility that someone or something other than oneself—such as God, the Devil, or disease—will harm either the person with OCD or the people or things that the person cares about. Other individuals with OCD may experience the sensation of invisible protrusions emanating from their bodies, or have the feeling that inanimate objects are ensouled.

* * *

Author's comment:

While I agree with above definition of "intrusive thoughts", this fic will also include some forms of intrusive thoughts that doesn't fit the above mentioned categories. There's not too much written about these kind of thoughts, but most of the writing done about it will be connected to early onset OCD/childhood onset OCD or PANS/PANDAS (see Wikipedia, or notes later in this fic). While most of the thoughts mentioned in this fic will probably fit the descriptions above, some won't and that's mostly because of the back story of Sherlock's obsessions; when they began he didn't know that they weren't
logical or real, and they would therefore be regarded as "delusions" rather than "obsessions". This is debatable, though, since a child does not have the logical framework or the experience an adult does, and would have a harder time distinguishing between what's probable and what's not. This seems to be fairly common with early onset OCD of the primarily obsessive kind, which also seems to have "more disturbing" obsessions than the later onsets, according to some authors.

(I promise that possible future notes won't be this long.)
Irreversible Damage

When Sherlock is eleven years, six months and fourteen days old he’s just like any odd, uncomfortable, confused genius. When he’s eleven years, six months and fifteen days old his brain derails while going at it’s usual speed of 80 mph.

The damage is instant and irreversible.

*

He’s already feeling a bit faint as he reluctantly sits down beside his cousin Sherrinford on the glassed-in porch of his aunt’s summerhouse. It could be the heat, the fever that left him just a couple of days ago or a foreboding of what’s to come, but it doesn’t matter; it won’t affect the outcome. Sherrinford is already deeply focused on the book he's resting against his knees as Sherlock begins to browse through the seemingly unread book with the rather distasteful colourful cover showing - amongst other things - the Loch Ness monster. The book was lying there on the shelf in the small, unoccupied bedroom to the right of the one Sherlock occupies here, and the title was so childish that he took it out just to make fun of it in front of Sherrinford. His cousin, however, is too engaged in his own reading to notice Sherlock, so Sherlock begins skimming through the pages of "Unbelievable, isn't it?", skipping most of the short tales and predictions the book has to offer. Right between the chapter concerning Bigfoot and a story about a man who vanished from a locked room, leaving only his clothes, is a passage on predictions of Doomsday. Sherlock is just about to flip the page when his eyes catch on some numbers. They are familiar, yet... oh.

It's today, the seventeenth of June, only one year forward in time. Interesting.

Sherlock reads the short text surrounding the date that caught his attention. An old Mayan calendar predicting the end of the world. Unscientific. The world is supposed to be hit by a flaming blow and dissolve in burning fragments. Hardly likely. According to some old Christian beliefs this was the heathen prediction of what the Christians knew to be the return of Christ. Even more unlikely.

A few minutes later Sherlock's mother calls him and Sherrinford to have some tea by the seashore, which is where she and Aunt Maud spend a majority of their time. Sherlock closes the childish, sensationalist book and follows Sherrinford over the wide lawn, the sunlight almost dizzying again. He’s still slightly feverish, then.

As Sherlock looks down at his feet to avoid tripping over Redbeard's toys scattered across the grass, two things happen at once. The sunlight is suddenly obscured by a cloud, leaving the grass oddly grey in his perception, where he was previously blinded by the intense light. At the same time something snaps in Sherlock's head. There's no more accurate way to describe it. There's something derailing at break-neck speed and suddenly, as he looks up towards the almost clear blue sky, Sherlock knows.

He knows now. And he will never not know it again.

All he does from now on will be done with that knowledge in mind.
The realisation is dizzying in itself, but it doesn't stop there. For some reason, Sherlock spreads his arms as he looks up at the sky and the single cloud there and then he swirls. Around and around, seeing only blue sky but perceiving it as grey due to the previous light. Sherlock collapses on the grass as he loses his balance, and he smiles, because that's all you can do when you're eleven years old and has just learned how fragile life truly is.
Intrusive Thoughts

Chapter Notes

From now on, trigger warnings for intrusive thoughts which might be of a violent or otherwise disturbing nature may apply, as do trigger warnings for depressive thoughts/behavior.

The cab ride back to Baker Street is turbulent.

Sherlock’s intestines seems to be making very advanced attempts at leaving his body and John seems determined not to pick up on any signals that Sherlock doesn’t want to talk at the moment. Meanwhile, Sherlock’s looking out for more silver birds, but there are none to be seen, which is almost worse than if there had been one - anticipation.


It was to be expected that some of the more disturbing patterns might be returning as the chemical imbalance of Sherlock’s brain reestablished itself after he’d abruptly stopped supplying the chemicals needed to balance his chronically low level of free serotonin. He’d taken it into account. Still, he finds himself wonder if the mental distress is more intense now than it used to be, or if he just perceives it as such due to the number of years since he last experienced it? Is his recollection of the pressure he felt back then - years ago - vague due to the time passed, or is the added distress of withdrawal from psychotropic drugs making the sensation more high-pitched and intrusive?

If his head hadn’t already been pounding, it would probably would have started to do so somewhere around now. Instead Sherlock feels how the fever-like sensation in his skin comes in surges, leaving him with chills. Beside him John is busy with his phone - browsing the comments on his blog. Sherlock wonders how John can focus with all the motion and lights sweeping by around them.

Rationality has nothing to do with this.

The shell of the cab can protect them from other vehicles to some degree - wrinkled metal, violent impact, blood smeared against the windows, subdural bleeding increasing pressure on the brain until the swelling causes permanent damage to the frail organ and the brain is no longer able to send out signals to the heart to make it contract or to the lungs to make them expand, cutting off the supply of oxygen to the brain... - with its cage of metal and glass, but it offers no protection against the implications of a silver bird. Nothing ever has and nothing ever will. Except for the simple knowledge that they aren’t silver birds, they are aeroplanes, and they are not a sign of forthcoming doomsday, they are man-made machines used to transport people in absurd patterns - from point A to point B via point R and then point F. Sherlock can’t stand travelling by air, silver birds or no silver birds.

It’s about patterns seen and calculations made, as are all things. Like the return of the patterns, which was to be expected, but the calculation of his own reactions to the patterns has proved to be deficient. He calculated on the knowledge of the irrationality and absurdity of the thoughts to lessen the physical and emotional effect of said thoughts. In some regards, he was correct; he doesn’t live in
constant fear of the world ending this time, it's just the pressure caused by sense memory that affects him. In other vital parts of the calculation he’s been proven wrong; the knowledge he now possesses regarding the irrationality of his thoughts hasn’t made them any more manageable; it's only made his cognitive failure in perceiving them accurately and logically more prominent. He knows and still he can’t control his emotional and physical reactions. It is pathetic.

He is pathetic.

(He is also going to be sick very soon, his intestines kindly tell him.)

From the seat next to him, John is looking at him with a complicated expression on his face, radiating furious red - arterial bleeding - mixed with cold grey - clouded sky -, and it's making all this even less tolerable. If John could just stop bleeding his colors all over the place Sherlock might be able to focus on the silver birds which he - logically - should not be focusing on.

Cognitive impairment.
Weakness.
Freak.

* 

He manages to make it into the toilet before the regurgitation of bile reaches his throat.

With his coat and scarf still on, the hot flashes caused by the retching are made worse and it feels like whatever fluid he’s not currently throwing up is instead being sweated out through his skin. The fact that he’s only been pretending to eat doesn’t help either; there’s really just bile to throw up, and the acid makes his throat twinge with every retch. John will see that there’s only bile, and he’ll know that Sherlock’s not been eating. Childish.

This time John doesn’t say anything, just stands back as Sherlock’s knuckles turn white from his desperate hold on the toilet seat and his neck gradually gets damper and damper underneath his scarf and curls. The feeling of moisture spreading all over his back, diffusing into the wool of his coat, is so unsavory that Sherlock considers letting go of the toilet between the retches, to free himself of the suffocating fabric that’s weighing him down. He doesn’t, however, manage to do so. As he finally feels the nausea calm down, he slumps against the bathroom wall, lacking both the coordination and the energy needed to unbutton and shed his coat. John is still standing in the doorway - now just arterial red - watching him. Sherlock wants to shout at him to get out, to stop looking at him, but the thought of John being out of his sight is unbearable, so he tries to focus on getting his breathing back to more normal patterns instead.

“There’s something you’re not telling me, Sherlock, and I don’t really give a shit about what it is at this point. I just need you to spill it out - though not literally, your fluid balance can’t afford that at this point - so we can deal with whatever it is causing this. I’m not going to play detective with this, you hear me? I’m tired of being left out of whatever game you’re playing with your health. I’m a doctor, and you either tell me what you’ve done or I’ll just leave you to it, because you’re making it very hard for me to help you.”

John’s voice is calm and firm - dark, cold shade of icy blue - and there’s no doubting his intention of keeping his word. He doesn’t offer Sherlock water or a wet flannel, he just stands there, regarding
him with a piercing gaze that makes it very clear just how tired of Sherlock’s “games” he is. Only this isn’t a game. This is what Sherlock’s brain does, this is what Sherlock is reduced to without chemical aid.

“Then go,” Sherlock manages, his ragged breathing still making it difficult to talk and the taste of acid making every syllable sting.

And John does leave. Closing the bathroom door slowly behind him as Sherlock stares at it, willing it to open again, willing John to return with some water or just simply return. But John is more irritable than people commonly believe, and when John feels left out of something he tends to turn sour. Sour. Bile. Sour. Bile. Sour. Bile. Sou-r-bile-sour-bile. Stop it.

There’s something Sherlock’s not telling John, because there’s no point in telling him. This will pass, and everything will be back to normal. John will return, and this will pass.

Pass.

* *

When Sherlock is thirteen years old, the thing that’s not allowed to happen does happen. He’s been sent home from school; the orange sunlight over the benches served as a reminder of the end and as he repeats the patterns over and over again in his head, the dread becomes too much and he throws up loud enough to be overheard by other pupils. As he lies in bed while his mother fusses over him with rehydration solutions and flannels he begins to tell, almost delirious, even though he knows that it’ll make his mother just as terrified as he is. Knowing what he knows does that to people. It destroys you. It destroyed him.

As it turns out, it’s not the knowledge that terrifies his mother. It’s Sherlock’s words and Sherlock’s thoughts. And perhaps it is preferable to having destroyed his mother’s life with the knowledge, but Sherlock still can’t swallow the feeling of betrayal as he finds himself in front of a man who looks at him seriously as he attempts to evaluate Sherlock’s mental stability.

(As it turns out, it’s not Sherlock’s mental stability that makes him worry, the man says, it’s Sherlock’s lack of contact with reality.)
Sherlock hears the familiar pattern of his brother’s steps before the knocking on his door wakes him up fully. It isn’t so much sleep as dormancy, and Sherlock finds himself disoriented as he snaps out of it, his pulse picking up so rapidly that he can hear it inside his head. Something evoked by his dreams - his subconscious - leaves him with a sour taste in his mouth; a taste that has nothing to do with the fact that he hasn’t brushed his teeth since he last threw up. Distasteful. (Meaningless)

As is his habit, Mycroft doesn’t wait for recognition or sanction before he steps into Sherlock’s room (life). Sherlock ignores him, as is his habit. Sherlock’s wrapped and then rewrapped in his cocoon of sheets - in constant disarray; the folds in the soft, high thread-count fabric still manage to irritate every single nerve ending they come into contact with until it’s unbearable and he needs to adjust, redo and correct it all once more. His eyes are obscured by white cotton so he senses rather than observes how Mycroft stands in the doorway after closing the door behind him, taking in every piece of information he can gather from the dim room and Sherlock’s unmoving form on the bed.

Mycroft might be smarter, but he’s also more predictable than Sherlock’s ever been. Sherlock can predict his movements as Mycroft slowly walks over to the old chair by the wall and nudges it until it faces the bed. Mycroft stands by the chair for a few seconds before seating himself, adjusting his waistcoat - preparation for his unavoidable little talk. It’s hard to distinguish between relief and irritation, but Sherlock has developed an automatic pattern where he settles for irritation in any cases of ambiguous perception of his - unfortunate - emotional response. Sometimes, under different circumstances, Sherlock finds himself debating over whether his brother ever catches a glimpse of the brief hesitance between these two conflicting reactions before Sherlock’s now well-developed cognitive patterns set in and the relief - sentiment? - is set aside in favor of an irritable approach towards his brother’s intervention. At this moment, however, Sherlock doesn’t reflect on such trivialities. The humiliation, the debilitating pressure behind his sternum and the unwanted thoughts and patterns leave no room for any further irrational and useless reflections. It only leaves Sherlock in all his irrationality, his unwashed, crumpled sheets and serotonin-related misery, in full view of the immaculate man by his bedside.

The sound of Mycroft’s even breathing before he begins to speak does leave room for some comparisons, though. Because for every good Sherlock had, Mycroft always had better and for every bad Mycroft had, Sherlock always found himself with worse.

“Tell me, brother mine, is this lack of self-preservation a result of concern over possible side-effects on the ability to engage in certain… relations?”

Sherlock almost manages not to flinch at the unexpected opening. The allusion is both far-fetched and unusually cruel for an opening statement, even by his brother’s standards. It’s a deliberate affront coming from a man who usually goes out of his way to maintain an image of being above such appallingly common urges. He isn’t, though. Sherlock knows this, but doesn’t know if Mycroft is aware of this flaw in his facade. It only takes one crack in your composure to put you into someone’s thrall. Sherlock’s brain has derailed and completely rendered all attempts at composure in front of his brother approximately 23 times since he was eleven years old. It’s a disadvantage that renders their meeting like equals impossible.
Mycroft has the advantage of the unexpected. Sherlock has the advantage of apathy making even the unexpected pass by as if it was nothing. It probably was. If Mycroft intended for Sherlock to protest the fallacious statement, then Sherlock intended to not give a shit about it.

“Really, Sherlock? You decided to discontinue the one aid that’s kept you above the surface of your own mind? And you decided to do so without even consulting Dr Martell?”

Has Mycroft talked to Helena Martell? Or, more importantly; has Helena talked to Mycroft about him? Helena - a chameleon; green-yellow with an unusual edge of pitch-black at the core - has never stooped to sharing confidential information with his brother before, but then it really doesn’t matter anymore. Pride or integrity are luxuries not bestowed upon people lacking balanced neuroanatomy, not if they’re not clever enough to override and compensate for the imbalance. Still; a faint notion of betrayal.

“Of course you didn’t consult her. There would be no point of doing so if you were not intending to adhere her recommendations, and I doubt even she would condone this ill-advised course of action.”

Mycroft rises from the chair - infuriating ocher - and walks over to the bed. Something is dropped on Sherlock’s nightstand. A thump - light object; the dull sound indicates a small packet that would most likely be holding... No.

Sherlock fumbles to get his head out of the sheet with uncoordinated movements. The edge of the sheet is stuck under his shoulder and he has to roll to the side while fighting with the fabric before he is finally able to see the object on the nightstand in the dim room.

Oxazepam 10 mg.

Oxazepam - benzodiazepine; covers up patterns, dulls senses, eases the pressure, offers false balance. False balance is worse than unbalance, because the scales will always find a way to level out. False balance is for those who can’t face the reality of an imbalanced, impaired mind.

The packet hits the wall behind the chair before Sherlock even realises that he’s furious. His breathing is painful and rapid as he feels his pulse pick up at the sudden movement. He must have jerked upright as he threw Mycroft’s pity across the room, because now he’s sitting up, the sheet tangled around his waist - he’s not tortured by the folds anymore; a pathetic gain in the midst of humiliating panic. Cool air hits naked skin, but it’s hardly noticeable. Frustration and something that tickles and aches in the back of his throat leave him flushed. Even the contrast in temperature between skin and air is fierce and sharp.

Mycroft must have flinched at the sudden movement - tensed shoulders and slightly hunched posture before he regained composure. Sherlock is inferior to Mycroft in intelligence, self-control and chemical balance, but he will always have this one, simple advantage. Unpredictability. (Imbalance.)

“Get. Out.”

The words are uncomfortable, his throat unused to talking after more than 27 hours of silence. Sherlock doesn’t want to look at Mycroft, but looking away would be a display of weakness. He doesn’t need to display any more weakness than he is already doing; naked, unshaven, trembling and with his nerves having apparently migrated to the outside of his body.

“Have it your way,” Mycroft says in the neutral, dull voice Sherlock recognizes from other times when Mycroft’s realised that his younger brother might have a very similar set of genes, but that the decisions said brother makes for himself will never be as rational and balanced as those Mycroft would have made for him.
Mycroft looks at him for just a few seconds longer before beginning to turn towards the door, stopping half way through the motion.

“Your concern over side-effects on cognitive function is understandable, brother. I do hope you’ve taken the possible damage from previous cocaine use into account regarding how your brain will function without the clomipramine. It is possible that your serotonin levels are even lower after your little youthful experiments. Be careful, Sherlock. You might be risking more than you can gain here.”

It’s not a risk - it’s a certainty. Sherlock’s taken it into account, but the calculation doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the result.

As Mycroft closes the door behind him Sherlock slumps back down on the bed, his pulse still beating in his ears and the familiar pressure behind his sternum. It’s not a risk - it’s nothing. And nothing is something he’s learned to fear more than something more palpable.

There’s patterns and images in his head, and then there’s the sound of talking coming from the kitchen. The words are spoken loud enough not to be fully muffled by the pathetically thin door of his room, so he must be intended to hear what’s said.

Mycroft speaks first. He always makes sure to get the first word - and the last.

“He’s not doing drugs.”

_Did John…?_

“And that is actually the problem,” Mycroft continues, and Sherlock feels a pang of something like trepidation. _Don’t. Please, don’t._ “Some drugs attempt to stabilise chronic imbalance, and my brother is not one for balance.”

John says something, just a few words, but his voice is not deliberate the way Mycroft’s is, and Sherlock can’t make out more than a mumble. A mumble which holds both concern - _pity_ - and frustration - _Mycroft_. It’s worse than he thought, and he’s thought about this moment more than he can justify in front of himself.

“Do make sure to pick up the pills my dear brother administered to the wall of his room; I’d hate to see Mrs Hudson find something that might interact negatively with her ‘soothers’. Sherlock didn’t seem to find these soothing in the least, I’m afraid.”

“What are you… Are you saying that you gave your brother…”

“Doctor Watson, I assure you that there are other things I’d rather give him, but I will give them to you instead, in case he… sees reason.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, awaiting the pressure, the anger and the end. He has no doubt about what his brother is handing to John. John - _a steady hand lowering a gun and crinkled eyes meeting his in the flashing light of their first crime scene, barely holding back a fit of laughter long enough to leave - will take one look at it before his perception of Sherlock - _sharp, detached, brilliant, ‘friend’_ - is altered into something else - _impaired, illogical, inexact._

Sherlock never cared what people thought of him.
In fact, he cares about nothing now, seeing as it’s all going to derail no matter if he cares about it or not. Caring about it would only make things worse. So no; Sherlock still doesn’t care about how people perceive him.

(John was never ‘people’).

Chapter End Notes

Clomipramine - "older" tricyclic antidepressant still used on indications of both depression (most common) and obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

Oxazepam - a benzodiazepine (a group of narcotics) known as Serex in UK. Anti anxiety medication with potential for addiction. Sometimes temporarily used to lessen the initial side-effects of starting on antidepressants (which is often increased severity of the original symptoms; anxiety and depressive thoughts). When getting off antidepressants abruptly, the same phenomenon might occur, and often even more intensely.
Sherlock flinches as he feels the sudden vibration beside him on the mattress.

Vibration outside of himself is better than vibration inside his skin, but it's still intrusive and it still forces him to break his train of thought. It’s not really a train, though, it’s more like the paths in the village north of Dhaka where Sherlock once trailed down a drug lord. The heat in addition to the smells and the cacophony of sound and movement provided so many stimuli that he - who can see the road map of London as a mental blueprint when he closes his eyes - got lost.

The vibration continues and Sherlock snaps out of the mental images of suffocating chaos and sweat-drenched panic only to return to a reality that is disturbingly similar to those images. The buzzing sound is not helping, and he fumbles for the phone until he finally finds it tucked away halfway under his pillow.

*Le*strade.* Ignore.

Talking to someone requires the ability to make out their words over the constant noise in your own head. Sherlock cannot meet this requirement at present.

He might as well be in a village outside of Dhaka.

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Sherlock is losing time.

His ability to estimate time has deteriorated at the same pace as the rest of his cognitive functions. He’s doing this to increase his intellectual capacity but so far the result is the opposite. It’s to be expected, but it’s still hateful, because Sherlock does not know how much time has passed between Mycroft leaving the flat and John doing the same. An hour? Three? (Not two.)

John hasn’t knocked on his door. John hasn’t come to him with questions. John hasn’t asked him to explain, or to provide assurances that this is in fact one of Mycroft’s jokes at Sherlock’s expense, and of course the great detective does not need psychotropic drugs in order not to be… this.

Sherlock has, however, rearranged the sheets thirteen times - good number - drunk water - three sips, for good measure - and flipped restlessly on his bed. He also fell into a light slumber until he was woken by the vibration- *Le*strade’s call. Four missed calls. He wishes that Lestrade would call again so it’ll be five. Five is better.

Based on the time of day - 7 pm - John will hopefully be out for several more hours. He rarely does errands in the evening, so it must be something social. And while Sherlock does not care about himself being a bit smelly he does care about the feeling of mites crawling into his skin due to all the
old skin cells and dried sweat, and therefore a shower is necessary. Meeting John with mites all over himself is not something that would help if Sherlock decides to pretend that nothing’s the matter except for one of his usual black moods - or perhaps even doing drugs - nothing worse.

Making his way to the shower, Sherlock only feels vertigo and the importance of taking an uneven number of steps to reach the bathroom.

Not this again.

(Not this too.)

*Miscalculation.*

As Sherlock leaves the bathroom, wrapped in a dressing gown and towels, John is back in the flat. Sherlock refuses to acknowledge him, because ignoring him seems preferable to attempting (and possibly failing) a neutral reaction.

John does, however, acknowledge Sherlock. He nods at him from the kitchen table where he’s sitting with half a glass of water in front of him, dressed in muddy sportswear - one of his rare appearances in the group of old rugby friends, then. He must have been given a ride home, because John would never go on the Tube with dried sweat and mud all over him. He isn’t vain, but he considers it rude. Sherlock does, obviously, not care if whatever he might be covered in offends anyone else. Pedestrian. And looking at John, who actually smiles a tired but content smile - *endorphins and the feeling of connection from still being able to enjoy things with his old friends* - Sherlock is surprised to find that he is currently both thinking rather coherent thoughts and feeling a hint of something that’s not entirely unpleasant. Unfortunately, John is most likely smiling because he feels an obligation to be kind to the mentally deficient.

“Ah, good, you’re up. I was beginning to wonder if Mycroft had done something horrible in there and left me with the corpse.”

John is making jokes - *endorphins are perhaps as essential to John’s well-being as adrenaline?* - even though Sherlock hasn’t spoken to him in two days. Usually, by this point, John would be either ignoring him in return or appear to be irritated - a worry that he didn’t believe himself entitled to feel, mixed with something else; incapability?

“He tried to leave you some stuff, though,” John continues, voice still light and sweat still drying in his short hair. If Sherlock were closer, he could probably smell it; likely the same odour as John gave off when they were pressed close together in a small space after having outrun whoever was after them that particular week. Sweat, adrenaline, cortisol, pheromones, disinfectant, fabric softener and London streets. *Pheromones?* “I put it in your cabinet in the bathroom, in case you want to get rid of it yourself.”

There was so much information in this - *John talked around the issue; was he sparing Sherlock or sparing himself? The scent of pheromones is not something you can consciously register. A emerald green core and a sky blue fading into it; John is all clear, saturated colors while Sherlock himself is a diaphanous grey, is the tremors in his hand, holding his dressing gown tightly closed, is a slight vertigo situated behind his eyeballs. John’s placement of the pills in the cabinet only Sherlock used;*
no one besides him would notice if they were kept or thrown away. Pity or hope?

Pity. *Every other interpretation was just wishful thinking, cognitive bias.*

John’s bad leg is trembling a bit too. Sherlock’s left hand and John’s right leg. Trembling almost in tandem. The notion eases some of the pressure behind Sherlock’s sternum, a pressure he hadn’t even noticed until that moment. John is talking again and Sherlock struggles to pay attention to the words instead of estimating if their tremors are in tandem or in sync. John doesn’t seem to notice that for a few seconds Sherlock is only hearing syllables and pauses instead of coherent words.

“Lestrade called. Apparently, when you ignore his calls long enough, he resorts to calling me. I’m not taking messages, though, just to make that clear. I don’t need you getting even lazier. Anyway, he wanted us for a case.”

*Us.*

*(Almost in sync. Just a millisecond off. Almost like a musical canon.)*

“I told him no, which actually managed to render him speechless for a few seconds before he tried to persuade me to get you to do it after all. Eventually, I told him the truth, and that set him laughing and telling me I should put ‘living with Sherlock Holmes’ on job applications, since that must surely count for more than working as a locum when it comes to medical emergencies.”

John’s voice is slightly amused, but his colors - *now ocean green in a nauseating blend with arterial bleed* - speak of obliqueness and questions. Sherlock’s got a question of his own, but unlike John he’s not sure if he wants to know the answer to it.

“I just told him the reckless git he asked to consult on the case had used his massive intellect and his degree in chemistry to conduct experiments with himself as a test subject. Experiments that anyone with any knowledge of toxicology could have told him would - with no uncertainty - incapacitate the test subject for a while. But Sherlock Holmes doesn’t consult anyone on his experiments, not even the obvious candidate; the medical doctor he shares a flat with. Therefore, Sherlock Holmes is currently trying to avoid his friend and throwing up bile instead of being out in Camden, deducing strangulation marks in a double murder. Bummer, right?”

Sherlock wants to snarl. Sniping back or sulking would be appropriate responses to John’s sarcasm. Sherlock doesn’t, however, do either of these things. It seems like too much effort.

Sherlock just wraps his dressing gown closer around himself - *a shell, a disguise (disguised as someone who has skin covering their nerves)* - and heads to his bedroom. He doesn’t feel anything, not yet. It’s too much information, and he needs to count his steps.

(Nineteen, if he adds a small extra step to avoid finishing at eighteen.)

*[666 - Number of the Beast - even numbers are the numbers of Doom - uneven numbers means something unfinished - unfinished means there’s still time.]*

*Time for what?*
As Sherlock closes his bedroom door behind him, there’s no longer a discarded packet of Oxazepam on the floor next to his wardrobe.

He would be annoyed at the intrusion if he wasn’t preoccupied with the implications. Usually, this sort of action would only be an interesting point of data regarding the (unexpectedly) unpredictable nature of his flatmate. As things are, his impression is most likely fueled by neurotransmitters misfiring in his brain, causing emotional reactions to what ought to be mere interesting observations. Because right now, the absence of a packet of narcotics seems to be significant on a disturbingly (hateful) emotional level.

The removal of the pills seems to indicate that perhaps it matters.

Perhaps (he) mattered still.

*  

Standing in front of the mirror in the en suite, Sherlock is either being brave or simply trying to rationalize his weakness away. The discrepancy between the two options is unsettling, but the outcome will probably be the same no matter the reason behind the action, he decides, too tired to battle the noise inside his head. It’s been eight days since The Decision and something needs to be done. He’s losing time in more ways than one at this point and measures need to be taken in an attempt at damage control.

Opening the mirror doors to the first of the two bathroom cabinets - 60’s generic design, one of the mirror doors significantly more worn; single person using the cabinet, not a couple - Sherlock pauses a second before looking through the contents of the shelves. The pills must be here. They need to be.

Neatly placed in an empty space created in the midst of clutter - paracetamol, shaving cream, lotions, sunblock and hair oil - there’s two unopened packets of pills side by side.

Clomipramine 25 mg.

Oxazepam 10 mg.

Some of the muscular tension in his shoulders eases a fraction as he realises that John hasn’t thrown out either the antidepressants or the benzodiazepines. There was a clear risk that he would; he’s been reluctant to keep even his own pain medication in the flat after finding out about Sherlock’s history with narcotics. Placing the narcotics amongst Sherlock’s own belongings is an unexpected course of action.

Something needs to be done.

As he opens one of the packets and set it aside before filling his glass with water, Sherlock is at least taking action. Taking action is close to taking control. He pops two pills out of the blister - the fact that there aren’t three pills is problematic. Three would have been more Right, though it wouldn’t have been the correct dose - and only hesitates for half a second before he swallows them down.

There.
It’s done.

Once he can establish whether the pills have had sufficient effect on his brain chemistry he’ll be facing what he’s been avoiding - coward, child, cracked - and take back some of the control he’s lost.

(Taking two pills does not, however, feel like a Right way to go about things... but the pressure is manageable and his hands are not shaking.)

Logic over sensation.

Action over fear.

Intellect over biology.

(Pills over control?)
After a shower, a shave and a long overdue pampering of the curls, Sherlock is determined not to let imbalance stop him from being (or at least appearing) his usual self.

This isn’t good. It’s nowhere near good. But it is - in fact - slightly better.

It must clearly be the placebo effect - an illogical but effective mechanism, cognitive dissonance at its best - but the tightness around Sherlock’s chest eased within minutes of taking the two pills. It’s not pharmacokinetically possible for the pills to have an effect before they have a chance to dissolve and be taken up into his bloodstream, and even then it will take a while for the chemicals to reach the concentration needed in order to have any significant influence. Yet Sherlock found the effect to be almost instantaneous.

(So cognitive defects can respond to placebo - interesting.)

In addition to the slight improvement of his mental state, there’s also a plan. The plan is simple; damage control and the resumption of previous functional patterns. Resumption ought to be easy; there’ll surely be cases to be solved, ones that don’t require him to leave to the flat. Damage control is harder, because Sherlock doesn’t trust himself to estimate the extent of the damage.

“You don’t have to understand emotions, you know. You could just learn to observe others and mimic them. Fake it, but be sure to fake it well. It’ll make your attempts at reaching some of your stated aspirations a lot less tiresome if you do,” Helena says with what sounds like poorly concealed boredom. “You don’t have to buy into it, though.”

Dr Helena Martell has no personality of her own. Sherlock has seen her stop in the corridors to talk to patients - he refuses to use the phrase ‘the other patients’ - and her behavior, posture and words change for each one. Though it does seem consistent for each patient; she always uses the same persona when she talks to a person more than once. Except for when she talks to Sherlock. With Sherlock she doesn’t even bother to try to be consistent. She’s a different version of herself for each of their sessions - most likely trying out different characteristics on Sherlock before using them in other situations. Or perhaps this is his punishment for his initial resentment of her seemingly manipulative behavior. Her current persona seems to be a slightly blasé career woman who dresses too youthfully. Sherlock finds it a bit uninspired.

“I’d say that if you were to trust anyone on this, then you should trust me,” his psychiatrist continues. “But trust is ridiculous, isn’t it?”
Sherlock learned to read people like others read timetables; it didn’t come naturally, but once the practice was cultivated he soon became highly efficient at it. Sherlock is not one to do things in moderation, so when he decided that he needed to find a structure and a system for understanding others he didn’t settle for being moderately good - *passing for ‘normal’* - no; he excelled. Sherlock’s highly advanced system for categorizing people’s words, tells and body language has not only given him the opportunity to level with them, it makes it possible for him to rise above it all. Usually, that is an advantage that goes to prove that intellectual capacity trumps deficient neurology. Right now, all his structures are in disarray and his reading of others is filtered through a membrane of interrupting patterns and chemical impact. Therefore he doubts that he’ll be objective in his measuring of the damage done in regards to John.

As Sherlock enters the kitchen John is gathering the rubbish and recycling. He instantly looks up from where he's hunched besides the kitchen sink, chasing a bottle that's escaped the overfull plastic bag. It's odd; Sherlock's never before felt this exposed just because John is looking at him. Now he does. The sensation is presumably due to the knowledge of what John now (thinks he) knows about Sherlock, but it's still an unexpected reaction which triggers an impulse to turn away from the blue-grey gaze of his friend. Uncomfortable sensations in palms and belly. *Nausea?*

"Case."

It's just one word, but so far it’s promising. Sherlock’s voice comes out clearly and he's both clean and dressed.

(*Normalcy?*)

"Yeah?" John asks.

Perhaps he needs to make that a bit clearer. How would he go about it if there wasn’t a tingling sensation in his palms - *a sensory phenomenon usually manifesting when he's exposed to heights* - he hadn’t suddenly been outed as mentally unstable - *defective* - and wasn’t on a mission to recreate normalcy? He has no idea. His behaviour used to be dependent on his mood. What mood does he want to communicate now? 'Normalcy' is not a mood.

"A case. I need a case. Did they end up solving that case Lestrade was so desperate for us to take? Never mind, it's probably boring anyway."

John - *an unfamiliar hint of glowing orange at the midnight blue core flares out to the troubling ice blue that radiates unevenly around the core* - looks at him intently for several seconds, like he's trying to translate something Sherlock just said in a foreign language. Sherlock still feels the urge to look away, but the room around him is too bright for his eyes, and John's midnight blue is the only restful thing in his field of vision. The rest burns in his vision like the grey day outside did just before the silver bird reappeared and smashed all hope of that he might have gathered enough logic to permanently erase silver birds, trumpet sounds and calendars from his mind.
Finally John nods slightly, getting up into standing position, and puts the plastic bags on a kitchen chair next to him.

"I... don't know. I could check, if you like. You sure that your... poisoning is better?"

Sherlock's not sure if John is taking the piss. He would hardly be the first to do it. But John licks his lips - nervous response - and looks him firmly in the eyes, and the orange is spreading in sync with the twist in Sherlock's stomach. No, Sherlock will definitely not be leaving the apartment in this state.

"Don't be dull. Obviously. And it's not likely to be more than a five anyway, so I'm not leaving the apartment."

With that John seems to make up his mind and gives another nod before he exits the kitchen. A hollow sensation surges through Sherlock’s guts before he hears the telltale sound of John’s laptop being opened - checking the blog for cases.

And this is better, he knows as he lets the water run in the sink for thirteen seconds before filling a glass and taking three slow sips. He can’t make this go away right now, but at the moment he can control how much of it will leak out and become visible.

And if it took 20 mg of Oxazepam to get to this point, then that's a price he'll have to pay. Two round pills temporarily easing the signs of impairment - hateful, degrading, dulling - weighed against the continued disintegration of his life. It should be an easy choice.

Logical.

(It hadn’t been easy. It never was.)

17 years old, his first time on Oxazepam, and Sherlock almost feels like he’s found balance as he paces the dirt-yellow corridors of the ward without thinking about how many steps he’s taking with each foot, or how he can only stop walking when his left foot is in front of the right. This could be the magic fix he never believed in; the cure for imbalance.

After a couple of hours, the concentration of the drug in his blood is no longer sufficient to cover the ever-present symptoms of his deficiency. This leaves him in pure, illogical agony. A few more tries at the drug produce the same result. The temporary relief just isn’t worth the backlash.

Two weeks later he’s given Clomipramine. He’s surprised to find that it actually makes sense; it adjusts the imbalance in his serotonin levels, balancing his brain chemistry. Oxazepam doesn’t make sense; it just dulls the signs of imbalance. Once the benzodiazepine wears off there’s an increase in pressure and he is faced with the fact that he’s been unable to use the required patterns to even out the balance while under the influence of the drug. Without it he finds that he now has to work even harder to readjust all the balance that has been lost.
John is seated on the sofa, studying the comments on his blog. The curious glowing orange is still present but the blue has shift into a blend of Tyrian purple and teal. Sherlock finds it hard to redirect his eyes from the color spectrum that is John Watson.

The fact that John chose the sofa makes things complicated. Sherlock can’t stand behind it and peer over his shoulder as he usually does when John is in his chair or sitting by the desk. For now, Sherlock finds that he’s hesitant to take a seat next to John on the sofa. He’s aware of John in a way that’s not entirely comfortable.

“Someone who’s wondering if you can find out if their grandmother was unfaithful when she went missing for a few hours at a county fair. In 1954.”

John is absent-mindedly scrolling, his finger on the trackball and his eyes squinting slightly - should change the screen resolution. Sherlock is still standing in the middle of the sitting room, unable to make up his mind about where to position himself. He digs his phone out of his pocket and begin to randomly swipe the screen. Distraction.

“Oh this one. Asking what the kebabs are actually made of at some kebab stand in Camden market. She suspects it’s dove meat.”

“Not dove. Probably horse.”

John looks up at him, surprised. The orange is glowing more intensely, pulsing in a way that Sherlock has never seen anyone’s colors do before. It should not be important.

“Alright, should I tell her that?”

“If you like,” Sherlock offers, just moments before his brain derails.

Horses. Horsemen. The four horsemen. A pale, a black, a red and a white horse. Ridden by the harbingers of the Last Judgement. Trumpet sounds as seals are broken. Orders not to spare a living soul.

“Nah, I think the dove meat theory is more intriguing to her. Something to theorize about as she goes by the kebab stand every day.”

The white horse. Conquest or Pestilence. "They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth."

“This one might actually be something of relevance.”

John’s voice is no longer making sense - it’s impossible to distinguish between the words, the buzz of old verses and the low rumble of thunder. Going through his thought patterns to neutralize every single horse and its rider Sherlock finds that it gets worse before it gets better. Four. It had to be four.

“...and it says here that she had no reason to be on that bus. She had been planning to go to another seminar before she went home to her cousin, but the cousin hadn’t heard anything about…”

Black horse. Famine. The weighing scales falls to the ground and the people are screa… John. It was all written down by John. John must know. He saw all the terror and the Plague and the Judgement and he must know just how terrible the ending’s going to be and…

Inhale. Exhale. Everything inside of Sherlock is giving way for the pressure. Sensory phenomena. (Illusion; it isn’t real.)
The horses inside his head are not real. They come from 2000 years’ worth of myths and fairy tales used to oppress people into obedience. It isn’t real. It didn’t happen. John didn’t have to see Judgement Day. John didn’t have to write it all down as a Revelation.

“...but I reckon you’re not interested in those details. Should I ask Lestrade about the report on the disappearance?”

Sherlock manages a slight nod, suddenly aware that John’s once more looking up from his laptop, awaiting an answer of some sort.

This isn’t good. But it is - in fact - slightly better.

Sherlock might be combusting from the pressure, but doesn’t let it show on the outside. He can take the panic - it’s been his since he was eleven - it’s the thought of anyone seeing the depths of his irrationality that scares him the most.

People admire his skill at seeing patterns that no one else notices. There’s a significant difference, though, between seeing what no one else notices and seeing what isn’t even there. There's nothing 'amazing' about seeing patterns that don't exist.

Two pills were not enough to make the irrationality go away, even temporarily. But they were enough to keep it from leaking out and staining everything he touches. The insanity stays underneath his skin this way. Invisible to the outside world.

It will look almost like normalcy.

Chapter End Notes

For those unfamiliar with the four horses; it's from the Book of Revelations, where Saint John is shown what will happen at Judgement Day.
**Pattern Recognition**

*Pattern recognition.*

With every curtain in the room drawn to close out the harsh daylight, Sherlock is lying on the sofa with his hands pressed together, creating a calming sensation. The dim, unintrusive light paired with the pressure on his palms in addition to the 20 mg of Oxazepam help to limit his now constantly elevated level of distress, allowing him a momentary respite during which he can direct his thoughts towards a recently recognised problem.

The problem is in itself a cause for distress. Reviewing his own reactions to John during the last 20 hours Sherlock can observe tendencies that would indicate certain physical and emotional responses consistent with a very specific sentiment.

*It can’t be real.*

Sherlock knows that it can’t be - *he simply doesn’t feel things like that*. It was taken - *or rather lifted* - from him before he was even twenty.

Wanting… something.

*(Someone.)*

It’s the one complication that Sherlock’s been spared. Simultaneously a relief and yet another proof that he’s more malfunctioning machine than vulnerable human. It had seemed fitting.

(He’s only been aware of the current situation for 20 hours, and it’s already distracted him from the - so far obvious - case. A complication. One he can’t afford when his brain is already working on a less than optimal level.)

And now all these little tells are beginning to fuse into a vaguely familiar pattern. First there was the pulsing, sunset orange radiating - *he remembers it vaguely from his teenage years*. But it was never this strong or this intense. Then - last night - he’d noticed how vasodilation made it feel like the skin on his face was burning - *the brain often misinterprets heat as burning* - as he turned away from John to head to his bedroom. This is nothing novel - for some reason John’s provoked that involuntary reflex several times during the last few months. It’s only when seen in the light of the other parts of the schema that this is significant. The final part - the catalyst for this whole observational study - is the unusual state in which Sherlock woke up this morning. An autonomous physical reaction that doesn’t require external stimuli to manifest itself. Still, it’s rare enough to qualify as part of the pattern. A pattern he hasn’t observed in himself for the last 14 years.

*It’s not real*. It’s neurotransmitters confusing one obsession for another - *even more improbable* - one.
“Sherlock. We need to talk.” John’s voice is determined as Sherlock looks up from the screen of his phone, afternoon light creating sharp contrasts on the kitchen walls. He’s just sent a text, asking Lestrade for the case files on the missing woman. *Progress.*

*Nothing good has ever begun with those four words, and vasodilation is once again revealing far too much.*

John’s voice softens marginally as his eyes meet Sherlock’s - *seeing something that makes him hesitate.* “One question, alright?”

_The ‘depression’ - the staring - the visible compulsions - the odd colorings radiating from John - the incident with Mycroft - the way Sherlock gets visual images of John’s violent death at times._

Sherlock can come up with at least fifteen more things that he does not want to talk about, so he says nothing, just pretends to sip his tea. *Pretending* - all it’s he seems to be able to do lately. Honesty is impossible when the truth leaves you standing there with all of your nerve endings exposed. He’s not even capable of pretending convincingly. It’s seems almost useless to even try when all it would take is for someone to really look at you - *really see you* - to reveal that the skin you’ve put on to cover yourself up doesn’t even fit anymore.

John looks at him, but nothing in his features seems to indicate that he’s aware that Sherlock is disgustingly human - *just flesh, dilated blood vessels and nerves.* Then again; perhaps he isn’t really looking.

Setting down the packet of Hobnobs he’s been plundering, John is now leaning against the kitchen counter, eyeing Sherlock intently. *He’s surrounded by khaki beige and that pulsing orange - nauseating blend.* His newly toweled hair is still wet enough to make the shoulders of his striped shirt damp, just out of a shower that took approximately 7 minutes longer than his usual post-work showers - *feeling stressed or inadequate at work, then.*

(Perhaps not just at work.)

“Are you…” John clears his throat, clearly uncomfortable with the subject. “There’s more than twenty Oxazepam missing from the package.”

*...the Oxazepam?*

“They’re not missing.” Sherlock snaps, attempting to keep his voice unaffected - *failing blatantly.* “I know exactly where they went.”

“So you took them?”

“No, I sold them on the streets for milk money,” he snarls, then bites his lip. “Of course I took them!”

“You’re saying that you took over twenty pills during the course of what-- 3 days?”

24 pills - which is the exact number - in 72 hours means two pills every sixth hour. Reasonable dosage, really. Sherlock can’t, however, say this. ‘Reasonable dosage’ is something that John’s not likely to believe he’s capable of when it comes to narcotics.

(John’s gone through Sherlock’s cabinet, opened his medications, counted the empty blisters, knowing that Sherlock retreats to anxiolytics to manage his own thoughts.)

“I’m saying that you should stay out of this,” Sherlock spits, his hands visibly shaking as he rises
from his chair and walks over to John by the counter, towering over him with a confidence he’s very much not feeling. He manages to get the next sentence out with intonation on every single word. “Once again you’ve managed to stick your nose into something that has nothing whatsoever to do with you.”

John blinks, gathering himself.

"Once again? When did I last-- No. Never mind. It’s one simple question, Sherlock, and it’s not like I have a habit of inquiring about things that you do that doesn’t concern me, or… well, that’s the thing, isn’t it? Nothing you do has anything to do with me."

"What are you saying?"

"What I'm saying," John says with that forced almost-smile that indicates that John's near boiling-point with built-up frustration, but is schooled not to let it show on his face, "is that nothing is ever about me. Not for you. And I could handle that before. Could handle how you used my skills when you needed them to make a point and then left me behind as soon as I was at risk of slowing you down, and how you led me on and then brushed me off just to lead me on again, using the fact that I exposed myself once, that very first night, to keep me at a convenient distance at all times. And you just keep doing these things, all of them. I can barely hold on to my job, never mind a woman. Because you invade everything, rummage around for a few minutes and you don’t even bother to clean up when you go, not even closing the door behind you. And now you're telling me that I put my nose into things that don’t concern me. Huh."

John's shallow breathing is the only thing audible between them and it dawns on Sherlock that the reason for that is that he himself have stopped breathing.

"I never insisted that you explain every time you ran off without a word or ignored me for days. But now. I asked one thing of you. One thing. I need to know if you are taking narcotics.” John’s voice escalates into a near-shout. “Which I think, considering the fact that you’re a freaking drug addict, is not too much to ask!”

“Former addict,” Sherlock corrects, voice aiming for ice, because that's how his intestines feel. John’s never used the words-- No. Not something to think about now. “And it’s still not your business.”

He pauses for a second before his mind catches on something, something John had said that-- Oh.

“You think I lead you on? Sexually?”

This is very much not the time to inquire about something so… raw, but it slips out before Sherlock has a chance to stop it.

(The issue with not having skin - everything is immediate.)

“What?”

John - more khaki and more toxic green, the pumpkin orange reduced to a faint glow - looks like he’s just awaiting final confirmation of something before he can throw himself into a fight. Sherlock tries not to think about John’s proximity or the fact that something is vibrating inside him, making it almost impossible not to tap his foot just to relieve some pressure.

(This should not feel like it’s Sherlock that’s exposed himself. Still, it does. Because he finds that it matters.)
“You think I lead you on, and that bothers you?”

“That is very much not the point here, Sherlock. I don’t know why-- I shouldn’t have said that, I didn’t mean anything. Look, it just slipped out, OK?” John says, voice steady, but something is there just below the surface. Something that suggests that Sherlock should instantly drop the the issue. “Now drop it. Don’t try to change the fucking subject.”

Sherlock discreetly taps his left hand against his own leg, trying to come up with something to say. His mind doesn’t seem able to drop this subject and he certainly does not want to resume the previous conversation.

*Lead on/brush off.*

“Then what is the point? You’re bothered by my behaviour. I’m merely addressing the issues.”

John clears his throat, takes a deep breath. It doesn’t seem to calm him down, because when he speaks his voice is still all withheld thunder.

“The point is that you’re a ‘former’ addict who’s taking fucking narcotics.”

“It’s prescription medication!” Sherlock exclaims, another thing said without thinking. “I don’t even do depressants.”

“You don’t ‘do’ depressants?” John lifts an eyebrow, a gesture that Sherlock generally finds most fascinating when done by someone as serious as John is right now, but it doesn’t feel the least bit fascinating at the moment. It feels… like a storm warning.

“Not like that. I’ve never taken depressants for… recreational purposes.”

“Then what have you taken them for?”

The strain in John’s voice. *There’s no pulsing orange left.* Only breaths that are close enough to mingle and the not-quite silence of the kitchen. It’s possible to tell the truth, but it seems impossible to estimate the consequences of doing so.

“That’s… Something I do not wish to discuss.”

*Fridge humming, distant sounds from the TV - commercials - and the London traffic outside.* It’s never truly quiet in the flat, but the silence is palpable.

“You don’t ‘wish’ to discuss it? Too bad. Too bad, because we’re discussing it. Right. Now.”

“You think I lead you on?”

*Thump.*

John’s fist hits the counter without warning.

Sherlock flinches, not prepared for the sudden sound. His heart races even more, his eyes set on John’s fist rather than on his face.

*It must have hurt.*

“Shut. Up.”

John’s fingers still clenched into a fist. *No signs of pain.* Cortisol must have numbed the pain
perception.

Sherlock shuts up. His heart is now uncomfortably loud and it takes all his effort just to control his breathing, not to let on just how responsive his autonomous nervous system is - *fight or flight*.

“You listen, and you answer. Why did Mycroft give you - of all people - narcotics?”

Sherlock lifts his eyes from John’s fist to John’s eyes. Swallows.

He will not get away. Not this time.

“Quitting psychotropic drugs has certain physiological side-effects, some of which can be quite incapacitating for a short period of time until the brain reestablishes its previous uptake of the affected neurotransmitters,” he says, voice matter-of-fact, distanced.

“Psychotrop-- you mean the antidepressants? You - you were on antidepressants?”

Anger suddenly turning into confusion, but still lingering underneath the surface. Sherlock’s face is suddenly too warm and *this is not something that should ever--*

“I didn’t mean to… That’s none of my business,” John says slowly, pointedly not looking away, but looking increasingly uncomfortable.

It’s Sherlock who breaks eye contact, not wanting to know what John looks like when he realises--

“But you do?” he asks - words seems faster than inhibitory functions.

“Do what?”

“Think that I lead you on?”

Silence. Thin ice. Not looking at John’s face, but at his now loosening fist on the counter, Sherlock still sees the return of a very faint orange in the midst of the sand-colored confrontation - *threat/intrusion*.

“Yes.”

(Unexpected.)

“And it’s bothering you? I-- I make you uncomfortable.”

“No, it’s just-- Well, yeah, it does bother me. *Not* -” John emphasise the word heavily “- because you’re male. But because you keep doing it.”

(‘Not gay’. Yes, *noted.*

It’s surprising that John let the conversation be turned in this direction after all. Perhaps the subject of Sherlock’s… medical history became too emotional for them both.

(*Not that this subject is less inflammatory.*

“I wasn’t aware of doing so.”

**Honesty.**

“It’s just… you can’t keep looking at someone like that or invading someone’s space like that if
you’re not interested, alright? It’s— confusing. That’s all. I realise that you might not be aware, but— actually, never mind. It’s not really your problem.”

(They are taking turns. Recognising patterns and exposing rawness.)

“But you…”

“I said never mind. I know you don’t mean anything by it, and I shouldn’t let it get to me.”

“How... How do you know?”

There’s something very painful in the way Sherlock’s pulse sounds almost louder than John’s words. Again.

(This is exhausting. This is why caring is not an advantage.)

“How do I…? Because you bloody keep brushing me off, clearly! And because you’re ‘married to your work’ and all that nonsense.”

“What if I didn’t?”

“Didn’t what, Sherlock?”

John’s at boiling point once more, trying not to let it show. This time it’s not anger. It’s something even more personal.

“Intend to brush you off.”

Sherlock is not sure about the terminology. He’s not even quite sure what he’s asking, and John looks equally confused as he forms his own half-question.

“Are you saying…”

Hesitancy. Doubt.

“No I’m not saying. I’m asking,” Sherlock clarifies, voice finally firm again.

“I have no idea what you’re actually asking.”

“If I stopped ‘brushing you off’, as you so eloquently put it, would the other things I do still bother you?”

This isn’t easy, but being fueled by stress hormones makes it slightly less difficult. Breathing’s not uncomplicated when being this close to someone you have autonomous physical reactions to.

“Why?” John finally asks, defensively - on the verge of something.

“I could stop doing it.” Sherlock licks his lips, realising too late what that gesture could imply.

John looks at him, then away, then back at him.

A slight nod, then nothing more.

And it won’t be that easy to just stop brushing John off, not really, because Sherlock didn’t even know that he’d been doing it in the first place. Just like he wasn’t even aware that he’d led John on.

(What does that even mean? It’s made-up terminology used for something Sherlock has had no
interest in for the last twelve years. He can’t be expected to fully grasp--

John is shifting color and is once again bleeding warm nuances and intense tones, and Sherlock is not sure what this conversation will mean tomorrow. He’s not even sure what ‘it’s all fine’ means in this context. He’s still not sure what it meant that first time.

Eyes dart over his face and his brain interprets warmth as burning.

(It’s a common impairment, though, not specific to his brain.)

Sherlock takes a step back, reaching for his phone, willing the pressure in his bones not to override the thoughts that are racing in ultra rapid. John gives him one last glance, one more nod before he puts the Hobnobs down and walks slowly towards the sitting room - uncomfortable, unsettled, attempting normality.

(There are some things that they don’t talk about.)

Sherlock should not feel this. This… anticipation. He ought to experience the weight of what John now knows and might interpret about his mental abilities like ‘dread’, like the threat of Silver Birds and pale horses. Instead he feels something he can’t (won’t) name. It doesn’t mean anything.

(Except if it does. Human nature is unpredictable and erroneous.)

There’s 24 pills not missing from the packet in his cabinet and there are 26 left that are yet to be not missing, but that won’t be enough. Because Sherlock has no right to ask for what he just did. Not when all he has is 27 hours of suggestive observations weighed against 11 months of something else.

Balance of probability.

(Pattern recognition.)
They don’t mention it after that.

It’s half an hour after the argument-turned-confession and John taps away at his laptop while Sherlock occupies the kitchen as he cleans out the fridge. It’s an old retreat - **organising, cleaning, structuring.** Empty fridge - spray fridge with soapy water - wipe off every package and bowl before putting them back again, this time in a new order that allows him to see all the content at once, nothing hidden behind something else. It doesn’t matter that some of the things in the fridge are supposedly hazardous - Sherlock’s never understood why some remains would be less hygienic than others - no, this is about something else. This is both a strategy for himself and a ‘sorry’ in advance for John, because there's no doubt that there’ll be more things to apologise for if this is--

It’s illogical, but there’s something - **obsessions, of course he knows that it’s the obsessions** - always telling him that if he can just organise everything around him - **be prepared for the inevitable tumult, counteract chaos** - then perhaps he’ll function, perhaps he’ll be enough.

When he was seventeen years old he finally learned how to work his way around this *(illogical)* need and only allow himself to give in on a few, well-chosen instances, and now he ought to know better than to embark on external solutions to internal problems, but yet he’s here; doing it once again. There’s chaos inside his mind and new obsessions threatening to override all the previous ones *(except the first one, the one that never happened, the one that broke his mind)*, and he’s willing to let it do just that, but he needs an external way to organise the internal chaos if he's to stand a chance to stay above the surface of the shapeless dread of--

He only hopes that John will not see this for what it really is.

Inadequacy made visible.

*"

“What are you hoping to accomplish by keeping things ‘in balance’, as you call it?”

**Sherlock is sixteen years old and eyes the woman sitting beside him on the bench on the courtyard. Helena is having one of her ‘screw convention’ days and has taken their weekly session outdoors. Sherlock’s still conflicted about seeing her as an outpatient, but things can hardly get worse, and at least the woman’s insane enough to be somewhat interesting, albeit irritating. The fact that she’s really as cold as a fish is somehow quite comforting.**

“You already know the reasons I do these things.”

“Yes. And you already know why I want you to still say it out loud.”

“Because it’ll make me reflect over whether or not my thoughts are logical as I voice them and hear them spoken out loud,” Sherlock recites.
Helena nods, the wind blowing her hair - messy bird’s nest today - into her face. And yes, Sherlock had already known, but answering her questions too easily would feel too much like cooperating.

(Cooperating would feel too much like he was the one who wanted this. Wanted to keep seeing her. Wanted to work on his... 'issues')

“Fine. I structure things and organise every detail and every event in patterns because it helps me make sense of it and gives me a feeling of being in control.”

“That last part was just you quoting a poorly-written psychology book, Sherlock,” Helena says, her voice indifferent as she brushes the hair away from her face, eyes directed at the windows of the building next to them. “Give me something more original, would you?”

There was a time in Sherlock’s life before he committed himself fully to logic, but that time was neither productive or satisfying. The decision to hold logical reasoning above all else was what led him to this point - the Work, sobriety, sanity, 221B, being alive--

(John.)

Logic should therefore also be sufficient when it comes to keeping these things, even if one of them is highly illogical.

(John.)

The sentiment has no logic but he could build it a structure - a skeleton for all the soft tissue that's pooling all over the well-kept floors of his mind palace - giving it something to attach to.

John dislikes being brushed off. Sherlock has been unaware - except on a few rare occasions - of doing so. Mainly because he’s been likewise unaware of having led on.

The conclusion to be drawn is obvious:

Stop brushing off.

Keep leading on.

He will need time. Time to reevaluate so many events and conversations, time to observe the present ones. Assess and categorise and calculate.

He needs to find a pattern - an algorithm - because this is as illogical as Silver Birds and vibrations, but with the additional complication of being something that Sherlock might not want to dismiss.


In the meantime, he will need to resume his use of functional patterns - deductions, cases, science, logic - in order to enable the new patterns to be incorporated in his structures.

The game might not be fully on, but it might be time to unpress pause.
It takes longer than it ought to, but after an hour and a half on his laptop, Sherlock has found the structure - or rather the pattern of a changed structure - in the missing girl's life so far.

Summoning John to share the information gained, Sherlock feels almost like himself for the first time in two weeks.

Solving problems. Counteracting chaos.

“Until she was nineteen, Sophia Sanders attended bake sales, Bible groups and ridiculously expensive teen camps, all related to her parents’ congregation. Look at this,” Sherlock says, pointing at a photo posted on Sophia’s Facebook page. In the picture, a tall girl stands in the midst of a group of other girls, all making faces at the camera while pointing to a sign that announces their arrival at “Jesus Camp”. The girl squints in the bright sunlight, but her smile seems sincere and a shorter friend holds an arm around her waist while Sophia has an expensive-looking handbag on her arm together with a bracelet that seems to be identical to the ones worn by the other girls.

“Yeah, my cousin was involved in a lot of stuff like that. Evangelical churches,” John comments.

“Now, four years ago something made her change her church-related activities quite drastically. She left her parents’ church and began seeking out more socially radical groups…”

“Socially radical?” John asks, brow furrowed.

“Political activism and religion. Demonstrations against segregation and the weapons industry, hiding refugees; that kind of radical. Certainly not something Mum and Dad would approve of, judging by the political groups they have liked on their Facebook.”

“So a late rebellion against her parents, then,” John suggests, leaning forward and clearing a small area on the table in front of him to put his now empty mug on, then returning to sit even closer to Sherlock, head almost brushing against Sherlock’s shoulder as he eyes the screen of the laptop.

(Lead on - to acknowledge or to reciprocate?)

“Possibly, but not very likely. She actually seems to be making an effort to conceal the more radical aspects of her current religious strivings. She has another, more anonymous Facebook account for some of these activities, and while she’s not exactly attempting to obscure what she occupies herself with it’s clear that she’s trying to tone it down and still attend her parents’ church as often as possible, seemingly to keep them from worrying about her immortal soul.”

Immortality. Eternal life. Heaven or hell. There's no limbo - limbo is the same thing as hell, only made worse by its uncertainty.

The mere word causes vibrations. Ignore.

“So, perhaps she got new friends who made her change her opinions on things? Or she might have just grown tired of everything that she'd grown up with and wanted to try something new?”

“John. If a girl who was moderately popular in her circles, had somewhat decent grades, aspired to become a journalist and considered piercing her nose to be an act of rebellion - which her parents
seemed to agree on, by the way - wanted to try something new, wouldn’t you rather think that she’d apply for Bible Studies abroad or attempt a career as a singer, rather than selling her expensive bags - all seven of them - to move in with a single mother and her toddler whilst earning her money by taking a low-paid night job at a home for severely disabled youth, and then spend that money on rent for a family of four illegal immigrants? Look at her hair, John. She didn’t even bother to recolour it as it grew out. She’s got hair that’s half blonde and half chesnut, and I’m pretty certain that’s not fashionable even in her current circles.”

("Brush off - probably. Nature of brush off - hardly romantic, more intellectual. Acceptable?)"

“Alright, yeah, I guess it was a big change, then. Perhaps she had a revelation?”

John says it lightly, part serious, part joke. The last few months he’s used that tone of voice more often, as if giving Sherlock any serious-sounding suggestion would be to expose himself to ridicule that couldn’t be joked away so easily. Perhaps he has a point.

(Not romantic. Acceptable.)

“I think she might have had, yes. Not impossible.”

Sherlock doesn’t believe in revelations - Book of Revelations - pale horses - John facing the Judgement Day. The trials that will plague the Earth and those not redeemed by their faith - the flames and the pestilence--

Vibrations. Impossible to ignore, but the external counteraction of them might be possible to postpone. This is working - he's finally working - back to 'sharp' and 'brilliant', back to a situation in which he's not impaired, back to normalcy - and this isn't the time to disrupt it all by being compulsive.

Sherlock believes in logic. He’s vowed himself to the laws of logic. It was the only sound thing to do when his brain kept-- But perhaps Sophia promised herself to something else? Another kind of revelation. Another kind of reaction.

John looks at him the way he sometimes does when he thinks that Sherlock is being knowingly opaque, but still settles for waiting until Sherlock chooses to reveal the logic behind his reasoning.

(Logic. His brain is anything but logical without the chemicals adjusting the deficient levels of certain neurotransmitters.)

“You have to look more deeply into what happened just before the break in the pattern appeared, John. Patterns like these are seldom broken. There’s always a trigger. If you find that trigger, you will learn a lot about the true nature of a person. Or, in this case, the most likely cause for Sophia’s disappearance.”

(Deflect. Redirect.)

“Alright. And how are we planning to do that?”

(“We.” Self-invite. Self-inclusion. Lead on.)

John’s thigh brushes against Sherlock’s as John leans forward again, picking up his mug once more.

The touch is light, causing a real and very somatic sensation of vibration, and Sherlock can’t stop the compulsive tic that he knows will make the vibrations in his skin go away. There are too many compulsions queuing in his mind to stop this one from escaping his control, and suddenly his hand is
rubbing firmly against the point where their thighs brushed, replacing the tingling on his skin with something more palpable.

Just as Sherlock is realising just what he’s doing, his eyes slide up to John’s face, and his hand stops moving as he sees the way John instantly tries to make his face neutral, like he didn’t just witness Sherlock trying to erase the traces of their physical contact.

(Brush off. Undeniably. Incorrectly.)

Half a second of hesitation, then Sherlock is also rubbing against John’s thigh with his hand, feeling the warmth through the worn denim. It’s not at all how he’d planned to go about this, but he just couldn’t let John--

(Lead on. Unintended. Compensatory. Unmistakeable.)

Sherlock averts his eyes to the laptop screen, withdraws his hand from John's thigh, placing it on the keyboard where it should have been all along. John’s breathing seems to have paused.

“We begin with the police report,” Sherlock says. “Tell Lestrade to send it over.”
Penny calls insists on calling Helena "the guru of psychiatrically-endorsed nihilism". I insist on finding this rather complimentary.

The front door slams hard enough to startle Sherlock out of what must have been a shallow sleep. The sound of the footsteps on the stairs - every other step is heavier and the pacing is asymmetric - confirms Sherlock’s theory that John’s PTSD is acting up again. The past few nights there’d been the padding down to the kitchen for glasses of water in the darkness, a restlessness that only surfaced during periods of intensified symptoms. The conclusion is simple.

Insufficient adrenaline in John’s system - Sherlock’s not supplied him with anything more dangerous than the risk of being vomited on over the last two weeks. Another thing lost due to the tumult of Sherlock’s chronically imbalanced brain.

Sherlock gets to his feet - mind palace pose ridiculous when you look more like you’ve run a marathon than having immersed yourself inside your own memory storage system - and attempts to hide his startled reactions to the slamming door by pacing across the sitting room floor, hoping that the rapid pace will account for his rapid breathing.

There are crumbs on the carpet. Every nerve ending in the soles of Sherlock’s feet sends sensory information to his brain; the filter that usually sorts out at least part of the superfluous information was burnt away by the grey skies the day the silver birds reappeared.

It’s not true. And it isn’t real.

(But he still feels the crumbs mixed with the coarse structure of the oriental rug under his bare feet.)

The sound of footstep approaches and Sherlock continues to pace, faster now, but his footsteps can’t keep up with his tachycardia.

John doesn’t take his jacket off, just continues into the living room, stopping just inside the doorway. Sherlock doesn’t look at him - too much data (facial muscles; expressive, and the distinct breathing pattern of someone who is looking at… no) that counteracts what he’s held as truth for so long - and he ends up not acknowledging John at all.

(Brush-off?)

It’s a struggle against the instinct to avoid chaos and the will to follow the new patterns he’s set out, the patterns that will allow - enable? - him to approach something almost foreign but surprisingly familiar. The want. A compulsion that requires him to act against other compulsions.

John.
Lifting his eyes, giving a nod, Sherlock takes in John in.

(Acknowledgement - not quite a lead-on, but no longer a potential brush-off.)

Things haven’t got easier since their little talk. Sherlock is uncertain whether John can feel the density of the atmosphere whenever they share the same space, how it’s growing and making the air more viscous. He is, however, fairly certain that John is unaware of how his color’s been changing - Tyrian purple and the pulsing of Tangelo orange. It’s distracting, and the pulsing is out of sync with Sherlock’s heartbeats.

Out of sync - a three-word summary of the past twenty-one days.

John’s voice breaks through the tension with two words that aren’t really a question.

“You ready?”

Ready. Ready to leave the flat, to expose himself to the sounds and the light, to face everything he’s avoided for three weeks. Ready to go to NSY and pick up a file.

“Yes.”

A one-word answer that doesn’t really tell the truth.

* 

Lestrade had refused to send over the files on the missing woman. Predictable. The thought of going to the Yard himself in order to access the files had almost been enough to make Sherlock drop the whole case. It just didn’t seem worth it. He already knows, and further research - one of the silent hours when John was at the clinic was spent doing research on his laptop while the rest were spent clenching his fists, breathing through his nose, trying not to give in to the thoughts spinning inside his head like a centrifuge trying to pull him in - had proven that the disappearance was planned by the woman herself. Sherlock had the choice to just live and let live. He isn’t sure about how he feels about the “live” part when it comes to himself, but Sophia will surely live no matter if Sherlock tracks her down or not.

Then there were John’s steps on the stairs and the realisation that while Sherlock might not be able to handle a case, John actually needed this.

And for once the choice was easy.

* 

The light outside the door to 221 Baker Street is relentless.

It’s not the grey skies - no, this is almost sunlight and it cuts right into his retinas, making it impossible to keep his eyes open. Blinking heavily, Sherlock forces himself to squint in order to make his way towards the edge of the pavement, waving for a cab while John follows just a few steps behind.
It’s minutes before a taxi comes down the street, and Sherlock almost misses it, his eyes still not adjusted to the daylight and the piercing sharpness that’s making it impossible to force his eyes to open fully. John is silent beside him, scrolling on his phone while waiting for Sherlock’s cab-hunting mojo to kick in. As the cab pulls over, Sherlock’s eyes catch on its numberplate - LY06XJX.

*Not Right.*

The pressure rises further as John walks to the door on the right side of the cab and Sherlock automatically heads for the left side - the Right side. He can’t see much at the moment, but he saw the six - and X is not a particularly good letter either.

Listening for the thunder-like sound of silver birds Sherlock manages to get into the cab. Left foot first, then the right, then putting the left foot down on the floor once more to achieve asymmetry. *Making amends for something that isn’t even real.* No silver birds, only even numbers - 666 - and burning light. John’s still holding his phone, but Sherlock can see that he’s looking at him from the corner of his eye. Sherlock shuts his eyes, shuts the world out and pretends that it’s a perfectly normal thing for him to do. That Sherlock is someone who commonly tilts his head against the neck rest and closes his eyes for a few minutes’ rest in a cab. That this is something normal and that John won’t see it as… something that isn’t.

Even with his eyes shut Sherlock can feel John’s gaze, radiating lime green and khaki with only the slightest touch of aubergine.

As the taxi takes a sharp bend, Sherlock blinks his eyes open at the same moment a text alert beeps from the pocket of his coat.

It’s taken her long enough to answer. Five hours, thirty-two minutes. She’s getting slow. Or perhaps it’s just one of her ‘Eccentric Researcher Who Couldn’t Care Less’ days. He learned that from her. Learned that you can cover up certain weaknesses by playing up your eccentricity. Though it took him far too long to catch up on that, on part of the reason for her uneven behavior.

On his screen, a name appears - Helena Martell.

He thumbs her name, and the image on the screen changes, revealing first his own initial text - the one he almost didn’t send - followed by her reply.

*Your opinion on the chances of partial remission from symptoms of early onset OCD without the Clomipramine? - SH*

*I wouldn’t quit my meds, honey. In your case the chances of remission are not chances, they’re statistical anomalies.* - Dr Martell

He’d suspected it; hadn’t held his breath hoping for a different answer.

Nevertheless. One less straw to catch at.
As Sherlock pockets his phone he's very much aware of how close together he and John are sitting in the cab. Closer than usual And for two seconds he feels nothing but the flutter in his stomach that this notion produces. Then there’s only chaos.

It only takes a tenth of a second before his mind is invaded by images of John sent violently crashing against the driver’s seat by the impact of a frontal collision. In his mind it happens in slow motion; the way John’s head moves in a way no head should be able to, heavy from the force of the movement. Splinters of glass cutting skin, leading to arterial red splashing into patterns before the image consists of nothing but arterial blood pulsing against his retinas. The same arterial red that flashes at the inside of Sherlock’s eyelids as the cab makes a right turn.

*It’s not real.*

As the cab halts, Sherlock takes a deep breath before stepping out into the chaos of daylight and people walking in dozens of different directions, seemingly without any recognisable pattern. Steadying himself with a hand on the back of the cab he manages to get to the pavement even though his eyes are not fully adjusted to the light yet.

The sight of the crowded pavement is almost enough to make him turn around and retreat back into the cab. The cacophony of smells, movement and the buzzing sounds coming from every direction makes him disoriented, and the nausea from a few minutes ago returns instantly. People are passing him at different paces, in different rhythms, and it’s unpredictable, disorganised and overwhelming in a way it hasn’t been since he was a child.

A man is screaming into his phone as if he wants to override the buzz in Sherlock’s mind.

Two teenage girls are skipping on the pavement, almost bumping into him, laughing out their excuses as they almost crash into a woman on their other side.

In the distance - or is it just beside him, it’s impossible to tell at this point - a baby yells as a van backfires.

It doesn’t make sense, this feeling of suddenly having lost depth perception. But the distance between him and the other people is impossible to predict, and taking a step forward feels like stepping into the line of fire - exposing himself for cyclists, skaters, runners and everyone that is suddenly moving outside the any visual timeline.

Sherlock can’t take another step, but he can’t stay still either. People are beginning to bump into him. He’s obstructing their irrational paths and their normal lives and their senseless routines. He disrupts.

*Slow inhale. Keep air in lungs for a second, two seconds. Controlled exhale.*

*Shut eyes.*
Take two steps forward with eyes closed.

*Open eyes.*

*Slow inhale. Slow exhale.*

*Keep eyes open.*

Keep walking.

*Slow inhale.*

*It's only after they step into the lift that'll take them to Lestrade's office that John eyes him, all pale green and a faint pulsing orange. There's no purple to be seen, and John's look is quizzical beneath furrowed brows.*

He seems older like that. Sherlock wants him to stop looking like that, like he's on the verge of figuring out something unpleasant. Like Sherlock's giving him yet another reason to be concerned.

*There are some things you don't tell. Things that, given voice, would make people just as scared as you are. And that's one thing you can save them, even if you can't save their lives as Judgement Day comes. Sherlock is only twelve years old, but even he knows that if you can't show just how much you love them, you can at least spare the people you care about the terror of your thoughts.*

So he keeps his silence as his father asks him what makes him wake up feverish and screaming on odd nights, he shakes his head as Mycroft attempts to reason the truth out of him and he just smiles when his mother wordlessly coaxes him to talk to her.

*He doesn't talk about it. Not until years later, as chameleon-woman makes it very plain that nothing he says will ever get to her, and watches him like he's an interesting specimen under a microscope slide rather than the frail, scared boy that people around him seem to see.*

*It's free from care and emotion, his and Helena's sessions, it's only diagnostic criteria, a case study and a question of neuroanatomical abnormalities.*

*It's possible, then.*

“*You know I shouldn't let you bring this file home. You're not even consulting on the case, and*
frankly I can't see what interests in with this disappearance. Nothing that points to unusual cleverness, in there.” Lestrade says as he pretends not to want to give Sherlock the manila envelope.

“Well, if there was anything remotely clever about the disappearance I wouldn't expect the Yard to pick up on it,” Sherlock retorts, feeling the slight movement against his arm that means John's suppressing a snicker.

The light's shifting, then, replacing acid yellow and pale green with warmer orange, a tint of Tyrian purple.

(This is worse than so many other obsessions. This is worse, because this matters. And John's standing too close by his side, like he's set on grounding Sherlock and keeping him from swaying. Filthy empathy or simple want?)

“Anyway, I don't see why you're not simply out looking at the place she disappeared or stealing my files as usual,” Lestrade says, watching him closely.

“My intellect may be unaffected, but exposure to a good dose of neurotoxins might have slowed my body down a bit.”

“Right, the poisoning,” Lestrade says, aiming for neutral but not quite managing to hide the tone of disbelief and slight amusement. “Something for us to investigate?”

“Oh, the perpetrator is suffering the consequences already, I promise you,” John says.

“I don't want to know!” Lestrade says, putting up his hands as if to shield himself from finding out yet another thing he’d be theoretically obliged to arrest them for.

“Oh, just one more thing before we leave you to it. Do you happen to have any sunglasses with you? I forgot to bring mine. Just in case we need to go and see…”

*John's voice. Natural, unhurried, casual.

(Steady - unpredictable.)

“I'd rather not know what you're planning to do,” Lestrade cuts him off.

Sherlock can't see what John's face communicates to Lestrade, but it seems effective. Lestrade sighs and rises from his desk to dig through the pockets of his jacket until he finds a pair of cheap sunglass. He hands them to John with the comment "just keep them and I'll get another pair".

*!

Just before they leave NSY - the elevator, the now less crowded entrance and then the pavement still filled with people walking in every direction - John reaches out towards Sherlock.

At least it seems like he's reaching for Sherlock. For a second Sherlock's stomach flips before he realises that John is not reaching for him, he's handing him something.

The sunglasses.

John doesn't really look at him, and keeps pacing beside him as he holds the glasses within
Sherlock’s reach. Sherlock returns the favour of not talking by accepting the glasses without a word or any attempt to meet John’s eyes. Careful not to let skin touch skin - it's not something you just accidentally do, is it? - he lifts the proferred shades from John’s hand and inspects them.

Lestrade's sunglasses are tinted brown, which is fortunate. Brown will soften everything that is currently too sharp. Unfortunately, they are also of the now-popular pilot type with gold rims, which Sherlock finds to be both unflattering to his own appearance and generally rather tasteless.

They’re tasteless, but they work. As he and John step into the cold light of spring outside the Yard, Sherlock’s eyes are shielded just a fraction, allowing him to keep them open and observe his surroundings without being blinded. Everything is a few shades warmer and the feeling of light burning right into him is kept at bay.

John.

John looks warmer too. The tint makes the pulsing orange intensify and glow.

Sherlock manages to hail a cab quickly this time. Left side, left foot, right foot, left foot. Three taps.

Beside him, John is once again occupied on his phone.

Beside him, John is once again sitting a little bit closer than before.

They don't say much to each other as they get home. They heat some food from the fridge, they watch the news, and then John is off to bed. Sherlock, attempting to read through the files they got, gives up after an hour, heading to his own bedroom and one more night of insomnia.

The darkness of his bedroom enfolds Sherlock as he closes the door behind him. The smells are all familiar and the sound of London’s constant traffic noise keeps the room from being too quiet. When there’s too little sound Sherlock’s mind will interpret everything he picks up as something that has a meaning. However very few things in this world do have a meaning.

Curling up on his side he feels slightly better. The (external) pressure from his own arms around his legs leads to release of oxytocin into his blood. Decreasing stress - or distress? The whole thing’s a biological phenomenon, not an emotional one. There’s pictures in his head that he can’t suppress, but the thoughts are worse. Helena once talked about those thoughts as nightmares. While they might appear in his head they are still not ‘his’. They aren’t dangerous, but they will gnaw on him.

They are not his.

(He didn’t ask for them and he can’t control them.)

Blinking his eyes open, Sherlock realises that he must have fallen asleep. From the floor above Sherlock can hear how raucous cries are shifting into almost inaudible sobs.

John is dreaming about the war - more specifically, he’s dreaming about being incapable. The cries will be muffled by the pillow - as if he actually believes that Sherlock hasn’t already heard him - as soon as John realises that he’s not in Afghanistan, but in his small, tidy bedroom with his laptop on his bedside table, the light diode flashing every few seconds.
Sherlock is so familiar with the patterns of John’s nightmares that he knows just from the sounds when John finally wakes up, terrified by the reality that once was his.

And it hits him just then, that perhaps they are both suffering from the same thing - the aftershocks from previous terrors. The difference is that John’s terrors were once real, while Sherlock’s only ever existed inside of his own mind.

Unlike war zones in different countries, your own mind isn’t something you can ever leave behind.
**Chapter Summary**

Kiss - [verb]: Touch or caress with the lips as a sign of love, sexual desire, or greeting.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

**What in the very precise science of psychiatry makes you think that in my case the possibility of remission is ‘a statistical anomaly’? - SH**

In the end, Sherlock finds that even a text conversation with a chameleon psychiatrist from his past is preferable to his own thoughts at 5 am.

The sound of John's muffled cries from above died out hours ago, but in his head such things have a tendency to echo in the silence. As dawn approaches behind drawn curtains, Sherlock surrenders to insomnia and gets up to a sitting position on his bed, knees drawn up and back resting against the headboard.

It has taken a fair amount of rationalisation, three Oxazepam - *which prove to be just as useless when it comes to sleeping as he vaguely recalls them being* - and now a text message to Helena Martell, but he’s finally made up his mind regarding the fact that waiting for an impending terror is often worse than living through the actual terror - at least then you have nothing more to fear. One thing less to haunt you. One thing more that you've already butchered. Either way, living it isn't as bad as fearing it. John knows this too. Unfortunately, John’s subconscious is stuck in a place where the worst still hasn't happened. In his sleep, John is forever trapped in all the different moments that occurred just before disasters struck.

And Sherlock is wide awake in his dim room, but he still can't distinguish actual threat from benign fear.

*(There's no impending doom but silver birds are still read as a threat, as a sign, a tell, an omen--)*

Except this is nothing like the memories of a Judgement Day that never came. This is about something that may or may not be real, but that isn’t a threat. It’s… a chance.

*(But he isn’t certain that he knows what is really at stake, the abstract concept of such things reminds him more of obsessions, addiction and promises of relief than of something palpable - logic.)*

His mind palace has turned into a labyrinth and there’s something missing, something that will prevent him creating a pattern of *lead on* that will be visible enough for John to follow. The sheer amount of other patterns and obsessions in his head renders every attempt to follow one single thought from beginning to end impossible, and he needs to follow this through, needs to do this one
thing to invite-- John. Sherlock knows everything about living in limbo, and John has asked not to have to stay in the limbo between being or not being… more. Unfortunately, like everything else about him, Sherlock’s problem-solving skills are more than a bit uneven, leaving him brilliant in most areas and hardly functional in others.

Which leads him to this; Helena knows more about his malfunctions than anyone else, Mycroft included. Knowing what she already knows about him, there’s not much Sherlock could do to make her think even less of him, so one pathetically hopeful question can’t really make matters worse. And while he hates every direction this conversation can take, he won’t be able to store it away until he’s asked this. Because he needs to slay dragons before he becomes the hero he ought to tell John not to believe in.

(Heroes don't exist. If they did, they'd be cruel. Once he used to ask for someone - something - to lift him up from all of this, release him from this purgatory, but he wasn't even granted a “no”, he was just left there in his childhood room, wondering if he'd spoken into the nothingness.)

Only seconds later, his phone silently lights up in the darkness of his room. He discards the sheet - wrinkles, folds, chafing against him in a way that has suddenly become unbearable - and shivers as the slightly colder air finds its way to his skin.

**Comorbidity, dear. The things that you never let anyone diagnose. Diagnosis or not, they’re still there and that makes the prognosis less hopeful.**

Apparently, one pathetically hopeful question can in fact make matters worse.

(\(Like he hadn’t had enough reasons to duck out of what he needed to do - lead on - already.\))

**Diagnosing things that are untreatable is per definition pointless. - SH**

And it is, because he doesn't need more names for the ways in which his brain is dysfunctional. Accepting attempts at diagnostics means that you're open to the possibility that something is faulty. And once you acknowledge that possibility, there can be no more believing you’ve chosen your path for yourself.

If you can’t be like them, then you’ll simply have to be better than them. And if you can’t be like everyone else you will have to be something that is nothing like them, because you can’t compare two different species and proclaim one of them superior when one of them is land-living and the other one can fly.

**That would depend on how you define "treatable", Sherlock.**

**Congenital brain dysfunction is not treatable in any means of the word. - SH**

Using those words himself made them no less hateful. It did, however, spare him from the pity of someone else thinking them but stopping themselves from saying them out loud.

(\(Silent pity is by far the worst kind of pity, because you can never argue with it.\))

**I'd almost forgot your charming expressions for the neuropsychiatric spectrum. Been far too long, dearie. Come see me. I don't do check ups via text messages. I'm too old for this kind of modern doctoring.**

Helena had never been one for pity. None of the personalities which she’d employed on him had been more than superficially inclined towards any of the emotions - all of that filthy empathy - one
most likely needed to feel in order to experience pity.

**You don’t do check ups at all, Martell. Unless I misremember, which I don’t, you were struck off. - SH**

**So you looked me up? I’m flattered. But it’s besides the point. Research has always been what really holds my interest. The rest was just necessity at the time. For you I could make an exception. You always loved exceptions, Sherlock. They make you feel special. The right kind of special.**

She’s right - of course she’s right, because it takes one to know one and this is one of the reasons he could stand her; she was self-obsessed, disturbed and manipulative, but she was aware of it, and she was seldom dull - and it pains him that she’s still able to read him. That he’s predictable, that he follows the doubtful logic that the science of psychology relies on.

Putting his phone away - putting it face down on the mattress because the diode sometimes gives him illusions of pulsing light when in his peripheral vision - Sherlock reaches for the package of anxiolytics that has now moved to the drawer in his bedside table.

*(Chemical aids for chemical problems.)*

And love is - if one accepts the vague concept of ‘love’ - a chemical problem.

The only really remarkable thing about this particular chemical problem is that Sherlock’s not certain if he even wants it to be solved.

*(Solve - dissolve - disappear.)*

"Other people may believe in ‘monsters under the bed’ or ‘ghosts’, little brother, but you? Of course it had to be dragons you feared."

Mycroft is thirteen years old. Sherlock, who's not especially verbal for his five years (what's the point of uttering words when you don't have enough of them to say what you really want to?), just stares at him, defiant.

"Go back to your room now," Mycroft snaps, annoyed at the interruption of his piano playing.

But Sherlock won't, because no matter what Mycroft says - and Mycroft is most often right - there's something very Not Right in the dim hallways leading to his room.

"If you have to cling to such childish ideas, you can at least imagine yourself a dragon slayer."

“What does a dragon slayer do?” Sherlock asks, because Mycroft is about to start playing again and Sherlock wants him to keep talking, to tell a story about something else, something that will keep the dragons at bay for just a little while longer.

Mycroft sighs, turns on the piano stool, looks at Sherlock with a bored expression.

“They slay the dragons instead of fearing them. Now, be a dragon slayer and go to your room.”

And Sherlock goes to his room, because Mycroft says he'll call on the East Wind if Sherlock doesn't,
and Sherlock has never heard of a wind slayer.

He won’t lose what he and John had by pushing this. What they had - what they used to be - must have been lost months ago. As the unexpected, comfortable ‘warmth’ between them was slowly, gradually infiltrated by...anticipation- hope, he had already lost it. Hope, to him, is far too similar to trepidation. Just two different words for ‘uncertainty’.

At first, Sherlock had wanted it not to be true.

His eleven-year-old mind would refuse to accept what he knew to be true; that his time - that everyone’s time - was limited. It wasn’t that he was new to the concept of death or had thought himself immortal - no, death had already been one of those things he couldn’t grasp and that, by its mere uncertainty, had made him uncomfortable. But the concept of one day dying was quite a different one from the concept of having a date for said dying, and knowing that it wouldn’t only be he himself who was lifted from the surface of this - comprehensive, strictly physiological and describable - Earth. No one would be spared as each of the seven sigils were broken, and this - warm, relatable, palpable - Earth would be left behind, emptied and rejected.

At first, Sherlock had wanted to find a reason it couldn’t be true.

Waking up in the midst of night, feverish, nauseous with the notion of doom. Fumbling fingers on the thin pages of his father’s Bible, - looking, yet not wanting to look - for more clues. For anything to override the certainty of the signs presented to him; the red moon, the silver birds and the prediction from the Book in his cousin’s spare room.

Later, Sherlock had begun leaving.

Accepting without accepting that everything he did might be the very last time he did it. Trying to store every moment whilst simultaneously trying to create a distance between himself and this mortal world, wanting not to belong to something he would so soon lose. Still, the panic crept up on him, the fever which worried his parents and the distant expression that had led Mycroft to wonder what had caused such guilt in his brother, and had led to a very humiliating conversation about sexuality with his mother (whom he couldn’t hate, no matter how his cheeks burned, because it might be the very last thing he ever felt).

At the end, Sherlock stopped bargaining with a deity he was on very uncertain terms with and began wishing for the End to come.

Because there comes a time when you’ve completed all the goodbyes - wordless, unspoken - and you begin to long for the departure, for what you’ve tried to avoid for months. Once it’s begun there’s nothing more to do, and then all your efforts will be futile and you can finally just watch it happen, that thing you’ve seen in so many visions that you’ve not been allowed to interrupt. Interrupting the visions or failing to comprehend them in their entirety was worse than facing the horrors, because that meant your head would be full of pressure from all the unfinished horrors that you can only let go of once you’ve endured them.

And in the End, Sherlock just wanted that pressure to go away.
“Of course,” Sherlock mutters, finally finding the articles on the case he knew he’d read about earlier that year.

John doesn’t look up from his own laptop at the sound of Sherlock’s words, just keeps scrolling and reading. He’s all deep colors except for that pulsing red, always visible in the corner of Sherlock’s eye just like light diodes, indicating something recieved, an attempt at contact he nearly missed.

It's nearly 3 pm, and Sherlock has probably ignored John since they begun working - *brush-off*. Though John doesn't seem to mind that Sherlock's not been answering his questions. John doesn't seem to mind Sherlock at all, most of the time. And they're on a case, and being ignored while actively working on a case doesn't seem to classify as a *brush-off*.

(If this doesn't end after what he's about to do, such information might prove to be valuable.)

After two hours of sleep, two hateful, dulling pills and one of the longest baths in his life - the water from the shower head hitting the surface of the bath water and his own, hunched body, creating a white sound that drowns out some of the thoughts while the sensation of the water numbs his skin - Sherlock’s mind slowly recognised what had been in the back of his - dysfunctional, delusional, deductive - mind since the beginning of the case.

There had been more.

It wasn't only the details of the current case that had led him to the conclusion that Sophia wasn't missing, but hiding. There had been other cases, cases that hadn't been his but that he'd read about in the papers and routinely stored away in his Mind Palace for reference. But he hadn't been able to access those articles, because entering his Mind Palace meant entering a place where memories were kept, and there were things there that he needed not to remember in too much detail right now. Patterns that could reconnect in his brain once more, replacing what little logic he had left with more delusional obsessions.

But he'd been right - there had been others. On his screen, he could read about a woman in Brighton who had left for a week alone in Budapest, and never returned. The police had discovered that she hadn't even boarded her flight. But what had struck him was a comment from the woman's friend - that he'd been greatly surprised to see her Facebook update about leaving for Budapest, since she had been known to object to the current political situation in Hungary and would, according to the friend, never have supported the country by going there on vacation.

It fit. It was a pattern. So far, a vague pattern, but still a pattern.

It is a pattern strong enough that Sherlock would normally have proceeded with the investigation right away, but due to the current risk of adhering to patterns that never existed outside of his head, it's a safer course of action to look for confirmation by finding further data supporting his theory.

Damage control. *Compensation.*
Twenty minutes later, John finds another case that seems to confirm Sherlock's theory. John is unaware of the specifics of said theory, as the risk of Sherlock working on a lead based on a faulty conclusion can’t be ruled out. Since John is used to Sherlock only sharing information when he either wishes to show off, needs to talk out loud in order to override the noise in his head or to teach John how to observe, this lack of communication earns him no suspicion. John is hitting the keys on his laptop slightly harder than he does when in a good or neutral mood, but that is to be expected after nightmares.

As John finishes reciting the article he found, Sherlock shuts his own laptop, nodding thoughtfully - *three nods, three taps on the lid of his laptop* - and walks out to the kitchen.

“So what does this mean?” John calls out after, traces of khaki and lime green mixing with the dark blue and pulsing red - *frustration*.

“That there's nothing more we can do until school starts tomorrow,” Sherlock says, adjusting a few knives that had been left on the counter by the sink.

John doesn't asks what schools has to do with anything - *determined annoyance*. Still, he follows Sherlock into the kitchen, placing himself at the table near the microscope while Sherlock fills the kettle.

Sherlock has gone twenty-one days without the Clomipramine and has just observed a pattern that very few people - if any - would have picked up on. He's never going to be alright, but objectively, he's doing better. There's pressure increasing and decreasing inside of him as he reacts to things that aren't there, but he is now fairly certain that he hasn't deluded himself when it comes to this.

And he might hate John just a bit for all the turmoil he's causing, but that doesn't seem to change what is now inevitable.

\*\*

“You said I led you on.”

Sherlock’s eyes are focused on the kettle - John's presence is palpable enough even without the direct visual confrontation as his colors constantly leak into Sherlock's field of vision.

“Um, yeah, I did,” John says, a sliver of uncertainty lurking under his careless, absent-minded tone.

“And you said that I could continue to lead you on, as long as I didn’t brush you off.”

“So I did.”

Sherlock’s toes are tapping out a silent pattern inside his shoes, and by force of will he lifts his eyes from the kettle, turning half-way around to look at John.

*(You can’t lose what’s already been lost.)*

“Where did you think I might lead?”

John is perfectly still for a few seconds, furrowing his brow slightly, then looking away a fraction of a second before determinedly meeting Sherlock’s gaze.

“As far as you wanted to go, I suppose.”
And John says it like it's not Earth-shattering, like it might be safe -

(Or maybe that was just it - John was only ever comfortable in his own skin when the world around him was a battlefield. In that case... Sherlock's brain might be the best thing that had ever happened to John.)

“And if I wanted to go further than you imagined?”

“I don’t think you realise how far I’ve imagined going,” John says, letting out a breath. “But then you’ve always had the capacity to surprise me. And I’m very good at dealing with the unexpected.”

* 

It’s all about logic now, practicalities. The hardest part - the most uncertain one, the one that requires words - is already over, and just like when he was twelve, he’s still standing, still breathing.

(“Dragons don’t exist, except in your mind, so don’t poison it with fairy tales, Sherlock.”)

Their positions are far from ideal for the coming proceedings, but it can’t be helped. As soon as Sherlock’s mind takes in the whole situation there’ll be too many patterns, too many options, risks and possibilities. It’s a paralytic, and he can’t afford that at this point.

(“The most efficient way to slay a dragon is simply to call it what it actually is; an illogical creation of an overly active imagination.”)

He can already sense the process starting in his head - calculating 27, no; 28, 29 - ways to go from here - leaning against cupboard, facing John, a table and the back of one chair separating them - to... there--

(--Kiss - [verb]: Touch or caress with the lips as a sign of love, sexual desire, or greeting.)

It’s almost blinding, the pulsing red that exploded in the room as John spoke his final words. The teal tiles are discolored by the red glow, and the intensity of it is yet another proof that this is when it must happen - when the moon is painted red as with the blood of the pure, God will soon sift the wheat from the chaff. Sherlock knows that John can’t see it, knows that the colors he sees are nothing but the result of increased cross-talk between the regions of his brain, but he wonders if John can sense it. As tension, or some other abstract manifestation of something that is so visible and clear to Sherlock.

He hesitates, his brain overwhelmed by all the different possibilities and lacking the data to distinguish which way is the most efficient.

(It’s difficult to sort through data you have no prior experience of.)

The scrape of the chair against the floor - vibrations - John’s hands on the table as he rises, and Sherlock can’t look - can’t look away - because it wasn’t supposed to be like this. John is on his feet and Sherlock is leaning against a counter, and there’s four-and-a-half John-steps of distance between them - three Sherlock-steps - and Sherlock respects competence above all other things, and in this matter he completely lacks it.

On the other hand, it might not matter. It’s meant to be a symbolic gesture - the final lead-on - and not a beguiling one - realistic expectations will lessen the negative impact of the possible failure.
Three taps with his left hand on the counter before three steps are taken across the floor, one tap with his hand against his thigh so the sum doesn’t add up to six. Sherlock’s chest is five inches from John’s, and their lungs expand and contract almost in tandem, Sherlock’s breathing only marginally faster than John’s.

It’s a boy with a wooden sword racing towards the dragon, and it’s Sherlock’s only slightly shaking fingers that come to rest at John’s side, establishing a point of contact, a connection through which John’s colors will be infiltrated by Sherlock’s - the only colors he himself has never been able to see.

The touching isn’t the hardest part, the hardest part is where he needs to see, needs to create yet another point of contact where he’s not only palpable, but also visible.

It takes effort - controlling breathing rate, focus, being still, retaining eye contact. It takes self-control not to break contact as the arterial red almost drowns out the Tyrian purple and completely erases any traces of the midnight blue and any hints of bright greens. The khaki remains at the edges; an uncertainty not fully extinguished. It takes a few taps of his toes, hidden in his dress shoes, to let go of some of the pressure and direct his focus on this.

John doesn’t lick his lips like he would usually do when in a new and somewhat uncomfortable situation - control. They are both controlling as much as they can. John was a soldier and Sherlock has permanent brain dysfunction and that means that they are both apt in restricting the number of tells and signs that will end up giving them away as human, defective, responsive. It’s the ones with the most wounds who best know the cost of showing vulnerability when the world is at war.

John’s wounds. Sherlock’s own unintentional brush-offs. It adds up too much more than Sherlock wants to think about at this moment, so he attempts not to think about it, attempts to focus on keeping his eyes open as he bends his head, taking the first step, for once offering to be the first one to display his vulnerability - that he wants John.

(That he might even want this.)

It’s breath held, dry lips, bad angle.

It’s lips angling to better meet his, severe tachycardia, hesitance.

It’s the realisation that maybe he’s supposed to move his lips - do something - but there’s a hand that comes to rest at the nape his neck, guiding him, and that’s confusing and far more intense than the sensation of lips brushing-pressing-moving. It’s the realisation that he will need to breathe, and that his nose is adequate for this when he doesn’t want to interrupt what’s happening.

John’s hand generates pressure - the good kind, the external kind - and Sherlock’s hand on John’s shirt adds up with the light brushing-moving-not-breathing contact of their lips.

Three points of contact.

Two individuals controlling their breathing while pretending this is not vulnerability.

One dragon slayer.
Chapter End Notes

On "Congenital brain dysfunction";

At the time Sherlock was treated as an in-patient, most of the conditions that are currently considered to be 'neuropsychiatric' - in this case primarily the autism spectrum diagnoses - were considered to be a form of 'brain damage'.

This assumption has since then been replaced with other theories due to numerous research breakthroughs, and as a result of this changes have been made in the terminology and the naming of the diagnoses.

The phrasing Sherlock is using here alludes to the diagnosis "Minimal Brain Dysfunction" (MBD), which is a previous name for the neuropsychiatric variation we now call "ADHD", an allude most likely chosen due to the name rather than the likelihood of him receiving that particular diagnosis.
Breathing through his nose, Sherlock finds it easy to slip into well-known patterns.

*Observe, deduce, mimic* - it's instinctive and logical.

*(It's functional.)*

John presses his lips harder against Sherlock's and Sherlock returns the pressure. John’s head tilts just a bit, Sherlock's tilts just a bit to the other side. A brush of lips for a brush of lips, a stroke of the hand against his nape for a stroke of Sherlock's hand against John's side.

It's like dancing, and Sherlock has always found dancing to be the most tolerable of social interactions. It comes with steps and moves you can learn, a skill you can acquire and practice to perfection.

*(A pattern that allows for improvisation.)*

The colors of John seep in behind Sherlock's eyelids and the pulsing light is arterial red and seems to diffuse into his actual arteries - illogical, but rather metaphorically apt for a sensation caused by crossed neurons.

It's both a physical act and a token, and Sherlock finds himself wishing that his brain wasn't so occupied with the token aspect of it. This is kissing, and it could have been one of the things that absorbed his whole mind, drowned out the constant noise, but it isn’t, because Sherlock’s mind is too preoccupied mimicking the John’s level of pressure, controlling his breathing and trying to determine what comes next. And perhaps that’s at least something new.

The kitchen is saturated with grey daylight but it's the pulsing red that breaks through as the kiss breaks, and Sherlock must have gotten lost in his own mind, because they were pressing their mouths against each other's and then suddenly they no longer are, and Sherlock has no recollection of how it ended.

*(Broken kiss - broken seal - broken sky…no. That's not it. John's still close enough to cause proximity blur and the world did keep on turning after Judgement Day.)*

Their hands have stopped moving but haven't moved away. Sherlock's skin is painted by John's breath against his jaw. It's 3.47 pm and Sherlock still doesn't know if this changes anything.

“I… hm,” John begins, his voice sounding a bit like there’s something in his throat.

“You should leave for the clinic,” Sherlock supplies. Yet another one of those things his brain seldom lets lapse - *awareness of time*.

John leans back just so, allowing them to see each other without the filter of proximity blur - no; allowing John to see the digits on the microwave, the ones Sherlock registered 4.5 seconds earlier.
“Oh, right,” John says, but doesn’t move, just clears his throat, his hand falling from Sherlock’s nape to rest on his shoulder for a few seconds.

It's Sherlock who lets his hand stroke down John's back before breaking the contact - releasing, letting go.

John’s gaze falters, returns, and there’s a pressure building up inside Sherlock’s bones. John keeps their eyes locked as he retracts and rubs his hand against the kitchen counter, his Adam’s apple moving almost audibly.

Then there’s the squeak of John’s ergonomic brown shoes against the kitchen floor as he takes another step back, nodding towards Sherlock.

“I’ll be late, so… see you tomorrow morning, then.”

Sherlock nods, once, twice, three times for good measure. Perhaps it looks redundant, but he needs it to be Right.

And as John rubs at his own neck - uncomfortable, out of his element - and hesitates - uncertain if he’s gotten his message across (which message precisely?) - Sherlock’s toes are tapping away inside his shoes, a rhythm in tandem with his own pulse.

A last smile, a hint of midnight blue - concern - and a glance at Sherlock’s mouth - involuntary, hastily aborted - and John is picking up his phone from the counter, leaving the kitchen without even putting his mug away.

A slight disruption of routine, this kissing thing.

* *

It's ludicrous, standing a few feet back from the window, watching John making his way towards the tube station on Baker Street, his steps hurried to make up for having left the flat later than usual.

Sherlock’s watched John leave before, watched him from this exact spot, and the next time he saw him after that, his mind had gotten things mixed up, for a moment mistaking John for the Moriarty he was yet to meet.

And beneath his feet, the floor of their flat suddenly seems to rock slightly, but it’s his brain chemicals affecting his vestibular system, not actual shifting beneath him, and he’s aware that his mind is playing tricks on him.

Unfortunately, knowing this doesn't prevent the slight onset of nausea.

* *

“Avoidance,” Helena says slowly, allowing herself to absentmindedly rub the side of her pencil against her bottom lip before continuing. “How is that working out for you?”
Helena; today she’s the thoughtful version of herself, the version that wants him to figure out how to help himself by only providing him with open questions so that he can hear his own thoughts out loud and see the irrationality of them. It’s always been his least favorite of her personas, and one even she seems to grow easily bored with. Answering questions they both know the answer to is simply a waste of time, even if Helena wants to pretend that she has time in excess, by the way she progresses slowly, patiently.

She must have seen that he wouldn’t indulge her current little game by answering such an inane question, because after half a minute of silence, she continues, her voice faster now.

“You can avoid the things that trigger you into performing all your compulsory little dances of the mind, but your mind will always be one step ahead of you. Soon you’ll start to avoid the things that remind you of the things you avoid in the first place, and when you’ve eliminated those, you’ll find yourself triggered by the things that remind you of those things too. It’s a shame, really. In this case that big, throbbing brain of yours is your biggest disadvantage. Because it’s faster than you are, and you’ll never get ahead of it.”

“So it’s a lost cause, then?” Sherlock asks, temporarily distracted by the fact that Helena has just slipped out of one persona and into another during her brief summary of why he’s not clever enough to keep up with the defects of his own mind. It’s a first, this changing of persona in the midst of a session. A slip or a choice?

“I said you couldn’t outrun your own mind. I didn’t say that you couldn’t change the direction it was spinning.”

“Distraction never worked that well for me, as you are aware. Distractions are for people who can settle for fewer stimuli than the one provided by the problem itself.”

“Then don’t. Don’t settle for something less stimulating than the problem. You have an imagination; use it. I’m not going to provide you with any ‘hows’, as you clearly think yourself cleverer than me. So prove it. I’ll see you Wednesday; that’ll give you five days to show me just how inventive you can be.”

* *

Sherlock is pacing.

Seven steps, turn, seven more steps. Three steps. Seven steps.

The unscientific use of numbers in pseudoscientific methods of relieving the pressure.

Rituals as a way to alter consciousness. Even simple rituals are believed to provide a certain degree of placebo effect that aids the individual in their pursuit of something, whether it’s relief in mourning or enhanced performance during a task.

(It’s not a compulsion if you choose it rather than resign yourself to it?)

(It is.)

Seven is for perfection and the completeness of things, three is for the more spiritual form of perfection, or holiness if you will. Safe numbers used to counteract the pressure. It works when he
does it like this, like a chant rather than an involuntary response to something uncontrollable.

*Prevention.*

There’s no perfection or completeness in his conclusions. Helena would arch her eyebrows and look at him the way she did when she wanted to say ‘I really thought you were smarter than that, dear’ for performing these rituals, but Sherlock eventually found that externalising them made them more conscious and less invasive than performing them inside his mind. Externalising them at least left his mind more free to work on other things.

Turning the skull on the mantle, allowing it to face the dim light of their kitchen rather than the more illuminated living room, Sherlock knows that he’s never really freed himself of rituals no matter what he might have been telling himself over the past eight years. He’s only integrated them, made them part of his daily routine. He loathes magical thinking, but he’s rationalised his rituals as routines that will appease the other defect of his neuroanatomy, the one he refuses to let anyone name.

(*It’s not treatable, therefore not worthy of such attention.*)

Even Helena couldn’t always tell the two deficiencies apart at times, which gave him leeway in choosing his strategies to deal with the named one, as it could be seen as a healthy way to deal with the other. She was right - *he did consider himself the cleverest of the two of them*.

John has been gone for sixteen minutes, and Sherlock has not given him more than a sliver of thought. The distortion inside of him efficiently blocks out such trivial topics as what happened in the kitchen and how to interpret it.

He stepped into the role of a dragon slayer, and he slew the dragon. The rest of it, the outcome, is out of his control now.

John is on a tube train - *westbound Bakerloo line with its worn seats, soon passing Harlesden if no delays have occurred* - and Sherlock is pacing on the already threadbare parts of the warmly red carpet covering the stained wooden floor. John doesn’t need to see Sherlock display the evidence of his mental dysfunctions and Sherlock doesn’t need to watch John trying to hide-- whatever reaction he would be likely to hide behind soldier-like equanimity.

("I don’t think you realise how far I’ve imagined going.")

John’s statement had been less than exact, and what else could Sherlock have expected? The statement says nothing about the nature of the progression: emotional, sexual, towards some tangible commitment? Or simply towards a mutual destruction?

A chime. Vibrations of a very palpable kind emerging from his dressing gown pocket.

It could be--

It isn’t.

It’s Lestrade. A short text notifying Sherlock that the lead he’d sent earlier that morning, asking the Yard to track down an IP-address, had led to a hit.

Both the known disappearances in London now have a vague connection to each other. Realising that Lestrade will not oblige him in searching for the other vanished individual’s IP-number on the server in question, Sherlock considers his options.

(*John’s been gone seventeen minutes. Seven is for completeness. John is -- no.*)
There’s a middle-aged woman who calls herself Marvel who could perhaps be persuaded into attempting to find further connections, and given that his other option is…

*Knock, knock, knock.*

A rhythmical rapping on the downstairs door, the first two faster than the last one.

His other option is currently being let through the door by Mrs Hudson; unfortunately however it’s too annoying and intrusive to be seriously considered. Marvel it is.

“Sherlock dear, your brother is here to see you,” Mrs Hudson informs him from below the stairs to 221B - *her hip is bothering her again, then.*

Wiping his mouth, erasing the ghost of something that Mycroft cannot be allowed to deduce, Sherlock straightens his back before slumping down on the sofa, his brother’s steps approaching up the staircase.

First step.

*(One is for unity.)*

Sixth step.

*(Six is for evil, for man and for imperfection.)*

It’s a crude comparison, but it works in his favor.

*\*

“I thought you’d give your doctor a bit more credit than that,” Mycroft says, his voice carefully neutral as he puts down the saucer, adjusting the handle of the cup to align just so.

*(The teacup. A tell. They both have their ways of smoothing over the gravel their minds constantly encounter. Mycroft’s perfectionism was never really perfectionism, but compulsions sound a lot less pathological if you use words like ‘the need for knife-like precision’ and ‘in this line of work, one can not afford to leave anything to chance’ to justify your constant need for control.)*

Mrs Hudson has brought them both tea, and while Sherlock ignores his cup, Mycroft has almost emptied his before Mrs Hudson descends to her own flat after having cleared the table for them. Mycroft has been attempting to be pleasant, which means that he’s got something up his sleeve that he will doubtless enjoy deriding Sherlock for. Sherlock has so far offered him nothing but silence, but his patience is running out as Mycroft once again reaches for the cup.

“What do you want, Mycroft?”

“Why do you assume that I have an agenda?”

It’s not even worth acknowledgement, so Sherlock offers none. Mycroft, taking his phone from his pocket, allows the question to drop, picking up another thread.

“I’m well aware that your health currently prevents you from working on most of your usual little ‘problems’, but this current attempt at inventing a problem for yourself is quite a stretch even by your
usual standards. You’re not playing safe, Sherlock. You’re not playing at all.”

A moment’s hesitation, but Mycroft’s expression is not nearly as pitying as it would have been if he’d known what problem Sherlock was truly turning over in his mind as he interrupted, and suddenly it’s vital not to let on.

(Sherlock needs to see the problem for what it is before he's forced to see what Mycroft sees.)

“Maybe I’m not playing simply because it isn’t a game?”

“Oh, brother; everything’s always part of somebody’s game. The question is whether or not you’re sitting at an empty table, moving all the pieces yourself.”

“It seems cheaper than just paying everyone else off and still pretending to be a winner when the last opponent folds.”

“As long as there are opponents, there’s a game, Sherlock. But you always preferred making up the rules yourself, so why not advance to making up the whole game? I’m just offering you a chance to play at a real table. There’s a weak link at the Portuguese embassy and while it will require a small amount of leg-work, I doubt that your current bout of ill-health would present too much of an obstacle.”

Political games were always more Mycroft’s cup of tea than Sherlock’s - too dry and clinical, and Sherlock prefers to observe the mess that people make in their own lives rather than the mess caused by lobbying, bribes and governmental scheming. It makes his own structural distortions fade in comparison.

For a second, though, it’s a possible solution. No one would berate Sherlock for dropping everything - the mess in the kitchen, the pills in his dressing table - to follow the trail of a Portuguese leak. Not even he himself could berate--

“No.” Sherlock hastily interrupts his own line of thought. Avoidance. Pathetic. “Why go through all those tedious stages when you could just pay the other participants and force them to fold? I’m not a puppy you need to entertain, Mycroft. And if I were, you’d still be doing a lousy job. Embassies? Really, it’s almost like you don’t know me.”

“Well, that’d make two of us these days, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m perfectly aware of what I am, and in the event that I wasn’t, I know you’d make sure to instantly remind me of just how you see me. It was always your trump card, wasn’t it? It didn’t matter that I outplayed you every now and then, because at the end of the day I would always be the one whose mind was inherently deficient. Compared to a brother who’d been locked away in a madhouse, you would always be unquestionably sane. How fortunate for you that you could go on with your little quirks without causing any concern.”

Mycroft has forgotten his phone, and the display locks itself while he’s still holding it. Surprised.

“What are you really thinking, then?”

Sherlock is bored - or distressed, either way - by what Mycroft is about to say before it’s even spoken, so he steers the conversation, exploiting himself further in favor of not being closely inspected.

“If you’re so concerned over my mental facilities you could always drop by with some more pills. I promise I won’t tell Mummy about it.”
It’s rare to see Mycroft baffled - *a few blinks, a slight raise of his left shoulder* - and Sherlock doesn’t enjoy talking up his defects, but he certainly enjoys the way it affects Mycroft. Sherlock has always been able to throw him off his game a little, simply by not censoring himself so much for a few minutes.

*The patterns of logic don’t always apply to those whose minds are ill.*

“Take it that something’s upset you, besides your own thoughts. Has your John begun to suspect that you’re fumbling around in the dark with this made-up case of yours? It must hurt your pride, because that won’t be so ‘amazing’, will it?”

Mycroft’s voice is a crude imitation of John’s as he says the word “amazing”, but it doesn’t hurt, because it’s not new information, it’s not a new consideration. It’s just an unusually low blow, coming from his brother.

(It does, however, hit him. Because he is low, almost in line with the floor, so his brother’s aim wasn’t that off.)

“Are you going to be a helpful brother and bring me some narcotics to alleviate some of my temporary deterioration or are we done here?”

With another hasty flicker of his eyelids and the adjustment of his already straight tie, Mycroft moves to stand up, Sherlock lazily following him from his reclined position in the other armchair.

“It was never my intention to tempt you into some form of addiction, as you are well aware,” Mycroft finally says.

“I’m afraid my doctor’s not convinced of that after your little display on your last visit here.”

“Your doctor is not objective when it comes to you.”

“Neither is my well-intentioned brother, it’d seem. So aware of some of my faults, yet so willing to overlook others. Rationalising, are we?”

“You were never one for depressants, and considering the speed at which your mind is currently working, I’d be surprised if you felt inclined to indulge in mind-slowing substances the way you used to indulge in those that you believed would sharpen cognition. I simply offered them to you so that you’d be able to keep up appearances, as that’s something that you’ve taken to caring about these days. It’s never too late to mature, Sherlock.”

“And you’re always too late to leave, so please oblige me by not dragging this tedious visit out any longer. Give my best to Mummy when you talk to her. Tell her I’ve enjoyed every single one of the benzodiazepines--”

“Goodbye, Sherlock. Do consider the possibility of acting like a grown-up.”

Biting back what he thinks Mycroft ought to consider, Sherlock hears the door close, and the rapid footsteps on the stairs.

Two is for witness. And Mycroft saw, but Sherlock made him observe something else.

*Four is for worldly things.*)
There’s a case and there’s a lead - a connection - to follow, but instead Sherlock’s mind is cluttered with images of things that have never happened and connections that don’t exist.

(Again, ironically; the patterns of logic don’t always apply to those whose minds are ill.)

John’s pillow doesn’t smell like John - a romantic idea, really, absurd - but of laundry detergent and old fabric. Unnerved by his own actions, Sherlock throws it back down on the bed, ignoring the already-hushed voice that’s telling him he shouldn’t be here, in John’s room.

He’s an intruder, and that’s not something he’s about to get overly sentimental about. It is what it is, and at least this way he’s an intruder in a more physical sense.

(Three movements to adjust the pillow. Five steps to back away from the bed. Five steps to return, now opening the bedside drawer. A muss of things - no military order.)

Order - John is the order to Sherlock’s chaos. Externally. Internally, John is currently the reason for Sherlock's chaos.

Either way you look at it, Sherlock is left with the chaos, the same chaos he's spent his whole life trying to sort out, but no matter how many tangled cases he untangles or how many perfect systems he forms in his mind palace, it’s never enough. The wilderness remains.

Instead of slamming the drawer shut, Sherlock rummages through the contents. It's not the first time he’s invited himself to look at John's things, and if John stays it will probably not be the last time either.

(It's one of those things he's been told is Not Good, but he never found any guilt inside afterwards, so it became one of those things that he accepted he could allow himself - it's really such a small thing compared to all those others he restrains himself from doing.)

Nasal spray, pencils, out-dated library cards, condoms, a broken mp3-player, two pairs of tangled headphones, tissues, lubricant, a few business cards, ear buds, an old identification card from a former job and numerous receipts and coins.

Typical. Unsurprising. Almost impersonal.

Sherlock wants to place something there, something unique, something that will show that this is John's drawer, and that John is... perhaps the bullet John shot Jeff Hope with - Sherlock nicked it from the evidence room before all this began. Or the paper John submitted to a medical journal before Afghanistan (rejected, but it shows an ambition that Sherlock sometimes finds himself missing in the John he knows. Or just a few words on a piece of paper, his--

The sudden muscle tension in his torso doesn’t hurt.

But he’s suddenly a little more aware of breathing than he was just minutes ago, and Sherlock needs to breathe, so he leaves the room, leaves the dim, distant world of John and heads down the stairs, into the living room with its windows and its space and the worn carpet and he really needs to open a window, just one--
There's a case, and he has people to contact, but instead he's on the floor of the living room, shivering in his dressing gown with the wind whipping in through the open window, threatening to scatter the papers on the desk like snowflakes.

It's freezing, probably, but it's not freezing enough.

*(Don’t settle for something less stimulating than the problem.)*

There were fingers against his scalp and Sherlock never knew that a pressing together of lips would feel so foreign; people always said it was like merging and like melting and like belonging, but it hadn’t been, it had just been pressure, and a dragon slain and something even more hateful, something like hope--

And Sherlock doesn’t have condoms in his dressing table, but he does has the bullet that killed Jeff Hope, and he has 20 Oxazepam and he has other things; things he prefers to think of as *instruments for stimulation*, things that he uses when he’s sure that John’s going to be away for more than an hour. It’s not that he’s ashamed of them, but there was a time in his life when such things were--*sinful*.

It’s freezing, but that’s not even a distraction.

*(He trained himself out of most things that distracted others long before he trained himself out of the hand-flapping and the internal rituals.)*

Eventually, you come to a point where you’d rather risk getting killed by the cure than keep living with the disease.

*\*

It’s not a more potent stimulus.

*(It’s the opposite - an anti-stimulus - and he hates it, he hates that he has to retreat to things he hates in order to cope with the things that he... loves?)*

One, two, *three*--

*Three is for divine perfection* - ironic, absurd. He knows it isn’t a sign, he knows that nothing he does will either prevent or hasten the end of the world.

(He could be accused of megalomania at times, but even he knows his limits, and this is one of them. He only wishes he’d known earlier, so he wouldn’t have had to follow every single ritual, to protect everything he loved and --)

...four, five...

Oxazepam is not a solution to his problem.

*(It doesn't matter - just like other, less easily rationalised drugs, it's not about a solution; it's about*
getting through. An admitted surrender to the fact that he in himself isn't enough to do that. And he used to hate the medications for that, but then he got a life, and it was suddenly… worth it.)

Six pills in his hand. A defiant number that just increases his unease, but he'd been too fast in popping out the pills, and he'd just freed the sixth from the blister when he realised that seven might be overdoing it.

He swallows them down with cold tea - John’s? He isn’t sure, and he hates that he can’t even tell such simple things.

John’s hand had moved over his spine, absently, like it belonged there, but his nightmares are more frequent and Sherlock hasn’t supplied him with anything to chase away such ghosts (and it’s true; the distraction must be more potent than the problem, and running for your life is more potent than memories of helplessness--)

Putting the mug down on his dresser, Sherlock returns to the living room and its blowing curtains.

Maybe it’ll be enough.

There are currently no dragons waiting outside the living room, and Sherlock has closed the windows.

The pills weren’t enough until suddenly they were.

It’d taken 32 minutes, but the patterns were replaced by a slow drowsiness, and Sherlock had caught himself staring at the rug for seconds without registering much thought.

This is not what Mycroft had intended when he brought Sherlock the pills. A victory of sorts, but it doesn’t quite feel like a feat right now, because Sherlock is wrapping his dressing gown tighter around himself as he curls up on the sofa, the leather bitingly cold against his bare feet, and he’s not counting anything, just registering and moving.

There’s one of Mrs Hudson’s blankets hidden halfway under the sofa, so he pulls it over him, initially shivering as the cold woollen fibres shift against his skin.

Sherlock never understood the rules of these things - entanglement, love - but John does, even if it never seems to do him any good. Perhaps it’s enough that one of them knows.

Rules only apply to those who understand them. And Sherlock is far above such considerations, which is why it doesn’t matter if he takes two or six anxiolytic pills, because his brain works differently, so why shouldn’t he medicate differently?

His head is heavy, almost painfullly so, but his legs have finally settled - almost grown into the sofa cushions, by the feel of it - and he’s not counting things anymore.

There’s a conversation somewhere, but it’s on in the border between sleep and wakefulness, and just before Sherlock crosses that border, he recognises the words.

Chameleon dreams, he thinks before he drifts off.
“I’m not saying that you have to play by the rules, Sherlock. All I’m saying is that breaking a rule that you’re actually aware of is a defiant and deliberate act. Breaking one that you don’t even know about is just ignorance.”

Helena. She’s picked up on which buttons to push way faster than he’d have liked her to. Sherlock is well aware of that. Still, it seems to be working, because Sherlock finds her point valid and reluctantly begins to look for patterns in how people behave in different social interactions. It’s hateful, but it proves to be useful. More useful than he first imagined, because a few weeks later Sherlock’s released from the ward for the second time.

Chapter End Notes

A curious pattern;

After I posted the previous chapter of this story about silver birds, I actually got on a silver bird myself to go visit Penny, who I, incidentally, got to know because of this very story.
The phone hits the floor with a thump.

His head pounding slightly from leaning over the side of the bed, Sherlock scrambles for his phone where he spots it halfway under the nightstand. He recalls nothing before the sudden sound of his phone meeting the wooden floor, but he must have reached for it, still half asleep, and accidentally pushed it off the table.

He reaches it, and the screen is still intact.

9.37 am.

There are messages, missed calls and emails, but that’s too much of a bother. In his post-narcotic heaviness, Sherlock pushes himself up into a sitting position, aware that his blood pressure won’t allow him to stand up too suddenly.

Slowly getting himself off the bed, Sherlock doesn’t sense any patterns and doesn’t feel any pressure except the kind that comes from too many benzodiazepines on top of too little sleep and a total lack of tricyclic antidepressants. It's relief. Relief that comes with side-effects.

His body gradually adjusts to his upright position as he makes his way towards the bathroom, and he briefly acknowledges the fortunate inhibiting effects of too much Oxazepam on the phenomenon of nocturnal penile tumescence - with a suspect to talk to, it's hardly the time for engaging in masturbation, with or without the (intrusive) mental images of--

Three points of contact, the pressure against his lips and--

His fingers fly to his lips, feeling them, trying to make sense of whether it really happened or if--

Gripping the doorframe, Sherlock manages to get himself into the bathroom, locking the door behind him before allowing himself to take it all in, sinking down on the lid of the toilet.

On the other side of the wall, John is bumping the toaster against the microwave as he wipes the kitchen counter. Normal sounds. Not the silence of an empty flat.

He had… yes. They had.

John’s phone chimes in the kitchen, and footsteps follow. Quick footsteps, no limp - no nightmares in the early morning.
The dragon is still dead and John’s movements speak of not missing the war, and perhaps Sherlock’s chemical instability isn’t the worst thing that could happen to John, after all.

It might even be something that will banish some of John's ghosts too, thinks Sherlock, before striding back into the thick of it.

* *

John looks up at him as he enters the kitchen, and there's a slight buzz beneath Sherlock's skin, but it's not a vibration, more of an intensity. Like Sherlock’s a force of nature - a marvel.

(And he is, isn’t he?)

A nod from John, and Sherlock rubs his hand against his own newly-shaven chin as John resumes his Sudoku game on his phone. Sherlock's wondering what another hand would feel like against that part of his body.

Three taps of his bare toes against the floor. Focus. Case.

Somewhere in his mind, Sherlock recalls that there's a boy attending a school on the outskirts of London that he needs to talk to. It's possible that said boy is only still alive thanks to a man who's been missing for two years, but Sherlock knows that he's missing several variables in the equation and the answer is almost there - like a taunt - lurking just outside his field of vision.

“So, a school today, wasn’t it?”

John’s voice over the humming sound of the refrigerator as Sherlock pours water into a clean mug, searching for the instant coffee. He prefers tea, but his head is still feeling heavier than it ought to.

“Deptford Green, yes, at 11 am,” he confirms.

“We’ll have to leave soon, then. Call a cab?”

John is… not different. Still, there's something, a caution, in his voice, and it makes the colors around him paler.

Sherlock nods.

“And you’re still not going to tell me what you’re looking for from this lad at the school?”

“Where would be the fun in that?”

Grinning, Sherlock drains his coffee, letting a pleasant tingling chase away the feeling that it’s he himself who is missing something vital in all of this.

* *

As they enter Deptford Green School, Sherlock is aware that it’s only a matter of minutes until the
chaos in front of him will be dissolved. Four minutes, then the bell will ring and make it all go away -
the children moving haphazardly in all directions, the sounds bouncing against the painted walls
and the way it all radiates a rather feverish heat that makes the cold sweat break out underneath his
coat. Four minutes of cacophony. Less, if they find their way to the staff room quickly. It shouldn’t
be overwhelming.

John doesn’t talk, but he makes his way through the crowd, creating a path for Sherlock to follow.
An impulse, an absurd one, about reaching for John's hand so he can follow with his eyes closed.

(As a child, crowds were the only place in which he sought out physical contact with his brother. In
that, Sherlock would let Mycroft lead. It was one of the few things Mycroft never held against him.)

They reach the staff room thirty seconds before the bell clears the hallways, and they are shown to a
small classroom where they can wait for their witness, Joseph, who will be another ten minutes. A
teacher brings them each a cup of coffee before he leaves them. Sherlock sinks down onto one of the
two chairs as soon as the door closes behind the young man, his senses filled with sounds and a
childhood that should be forgotten by now.

(He never was a child, he’d just been was stuck in the body of one.)

John hesitates before sitting down on the chair next to Sherlock-uncomfortable. Why?

He sips his coffee, the plastic cup almost to hot for him to hold. Setting it down besides some crumbs
on the table, John looks briefly at Sherlock, then away before he speaks.

“So, um. When I said I was willing to go as far as… I just wanted you to know that - yes, I still…
there’s... You’re still adjusting to not taking the pills, and I am aware of what that does to someone’s
brain. The depr-- initial symptoms might return with renewed intensity when someone suddenly
stops taking antidepressants-”

John’s voice goes from the khaki of deeply uncomfortable to a deep green as he starts talking about
the psychotropic drugs. Sherlock sees how John’s internal focus shifts as he speaks. Where before
John was self-conscious and not letting too much show, not taking any risks, he is now fixed on
Sherlock, automatically entering doctor mode - posture relaxed and attentive, eyes searching for
Sherlock’s, voice unassuming.

The Tyrian purple is suddenly back. And this is not a conversation Sherlock’s even remotely
comfortable having, but John’s eyes are no longer avoiding his and John’s suddenly radiating a color
that’s been mostly absent since the day he left Sherlock on his own on the bathroom floor, too
frustrated by the lack of information about what was happening to stay and observe him.

“-and since you’re surprisingly selective when it comes to how you apply your skills in chemistry I
don’t doubt that you failed to take that into account. What I’m saying is-”

The Tyrian purple recedes, leaving the fading deep green to fight the now increasing khaki once
more.

“We don’t have to - while you’re affected by the withdrawal. Take this any further. Right now, that
is. I’ve-- you already know I’ve… had it too. Before we met. It’s… all fine, just like… other things.”

Depression. Sherlock had known, of course, it had been written in every sparse movement of the
man who unwillingly had let himself be dragged down to the lab at Bart’s. That John himself had
seen it for what it was a surprise, though.
Speaking to Joseph, Sherlock is aware that John’s eyes follow him, but not in their usual way - the way they do when he’s trying to figure out what conclusions Sherlock is drawing from the information from a witness or a suspect - but in a way that tells Sherlock it’s something else John’s looking for this time. That, in turn, makes Sherlock observe himself even more thoroughly as he attempts to listen to Joseph’s retelling of his teacher’s disappearance. There’s a focus shift, and instead of hearing Joseph, Sherlock hears his own words echo back, picking them apart to see if there’s anything in the way he acts that could give him away. In the end, that itself will give him away, because he forgets to listen to Joseph, finding himself rephrasing his initial question just to avoid asking the same thing again. Something about this must have given John all the information he needs, because he averts his gaze, instead focusing it on Joseph, and Sherlock is once again able to make out the words through the noise of his own mind.

The boy answers the questions the way that someone who has had to repeat the same story over and over again often finds themselves doing. Still, Sherlock finds that there’s something about the answers that is too well thought through. It’s too neutral and objective to come from a 14-year old boy with ill-fitting street clothes and badly spiked hair, and pushing his questions even further, Sherlock manages to get the answer - or lack of answer - that proves that he’s on the right track.

Joseph knows why Mr Leonard disappeared, but there is probably no way that Sherlock will get the boy to crack and tell him why. That in itself is an answer - there’s a sense of loyalty that could only derive from the knowledge that you owe someone more than you could ever repay. Joseph, in his poor attempts to seem laid-back, is not a secure or even overly mature teenager, but the way he speaks carefully and gives all the right answers speaks of another side of him, a side that knows more about the rougher realities of life than it does about fitting in or how to know where you belong.

(Like knowing that the sound of trumpets will fill the sky in 27 weeks and that there’s nothing you can do about it except keep it to yourself so that no one else has to know, because knowing it destroyed you, and you can at least limit the damage by not letting that spill out and destroy anyone else-- no. Not the same thing. Focus.)

Losing track of the conversation again, Sherlock interrupts Joseph with one last question.

“Does anyone else know what Leonard knows about you?”

Joseph freezes for half a second before he answers.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I need to get back to class now.”

“So that’s a no?”

There’s no verbal answer, but there’s a ‘no’ in the silence, and that’s all Sherlock needs.

A tingle spreads outwards from his palms and the soles of his feet, and the patterns in his mind are suddenly genial and otherworldly instead of limiting and damaging, because Sherlock has seen it - a pattern where no one else did. It’s what he does, and he’s built a name doing so; observing when others just see.

Beside him, Sherlock almost feels as if John’s colors have shifted to a more vibrant set of purple and pulsing red, but it isn’t really John’s colors, so it might be his own. Except he never could see his own colors.
Back at the flat, John startles slightly as Sherlock drops a fork while setting the table, and Sherlock pretends not to notice, which is inane, because John knows that Sherlock notices everything - that’s what he does, what John finds him ‘brilliant’ for doing.

The frequency with which John licks his lips during the cooking of their lunch is increased after that - hypervigilance with a hint of nervousness.

Sitting down at the table, Sherlock finds this fact to be equally unsettling and distracting. There’s something flizzling slightly in his abdomen as his gaze flicks to John’s lips, and Sherlock has felt that tongue against his own. Has felt that body closer to his own, and knows how the pressure of John’s hands feels against his nape, wonders how it would feel if that hand had pressed harder, more forcefully, if it had--

“So are you going to tell me what Leonard knew about that kid, or are you waiting for a grand moment to show off?”

Sherlock realises too late that he’s blinking in order to clear his head of the image of John’s hand pressing against his throat just so - not something one ought to imagine after only one kiss, Sherlock knows, but lack of experience does not mean that his tendencies towards sensation-seeking behavior will keep out of this particular area of his personality.

“Why would I need a grand moment in order to show off?”

“Because you’ve chosen not to tell me yet.”

“Genius needs an audience, and you are my favored audience since you will find my deductions extraordinary regardless of the situation.”

“Smug bastard,” John mutters, but he’s smiling now.

“Leonard knows who Joseph is hiding from, because it was Leonard who helped him and his father create a new life under new names.”

John stares at him, his smile shifting as he mentally replays the conversation at the school, trying to piece it all together.

“How--”

“All the missing people who fit into the pattern I’m tracing had philanthropic tendencies. Some had had these tendencies their entire lifetime, some had developed them more recently, due to certain life events or new ghosts haunting their minds, but they all had this in common; they toned down these tendencies some time before their disappearance. They all used to be active in socially radical online networks, and that must be the connection. In one of those networks, they must have come into contact with some kind of organisation that helped people escape others who threatened their lives - possibly criminal groups, but I need further data in order to make a final conclusion there. The fact that the benefactors themselves disappeared later makes it obvious that someone was closing in on this network, once again threatening the safety of those who had started a new life. Those disappearances were clearly voluntary, but as the network has done a fairly impressive job of covering up the tracks leading to the people they’ve helped, I’m yet to distinguish the motivation
behind it. Joseph knows that his former teacher had to leave everything for Joseph’s safety, hence the
guilt and gratitude. He was Leonard’s pressure point.”

It’s John turn to blink. *Once, twice…*

“You got all that from Joseph refusing to answer one question?” John asks, his food now forgotten
on his plate.

“Of course not, that only served as confirmation of what I had already deduced.”

“Amazing.”

It never stops feeling *amazing*, the way John says it.

“Simple pattern recognition.”

John keeps his gaze focused on Sherlock, but something’s shifted, admiration has turned into
something more uncertain, and Sherlock is *amazing*, but John is a puzzle he’s yet to solve.

When John finally speaks, half a minute has passed, and Sherlock has returned his attention to his
food, waiting for John’s thoughts to translate themselves into words.

“You’re not depressed.”

John says this like he’s saying that they’re eating lunch - *which would have more merit, since they
are eating lunch* - so Sherlock accepts the invitation to state obvious things and nods at John's plate.

“And you’re not blind, despite all evidence to the contrary.”

John regards him, lowering his fork to his plate.

... *seven, eight, nine* seconds of silence.

“But I have been blind, haven’t I?”

John’s voice, merely establishing a fact. There’s a slight grimness in it, the way it sometimes is when
John feels left out.

Their eyes meet, and the khaki swallows some of the peaceful pumpkin orange that had surrounded
John.

*Distance*.

“Most people are,” Sherlock retorts, aiming for fond but missing the note slightly due to the
hesitation in his voice.

It’s a childish game, this, but it’s something.

(*It’s more distance.)*

Sherlock counts - *3, 6, 12, 21, 33…* - keeping his gaze steady. His own palpitations being almost
audible, it's hard to focus on another rhythm.

Eyes still on his, John nods slowly. *Accepting*.

(Not a *brush-off*, but coming dangerously close.)
“Clinical anxiety is sometimes just the result of an overactive nervous system,” John says, clearing
his throat and absentmindedly picking up his fork again - *more out of need for another focus than out of hunger.* “Seeing how you seem to radiate buzzing activity almost every single moment, I’d say it's no
wonder that your amygdala is working overtime.”

Sherlock almost raises his eyebrows, but holds back any gesture or comment, pressure increasing as
he refrains from pointing out the obvious flaw in John's conclusion.

Current NHS-approved indications for Clomipramine:

*Depression*

*Phobias*

*Obsessive states*

*Muscle weakness associated with narcolepsy*

The point being: *there's no indication for the use of Clomipramine in anxiety disorders.*

Anxiety could be considered part of a depressive symptomology, but John has already drawn the -
correct - conclusion that Sherlock isn't, in fact, suffering from depression. That fact aside,
Clomipramine is hardly the first or even second line choice for treatment of depression.

To keep his expression blank, Sherlock concentrates on tapping his hand against his leg instead; a far
from satisfactory substitute.

John is usually up to date on his medical reading. Sherlock respects competence, and staying current
in your field is certainly part of said competence.

“You could have, you know, just have said so, instead of letting me talk about depression like an
idiot back at the school,” John continues, unease mixed with relief shifting in his features.

It does itch, the need to correct, and for a second, there's a flare of something sharp and corrosive
inside Sherlock, but he swallows the anger down. It's a weakness, letting emotional urges get in the
way of pointing out lapses in logic, and he seldom does this - *not anymore* - except now he’s back to
doing it frequently, and it's because of John. John, who can't even keep up with the state-approved
indications for treatments he's likely to prescribe at the clinic.

Useless, all of this.

“It's not like anxiety is unusual, especially in people with high intelligence,” John provides. “I don’t
know why you’d rather let me think it was depression. Besides, except for the withdrawal, you seem
to be able to cope well enough, but you would, wouldn’t you, you bloody brilliant git? I mean, I
have patients who actually believe the end of the world is nigh, so it's not likely your anxious
symptoms would be the most mental I've ever encountered.”

A sting, a fierce one, and Sherlock's mind is not balanced enough for this conversation, because
John's wrong, so wrong, and Sherlock's…

…” *mental*”.
When John looks up from the keyboard as Sherlock enters the living room, his stare is instantly inquisitive.

“Put that aside,” Sherlock instructs, indicating the laptop in John's lap. “I need you to go down to the Yard and pick up someone else’s laptop for me.”

“...Okay,” John says, his voice hesitant.

It's the first thing Sherlock has said since lunch; since John inadvertently revealed that he considers symptoms like Sherlock's to be truly mental. John’s brow is slightly furrowed, though he’s pretending he’s not looking at Sherlock the way one looks for the last piece of a puzzle. It’s clear that he’s trying to figure out what caused Sherlock to suddenly end their conversation, then remain at the table for five tense minutes before shutting himself in his room.

*Brush-off?*

*(Irrelevant. The alternative - the risk of giving himself away with his reactions - is unthinkable. In not giving himself away, he still has a chance to get what he wants - *needs?* - even after a possible brush-off.)*

“It's Sophia Sanders’. I can't access the encrypted messenger through any of her accounts.”

John - *beige, pale green* - nods.

“I'll just finish this up, then I'll be on my way.”

Normally, John would ask Sherlock why he couldn’t just get the laptop himself - even if it’s more of a token protest than an actual question. Today, he doesn’t.

*(Resignation or frustration? *Pity?*)

Turning around with a swirl of his dressing gown, Sherlock returns to his room. He’s barricaded himself in for the past two hours, hoping that John would go away so Sherlock could get to his violin without having to face him. Hoping that the pressure would go away.

*Pressure*. The urge to rake his nails across his skin, breaking it. The condescending empathy that would emerge if John knew how close he was to understanding what Sherlock really is. *Was. Is.*
“I have with me the results of the evaluation I performed, and I do believe you owe me three cigarettes, Sherlock. You are suffering from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, albeit a rather unusual kind that is only seen with early onset.”

Sherlock looks up. He’s unsurprised, despite him betting against her being able to find a good diagnosis. Still, it’s been three years of seeing different psychiatrists, and this is the first time anyone’s offered a diagnosis that he considers to be even remotely accurate, or acceptable.

One can have pride even when it comes to labelling one’s own defects, the implications of each label making it easier or harder to take.

A sly smile emerges as Helena continues, apparently following his thoughts: “You’re lucky you met me, otherwise you’d still be stuck with all those poorly sustained diagnoses of different psychotic features. Pity you won’t let me do the neuropsychiatric evaluation. I could have made a rather intriguing case-study had I the full diagnostics on you.”

“The conclusion is nevertheless that I have a disorder. I’m still a nutcase. I’m ‘mental’.” Sherlock says it with a morose air, not certain what he hopes to accomplish with his almost-objection.

“Well, feel free to call it a serotonin deficiency, if you prefer,” Helena says, not allowing Sherlock to spoil her triumph at solving a puzzle. “That has a nice organic ring to it, don’t you think?”

Positioned cross-legged on his unmade bed, Sherlock massages his temples before giving in to the impulse to silently curse.

Pressure. Increased.

He shuts his laptop, tosses it aside on the covers next to him, then adjusts its position.

Four Oxazepam haven’t helped. He will have to go out soon, hand a note to one of his contacts. Diazepam or Alprazolam this time. Temporary solution.

He needs to hold himself together. It’s a fine line, but prescription medications for a symptom he actually has should not be crossing the line, not even where John is concerned.

Not that John will ever know.

Sherlock just need something to take his mind off… everything. Just until his brain readjusts fully after the tricyclic antidepressants. Just until he finds another escape from everything that’s making him…

... mental.

It’s not enough of a distraction if you can’t hear it through the noise in your own mind, his chameleon psychiatrist said when he claimed distractions were for lesser minds.

Use what you’ve got, she also said, her tone motherly at the time.

(Sherlock hated the implications of that tone, and after that particular session and the tumult he’d caused at the ward afterwards, she never used that persona again.)
He took her advice and began using one obsession to cancel out another, more disturbing, one.

An eye for an eye, and--


Things that, until this day, had usually been strong enough to cancel out some of the noise. One of them was no longer valid, because using it would disable him from The Work, and The Work was a far more potent distraction. A far more respectable one too, his brother might add.

Still, he found himself craving the instant escape, the heightening of senses paired with the ability not to stay focused.

(You can still find yourself yearning for something that almost destroyed you.)

Dead animals were replaced by observation of murder victims. He couldn't dissect them, but they still held far more appeal than the birds or mice he'd been able to find as a kid. Death. It is strong enough to cancel out everything.

Exposure therapy with a twist.

The Work.

He needs to get on with the case. It's the only possibility. He sees patterns, and he used to fear the end of the world, but he can also be brilliant.

He needs to be brilliant.

With a sigh, less dramatic than usual - there's no one there to see it, anyway - he gets up with his laptop and positions himself at his desk.

* *

Twenty minutes later, there's a knock on the door, and John enters without waiting for a reply.

"I'll be on my way then."

Sherlock nods. John is oddly purple and the color is radiating heat. It shouldn't. Not after--

"Is your head bothering you again?" John asks, then apparently thinks better of it and adds: "Physically, I mean?"

Met with Sherlock's continued silence and apparent focus on the laptop, John takes a hesitant step into the room. He's seldom been further in than a step or two, as he's always sensed that Sherlock's bedroom is private in a way few other things between them are. Now he takes another step, and it's hard for Sherlock not to look up, assessing the situation.

Getting visual cues would unfortunately also mean giving away visual cues.

"Look at me, you stubborn git," John insists, irritation and determination mixed in his voice, out of keeping with the colors that entered Sherlock's field of vision as John stepped closer. The purple has
“Busy.”

A jolt goes through Sherlock's body two seconds later, because suddenly there's contact. Two fingers under his chin, and he's so startled by the boldness that he allows his head to be tipped upwards, allowing John to check… his pupils?

“No pain?”

Sherlock wants to shake his head, but that would mean losing the contact of those two fingers, so he settles for words.

“No.”

“You could have just answered, you know. It wouldn't hurt you to say some things instead of waiting for me to figure them out.”

There's still irritation in John's voice, but his fingers linger, and Sherlock is not sure if they're talking about the silence or the lead-on.

“There's nothing to it.”

Sherlock fervently hopes that they're talking about the silence.

“There’s always something to it when it comes to you. And I'm fed up with not knowing whether I should make something out of it or not.”

“The best option is not to.”

John's mouth quirks into a tired smile that looks almost grim, before his features soften a fraction.

More green. More of the hateful khaki. But the Tyrian purple is there too, mixed with just a hint of arterial red.

“That doesn't work with the kind of situation you've been getting us into lately.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Sherlock settles for answering, swallowing back something far more biting, the proximity and the almost-sensation of John's breath against his hair stealing away his determination and his edge.


It's becoming frustratingly hard not to avert his eyes, but then John's face turns unreadable and Sherlock is briefly distracted from the always-present discomfort of prolonged eye contact.

Then his eyelids flutter, just for a tenth of a second, because two fingers slide from his chin, slide down his throat, painting a slow line over his carotid artery before getting stuck in the collar of his T-shirt.


As the fingers are removed, Sherlock can still feel them.

“I'll see you in an hour or so, then.”
The laptop is temporarily put aside, as is the case.

When the door to 221B closes a minute later, Sherlock’s thoughts are very far away from disappearances and links between victims, and it should be hateful to be reduced to this state by such a trifle - to let someone else cause this response in him - but it isn't. Sherlock's no stranger to his own sexuality, but to be so affected by--

*John's fingers.* If they hadn't gotten caught in the collar of Sherlock's T-shirt... The fabric is threadbare, and Sherlock would have been able to feel the warmth - would almost have been able to feel each fingerprint - had they continued to move down his collarbone, over his pectoral, reaching--

With a shiver, Sherlock realises that arousal is something that’s starting to become far more frequent and urgent than it has ever been during his adult life.

(*Unforeseen,* this; finding your libido slowly restoring itself to the state it had been in when you were seventeen.)

Closing the lid of his laptop, Sherlock allows his own fingers to continue from the point where John left off.

(*Unforeseen,* but not unpleasant.)

Through the fabric, he can feel his hardened nipple. His hands don't feel very much like John's - wrong size, wrong texture, wrong... so he settles for not attempting to imagine that they are, only brushing his own nipple absentely, thinking of what he would like to do to John.

What he would let John to do to him.

(*Sherlock's never been one for preset limits.*)

Twisting the nipple, the images in his head shift. Fragments of his old masturbatory fantasies blend with newer ones of hands travelling further and of the pain from his nipple being the result of a brutally eager mouth. That's all it takes before Sherlock feels that his body is fully responding to the stimulus, blood filling up the erectile tissue in both nipples and genitals simultaneously.

(At the age of ten, Sherlock found this phenomenon fascinating. Twenty-two years later, he finds it… *stimulating.*)

Rubbing the left - always the left - nipple, he lets his other hand feel the response in the right nipple. It's tightening, hardening.

Symmetrical response despite lack of symmetrical stimulation.

(*It reminds him of something, of something he very much doesn't want to think about, not now, not with--*)

Turning the desk light off, Sherlock makes his way to his bed.

(*The case is just a tangled mess, John's demand for communication is a bit too much to deal with and he's not taking any more Oxazepam - oh, he needs to contact someone about that, yes--*)
Endorphins might help.

A mere practicality, just like intravenous solutions.

Ridding himself of the T-shirt, Sherlock lies down on the unmade bed, his fingers returning to his chest, and this is both a practicality and an indulgence he’s never seen the point of refusing himself. Compared to eating and sleeping, it’s relatively time-efficient as far as physical indulgences go. And given that it’s fully possible to maintain a life without this particular pleasure, it feels more like a choice than eating ever did.

In fact, it might even constitute a ritual of sorts, and Sherlock is well aware that ritual is one of the easiest ways to alter your state of consciousness. Useful, if one's state of consciousness tends to be littered with excess thoughts and obsessions. Medicinal.

(Enjoyable.)

As the renewed pain from his - left - nipple causes more and more endorphins to accumulate in his blood, Sherlock feels the shift that comes when his body is taking over, the ritual and physical stimulation slowly starting to compete with his mind for his attention.

His penis is still not fully engorged, his fingers finding their way under his pyjama pants, just resting over it, feeling how the erectile tissue gradually swells until the soft skin is fully stretched out underneath his hand.

Allowing only a few - three - slow, cautious strokes, Sherlock proceeds to extract lubricant and a dildo from his night table, letting them rest on the covers next to him as he gets his pyjama bottoms and pants off, leaving a pile on the floor, out of sight.

The lubricant makes his finger feel foreign as it returns to his genitals - his cock, as he would think of it only in these situations, his vocabulary always shifting when he considers himself as a sexual being, as an object - fingertips running down the side of it, the other hand still pinching his left mammalia.

Images. Body held down, his lips touching rougher skin, his tongue working over a slightly stubbled jaw, the hand on his cock now teasing, almost mocking.

(The pain focusing him, someone else’s desire to see him take those sensations, to endure everything that he’s given, to meet every need of--)

His hand now pumping forcefully on his cock, Sherlock realises that he won’t make use of the dildo today. He’s too close already.

A finger coated in viscous liquid probes his anus, the muscle fluttering at the touch, and the thought of the words muttered-whispered-gasped into his ear, into his skin, makes the reaction even stronger.

As he’s slowing down the movements of his other hand, Sherlock’s index finger slips in, passes the sphincter and causes a dually uncomfortable and intriguing sensation. Sherlock has always wondered whether everyone experiences it this way, or if it’s just his wires being crossed, the mixed messages making the stimuli far more potent than they’d be if they were solely pleasurable.

Working his finger in and out without allowing the muscles to fully adjust, the sensation only increases. As the second finger breaches the opening, his movements are fully synchronised with his mental images.

Being stretched hastily, the eagerness of someone being more than ready to get off. A mouth - not his
own hand - on his cock, distracting him from the discomfort, but not fully. Words uttered in between swallowing him down. Filthy, hungry.

He’s ready.

Pressing three fingers inside himself, Sherlock has to fight the impulse of his body to resist the intrusion, working with his other hand to put his mind off the slight burning, now imagining it being his own fingers again, the other man’s hands - John’s? He’s not sure at this point - holding him down, taking him. Invading.

Wanting.

(Taking.)

The contractions in his internal muscles begin before he registers the pleasure, and his hand is rapidly slicked not only with lubricant, but by his own sperm, running down over his fingers as he strokes himself through the orgasm.

He makes no sound apart from the enhanced breathing, used from childhood to keep his quiet during these explorations of himself, but the sound of his hand still working in and out of his arsehole, until the overstimulation becomes too much and he finds himself cringing away from it, is still loud enough to fill up the room.

Resting his hands on his stomach, Sherlock waits for his breathing to calm down.

What would this feel like if he let himself think constantly of John while doing it?

(Not even his imagination would allow for such inane wishful thinking, certainly.)

*

His gaze catches on the white and yellow box just before he closes the drawer of his night table, having returned the lubricant to its place in the back.

Clomipramine 25 mg.

For a moment, Sherlock's thoughts pause. It would be so easy just to--

(--to make everything he needs not to be go away.)

It would make some the 'mental' controllable. It would make for less things to hide from--

It would disable him to find out if his brain functioned better without it.

(Choosing sentiment over logic, abhorrent.)

It'd make his libido return to the state it’s been in for the past two decades.

(Choosing fear over pleasure, illogical.)

Closing the drawer, something bordering self-disdain fills him, sitting half-naked on his bed.
To consider giving in to the weakness of his brain chemistry just to present himself in a better light for another person: absurd. Unthinkable.

And yet he did think about it.

It's chemical defects, all of this is. And one of the defects he never chose for himself, never accepted. The other one he didn't choose either, but he allows it still.

And perhaps he shouldn't.

*  

“Does it have to be either/or?”

“All previous attempts at medication have left my brain almost completely useless. You said that I could learn to cognitively rewire some of my maladaptive thought patterns, so why don’t we focus solely on that?”

“If I recall the conversation correctly, I merely said that you could learn some strategies that might enable you to live with the obsessions without constantly giving in to the compulsions. The obsessions would become less intrusive with time if you didn’t acknowledge them with compulsive actions or thoughts. As you are well aware, you feed your obsessions every time you allow yourself to act on them.”

“So what do you suggest I do instead?”

“You’re already very good at being obsessive. Why not use that skill to focus your mind on something else, something that’s… you know, not the end of the world?”

Sherlock, in addition to wanting to throw something at Helena, felt bile in his throat. It was suddenly hard to breathe properly, but he refused to give his psychiatrist the satisfaction of seeing that.

“It’s pointless. If I take any more antipsychotics or any of that anesthetizing crap I won’t be able to access my brain, and if I were to make use of your backwards little suggestion I’d be too occupied rewiring my brain to have the time to make use of it. Can’t we just face that I am too defective to make use of my brain and leave it at that?”

“Oh, Sherlock. You’re doing it again. You’re making excuses not to work hard for what you want. Rationalisation will always be your go-to defense mechanism, won’t it? Listen. You can either resign yourself to doing that, or you could do the work and see how far that will take you. I wouldn’t want you to settle for less. It’d be boring, and I’ve worked very hard myself not to succumb to such dreadful laziness. And just for the record, I wasn’t suggesting either antipsychotics or anxiolytics this time.”

Three weeks later, Sherlock agrees to try out the Clomipramine. Helena doesn’t comment on his decision, just makes an impatient gesture that implies that they should continue the session.

The medication in combination with the cognitive treatment is, in fact, effective. So much so, that Sherlock’s rudeness, brilliant mind and sharp tongue outweigh any other divergent features he might display when he starts university half a year later, at age 18.
John’s message arrives as Sherlock swallows down the last of his now cold tea, having just finished remaking the bed.

At Speedys w laptop.

Resigning himself, Sherlock decides not to argue with John on this. John’s far less tetchy when his blood-sugar levels are stable anyway.

A glance in the mirror indicates that there’s still a faint glow to Sherlock’s skin, but it could just as easily be from the shower as from the orgasm, he concludes, adjusting his curls. The product he uses has made a few of them a bit stiff, but he needs to wait until his hair is completely dried before brushing it. It’ll have to do.

People are far more forgiving if you’re good-looking.

(It’s a useful distraction, that.)

As he enters Speedy’s - only a slight increase in heart rate due to being subjected to the sounds and people outside their flat - John sits with the laptop open, sipping coffee from a chipped mug.

“What are we looking for?” John asks, instantly turning the computer around so that the screen is towards Sherlock.

“Some kind of app or program that allows for communication, but won’t leave much evidence behind. Hopefully they didn’t use privnote, as I hope to recover some of it.”

A possible lead in the case. John, opposite him, eager to know more about the results. John, who wants Sherlock to tell him more about other things as well. Wants to… know him. Presumably in more than one sense of the word.

(And Sherlock suddenly knows that he wants to have it all - to have both: cases and… John. The possibility of more John . )

To not make excuses.

“Alright, then. I’ll just order. You want anything?”

The smell alone is making Sherlock in equal measure hungry and nauseous.

“Sandwich. Tuna.”

John waves to a member of the staff, ordering, before he returns resumes his coffee-drinking, leaving Sherlock to go through the laptop.

Half a sandwich later, Sherlock concludes that privnote is the only website visited on this computer that could have been used for untraceable communication. There’s still a chance that Beta, his most frequently consulted hacker, could find something more, but he doubts that he can get her to come and pick the laptop up from his place at this time. Beta has recently found herself a day job, which is most unfortunate. He texts her, but expects nothing until later.
“Are you done?” John asks as Sherlock closes the laptop and straightens his lapels.

“Yes, we are.”

The case is currently at a dead end, and there’s a pressure building up in Sherlock’s limbs. He’s not being brilliant, or even making progress, and perhaps even being on Clomipramine is better than this.

(Better than being him.)

“Now what?” John asks restlessly as they go out onto the street, finding his keys to their front door.

John’s gait is slightly off - his leg.

(Sherlock is not only stuck, he’s taking John down with him.)

Right then and there, with his eyes on John’s hand as it slides the key into the lock, Sherlock wants nothing more than to close a door behind him, to shut himself in, shut himself off, because what’s the use of this anyway? He can’t win this, none of it. It was reaching too far to aspire to solve this case at his current state, and to even consider that he could ever make… a relationship work, even when he’s at his best… well; that’s just presumptuous.

Making excuses, Helena would have said, and Sherlock wants to get his phone out and tell her how off-target that is, how much it is about him actually not being human enough to handle such inane things as sentiment and expectations of his behavior.

John is holding the door open for him, apparently resigned to his question remaining unanswered, his expression radiating a low-key frustration. Sherlock’s nipples still ache slightly from his own earlier ministrations, and it’s a cross-wiring of his brain that makes that feel like pleasure in this context.

Making excuses.

Sherlock was frustrated. The endorphins produced by physical stimulation and the orgasm that followed offered a certain level of respite. Endorphins might do the trick for John as well.

(Sherlock wants to know what it feels like, all rationalisations aside.)

It’s like slaying dragons, all over again, but he’s not being amazing right now, so he feels less entitled to what he want to claim. John deserves someone who can at least see real patterns as well as delusive ones, and right now, Sherlock isn’t sure that he’ll ever will be able to do so.

Still; does failing on one account make for an excuse to not even try on the other? Sherlock needs an obsession - John’s not a distraction, though touching him might be - and Sherlock knows that John secretly revels in being at the centre of Sherlock’s attention, so maybe it’d be to their mutual benefit, not just to fill up his own mind, his own senses and--

(Could he still have this - and still ask for more?)

Behind him, John’s picking up the mail on the sideboard - bills and a medical journal. Boring. Even John must think so. And John doesn’t handle boredom very well - that’s why the two of them get on like forest fire and drought.

There are no excuses.

(At least no excuses Sherlock can honestly tell himself that he believes in.)

As they reach the stairs, Sherlock turns around, looking down at John, who’s a step behind him.
“You made the correct conclusion when you deduced that I am not suffering from depression.”

John looks surprised, but doesn’t comment, just waits for Sherlock to continue, as his own colors are shifting rapidly - khaki, green, a hint of purple. John might not know what to think, but although he’s frustrated and curious enough not to interrupt by asking questions, it’s clear that it’s costing him to remain silent.

Sherlock, for his part, is waiting for John to realise the implications of what he’s saying. John doesn’t, however; he’s evidently too busy fighting back impulses to inquire further about Sherlock’s mental health.

“That means your worries about me being compromised or in an unfit state to advance this… relationship clearly do not apply.”

The mosaic window further up the stairs suddenly seems to be glowing with light; the shifts in color are so marked that it could have been daylight through colored glass that painted the hallway with purple, deeper green and a royal blue.

John clears his throat, assessing Sherlock cautiously for a few seconds, then nods slowly.

“Point taken,” he says simply, his pulse visibly more rapid - 96 bpm, no; 92 - but his posture remaining stoic.

Sherlock allows himself to study the pulsing, arterial red that bathes the stairwell for just a moment longer before he turns around, resuming the climb up the seventeen steps to 221B.

It’s another kind of obsession, this, but it’s not pathological.

And it’s strong enough to cancel out the lingering doubts in his mind.

*Pulse.* Beat.

*Anticipation.*

Chapter End Notes

For the record; I’m fairly certain that some of the things that Dr Helena Martell suggests and some of the techniques which she employs in treatment of Sherlock were not in use in the UK during this period of time. However, I will take some artistic freedom in regard to this, as it serves the purpose of the story much more. Also; not all the options that Helena suggests are evidence-based or even commonly used, and sometimes reflect her own opinions more than they reflect the general consensus of mental health professionals.
A psychiatric side-note; It should be mentioned that what Sherlock experiences with the tapping, the pressure and what he perceives as external compulsions isn't quite that easily categorised. At this point, I'd say that it's a mix of compulsions (which is something you do to reduce the discomfort of an obsessive thought), a stim (a behaviour which is self-calming/self-stimulating regardless, but in this case it might be prompted by an obsession) and a tic (an involuntary movement or gesture that you feel a pressure/urge to perform). I just want to clarify that some of what Sherlock regards as part of his OCD might have a different - or mixed - origin, which is only natural, given the high rate of comorbidity between the thing he never let anyone diagnose, OCD and other neurodiversities, and nothing in this story should therefore be regarded as purely symptoms of his OCD (which in this story doesn't manifest itself in any of the more common ways, but that's covered in another A/N, so let's get on with the story…).

The pulsing doesn’t stop.

When he hears the door to the flat close behind John, Sherlock counts to three taps with his toes, then turns his head, eyeing him.

The red glow is still tinted with a hint of khaki, of pale green, and it doesn’t make sense, but then sentiment - or whatever this is - seldom does. Sherlock decides that this is not the time to solve a puzzle that’s been bothering him for twenty-odd years.

There’s definitely tension in the air, almost as visible as the colors that surround them. But John doesn’t move, doesn’t take a step towards Sherlock, and Sherlock isn’t sure if this is his cue or if he’s been too vague in his invitation a few seconds ago, and John simply doesn’t get it.

No. John gets it. The angle of the crow’s feet at the corner of his eye, the pulse that’s not slowing down even after they quit the stairs. John knows.

Sherlock had wanted - illogically, a childish need for symmetry - to be the one who was kissed this time.

(To have John step up to him, to still Sherlock with his hands in his hair and stop the noise, stop the uncertainty and breath against his lips before--)

Symmetry.

But the situation doesn’t seem to allow for symmetry, so Sherlock goes for clarity instead, because if the moment is lost, he’s not certain if he can create another one.

(He can’t very well come up with something more in the line of his earlier admissions to John, and making admissions of intent has so far been the only way he’s provoked a moment where--).
Three taps of his other foot, then Sherlock takes a step towards John, who’s still in his coat, and Sherlock lets his hands find their way to either side of John’s face. John’s lets Sherlock lead, his chin tilted upwards without being prompted by Sherlock’s hold, and Sherlock very much wants to close his eyes, because what he sees in John’s gaze is distracting him from the task at hand.

(It will be easier with practise, Sherlock knows this. Once the mechanics and the expectations are better defined, he will be able to do this almost effortlessly.)

Breathing against John’s lips, Sherlock finally allows himself to close his eyes, and everything becomes easier. Easier to kiss the thin, firm lips beneath his own, easier to feel the warmth and the flesh and the muscle beneath John’s coat as Sherlock’s arms brush against John’s chest, still holding John’s head.

It takes only two and a half seconds, but then John is angling his head and pressing back, into the kiss.

Red pulsing. It’s visible even through closed eyelids. It’s not the color of intimacy or affection - Sherlock is not sure exactly how to define those sentiments, let alone to determine what colors they might provoke. It’s the color of need, expectation, sexuality, lust--

John’s hands find their way into Sherlock’s hair, and suddenly this feels nothing like their previous kiss. Breathing becomes hard, and not because Sherlock's forgotten that he should breathe through his nose (he’s nothing if not a fast learner), but because his chest feels constricted. For some reason, his body’s response to that is to shift closer to John, and his body seems to know what it’s doing, since the pressure and proximity ease that constriction slightly.

As lips slide against lips and hands press bodies closer, Sherlock knows that there's something he's missing. John's movements are almost desperate, like he's escaping something rather than giving into it, and Sherlock can’t make out whether he's projecting his own motives onto John or whether this is what it's supposed to feel like.

There are interruptions - like John breaking away to let Sherlock breathe - but that only makes it harder. So Sherlock never lets go, keeps pushing in, and when John's not backing off slightly his movements are just as desperate and erratic as Sherlock's.

The press of John against his thigh - a jolt, a revelation -

(No. Not revelation, not now, no revelation of John and pale horses and the final judgment--)

Breathe. Pull the strands of John's hair three times - less telling than the tapping would be at this point, and produces far more satisfactory sounds.

Erectile tissue. Stimulation. Proximity.

(It's more than effective as distractions go.)

It tickles at first, but then the pressure become more insistent, and the tongue - warm-wet muscle covered in papillae - probes and pushes before Sherlock understands that it’s not just meant to be a sensation; it’s his cue to open his mouth, to let John in.

Inside. Inside of him. An invasion, and it tinges all the way down his torso, making his palms and the soles of his feet burn pleasantly and something in his pelvis tighten.

(The sensation of one invasion makes him imagine other physical invasions, and the mere thought of it causes his body prepare to participate in… oh.)
Without thinking about it, Sherlock lets his own tongue find John’s, wanting to experience and explore it in as many ways as possible, and what is initially tentative soon evolves to something else, something more determined on John's part.

(Another kind of pulsing now. The colors almost fade; this is carnal - physical - and he doesn’t need colors for this, he can ignore them for now.)

As he attempts to mimic John’s movements from just a minute ago, their tongues collide and heads are bent the wrong way, but then they manage it, and it’s Sherlock’s turn to taste and probe, and it’s curious, the sensation of entering someone else. It’s less overwhelming than the other way around, but not by much.

John's torso is against his now, but Sherlock is angling the lower part of his body away slightly, because erectile tissue is very responsive, and he wonders if it's too soon for erections to enter into this.

(He wants them to, though. Wants to press against, grind against, rut against--)

Finding himself bereft of John's mouth for a second, Sherlock has time to panic before John is pushing him back a bit, until his shoulders hit the wall behind him, steadying them both. Then, after a quick meeting of their eyes, the wet-warm pressure is back, and John is pushing into his mouth, fingers pulling slightly at Sherlock's hair and what Sherlock saw in those eyes before the kissing resumed--

They're slowing down, he notices. He attempts to push further into the kiss, but John's hands in his hair and on his chest control the pace, and Sherlock is willing to follow in this, because Sherlock respects experience; he respects it, and wants to gain it.

His own hands. Tactile indulgence. The worn fabric of John's cardigan, the shift of muscles underneath it, the sharp tips of his newly-cut hair, the scapula underneath Sherlock's hand, moving as John's hands move on Sherlock's body. His hands slow down as the kiss does, because there's something awkward in letting your hand rummage restlessly over someone else's body when the movements of your mouths are no longer just as hungry.

(Hunger. Hunger for food is a need Sherlock has control over. This kind of hunger, he never saw the point of controlling. It was always his to indulge. Something must be his to indulge.)

They stay like that for several minutes, and the urgency to grind, the need for friction, is slowly becoming easier to control.

...and John keeps pausing, as if he expected Sherlock to pull away at any moment and just--

Oh.

Suddenly, it fits.

Apparently, Sherlock's not been demonstrative enough.

When John breaks away for the final time, Sherlock leans his forehead against John's, so he can almost see grey-blond strands mix with brown-black curls.

*Merger of colours*. Pressure .

Clearing his throat - a nervous habit - John lets go of Sherlock's body, and of their shared breath.
“Alright,” John says, voice odd. “Message received.”

(Unlikely, given John's reactions.)

#

Tachycardia.

Sherlock's heart beats too rapidly for approximately 23 minutes after the kiss.

(The “making out”? A plebeian expression that lacks a more acceptable synonym.)

His own finger is absently pressing against his own lips, and it's an absurd gesture, because his lips won't feel any different after kissing. (Sherlock knows, because he made the same gesture after their first… kiss.).

Nothing ought to feel different.

Yet some decidedly non-physical things do.

Sherlock lets his finger fall from his lips, instead pressing the palms of his hands together under his chin, exchanging the memory of one pressure for the reality of another, and attempts to focus on what’s happened.

(Mentally.)

Sherlock is aware that he might lack practical data concerning standard reactions during physical proximity, but he is very skilled at reading body language.

(The body. It gives away far more accurate information than words do. People rehearse their lies verbally, not physically. Physically would be wiser.)

Hesitation. John holds back when he remembers what he's doing (what they're doing).

Doubts.

About his attraction? About Sherlock's mental stability? About Sherlock? About them?

The lead on/brush off?

(Still?)

*

John goes down to - escapes to - Mrs Hudson, and Sherlock is seated on the sofa, his palms pressed together, the pressure a source of calm.

His lips are still tingling. Sense memory - sentiment?
Sherlock's identified a problem, an overlooked complication of his stated goal to engage in a relationship - of a romantic nature - with John.

The problem being that he needs to devise a plan for how to reach his stated goal, but finds himself lacking several variables needed in order to form a theory on the best way to reach the desired result.

(The goal; pair bonding. Monogamy. The means to achieve said goal; yet to be determined.)

**Relationship, definition:** A romantic and/or sexual friendship between two or more people.

Preferably both romantic and sexual, Sherlock assumes.

**Romantic, definition:** Decidedly harder to find an apt definition. After some searches, Sherlock settles for *Thinking about love and doing and saying things to show that you love someone*, finding it to be most practically useful.

Love, in a romantic context, might be translated to *emotional intimacy*, or rather *pair bonding*.

(What does that entail when at least one of the participants has a decreased tolerance for or understanding of emotional intimacy? *A question for further research.*)

Sherlock frowns at his phone, at the dictionaries and their inadequate descriptions of something so common, something many people do - something many people claim to *live* in - every day.

Sherlock knows what love is. Chemically. (That knowledge seems to be inadequate for understanding the process.)

Another approach; philosophical.

The mind-body problem. Descartes’ problem, but reversed; How do physical actions relate to the non-physical states?

(*How does a tongue against a carotid artery relate to emotional bonding?*)

Sherlock has always subscribed to the theory of physicalism in this question; the mind being nothing more than matter.

(Doubtless.)

And a multidisciplinary approach would be necessary in order to form an hypothesis to test.

The question being; if the goal is pair bonding, which means will prove most efficient?

Their previous physical encounter - *a firm thigh between his own, breath against his neck, hands tugging at his hair*... - had revealed a discrepancy that needs to be addressed.

Emotional and physical proximity did not seem to correlate, despite the popular, romantic notion that it does.

(He's never understood the emotional implications of being in a sexually aroused state, but he'd put that down to his lack of experience of being in said state with another person. Having experienced that twice now, he still fails to see any connection.)

Being in such close physical proximity to John, Sherlock experienced it more as a slip into his headspace of sexual fantasies than as a moment of emotional connection, or even affection.
He’d wanted to grind against John’s leg more than he’d wanted to… wanted to what? Connect? Care for?

Four hours ago, in his bedroom; John’s questions, his insistence on checking on Sherlock. At Speedy's, working on the case. Connection. Something like it.

Hypothesis; emotional pair bonding is more efficiently achieved by approaching common points of interest and by allowing the other person gain personal knowledge of you, and you of them, than by physical proximity.

Extensive experimentation needed to reach a conclusion.

* *

“You know, you said something about Sophia Sanders having experienced something that made her, you know… more charitable?”

“It didn’t make her ‘more charitable’. Whatever it was, it changed her entire outlook on life,” Sherlock absently corrects, because this part is not new. Still, he’s curious about where John’s going with this.

John’s gaze is flickering, while his posture seems intended to make him seem more… steady? He's sitting with his legs a bit wider apart than he usually does, his back straighter, the way some men would do to assert their masculinity - absurd, futile - which makes no sense, because why would John need to--

“Does what happened to her influence the case? Could it have been purposely done to push her to, well, ‘change her outlook on life’?”

Sherlock finds himself pondering the question longer than he normally would, because he’d never actually considered it. Never considered if the reaction--

Reaction. An opportunity to test reactions.

(To let John in.)

“To what degree would you say that a person's reaction to a traumatic or otherwise life-altering event can be predicted?”

It only takes John a second to accept this new direction in the conversation - the unexpected consultation. Sherlock generally prefers his own opinion - for good reasons - but he's not blind to John's competence, or rather to John's complex and sometimes paradoxical skills. Does he let it show?

“Well, the past is still the best predictor of the future, but the specific circumstances will still affect the each person reacts, I’d say. And there's always something that will prove to be the last straw, that makes someone change their pattern of behaviour,” John says as the Tyrian purple slowly begins to expand.

Patterns. There will always be patterns.
It becomes interesting only when someone eventually breaks those patterns. And Sherlock loves it when something finally becomes interesting.

(Still, it's so hard breaking his own patterns.)

“If we're talking about a first-time occurrence,” he elaborates. “An attempted murder. A war. How predictable would you say that the reaction would be on an individual level?”

John's expression doesn't shift in the slightest at the mention of the war, of his own ‘first’. And it's only then that it hits Sherlock - was the war John's first trauma? He'd always assumed it was; his deductions had never given him reason to consider otherwise.

“Was it - was the war the first time?”

There's a tingle in Sherlock’s palms, and he closes them even tighter around his mug, willing the physical response to pressure to overrule the slight tremble he feels in his arms.

(Why now?)

“That I almost died? Or that I reevaluated everything? Or experienced a trauma?”

The purple is accompanied by a deep blue, and Sherlock sees a flash of wariness in John's eyes before he let his shoulders down a bit, considering.

*If the world ends, John ends too.*

(The thought comes without any prelude this time, vibrates in his nerves. *No.* Three light taps of his hands to the side of his thigh. A pitifully small relief.)

“Any of it,” prompts Sherlock.

“I guess not,” John says, and Sherlock momentarily forgets his hands, forgets the pressure, because this could mean he's going to get new information. Something to add to the pattern that is John.

(One of the most unpredictable patterns Sherlock's come across. Not as unfortunately random as the patterns of his own brain, though.)

“Why do you want to know this? Is this some kind of random sample to compare to the case?”

*Unpredictable.*

John's sudden anger is hidden under a defensive tone. The purple and blue become polluted, too transparent. Sherlock has hit a nerve, but he has no idea how.

“Partially,” Sherlock concedes. “Not only.”

John; puzzled. Sherlock; almost crushing the mug, albeit discreetly.

(A minefield, this. It began when Sherlock first refused to tell John what he'd done to himself that had left him trying to evacuate his guts into the toilet. A constant vibration under his skin. A shift between them.)

“Look, you deduced my limp, and my shoulder, the first day we met. Can't you be content with that… level of damage? For now. Until you deduce the rest. But - when you do, don't tell me. I’d rather not know, alright?”

And Sherlock hates it when John goes pale. John should never be pale. It's not his real palette. John is deep, saturated colors. That’s how he needs to be.

It’s a decision made almost intuitively, and the words comes out of his mind almost before Sherlock is aware of having made the decision.

(To say something he never intended to tell John. To share it.)

“In my case, I was eleven,” Sherlock says, his hands almost steady again, but the images that flood his mind are everything that he’s spent two decades training himself not to react to.

The high sun, the way the grass looked as the world became distorted. His mother's voice. The book on the shelf that had told him about the End of the world.

(The knowledge.)

“I was eleven when it began. When I was seventeen I began taking the tricyclic antidepressants.”

It's almost quiet in his mind.

(He's surprised even himself. Rare.)

John slowly nods, the blue becoming richer as he understands what Sherlock's given him.

(Vulnerability. The most naked kind.)

There are no questions. John was never one to grab for more than he was freely given. Never greedy the way Sherlock is.

“I was thirteen. I was on my way home from practise a bit later than usual, with my mate Nate. A couple of older kids approached us, and I think we knew that it wasn’t going to end well. I escaped as they surrounded us, Nate didn’t. I watched from behind a corner as they beat him. Badly.”

John’s voice is neutral, not giving anything away - intellectualising. A Painful memory still. Often revisited.

Sherlock doesn't ask how it ended, or inquire about John’s reactions, restraining himself.

(Now is not the time to be greedy. It's enough that John's colors are once again right.)

“It happened later. For Sophia and the others.”

“I'm glad. It leaves deep enough scars as it is.”

Welts. Traces. Patterns.

“What kind of scars are you referring to?”

“The ones you mentioned. The effects of trauma. The way you reevaluate things. And the hypervigilance, the troubles sleeping…”

“But it wouldn't affect everyone that way, although I assume that they’d all try to comp--”

Sherlock interrupts himself, because there it is; one answer to two questions, one of which he hasn’t
even spoken out loud.

*To compensate.* To make up for.

Looking sharply at John, seeing the pieces of two entirely different puzzles begin to align, Sherlock can’t help grinning.

*To compensate* - that’s what it’s all about, that’s what they all--

“They all do it, don’t they? We all do! John, you’re brilliant!”

And John looks pleased, they way he does when Sherlock’s mind is five steps ahead, but John is still contributing, still making a difference, even if he has no idea how.

Spinning around, Sherlock leaves for his bedroom. There are things to send inquiries about, and there’s new information to consider.

Unfortunately, Sherlock is currently unable to process any vital information as long as John is there, radiating the Tyrian purple and all that deep, confident blue.

It’s something to return to.

With a plan.

*#

After sending a few emails to people who have no idea who Sherlock is, but who he has been researching methodically during the past week, Sherlock allows himself to sort through all the new clues about John, especially the new piece of information about Nate.

It hadn’t been the alcoholic sister, nor John’s father, who’d died when John was overseas. No, it had begun earlier, John’s need to compensate. It made sense now, and Sherlock enjoyed this part; scanning through all the interactions between John and other people that Sherlock had found noteworthy and in need of further examination and trying to see in which situations this new knowledge could serve as a key to understanding.

Several, he soon gathered. Starting with not being deterred by people’s warnings about Sherlock, nor accepting Mycroft’s offer about money that very first night.

Loyalty. Bravery.

Sherlock abides by the laws of logic, not morality, but if there was such a thing as being ‘good’ (or, in Sherlock’s head; being ‘Just Right’), then John was good.

It was partially a compensatory goodness - compensating for many more things that had happened later in life too, Sherlock was certain - but the reason behind it was only a catalyst, and once it was consumed it had already played out its role, the reaction it caused being the only thing that mattered. John had made a choice about his direction in life, making loyalty and bravery something larger than fear.

Sherlock, on the other hand, had chosen logic and structure, making it something larger than things that were perishable or senseless. Like life itself.
(Like the end of the world. Like the faulty patterns of his mind.)

Returning to the present time, Sherlock’s mind is set on a more current question of logic.

The experiment; pair bonding, and how to interpret the result of his observational studies of it so far.

(Running his hands through his hair, the waves of it circling his fingers, provides an outlet for the fluttering, nonsensical sensation that this particular question gave rise to. Illogical, unlike his reasoning.)

The initial question was this; is it possible to measure the outcome of a partial experiment by the colors you see due to faulty wiring?

(If it is, the results so far would indicate that emotional proximity achieved by the sharing of personal information is superior to physical proximity.)

Sharing. It had been sharing, even if Sherlock's sharing was based on the false assumptions John held.

John believed Sherlock had been referring to anxiety when Sherlock had told him about being eleven years old, about it being the first time his life fractured. On some level, Sherlock finds that it's almost not a lie, more of a partial omission of the truth.

Sherlock has never been sure how to define anxiety, and therefore he’s never been certain of whether or not he's experienced it.

(He's beginning to suspect that he has.)

Thinking about it won’t help to settle the matter.

Actions will.

And Sherlock decides on two separate actions right here and now.

The most important of the two is a retest of his observations of pair bonding during physical proximity.

The other one is another inquiry.

---

Can a person who has perceived a traumatic event during a delusional state later present with symptoms of long-term stress reactions? SH

In general? No. The effects of the perceived trauma would go into remission as the delusion in question does. In psychotic states, the remission might be somewhat more protracted. But in your case? No. This is an issue of compliance, not post-traumatic stress, as you’d know if your cognitive abilities weren’t currently compromised. A combination of antidepressant withdrawal and the re-onset of symptoms of one of your chronic conditions. As your psychiatrist, I will refrain from saying that I told you so.
You’re not my psychiatrist. SH

I may not be your psychiatrist officially, but tell me, Sherlock, how many times have you visited whatever overpaid self-server sees to it that you always have your medication?

If you're referring to my brother, that would be an unfortunate number of times. SH

I'm happy to hear that your brother is well. I assume he's no less compulsive to this day? It's always great when siblings have something in common, even if it's just the refusal to face the severity of their little ‘quirks’.

He still can't leave the house without an umbrella. SH

And what about you? Can you currently leave your house? If so, do come and disprove me regarding the permanency of your condition. Seattle is lovely this time a year.

*

The plan in itself is simple enough; create another situation with physical proximity to ensure that the observations of last time remain valid.

The execution of the plan does, however, manifest a few minor practical problems.

Leaving the bathroom after a having showered his body but leaving his hair dry - too much hair care needed afterwards; he’s simply not patient enough for it currently - Sherlock knows that he has no idea how to actually initiate a situation where he can retest and confirm the observations made during the last physical encounter. He will have to trust himself to read John’s actions in this, and to use his own signals to affect John in a way that wordlessly leads to… touching.

(Previously, he’s used words to provoke these encounters. During his brief shower, he’s found that he is now at a loss for words. The only ones he can come up with sounds clinical and bereft of all… intimacy. He simply doesn’t speak the language people wish to hear in these situations.)

John is sitting by the desk in the living room, proofreading and offering his opinions on an article written by an old friend from med school for a medical journal. The article lacks several significant data points, Sherlock had observed while glancing at it earlier that day while waiting for John to return. John must have noticed too, because his face is furrowed that particular way Sherlock knows to mean that John is annoyed.

John’s doctor persona might be mild-mannered, but he takes great pride in his work, and Sherlock knows there are few things that make him as frustrated as poorly-practised medicine, including sensational research articles and the promotion of treatments that lack scientific grounding.

It’s an affront to everything that John himself has striven to become. A healer. A man of science.

Sherlock finds himself presented with a practical matter; the question of how to shift someone’s attention from post-surgical infections and the problematic use of broad spectrum antibiotics to the act of kissing?

(This is a kind of problem Sherlock’s avoided until now. He’s not sure he likes this new kind of
problem, but he’s determined to see things through. He will be consistent in this. He will be consistent for John. For himself.)

Looking up from the laptop, John glances wonderingly at Sherlock, who’s been standing in the doorway, just looking at him for several seconds.

“You should write your own article,” Sherlock says, and he hadn’t intended to say that, but something needed to be said.

Eyebrows slightly raised, John’s expression indicates that he expects more of an explanation for this suggestion, since it’s unusual for Sherlock to show any interest for John’s profession except when it comes to his usefulness as a medical consultant at crime scenes.

“I guess I could do better than this,” John finally says, nodding at the laptop.

“Yes,” Sherlock confirms, uncertain of what to say next to keep filling the silence, to form their words into steady stream that will someway ease their way towards--

_Pulsing._

“I accepted a shift at the clinic tomorrow morning, so if you want me to pick up intestines or more laptops you’ll have to come out with it now,” John says, his eyes back on the screen.

“No. Inquiries have been sent and I’m awaiting confirmation on a few things.”

Silence.

“So. Should I head out of the flat before you tear it to pieces because you can't stand the waiting?”

John's voice is matter-of-fact, but his colors are deep, warm.

“No,” Sherlock says again.

The void that usually presents itself when Sherlock is forced to be idle when all he wants was to continue to ride the high of hyperfocus and adrenaline that a good case provided is currently not looming over him the way it normally would. This time, Sherlock finds that his mind is instead obsessively preoccupied with another kind of puzzle, which makes the gaps in the case work almost feel like respite rather than suffocation. (Two puzzles at once is more than enough when your brain is trying to disassemble itself for reasons that are chemical rather than circumstantial.)

“No? Does that mean you're about to start tearing yourself to pieces instead?”

Sherlock can see John doesn’t believe that. John knows Sherlock's moods - _at least he use to; John knew Sherlock's moods while they were still somewhat balanced by the tricyclic antidepressant_ - and this is not how Sherlock holds himself when he's about to tear something apart.

A deflection. A conscious misreading of Sherlock. _Why?_

_I would rather have you tear me apart._

The words suddenly rise up in Sherlock’s throat, and it unsettles him, because that's not something he's ever imagined wanting to say. (It's still not something he wants to _say_, not by any means.)
Sherlock scoffs and John smiles, head turned away.

_Ah_. John was testing for reactions. _Testing Sherlock._

Lately, Sherlock has noticed that John seems pleased whenever Sherlock’s is either rude or dismissive.

No, _correction_; John’s pleased when he thinks that Sherlock is acting like… _Sherlock._

(The Sherlock John was used to; the one with less obvious defects. The one who offered danger and cases and who couldn’t be considered to be emotionally compromised - _couldn’t even be considered to be emotional_? The version of himself that John needs him to be in order not to feel like he’s starting something up with a Sherlock that is not himself, and therefore might regret or despise this later.)

That deduction makes the next step easier.

“You do not initiate physical contact.”

The statement is delivered in Sherlock’s observational tone of voice; distant, uninvolved.

_**His usual self.**_

(A mirroring of his medicated self. He’s still capable of that for short durations of time.)

“Ehm, no, that’s… No, I guess I haven’t.” John’s surprised by both Sherlock’s question and his own answer, it seems. “Do... do you want me to?”

Deflecting, again.

“Do _you_ want to?” Sherlock retorts.

His arms folded across his chest, Sherlock leans against the doorframe, raising his eyebrows but trying not to imply he’s invested at a level beyond mild curiosity.

John rubs a hand over his face, wincing a bit before he reestablishes their eye contact.

“I figured I’d let you set the pace for this,” he finally says.

It’s not the whole truth, and Sherlock knows this, even if he doesn’t know what constitutes the rest of the truth. The possibilities are plentiful; pity, reluctance towards acts that challenges John’s perception of his own sexuality, misplaced caution regarding Sherlock’s state of mind, lack of sexual attraction, fear of intimacy, the potential threat of another _brush-off_--

There are suddenly enough possible reasons for John’s hesitance that Sherlock finds himself at a loss as to why he thought that this was even remotely possible.

**Vibrations. Pressure.**

(He should get out of here before he acts on a compulsion to do something about the pressure that’s building up behind his sternum, forcing his fingers to twitch and making him fight the urge to--)

Then John suddenly rises from the desk, walking over to Sherlock in the doorway, his steps confident and determined in that oddly mild way that John sometimes adopts in order to conceal just how stern he really is.
John’s close now, looking up at Sherlock, who straightens his back automatically, needing his body to express something he’s not even remotely close to actually feeling.

“But that’s not what you want, is it?”

It isn’t - it really isn’t - but Sherlock’s finds that his mouth is suddenly deprived of saliva and his tongue feels like it’s too dry to form words.

(Involuntary physiological reactions to verbal communication - *impractical*.)

Sherlock attempts to make his gaze as steady as his posture as he shakes his head, uncertain of what exactly he’s negating with this gesture. There seems to be more than one meaning to the words, judging by the way John utters them and the way the arterial red is becoming more and more prominent before him.

Adopting Sherlock’s means of communication, John slowly nods.

(Agreeing, affirming, *regrouping*--)

A hand is reached out, finding its way into the hair on the right side of Sherlock’s head, fingers nestling into curls as Sherlock allows his head to be angled by the not-quite tug on his hair. John’s other hand touches Sherlock’s neck, stroking up until it rests on Sherlock’s cheek. The vibrations and the pressure are dissolving into a tingling sensation on Sherlock’s palms, and he’s not sure what to do with his hands, so he finds himself slowly rubbing them against the sides of his legs, the friction almost enough to distract him from the tingles.

John doesn’t lean up to kiss him. Instead, John uses his hands, his demeanor, to make Sherlock bend - to make Sherlock *want* to bend - his head down, unconsciously seeking him out for contact.

(John doesn’t use words when he wants something, Sherlock knows this. John uses his facial expressions, his minute approval or disapproval, his body language or his actions to communicate and ensure that he gets what he wants. He simply makes the other person want to give it to him. It just hadn’t occurred to Sherlock that this style of communication would transfer so well to… *this*.)

John’s mouth beneath his, pressing up and moving against Sherlock’s.

The tingle in his palms is forgotten as Sherlock's hands grip John's shirt, feeling the warmth of his skin radiate through the cotton the same way John's colors radiate through Sherlock's eyelids.

(Dissolving- no; *diffusing*.)

This time, Sherlock instantly opens his mouth at the pressure from John's tongue, angling his head and letting his own tongue meet John's, stroking it, the structure being just as odd and enticing as he’d found it to be a few hours ago. It’s more coordinated this time, the way their mouths slide and their heads angle, but Sherlock is yet to find a pattern to it. When John's tongue retreats, Sherlock's own attempts to follow it back into John's mouth, only to be pushed back as John's tongue is suddenly poking out again, tracing the outlines of Sherlock's lips, and when Sherlock angles his head, following the tug on his hair, it's only to have his nose instantly collide with John's.

(There must be a logic to this, there must be tells people learn as they continue to engage in these kind of activities, because what's happening now is inelegant, if not at all unpleasant.)

There’s a huff that could be laughter breathed into Sherlock's mouth, but Sherlock isn’t sure, because he fails to see what there is to laugh about. There’s too much to think about at the same time - the neurochemical responses to oral stimulation, the physical reactions caused by the tugging on his hair
and the way he needs not to let any of these things show too much. Not yet.

(Release of dopamine, testosterone and endorphins. Blood flow redirecting itself to fill up erectile tissue. Activation of the sympathetic nervous system. Understandable, predictable reactions. And still--)

--still there’s a jolt of something - of doubt? - striking Sherlock the moment John presses closer, close enough to feel that Sherlock’s body is very much prepared to engage in sexual activity. A breath caught in between their mouths - an odd sensation, fascinating in itself - and a moment of hesitation, of involuntary reaction on John’s part.

(Too much? Too soon? Too unmistakably male? This could be the tipping of any of those scales, and Sherlock’s mind is preparing itself for the rejection and--)

--and instead of rejection, Sherlock gets another mouthful of John, a firmer hand on his scapula, pressing them closer, until this is no longer kissing, but something decidedly more… carnal.

At first, there’s no mirroring reaction towards the physical stimulation on John’s part, but as Sherlock’s body acts on its need for friction, Sherlock can actually feel John’s cock go from flaccid to half-erect in a matter of seconds, the sinusoids filling up with blood due to the physical stimulation of Sherlock’s body against his.

(Too much? Too soon? Too unmistakably male? This could be the tipping of any of those scales, and Sherlock’s mind is preparing itself for the rejection and--)

(It’s impossible to determine if autonomic processes like attraction to his own body factors in, and the end result will be the same either way, even if Sherlock has found himself hoping for evidence for such a process, although it shouldn’t matter, mustn’t matter, still does matter--)

(Hope is still the most useless kind of cognitive bias.)

In the midst of sensations, of bodies pressing against one another and the pain of having the edge of a doorframe pressed into his back, Sherlock loses all conscious focus on the movements of his mouth. The kissing becomes more instinctive as his attention is instead directed toward the sensation of a hand roaming over his back, and then the kissing stops all together as John’s mouth leaves Sherlock’s to trace down Sherlock’s neck, leaving a trail of rapidly cooling saliva behind and causing shivers as teeth scrape lightly against warm skin.

(John’s movements - decisive now. There’s no doubt whom is kissing and who’s being kissed in this, and it’s almost like it wouldn’t be Sherlock’s fault if this backfired.)

His own hands have found their way into John’s hair, stroking his skull beneath it, exploring the textures and the warmth, the way John’s head moves with each shift in what they do. It’s Sherlock’s hands that first register that John is withdrawing, creating a space between them where there had not been one just seconds ago - where there shouldn’t be one.

Eyes opening reluctantly - the need for visual data in order to interpret whether this is a putting on brakes before this goes further than they might have planned for, or the realisation of a mistake - Sherlock first notices John’s chest, the way it heaves and falls. John’s respiration rate is much higher than Sherlock registered when they were pressed close enough to feel each other’s breath rather than observe it.

(His senses are clearly unreliable in such close proximity to another person. Interesting. Problematic.)

Then he sees John’s eyes; and the colors are not diluted in any way. Rather, they are intensified.

(Not a rejection, then.)
“Tell me if I--” John began, breathy, seeking the words, “--if I'm too… I know I tend to be a bit--”

Oh.

Worry. Is it about being too eager (hardly a problem), about being too dominant (definitely not a problem) or related to some amorphous concern regarding Sherlock’s inexperience (the reason that’d be deemed as relevant remains unclear, but Sherlock is aware that some people would consider it important)?

Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Sherlock had known that John would potentially question Sherlock’s lack of practical experience, and had his words already prepared.

“In some matters, you are rather more competent than I am. Relish it. I’m expecting you to put that competence to use.”

The words come out almost as casually as he'd intended, and for once, John doesn't follow up with more questions, just nods slowly and lets out a breath as his fingers begin to unbutton Sherlock’s shirt. Sherlock manages to catch a glimpse of his face before John inclines his head, and there's something new there, something that makes the Tyrian purple and the forest green challenge the red.

Confidence. No; not only that. There’s decisiveness in his look too. And something that reminds Sherlock of how John looks when Sherlock requests his medical opinion on a crime scene after having ignored him since they arrived.

After the second button is undone, John's mouth finds Sherlock's jaw, then the skin just below it.

He should probably do something, reciprocate in some manner, but instead Sherlock finds himself just relocating himself a bit to the left, allowing himself to be pressed against the wall instead of the doorframe. The relief in the muscles of his back is in itself enough to make him groan.

All the buttons now undone, John's fingers trail from Sherlock's waistband and move slowly up his chest, across his sternum, and ghosting over his pulse point before they stroke his cheek and finally tug at his hair.

It's instinctive, leaning down to meet John's lips.

“Bed,” John says, the word uttered almost directly into Sherlock’s mouth as he breaks away from the kiss.

The tingles reappear, the single word from John leaving no room for ambiguity.

Unexpected.

(Not unwanted.)

John backs off a bit, giving Sherlock room to follow him. Sherlock feels naked, stripped of the proximity and neurochemical reactions from kissing. This is the point at which people change their minds, Sherlock realises. This is where people sober up from suddenly having all that space between them.

He could change his mind.

(He won’t.)

John leads the way, but it's Sherlock who opens the door to his own room, then closes it behind
them, breathing harder as John's hands are on him once more, rucking up his shirt from his trousers.

Another wall to support himself against.

(He hadn't seen this coming, but his body is prepared and his mind is overruled by his body, and for once that knowledge isn't hateful, because his body knows this - wants this - so his mind is curious and he won't brush John off again.)

Sherlock's hands are resting on John's hips; John's hands struggling to unbutton the cuffs on Sherlock's shirt. There seems no need for Sherlock to do anything but kiss back, so he does just that, clumsily… hungry.

The physiological reaction that had not been especially prominent in John's body before is now growing between them. The first hint of it against Sherlock's thigh causes sparks of something like… confirmation. The arousal of a decision having been made.

Sherlock's shirt is pushed off his shoulders, getting stuck between his back and the wall behind it, leaving his arms trapped in the sleeves. John doesn't make a move to help him out of it; instead Sherlock finds his hips pushed back against the wall as he attempts to dislodge himself from the garment. John is breathing heavily against Sherlock's clavicle, and then there are fingers unfastening his trousers, and it's an odd sensation; his arms trapped and his body more and more exposed.

(So it had been this John had hinted at earlier, before Sherlock interrupted his self-conscious inquiry. If he was too-- and he isn't. This is something Sherlock had been unable to deduce about John, something that's now making his pelvis feel like--)

It takes determination to make himself look away from the ceiling - too much sensory input even without the visual clues - and make himself look down, look at John's hands fumbling with his zipper, looking at John's face and--

There's an expression on John's face just before he pulls Sherlock's trousers down. An expression that Sherlock can't quite read, but although it reminds him of determination, it still doesn't look anything like the determination he saw earlier on John's face.

(It looks more like John's face when he's pulling the safety on his gun or when he's following Sherlock somewhere he knows they can't escape from without some level of collateral damage, like--)

Then there's a mouth against Sherlock's again, and there's a hand touching - holding, tracing, stroking - his cock, and it's--

Yes.

So much, so strange, so very much--

(It does feel different, when it isn't his own hand doing that. Unpredictable. Like burning .)

His trousers are somewhere around his knees and his erect penis is in John's hand, the hand that’s moving up and down, up and down, slowly, testing. There’s a groan next to his ear, and another erect penis is pressing - no; grinding - against his thigh, and yes, yes--

Sherlock’s hands are still trapped as John manages to turn him around and back him onto the bed, before finally allowing him to untangle from the shirt.

There's suddenly a shift, a deepening of colours, and then clothes are discarded and Sherlock is
sitting on the edge of the bed, naked, and John is undressing right in front of him, garment after garment.

(John; confident now, apparently comfortable in his own nudity, with his own body - more so than with Sherlock's nudity? The deep, saturated colors surround John as the hairs on his chest becomes visible, then his shoulder - and oh; the scar, it's more crater-like than Sherlock had anticipated, the angle slightly different from his previous estimations and--)

His belt is being unfastened, his zipper pulled down, and is Sherlock meant to help with this, show his interest and urgency by disrobing John the way John has mostly disrobed him? But no; John stands a bit too far away, and it seems to be deliberate.

(John; needing - wanting? - some degree of control in this. Acceptable. A facilitation of the proceedings, in fact, at least as far as Sherlock is concerned.)

His hoes discarded, John is leaning down as he pulls off jeans, pants and socks all in one go before straightening up again. It's not a sensuous display, not like in badly produced porn, it's a practical and effective movement and it's so simple, so oddly prosaic in the midst of all this and Sherlock's suddenly--

Penis.

An erect penis, more precisely. An erect penis that's only a few inches away from his face.

(In the flesh.)

Sherlock looks at John, at his body, at all the bare skin and imperfections and curious contradictions in front of him, and then John is stepping closer. For a moment, the question of whether Sherlock's expected to take a hint from their relative positions - if he's expected to fellate John here and now - races through his mind, but John leans his head down, and Sherlock's lips instantly come to meet John's, a slow, determined kind of pressure that soon becomes more demanding. Sherlock imagines that, for once, John can feel the internal pressure the same way Sherlock does, because while Sherlock’s brain might be wired wrong, there's nothing biologically freakish about him.

A pressure that can be shared.

(Another kind of intimacy?)

Sharing. Vital to emotional bonding. Sherlock’s recent observations led him to the preliminary conclusion that emotional bonding was almost exclusively a result of emotional proximity due to verbal sharing, but in a few fragments of this, he's sensed several colors and sensations that might cause him to slightly revise that conclusion.

(For now; the data seems inconclusive, and how can Sherlock expect one kind of shared pressure to translate to his very own kind of mental fallacy--)

And then Sherlock’s back is suddenly against his duvet, and then there's a whole other pressure, the pressure of John's body on top of his own, moving against him, mouth finding his cheek, his shin, his ear--


(Frottage, rather.)

Time seems to become more erratic and less linear after that, because sensation coils low in
Sherlock’s body, his skin is tingling and John’s skin is pressed against his own skin, the warmth and friction and the sheer boundlessness of it all is… (neurochemically) intoxicating.

John is gasping profanities in between kisses that are growing wetter and clumsier by the minute, and their cocks are sliding against each other in between their stomachs. Sherlock’s hands are pulling John closer, harder, needing the weight of him against his his cock, needing something to grasp at.

His hands on the mattress on either side of Sherlock's face, John grinds his pelvis against Sherlock’s, evoking sounds from Sherlock, sounds he never thought he’d make in the presence of… anyone.

Filthy, breathless, needy.

Sherlock can sense his orgasm as it builds, and it feels just the same as it always does as it coils up inside of him, only this time, the body pressed against his own isn't imaginary. This time, his orgasm hits him just as he feels an odd wet sensation spreading over his abdomen, and it isn't until he’s finished - after frantically grinding up against John's now rather heavy body without any kind of rhythm - that he realises that John must have come too.

Breath. Heavy, in tandem.

(Semen. Smeared out between their bodies, sticking skin together, easing the friction.)

John slumps down even further, falling to Sherlock's side rather than staying on top of him.

A weight off his chest, in some ways.

The colors around them seem muted for a few seconds, before they merge through the thin skin of Sherlock's eyelids, a pulsing red slowly shifting from arterial to something deeper, more like venous blood - blood that was just as deprived of oxygen as Sherlock felt; a strangely apt image supplied by his pathologies.

It takes some more breathing and some additional oxygen in his blood before he can feel John's ribcage expand and retract against his side, and summarise his observations from his latest retest.

(The conclusion is compromised by the vast number of incidental findings.)
Sherlock doesn’t see the colours that radiate from other people, because they are not something that can be seen. He senses them the way other people sense moods and meanings behind words. Since perceiving things that way doesn't require any light, logic dictates that he ought to be able to perceive the nuances of someone even with without using his vision, but this is where his brain fails to obey logic. The colours always fade mere seconds after he’s closed his eyes, and he’s left with nothing but an afterimage.

As long as Sherlock is not looking he will remain unaware of what John is currently radiating. Until he opens his eyes he won't know if the colours still pulse or if it they’ve slowed down to a steady, languid rhythm the way their both of their heart rates have done by now.

(Sherlock radiates no colours of his own, but would it be possible for him to be stained by someone else’s shades as they leak out into the synapse gap between their bodies?)

A few minutes ago, there came the muted sound of a text alert from the pile of clothes on the floor next to the bed. It registered in Sherlock’s mind, but at that moment he’d been otherwise occupied and chose to leave things be for the time being. Now, as the chemical rush after orgasm is slowly dissolving - the reuptake of the neurotransmitters that were released into his bloodstream efficiently clearing away any residue haze - Sherlock recalls the sound once more.

(The need for other chemical rushes. Nicotine. Preferably cigarettes, but patches would do.)

“You're texting?” John asks in a tone of voice that Sherlock can’t quite put his finger on as Sherlock finally retrieves his phone from the floor, his fingers flying over the screen.

“Beta. She’ll have a look at the laptop if I drop it off at her place.”

Leaving the flat will be a gamble at this point - too little sleep and too much clutter in his head - but Sherlock won’t tolerate any more unnecessary delays on this case, so it will have to do. He gets to his feet, the air against his bare skin making him shiver slightly, and composes a quick reply to Beta before putting his phone on the nightstand and heading over to the dresser to get clean pants. There’s an urge to cover himself up, but that kind of modesty would certainly be redundant given the kind of activities they were engaged in just ten minutes prior.

“Right,” says John, pulling the duvet closer around his waist as he leans over the edge of the bed to scramble for his clothes on the floor. “You might consider showering before we go, though.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agrees in a tone that suggests that that had been his plan all along.

(It ought to feel either disturbing or arousing to have another person’s dried semen on your skin, but apparently it’s neither. It’s negligible in the light of the radiating deep arterial red and the possibility of a breakthrough in the case, it seems.)

“I’m going to need to shower too,” John reminds just as Sherlock is about to shut the door to the ensuite behind him, and Sherlock offers nothing but a grunt before finally closing the door, allowing himself to rest his head against the tiled wall next to it.
Three silent taps with his left foot against the floor, then three more with his right hand against the sink. Then three more. And three more.

(Not a pressure, but still a need.)

Meeting his own eyes in the mirror, Sherlock experiences the now-familiar sensation of not quite recognising his own face. It happens fairly often, like a glitch in his facial recognition that only affects his very own face. The exterior does not match the internal image he has of who he is; of who he’s chosen to be.


(It’s a choice.)

Standing there naked in front of the silver-framed mirror beside his wardrobe, freshly out of the shower, Sherlock is a blend of all those things - the sum of his conscious choices for himself - and of the things he once was - lost, undecided.

It’s blend that lacks contours and definition.

In the mirror he eyes the pale skin that will burn easily in the sun and turn reddish and flake. No tan lines anywhere - body lotion with sunblock, a lesson learned early in life. His skin is currently painted in different shades of pink from the heat of the water and the rub of the soft towel. *For a skin that is so easily marked, it’s strange to see that it bears no traces of John.*

Between his legs, a patch of copper brown curls, well-groomed; order, control. His flaccid penis is eggshell white in contrast to the copper, and Sherlock tries to look at his body as if it were any other body.

(Would it look any different seen through John’s eyes?)

His body has been utilised for sexual pleasures since he was ten years old, although at times during his early youth, these pleasures were mixed with a persistent, burning sense of shame over his own ineluctable urges. The body - his body - is a sexual object, even in his own eyes. There has never been any innocence to lose, as if Sherlock ever believed in innocence in the first place.

(He used to believe that he needed to be just that, though. *Innocent. Because it was the innocent, the pure, who would be saved when the Earth was rid of the sinners on the very Last Day, and--*)

The pressure has been building up slowly, and now it surfaces.

Sherlock downs three Oxazepam - need to get more, only eight left - and starts getting dressed just as he hears John turn on the shower on the other side of the thin wall.
“What’s next, then?” John says as they climb into the back of the cab after having dropped off the laptop at Beta’s small student flat on the other side of London.

All things considered, Sherlock’s brain handled the outing well, but there’s an undercurrent of pressure that’s slowly rising under his skin, because of the sounds, the movement and most of all the constant reminders of his obsessions that are everywhere - the number plate, a house number, the distant sound that reminds him of Silver Bi-- aeroplanes and--

“We wait,” Sherlock answers, because while he will not be idle - there’s some Internet research he can do himself while Beta works on the laptop - he’s not sure if anything will come out of it, and John doesn’t need to know that he is pulling every loose end he can find.

Right now, he knows that he needs the walls of 221B. In the darkness of his own bedroom, the lack of input will allow him to figure out the next step.

John, on the other hand, needs something else entirely. Something that will make the slight ache in his bad leg stop, and distract him from the uncertainty that Sherlock detected in his overly assertive gait just minutes ago as they headed up to Beta's flat.

Sherlock realises that he's tapping his fingers against his thigh in a rapid rhythm; tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tap.

Looking out of the window of the cab, all he sees is a reflection of himself and the back of John's head as John too is looking out of the window.

(Or is he also just seeing a reflection, watching the people inside the cab rather than those outside of it?)

The sight of John evokes a sense memory. Stubbled chin against the skin over Sherlock's clavicle, fingers tightening their grip on Sherlock's shoulder.

The shiver that runs through him at this is not unpleasant.

Vibration. Coat pocket.

Phone.

Then there's Beta’s voice, a shifting of dark green and grey nuances even over the telephone.

“OK, I’m sending the logs, but basically this girl was in some kind of loose network. There were loads of cells, didn’t know too much about each other, and it looks like they were out to protect victims of some kind of crime against another network. That lot specialised in finding people, but not the usual way. I don’t think your network number two was the same people that committed the crime to start with, but some kind of private investigators gone to the bad.’ Beta pauses for a breath. ‘Apparently Sophia helped one person disappear, and then found out that other people on her side were being threatened, and two of them had died under suspicious circumstances. I worked out that one of Sophia’s contacts was planning to do a bunk before the investigators got them. After that the data’s pretty sketchy. Looks like Sophia got better at covering her tracks."

“Is there anything about the person Sophia helped disappear?"

Beta falls silent, but Sherlock thinks he hears the faint click of nails against keyboard. It could just be in his mind, a silent metronome that makes him move his toes to the non-existent rhythm of the
"OK, seems they called him ‘Lot’ and he had trouble sorting his documents to get treatment at a place called the Rushfordshire Clinic. Otherwise, there’s not much about him."

“How recent?”

“I only managed to extract what they said, couldn’t get time or date. But it was in one of the last conversations Sophia had.”

Disconnecting the call after a short goodbye, Sherlock stares out of the window for a brief moment, fighting the faint nausea that’s begun to set in his stomach.

(Lack of food? Withdrawal symptoms, still? The Oxazepam? Anxiety? Either way, it’s irrelevant in this now. Case. Focus.)

While the taxi keeps making its way through the shopping centres and grocery markets on the outskirts of London, Sherlock uses his phone to find the information he needs and then leans forward, a hand on the seat-back in front to steady himself. He is not sure he’s up for this, but it’s not about him - it's about the case.

(It's about John.)

“Change of plans: we’re going to the Rushfordshire Clinic instead,” Sherlock almost shouts to the driver over the humming of the traffic.

As he sits back, his gaze flickers over John, who is watching him.

There’s a hint of uncertainty - of protest - in John's features, but it dies away as John takes in the intent and the excitement in Sherlock's eyes.

The game is - finally - on.

§

“Shit!”

John's whisper is almost drowned out by the echo of the broom that fell against the concrete floor, the sound of it breaking the silence like a gunshot.

They both freeze for a second, John already halfway out of the cellar window, then he hastily resumes crawling, assisted by Sherlock.

50 seconds later, Sherlock is on his hands and knees in the wet grass outside the window and John is assessing the best way to escape unnoticed, deciding on the same way they came here; through the bushes and trees by the fence a bit further away from the main building. Sherlock gets to his feet and they hurry to the shield offered by the greenery, hunched over and out of breath.

“Seriously; you knocked something over?”

John's voice is half amusement, half frustration. His colours, on the other hand, are both intense and deep. The blend is so familiar, yet has been so rare lately, and something about those colours being
back makes Sherlock feel more like he’s solved a hundred-year-old mystery than like he’s broken into a rehab facility in order to talk to a possible witness in a rather opaque case.

“If you spent more time working with me and less time at the clinic you wouldn't be so clearly out of the habit of climbing. It's hardly my fault you flailed and almost kicked me.”

“I was not flailing!” John hisses, and Sherlock is on his feet once more, running towards the fence. He can hear the curses behind him as John gets up to follow.

As they manage to climb back over the fence and are once more surrounded by the deep, unlit woods with just the faint light from the cloud-covered moon to guide them, they're both grinning, if not acknowledging it.

The rapid breathing, the lactic acid in their legs and the adrenaline surging in their blood. It's addictive, and they've been without it for far too long.

They pass the sign to the rehab facility, and this isn't the first time that Sherlock's left such facilities without using the exit, but he shakes those images out of his head - he's recreated himself since then, there's nothing but the practical knowledge on how to escape unseen that he needs to recall now - as he fumbles for his phone, briefly turning on the flashlight to illuminate the narrow road before putting the phone away, saving the battery.

“So, does this mean that there's a whole criminal network for finding the people that Sophia’s network has helped finding new lives for?”

“Essentially,” Sherlock says, his focus directed at puzzling all the pieces of information together in his mind.

“Lot”, as it turns out, is a twenty-two-year old woman named Tina who has almost completed her rehabilitation programme at Rushfordshire Clinic. She started drinking at age twelve, and by the age of seventeen she’d developed an addiction to several street drugs, the file in clinic’s office had supplied. After the initial hassle of her being terrified by the two strange men who woke her up in the middle of the night, she was eventually convinced - mostly thanks to John's patient explanations, Sherlock admits - that they were not out to reveal her former identity to anyone else.

The information they'd managed to get out of her was sparse due to her habit of not revealing anything about herself ever since she’d managed to get a new life, but Sherlock's suspicions had been confirmed. There was a group - a network - that seemed to specialise in finding people who fled from certain organised crime syndicates. As far as Sherlock had been able to tell, Tina hadn't been involved in any of the activities of a particular crime syndicate herself, but had had the misfortune of having been involved with one of the younger members. The now-healed fracture of her nose and the slight deformation of several of the fingers on her right hand, as well as a hypervigilance that seemed to be more than the usual withdrawal paranoia, told Sherlock all he needed to know about the reasons she fled. Tina did not, however, confirm Sophia's involvement, nor supply any more information on the network she'd been part of. Still, it was enough to go on for now.

“We're almost at the village,” John says, interrupting Sherlock's sorting of the new facts. “Now would be an excellent time to call a cab, don't you think? I would prefer to get home before my shift starts in… oh, four hours.”

John's sour voice makes Sherlock check his phone.

3.44 am
They are close enough to the village to call for a cab now. Picking up passengers from outside a
rehab clinic in the middle of the night is something that the cabby is sure to remember, and therefore
an unnecessary risk.

As Sherlock makes the call, it strikes him that he hasn't felt any compulsions for the entire duration of
their break-in.

Brainwork and danger are, not surprisingly, decidedly better when it comes to managing certain
symptoms of his deficiencies than the Oxazepam ever was.

John rubs his gloved hands together, moving around on the spot beside Sherlock, the wetness of the
grass they'd crawled in, together with the chilly night air, most likely making him cold to the bone at
this point. The muttering is getting increasingly rude as the minutes tick on, and some of John's more
inventive coinages make Sherlock quirk his lips when John isn't looking.

When the cab finally arrives, the cabby takes one look at them before he turns up the heat as far as it
goes.

*His last experiment was inconclusive in determining whether physical or emotional proximity were
more effective in terms of pair bonding. Now, at almost five in the morning, once more in their
hallway, Sherlock thinks that he might be closer to a reliable hypothesis.

Taking the stairs two at a time, the boundaries of Sherlock’s sphere and John’s are markedly blurred.
John’s colours bleed onto Sherlock from where he walks one step ahead, and Sherlock wonders if
it’s possible to see it - see the reflection of John’s colors on Sherlock’s own skin.

(It goes to prove just how tired this all has made him - attempting to apply logic to something that has
always defied it. He needs to stick to the palpable things - pulse, breathing, the lactic acid in his
thighs.)

“I can’t fucking believe that I need to be at the clinic in two and a half hours,” John says and drags a
hand over his face as they reach the landing, and Sherlock fumbles with the keys, hands still a bit
stiff from the cold. John mumbles something about warming up in the shower and Sherlock
swallows.

(Arousal - inconvenient. Pressure - rising.)

“Indian leftovers?” Sherlock hears himself asking before John heads to the upstairs bedroom for his
things.

“When did we last eat-- Never mind. Just bin it. I think there are some pizzas in the freezer. I'll have
the ham, thank you.”

With that, John is off and Sherlock's fingers rake through his still cold curls, the sensation of ringlets
flowing between his fingers and the steady tap of his still shod foot against the carpet helping him
gather his thoughts enough to make a decision.

(Attempting research now would only result in failure, because his mind is overflowing with too-
much and too-intrusive, and he might as well eat, might as well keep John company and help him
stay awake. It will be easier once John leaves for the clinic. It must be. No one to hold himself together for, on one--)

“You do know why it says on the box not to microwave these, don’t you?”

Sherlock ignores John’s words, hearing only the familiar sound of his voice taking on the tone that means that he wants to be annoyed, but can’t be bothered.

Several edges from John’s pizza - stiff from the microwave - land on Sherlock’s plate.

The sound of John’s fork against the ceramic of the plate makes Sherlock cringe, and Sherlock gets up from the sofa, using the movement to conceal his expression and the tapping of his hand against his leg.

(Some sounds need to be swatted away, like persistent mosquitos.)

Sherlock looks at his violin, but before he even begins to move towards it, John interrupts him and tells him that if he is to have any chance of remaining awake for the next hour and a half then Sherlock better bloody not play his violin. Instead, Sherlock settles for making a fire while John turns the telly on, searching through the channels.

“You don’t have to stay awake with me, you know,” John says from the sofa, apparently recognising Sherlock’s restlessness for what it is - a tell-tale sign of his need to sleep. “Even if it is your fault that I’m awake at this hour.”

“You didn’t object at the time.”

“I never do, do I?” John sighs, but there’s something more beneath those words.

Sherlock rises from his place in front of the fire, satisfied with the way the logs are slowly beginning to catch alight. The room is aglow, the flames from the fire painting it in warm oranges and reds the way the heat of the shower painted Sherlock’s own skin in different shades of pink earlier that night.

John is absentmindedly rubbing the side of his neck, which is one of his tell-tale signs. His shoulder is bothering him. The cold, of course. His neck will be stiff from the way John compensates in his movements as soon as his shoulder is acting up.

(A strange duality; when it comes to the physical manifestations of John's suffering Sherlock finds that he’s often both the cause and the cure.)

“Sit closer to the fire,” Sherlock says over his shoulder, leaving the room to change into his pyjamas - the cold seems to have settled into the fabric of his suit, and he needs to feel warm again.

When Sherlock reenters the sitting room, the telly is turned off and John has positioned himself on the floor in front of the hearth, socks peeled off and feet out in front of him.

“Can you bring my glass?”

Sherlock hands John the half-empty glass of water that he’d left by the sofa before settling down next to him by the fire. John nods his thanks.
“Will Tina be safe at the clinic?”

John’s question breaks the silence after a few minutes.

“Most likely.”

“We found her.”

“We had access to information that whoever is looking for her doesn’t have. If they did, she wouldn’t still have been at Rushfordshire.”

“Do you think that Sophia gave up her life to protect her?”

“She probably thought she did. Though I doubt that Sophia is dead.”

“Still. She left everything she knew behind.”

John’s voice sounds thoughtful at this.

“Yes.”

John adds another log to the fire, and Sherlock adjusts his position on the floor - his back is getting stiff and even through the carpet, the floor is too hard for his oddly sore muscles.

Then, without any prelude, Sherlock feels John almost close enough to touch, and then the light from the fire is obscured by John leaning in in front of him. It’s a struggle not to flinch at the suddenness of it, and it’s not right that he misses the intention and the movement, but John is leaning closer, making Sherlock instinctively move backwards.

It ends with Sherlock leaning back on his elbows, and John, looming over him, his breath ghosting over Sherlock’s lips.

(The colors from the fire are so close to the colors that John radiates that for a minute, Sherlock almost believes that his wires have been uncrossed, and it’s a beautiful thought.)

“You don’t ever get to do that.”

John’s voice is a whisper over Sherlock’s skin, and as the meaning of John’s words register in his mind, Sherlock frowns.

“What makes you think that I would?”

“Because you believe in things the way Sophia did. Like I did.”

Oh.

“And you think that you could just physically stop me, just like this, if I was thinking about it?”

Once again, the words escape before Sherlock has a chance to filter them. The deadpan inquiry seems strangely out of place given their positions and the way his blood rushes through his body.

“No.”

Sherlock never gets any further explanation, but he does get John’s fringe against his forehead, and John’s breath against his lips. Then there’s lips brushing lips, and it’s too light, almost ticklish, so Sherlock leans up into the kiss, deepening it.
After a few minutes, John’s arm can’t support him any longer, and Sherlock ends up flat against the carpet with John half on top of him, hands roaming his hair and Sherlock’s own hands on John’s back, pressing John’s upper body against his own chest. It’s grounding, the way John’s weight is holding him down and the way he can feel his own body through the dual pressure of the floor and his friend. It’s grounding, and it’s a counterweight to the feeling of fleetingness that somehow emerged with John’s words, words that Sherlock does not know how to interpret.

(It doesn’t matter.)

The carpet needs vacuuming, and Sherlock needs to find release, and first things first, Sherlock thinks, but is interrupted as John pulls away, breathing against his throat.

Sherlock leans his head to the side, exposing more of his neck to John, but John doesn’t take the hint. Instead, he stretches and groans a bit as he lifts himself off of Sherlock, pushing himself up to a sitting position.

John offers Sherlock a hand, helping him up so that they’re both sitting, almost facing one another.

Sherlock draws his legs up just a bit, hiding an erection that is seemingly not going to be put to use.

“I’m crap at this, you know,” John says conversationally.

The heat and the lack of sleep - or the neurotransmitter response to sexual arousal - is slowing Sherlock’s brain. At first he decides that John is talking about the kissing, but then his cognition catches up and he thinks better of it.

(It would have been too simple if it had only been about the physical aspects.)

“You’ve managed before. Multiple times, I’ve been informed.”

“Sherlock, I’m not talking about s--”

“I know,” Sherlock cuts him off. “Neither am I.”

Sherlock won’t tell John that he has no idea about whether he himself is crap at this - whatever this is - because he’s never before been given a chance to experience it.

John is clearing his throat and adjusting his shirt, and Sherlock knows that while they are both crap at so many things - moderation, admitting weakness, accepting help and most of all: refusing a challenge - he’s yet to find any of that to be an actual disadvantage when it comes to the two of them.

John is offering a sheepish half-smile - a nervous response to tension - and Sherlock finds that he ought to offer John something in return.

“Carpet needs vacuuming,” Sherlock points out, brushing away crumbs that have stuck to his bare arms, getting to his feet and making his way over to his chair.

John takes that for what it is - an unspoken suggestion of saving his shoulder from the hard floor - and follows to his own chair.

“What’s our next move, then? For the case, I mean.”

Sherlock looks at the fire - suddenly far too bright, hurting his eyes - and then at John, seeing how John’s eyes are fully focused on him and how the change of subject and seating seems to make John more relaxed.
Sherlock begins outlining his thoughts on the case, interrupted only by John’s questions and reflections, until John needs to prepare for work, and Sherlock finds his laptop under his chair, proceeding to do his research.

As John leaves, Sherlock is already deeply focused on the new lead that he’s following, and being able to focus once again, to be absorbed into the data and the puzzle the way he’d taken for granted up until a few weeks ago is such a relief that Sherlock doesn’t mind the sound of the door closing behind John, or the sound of his steps as he descends down the stairs.

Mind over matter, cognition over faulty neurochemistry.

(It wasn’t so hard, after all.)

* *

It’s two hours later when Sherlock finally finds the last link he needs in order to track down Sophia. Stretching his body, he puts the kettle on before returning to his laptop, getting ready to do the tedious work of putting together the information that will lead him to her. The kettle boils, and Sherlock looks at the grey London landscape outside the window as the tea steeps in his mug, trying to determine from which end he should start sorting the information. Without thinking about it, he arranges the test tubes on the windowsill by age, putting them in a neat row.

(There’s no pressure, no vibrations, only this; the full and intense focus on the pattern that’s taking form on the screen in front of him as he works with both his hands and his mind, untangling and sorting through the data.)

His fingers are interrupted in their sorting of glassware by a knock on the door. Sherlock hasn’t heard anyone on the stairs, but then he’s been halfway into his mind palace, examining the vast amount of information absorbed from his laptop.

The interruption couldn’t have come at a more inconvenient time.

“What?” Sherlock snaps out almost before he’s got the door fully open to reveal his brother, standing outside the door to 221B with a bland expression.

“If it weren’t so obvious that you didn’t get as far as the bed last night, I would have suggested that you must have woken up on the wrong side of it this morning, Sherlock,” Mycroft says smugly after a quick glance at his brother.

(Sherlock’s always hated that idiom, because for most people, it makes no sense. To him, however, it does. There is a Right and a Wrong side of everything.)

Sherlock refuses to acknowledge that he’s caught Mycroft’s double - triple? - meaning, and just turns and walks back into the kitchen, where his tea is waiting, now lukewarm.

“Breaking into a rehab facility? Really, Sherlock? As I remember it, it used to be the other way around.”

“I was right.”

Sherlock wishes that he was fully dressed instead of standing there barefoot in his pyjamas. Mycroft
will doubtlessly notice even the slightest twitch of his toes. Sherlock takes his mug and goes to stand by the window, not willing to offer Mycroft the clues that his face will undoubtedly give away as the pressure rises.

“Ah, yes. Your little case. You've been making progress.”

Mycroft inspects one of the kitchen chairs - always the same one; the one overlooking the opening into the sitting room - before apparently deciding that it's clean enough for his pristine trousers.

“Anyway, this is not just a courtesy call.”

There's the sound of something being put on the table, and Sherlock doesn't have to turn around to know what it is.

It's a condescending gesture, but Sherlock does in fact need more benzodiazepines. Just a few more days. The withdrawal cannot last much longer now.

“I must say, your friend is certainly less predictable than most. Embarking on this kind of… entanglement. But then he never was one for self-preservation.”

It feels like pressure, but it's not the usual pressure. It's more of a heaviness. Mycroft, all evidence to the contrary, is one of the few people who has never considered Sherlock to be antisocial. Part of Sherlock hates this fact, because it was born out of his brother having seen him in far too many situations where he was… less controlled. And yet--

“Don't break your toys. I know it's not intentional, just like it wasn’t that time with the model railway… but you will always ignore the safety instructions.”

“Since you have such vast personal experience in the matter, I will certainly take your advice under consideration, brother.”

The sourness of Sherlock’s own voice made the tea taste overly sweet in comparison as he took as sip.

“One doesn’t have to have experienced every possible compromised state to know the signs.”

“I am not in a compromised state!”

Sherlock doesn't bother controlling his anger. There are so many more important things to keep under control.

“You do know why this is happening right now, don’t you, brother dear?”

Sherlock refuses to acknowledge his brother’s question; it won’t make a difference anyway.

“You received the tricyclic antidepressants as a treatment for an unfortunate imbalance in your neurochemistry. An imbalance that, need I remind you, made you see patterns that didn't exist and let sentiment rule your mind.”

“I doubt that the DSM would acknowledge “sentiment” as the root of our pathologies,” Sherlock retorts, because Mycroft should never be allowed to forget his own part in this.

“‘Our pathologies’, Sherlock? There's a difference between you and me in that regard. Certain obsessive tendencies can allow an individual to succeed in tasks that require a vast attention to detail, while others cause distortion of reality. Now, which of those models most closely fits you?”
There are several things Sherlock could say to that, but this is a minefield, because he is aware of the truth behind what is said. And Sherlock can bypass that fact just to argue with his brother, but there's a pressure building up, and there are some things Sherlock is not willing to do in front of Mycroft. One of those things is providing visible proof of just how much a slave to his compulsions Sherlock really is.

“Since you decided to upset the balance that you have benefited from for the past decade, you are now subjected to another unfortunate side-effect of serotonin imbalance. Another display of obsession, if you will.”

Mycroft delivers his speech in a matter-of-fact voice, and Sherlock has a vague recollection of something, a theory, that he can't quite grasp, but it still makes the blood drain from his face, his hands clasping at the tea cup, because on some level, he knows where this is going.

(It’s a pattern he should have recognised, a sign he should have seen.)

“It’s most commonly known as ‘infatuation’ and it’s dependent on serotonin levels falling low enough to allow the brain to become obsessed with the object of the infatuation. Isn’t it poetic, brother mine, that what people call ‘love’ manifests through a chemical imbalance that’s almost identical to that of obsessive-compulsive disorder?” Mycroft isn’t smiling, merely observing, but to Sherlock, it feels like his brother is ripping something away, tearing a hole in the floor beneath his feet and-- “In other words, you seem to have efficiently landed yourself in yet another pathological state of obsession.”

Things go very, very quiet.

Sherlock can hear the sound of his own heartbeat, but nothing else. It should feel like clarity, but it lacks every edge.

(It can’t be, it’s not the same thing--)

(--but it is, because chemistry doesn’t lie, it just manifests itself through different reactions and this is all it is and--)

He's been played the fool once more. By his own impaired mind. To think that he-- That he thought that this--

Sherlock wants to say something, to argue with his brother, rip apart Mycroft’s logic the way Mycroft ripped away the ground beneath Sherlock, but he has no words, and for once, he has no argument. It’s too shameful to voice, the fact that he missed this; a pattern that was clear in front of him. And if Sherlock has learnt one thing from the whole ordeal with the silver birds, that is never to speak up about the divergence of his mind or to admit to anything.

(Like Mycroft, they always said it was for the best, and that it was the only way they could help him, but what he got wasn’t help, it was pity and attempts to change him, to make him ‘pass as normal’, and Sherlock will never manage that - doesn’t want to manage that - and--)

And Mycroft looks thoughtful, fiddling with the handle of his umbrella, and Sherlock knows that his brother sees this for what it is.

Silver birds all over again, just a different shape and a different delusion.

For him, it turns out, love is nothing but yet another chemical defect.
There's an ache in his right hand, a distant pounding that grounds him.

(Better his right than his left - the left is for working the violin strings - so at least he’d had enough presence of mind to ensure that it was the right hand. The *Right* hand.)

A knock on the door, and Sherlock trades a couple of folded bills for five blister packs. There's a spite in that - *he won't just settle for what his brother deems fit to give him.*

“Will you be needing more?” the neutrally dressed woman outside his door asks and Sherlock shakes his head.

(One hundred pills ought to be enough for now.)

Cocaine, Sherlock thinks as he returns to the kitchen with the pills, would do wonders for his serotonin levels.

Considering the time he's wasted doing illogical things - a result of his current low levels of the neurotransmitter in question - lately, it only seems rational that he would make up for it by kick-starting his brain back into efficiency.

There's a case to solve, and fuck any and all thoughts on what objections his flatmate might have.

He will not allow himself to consider something (*someone*) that's already had far too much influence over him, skewing his perceptions in an unacceptable way.

And still. Still, here he is, neither snorting or injecting what he really *wants-craves-needs,* despite his newly found conviction about the logic behind such action. Instead, he settles for three of his recently purchased Alprazolam, swallowed down with cold tea and self-loathing, letting them mix with the barely contained feeling of impending disaster that has taken up permanent residence in his midriff.

It’s not John’s fault that Sherlock can’t tell reality from delusion.

Still, there will inevitably be more than a bit of collateral damage to John. It’s not Right, and the wrongness of it is creeping into Sherlock’s bones with a *vibrating-tingling-burning* sensation. Because even if causing John pain is not Right - can never be *Right* - allowing himself to entertain a delusion is worse.

Anyway, what good would it do John to be romantically involved with someone so impaired that he can’t tell reality from delusion? There’s nothing ‘amazing’ in that, and if Sherlock can’t be amazing then he’s nothing - worse than nothing; a psychologically crippled charity case.

(That is him, after all, but in seeing himself through John’s eyes and covering up some of the more prominent manifestations of his defective brain with medication, he’d begun to believe he could be more than that.)
Coming to one’s senses fucking hurts.

* 

When the world didn’t end, Sherlock didn't experience any relief.

The morning after the world didn't end, he found that it was hard to move his limbs. They felt heavy, as if filled with sand, and it took all his willpower to get himself out of bed and make his way through the day; the knot in his stomach, instead of dissolving, slowly turning into something more like a hole.

It was supposed to be over. However horrendous the ending, it was supposed to finally be over. Whatever happened, at least he wouldn't have to wonder any more. There'd be nothing left to fear.

And there was nothing left to fear.

Unfortunately, his nervous system wasn't susceptible to that information, and the dread he felt after the world didn't end had no end date, no solid core and it was inevitable that it would, sooner or later, find another outlet.

* 

John doesn’t challenge Sherlock’s stubborn silence when he returns home from work that evening. Instead, he does what he usually does under such circumstances - avoids any room Sherlock is presently occupying. It’s yet another pattern; John’s ability to adapt in order to handle what he sometimes calls Sherlock’s ‘viler sulks’.

It’s not a sulk, though. It isn’t anything, really, Sherlock thinks as he rips the sheets off his bed in order to rid the room of the smell that will otherwise keep evoking sensations that he can’t currently afford.

Even though what Mycroft had told him is just a hypothesis in the field of neuroscience - and a controversial one at that - there are patterns you can’t ignore. Whatever he might have felt - feels - about John, it started only after his brain was once again destabilised due to the decrease in serotonin. And caring - needing - has always been a disadvantage.

(He can no longer allow himself the indulgence of disadvantages or distractions, in any form.)

The only time John actually interacts with Sherlock that night is when John is traversing the short corridor to the bathroom. His steps falter before he reaches the room in question, and then there’s a shout - an anomaly, considering that John rarely raises his voice when he perceives that Sherlock’s in a ‘black mood’.

“Sherlock, what the fuck did you do to the bloody wall?”

*
“Shit, what have you--” John’s jaw does that slight shift, the muscles tensing up, and Sherlock knows what's coming. “You fucking idiot--”

Biting back the rest, John averts his gaze from Sherlock - or rather Sherlock’s right hand, which is objectively quite badly bruised and swollen by now - for a few seconds before apparently trusting himself to speak again.

The morning light floods through the windows and Sherlock wants to close the curtains, to cover his ears, but he does neither.

(It's hardly going to make anything Right anyway.)

“You need me to take a look at that hand. I don't care if you won't talk to me at the moment. Just let me look at it.”

John's voice is strained, holding back all the things he thinks will make Sherlock retreat.

Sherlock retreats anyway, because John doesn’t have to voice any of the questions or doubts for Sherlock to feel their impact, heavy and suffocating.

There's a loud bang; John's fist must have hit the side table. The beige, khaki and bright, pale green become almost nauseating even though Sherlock has his back to John.

At least John's colours are too diluted by the veil of Alprazolam to stick with Sherlock as he closes the door behind himself.

John's colors keep shifting during the next two days, as does his gait. He’s beginning to limp slightly, and trying to compensate for it.

Normally, John isn't that affected by Sherlock's ‘moods’, but now he’s also angry, but trying not to be. Anger, Helena used to say, is often a secondary response to sadness, fear or shame.

(What’s the secondary response to guilt, Sherlock wonders - he even considers asking her, but decides that the still-lingering ache in his hand and the metallic aftertaste of Zopiclone might be all the answer he needs.)

It seems like what they've started has a negative effect on John's ability to endure Sherlock's shifts, causing him to respond with shifts of his own.

As Sherlock leaves the bathroom, heading back to his room after having spent an unacceptable amount of time giving in to various compulsions without any achieving any palpable release, he knows that this is just further proof of what he now knows.

This would never have ended well, even if it hadn't started as a direct consequence of a chemical imbalance.

Opening his laptop once he’s returned safely to his room, Sherlock sees a notification about a message from Beta.
His mind shifts once again, but this time it's towards pure, focused triumph.

On the screen, a few short comments appear, along with Sophia’s current contact information. It only takes Sherlock a minute to compose an email to the address provided by Beta. In less than ten minutes, he receives a reply.

To delay any possible intervention from Mycroft, the single ticket for the morning train to Edinburgh is purchased with a credit card in the name of one Mr House.

Finally.

There’s a pattern to follow, and he can finally be sure that the pattern in question doesn’t just exist inside his own head. And so that night, Sherlock sleeps, because it gets worse if he doesn't, and that’s yet another thing he can’t afford that now.

The lack of sleep will only aggravate his symptoms, and he knows what it costs not to pay attention to such things.

(He’s not going to repeat that mistake.)

*  

On the train to Edinburgh, a toddler has a tantrum, each scream provoking a flood of tics and compulsions as well as physical pain and a pressure that never recedes. With shame burning in his face, Sherlock locks himself in the foul-smelling train lavatory, giving in to each and every impulse that can be done silently enough not to evoke suspicion.

In the end, there are more than five trips to the same disgusting lavatory, the tapping, mumbling, touching and counting slowly giving way to pinching, hitting and pulling. The knowledge that things have not been this bad for at least fifteen years - the cocaine withdrawal notwithstanding - does nothing to ease the pressure and the hate he feels for everything - the toddler, the creaky doors of the train compartment, John... but most of all he hates himself and his own brain.

Sherlock also hates Edinburgh before he even arrives.

*  

“Sophia.”

She’s waiting for him outside the library in the south of Edinburgh, but he doesn't recognise her from the photos on Facebook. Instead, it's a process of elimination. She's the only one remotely the right age and height currently on the street.

(It's appalling, having your senses so impaired by a few hours on a train that you can't even make elementary visual comparisons.)

She turns around, her face guarded and closed. Her hair is shorter now and it blows into her eyes in the strong wind as she frowns, moving slowly towards him. Suddenly, he almost regrets coming.
He doesn't want to be here, and she doesn't want him to be there. Being found once means she could be found again, with uncertain consequences. But for him, this is just another chance to prove he’s right, isn’t it?

“We’ll go somewhere more private. We can talk there,” she says, and she's a shadow of the old, constantly smiling Sophia in the pictures. Sherlock follows her through the almost empty streets of windswept Edinburgh, squinting to keep the drops of water from his eyes.

It's like fumbling through the dark, and he's sure to stumble any minute. He can feel it: the tingling in his palms and the sense of impending disaster in his gut.

(Even with a tolerance like his, the amount of benzodiazepines he's ingested since he woke up is making him feel a bit unsteady.)

All the colors are muted, the drugs taking the edge off most of what’s happening inside his brain; his obsessions, his perceptions, his coordination and also his ability to think. Sophia is a vague intimation of dark blue, pale yellow and ocher moving in front of him, and for a moment, he forgets what it was that he needed her to tell him.

“Do they know?” Sherlock asks.

They’re in a small room in the back of a church hall that has seen better days. On the floor, a bright blue rug is constantly catching his eye. Sophia sits opposite him on one of the overstuffed chairs that surround the scratched table. At her left, a box of crayons has been placed at a decidedly Not Right angle and threatens to fall off the table.

He does not move to adjust it, only notes that he can’t stop looking at it with growing unease as he awaits her answer.

“Yes,” she says, eyes flicking downwards for a second. “I know the risks, but I couldn’t do it any other way. Not allowing them to say goodbye would have been…”

Sophia had told her loved ones about what she was going to do - about disappearing so that another person would not be found. Now they have to live with the not knowing how long she will stay alive, alone, but at least they don’t have to search for her.

(If it had been he who-- would he have--)

“So how were you made aware of the threat against… ‘Lot’?”

What she tells him is mostly confirmation of what he’s already pieced together, and there’s a sudden thrill because he was right - he saw it - he connected the pieces and observed the pattern and drew the right conclusions and--

The criminal network had been searching for Lot, and Sophia’s loved ones were pawns to be used against her to make her tell them where Lot could be found. They had done this time and again, after working out who had helped their original target to escape and assume a new identity. Two of Sophia’s colleagues had already been forced to give up information or have their loved ones pay the price. Sophia, along with a few other activists, had chosen to disappear instead. She had given up
everything for the sake of a near-stranger who she had once decided to help without knowing what that would cost.

“Have you seen her?” Sophia asks, referring to Tina, the woman Sherlock had met days earlier and who was codenamed ‘Lot’.

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“First, tell me any information you have on who’s looking for her.”

Sophia hesitates, seemingly unsure whether Sherlock will answer her question once she’s given him what he wants, but then she sighs, picking at a thread at her scarf, and begins listing the information her own network of anonymous activists had gathered about the threat before she disappeared.

When she finishes, Sherlock nods.

“Now, tell me. Is she alright?” Sophia says, and for the first time since he’s met her, her eyes are steely and unrelenting instead of silently fearful.

* 

When Sherlock leaves the overheated church hall a while later, he’s at a loss for where to go. All he’d known, as he said goodbye to Sophia while his pulse was hammering in his head, was that he needed to get out, get away-- and that finally, he had all the attainable information. Hopefully it will be enough data to narrow down the potential suspects and single out those responsible for not only Sophia’s but almost a dozen other seemingly voluntary disappearances.

(Sitting in a church hall, surrounded by silent reminders of his own obsessional beliefs about Judgement Day and the eternal damnation of the world, had evoked a flood of old associations, compulsions and mental rituals. At moments, he’d found himself once again being eleven years old and incapable of doing anything to prevent--)

It's late, and going home - hours on the train with the cacophony of noises and lights picking away at his brain and then John and the reinforcement of his new resolution and... no - does not seem like an option. There's nothing to come home to. Just the reminders of his own--

According to his phone, there's a hotel not far away but the street address, 62, is all wrong in terms of acceptable numbers (sixes - 666 - the number of the beast, and six can be divided by three, which is a Right number, but it divides into two, which isn't. Two is also symmetry, and that is simply Not Right. 62 is not a good number, but if he takes the stairs in a way that will allow him to both start and finish with his left foot, and perhaps it's possible-).

Sherlock takes three pills, chewing them for faster release, and when he gets to the hotel (137 steps - Right) he manages to get room 19, and that's a neutral enough number.

The door closes behind him, and he’s finally left with nothing but himself and this room.

There’s light blue walls (hateful, cold, distanced), a wide bed and far too many mirrors on the walls.
(His own reflection, as seen out of the corner of his eye, shouldn't register as foreign, but it does, it often does, and it feels like he's being watched by someone, always observed and--)

He wants to be completely alone, finally unseen after a full day of being exposed to the eyes of others.

(He wants not to be at all, wants to stop this madness once and for all, because it won't ever get any better - he won't get any better-- he just wants this to stop so he can get some relief, a glimpse of peace--)

"And how can you be certain that death is peaceful?" Helena had said, raising her eyebrows, demanding an answer that a fourteen-year-old couldn't provide.

Sherlock still can't answer that, no one can, and he does not know if he still believes in the God he thought would end the world, but if he does, it's an involuntary belief. No one can save him, and he knows this now.

John would try, something tells him, but he pushes the thought aside because he should not occupy himself with thinking about what he can’t have.

He needs not to think like that. Needs to know what will stop it. Needs to think about anything but--

(unsent message:) Does Clomipramine prevent patients from falling in love? SH

Tucking his phone back into his pocket, Sherlock considers his options. In addition to all the rest, he’s feeling a sudden urge for a whole other kind of release.

(Needs not to think--)

He almost laughs, sardonically, because he can’t quite believe that this is the moment his body chooses to remind him of his resurrected libido. It’s been… persistent, to say the least, ever since the first week without Clomipramine. It’s ironic, perhaps, that he will now no longer have anyone to share this side-effect with.

(But he knows sex now, knows what it feels like to do that with someone other than himself, and he could still have that, because sex and love are two separate things, and it’s just biology, and there have been offers before, offers from people who wanted him and wanted to do things to him and he’d always ignored them, but now--)

Now he's thirty-two years old and he has urges and people - even normal people - do this, but he's also twelve years old and unable to cry over the fact that in a few days time, everything will be over, and he won't miss anyone, because he won't be alive to miss anything. He's both, and he's neither.

(Always in-between, never clearly defined or easily categorised. Incomplete, in every sense.)

In the mirror above the desk, he can see a face, and he knows abstractly that it could be considered attractive. He’s anonymous here in Edinburgh; he could go out and get himself laid and it would pass the time and it would ease at least one pressure.

As he starts rummaging frantically through his bag for a clean shirt and wondering if there’s a point in taking a shower beforehand (he’s gonna get dirty-soiled-filthy anyway, that’s the whole idea and--), there’s a vibration in his pocket.

On the screen of his phone, John’s name appears next to a text.
Where are you?

There’s no simple answer to that carefully neutral question, but his heart races as he realises that wherever he was thinking of going, he doesn’t have the right to go there.

*Not yet.* Not until he’s made things clear and - John does not know yet that what they had is no more, and there are things you don’t do. Sherlock does knows some Rights and some wrongs - and cheating on someone is one of those wrongs.

Any arousal that had tingled in his body mere moments ago is now gone, leaving him with nothing but a half-hard penis and a sense of missing too much data, of not getting the full picture, not getting enough distance and too many thoughts to see clearly and--

(sent message) **Does Clomipramine prevent patients from falling in love? SH**

He doesn’t get an immediate answer, and while he’s packed what he thought was enough pills in his bag, he’s already taken too many, but he needs to sleep, needs desperately to sleep so that he will not think, and right now he doesn’t care about the consequences of any action that cannot even theoretically hurt anyone but himself and so he grabs his coat and leaves all the mirrors behind to find something that will stop him from reflecting.

He’s halfway to the place one of his contacts recommended when he gets Helena’s answer.

‘Being used as a contraceptive against infatuation’ is not listed as one of its indications if that’s what you’re asking.

Another text arrives a few seconds later.

**And no, it's not listed as a side-effect either. Although there is some empirical data suggesting that antidepressants might have a slightly detrimental effect on the initial ability to reach the levels of infatuation needed to provoke a person to act, and this might prevent matters developing to the point of ‘falling in love’. One might also add that the sexual side-effects of antidepressants could make the idea of romantic entanglement seem a bit… flaccid.**

Sherlock could tell her that she really hasn’t answered his question, and that she can stick her superiority and her patronising insinuations where the sun doesn’t shine, but he doesn’t, because he can’t really come up with anything that sounds any less childish than his initial question.

**In Edinburgh. SH** he types out and quickly sends to John, before he has time to change his mind.

(He doesn’t have to be childish about that too. It’s not John’s fault, it’s not John’s fault, it’s not--)

Shame is still burning in his face when he reaches the bar and asks for the name he’s been given by his contact.

*
“Three hundred? That’s just absurd,” Sherlock says, eyeing the woman who’s supposed to hand him what he wants.

He had a few whiskeys in the dingy little bar before asking the bartender for ‘Emilia’. Drinking them in quick succession, he tried not to feel the others’ eyes on him. He doesn’t belong here, and he’s just as aware of it as the others are. Their loudness was been in stark contrast to his own silence, but inside his head, there’d been enough static and haze to drown out everything else.

“You’re a fucking rich white dude. You don’t get to complain,” the dealer says, lifting her eyebrows and nodding in the direction of the people walking down the alley, none of whom fit her description of him.

She has a point, so Sherlock keeps his mouth shut, or maybe he keeps his mouth shut because he can’t really be bothered to form any coherent sentences at the moment.

(And he is rich, comparatively, and he's white and he’s male, but he wants to tell this woman that he's more than that. A freak. Neuroatypical. Gay. Addicted. Mentally ill. Defective. These are things you can hide more or less successfully when you're a rich, white male, but they're still things that define his every waking minute some days.)

(Most days.)

Pills. Alcohol. And it keeps getting worse.

In the end, he leaves with half of what he’d intended to buy, but somewhere in the side streets on his way back to the hotel, he realises that he will never use what he’s just purchased.

Once again being an active addict, on top of everything else, would be the tipping point.

He can’t bring himself to throw the little bag away, but when he falls asleep it’s still lying unopened among empty blister packs and half-full pill bottles in the side compartment of his bag.

Sleep is the respite he’s after, and anything beyond that is a luxury he cannot allow and does not deserve.

* *

The morning train back to London is, thankfully, not as loud and infuriating as the one to Edinburgh was.

His brain still muddled by last night’s combination of alcohol and sleeping pills, Sherlock finds himself feeling almost too terrible to take anything in.

His thoughts are muddled, his head is pounding and he has a queasy feeling that’s exaggerated by every shift of the train. Things are blurry for a while, but after an hour, he manages to collect himself a bit as the effect of what he’s taken continues to wear off.

He needs to go back home, needs to finish this case, needs to make John understand that what they did was a mistake but they can go back to what they used to be. John doesn’t have to leave, and it
will work, it has to work, because--

**How fast will an obsession fade once you stop acting on it? SH**

**Depends on how much and for how long you've already been feeding it, and the level of emotional arousal it still provokes, as you are well aware. Now, what did you really want to ask?**

Of course. She might not be as bright as he is, but Helena never did fail to take his intellect and memory into account when dealing with him. She knows that he will have remember everything she’d taught him, and what had he really wanted to--

Sherlock will not ask her his actual question. It’s something he’ll need to figure out for himself, he realises when he can’t even make himself write the words.

*(Will it ever get better?)*

Instead, he goes online and starts to put the information Sophia gave him to use.

(He wasted time, last night, time he could have spent working, not struggling pathetically against his own urges - and now that’s yet another fine pattern, isn’t it?)

It only takes half an hour to gather everything he needs to find the people he’s been looking for ever since he realised that the cases were linked.

Three men, connected through a criminal organisation that mostly focuses on medium-scale smuggling. A few inquiries among his own contacts leaves Sherlock with an address where they’ve been known to meet.

There are two hours left before the train gets back to London.

Then the game will be on, and after that he’ll have to take it from there.

#*

The first thing Sherlock notices as he exits the cab is that 221’s door knocker is no longer hanging asymmetrically.

**Mycroft.**

Shutting the door carefully behind him, Sherlock moves silently up the stairs, hoping against hope that his brother's unannounced visit is already over, but as he reaches the thirteenth step (a left footstep), he hears the unmistakable sound of John's barely restrained anger.

The actual words are almost impossible to make out - John's voice when he's tense is a low, steady threat that doesn't travel well through doors or walls. Still, Sherlock manages to understand a little.

*Coulnd't. Of course. You let--*

Then Mycroft’s voice, his words far easier to distinguish.

“*You know I wouldn’t be here right now if I thought my brother would resort to drugs in order to*
punish either of us. The only thing that could push Sherlock back to his old habits is himself, I assure you.”

John seems to say something like “hardly reassuring”.

“Contrary to popular belief, Sherlock does not lack feelings, but he does lack understanding of them. Popular psychology will tell you what a brain like his does with feelings it cannot comprehend.”

Tapping, feeling the vibrations underneath his skin and wanting to do more than tap - wanting to slam-fist-hit - and Sherlock pinches the skin on his left thigh through the thin wool until there are enough endorphins in his blood to make the vibrations bearable.

(He cannot have John like that, but he doesn’t want to purge his life of John, and what Mycroft’s implying, what John might pick up from the obvious hints from his brother-- it would--)

John’s words are now completely inaudible, a sure sign that he’s either feeling deflated or is even more dangerously close to harming someone.

“You’re a doctor, and you knew Sherlock was not conventionally sane when you moved in here.”

More muffled sounds from John, and judging by the slight tapping of what must be the tip of an umbrella against the floor, Mycroft is getting restless.

“I told him nothing he couldn’t have worked out for himself if he weren’t too, let us say, preoccupied. The realisation would have come to him at some point, but it seemed better to force the issue than idle around waiting for disaster. Don’t worry, John, Sherlock is rarely able to stay away from anything he finds intriguing for more than a short amount of time. And I believe that’s all I have to say on the subject, so if you’ll excuse me…”

There are more words, but they’re spoken in such a way as to make them indistinguishable. Sherlock backs away, hiding himself further along the hallway before Mycroft opens the door to go down the stairs.

(Mycroft thinks - expects - that Sherlock will return to John, despite of what he now knows. Like it didn’t matter that it’s all just a chemical delusion.)

* 

A text arrives a minute after Mycroft has left 221 and Sherlock is still standing - hiding - in the alcove, waiting for time to pass by before he returns to the flat.

**Mummy never did manage to teach you not to eavesdrop. MH**

**Says he who uses CCTV for his own amusement. SH**

**You might have discovered some new features in your Doctor Watson, but whatever conclusions this leads to don’t forget he is useful to your work. MH**

Sherlock waits for another twenty minutes before entering the flat.
The tension hits him instantly.

(“You don’t pick up on these things, these normal, human things, do you?” John had once said, rubbing at his own face in frustration.)

Sherlock could still back out. There's still time to turn around and avoid this.

In fact, he does in fact pick up on those human things, his brain almost merclessly detecting every shift in the atmosphere between people; all the tensions and moods, and all those confusing energies.

(Telling John about this would likely lead to John expecting him to correctly interpret what he's picking up, and that would be unfortunate, because while observing is one thing, understanding is another entirely. And so he ignores his own observations, in this one case.)

Sherlock's not sure what exactly he’s avoiding. It’s a nebulous, ghost-like presence, seeping under doors and through--

As he steps into the flat he doesn’t bother to shrug off his coat, because he’s not staying.

“Sherlock?”

John's voice, followed by a stream of pale colors as John appears in the doorway by the kitchen, his shoulder stiff and his face cold. The bags under his eyes are more prominent, and the way his mouth tics at the corner tells Sherlock that he’s in pain, but not taking anything for it.

(They’re both using pain as a distraction, it would seem, but in opposite ways. John’s mind supplies him with endogenic pain whenever something stirs up his PTSD, while Sherlock’s supplies him with the impulse to create external pain, anything to distract from what’s happening inside.)

This is all Sherlock’s work. He’s managed to trigger something in John that shooting people or being in mortal danger don’t touch.

“I hope you enjoyed your little trip,” John snaps, taking in all of Sherlock before his eyes widen, then narrow. “Are you high?”

“Oh, come on, it’s nothing that’s not legally provided to the psychologically impaired,” Sherlock snarls, regretting his words even before they’re out.

“It’s generally not legally provided in the doses you must be taking. Do you have any idea what kind of--”

“Yes!”

Sherlock’s shout echoes around the room. John momentarily is frozen to the spot.

Then John slowly shakes his head, turning to walk towards the stairs and his own room without another look at Sherlock.

“ Fucking coward,” Sherlock hears him mutter.

Nothing to argue with in that.
When John returns to the living room an hour later, Sherlock’s managed to get himself under a modicum of control, and John seems to be just as set on avoiding further confrontation as he is, so Sherlock gets up from his chair to collect his coat.

“Get your gun; we’re going to find a Mr Evans, a Mr Coleridge and a Mr Larson,” Sherlock informs, pointedly not looking at John as he drops the overnight bag he’d left by the door onto the sofa. Remembering exactly what is in the side compartment of that bag, Sherlock instantly grabs it again, heading towards his room.

“Yeah? And who are they?” John says - voice clipped and colors cold-distant-weak.

“They're who we've been looking for.”

John nods, his chin tilted upwards, and Sherlock knows what that expression means, because he does pick up on these things, even if he can’t always decipher them correctly.

This is what determination looks like in a man who is used to putting his own feelings and reactions aside when the situation demands.

It’s so painfully perfect (he's so painfully perfect), so much more than Sherlock could have thought anyone capable of, and it hurts. Sherlock swallows hard when John heads back towards his own room to retrieve the gun.

(John’s finger on the trigger, his stance practised and his hand perfectly steady. He’s lethal, focused, amazing-- and at the same time broken.)

“Don’t break your toys, Sherlock,” Mycroft’s voice echoes, and Sherlock swats it away before John returns.

“Alright,” John says. His voice entirely lacks the concealed excitement that would usually be present when they’re on their way out and his gun is tucked into the waistband of his trousers, but he’s not refusing.

(He never did, did he?)

* *

When the taxi drops them off outside the seemingly abandoned building, covered with scaffolding, John finally speaks again.

“So what’s the plan, then?”

After Sherlock tells him, John’s face goes from dogged to focused, his colours shifting along with his expression, becoming less grey-pale-khaki and more intense-clear-saturated. It’s exhilarating,
suddenly, to be able to do this to John, to be able to transform something in this man simply by giving him what he needs - danger-purpose-goal.

For a moment, the thought of what he might have completely fucked up by initiating what he’s now about to end hits Sherlock with full force, making him feel like he’s choking.

“Let’s go, then,” John says, tipping his head to the side, and starts towards the back door of the building.

*Focus.* Sherlock needs to focus, but he can hardly think for the mental image that suddenly flashes through his head.

*John, his hand steady as he finishes what he’d been planning to do before he met Sherlock: shooting his own brains out, leaving only a crater where his thoughts-life-smile-pain used to be.*

It’s there, then it’s gone, but the feeling isn’t, and Sherlock can’t think about that right now, can’t have that--

(This is what a chemical defect feels like. Sherlock knows that better than most, so he won’t ever call it ‘love’ again. Things should be called by their real name, and so this is what it is; a chemical defect.)

Tapping his fingers briefly, Sherlock feels the adrenaline of their situation and the cortisol of his mental images mix with flaring rage over what’s taking place inside his own head - his stupid, defective, distorted--

(If this had actually been what was called ‘love’ and not merely a manifestation of mental illness, he’d still want nothing to do with it. It is clearly not compatible with effectiveness, rational thought or even reasonable priorities in a situation where he needs every ounce of focus to make sure they make it out alive.)

A breath, then he’s following right behind John, catching up with him the moment he gets the door open.

From this moment on, he will not let anything distract him from the task at hand.

*

The building seems abandoned, but they move around quietly, checking for signs of life. Once the location is secure they start to search the few drawers and desks scattered around almost randomly in the otherwise empty rooms.

In the third drawer of a filing cabinet, Sherlock finds a stack of paper that must have been there for at least ten years, but underneath the papers, he glimpses something--

“Sherlock!”

John is whispering, eagerly, from the doorway of the old office.

There’s a moment of distortion, because along with John comes a whole range of colours and a pressure and--
Lifting the pile of papers, Sherlock can see that he was right. A piece of plastic in two different shades of grey, as big as a lighter is hidden underneath.

Yes.

A flash drive. Finally, something that might--

“Someone’s been here recently. Found yesterday’s paper over in the kitchen,” mutters John.

“Good, let’s hope they come back soon. We need to have a chat with them,” Sherlock replies absently, pocketing the flash drive and moving on to the fourth and final drawer.

John makes a sound that’s halfway between agreement and exasperation. Sherlock’s not sure whether it’s the situation or him that’s got John worked up this time, but it doesn’t matter, because John’s feelings are of no importance in this situation, and yet--

(He used to be able to think more clearly when John was there, but that was before the Rubik’s cube and the withdrawal and lips-hands-intent--)

It’s exhausting, retaining his focus as he flips through the papers in the final drawer, listening out for the sound of anyone approaching, trying to block out the images that are now constantly flooding his mind’s eye, not focusing on John-John-John-- and this is obsession, but he needs to hold it together, he needs to keep the obsessions apart, because if he doesn’t--

He hears his footsteps moving into the next room, and suddenly there are no colours left to distract him, and for some reason it feels like a loss. It shouldn’t be like this, because Sherlock knows it’s just in his head, knows that he can defeat this and what do these papers even mean, he can’t focus and--

He slams the drawer shut, resentment and anger flooding his system. There are no compulsions now, only fury over this empty house and pointless papers and countless distractions thrown up by his fucking useless impaired mind.

Clenching his fist, Sherlock turns and starts to feel under a nearby tabletop for anything that might be attached there.

Empty.

(Everything always is, once you really look at it.)

He proceeds to the bathroom across the hall, opening the cabinet to see if there’s anything there.

It’s empty.

(Empty threats, empty promises, empty lives, empty--)

In the next room, a stack of cardboard boxes is partially hidden in an alcove. When Sherlock opens the first one, he can hear footsteps in the corridor as John comes back...

(Everything is empty, except his mind, which is never empty, always crowded and he never had a choice but now he’s making one and he’s--)

“Sherlock, there’s--”

John’s whispering, his voice urgent now.
It snaps the final thread of Sherlock’s focus.

“Yes! What now?”

He doesn’t realise that he’s shouting until the words echo around the almost-empty room, and for a moment, everything is very quiet.

Then, it all goes pear-shaped.

From the floor below, clearly now: footsteps. Several pairs of them.

(How had he missed--)

John moves swiftly, getting inside the room while he motions for Sherlock to shift towards the window, and it takes Sherlock a second before he realises that John means he should get it open, to see if they can escape and--

The door flies open before Sherlock’s managed to unstick the latch on the warped old window. He hears a grunt and then the thud of a heavy body hitting the floor. He snaps his head around to see.

For a second, it’s John lying there on the floor.

No. John is standing, his gun aimed not at the man lying on the floor, but at another, who’s holding a stiletto knife whilst the man on the floor is reaching behind himself to--

“Don’t,” John says, his voice all steel, and the man on the floor loses track of what he was doing for less than a second, but that’s all John needs. Then man is once again whimpering in pain and curling in on himself, and John’s ducking away from the knife that’s now coming at him, using his arm to fend off the attack.

Grabbing the chair next to him, Sherlock moves quickly towards the attacker, but before he gets close enough, he sees the glint of a gun in the hand of the man on the floor, and everything goes still.

John is aiming at the knife man, and the man on the floor is aiming unsteadily at John.

It only takes one look from the armed man for Sherlock to lower the chair and put his hands up.

John’s hand doesn’t waver, his focus absolute as he continues to aim at the man who has now backed a few feet away from him. The other man starts to work his way up to his feet while his gun remains pointed at John’s chest.

Sherlock kicks over the chair. The crash causes the man to look up and away from John - and half a second later his gun is on the floor and John is kicking far out of reach.

With his own gun now aimed at both opponents, John nods at them to get closer together, forcing them into a corner.

“Sherlock, would you mind contacting Lestrade? I have somebody here I would like him to meet.”

*!

When they get into a taxi two hours later, Sherlock’s pulse is hammering away, nausea washing over him in wave after wave.
He’s holding it together, aided by a brief visit to the bathroom at the Yard to pop two pills - not more, not when he needs to be precise and clear in presenting his evidence, but not less, because he cannot finally snap and--

Beside him, John is a blend of clear, strong colours - from the danger and the triumphant routine of giving a statement and listening to Sherlock’s deductions as he revealed to Lestrade, bit by bit, the details of the case - and the pale colours of rejection and frustration that had faded before, but now slowly return as they find themselves alone again.

(If Sherlock had only paid attention--)

“221 Baker Street,” John tells the driver, then settles for staring straight ahead, not sparing Sherlock a glance. 

Minutes ago, things were as they’d used to be. Sherlock, high on having been right, pointing out all the obvious patterns, John’s ‘that’s incredible’ and Lestrade’s ‘holy shit’ once again filling him with a sense of control, of being where he’s supposed to be. John’s limp had once again vanished and he was smiling as he rolled his eyes at Lestrade when he thought Sherlock was being a git.

Now Sherlock doesn’t even know what to do with his hands - don’t tap, don’t tap, don’t touch-- and he swallows, thoughts rushing through his head.

(John is a distraction, but his absence is an even greater distraction, and Sherlock might loathe it, but it doesn’t change the fact that--)

For a moment Sherlock feels an impulse and considers acting on it, eliminating the distance he’s so determinately created and maybe, that would be the Right thing - or more of a Right thing than this - and just--

He can’t allow himself to act on impulse. Not in this, not with John.

Sherlock - now more than ever - doubts his ability to calculate the meanings and patterns in these things, and a miscalculation now could put everything he values at risk.

So he does the only thing that might enable him to reach a conclusion before it’s too late: he reaches for his phone, and starts tapping out a message, trying to pretend that he’s only gathering data and certainly not doing anything so trite as accepting that in this, he might need to ask for help.

This time, he will have no choice but to accept the collateral damage to his dignity.

Chapter End Notes
Some psychiatric side-notes on this chapter:

**Synesthesia** - In this story, Sherlock is experiencing that his tendency to see people ‘radiate colours’ is increasing. The whole idea about ‘seeing colours’ in this story is based on the neurological condition known as synesthesia, which is defined as “a perceptual phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway.” (Wikipedia). One of the most frequent manifestations of this is seeing individual letters or numbers as if they are in a certain color (that is constant for whenever you see that number or letter). The variation of synesthesia that Sherlock experiences here is something I’ve never seen or heard described, but I then Sherlock could of course never do anything by the book, and I also found that it added to his other sensory experiences in this, as well as became his way of interpreting other people’s’ moods or at least his experiences of said people. The specific colours that people and moods are provoking in him are shamelessly based on what colours I relate to (not as experience visually as Sherlock does) different moods or people.

*A little anecdote;* the idea that Sherlock began experiencing an increase in his synesthesia after quitting the Clomipramine was not based on any clinical data or research when I wrote it in to the story over a year ago, but was merely something I put in because it felt like it made sense in order to show the shift of intensity in his perceptions, but recently I read about synesthesia in the (frankly fascinating) book “The Tell-Tale Brain”, and it was actually mentioned that some people experience a decrease or even complete lack of synesthetic manifestations when they start on antidepressants, suggesting that serotonin might in fact be involved in synaesthesia.

**“Just right OCD”** - Sherlock’s symptoms of OCD, as previously mentioned, not very easy to define from other, possibly co-morbid, conditions. It’s also hard to say what ‘subtype’ of OCD he has, but when writing this, I’ve based most of his symptoms on the “just right” sub-type. To accurately describe what this could entail, I’ll use some facts from a rather useful fact sheet (https://iocdf.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Just-right-OCD-Fact-Sheet.pdf):

“Just right” OCD symptoms involve more of a sense of “incompleteness” rather than the need to “avoid harm” seen in more typical OCD symptoms. “Just right” symptoms are more likely to be experienced as discomfort or tension rather than anxiety.

Over 50% of those with OCD experience “just right” obsessions or compulsions. Those with “just right” OCD symptoms are likely to have:

- perfectionism (e.g., concern over mistakes)
- counting rituals
- ‘obsessional slowness’ (i.e., loss of time due to obsessional ‘loops’)
- repetitive behaviors
- a need for control/predictability
- checking behaviors
- ordering/arranging/symmetry behaviors/evening-up
- procrastination (i.e. “putting off” tasks)
- a sense that the mind does not rest (i.e. a mental ‘broken record’)
- trouble delegating tasks
• greater difficulty making decisions
• general inflexibility
• reassurance-seeking (i.e., comparing notes with others, to determine whether their sense of something being ‘off’ is valid)

Because ‘urges’ in “just right” OCD and tics feel similar, it can also be difficult to tell them apart. While “just right” obsessions are less evident than in other OCD subtypes, the urges tend to be more thought-based than tics. In other words, an individual with “just right” symptoms may say that something does not ‘feel right’ – and that he/she performs certain rituals to try and get rid of that feeling, whereas a person with tics would tend to show less voluntary control over his/her actions.”

**Medications mentioned in this chapter:**

*Alprazolam* - perhaps best known under its trade name Xanax, is “a potent, short-acting anxiolytic of the benzodiazepine class—a minor tranquilizer” (Wikipedia). It’s far more potent and also more addictive than Oxazepam, which Sherlock was given by Mycroft. Withdrawal symptoms are likely to occur are regular usage.

*Zopiclone* - a hypnotic drug (sleeping pill) with molecules very similar to that of benzodiazepines, but it’s not classified as such. In some countries (well, in Sweden at least…) it’s often counted as a benzo and treated as a narcotic, because of these similarities and the level of tolerance increase.
As the cab reaches Baker Street, Sherlock is almost certain that he's reached a conclusion.

The implications of the texts sent and received during the ride are causing shifts in his head, and now there's a pressing need to re-examine, reorganise and see if this conclusion does, in fact, fit with the things he knows to be true. He needs to review both memories and facts to see if the new data is compatible; if the theory covers all angles.

But first, as it seems, he will need to pay the cabbie, because John's already left the cab and is heading towards their front door.

Phone still in hand, Sherlock passes the woman in the driver's seat a few notes and walks slowly towards the door that has now closed behind John.

(He will need to fix this.)

Sherlock sends another text, leaning against the door and allowing the warmth on his cheeks to be cooled down by the brisk wind outside.

(He's thirty-two years old, and this is how little it takes to make him--)

To reevaluate all the data will take time. Unfortunately, he doesn't have that time right now.

He will need to act right away. Any more definitive actions will, of course, have to wait until he is absolutely sure about whether or not this is something that he will be capable of sticking to.

In this, he needs to be assertive.

(Being and feeling are two entirely separate things.)

Waiting for another reply, Sherlock reviews the text exchange from his journey.

**How can one be certain that one’s experiences aren’t just part of a delusion? SH**

**People with delusions rarely feel the need to question the truth of their beliefs.**

**I question everything. SH**
That’s why I thought it appropriate to give you a diagnosis that didn’t have ‘delusions’ listed in the criteria.

And yet you claimed that I had been delusional before I started seeing you. SH

From what you eventually told me about what happened back then, I would say that you were in fact delusional at that point. You were also eleven years old, which would in part account for your inability to question the probability of your beliefs. In addition, you never voiced those beliefs, so others had no chance to question their logic either. When I met you, you were doing the opposite. You doubted every single thought, fact, emotion and experience, which is pathologically obsessive, but psychologically it could be seen as the opposite of being delusional.

At this point in the conversation, Sherlock had found himself staring at the screen, feeling something lurch in his stomach. Could it be that--

Is it his feelings or your own that you find so improbable that you question your sanity?

It’s a strange experience, having your own methods used against you. He’d provided her with all the information needed to reach this conclusion, and yet it’s surprising in a way, because Sherlock’s not used to anyone except Mycroft actually managing to deduce anything meaningful about him.

He should have seen this coming. After all, Helena had been one of the first people in his life to recognise the underlying potential of the way he regarded the world and drew his conclusions. With hindsight, Sherlock could see that this was probably the reason she kept seeing him even after he was no longer a pediatric patient and she was no longer allowed to practise medicine. A mutually beneficial bending of the rules.

As Sherlock tapped out his response, it had felt like John could read the entire conversation on his face from where he sat next to Sherlock in the cab.

I do not question my sanity, I merely inquire about the possible differences between infatuation and delusion or obsession in a brain with chemical imbalances. SH

Infatuation will always be obsessive. It is however a socially accepted sort of obsession that does not seem to be limited to the psychiatric population. It does have certain evolutionary advantages in terms of generating offspring and keeping said offspring alive, even if that is hardly relevant in your case.

Charming. Clearly, that’s all the answer he’s going to get from his manipulative, malpracticing so-called psychiatrist, and he should get moving, should go in and--

Vibration. Another text.

There are studies - albeit somewhat lacking in data even though the neurochemical reasoning is probable - that suggest antidepressants might suppress potential romantic and/or sexual responses, as well as blunting already existing romantic feelings. Seen from that perspective, your current reactions are less ‘chemically defective’ than your lack of said reaction while on antidepressants.

(Could it be that--)
He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, then opens his eyes again, struggling to grasp the significance of what he’s just read.

(That what had felt like losing his mind could be—‘less chemically defective’.)

The phone vibrates once again in his pocket as he climbs the stairs - *17 steps, a comfort in the midst of turmoil* - but he ignores it for now.

Whatever snide remark Helena has for him, it can wait.

There are other altars for him to sacrifice his dignity on.

* *

When he enters the flat early morning light is flooding in through the windows, and Sherlock finds himself drawing the curtains - *too harsh, too grey, too--* - before taking off his coat, waiting for John to emerge from his bedroom, where he must have gone to take off his shoes and get his pyjamas.

(Sherlock thinks he can hear him, rummaging about upstairs, but right now he’s not entirely sure that it’s not just his mind predicting the sounds rather than actually hearing them.)

Steepling his fingers beneath his chin, Sherlock sits in his chair, waiting for John to return, trying to formulate a battle plan - before he realises that this isn’t a war.

(If it was, it would be a civil war, because John isn’t the enemy, whatever Sherlock’s mind might indicate from time to time.)

When John emerges in a striped dressing gown over pyjamas, heading towards the kitchen to grab something to eat before he falls asleep standing up, Sherlock speaks.

“I’ve been ignoring you.”

John is silent for a second, but he’s stopped in his tracks well before reaching the kitchen, and he’s turning his head to look at Sherlock. His face is inscrutable and his colours weak and pale.

“One might say that, yes,” he concedes, licking his lips, averting his gaze.

He moves like he’s in pain again, but the psychosomatic pain usually doesn’t resurface that quickly after--

“I might have been a bit… obsessed with proving that I wasn’t just seeing non-existent patterns in this case,” Sherlock admits, consciously using words he finds painful even if John will likely never understand the cost or the significance of those words.

Sacrifices are to be made.

John gives a barely visible shrug and continues to walk into the kitchen. A hint of artery red has appeared, but it’s not the kind that Sherlock would see when they were… about to do something sexual. No, this, Sherlock has learned, is anger.

“John.”
Sherlock gets up, follows John into the kitchen, and watches him eyeing the contents of the shelves and the fridge, presumably looking for something - anything - he could stomach at this point.

“You know what? I’m too tired to even think about this right now,” John finally says, closing the fridge and instead grabbing an apple from a bowl by the cooker. “You can’t just-- no. Let’s just have this talk some time when I haven’t been awake for twenty-four hours straight.”

He shakes his head, passing Sherlock on his way out of the kitchen.

Sherlock hears the steps as John heads up to his own room, and it’s a strange sensation; having been prepared to offer something he didn't really want to give, only to have his offer refused before he even got started, and still end up feeling like he lost something.

(He'd been ready to sacrifice so many things when he thought the world was going to end, anything to stop it from doing so, and in the end, it wouldn't have helped, because the threat was never real. Instead, he had stood there with his promise to put logic above everything else in order to never find himself as thoroughly fooled again. And yet.)

With one more look towards doorway which John had just exited, Sherlock grabs a packet of biscuits and goes to find his laptop.

* 

In the course of a few hours’ research, Sherlock manages to accomplish several things.

First, he reads up on the current research, and perhaps he can be excused for getting a bit sidetracked considering the state of - or rather the complete lack of - studies on the long-term effects of antidepressants on cognition and neurodevelopment. By morning, Sherlock has dispatched several emails to different authorities and institutes regarding the appalling lack of research in psychiatry compared to other medical fields (although part of him still twinges at calling psychiatry a ‘medical field’, given said lack of research and given his old habit of throwing the lack of reliable evidence, by way of an insult, in the face of each and every mental health professional he’d been forced to interact with).

In the midst of their dawn-to-afternoon text conversation, his struck-off psychiatrist also sends him a particular acronym, telling him to look it up and let her know his thoughts on the matter. The search results, once he’s filtered out a number of articles on the mental health of Asian bears, are… something worth taking into consideration.

In the end Sherlock also manages (albeit not through the aid of a sufficient amount of reliable scientific evidence, as he had hoped) to make up his mind regarding what does and does not constitute a chemical defect.

He’s reluctant to give the woman any credit, but whatever she may lack in bedside manner and personality, she makes up for in empirical knowledge and insight in her field. Their text conversation had lasted well into the morning, and Sherlock ended up reluctantly promising to at least consider visiting her research department in Seattle to let her perform a few extended interviews and some cognitive testing, so that she could use the data in a case study, since he was ‘so snitty about the state of psychiatric research’. In exchange, she’d also tell him more about her new… theory regarding the origin of his impaired mental state.
Love might, after all, not be so much a defect, but more of a natural variation in the frail balance of different neurotransmitters. Perhaps even a variation that could be considered to have certain merits.

As the hours pass by, Sherlock finds that the lack of sleep together with his drastic decrease of anxiolytics is not a particularly favourable combination.

He manages to keep from pounding his head against the wall, as the obsessions and doubts finally tip over as his nervous system gets stuck in a loop in which each physical manifestation of sympathetic response only serves to trigger a bigger response, until there’s too much oxygen in his blood even as it feels like there’s not enough air.

Anxiety is just a chemical reaction, albeit a surprisingly potent one, Sherlock concludes, absently running his finger over the crescent indentions in the soft skin of his palms while the vertigo finally recedes.

It’s almost noon, and John’s still asleep upstairs. Sherlock, meanwhile, is in the sitting room, trying to regain a modicum of control over his own breathing.

He’s grown used to his obsessions being merely background noise - something he can drown out when he really needs to - but now they’re no longer in the background; they’re in the forefront of his mind and he can’t seem to ever really drown them out.

Fifteen years of anxiety as background noise, only for it to take over again.

In an attempt to distract himself, Sherlock decides to gather up the data needed in order to compose a blog post on the toxic effects of common household chemicals.

It's when he's shuffling through the stacks and piles of papers in the low bookcase by the sofa for some notes on kidney damage after ethylene glycol intake that he hears the sound of something other than a book falling to the floor.

It briefly distracts him, and the stack of papers he's been rifling through tips over and slumps to the floor, scattering over the object that fell just a second previously.

The itch in his fingers and the pressure over his sternum only intensifies as he watches papers settling all around his feet, a visible manifestation of how things are slipping, how his control shatters like loose leaves around him, disrupting every attempt at finding anything of significance in--

Beginning to pick up the papers, Sherlock suddenly catches a glimpse of the object that had fallen down with a thud, distracting him.

Partially covered by papers and folders, the colored plastic looks oddly out of place, and Sherlock shoves the notes aside to fully reveal it.

_The Rubik’s cube._

One of John's little attempts to keep Sherlock's boredom at bay. The catalyst for the turbulence that is currently almost deafening in its intensity and doubt.
It's an unlikely trigger for mental deconstruction and the start of what might have been--

Picking up the cube, Sherlock wonders if this is what people with lesser minds might describe as a 'sign'.

A sudden recollection of a conversation held decades earlier, of words that he hasn’t thought about for years:

“Some call it ‘the Doubting Disorder’,” Helena said, twirling a pen in a distracting, sweeping motion. Rubbish, he thought, because surely his problem was believing untrue things, not doubting real ones, but then she said, "If you felt no doubt the world was going to end, what was the point of your little abracadabra rituals? If it was set in stone, there’d be no point in you trying to prevent the worst from happening, wouldn’t you say?"

And now here Sherlock is, holding the catalyst for it all in his hand, doubting not only his own reactions but also John’s, doubting that John would think anything Sherlock did was ‘brilliant’ if he knew just how thin is the line between seeing connections that others miss and seeing connections where there are none.

The sudden sound of footsteps - John’s footsteps - on the stairs brings another problem to Sherlock’s attention.

He isn’t the only one in doubt.

John’s psychosomatic limp is slightly better than it was two days ago, but Sherlock can still hear it in the way he moves.

He should have done something about that days ago, had promised himself he would, but then there’d been the question about what to do and how to go about it, and maybe, after all it wasn’t the best way to--

“Good morning,” John says, entering the sitting room.

Sherlock doesn’t turn around, doesn’t face John, because making up his mind is hard enough as it is.

(‘You’re letting your doubts seed and grow a bit more with every second you’re just standing and hesitating before doing it, honey,’ she had said while they’d done what she’d called ‘exposure therapy’ and he’d thought of as ‘NHS-approved torture’. ‘Don’t think. Thinking is what got you into this mess. Act.’)

“I-- I needed to solve it. It’s the first one. Since-- After I quit the--”

It’s hateful, finding himself incapable of speaking in full, comprehensible sentences, but he’s had no time to prepare his words, and while his usual problem is an excess of the things, this is different.

(‘Emotions will always be a kind of second language to you. It will never become effortless the way it is for a native speaker,’ Helena said.)

His words, while hatefully disjointed, at least have the benefit of making John finally look at him.

“Since you quit the Clomipramine?”

Sherlock nods as he’s standing there with a plastic toy in his hand, unsure about whether or not he ought to move closer.

(Familiar.)

“It never occurred to you that you could have, well, I don’t know… talked to me about it?”

“I did talk to you about it.”

“I wasn’t referring to the case.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh’ indeed,” John says, letting out yet another sigh, and steps further into the room. “Sorry. That was uncalled for. I know you’re trying. Just. It would have helped to know that it had nothing to do with me, that you just happened to become even more of an arsehole the day after we… well.”

“I thought I might… become a bit distracted. I thought that the combination of withdrawal and distraction would prove–”

“You were distracted? By me?”

John suddenly looks amused, but after just a second his expression shifts again. So does his posture; his leg must be bothering him more than Sherlock had initially thought.

“False modesty does not become you,” Sherlock says simply, yet he can hear warmth sneaking into his tone unbidden.

“So what will happen next time there’s a case, then? I’ll turn into a distraction again?”

Here it comes, Sherlock knows. The part where he needs to provide something more than a simple ‘no’. The part where he needs to use skills left undeveloped, simply because he thoroughly dislikes practising anything at which he doesn’t instantly succeed.

“I think I’ve just quite effectively proved to myself that trying not to pay too much attention to you is… even more disadvantageous.”

“In what way do you--” John begins impatiently, grimly, before breaking off, his eyes widening just a fraction. “Are you saying that that’s why you didn’t notice when those blokes-- Oh, shit.”

Sherlock doesn’t nod or answer affirmatively, knowing that the lack of negation will be enough. Within seconds, John’s colours are shifting, turning a few shades deeper, and this perception of non-existent colours is illogical and can’t be trusted, because the synesthesia is just symptom of how his brain is wired wrong.

Turning away from John and starting to pick up the papers by his feet, Sherlock wonders how he’s supposed to do these things, make all these shameful admissions. It feels like play-acting, but he’s speaking the truth, and how does that even add up--

If there’s any truth to what Helena wrote about the tricyclic antidepressant only obscuring things - feelings - that would otherwise have manifested, then would it be possible to assert that if he hadn’t been on the antidepressant for all those years he would then have got more accustomed to - would have learnt to recognise - his emotions? Would he have known then how to do all this stuff - relationships, social cues, talking about things? If he hadn’t spent his entire adolescence and adult life being either too mentally ill or too medicated to experience anything even remotely similar to this, would it have made any difference?
It shouldn’t matter, because whatever the answer, it wouldn’t change anything about the present situation, and the present situation is what he needs to deal with.

And he isn’t sure, can’t be sure, will never be sure; and that’s not going to change, so he will have to.

“It was you.”

As soon as he’s pushed the words out, Sherlock turns around, meeting John’s surprised look.

Taking six - no, seven - strides, Sherlock comes to stand before John, holding out his hand, which is still gripping the plastic cube; waving it in front of him.

“That was-- not exactly what he’d been meaning to say, but it doesn’t matter, not now, because he needs to keep talking. If he stops, he might not be able to continue.

“If you think that giving me a toy would keep me busy for at least a few minutes, when in fact, solving it took fifty-seven seconds.”

That was-- not exactly what he’d been meaning to say, but it doesn’t matter, not now, because he needs to keep talking. If he stops, he might not be able to continue.

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That was-- not exactly what he’d been meaning to say, but it doesn’t matter, not now, because he needs to keep talking. If he stops, he might not be able to continue.
out of his mouth as his hand once again shoots up to brandish the Rubik’s cube at John, “-you are. I thought it might please you to know that.”

It’s an offering, but perhaps John reads it as yet another accusation, and once again, it might actually be both in equal measure.

(Needing things to be balanced out, needing the imperfect symmetry of their relationship to add up to--)

John clears his throat, and Sherlock takes the hint and backs off just a bit.

“I’m not happy that you’ve been going through… that,” he says, looking up at Sherlock. “But I can’t honestly say that any of the rest of what you said made much sense to me.”

There’s something both defeated and slightly… proud in his face, and the deep, royal blue and the pale green are merging and shifting and it’s too difficult to really tell what--

“Would you mind… perhaps expanding a bit? Take it slow, because you know everyone’s an idiot.”

John shouldn’t sound like that, shouldn’t have that barely hidden defensive stance instead of the military bearing that had made Sherlock consider him a possible brother-in-arms almost straight away.

“I have doubts,” Sherlock says, forcing the words out before he has time to regret them.

“I assumed as much when you left and didn’t even bother to text for twenty-four hours,” comes John’s reply, matter-of-fact and even slightly off-hand, like Sherlock was stating something obvious. But the fact that it arrives several seconds after Sherlock spoke suggests otherwise.

He itches to correct John, to tell him that he’d in fact been gone for thirty-one hours, but it seems a bit beside the point. For a medical man, John doesn’t seem to be too keen on exactness most of the time.

“It’s not just about… this,” Sherlock says, with a gesture that’s meant to indicate whatever it is that is between them, but probably comes off as more exasperated than informative.

“It was Mycroft, wasn’t it? Who planted those… ‘doubts’."

It's absurd, this impulse to defend his brother, given that it’s essential for their… relations that John retains a healthy suspicion towards everything Mycroft might insinuate about Sherlock in the future.

“I am fully capable of reaching conclusions without my brother’s guidance.”

While ‘conclusions’ isn’t quite the word, it does sound better than saying that he’s fully capable of creating his own doubts, but Sherlock hopes John won’t remark on this particular lack of consistency.

“Oh, doubtless, but you also find a pleasure in doing the opposite of what your brother wants.”

“Only because the opposite of what Mycroft thinks is often a good place to start.”

He shuts his mouth as soon as he realises the truth in what he's just said. Mycroft had thought this a symptom of something pathological, but then Mycroft sees everything that he cannot have or does not desire as a threat.

“So he suggested that you’d do something, which made you want to do the opposite?”
“No.”

The truth comes easily when the alternative explanation is more humiliating to his own ability to think critically.

John looks at him as if trying to solve Sherlock like a particularly tricky and somewhat infuriating crossword.

“There are things that I-- He suggested a pattern that would form a plausible explanation for something I could account for no other way. One might say he provoked an apophany.”

“An apo--”

“Apophany,” Sherlock fills in, already regretting using the word.

John nods in a way that means he not only does not understand, but has now also given up on trying, and is getting increasingly frustrated.

“Right… If this conversation is going to continue, I think I’m going to need some coffee,” John says, taking one more glance at Sherlock before continuing. “And when I say ‘if’, I mean it will.”

With that, John turns and walks over to the kitchen, leaving Sherlock to follow him.

Now it’s Sherlock’s turn to stand in the doorway, overlooking the kitchen as John prepares coffee, his movements tense and his jaw set. Sherlock’s own movements are far too revealing, but John isn’t looking at him and can’t see how his fingers tap and his eyes flicker.

Only once John has poured coffee into a mug - not offering any to Sherlock - does he look up. Their eyes meet, and John takes a seat on one of the kitchen chairs, giving Sherlock an expectant look.

It's time.

(‘Don’t think. Act.’)

“Love,” Sherlock says, and just as he says it, he suddenly becomes aware that it's the first time he's used this word in a context where it could allude to whatever it is that he and John… to what he feels-- “is a chemical defect.”

John’s face remains impassive, and it looks like he’s preparing himself for one more blow.

(Not a physical one, no; something that's far more difficult to defend against.)

Colours grow both more marked and more painfully pale at the same time. Sherlock braces himself, diverting his eyes from the panorama of colours that will undoubtedly shift as he continues to speak.

“In my case, it's very similar to another, chronic, defect of my brain. One that, until recently, was compensated for chemically, and had been for fifteen years.”

It's tempting to allow himself to speed up until his words come out in an incomprehensible stream, but Sherlock has promised himself to do this properly. He’s unlikely to cause more damage than his behaviour over the past few days already has done.

He seats himself on the edge of the table, resting his feet on the chair in front of him.

(Sitting in a chair opposite John when talking about this would made it feel too similar to therapy, and Sherlock's had enough of that to last him a lifetime.)
“The Clomipramine,” John says slowly.

“A common hypothesis would be that my serotonin levels are below average. At age 11, this resulted in me developing certain fixed ideas.”

That’s not the whole of it. He has to force the word out.

“Delusions.”

The look in John's eyes is still unreadable. Perhaps Sherlock hasn't been clear enough, or perhaps he's been too clear.

“And when you say ‘delusions’, exactly what, ehm, are we talking about?”

Suddenly there’s something that might be a hint of a smile on John's face, but that seems absurd, unless he’s already--

“Delusions which I believe you yourself labelled ‘mental’ not long ago.”

“That I labelled-- Sherlock, we haven't discussed anything related to--” John cuts himself off, suddenly remembering the conversation in question. “Shit.”

(‘People who think that the end is nigh.’)

“Quite,” Sherlock agrees.

John is staring as if something in Sherlock's face will somehow fill him in. There's a flash of something not unlike… fear, just for a second, and Sherlock braces himself before he continues, feeling a pressure over his sternum that has nothing to do with compulsions.

(“Amazing.”)

“Clearly, I don’t have any such delusions at this point, and I haven't for two decades. Unfortunately, there are other symptoms that have proven to be slightly more resilient. Hence the… medication.”

It's a hateful word, even more so than ‘delusions’, because it only goes to highlight the fact that his own logic and determination hadn't been enough to override these things. That they still aren't.

When John doesn't interject, Sherlock continues, now simply wanting this to be over with so he can retreat, lock himself in somewhere and just--

“You accused Mycroft of making me think of this--” Sherlock gestures vaguely at the space between them, not wanting to be too precise, “-as a weakness. You were correct, but only in a sense. He did not make me doubt things by telling me it was a weakness. I am more than capable of generating doubts on my own, which is part of the problem. It is, however, possible to override these irrational doubts as long as there’s no cause to assume that they might be… legitimate. What Mycroft did was to inform me of a connection that I myself should have seen. You see, when it comes to the chemical side of things, being ‘in love’ is a state believed by some researchers to be very similar, in terms of the levels of neurotransmitters, to OCD. ‘The doubting disorder’.”

On the three last words, Sherlock’s voice gets a biting edge which doubtlessly makes the air quotes look even more childish.

And yet those are not the worst - or most terrifyingly plebeian and naive - amongst the words he's just uttered.
“OCD?” John repeats, his eyebrows rising.

Of everything that Sherlock has just said, of course that is what John homes in on.

Sherlock merely nods, and if there are colors changing around them right now he doesn't notice - doesn't care - because they won't give him any answers anyway.

“You had... OCD?”

“Have,” Sherlock corrects automatically, because if he needs to endure this conversation, he might as well endure it in a technically correct way.

“That… is not generally a psychotic disorder,” John says, as if trying the words out, making Sherlock wince.

(“Brilliant.”)

“Not all delusions are psychotic.”

As an afterthought, careful not to attempt to minimise the devastating implications, he adds: “It's often said to be difficult to classify when it occurs in an eleven-year-old. For me, it was more like an… apophenia.”

One glance is enough to tell him that John will not be stalled by unfamiliar terminology.

“Seeing patterns in unrelated things,” Sherlock reluctantly explains.

Sherlock leans down to rest his chin on his knee for a few seconds, bracing himself to continue. Stroking his hands absently down his shins before sitting up straight again, he can't help wishing for the comfort of his old, threadbare pyjama bottoms.

“As you are aware, pattern recognition is one of the things at which I excel. With all those irrelevant patterns clogging up my brain, the real ones get a bit… difficult to distinguish. It makes me doubt everything which I cannot intellectually confirm, which is… relevant to what happened a few days ago.”

Sherlock thinks John is going to take the bait, and start discussing what has happened between them, but as happens more and more frequently, John surprises him by asking something far closer to the heart of the matter.

“If the Clomipramine helped, then why did you quit taking it?”

Sherlock suddenly wishes that they had stayed on the topic of his not-quite-delusions.

“There are no studies on the long-term effects of antidepressants on cognitive functions. I also find that it… slows my mind down.”

John stares at him.

“You mean that what I've seen so far is your brain being ‘slow’?”

This time, John makes no attempt at hiding his disbelief.

For a moment, Sherlock is distracted by the sudden shift, the way John has gone from being distant and resolute to that familiar sarcasm that never really manages - and perhaps isn’t meant - to conceal the admiration beneath.
“Comparatively, yes. I can't say whether it's noticeable outside test situations yet, but there seems to be a discrepancy.”

At this point, John is pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Alright. I can see how you would totally try going off them from one day to another, then, any and all medical advice aside. Not that you need to be any fucking faster, but why do I even try arguing with that? So. You have had OCD since you were eleven years old?”

“According to… a researcher,” Sherlock starts, not knowing how else to describe Helena without mentioning things like ‘psychiatric institution’, “there's an off-chance it's not exactly a mental disorder in my case. It's been suggested that it might be a neurological disorder with psychiatric manifestations, the result of an autoimmune reaction after an infection. PANDAS. In that case, it could be… curable.”

“I… have never even heard of that. But if it might be curable, how come you haven't gotten the diagnosis confirmed?”

“I have been offered the possibility of doing so. I might… accept, even if that scheming and self-serving chameleon of a woman wants to put me through an absurd number of unrelated tests in order to turn it into a case study. ‘Since you like science so much’,” Sherlock says with an exaggerated imitation of the voice he can still hear inside his head.

John only raises his eyebrows, seemingly deciding that he'll leave that line of questioning for another time, and not allow himself to get side-tracked.

“So, wanna tell me how it all started?”

When Sherlock's finished talking - finished answering John's questions, finished watching as John sometimes tries to hide his astonishment and anger over all the things that Sherlock himself is past feeling anything about - he looks John straight in the eye, holding his gaze for a silent moment.

There are things - irrelevant things - he left out (‘pervasive development disorder’ - ‘overuse of anxiolytics’ - ‘involuntary commitment’ - ‘almost relapsing just days ago’), but they are hardly relevant to their current situation and therefore none of John's business.

He can at least hold on to what’s left by the altar after the sacrifice of most of his dignity.

When Sherlock speaks again, his voice is carefully neutral, indifferent.

It’s time to stop postponing the inevitable.

“There you have it. I make a living by observing patterns that others miss, but now you know that I also see patterns that only exist in my own head, and that I have doubts about my ability to tell them apart, and then there’s the additional doubts about everything that I might think I know. Not quite what you had in mind when you decided to make an exception to your--”

John interrupts him by holding up his hand, and suddenly, Sherlock becomes aware, for the first time in minutes, of the vivid colour scheme that radiates from him.

John is looking… relieved? Engaged? Comprehending?

(John is looking like amber in the hearth, glowing with warmth.)

“Sherlock, you think planes are silver birds. I still find your mind amazing.”

John’s voice is matter-of-fact but there’s sincerity to it, or at least so Sherlock thinks, and his eyes are holding on to Sherlock’s, making it almost impossible to look away as John breaks into a smile, one that Sherlock can’t understand and can’t mirror just now.

Somehow, it makes him realise there’s a chance he might get to live to regret telling John certain details of his psychopathology. Long enough for them to become something that John will sometimes use to make fun of him when he thinks Sherlock is being more of an arse than usual.

John is a contradiction and an impossibility and right now, John is alive and still here and looking at Sherlock with a hint of disbelief in his smile, but there’s no sign of pity.

“Of course I don’t think they are silver birds. It’s merely a Pavlovian response to something I used to fear due to the chemical imbalance that I was yet to be made aware of.”

“I’m sorry, my mistake,” John says, clearly attempting to sound serious for Sherlock’s benefit, and Sherlock might scowl, but there’s no edge to it, because poorly concealed amusement is not the worst possible outcome.

Inside his shoes, his toes are tapping. A silent rhythm that grounds him, reminds him that it’s not just a story he’s just made up, not a magic trick to lure John back to him, but the truth.

(Parts of it, at any rate.)

“Just to be clear; you no longer think that what we-- that, ehm, this a ‘chemical imbalance’?”

“It is a chemical imbalance, but… as someone pointed out to me: it’s a socially acceptable one, one that doesn’t necessarily cause clinically significant suffering.”

John looks at him, and Sherlock considers whether or not what he’s already given will suffice.

It’s far too much, and maybe it’s even enough.

“Oh, there’s suffering involved, let me tell you that,” John finally says, somewhat darkly. “At least on my part, there’s some pretty unmistakable suffering being caused by this particular chemical imbalance.”

Sherlock ignores John’s comment, because that is what he does when John complains about any of the ‘un-fucking-believable’ things Sherlock ‘puts him through’, and strangely, this seems to be just another one of those.

“Are we done?” Sherlock asks, suddenly impatient, glancing down at John where he sits with his hands wrapped around his empty coffee cup.

“Not even close,” John states, though his voice is friendly enough. He makes no move to continue the conversation, so Sherlock gets to his feet, adjusting the cuffs of his shirt before he nods, meeting John’s gaze.

He opens his mouth, about to say something, but nothing emerges, so he settles for another nod.
before he leaves the kitchen.

There are questions, but for now, they’ll have to wait.

It’s two pills and two hours later that John walks past Sherlock - sitting in his chair trying to solve a case via email and finding it less than efficient as a distraction - and lets his finger slide up Sherlock’s neck.

When the finger reaches Sherlock’s jaw, the pressure behind it increases until Sherlock’s head is tipped back. He watches intently as John leans in, meeting Sherlock’s eyes as he looms over him, breathing the same air before tilting his head to the side.

“Don’t do that again. Don’t shut me out or run off on me that way,” he whispers into Sherlock's ear. The words possess a certain sharpness.

“I did no such thing. I didn't ‘run’--”

His protest is swallowed by John's mouth, and the amber warmth of the glow still left on the altar after his sacrifice. There’s something else there too, something a bit more fierce than Sherlock's grown to expect from the few kisses they've shared so far.

With John’s finger still on his jaw and John’s tongue now inside his mouth, Sherlock finds that he’s not in a position to object. There’s too much of that going on inside his head anyway, and John tastes like bergamot and sleep and iron, making deep maroon and tangerine blend with the amber.

Humans are hardwired to lean their heads to the right when kissing, Sherlock recalls as their mouths slide together, his hand in John’s hair and John’s thumb stroking his cheekbone, his chest heaving against Sherlock’s.

There are behaviours that serve no evolutionary purpose, and yet, there are neuronal pathways that serve to facilitate kissing, and that’s illogical and wasteful and perhaps it’s just a symptom of an underlying chemical defect, one that makes people crave the relief that comes from rituals older than language.

An obsession is always an obsession, and somehow, suffering will always be involved, Sherlock thinks as he fumbles with buttons and shivers at the sounds John makes as--

And yet, there’s a respite offered by these particular rituals; and what’s more, the irrationality involved in them might just be something he’s willing to put up with.
On compulsions and tics: The idea about how the compulsions decrease or even vanishes when Sherlock does something smooth/in a flow, something that absorbs him fully, comes from the amazing book An Anthropologist on Mars, in which a surgeon with Tourette’s is one of the people Oliver Sacks portrays in a mixture of biography and neurological case study. The surgeon mentions this; that when he does something that has his full focus and in which he isn’t side-tracked by any distractions that would pull him out of that flow, his tics are completely absent, but as soon as someone disturbs him or he starts thinking too much about things, they will return.

*

On PANDAS:

PANDAS is short for Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorders Associated with Streptococcal Infections. A child may be diagnosed with PANDAS when:

Ob sessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and/or tic disorders suddenly appear following a strep infection (such as strep throat or scarlet fever);

or

The symptoms of OCD or tic symptoms suddenly become worse following a strep infection.

The symptoms are usually dramatic, happen “overnight and out of the blue,” and can include motor and/or vocal tics, obsessions, and/or compulsions. In addition to these symptoms, children may also become moody or irritable, experience anxiety attacks, or show concerns about separating from parents or loved ones.


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